


GolfStyles

DECEMBER 2009

2010 TRAVEL PLANNER

AROUND
THE CORNER

AROUND THE WORLD

SCOTLAND'S NEWEST CLASSIC:
MACHRIHANISH DUNES GOLF CLUB



It May Not Be Home,
But the Golf Sure is
Sweet

THE RTJ TRAIL



Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" incessantly hummed in my head while playing courses on Alabama's alluring Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. Sweet home Alabama – where the skies are so blue – shadowed me from tee to green from Montgomery to Opelika to Birmingham.

By Patrick Jones

I could not get the tune out of my head; it is a good thing that I like that song. And the more impeccably groomed and downright gorgeous courses that I encountered along The Trail, the more poetic license that was taken with Skynyrd's Alabama anthem.

"Sweet home Alabama, where the skies are so blue, where fairways are lush and the putts roll so true."

My golfer's song adaptations seemed appropriate considering the surroundings – and with all apologies to the band and its fans. The internal volume pumped up with every precious fairway hit and elusive par or better carded along what is likely the country's most impressive collection of public layouts.

The ultra-successful Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail was the brainchild of Dr. David G. Bronner. As head of the Retirement Systems of

Alabama, Bronner envisioned a multi-level marketing campaign with its missions to transform Alabama into a top golf destination, expand the state's overall tourism, recruit new industry and jobs (most executives do love golf), attract retirees, and reshape the state's sometimes marked image, while, of course, boosting the pension fund returns for the state's teachers and other state employees.

Bronner believed that a collection of affordable, easily accessible world-class

building the golf trail beginning in the late 1980s. In less than two decades, The Trail has blossomed into 468 holes (equivalent to 26 18-hole layouts) in 11 locations in every corner of this charming Deep South state.

Accolades for The Trail have rolled in from almost every major media outlet and golf publication. The financially savvy *Wall Street Journal* says The Trail "may be the best (golf) bargain in the country." And from the *New York Times*: "(The Trail offers)

he chooses, to the loudest and last laugh. Many other states have attempted to duplicate the groundbreaking Alabama golf trail's success. None has come close. "I think the success of The Trail has been better than I thought it would be," says Bronner. "I know it has frustrated a lot of enemies. I know when we started there were a lot of skeptics."

Alabama's standing has been greatly enhanced by the RTJGT. The state's past is both controversial and colorful, from its former governor, the flamboyant George Wallace, to Rosa Parks sparking social change by refusing to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery to legendary University of Alabama football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant scowling and prowling the sidelines leading the Crimson Tide's fortunes in his ever-present hound's tooth hat.

Professional golfer Jerry Pate, who played collegiately at the University of Alabama, brought the state some positive notice in the golf world with his major championship victory at the 1976 U.S. Open. Much goodwill, however, was undone with the controversy over Birmingham's Shoal Creek Club, host of the 1990

PGA Championship, which did not allow black members at the time.

Time, change and the rise and popularity of the RTJGT have transcended that clamor. Alabama can now also pride itself in another golf major champion. Huntsville native Stewart Cink captured the 2009 British Open.

"The Trail is a neat arrow in a quiver of arrows," says Bronner. "It has impacted almost every city in the state



THE SENATOR COURSE AT CAPITOL HILL

public courses strategically dispersed across Alabama's most desirable locations was the ultimate answer for all of his lofty goals.

Don Quixote may have garnered more initial public and political support for his demented, one-man crusade against defenseless windmills.

The undaunted Bronner landed the services of renowned golf course architect Robert Trent Jones Sr. and invested more than \$100 million into

some of the best public golf on earth."

Alabama's tourism dollars have increased almost fourfold in the past decade to nearly \$10 billion annually. Much of that increase can be attributed to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, which hosts more than 500,000 rounds per year. Global companies such as Mercedes, ST Aerospace, Airbus, and Honda have opened new facilities in Alabama in recent years.

The clever Dr. Bronner is entitled, if

in one form or another. I think the state's image has been changed for the improvement of the people of Alabama."

The beauty and genius of the RTJGT are multi-faceted. It offers multiple top-notch courses at all of its locations, including 54 holes at some destinations. Most facilities are located just minutes off the state's major interstates and primary thoroughfares. Alabama's Department of Transportation gives major play to the RTJGT roadside signage,

preventing even the most directionally challenged drivers from getting lost.

On a shoestring budget (green fees average around \$55), golfers can play courses polished enough to host the professional tours each year. The LPGA's Navistar Classic is hosted at Capitol Hill's Senator Course just outside the capital city of Montgomery. The Bell Micro LPGA Classic is played at Magnolia Grove's Crossing Course in the Gulf Coast city of Mobile. And

the Champions Tour Regents Charity Classic is hosted at the impeccable Ross Bridge on the outskirts of Birmingham. Ross Bridge is the third-longest golf course in the world, playing up to 8,191 yards for anyone willing to take on the full real estate.

In addition to its golf appeals, the accommodations, dining, and other amenities at the RTJGT's sites are also first class. The Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort and Spa in Hoover and The Battle House in Mobile have both been chosen "Top 500 Hotels in the World" by *Travel + Leisure*. Five of the Alabama trail's hotels are ranked AAA four diamond properties.

It is all enough to make a golfer never want to leave. In fact, that, too, can be arranged. National Village is a planned 700-acre residential community that adjoins the Grand National courses in Opelika, just minutes from the Auburn University campus. The area was named one of the "Top 10 Places to Retire for Golf" by *U.S. News & World Report*. Golf cottages start at \$170,000. Larger homes begin at \$400,000. The Colony at the Grand Hotel on Mobile Bay also offers residential opportunities on the RTJGT.

The success of the state's golf trail has spawned the Robert Trent Jones Spa Trail. Located at The Trail's five four-diamond resorts, the Spa Trail offers services ranging from warm stone massages to caviar facials and can keep non-golfing significant others fully satisfied.

There are plenty of options when setting up a golf-filled trek to Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. It might even require multiple trips to capture its full essence.

Oh, the possibilities. Here comes that Lynyrd Skynyrd song back into my head: "Sweet home Alabama, Lord I'm coming back to you." ■

What Else in Sweet Alabama?

Anniston/Gadsden DeSoto Caverns in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains is noted for one of the world's largest accumulations of onyx-marble stalagmites and stalactites.

Auburn/Opelika A tour of this college town (Auburn University) offers numerous restaurants, bars and sporting events. Auburn's University Chapel is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Birmingham Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum: The country's largest motorcycle museum has more than 1,100 motorcycles, including a few that are more than 100 years old. Motorcycles come from 14 countries and from more than 100 different manufacturers. Lotus and other racecars are also on display. The city was built on steel, and Birmingham's Commerce Club built a monstrous statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of the forge, for the 1904 World's Fair. Vulcan overlooks the city with unparalleled views of the downtown skyline from atop Red Mountain.

Dothan "The Peanut Capital of the World" naturally is home to the George Washington Carver Museum, a tribute to his 300 or so uses for the peanut. The Army Aviation Museum on Fort Rucker features more than 160 military planes and helicopters.

Huntsville The U.S. Space and Rocket Center features artifacts of the country's space program, including hands-on interactive exhibits and space travel simulators.

Mobile Bellingrath Gardens is a 10,500-square-foot home, completed in 1935, that showcases an extensive collection of antiques, furniture, china, crystal and cut glass. The 65-acre grounds have won an award as the "Top Public Rose Garden in the U.S."

Montgomery The Rosa Parks Library and Museum honors the woman who sparked the civil rights movement when she refused to give her bus seat to a white man in 1955. The museum relives the turbulent era with video and other historical displays. The Hank Williams Museum pays tribute to one of country music's early pioneers.



BELLINGRATH GARDENS AND HUNTSVILLE SPACE CENTER

The Courses



CAMBRIAN RIDGE

Greenville

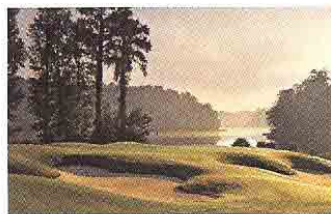
Three nine-hole courses. The Loblolly course exudes an Augusta National feel.



CAPITOL HILL

Prattville/Montgomery

Three 18-hole courses. The Senator is a traditional, Scottish-style layout. The Legislator features huge pine trees reminiscent of Pinehurst. The Judge plays alongside the Alabama River with 12 holes bordering water and large elevation drops.



GRAND NATIONAL

Auburn/Opelika

Three 18-hole courses. Layouts include The Links, The Lake and The Short Course designs. The Lake features a 230-yard par 3 with an island green. One national publication named Grand National as "the best public golf in the country."



HAMPTON COVE

Huntsville

Three 18-hole courses in the northeast corner. The River is the only Trail course without a bunker. The Highlands is lined with thousands of Japanese black pines, oaks, dogwoods and crepe myrtles. Eleven of The Short Course's holes have water in play.



HIGHLAND OAKS

Dothan

Four nine-hole courses. The Marshwood course features a 701-yard par 5. The Magnolia course is reached via a 1,000-foot wooden bridge spanning a marsh.



MAGNOLIA GROVE

Mobile

Three 18-hole courses. The host course for the Bell Micro LPGA Classic features The Falls, The Crossings and The Short Course.



LAKEWOOD GOLF CLUB

Point Clear

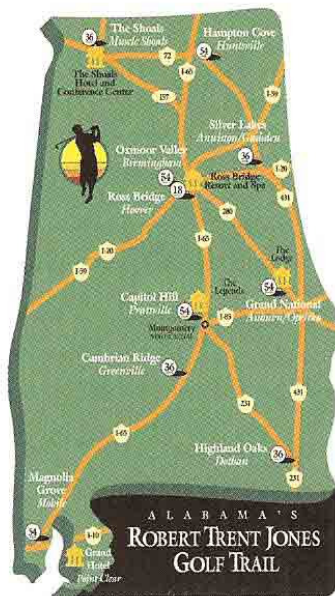
The Dogwood course was renovated in 2004 and the Azalea course was renovated in 2005. The Grand Hotel, originally built in 1847, sits along Mobile Bay and offers luxury to golf travelers.



ROSS BRIDGE

Birmingham

Host to an annual Champions Tour event, Ross Bridge is the third-longest course in the world. Ten holes play along the banks of a pair of lakes connected by an 80-foot waterfall.



OXMOOR VALLEY

Birmingham

Three 18-hole courses are located within approximately one mile of Ross Bridge. The Ridge, The Valley and The Short Course range in price from \$40 to \$62.



SILVER LAKES

Anniston/Gadsden

Four nine-hole courses. The aptly named The Heartbreaker is considered by many as the most challenging nine holes on the entire Trail. Other courses include The Short Course and the intimidatingly named The Backbreaker and The Mindbreaker.



THE SHOALS

Florence

Courses include The Fighting Joe and The Schoolmaster. The nearby Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa overlooks the Tennessee River.