

Within Driving Range

The Bear's Gold

Imprints of some of the best Bear tracks in the world can be found alongside the banks of the Chattahoochee River, less than 45 minutes north of Atlanta. Jack Nicklaus, The Golden Bear himself, has faithfully replicated 18 of his favorite, personally designed golf holes from around the world in the far western reaches of Gwinnett County.

The course, without question, is accurately named Bear's Best.

In his three-plus decades as a golf architect, Nicklaus's design company has opened more than 275 courses worldwide. That amounts to approximately 5,000 holes that he has overseen. From that abundance, Nicklaus has selected the crème of his crop that are yours for the playing in one location on the outskirts of sleepy Suwanee, Ga. (A sister Bear's Best course is also located outside Las Vegas.)

Holes from Muirfield Village (Dublin, Ohio), Mt. Juliet

BY PATRICK JONES

(County Kilkinny, Ireland), Gleneagles (Perthshire, Scotland), Sherwood Country Club (Thousand Oaks, Calif.) and Castle Pines Golf Club (Castle Rock, Colo.) are among the chosen few replicated at Bear's Best in Atlanta.

According to Nicklaus, he selected the design for each hole at Bear's Best based upon how well its topography matched an original location and how accurately the design strategy and shot values of that original hole could be duplicated. Jack sought permission to reproduce the holes from each club represented, and, not surprisingly, was granted complete consent. Who says no to a man with 20 major titles and 73 PGA Tour wins, who played in six Ryder Cups and captained the team twice?

The computer-aided designs from the original holes were resurrected to make sure that the replicas were "precise to the exact inch," according to Jeff Whitt, Bear's Best operations manager.

"That presented some unique challenges," says Whitt. "After the hole selections were done, it didn't matter what was in the way. Jack said to make it happen. What you see is the exact profile of that original hole."

Indigenous black sand from Montana was even imported to fill the greenside bunkers on the fourth hole to provide the meticulous look and feel of No. 2 at Old Works in Anaconda, Montana.

Opened in September 2002, the caliber of the Bear's Best layout has left mouths agape in awe like one of its designer's patented, penetrating 1-iron shots. National accolades and awards for its superiority and design have rolled in like Nicklaus's putts during memorable Sunday back-nine charges at The Masters.

Bear's Best is a daily fee course that offers amenities normally found in exclusive private membership settings. You won't find a double-wide trailer serving as the clubhouse. Instead, Bear's Best, which heavily caters to charity and corporate outings, features a sprawling 11,000-square-foot golf sanctuary that includes a full-featured pro shop, sit-down grill and banquet-room facilities. The interior walls are covered with framed



BEAR'S BEST

Suwanee, Georgia
866.511.2378; bearsbest.com

Par 72	6,857 yards	71.9	138
Par 72	6,447 yards	70.1	134
Par 72	5,951 yards	68.0	125
Par 72	5,076 yards	70.0	127

Fees: \$85 weekdays; \$105 weekends, includes cart, forecaddie and practice.

Directions: From I-85 Northbound (Airport/Downtown): Take Exit 111 (GA 317) Lawrenceville-Suwanee Road. Turn left heading west (turns into Suwanee Dam Road). Follow 6 miles to Johnson Road. Left on Johnson Road, after 1 mile dead-ends into Bear's Best/Edinburgh entrance.

photographic moments from Jack's illustrious playing career. To candidly sum up the ample creature comforts on site, each stand-up bathroom stall in the men's locker room even has its own television set to make sure that you don't miss any action on ESPN.

One of the privileges of a round at Bear's Best includes the services provided by a forecaddie assigned to your foursome. These trained course concierges pick you up in the parking lot, stand by to assist on the driving range, introduce each hole, track down your tee shots, provide yardages, rake bunkers, read putts if requested, applaud your good shots, look the other way with a straight face if you shank one deep into the woods, clean your clubs and bid you adieu on your way home. The forecaddies serve the dual purpose of pampering players and speeding up play. A round at Bear's Best, for better or worse, leaves plenty of remaining daylight for weekend honey-do lists.

"Keeping up the pace of play is a primary role for our forecaddies," says Whitt. It is taken to the degree of seriousness that birdhouses placed strategically

around the course actually provide shelter for two-way radios, not warblers, to keep forecaddies in touch with the pro shop.

"The forecaddies call in at specified checkpoints and the pace of play for their foursome can be addressed as needed to get their group back in position," says Whitt. "Our philosophy is that if we don't get a golfer around in four hours and five minutes then we have failed as an operation."

The indulgences at Bear's Best are not reserved for the nouveau riche. While a similar experience at some of the country's upper echelon publics might exceed some monthly mortgage payments, fees at Bear's Best in 2005 are \$85 during the week and \$105 on the weekend. An optional industry standard tip for forecaddies is \$20 per player, though not required and based solely on their performance.

Known for his monstrous drives at the height of his game, Nicklaus tends to provide ample landing space for tee shots on most holes at Bear's Best. The course's length is not overwhelming, playing to 6,857 yards from the back tees. Your approach game, however, had better be dialed in if you want to score. Greens are well protected, fast, tiered and undulating.

Two of the par 3s, Nos. 6 and 11, require precision and nerves of steel. A dose of Nicklaus's renowned course management skills might also come in handy. Both holes require full carries over water with little margin for error or weak-kneed bail outs.

The sixth hole, a replica of No. 12 at Muirfield Village Golf Club in Nicklaus's native Ohio, plays to 169 yards. It is both picturesque and daunting; good fortune would be having a sports psychologist in your group to reassure you and your ball over the expansive liquid trouble.

No. 11 was inspired by the 15th hole at the PGA Championship Course at Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. It, too, accurately reflects the earth's overall makeup – 70 percent water, 30 percent land. Miss the green short or right and you're wet. Viewed from 193 yards away, No. 11's narrow 18-yard wide green appears frighteningly thinner than an Atkins' Diet zealot.

Holes seven and nine are carved along the banks of

the Chattahoochee River, though buffered by a line of trees. As Atlanta's water supply heads south from Lake Lanier a few miles upstream, golfers get a sip of No. 3 at Shoal Creek (Ala.) Country Club, a straightaway 525-yard par 5, and No. 7 at TPC of Michigan, another par 5 that stretches 541 yards.

Holes on the back side transport you to Nicklaus creations in Ireland, Scotland, North Carolina and Colorado, among other destinations.

A highlight is the closing hole, a replica of No. 18 at Castle Pines Golf Club, site of the PGA Tour's Sprint International. It is a monstrous 483-yard, par-4 hole. For golfers struggling to get home, it presents the perfect chance to embrace the Sprint's Modified Stableford scoring system to reduce the damage.

In its two-plus year existence, Bear's Best has proven to be a magnet for prominent Atlantans as well as notable visitors. Chipper Jones of the Atlanta Braves hosts an annual charity tournament here. Actor Samuel L. Jackson is a frequent player. Bob "Must be in the front row" Uecker regularly gets in 18 when the Milwaukee Brewers are in town.

If you're a fan of one of golf's greatest players, designers and statesmen, tracking down Bear's Best off the beaten path north of Atlanta is well worth your while. ♦



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