

# 'Gulf Golf!'- The Perfect Golf Getaway

By Susan Bairley

**W**hen you live in a fabulous golf state like Michigan, it's not always clear why anyone would golf elsewhere, except for one compelling reason - WINTER.

Once little white snowflakes begin to replace little white golf balls flying through the air, it's time for Michigan golfers to head south. And what better place than the Gulf Coast of Florida?

Wishing to explore 'Gulf golf' before the onslaught of northern snowbirds, my husband, Paul, and I participated in an October media 'Writer's Cup' tour of Florida's Gulf Coast. Guided by Heather Cooke, of Golf Placement Services Inc.

www.golfplacementservices.com, we and 13 other golf writers from the United States, Canada and Europe enjoyed a weeklong team competition as we toured and golfed nine different courses from Tampa, in northern central Florida, to Florida's southernmost Gulf resort destination, Marco Island.



Photo by Dick Durrance II

Copperhead Hole No. 15, Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club

From start to finish, our journey was a toasty continuation of the Michigan summer we had just kissed good-bye. And the golf was diverse and challenging as our descent in latitude was distinctively marked by changes in the vege-

tation, topography and style of the courses.

Our first stop was Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club [www.innisbrookgolfresort.com](http://www.innisbrookgolfresort.com) in Palm Harbor, near Tampa. Situated in a



Florida Golf Part I and Part II

<http://youtube.com> - search: Florida golf Michigan golfer

bustling urban area, this 900-acre resort is an amazing hideaway. Recently purchased by Sheila Johnson and her firm, Salamander Hospitality, Innisbrook is enjoying a massive infusion of investment capital and energy, which translates to multimillion dollar course and resort improvements.

Home to the Pods Championship and Fed/Ex Cup on the PGA Tour, Innisbrook has more than 600 renovated suites, 65,000 square feet of meeting space, six swimming pools - including its sizable 'Loch Ness Monster Pool,'

tennis and fitness centers, four restaurants and four 18-hole golf courses, including the tournament Island Course and top-ranked Copperhead, as well as Highlands North and South courses.

Playing Copperhead, we found the golf challenging, yet fair, and enjoyed the way the course showcased "Old Florida" with its traditional layout and native vegetation, including oaks, pines and Spanish mosses. At the edge of the Ocala Sand Ridge, the Innisbrook golf courses feature rolling hills and undulating greens, plus something

that's getting harder and harder to find at resorts - great walking courses for professional tournament play.

Stop Two on our tour was the 'most popular public golf course' in Tampa Bay's Pinellas Country - Bardmoor Golf and Tennis Club [www.bardmoorgolf.com](http://www.bardmoorgolf.com) Host to the PGA/LPGA JC Penney Classic for 13 years, and longtime home to numerous professional tennis tournaments, Bardmoor has local and international notoriety. The par 72 course was redesigned by Gary Koch in 2001 and measures 7,015



Photo courtesy of The Legacy Golf Club

Legacy Hole No. 11



### Venetian Hole No. 2

from the tips and 5,045 from the forward tees.

What makes Bardmoor so popular? General Manager and Director of Golf Jerry Moore says it's its location, "close to all of the beaches and Tampa," and its playability. "All ages and abilities...can come out and have a really good time," he said. "It's a classic layout - very eye-appealing, and it has good shot capability."

From there, we landed at

Emerald Greens Private Resort [www.stayandplaytampa.com](http://www.stayandplaytampa.com) Located on the site of the old Carrollwood Village Golf and Tennis Club, Emerald Greens is a luxury resort that has risen from the demolition dust of the old facilities. Our media group was literally the first guests to enjoy Emerald Greens luxury accommodations and facilities.

Designed by Dan Maples, Emerald Greens Golf & Country Club has 27 holes, 18 of which -

the Meadow and Cypress nines - were open when we were there. "Very playable, very challenging," said Dave Stewart, director of golf. And we agree.

Emerald Greens considers itself a 'boutique' golf resort. With the full-service elements of a private golf club,(including air-conditioned golf cars) and luxury hotel, it's a unique stay & play resort that offers luxurious two-bedroom, two-bath villa accommodations instead of hotel rooms. Each has a fully equipped

top-of-the-line kitchen, HD TVs and memory foam beds. Tennis and aquatic centers, gourmet dining, the Oasis Day Spa and an expansive Southern-style clubhouse terrace make Emerald Greens a wonderful place to relax amid attentive luxury.

Arnold Palmer's Legacy Golf Club [www.legacygolfclub.com](http://www.legacygolfclub.com) at Lakewood Ranch, near Bradenton was our first contemporary designed course on the tour. A Troon Golf property, the Legacy Club is everything you'd expect from a Palmer-designed course, making it a true quality golf experience. Big water and big sand bunkers, with greens that hold - yet allow heavy or wayward shots to slip into the water, are part of what I enjoyed about this beautiful tract.

At Venetian Golf and River Club [www.venetiangolfriver.com](http://www.venetiangolfriver.com) in North Venice, our most memorable experience was an eagle on the fourth hole - a real eagle, with feathers, talons, and piercing eyes that followed Paul's steps as he approached his tee shot, which somehow ended up right under the bird! Built four and a-half years ago, Venetian Golf and River Club is a Chip Powell design and WCI Communities property. Playing here, you really begin to experience Florida's Myakka river environment and natural wildlife habitats. Lots of water and wetlands, an open layout, white sands and flat terrain tell you, you're in Southern Florida. You also learn that a

ball in the water is a lost ball - no fishing 'em out of these waters, which are likely hosts to alligators and snakes.

Riverwood Golf Club in Port Charlotte [www.riverwoodgc.com](http://www.riverwoodgc.com) is also built off of the Myakka River. Designed by Gene Bates in 1992,

the course is host to a number of state and local championships. Rated four and a-half stars by Golf Digest for the nearly a decade and voted one of the most women-friendly courses in 2000, Riverwood offers two distinctive nines. The front nine has winding fairways and pines, while the back



Photo courtesy of The Riverwood Golf Club

Riverwood



### Corkscrew Par 3.

has salt marshes, natural areas and native plant life. There's lots of water, but it's a bit deceptive; you see it, but it really doesn't come into play.

The showcase course of the writer's tour was easily Old Corkscrew in Estero [www.old-corkscrew.com](http://www.old-corkscrew.com). This Jack Nicklaus-designed signature masterpiece is a stand-alone course. No condos, no houses...just you, the course and nature...and it's spectacular. The Nicklaus architects have crafted a course that capitalizes on the area's natural beauty. With added mounding and plantings, it is a unique, and often breathtaking, Florida property.

Voted 2008 Florida Course of the Year by the National Golf Course Owners Association, Old Corkscrew opened in February 2007. As

described by Head Golf Professional Mike Collins, the course and its surroundings comprise 175 acres near the Everglades - "a pretty sensitive area." And for that reason it will never be further developed. The result is "a beautiful golf experience," he said. "You'll probably be shaking your head a little bit from a scoring perspective, but you'll certainly enjoy it."

Raptor Bay Golf Club in Bonita Springs [www.raptorbaygolfclub.com](http://www.raptorbaygolfclub.com) is the first resort golf course globally to receive Certified Gold Signature Sanctuary status from Audubon International. Designed by Raymond Floyd, this is a fun, pretty and very playable resort course. What adds to its speed of play and enjoyment are no sand bunkers. That doesn't mean there aren't other hazards, like water and crushed coquina shell areas with

scrub vegetation, which will either eat your ball or skid it off on its merry way.

Currently, Raptor Bay, which is associated with the adjacent the lavish Hyatt Regency Coconut Point [www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com](http://www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com) has two nines - the Hawk and Osprey - with a third, the Eagle, opening in about two years.

The final stop of our Writer's Cup Golf tour was The Rookery at Marco Golf Club on Marco Island [www.therookeryatmarco.com](http://www.therookeryatmarco.com). Part of the impressive Marco Island Marriott Beach Resort <http://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/mrkfl>, The Rookery was recently rebuilt as part of \$187 million resort renovation, the largest cash investment in any Marriott property in its history. Redesigned by Robert Cupp, Jr.,

the course is nestled in shallow wetlands that attract many species of birds. Here, our golf car GPS, in addition to yardages, notified us of an occupied eagle's nest, visible in a tall tree behind one of the greens. At more than 7,100 yards from the tips, the Rookery has generous fairways, oversized greens, the option to play from one of five tee locations and of course, wonderful birds and wildlife.

Our weeklong trip was a great tour - and a doable one for weeklong travelers who want to golf the Gulf. Paul and I came back to Michigan with lots of great memories and with the winning team trophies - our challenging Michigan courses had taught us well! **MG**



Susan and Paul Bairley at Marco Island



Raptor Bay