

Top of the Rock at Big Cedar Lodge

By Len Ziehm



Chicago golfers don't need to go very far to find one of the best golf destinations in the country. Big Cedar Lodge in southern Missouri is the place. It's an easy day's drive from Chicago, and air travel is available. Getting there is no problem and you'll find it well worth the trip.

The rocking town of Branson, with a population of about 10,000, has its share of tourist attractions, but Big Cedar, which is located 10 miles south in the town of Ridgedale, is a world unto itself.

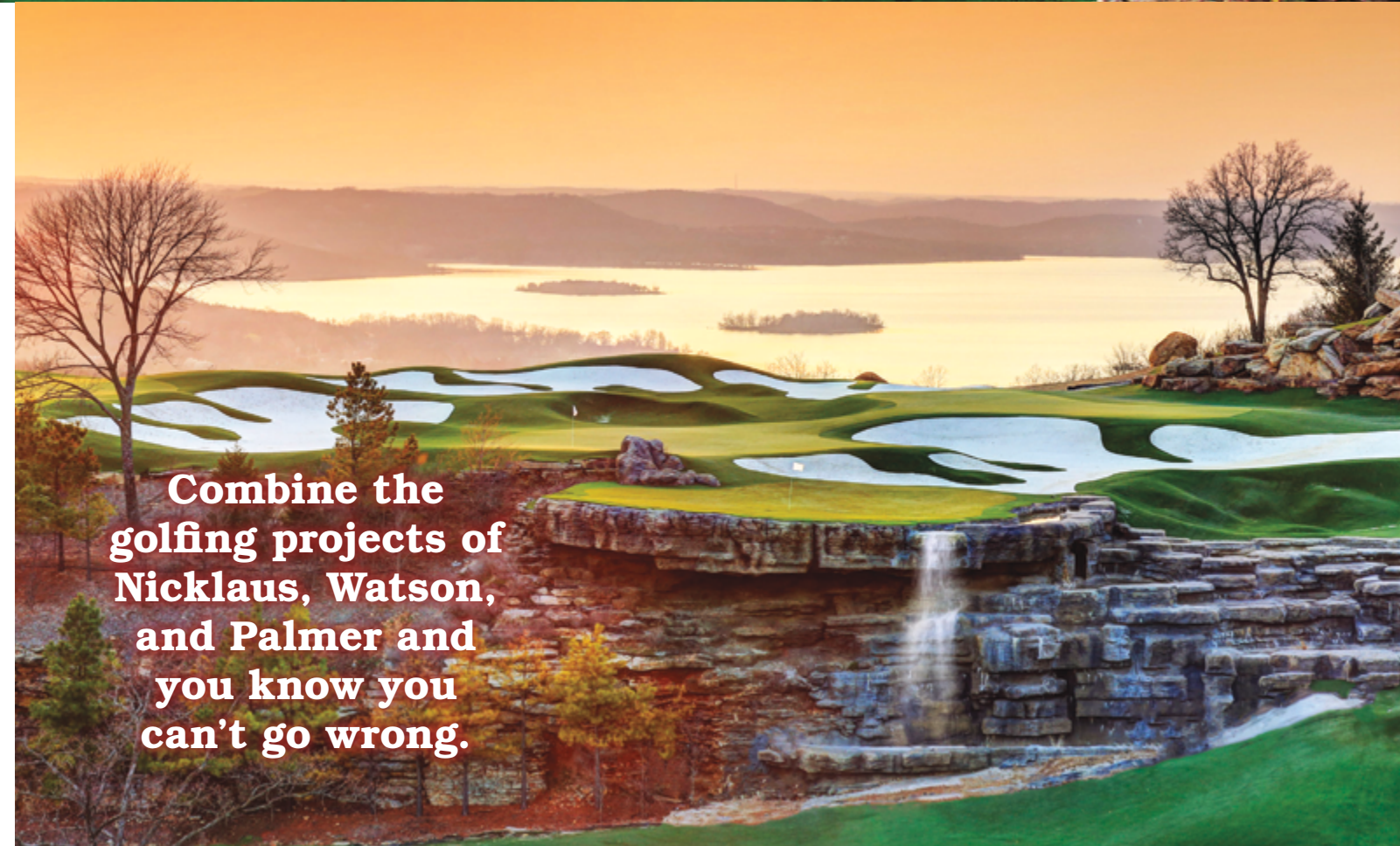
Big Cedar has most everything thanks to the efforts of Johnny Morris, the creator of Bass Pro Shops. Morris' first Outdoor World opened in the nearby, much larger town of Springfield, Missouri, in 1972. A passionate conservationist, Morris wanted to promote the stunning beauty of the Ozarks while encouraging family activities there. He did that by building his business empire around the fishing, hunting, camping, and boating

opportunities in Branson and the nearby towns of Ridgedale, Hollister, and Reeds Spring.

Morris opened Big Cedar Lodge in 1987 and things took off from there. Now Big Cedar is a sprawling wilderness resort. Its rustic elegance is evident in upscale log cabins, lodges, and a spa. There's also a variety of dining options: Devil's Pool Restaurant with its Buzzard Bar, Truman Coffee and Café, and the historic Worman House. They're all a little different but all of the same high quality.

Table Rock Lake, with its 43,000 acres of crystal-blue waters, is a playground for water sports of all sorts, and Big Cedar also offers four chapels, a world-class spa, a full-service marina, horseback riding, world-class fishing, and trails suited for walking, biking, and hiking.

Oh, yes. There's also golf—great golf—readily available at Johnny Morris' Top of the Rock Ozark's Heritage Preserve course and the accompanying Arnie's Barn.



Combine the golfing projects of Nicklaus, Watson, and Palmer and you know you can't go wrong.



The golf course at Top of the Rock is a par-3 course designed by Jack Nicklaus. It is—from the perspective of a golfer who has traveled widely in search of playing opportunities for 60 years and been a scribe on the sport since 1968—the most scenic course in America.

Nicklaus started building the course in 1996, and the work took awhile—over seven years, to be exact. By 2014, however, it became the first par-3 layout included in a PGA Tour-sanctioned competition. The oldest event on the Champions Tour—the Legends of Golf—is partially played there. (That tournament was re-named the Bass Pro Shop Legends of Golf at Big Cedar Lodge in 2014).

Take it from Tim Finchem, the long-time commissioner of the PGA Tour. “If there ever was a par-3 course worthy of PGA Tour tournament play, Top of the Rock is it,” Finchem declared.

Top of the Rock also includes a one-acre putting green called “the Himalayas,” which was designed by Tom Watson to replicate the iconic





DESERT MOUNTAIN TEMPERATURES

Month	Avg. High	Avg. Low
January	62 F	41 F
February	65 F	43 F
March	70 F	46 F
April	79 F	52 F
May	88 F	60 F
June	97 F	70 F
July	98 F	76 F
August	97 F	74 F
September	94 F	70 F
October	83 F	59 F
November	70 F	47 F
December	62 F	40 F



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Himalayas putting course at St. Andrews in Scotland, and has an elevation change of 20 feet from top to bottom.

The overall practice facility was a collaborative effort of Watson and Palmer, and features 16 fully-lit target greens. Combine the golfing projects of Nicklaus, Watson, and Palmer and you know you can't go wrong. Even last year's unfortunate development of sinkholes adjacent to the all-synthetic turf practice range doesn't detract from the facility's popularity. The sinkholes became a curiosity piece and photo opportunity more than anything else. They are all open and available for play.

Palmer's influence is more evident in the "Barn," which houses the pro shop and an upscale Mexican restaurant. The wooden barn has a history; it was built 150 years ago in Palmer's hometown of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and was transported piece-by-piece and reconstructed at Top of the Rock. Included in its bar area is the mounted replica of a then world-record 1,358-pound black marlin that Nicklaus caught in Australia in 1978.

The course is filled with breath-taking views of Table Rock Lake, waterfalls, and fascinating rock formations. Golfers also have the option of taking a tour of the Lost Canyon

continued on page 37

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Prescription for Golf

While the industry has stabilized—to some degree—there are a number of recognized issues that continue to plague golf, most notably cost, pace of play, and the difficulty of the game. Each of these continues to erode the ongoing stability of the game and more specifically, any particular golf course. Those ills are the result of a multitude of poor decisions about design, development, and operations.

How do we fix it?

It starts with an understanding of health—industry health. How? I offer the following prescription—at a minimum.

Authenticity

Golf courses that most represent a ‘true’ landscape while presenting an environmentally beneficial and engaging golf experience will win. Unique, original, and interesting golf will survive and will be tied directly to a site’s uniqueness and customer loyalty. The next generation of golfer wants genuine experiences in real places. The ‘Uber’ generation does not tolerate anything less than legitimate experiences, ease of access, and value. Also, they are *not* joiners, which can make exclusivity a tough sell.

All golf is local, and authenticity is joined to the fabric and dynamic of the community. It is more representative of the landscape and

its customers, and ultimately, authenticity is less expensive to construct, to maintain, to operate, and to enjoy.

Width

Provide more width through the green. This is not new and I am not the first or only architect to suggest this. Width is linked directly to playability, strategy, and site engagement. Wider golf course architecture produces more fun and thoughtful golf experiences. It is the antithesis of linear, penal golf. Width creates dimension to the game and allows multiple strategies to be employed. The result generates more engaged participants of all ages and abilities.

Some will say width makes the game easy. In truth, width provides playability and introduction to the nuances and strategies of the game while providing long-lost angles, and expands uniqueness and authenticity. Simply, employing width is more fun to design and play.

Environment

To those who exist in this industry, know that golf is an environmental benefit. Golfers know it and the industry knows it. Generally, however, those who do not play golf do not know it, or don’t believe it. A perception exists that golf is an undesirable or unproductive use of open space. That must change, and will

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only change if we are proactive and seek to provide solutions to greater environmental problems for communities and regions.

Golf has a unique opportunity because it can shape and shift to provide solutions that other development opportunities cannot. Golf has a responsibility to do so. Golf must do more to solve environmental problems in neighborhoods, communities, or regions. The benefits will be widespread.

The word ‘sustainability’ is thrown around easily, and it is generally accepted to mean environmental benefit. That is a disservice. True sustainability (for golf or any other resource) is constructed from equal parts economic viability, environmental benefit, and operational efficiency. Authenticity, width, and environment are linked to each other. Authenticity is more natural and easier to build, less costly, softer on the environment, and easier to market. Width will help playability and thusly, help economic sustainability. Environmental solutions relate specifically to the site’s uniqueness to introduce authenticity. And so on...

A sustainable golf course, therefore, that employs all three, will win golfers. More importantly, sustainable golf will improve the public perception and carry this great game into the next century.

Take one of each and call me in the morning.

Top of the Rock at Big Cedar Lodge

continued from page 30

Cave and Nature Trail on their carts and/or visiting the Ancient Ozarks Natural History Museum. A nine-hole round at Top of the Rock obviously isn’t your ordinary breeze around a par-3 course.

Then there’s the very respected Buffalo Ridge Springs 18-hole in Hollister. It grew from the high-quality Branson Creek course—a Tom Fazio design built in 1999—after Morris acquired it. The course was renamed Buffalo Ridge Springs, updated by Fazio and Morris, and now includes free-ranging buffalo adjacent to the course. Morris brought them over from his nearby Dogwood Canyon Nature Park, which spans the Missouri-Arkansas border.

Buffalo Ridge Springs is the companion course for Top of the Rock in hosting the Bass Pro Shop Legends event. It has been named the No. 1 public course in Missouri by *Golf* magazine, and has been in the top 10 of *Golf Digest’s* ranking of all Missouri courses every year since 2001.

The \$2.8 million Legends event is something special. It’ll be played from April 22 - 24 following two days of pro-am competition for 52 four-player teams. The pro competition features two divisions, for players in the 50 - 65 range and for those 65 and over. It makes for great spectator viewing. Tickets are available at <http://bassprolegends.com/> as well as many golf-centered packages. You can find more information on those at BigCedar.com.

And that’s not all. Morris isn’t done yet.

Murder Rock—another Hollister course, and one which used John Daly as a design consultant—is no more. Its terrain will soon become two courses. Gary Player is building a 12-hole family-friendly course which is yet to be named. The well-regarded architectural team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw is creating an 18-hole championship layout. Upon completion they’ll greatly expand the already ample golf options at Big Cedar.

Morris is especially enthusiastic about the Coore and Crenshaw course.

“Our goal with this is to have a high quality-enough course to have very significant PGA-caliber golf tournaments,” he said when the hiring of Coore and Crenshaw was announced. “We think it will be a crown jewel golf course in the Ozarks.”

Given what Morris has done already, there’s no doubt he will accomplish this goal in no time.

Big Cedar Lodge

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