

The Breakers' Ocean Course

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Published: January 01, 2002



Living near the ocean takes its toll. Just look at the weather-worn, prematurely aged faces of most commercial fishermen. Same with golf courses, even in Florida's affluent Palm Beach. The combination of salt spray, blazing sun, and constant breezes quickly ages the features of vintage seaside links. In the case of The

Breakers' Ocean Course, the combination of its ocean-hugging location and numerous architectural tinkering over the years had left the original 105-year-old Alexander Findlay design nearly unrecognizable.

Enter golf course architect Brian Silva. Resort owners hired the Massachusetts-based designer to perform a \$4 million facelift to restore Florida's oldest course to its former beauty. Much like a cosmetic surgeon, Silva nipped and tucked the Ocean Course's features -- introducing random bunkering throughout the landscape, weaving fairways around sandy hazards, extending water bodies to the edge of a half-dozen greens, and replacing the time-worn, thatchy putting surfaces with smooth-rolling Tifeagle Bermudagrass.

The result is a rejuvenated grande dame whose classic, outward appearance now enhances rather than detracts from that of the impressive oceanfront resort. "The Breakers is such a spectacular facility, the course really needed to be brought up quite a few levels to match it," Silva says.

The 200 yards of additional playing surface, 18 new greens, and 88 new and rebuilt bunkers also increase the challenge of the 6,167-yard layout, although golfers shouldn't expect a (Pete Dye) Ocean Course-sized round.

"We're never going to host a Tour event here," says Director of Golf Dan St. Louis. "We're restoring an heirloom."

One of the things Silva restored is the par of 70. With just a single par five (the 469-yard 17th), strategy rather than length provides the challenge. An exception is the sixth hole, a robust 440-yard par four where length and strategy combine to foil the golfer. The drive must sail between a pond on the right and a single bunker on the left before coming to rest in a tight landing area squeezed by sand on one side and water on the other. A mid-iron approach must carry a stone-fortified pond fronting a peninsula green backed by three more bunkers. Silva also provides an alternate route around the pond for the less-skilled player.

More typical are the shorter par fours. Holes eight through 12 are part of a five-hole stretch of two-shotters that alternately head toward and then away from the beach. If the wind is busting off the Atlantic, the 296-yard eighth may require a well-struck fairway wood and mid-iron into a stiff breeze to reach the green in two. With the wind at their backs on the very next hole, average ballstrikers might actually consider going for the green off the tee while retreating from the surf on the 301-yard ninth. In both cases, however, precision is needed to avoid the deeply recessed bunkers that edge the fairways and defend the greens.

Coming into view during the stroll up the 18th are the 560-room Breakers Hotel and new Breakers Ocean Clubhouse. The 32,000-square-foot clubhouse, opened last February, is part of the resort's \$130 million revitalization program.

The two-story, old Florida-style structure features wood clapboard on the first level, shingles on the second, and a slate roof. Inside is a complete golf shop, luxurious locker rooms, fitness center, and the Flagler Steakhouse, with porch seating and fairway views.

The resort's many amenities offer alternatives to golf in the event of rain. But don't count on a shower to keep you at the bar or in the spa, which might have been the case prior to the drainage improvements.

"We re-opened in November and had an 11-inch downpour one night," recalls St. Louis. "We were playing golf at 9 o'clock the next

morning. We would have closed for a minimum of five to seven days before the renovations."