Montana, Glory of the West

By Dave Lockhart

Known for skiing, fly-fishing, and big game hunting, our 41st state is a nature lover’s dream with mind-blowing golf. This is America’s fourth largest state, but only 48th in population density. Even though this is Big Sky Country, getting there is swift; the legal speed limit on most highways is 80 mph. Montana has dynamic golf surrounded by unspoiled country without Chicagoland traffic. A gaper’s delay in Montana usually involves a moose crossing the road or the golden light illuminating the mountain peaks. The clean mountain air renews your soul. Maybe that is why folks here say this is “the last best place on earth.”
We started our golf adventure at Arnold Palmer’s first-ever golf design, the appropriately named Big Sky Resort Golf Course which opened in 1973. A friendly, almost links-like layout that rests at the base of the Big Sky Mountain Range; this is the perfect place to begin your golf trip. The King may have had some thoughts about the two Open Championships he won on the winds-lyks of Great Britain when he carved out this track where the breeze can certainly be a factor. You can get your game going if your driver is treating you right as the course sits at 6,500 feet of elevation. There could also be some interested spectators watching your game: moose, deer, and beaver are just a few of the wildlife that are roaming along the scenic and flowing West Fork of the Gallatin River. The Big Sky Resort Golf Course is a nice introduction to your western journey; it is sensibly priced, scenic, and just might be the place for your low round of the week.

At The Club at Spanish Peaks, you can expect to play one of the best mountain golf courses experiences in the Western U.S. Before Tom Weiskopf began designing the golf course at Spanish Peaks, he wanted to get a feel for the old west, so he explored the massive 3,000-acre parcel on horseback. Weiskopf touts many virtues of the course, “The owner gave me the best land to choose from, the trees are huge, there’s no housing, and the views are unparalleled.” Players will encounter plenty of deeply gratifying challenges, and yet beginners and weekend warriors will enjoy themselves as well. It can be hard to keep your eye on your ball as you find yourself looking out to the deeply gratifying challenges, and yet beginners and weekend runners are out there to keep you honest as well. You can almost feel the miners and the furnace operators working here in what had to be extremely difficult conditions in helping build the backbone of our country. Come out to play and rejoice with Old Works this year as they celebrate their 20th anniversary. Thanks to the Golden Bear for putting his golden touch on this compelling piece of land that you will never forget.

Our Big Sky tour also included a couple of accessible private courses. The Reserve at Moonlight Basin is a new Jack Nicklaus design that is a wild ride of elevation filled with stunning unsouled mountain views. The holes literally traverse the mountain where you rarely see other holes, or people for that matter. Nicklaus gave plenty of room off the tee, so you can sap it with minimal consequence. If you like challenging putting surfaces, then this may be the place for you. Every green is filled with twists and turns, hums and humps, and roll true as a Montana sunset. For you big knockers off the tee, you might want to tip it out and try the Mill Creek tees at a robust 7,982 yards. The 14th hole is a par-3 at 256 yards. And yes, it plays downhill! The mark of any great golf course is the way it finishes. The 16th is a majestic par 3 as you face a green surrounded by bunkers and stately pines. Another picturesque-let’s-give-tees-you-teet. This copious hole plays a lengthy 777 yards from the back tees, but remember it is downhill with thin mountain air and firm turf, so the ball will run like an Olympian! Not many courses feature a drivable 18th hole, but here at The Reserve that is just the case, and good luck in avoiding the big heads putting surface.

A great way to break up your trip is to head down to one of the world’s natural wonders at Yellowstone National Park. An easy drive of slightly over an hour from the Big Sky Resort area, you will find this massive scenic park featuring the famous Old Faithful geyser. Here the buffalo really do roam. As we were leaving the park, we spotted a lone bison in the distance, so we pulled over to observe one of our nation’s living treasures. We sat in the car and shot video as the bull came closer and closer. He came within a couple of feet of us, and then he turned and walked directly behind the car. Priceless! You will not be baffled getting to Montana, as it is easier than you think. United Airlines has direct flights jetting from O’Hare to Bozeman, Montana, in just under 3.5 hours, which leaves plenty of time to get in a round, or a nousey down to Yellowstone National Park. In the town of Bozeman, there is an astonishing 302 days of sunshine. A week that mixes an Arnold Palmer course, stellar Tom Weiskopf designs, and a couple of rugged Jack Nicklaus layouts is just about as big as it gets in golf. The last great place on earth is waiting for Chicagoans to heighten their golf experiences in Big Sky Country.