

The Prairie Club: Remote Meets Renowned

There's nothing quite like pure destination golf. Places that aim for your heart along with your mind. Where tourist attractions aren't even on the radar, but a four-hour sensory journey is.

Remote golf destinations have never come without doubters. It started with Bandon Dunes in Oregon, then it was Streamsong down in Florida, and more recently, Sand Valley in Wisconsin. All of which are now regarded as golf "meccas" built upon mounds of sand. It worked out pretty well for the aforementioned courses, and we think The Prairie Club in Valentine, Neb., is more than deserving of the cachet that this masterpiece has been receiving since its inception in 2010.

How would you describe the Grand Canyon to someone that hasn't had the opportunity to experience it firsthand? You just can't paint a vivid enough picture to capture the vastness and beauty of what is before your eyes. This is what it was like the first time we saw the Sandhills, Neb., area a decade ago. We've all heard about the famed Sand Hills Golf Club, which is among the top private courses in the country. The Prairie Club is situated on the same terrain about two hours north. In fact, part of the experience is getting to the destination. With all the anticipation building mile after mile, you're left to wonder, "Will the resort live up to the hype?" and "Will the picture I painted in my mind's eye match what's going to be in front of me?"

Spoiler alert: Yes to both.

You may have taken some golf trips to popular places like Florida or Arizona, and perhaps even across the pond to experience links golf in the British Isles. Truthfully, The Prairie Club is so unique that you have to see it to believe it, even for the experienced golf traveler.

For starters, there is the spectacular Dunes Course designed by PGA Tour legend Tom Lehman along with architect Chris Brands. It's raw, natural, and wild. This par 73 can be stretched out to over 8,000 yards of fescue and Colonial bentgrass. The greens are enormous, averaging 14,000 square feet. The fairways are 58 yards wide on average. And yet, you still need

to navigate the bunkers that strategically dot the landing areas.

The par-4 5th hole is a treat. Driving the green on this short hole takes absolute perfection. Best bet is to play your tee ball to the left side of the fairway to have the best opportunity at a birdie. The 8th hole, also a par 4, is the No. 1 handicap, and takes a few times to play to really get the right line on your drive and approach. The hillside on the left can block your view of the green

, but strike your shot with confidence and be prepared to accept your fate.

Ready for some peace and serenity? The other championship course is the Pines Course, designed by former tour player and Aussie Graham Marsh. This layout has a bit of everything, with stately Ponderosa pine trees, prairie links-style holes, and dramatic scenery along the rocky outcroppings of the Snake River canyon rim. The 9th hole is a beautiful risk/reward test that typically

plays downwind. Tempting for a hole that maxes out around 315 yards. Don't try to be a hero as a driver is not always the play here. Some of the locals play the tee shot down the No. 8 fairway, and this allows their approach to have more green to work with, depending on pin placement. We left licking our wounds.

As if two championship courses aren't enough, there's the Horse Course. A 10-hole, fun bet-settling, par-3 layout

by one of the games hottest architects in Gil Hanse with help from well-known golf guru Geoff Shackelford. Here, you can play alone or with a group. Eightsomes are welcomed! This par-3 design has all of the elements of the Links and Dunes courses, just a bit of a downsized version. The idea here is to play like a basketball game of H-O-R-S-E. There are no tee boxes, no set order, just grab a few clubs and go. And yes, feel free to bring your

favorite adult beverage with you while you try your luck on this cool concept.

There are many long views at The Prairie Club that bring to mind that classic song from The Who, "I Can See for Miles!" Looking in all directions you can see thousands upon thousands of acres unfolding in front of you. Quite a refreshing sight for those that have been locked up and working remotely for the past year plus. The sandy soil drains so well you don't have to worry about plugged lies or mud balls. Like the finest links courses in the world, fescue grasses abound; your ball will roll. Firm and fast conditions are the norm here with Stimpmeter averages of 11 on the Dunes Course.

Overall, golf-wise, it's a minimalist approach by working with what the land gives you. There was no real earth moving or anything forced upon the terrain. It's real, it's natural, and above all it's fun, fun, fun!

The best thing about the resort is that once you arrive, you don't need to leave. Lodging options include lodge rooms, cabins, and the quaint and comfortable bunkhouse. There are various golf packages available and all of them include unlimited play. We've heard of golf "junkies" playing upwards of 90 holes a day during the summer solstice season.

Destination golf is truly a wonderful thing to experience. After all, isn't anything worth doing worth doing well? You can drive here like we did our first time, or if you do a fly/drive, Rapid City, S. D., is your best bet at a little over three hours away, with Omaha and Denver International around five-hour drives.

Don't just take our word for it, listen to what the course rating experts say about The Prairie Club. On the prestigious *Golfweek* course rating list, the Dunes Course places 38th. The Pines Course ranks 88th on *Golf Digest's* public course list. Heady stuff for this one-of-a-kind golf experience. The website states that their mission is, "The creation of unforgettable experiences that touch the soul of all who journey here." Mission accomplished.

For more information visit theprairieclub.com.



The Dunes #2 Fairway



The Pines #2



The Horse #1 and #2



The Bunkhouse