

SCRANTON Times Tribune

Atlantic City offers fun on the sand, and in the fairways

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We've all been there.

On our way back from playing a golf course that was a waste of time and thought, 'Boy, what a dump.'

Never thought that could be a good thing.

But while on a quick getaway to Atlantic City this month, I played a golf course that I knew was going to be a dump before I arrived.

Literally.

McCullough's Emerald Links Golf Course, located about 15 minutes from Caesars Resort - where my family was a guest for a couple of nights - is a diamond in the rough that was built on land reclaimed atop a landfill.

It was also one of three courses in three days in an ibuprofen-filled vacation of 54 holes in 42 hours.

Atlantic City Country Club and Harbor Pines were also on the itinerary, and frankly, each track was different and offered interesting challenges, as well as some spectacular views and relaxing surroundings.

Emerald Links was voted one of Golf Magazine's top 35 new public courses when it opened in Egg Harbor Twp. in 2002, and it's easy to see why. Every hole is a tribute to hole on the British Isles.

The layout is true links with imposing Scottish-style bunkers, waste areas and gorse, as well as the ability to hit a variety of shots into the holes. Fly it in, bump-and-run, whatever your pleasure.

And like you'd expect to find across the pond, there are blind shots, mounds, and surprisingly, rolling terrain, which surprised me for seaside New Jersey.

Add some ocean breezes and this place can be a lot of fun with all reachable par 5s and a yardage that tips out at 6,535, but also plays to a very friendly 4,962 from the forward tees.

The one thing that stands out, however, are the vents all around the course, which are there to let the landfill gases escape. Which to me, adds to the allure of the course, the fact that it was built on reclaimed land.

One of the neatest holes on the course is the 283-yard 15th, a dogleg that is driveable by taking the right line off the tee, and of course, hitting a precise shot. Trouble surrounds the two-tiered green, making it a classic risk-reward hole.

One more thing. Don't expect perfect lies in every fairway. I've never played in Scotland, but the way the ball rolls out and can come to rest in a less-than-ideal lie is part of the challenge in the shotmaking process.

ACCC

History in the air as you walk toward the clubhouse at Atlantic City Country Club, which was founded in 1897 and has hosted six United States Golf Association championships, including three Women's U.S. Opens and the inaugural PGA Senior Championship.

John McDermott, the first American to win the U.S. Open, was the club's pro, and Walter Travis, who designed the Country Club of Scranton Old Course, won the U.S. Amateur there in 1901.

It's also the place where the term birdie was coined. Legend has it that a good shot was referred to as a bird of a shot, and a plaque commemorates where the phrase birdie was coined in 1903. The term eagle also originated here.

You'd expect the conditions to be great here, and they were. The course's fourth redesign came in 1999 and raised several of the fairways up to 10 feet along the bay, which offers some spectacular views of the Atlantic City skyline in the middle of the back nine.

Like many older courses, golfers have the option of running shots into the green on many holes, although there are a handful of holes where there is a forced carry - Nos. 14, 15 and 17.

Speaking of which, the 17th is just 157 yards from the tips, but when all you can see is the top of the flagstick, it's an imposing tee shot on one of my favorite holes on the course. And if the wind blows - it was uncharacteristically still the day I played there - good luck. Those 6,577 yards from the tips, or even 5,349 from the forward tees, can be a real test of your mettle.

One final piece of history is on every hole. There are replica bells for tee markers, so don't be surprised if you hear golfers tapping their driver to signify a good drive on the hole.

But the real significance of the bell links back to turn of the 20th century. The large bell hung in the entranceway to the club originally was used in the early 1900s to remind golfers that the last trolley was about to leave for Atlantic City.

It's another cool piece of nostalgia that makes ACCC a must-play if you've never been there.

Harbor Pines G.C.

If you come home without a new personal record for greens hit in regulation, there is no one to blame but the archer.

An average green size at this Egg Harbor course, which opened in 1996, is 6,500 square feet.

Large, undulating greens are not the only enticement to play here.

Harbor Pines gets a nod for being very well-groomed, with wide fairways cut through thick pine trees.

The course wraps through a development, but you never have the sense that homes close in on the course, like they do at some courses.

Bent grass is the rule on the greens and fairways and the rough is kept short, which helps speed up play on a layout that stretches to over 6,800 from the tips to 5,099 from the shortest of its five sets of tees. An added bonus is that the scorecard recommends which set of tees to play based on your handicap.

There is no trickery. What you see is what you get off the tee, and that includes the water hazards that come into play on nine of the 18 holes. But most of those water hazards run parallel to the hole, with only one, on the short, par-4 12th, one of two forced carries on the course.

Teeing grounds, for the most part, are enormous, so you won't see the typical wear and tear on the course.

The course was soft from a storm the day before, and unfortunately, another thunderstorm halted our round after our tee shot on the penultimate hole, the eighth as the round started on the back nine.

But it didn't take finishing the round at Harbor Pines to see why it is a popular place to play.

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