

# haven

A guide to exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina





RENEWING A  
*Coastal Classic*





**Nº 14**

Patrick Jones, golf writer and member of the North Carolina Golf Panel, gives his take on the newly renovated Bald Head Island Club golf course.

BY PATRICK JONES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIP HENDERSON



## One of the first things

I quickly came to realize—and you will, too—after teeing off at the Bald Head Island Club golf course is that, regardless of my greens fee having been paid in the pro shop, I was a trespasser.

The long-term, year-round residents—deer, alligators, osprey, foxes and other abundant wildlife—were basically letting me play through. I was in their element. I was welcome to chase after my hard-to-control dimpled white ball as long as I respected their privacy and inherent ownership rights on this immaculate course carved (no, better yet—engraved) in an ancient maritime forest located two miles off North Carolina's southeasternmost coastline.

Because I was playing solo in an early morning round, the starter ushered me in front of a pair of foursomes already waiting at the first tee. With no warm-up swings, insufficient coffee yet consumed and a small gallery ready to critique my opening volley, I proceeded to block my drive into an expansive waste area running down the right side of the fairway.

Perhaps, it flashed through my mind, I should have, instead, saved my energy and resolve for the Waxing Wednesday hair removal treatment at the Island Retreat Spa and Salon.

Hastily exiting the scene in my getaway cart, I found my golf ball easily. An inquisitive red-tail hawk was on the ground scouting it like it was the egg of a potential offspring that had fallen out of its nest. Likely having seen quite enough wayward shots off the first tee, it quickly lost interest in my Titleist and flew off. This I took as a go-ahead sign from the winged sentinel to respectfully continue forth into the precious habitat.

I blasted out of the sand and then knocked my third shot to within 30 feet of the hole. I rolled the ball twice for an opening bogey, which was quite acceptable considering the shaky start. A chorus of cicadas steadily hummed from the trees in a loud monotone as if reserving judgment on my game for their brethren stationed on following holes.







## **Nº. 6**

White ibises and red-tailed hawks find the live oaks and cedars surrounding Hole 6 to be the perfect place to roost.



*The Bald Head Island Club golf course has long been considered one of North Carolina's coastal golfing gems.*







## **N<sup>o</sup>. 11**

According to Bald Head Island Club General Manager Robert Norton, one of the course's most dramatically transformed holes is No. 11.



Architect George Cobb originally designed the Bald Head Island Golf Club, which opened for play in 1974. Cobb, who passed away in 1986, left his imprint across the Carolinas. Additionally in his portfolio are Quail Hollow Country Club in Charlotte, host of an annual PGA Tour stop, and layouts at Sea Pines Plantation in Hilton Head, S.C. Cobb also designed the Par 3 Course at fabled Augusta National Golf Club, which is home to the annual Masters Tournament.

The Bald Head Island Club golf course has long been considered one of North Carolina's coastal golfing gems. But it, like, say, Demi Moore, needed updates after 35-plus years.

A better selection for the golf course modification work could not have been made. Designer Tim Cate does his best work with an ocean breeze mussing his hair and the smell of saltwater wafting in the air. Cate has his name on the "Big Cats," a highly acclaimed quartet of courses at Ocean Ridge Plantation in Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., with names like Tiger's Eye and Leopard's Chase.

I, having played the original Cobb design at Bald Head Island Club, and now experiencing the just refurbished course following Cate's handiwork, felt the transformations were both significant and subtle.

Blind tee shots no longer exist. The landing areas on more than half of the fairways are widened. Thirty-five acres of grass that once



required constant maintenance have been replaced with natural sand areas. With less water and fertilizer required, the course has taken a forward-thinking step back toward its natural surroundings.

What has not changed is Cobb's original course routing. There have been slight tweaks to make some holes more playable, strategic and aesthetically pleasing. For instance, the tee boxes on No. 16, a downhill par 3 that many consider the course's most memorable hole, have been elevated to provide glorious views of the Atlantic Ocean. The greens have been replaced with MiniVerde, a grass that provides a faster and truer roll.

Overall, the essence of the original Cobb design remains in place. It has even been built upon. Cobb drew double-tiered greens on Nos. 14 and 18 in his original drawings but did not implement them. Cate did, adding another level of intrigue to the thought-provoking design that reopened for play in 2011.

With its \$3.9 million rework, an already notable and acclaimed golf course has leapt forward—not unlike the deer that bounded across the fairway as I stood over my second shot on No. 4, a 545-yard par 5 with a dogleg to the left. Somewhat startled (me, not the deer), my perfectly placed tee shot went for naught as my second shot drifted right into some vegetation. Why not balance the fauna experience with some flora? After a punch out, bump-and-run to the edge of the green and a couple more putts, it was back on the bogey ferry.

Regardless of how you play on the Bald Head Island Club golf course, it is tough getting too worked up while enveloped in such a pristine outdoor sanctuary. I could not help but imagine that two of the baddest boys ever to set foot on the island—pirates Edward “Blackbeard” Teach and Stede Bonnet—would have spent less time terrorizing and more time chipping and putting if the solace of this course had been at their disposal. And post-round beers and cheeseburgers at the Pelicatessen would have worked wonders for their dispositions. I know it did for mine.

Golfers get so consumed with their games and getting the ball in the hole that they often forget to lift their chins and soak in their surroundings. I stood on the tee box at No. 7



## **Nº 16**

The morning this shot was taken, a gray fox stood careful watch near the tee box, perhaps taking in the ocean views for himself.



*The tee boxes on No. 16, a downhill par 3 that many consider the course's most memorable hole, have been elevated to provide glorious views of the Atlantic Ocean.*







## No. 17

During the course renovation, Civil War-era bones were discovered on this hole, and sent to the State Office of Archaeology for study.





and captured a carpe diem moment to store away for my rocking chair days. The statuesque Old Baldy Lighthouse, with its almost 200 years of history, loomed over my shoulder. An osprey soared overhead on unseen thermals. Five-hundred-and-eleven yards of lush green, carpet-thick Bermuda grass lay in front of me. The sky was vivid blue. Warmth from the sun was comforting. Lost in the moment, my swing tempo slowed, my clubface squared and I was on the green in three putting for birdie.

No, it didn't go in. The medium-length putt rolled like a hatchling Loggerhead turtle trying to find its way to the ocean. It left me a solid tap-in par, though, and I was not disturbed at the missed chance. I put the stick back in the hole and moved on with renewed vigor.

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The Bald Head Island Club course is not lengthy. It plays 6,823 yards from the back tees. The golf course is challenging, no doubt, but fair to those with the wisdom to play from the correct tee boxes. Beginners biting off the full distance of this layout may need a search party sent out on their behalf. Humor me while I preach: Do yourself and the golfers behind you a favor and move forward to the tees that best suit your skill set to get the most enjoyment from this layout.

A prime challenge on this design is proper club selection while adjusting to ever-present and directionally changing winds. Another test is finishing the round without shoes full of sand from the ample waste bunkers.

And did I forget to mention the water?

There is no shortage of the wet stuff to



grab your attention. Lagoons front tee boxes and greens complexes, and frame the sides of many fairways.

I submerged my first ball on No. 8, a picturesque par 3 that plays 173 yards downhill. As the winds swirled from the elevated tee box, I chose the right club for me—a 6-iron. The hole was a sucker pin tucked close to the left side of the green. The entire left side of the hole is avidly protected by a lagoon. Taking legendary golf coach Harvey Penick's advice, I took dead aim at the hole; not being one of Penick's prized pupils (major champions Ben Crenshaw and Tom Kite, for instance), my calculations were not complete. The ball started straight at the pin. A 10-15 mph right to left wind then took my ball for a blustery joy ride. The ball landed on the very edge of the green, hesitated, then plunged down the bank and into the murky depths.

One of the popular attractions on Bald Head Island is the Ghost Walk, advertised as *a stroll down shrouded paths...encountering the haunts of tortured spirits and lost souls*. I unofficially added myself to the itinerary as my somewhat promising round met its own untimely and harrowing end with a large number on Hole 8.

I considered peering into the water to see if the ball might be retrieved but remembered the ominous warning posted on a wooden sign on a previous hole. It read: *Alligators in many of the lagoons occasionally eat large animals, raccoons, deer and dogs. Swimming is strictly prohibited. To an alligator, a splash means food.* Better to serve up a Titleist as an alligator's bon-bon than an appendage; best to move on to the next hole.

The alligator warning is an unmistakably clear sign to remind Homo sapiens in soft cleats and Bermuda shorts that they only think they reign over this 12,000-acre nirvana.

Emerging out of the maritime forest on the back nine, I strolled onto the elevated tee box on No. 16 and soaked in the views. A massive cargo ship churned surprisingly close offshore as it headed for the mouth of the Cape Fear River on its way to Wilmington. A group of bicyclists stopped their ride behind the green to admire the hole's beauty. This time the impromptu audience inspired me. I safely found the middle of the



## N<sup>o</sup> 8

This 173-yard par 3 is made more challenging by the temperamental combination of water bordering the fairway and wind off the ocean.







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## Nº 9

Concluding the front 9, this hole rewards golfers with a spectacular view of the Bald Head Island Clubhouse with the Atlantic Ocean as its backdrop.

green, lagged the ball close and tapped in for another par.

As a member of a golf panel that annually ranks North Carolina's top courses, I have had the privilege to play some of the state's best from the mountains to the sea—with golf meccas like Pinehurst in between. As I made my way over the final two holes to the clubhouse, I reflected on the unique and memorable golf experience offered by the Bald Head Island Club.

One of the island's marketing slogans is "Getting There is Half the Fun." And it's true. The ferry ride across from Southport, particularly on the upper deck outside in the elements, provided me with a stunning view of the mouth of the Cape Fear River and its melding with the Atlantic Ocean. It was also a kick to take a golf cart, the main mode of island transportation, to the golf course so that I could switch my clubs to another golf cart. And when I finished my round, I switched my golf clubs from one golf cart to...well, you get the point.

From a personal standpoint, the quality of my game could have been better on this day. But that is golf. And you know what? I didn't really care. The course was beautifully manicured. The newly reworked layout was challenging and diverse. The staff was friendly. And most important, the long-term, year-round residents—deer, alligators, osprey, foxes and other abundant wildlife—allowed me the honor to play in their island sanctuary for an unforgettable few hours. 🌿



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