



Let's face it. This is the greater Chicagoland area, which is filled with golf enthusiasts, and the idea of a "hidden gem" is becoming less and less likely. The course that you feel fits into your back pocket and you're its one and only? I've got news for you, your course is seeing other people. Lots of people. I'm sorry that you had to find out this way.

I've got great news for you though. Fall is the perfect time to get out there and explore new horizons. We are Chicagoans and Chicago suburbanites, but we love visiting our surrounding states to see what they have to offer. So when I tell you that an exceptional course exists 90 minutes from O'Hare (75 minutes from the city) that you likely have not played, and it's incredibly cost efficient, are you going to be ready to hit the road? Great! Because you're heading to DeMotte, Ind., home to Sandy Pines Golf Club.

The city of DeMotte is located just east of I-65 in Northwest Indiana. It's what pops into your mind when you picture a small town, being that the population is only about 3,800. And within DeMotte's border is Sandy Pines,



Sandy Pines Golf Club

Time to Redefine "Hidden Gem"

Todd Mrowice

which in many ways is its own small town. The property not only has a championship 18-hole layout, it also offers inviting food options, brand new accommodations, and a staff that can not be more friendly and genuinely happy to see their guests.

Originally built in 1973, Sandy Pines underwent a massive overhaul in 2004 after course owners Greg Hamstra and Mitch Van Kley purchased the property. Under the direction of course architect Tim Nugent (White Deer Run, Foxford Hills, del Lago Golf Club), the work included adding ponds and bunkers along with bent grass tees and fairways. The endgame in mind was to create a course that would challenge players of all skill levels. Something that Hamstra and Van Kley feel that they've accomplished.

"This course really feels like it belongs in the Carolinas," said Hamstra. "The White Pines are 50 to 60 years old so it's very mature. Tee to green it flows tightly and I think you have a nice balance here of challenging holes and scoring holes."

Van Kley added that the change of terrain will likely catch visitors off guard. "This is a unique property when you take into account it's not too far outside of a busy area, and then you drive into wooded areas with elevation changes and sand. When we purchased the course we had a geologist come in because we noticed the ridge that runs the entire length of the course always had a different kind of sand—it had a white tint. Turns out it's different because the shores of Lake Michigan were once there. During construction we even found fossilized items."

Moving earth around wasn't something that these two gentlemen had to read up on. Greg Hamstra is the President & CEO of The Hamstra Group, Inc., a company that handles real estate development, construction, and property management. Mitch Van Kley is the Executive Vice President & CFO of the company. Together, they have overseen projects that include hospitals, dairy farms, churches, libraries, and much more. But, missing from their resume was a golf course. With both living near the course, it was a venture the duo felt confident in taking on.

"It was pretty simple, actually," said Hamstra. "It was already home for us and when the opportunity to purchase the course came up we decided to jump in."

Van Kley added, "We knew with the right remodel, Sandy Pines could be something very special."

From the tips, Sandy Pines can stretch out to just under 6,900- yards (par 72), with a 73.4 rating and 136 slope. In front of the tips, you'll find four additional sets of numeral tees to accommodate any level of golfer. I/ II Combo at 6,539 yards, II at 6,312- yards, III at 5,758 yards, and IV at 4,914 yards.



My favorite aspect of the layout at Sandy Pines is the harmonious balance between "gettable" par 4s and truly challenging par 3s and par 5s. Even if you're a long hitter, Sandy Pines makes you earn it. Personally, my average drive hovers somewhere around 265. Upon completion of my first round at the course I found that the spots I got into trouble were mainly the par 4s because I didn't take the proper line on my tee shots. Surprisingly, my best holes were the yardage-heavy par 3s and 5s.





Using the yardage from the tips, your par 3 numbers come in at 189, 249, 160, and 205. That's right, two of them over two bills! Hole No. 8 is the 250-yard beast. The slightly diabolical aspect to this hole is that short is safe. However, if you successfully rip one, long is dead meat. And if you hit the number but just miss, pot bunkers are left and right of the green. Talk about mean.

I'll openly admit, I'm a sucker for three things. My son, my daughter, and scenic par 3s. And if you're like me, the 17th hole will have you taking orders in no time. This 205-yard tee shot is essentially straight away, but the massive pond that sits between you and the green drifts off to the right almost as if to say, "come with me." At that yardage, I can't even imagine the number of golf balls swimming in there. Banking that pond all the way around is a thin width of sand that may end up saving those that come up short. As the sand approaches the green, it develops into a large bunker that protects the front of the putting surface. Bail out to the left if you can manage to keep your eyes off of the water.

Par-5 yardages leave something extra, even for long hitters. They are 552, 605, 554, and 549. The No. 7 hole maxes out at 605 yards but most players will, of course, play from tees in front of that. Still though, 591 yards is a long, long way home. Your tee shot is hit from an area of surrounding trees to a fairway that gradually opens up; that is, right before it encloses you on the right side with sand and water. A great tee shot here is one thing, but having to thread the needle with your second shot is where the trouble comes in. This hole actually has



two green complexes, both well-guarded with bunkers.

My favorite hole at Sandy Pines just might be the par-5 2nd; I'm still trying to decide. This beauty requires an uphill tee shot where you'll need to carry a strip of bunkers. Once you've reached the top, the land actually meanders down gradually to the left. You need to properly play angles to the green, which is easier said than done. Once you have your approach shot you'll need to clear a pond as well as three bunkers short. Anything long and you'll find a pair of bunkers or an uncomfortable pitch back towards the pond.

"We were looking at the routing for No. 2 and ultimately decided to purchase the 40 acre landfill across the street," said Hamstra. "That is now one of the most unique spots on the course and is actually one of the highest points in all of Jasper County."

Hamstra and Van Kley do not like attaching the words "signature hole" to Sandy Pines, citing that it would be difficult to even come up with a Top 9. I don't disagree with them. If there is one hole that I remember most, it's the par 4 6th hole. This short hole is such a blast to play, I can see good players getting anything from birdie to double bogey or more. Driver should stay in the bag unless you are insane or insanely confident in your ability. A "Y-shaped" creek stays with you the entire length of the hole on the right side and then splits the fairway near your approach shot. There are bunkers lurking everywhere and the entire green complex is gently housed by trees. The Sandy Pines website (sandypinesgc.com) has amazingly detailed flyovers of every hole. I would suggest scoping this one out ahead of time.

I previously mentioned, "incredibly cost efficient" and I wasn't lying. After everything you've read thus far and everything you're going to read ahead, keep in mind that the most you're going to pay for a round at Sandy Pines is \$80. You can catch twilight rates as low as \$35, senior rates (Monday - Friday) for \$40, and several other pricing options on their website.



If you go 90 minutes in any direction around Chicagoland, I don't know if you'll find a better deal than that.

A unique aspect to Sandy Pines that doesn't have to do with hole routing, fairways, or greens is the staff. The club actually has two individuals that hold the title of Director of Golf. Lauren Peretin and Andy Simpson are the "dynamic duo" behind the day-to-day success at Sandy Pines.

"This course can be pretty much what you want," said Peretin. "I like that it can be your little weekend vacation because it's just far enough away to give you a change of scenery. Plus, this quality golf course for about half the price of what you'd pay around the Chicago area makes it a great destination."

"The golf speaks for itself," said Simpson. "We see a lot of return trips based on golf, yes, but the welcoming vibe to go along with all of our amenities is what we hear as well. This isn't just a place to make money, it's home."

If you've ever experienced a "non-stay and play" golf trip, you'll know that trekking back to the hotel or waiting for a shuttle/Uber is just plain inconvenient. Staying onsite is paramount, and Sandy Pines recognized that. Two brand new cottages just made their debut on property. These cottages have four bedrooms (king beds), four bathrooms, and are positioned along hole No. 9, across the street from the driving range. Your front door is quite literally steps away from anything you want. Each cottage features a centralized living room, kitchenette, and an outdoor patio for you to begin or end your day. No expense was spared when designing these cottages. Three words: rainfall shower heads.

"It's all first class, that's what we were aiming for and that's what you'll experience," said Van Kley. "We're excited that we can now fully accommodate groups with our cottages so you can feel that everything you need is right here on property."

If you make your trip to Sandy Pines in the spring (March 15 - April 30) or fall (October 1 - November 30) seasons, your foursome can get into one of these cottages for \$800/night, \$40 per additional guest. Summer cottage rates run May 1 - September 30 and are \$900/night, \$50 per additional guest. Additional cottages are in the works for spring of 2022.

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With all cottage rentals you'll have access to some deals on go, including 9 and 18 hole replay rates as well as an unlimited driving range access during your stay. You'll also receive 10% off of purchases inside the Sandy Pines pro shop, because you're going to want the shirt, the hat, and some additional items to show off to your friends. Also included is a complimentary daily breakfast.

Speaking of food, don't even think about Door Dash. The Sandy Pines clubhouse has the SP19 American Kitchen + Bar. This casual, comfortable restaurant specializes in American comfort food along with the proper spirits to celebrate, or forget, what your scorecard totaled.

No SP19 meal is started correctly without the SP19 Nachos which are topped with slow-cooked BBQ pulled pork, white queso sauce, pico de gallo, and sour cream. For your main course, the restaurant offers something

for everyone. The Kougur is a signature burger that's topped with, you guessed it, that same delicious pulled pork in addition to applewood smoked bacon, crispy onions, and (drumroll please) macaroni and cheese!

If you're looking for more fork and knife, you can carve into a 12 oz. New York strip or a 10 oz. sirloin. Fish options include salmon, perch, bluegill, cod, and shrimp. You can also build your own pizza or build your own chicken. An extensive menu to go along with breakfast makes SP19 the perfect food compliment to your "stay and play" at Sandy Pines.

Making this property a truly versatile space is The Pavilion at Sandy Pines. This indoor/outdoor event space is the ultimate compliment to your golf outing, corporate retreat, baby shower, or just about any type of event. In fact, Sandy Pines hosts about 60 weddings every year on property. The feel here is that you're the only ones onsite for your special day. The Bridal House is available to brides and bridesmaids with an open layout that includes salon stations, a bridal suite, and an open area with a farmhouse table that seats 16. There is also a groom's suite with a changing area, a full-size bathroom, leather couch and chair, and a flat screen TV. Check out the event-specific site to see some amazing pictures; everyone will want an invite. sandypinespavillion.com

After I had some time to reflect on my trip to Sandy Pines Golf Club, this was my ultimate takeaway. I've traveled all over the U.S. and a little beyond to play golf and experience resorts. I never could have imagined such a tranquil, fun, and accommodating golf experience would be so close to home. It's comparable to destinations I've encountered in the Carolinas, the southern U.S., the desert southwest, and more. Maybe my eyes weren't open before, but they sure are now.

Sandy Pines Golf Club
10527 Bunker Drive
DeMotte, IN 46310
219-987-3611
sandypinesgc.com

ON THE CORKSCREWS

Stephen Hawk

I'm obviously a wine enthusiast, and with my wife will drink all or most of a full bottle of wine with dinner every night. However, you may enjoy less wine with your meals. If so, consider 375 mL half bottles. They are also handy if you want a red and your companion wants a white, like the two shown here. Half bottles are also convenient for picnic outings. And, empty half bottles are great for storing leftover wine; just fill the half bottle as close to the top as you can, reseal it (easily done if the closure is a screw cap), and park it in the refrigerator.

The only real downside to half bottles is that they will cost somewhat more than half what the same wine in a full bottle will, since, other than the wine itself, the remaining expenses of filling, labeling, packing and shipping are more or less the same as for a full bottle. For instance, the Chardonnay is \$15 for a half bottle, and \$26 for a full one. Similarly, the Pinot Noir is \$15 for a half bottle, and \$29 for a full one (but really, not much of a penalty on this one). Finding your favorite wines in half bottles can also sometimes be difficult, although like wine in cans they are becoming more common. And now, on to the wines.

In 1972, attorney, private pilot, and wine aficionado Fred Fruth was piloting his plane over the Russian River Valley area. Down below, he saw a natural amphitheater carved into the hills of eastern Sonoma. In addition to this other interests, he had been thinking of starting a winery, and it seemed as if this might just be the place to do it.

Soon after, a tour of the extensive property confirmed that the site indeed had the climate and soils to grow first-class wine grapes. Furth and his second wife, Peggy, purchased the land, named the estate Chalk Hill, and started producing wine about a decade later. They gradually planted more than 270 acres of vines. Years later, Furth said, "I have always been interested in wine because my grandfather had vineyards. I'm actually more interested in the working-the-soil aspect, but I have many very talented people in the winery

Chalk Up Two

who know how to produce a world-class wine. When I bought this property, I was told it was too hilly to be a vineyard, but I simply planted the grapes in rows going uphill. People said you can't do that, but I'd seen it done in Germany so I knew it would work." After a rich and varied life, Furth died in 2018 at the age of 84.

Lawyer Bill Foley acquired Chalk Hill in 2010. Although Foley is titled as "vintner," I doubt he sees the interior of the winery very often. He is a vintner in the broader sense of "someone who sells wine." He also owns the National Hockey League's Vegas Golden Knights, is the Executive Chairman of the Board of Directors for Fidelity National Financial Inc., is Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors for Fidelity National Information Services, Inc., and owns fifteen other wineries.

The Chalk Hill AVA is one of 13 in Sonoma County, and is distinguished from the neighboring appellations of the cooler Russian River Valley to the west and the warmer Alexander Valley to the northeast. Elevations are higher and soil fertility is lower. The soils include gravel, rock, and heavy clay. Under the topsoil is a distinctive layer of chalk-colored volcanic ash which inspired the name of Chalk Hill.

Each vineyard block has been planted based on criteria that include: soil profile and chemistry, slope, orientation to the sun, and climate. Under Fred Furth's direction, Chalk Hill was an early leader in planting its hillside vineyards "vertically," following the rise of the terrain, rather than across it. Because of this, the topsoil must be protected with a diverse cover crop serving many purposes. It anchors and protects the soil, preventing erosion; captures and affixes nitrogen; and harbors a varied community of beneficial insects that aid in pest management. Water conservation is addressed through a precisely controlled drip-irrigation system. Air movement through these vertical channels of the vineyard reduces mildew. All of the grapevines are a grafted combination of plants: a specific wine-grape variety above ground, and a complementary rootstock below.



smhawk@winervana.com

More than two-thirds of Chalk Hill's 1300 acres remain uncultivated. In addition to the vineyards, the property features wilderness areas, the winery, a hospitality center, a culinary garden, a residence, stables, and an equestrian pavilion.

Chalk Hill Chardonnay 2018 **\$15**
This offering underwent 100% malolactic fermentation, followed by 10 months of sur lie barrel aging in French, American, and Hungarian oak, of which 25% was new. It is rather pale for a Chardonnay, but that doesn't mean it's insipid. It features moderate aromas of citrus and melon, which continue on the palate, plus some vanilla custard. It has a full, unctuous mouthfeel, and plenty of zippy acidity. ABV is 14%.

Chalk Hill Pinot Noir 2017 **\$15**
This wine also underwent 100% malolactic fermentation, followed by nine months of aging in French oak, of which 25% was new. It presents with a transparent, light to medium purple in the glass. It is mildly aromatic, with flavors of raspberry, tart cherry, and a bit of dust on the medium body. Enjoy this easy-sipping Pinot now. ABV is 13%.

Read more about these and hundreds of other wines at Winervana.com.



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