



By Scott Seward

WHISTLING WONDER

Destination Kohler Makes Wisconsin the
Capital of Golf in the Midwest





The common myth on the recipe for a great golf course in the modern era says that a seaside panorama or mountainous landscape is an essential backdrop.

Sure, Winged Foot, Augusta National and Oakmont are terrific and neither an ocean nor mountain can be found, but they were built years ago. Nowadays, the surrounds have to make their splashy presence felt in glossy photos advertising the course.

No one would have thought that Wisconsin—yes Wisconsin—would have the necessary ingredients for arguably the best golf resort in the country not located on a coast. In the tiny hamlet of Kohler, a village built around a company perhaps best known for its kitchen and bath products, sits Destination

Kohler and the American Club. The resort's main building, originally constructed to house the company's immigrant workers

in 1916, reopened in 1981 as an elegant hotel. Seven years later, Blackwolf Run opened as Kohler's first course, becoming 36 holes in 1990. Whistling Straits, the resort's other 36-hole facility, debuted its Straits and Irish courses in 1998 and 2000 respectively.

Perhaps no other resort boasts two different courses with an already deep championship lineage at a young age and arguably no other resort has two facilities that present such a stunning contrast in setting.

The River and Meadow Valleys courses at Blackwolf Run began the resort's relationship with architect Pete Dye. The Sheboygan River divides the property, coming into play especially on the dramatic River Course. The 9th, "Cathedral Spires," epitomizes the layout. A short par 4 at only 361 yards, the hole parallels the river and demands a

controlled tee shot to avoid nasty bunkers short of the green. Standing on the tee, you can almost sense Dye whispering in your ear, "Go ahead, go for it," as the architect left a clean shot at the green requiring a 300-yard carry.

With the debut of Whistling Straits, Kohler joined an elite list of "If you build it, they will come" destination resorts in seemingly random locations that demand a pilgrimage of any avid golfer. Bandon Dunes is certainly on that list. So is Kauri Cliffs in New Zealand. But while Kohler is in the heart of the Midwest, its location on Lake Michigan only an hour from Milwaukee (and only 2 1/2 from Chicago), makes it fairly easy to get to.

With a nod to the possibly apocryphal story of Jimmy Demaret, upon seeing Pebble Beach covered with snow at a Crosby Pro-Am quipping, "I know I got loaded last night, but how did I wind up in Squaw Valley?" the traveler might feel they went to sleep in Wisconsin and woke up in Ireland.

From the moment you enter the property, your senses are altered. You



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are in Ireland, and the views of the wind-swept dunes, the Lake Michigan coastline to the herd of more than 40 sheep patrolling the property, do nothing to change that impression. When you realize that the original site was nothing more than barren coastline almost devoid of any outstanding natural features, your respect for what Dye and owner Herb Kohler have achieved is magnified. Large quantities of turf and sand were trucked in to manufacture what is a completely natural-looking Irish links.

Dye masterfully routed eight holes along the coast on the walking only, caddies-required Straits Course. All four par 3s have a green that perches precariously over the lake, each one presenting a postcard view. The 17th, a 223-yard one-shotter (a tee exists that can stretch it back to more than 250) is perhaps the signature hole. Dead into the wind, the tee shot for mortals is generally with a fairway wood or even a driver into what appears to be a tiny green.



Erin Hills

Other Courses Near Kohler

Two courses in the area present intriguing options and excellent values.

BROWN DEER GC, celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2009, is the site of annual PGA Tour U.S. Bank Championship, perhaps better known as the event where Tiger Woods made his professional debut in late 1996. No other PGA Tour venue offers such a low green fee this side of Poppy Hills—only \$39.50 with a readily available discount card, \$81.50 without.

One hour northwest of Milwaukee (and 90 minutes from Kohler) is **ERIN HILLS**, one of the most-lauded new courses to open its doors in the last five years. In 2011 the course will host a U.S. Amateur adding to the Milwaukee area's new status as golf championship central with two PGA Championships, a U.S. Amateur, U.S. Women's Open, Ryder Cup and potentially a U.S. Open all heading its way in the next 11 years (Erin Hills is rumored to be in consideration for the 2017 U.S. Open). While the normal rate of \$160 is quite good for a course of this caliber, an off-season rate of \$115 provides an even better deal.



Whistling Straits Clubhouse and Spa (below)





It's easy to imagine Vijay Singh's thoughts when the 2004 PGA Championship was on the line having to make par to maintain the one-stroke lead in the playoff.

The Irish Course, situated slightly inland from the Straits, is the newest of the Resort's quartet of courses and offers similar qualities to its older brother. But Dye added some quirky, fun holes, like the entirely blind 183-yard 13th. Nothing can be as much fun on a golf course as hitting a downhill blind shot and racing to the edge to see how close you got.

For new courses, sometimes all that separates them from entering the pantheon of the world's best is a tournament legacy. But no resort has built a championship pedigree so quickly. By 2020, the 32nd year of Kohler's foray into golf (and 22nd year since Whistling Straits opened), the resort will have hosted two U.S. Women's Opens, a U.S. Senior Open, three PGA



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Blackwolf Run River Course

Championships and a Ryder Cup, and a three-year run of world golf championships.

Besides the usual golf course press, the resort has garnered praise from wide-ranging sources such as *Forbes FYI* to *Conde Nast Traveler*. Dining choices are plentiful; the resort's premier restaurant, the Immigrant, serves contemporary cuisine and is decorated in the European style of early Wisconsin settlers. Both golf facilities have outstanding options and the more wallet-friendly Cucina, an Italian restaurant overlooking Wood Lake, is also available. Visitors can choose to stay at the American Club's stately, historic inn (AAA's only Five-Diamond Resort in the Midwest), the more contemporary Carriage House adjacent to the Kohler Waters Spa or the recently-renovated Inn at Woodlake.

The Kohler Waters Spa offers a

number of services including massages and facials. Standing beneath the waterfall in the spa's relaxation pool is enough to have anyone ready for a round the next day.

While Destination Kohler is a high-end resort, any trip to the area is achievable on a tight budget. Low-cost airlines Frontier and AirTran fly to Milwaukee from SFO, with Frontier also servicing San Jose and Sacramento. With an easy change in Denver and a painless drive north from the Milwaukee airport (or Chicago), the resort is actually more accessible and less expensive to get to for Californians than others that are closer.

Wisconsin might not have been on golf's radar as recently as 10 years ago, but it enjoys a new status as one of the first choices in the Midwest for major championships. Thanks to Destination Kohler, the area has also become a terrific choice for a golf vacation. ●



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