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THE JOYS AND VARIETY OF DAILY-FEE GOLF

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The landmark Biltmore Hotel stands behind the ninth green. Right: former Wykagyl and Biltmore pro Alex Smith.

Ross Redux

Everything old is new again at The Biltmore, where one of the best courses in South Florida has been restored to its former glory

BY BRIAN McCALLEN

It was the Roaring Twenties, that infamous decade of boom and bust, and Florida was just coming of age as a tourist destination. George E. Merrick, a visionary developer who by 1921 had amassed 3,000 acres of undeveloped land on the outskirts of Miami, set out to create a planned community he called "The City Beautiful." So was born Coral Gables, with tree-lined boulevards, plazas and fountains inspired by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and architectural motifs borrowed from cities in Spain.

The jewel in the fledgling city's crown was the Biltmore Hotel, a stunning Mediterranean Revival-style edifice designed to blend into the subtropical landscape. This is where high society gathered in the winter months to dance to big bands and dip a toe in the nation's largest swimming pool. Sportsmen from Bobby Jones to Babe Ruth were drawn to the resort's Donald Ross-designed golf course, a links-style layout that debuted in 1925 to immediate acclaim. Lessons were available from Alex Smith, a Scotsman who moved between the Biltmore and his head professional job at Wykagyl Country Club in New Rochelle, N.Y.

Alas, time was not kind to the golf course, which eventually was taken over by the city and operated as a muni. By the time a 15-year-old Tiger Woods claimed the 1991 Orange Bowl Junior Internation-

al at the Biltmore, the course had begun to curl up at the edges. The hotel's guest rooms and soaring cupola, inspired by the Giralda tower atop the Cathedral in Seville, were refurbished in the late 1990s, but the course they overlooked was a featureless dustbowl.

Enter makeover maestro Brian Silva, a course architect with a well-established affinity for Golden Age designs. He relished the opportunity to refurbish the course and make it a worthy companion to the hotel.



The Golf

The Biltmore Golf Course, now operated by the hotel, reopened in November 2007 following a five-million-dollar makeover by Silva, whose Ross restorations include fabled Seminole Golf Club in North Palm Beach.

"The course was terribly run-down when I first visited, but the



Newly restored cross bunkers add to the challenge of the par-five first hole.

bones were still there," Silva remembers. "The layout was treated like any other under-funded muni in tough times—it was simply left alone. This neglect was a blessing because the property was not planted with a forest of intrusive trees, and some of the most spectacular fairway bunkers Ross ever created were merely allowed to grass over."

Working from original routing plans, old photos and Ross's notes, Silva adapted the course for the modern game. The hole corridors were retained, but greens and tees were reconstructed, and a new irrigation and drainage system has vastly improved the quality of the turf. With five sets of tees, the course has across-the-board appeal.

Silva credits the expansive, 140-acre site with his ability to reinstate fairway widths to their intended dimensions and bring back the strategic options that Ross incorporated.

The open-entry greens, which had atrophied over the years, were enlarged and redone. Raised slightly above fairway level, the Biltmore's subtly contoured putting surfaces are nicely framed by low rolling mounds. Miss a green, and the game is on.

"Ross's chipping areas are actually tougher than bunkers or heavy rough because he forces you to manufacture a shot," Silva explains. "You can putt it or chip it or punch it or make up some other kind of shot. Ross gives you so many choices. He makes you think, and you're never sure which shot will work best."

Silva believes the fairway bunkers will be the legacy of the course. "The berms that Ross created behind the bunkers were still there—and they are extraordinarily high." Excavated to their original depth, the refurbished bunkers not only provide dramatic relief on the relatively flat landscape, they create a risk-reward scenario at nearly every hole. Accomplished players can attempt to fly their drives over the hazards, while average golfers can chart a longer but safer route around the imposing bunkers.

The strength of the course is its superb variety of holes. The par-35 front nine is short and sporty, with good scoring opportunities at the fourth and ninth holes, each an "engaging, vintage-era, shortish par four," according to Silva. The longer par-36 back nine ratchets up the challenge. From the tips, the 448-yard 13th and 450-yard 17th holes rank among the finest par fours in Miami-Dade, while the massive 558-yard 15th hole, its green fronted by a canal, is a true three-shot par five.

Insider's Edge

The one shot you need: A straight tee ball to avoid strategically-placed fairway bunkers.

Best chance for a birdie: At 320 yards from white tees, you should only have a wedge into the large green at the par-four fourth hole.

Toughest hole: Par-four 17th, stretching to 450 yards, calls for a big drive followed by a brave approach to an undulating, 50-yard-deep green perched on the far side of a canal.

Cart it or hoof it? Relatively flat course was designed to be walked. Greens and tees are close together. Pull carts available, or bring a light carry bag.

Best time to visit: October through April.

Don't leave home without: Sunscreen, bathing suits, and a paperback novel to read poolside.

Nicest touch: High Tea service beneath vaulted ceiling arches in hotel lobby to accompaniment of live classical guitarist on weekday afternoons.

Best drinks: Cellar Club Wine Bar is a wood-paneled enclave with 100-plus wines by the glass. Signature cocktail is Mango Sidecar—Courvoisier, Cointreau, fresh mango puree, lemon juice, and organic agave nectar.

Worthwhile souvenir: A copy of *The Biltmore Hotel: An Enduring Legacy*, a coffee table book that chronicles the iconic hotel's conception, heyday, decline and rebirth.

Don't miss: The large, colorful iguanas—up to five feet in length—that sun themselves on banks of canal beside the eighth and ninth holes.

The distance from the Championship markers (6,742 yards) may seem relatively short by modern standards, but Brian Linton, the Biltmore's director of golf, points out that the sea-level layout is often swept by brisk ocean breezes and plays longer than the measured yardage.

"On a typically windy day, the Biltmore plays more like a 7,000-yard course from the tips," he says. "Even seasoned players will be in for a surprise."

The Resort

The Biltmore is a genuine rarity: a full-service resort within a major metropolitan area. It has few rivals anywhere for amenities. The massive L-shaped pool, framed by a colonnaded porch, trellised gardens and a cluster of private cabana suites, remains the nation's largest hotel pool. The 10,000-square-foot Biltmore Fitness Center, with more than 100 workout classes scheduled per week and a forest of cardio equipment and weight machines, was built to satisfy body-conscious visitors. The hotel's spa, a sanctuary of relaxation and rejuvenation, offers an extensive menu of body wraps and massage therapies.

As for dining, the Biltmore's pièce de résistance is Palme d'Or, which offers an unsurpassed continental dining experience and is rated in the "extraordinary to perfection" bracket of the 2008 Zagat Survey. Fontana, debuted last year, features eclectic Italian-Mediterranean cuisine (the home-made pastas are superb). The Sunday Champagne Brunch, a local institution, is served in a loggia with tables spaced around a gurgling fountain in a central courtyard. The buffet, from the custom omelets and carved meats to the endless desserts, lacks for nothing.

A National Historic Landmark, the Biltmore's 275 guest rooms, including 133 suites, have modern conveniences along with retro charm and a human scale not often found in newer properties. For example, the high-ceilinged lobby, an Iberian fantasy of deep blues, rich woods and a gargoyle or two, has twin grand staircases, intimate seating areas and cypress beams ornamented with colorful designs. Best of all, the view from the oversize picture windows in the guest rooms is of a well-groomed golf course that is better now than



when it was considered to be one of Donald Ross's most imaginative creations.

The courtyard at the hotel provides a lavish setting for al fresco dining.

The Trip

Located in Coral Gables, the Biltmore is an easy 15-minute drive from Miami International Airport. Direct flights to Miami are available on several major carriers from the Met Area. Hotel guests receive preferred tee times and golf rates. For information and reservations, visit www.biltmorehotel.com or call 800-915-1926. ■

Brian McCallen is a contributing writer to *The Met Golfer*, and lives in Storington, Connecticut.



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