




American **HEARTLAND**



PHOTOS: DAVID J. WHITE/LINKSLAND & Co

Whistling Straits' 12th hole, which hangs on the edge of Lake Michigan, is one of the hardest par-3s to negotiate on the course.



MIDWEST USA MIGHT NOT BE YOUR FIRST THOUGHT WHEN PLANNING A GOLF HOLIDAY. BUT HAS AMERICA BEEN KEEPING ITS BEST-KEPT SECRET TO ITSELF? DAVID J. WHYTE DRIVES HIS WAY INTO THE HEART OF THE NATION TO INVESTIGATE.

For most of us, the American Midwest is an unknown quantity. As far as your average Australian golfer goes this is a gap on the golfing map. It hardly even gets a mention in popular golfing guidebooks. The Mid! The West! Heck, Jim Bob, it's neither in the west – nor the middle! I finally deduced the Yanks must be up to something, a conspiracy to confuse us, put us off the trail.

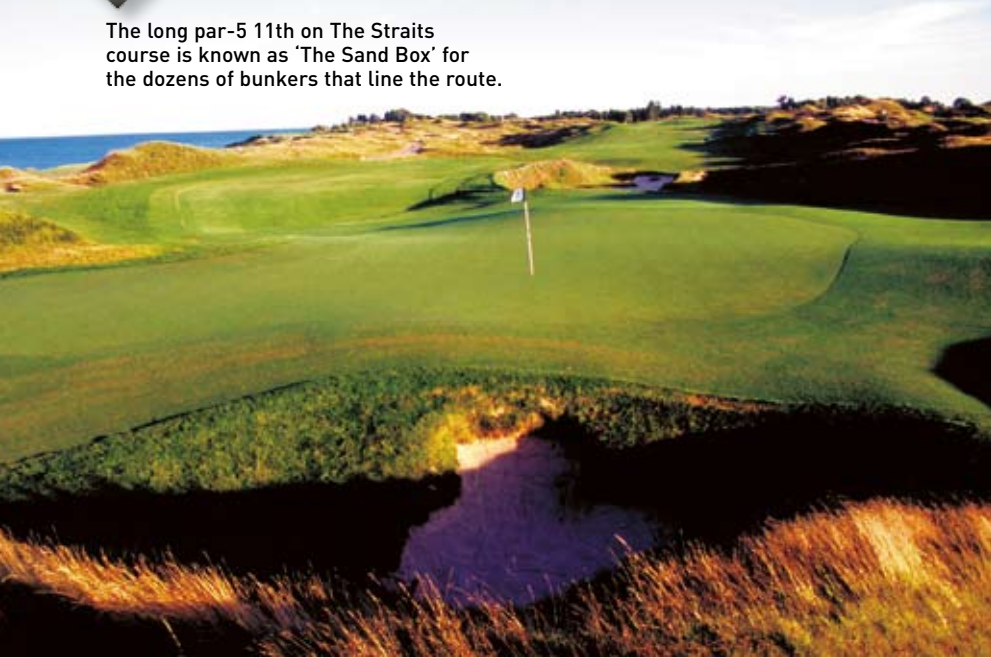
WHISTLING IN THE WIND

Milwaukee has one of the largest breweries in the world. But that wasn't going to put me off the trail either. I resolutely stuck to Lake Michigan's shores heading north towards the town of Kohler and Whistling Straits – host to the 2004 PGA Championship and venue for the 2007 U.S. Senior Open, 2010 PGA Championship, 2015 PGA Championship as well as the 2020 Ryder Cup. Yes, I know it's a long way away off but this just shows the stature of this newish tour venue. The Straits and its neighbour, The Irish, were once a small-plane landing strip and rubbish dump. Today they are a buxom, billowing seaside links.

Americans are extremely good at doing what-they-damn-well-please when building a golf course and, in this new age of course construction, Whistling Straits is the vanguard. ▶



The long par-5 11th on The Straits course is known as 'The Sand Box' for the dozens of bunkers that line the route.



The striking par-3 7th on The Straits course is perched precariously above the Lake Michigan shoreline.



Overlooking Lake Michigan, this wafting wonder was the vision of Herb Kohler Junior, whose grandsire's established the town of Kohler in the 1800's. Mr Kohler's family amassed a fortune partly on the success of their bathroom fittings. He was so happy with the outcome of the PGA at his course in 2004 that he bought St Andrews' Old Course Hotel in Scotland – along with its Duke's Course overlooking the Auld Grey Toon.

We set off to play the Straits, two caddies per fourball. Our bagman, Louis, was twice the carrier, a keen player and certified golf addict.

"I live to be out on a golf course, either golfing or caddying," he said, adding that his winters are spent working at Augusta National and his summers in Wisconsin. When it came to his advice, if only I could do half of what he told me. With infinite patience, Louis guided us over the Straits to an exhilarating experience of this magnificent course. Apart from an over-exuberance of bunkering, Whistling Straits is not as difficult as you might think. I scraped around in an 84 with some dreadful putting.

There are four fine courses near Kohler. The River Course at Black Wolf Run is fairly difficult – especially playing into the greens, with the Sheboygan River and overhanging trees coming into play on many holes. The Meadow Valleys Course looks less formidable – though we didn't play it – while The Straits and The Irish make up the Kohler foursome.

The standards and service at 'Destination Kohler' are exemplary, all that you would expect from such a classy facility. Prices of course reflect this!

The Kohler area is the upmarket end of America – let alone the Midwest. Only 20 minutes away from the town is The Bull, designed by Jack Nicklaus and recently voted by US Golfweek magazine as the best new daily-

fee course in America. The River also gets high ratings although I think Americans go overboard with these acclaims – everybody seems to have a gold star for something or other – Best Ball Cleaner on the back nine, Best Corn Beef Sandwich, Prettiest Beer Wagon Attendant etc. etc. I suppose it is all part of the motivational machine that makes America what it is.

WANDERING ROUND WISCONSIN

The State of Wisconsin itself was a revelation, one of those places I had no previous concept of but it turned out to be one of the prettiest, enchanting, most welcoming areas I've ever visited.

I met an Englishman serving behind a bar in the resort town of Elkhart Lake. "This is the friendliest place in the world!" he declared. "People are relaxed and easy-going – and they all want to talk."

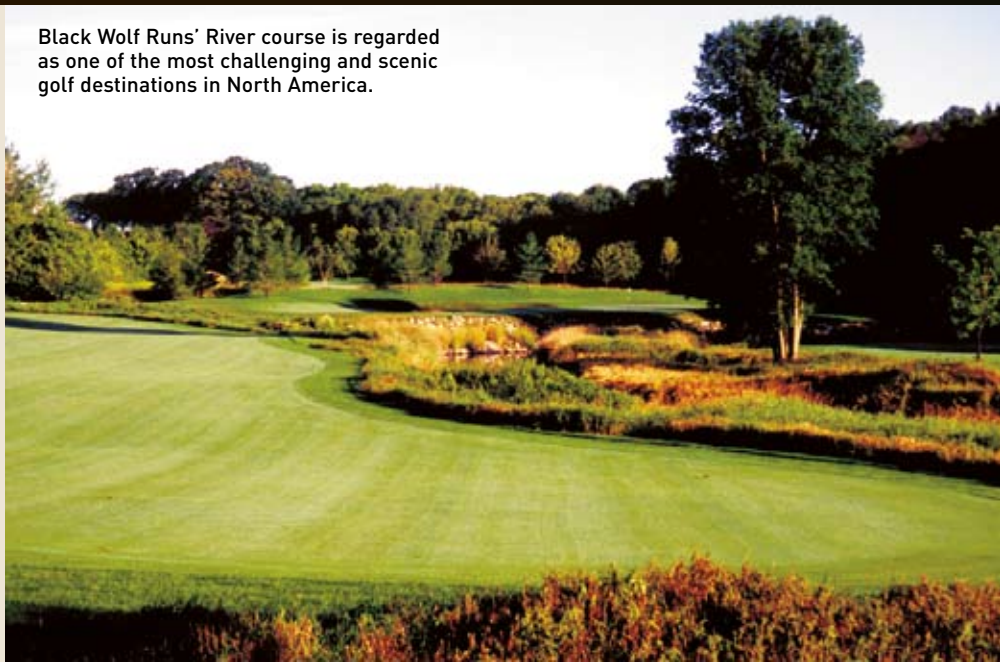
Accents go down very well here. If you stop for a beer or bite, you'll end up shooting the breeze with the locals or holiday-makers. It's mostly Midwesterners that vacation in the Wisconsin Lakes area, visiting the famous Road America Speedway or messing about on one of the many lakes. I could have easily dropped anchor and spent a week or more getting to know the place better.

There's plenty golf too!

Wisconsin has more than 500 public courses. We sampled Quit Qui Oc Golf Club near Elkhart Lake, a mere \$28 for a round through the week and \$14 for a buggy. That translates to around A\$56 per head including the wheels. There is a difference between public courses and the pampering and preening that goes on in expensive resorts like Whistling Straits. But to be honest, Quit Qui Oc was more what I was used to and as a course, perfectly adequate. Hanging out at the bar here was equally 'down-home'. I could move to this kind of place.



Black Wolf Runs' River course is regarded as one of the most challenging and scenic golf destinations in North America.



Green Lake is a short drive from Elkhart Lake, the oldest resort area west of Niagara Falls.

There are four courses here, offering packages of three or four days resort golf staying at local hotels. The Lawsonia courses have been around a while and didn't have the presentation that overseas visitors might expect in the States, but the Woodlands course was moderately challenging. Its sister, the Links, promoted itself as a British Open-type venue. Built in the 1930's, it might have been novel for those who didn't know proper 'links' courses. It can do with an overhaul now – and a less misleading name.

The best course we sampled in this part of Wisconsin was in Verona near the state capital of Madison. Madison is a college town and centre of local government; a laid-back, easy-going city. Walking, cycling and boating seem to be the main activities, unusual for a state capital but just great for holiday-makers. Even the buses have carrier racks for bikes in case you run out of puff.

University Ridge Golf Club was out of town, a classy layout with bags of room on some holes calling for length off the tee then becoming tighter and more technical on others. The course is run by the university and in supreme condition, a must for the itinerary.

THE ROCKFORD FILES

Rockford, Illinois is another place-name you might not be familiar with. An hour from Chicago and a world away in terms of the cost of a game of golf, Rockford is a handy staging-post if you are heading west from Chicago or the Kohler area.

If you think low cost equals low quality, let me introduce you to Aldeen.

Aldeen Golf Club is a public course run by the city of Rockford for the people – by the people. To look at it and indeed play it, you'd think you'd strayed into an exclusive country club. Aldeen costs A\$56 for the round. In fact, I have never seen such a well-designed, well-maintained, well-presented municipal golf course. Mr Aldeen was a local industrialist and golf fanatic and it was he that put the money up to have the course built before presenting it to the city.

Aldeen was exceptional – but there was nothing wrong with Rockford's dozen or so other public courses.

Aldeen was exceptional – but there was nothing wrong with Rockford's dozen or so other public courses. We played the Elliot and the Ledges, both outstanding tests, the Ledges suffering a little from drought conditions when we visited but clearly a decent, challenging layout.

Here's the uncanny bit – green fees at these two courses dipped below the A\$28 level through the week and at regular tee times. As you might imagine, Rockford has received a truck-load of top ratings for

Places to Play – the best mid-sized city for golf according to one magazine along with a host of other accolades. They are also doing a great job in encouraging kids; the Tiger Woods Foundation chose the Rockford community to host one of four national two-day Tiger Woods Junior Golf Clinics. Golf interest among teenagers has leapt from around 200 players 20 years ago to more than 4,000 golfers today.

THE ROAD TO GALENA

The road from Rockford to Galena takes you through some of the prettiest scenery in the Midwest. This area was bypassed by the great land-levelling glaciers of the ice-age leaving an undulating terrain not unlike the



The TPC at Deere Run hosts the PGA Tour once a year and charges just \$60 for a round.



The Eagle Ridge Resort in Galena has three stunning courses.

Scottish Borders or the English Cotswolds.

Eagle Ridge Resort makes fine use of this topography especially on its premier track, the General. The General's not an easy course to get on with. It recruits heavy forest and dramatic variations in elevation as its main defence. I came off rather shell-shocked and in need of a dram or two to regain my nerves, but it was a good test if you can shoot straight and don't mind the odd uphill assault.

Eagle Ridge's two other 18-hole courses, the North and South, are less demanding. Both are ideal for all levels of player, the South being the tighter but not overtly punishing, while the North is more pleasurable with wide, sweeping fairways. I would happily have spent another day or so playing these lovely resort tracks, especially the North.

The town of Galena is equally attractive, a leap back in time to one of the most charming spots you'll find

in the Midwest. Again, foreign tourists don't seem to have reached this area; it's frequented mostly by busy Chicagoans looking to de-stress. Galena is the ideal spot but who would suspect to find a little corner of Ireland tucked away in interior Illinois.

The Irish Cottage is just one of Galena's many unusual and delightful surprises. We spent two nights quaffing pints of Guinness, watching Irish Folk dancers and an effervescent Irish band laying on the entertainment.

QUAD CITIES

Just a short drive south from Galena and two and a half hours' drive west of Chicago, my ultimate objective on this American Heartland Trail was the Quad Cities – four modest-sized communities straddling the Mississippi River.

The towns of Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa and Rock Island and Moline in Illinois have undergone major transformations in recent years – bringing life, entertainment and culture back to their hearts. The four downtowns are now alive with music bars, art galleries, restaurants and museums. You can catch a riverboat for a meal on Old Muddy, or indeed take an overnight Riverboat cruise capturing the razzamatazz of the Mississippi in its Dixieland heyday. There are casino boats to fritter away your earnings from the golf course or, for the more physically sporting, superb bicycle paths following the riverbanks for miles. Golf has followed a different course in this area, again aimed firmly at local enthusiasts.

Once again, price plays a major part and most of the municipal courses I played wanted a mere A\$25 for the privilege. There were a dozen excellent courses within the Quad City area and I was told of quite a few other



WHERE TO PLAY

COURSE	Whistling Straits Kohler, Wisconsin	The River Course at Black Wolf Run Kohler, Wisconsin	The Bull at Pinehurst Farms Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin	Quit Qui Oc Golf Club Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin	University Ridge Golf Club Verona, By Madison, Wisconsin	Eagle Ridge Resort – North Course Galena, Illinois	TPC at Deere Run Silvis, Illinois	Glynn's Creek Long Grove, Iowa	Emeis Golf Course Davenport, Iowa	
PH	0011 1 866 847-4856		0011 1 920 467-1500	0011 1 920 876 2833	0011 1 608 845-7700	0011 1 800 892-2269	0011 309 796-6000	0011 1 563 328-3284	0011 1 563 326-7825	
GREEN FEES	A\$400 per person including caddy plus tax and gratuity. All caddies carry two bags and are required before 2pm		A\$278 per person including cart plus tax	A\$195, A\$115 (after 2pm)	A\$38 per round and easily walked	Weekdays: A\$75 per round, \$73 with cart	A\$80 per round	A\$95, A\$80 (after 1pm)	A\$23 and \$40 on weekends	A\$25, A\$27 weekends
WEB	www.destinationkohler.com		www.golfthebull.com	www.quitquioc.com	www.universityridge.com	www.eagleridge.com	www.tpcatdeererun.com	www.glynnscreek.com	www.cityofdavenportiowa.com	

exceptional examples only an hour or two away. How they can provide such excellent golf courses for such prices I don't know – but hey, who's arguing?

John Deere, the agricultural and green-keeping equipment giant is based in Moline, Illinois, and has a major investment in the area's premier Tournament Players Course, TPC at Deere Run, now a firm fixture on the US PGA Tour.

We played this course first and were amazed with each and every hole. This is a great test – with top-drawer treatment from the minute you pull in the drive, until you pull out again from this stunning USPGA Tour venue for – wait for it – a mere A\$60 per round (after 2pm) including a golf cart and practice balls. By anyone's standards this is not a 'dear run'.

We played at several excellent public layouts around town. Emeis Golf Course was exceptional, as was Palmer Hills and Highland Springs. The new nine-hole Pebble Creek at the back of Bettendorf was well worth going

round twice. All of these courses cost a heartbreaking A\$25 per outing, which is most unusual.

An American 'Road Trip' like this has a host of pleasures – on the golf course and off. Just cruising the USA is a pleasure in itself.

The Midwest is currently the country's best-kept golfing secret, there's certainly no doubt about it. Low prices are a fair consideration but, for us the friendliness of the locals, the rolling, gentle scenery and the enjoyment of sampling 'Real America' were as equally, if not more, appealing.

Many of the courses we played were municipal but it seems the American cities involved here are going out of their way to create new standards in public golf courses, encouraging their citizens to play the game and keeping prices within everyone's reach.

A word of warning though – you are bound to put on weight. Also, take an extra suitcase – shopping bargains are as cheap as the golf. 🍷