

Big Easy

Louisiana has seen its share of weather-related troubles over the last few years, but the state's golf courses are rebounding and are definitely open for play. **PATRICK JONES** visits bayou country's beautiful Audubon Golf Trail...

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, a foursome best described as “hellish” sliced its way across Louisiana. These good-for-nothing invaders left a trail of personal misery and property damage that, frankly, still remains a healing gash. Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike knocked much of Louisiana to its knees with destructive winds, flooding rains and deadly consequences. Though not the most important casualties, the state’s approximately 160 golf courses did not escape unharmed.

Despite the destruction, Louisiana is battling back with a vengeance. Part of that battle involves a strategic tourism recovery plan named Louisiana Rebirth: Restoring the Soul of America.

“I am pleased to report that Louisiana is open for business and ready to offer visitors an authentic experience that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world,” says Lieutenant Governor Mitchell J. Landrieu.

There is no denying the unique allures of New Orleans and the rest of the state: Bourbon Street, jazz and Zydeco music, Mardi Gras, seafood gumbo and expansive bayous are all well known Louisiana assets, at least by cinematic representation. Additionally, as the state’s license plates proclaim, Louisiana is a “Sportsman’s Paradise.” That reference primarily referred to its extensive hunting and fishing opportunities, but recent initiatives have pushed golf to the forefront

of the state’s numerous recreational appeals. Inspired by the success of golf course assemblages in other states—most notably Alabama’s Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail—Louisiana launched its own “Audubon Golf Trail” in 2001 (“Gumbo Trail” was briefly considered).

The Audubon Golf Trail (AGT) is named after naturalist and wildlife artist John James Audubon. His *Birds of America* image collection consists of 435 hand-colored, life-size prints of bird species, many of them researched and drawn in Louisiana. All courses on the AGT, by requirement, are members of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary for Golf Courses, a program dedicated to providing wildlife habitat, protecting water quality and improving overall environmental performance.

The AGT lineup comprises a diverse dozen courses that stretch from Shreveport in the northwest to





GRAY PLANTATION (ABOVE) & TPC LOUISIANA (RIGHT)

New Orleans in the southeast corner of the state. Stops include Lafayette, Alexandria and Lake Charles, among others. Course designers range from Pete Dye and Denis Griffith to Louisiana native sons Hal Sutton (Shreveport) and David Toms (Monroe). Arnold Palmer has one course design in the state, The Bluffs Country Club in St. Francisville, but the private club is not part of the AGT.

Toms, the 2001 PGA Champion, is the official spokesperson of the AGT. The trail's marketing brochures and Web site picture him standing near his golf ball in the rough next to a pond wearing

a deep purple golf shirt (representative of his beloved LSU Tigers). Aside from the huge (stuffed) alligator beneath him, it makes golfing in Louisiana look downright fun—if not a little intimidating. In fact, golf has a long and rich history in Louisiana.

Along with Toms and Sutton (a Ryder Cup captain and 1983 PGA Champion), other notable players to come out of the state include brothers Jay and Lionel Hebert, Brian Bateman, Kelly Gibson and Mike Heinen. The King himself once battled Jack Nicklaus here for the PGA Tour money title, in the final event of the

1964 season at the Cajun Classic at Oakbourne Country Club in Lafayette. High time, then, that the state be recognized as a golf destination.

When the Audubon Golf Trail concept was developed, the decision was made to pull together a consortium of Louisiana's best daily fee courses. According to Stuart Johnson, assistant secretary with the Louisiana Office of State Parks, a "two-fold process" was created for clubs wanting to gain, and then maintain, membership on the AGT.

"Our desire is to attract the very top courses in the state," says Johnson. "First, there are some mandatory requirements that a course has to have. One of the big components, of course, is that the course has to be open to the public since the Audubon Golf Trail promotes state tourism. The courses also

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have to have a certain course yardage (minimum 6,500 yards), offer certain amenities and have a certain budget for annual course maintenance (at least \$500,000)... We want to make sure that it is just not any course. There is a fee that courses pay to apply and that helps us become a bit exclusive in terms of the level of courses we get.

"The second component [for AGT course membership] is an evaluation," he continues. "A committee goes out and evaluates the courses, plays them, and evaluates everything from design to maintenance to facilities, all the way down to the food that is served in the clubhouse. The level of customer service is another valuable factor that is in there. Based on those evaluations, the best courses are selected."

Johnson explains that courses already in the system go through a



reevaluation each year to make sure quality and standards are up to par. As he puts it, "When someone comes and plays the trail and goes home, we want them to talk highly about it."

Courses on the AGT have individually won numerous awards, confirming Johnson's quality assertions. TPC Louisiana, which opened in 2004, hosts the PGA Tour's Zurich Classic. *Golf Digest* ranked it among the "Top Five Best New Courses" in the U.S. Atchafalaya at Idlewild in Patterson won the same award in a different year. The Toms-designed Carter Plantation, featuring live oaks and cypress wetlands, was voted one of the "Top 10 Best New Courses" by *Golf Magazine*. Audubon Park Golf Club, located in the heart of New Orleans near Loyola University, was redesigned by architect Denis Griffith in 2002 and has won awards for "Best Place to Play" from national golf publications. Interestingly, this course served as the base camp for the National Guard's search and recovery efforts following Katrina, and was reopened for play only two months following Guard operations.

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Besides the quality of its courses, there are other appeals that differentiate the AGT from golf trails in other states.

"What I particularly like about the Audubon Golf Trail is that each course has a different designer and therefore a very different look," says Johnson. "Audubon gives you a lot of variety."

Part of that variety has as much to do with Louisiana's geography and topography as it does with course design.

"The beauty of the state is in its diversity," says Paul Buckley, chairman of the Audubon Golf Trail. "There are swamps and flatlands in the southern region, but when you get up to the northern part of the state it has rolling terrain. There are 100-foot pines and hills and valleys like it is New Hampshire. The Audubon courses have a totally different feel depending on where you are in Louisiana."

No matter the part of the state, the AGT does its best to assure that visiting golfers have an enjoyable stay both on and off the course.

"It is important that we tie the golf experience to the Louisiana experience," says Johnson. "We think that we have such a rich culture and so much to offer people that when they come here, we want them to certainly enjoy the golf, but we want them to eat our food, to hear our music, to go to the attractions in New Orleans and around the state, including Cajun Country, and all the



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Audubon Golf Trail travel packages:

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<http://www.tpc.com/louisiana>

Audubon Park New Orleans, La.

<http://www.auduboninstitute.org>

The Atchafalaya at Idlewild

Patterson, La.

<http://www.atchafalayagolf.com>

The Wetlands Lafayette, La.

<http://www.wetlandsgc.com>

Olde Oaks Haughton, La.

<http://www.oldeoaksgolf.com>

The Island Plaquemine, La.

<http://www.theislandgolf.com>

Cypress Bend Resort Many, La.

<http://www.cypressbend.com>

Tamahka Trails Marksville, La.

<https://www.paragoncasinoresort.com/site36.php>

Gray Plantation Lake Charles, La.

<http://www.graywoodllc.com>

Carter Plantation Springfield, La.

<http://www.carterplantation.com>

Oak Wing Alexandria, La. (below)

<http://www.oakwinggolf.com>

Black Bear Delhi, La.

<http://www.blackbeargc.com>



THE WETLANDS

other things that are Louisiana. Each area has its own charms. We tie the golf courses as closely as we can to all the other attractions and amenities. After someone is finished playing golf, they have a slew of other things to do. If their spouse comes and doesn't play golf, there is plenty for them to do, whether it is a plantation tour, or a Civil War battle site, or a number of other activities."

Carr McCalla, executive director of the Louisiana Golf Association, says that there are "so many things that are unique to Louisiana, including, unfortunately, hurricanes." A fierce storm, however, did not stop his organization from staging the state's Senior Four-Ball Championship less than a week after Hurricane Ike rolled through in September 2008. McCalla stated that the state's golf industry "came back as quick as anybody." As an example, McCalla says the staff at the Lake Charles Country Club, host of the four-ball event, was at the course the day after the storm clearing trees and other debris to make the course playable as quickly as possible.

"We are resilient in Louisiana," says Johnson, assistant secretary with the office of state parks, regarding the recent hurricane challenges. "We are very good at bouncing back. We have learned how to do it and we do it quite quickly. You know, you lose some trees, well, you make that part of the future of the golf course in some manner. The biggest thing is that we are coming back strong. We want everyone to know that we are open for business." ■

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