Invermere's rugged Copper Point golf course (photo: Kari Medig/Destination BC)

TRAVEL

Trail Blazing: Great Canadian Golf Getaways

BY ANDREW PENNER

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Luggage on wheels. Touchscreen cell phones. Robot vacuums. Some inventions fall into the no-brainer category. For golfers, the advent of the golf trail was also an "aha!" moment.

What travel-loving golfer wouldn't want to grab his or her sticks, hop in a car, and follow a trail bursting with beauty and birdies?

When it comes to golf getaways, the golf trail might be the greatest thing since sliced bread. A trail is a collection of courses in a particular region, offering combined rates or special savings. The very first, Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, recently turned 25.

Today, there's a trail to suit every highway-happy hacker, from B.C. to P.E.I. They come in all shapes and sizes: Some are short and sweet and need little travel between courses. Others are spread out, requiring lengthy drives between birdie binges. (Alberta doesn't currently have an official golf trail, but you could string together a few courses in the Rockies to form your own.)

Some trails take days, some take weeks, but all are about the journey: The quest to experience new courses, landscapes and cultures. So cozy hotels, good food and non- golf attractions are key components of the experience.

As a golf pro, writer and photographer, I've been fortunate to travel down many golf-rich roads. Here's a rundown of the Canadian trails that rank highest on my scorecard.

COLUMBIA VALLEY GOLF TRAIL, B.C.

Golf and mountains go together like wine and cheese. There's nothing like swinging a club surrounded by rugged peaks and pine-scented air. And when you get a group of eight outstanding mountain courses situated just minutes apart, you've got something special.

The Columbia Valley Golf Trail is, admittedly, not so much a trail as a collection of courses in close proximity. But less time driving a car means more time driving golf balls! And driving on an expansive fairway set against soaring mountains is about as rewarding as it gets.

Case in point: Copper Point in Invermere. Boasting two excellent courses designed by Canmore-based architect Gary Browning, Copper Point has enough charm and challenge for everyone. The shorter Ridge Course, which can be played in three hours, is ideal for time- conscious golfers craving some outdoor fun after a round.

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Indeed, the perfect recipe here is early- morning golf and lazy afternoons on the beautiful beaches of Lake Windermere. From stand-up paddleboarding to kayaking through the pristine Columbia Wetlands, the outdoor recreation options here add another welcome dimension to your golf getaway.

Other excellent courses to put on your itinerary are The Springs Course at the Radium Resort and Eagle Ranch, both of which parade high atop bluffs over the wetlands. Last but not least, the three courses at Fairmont Hot Springs are easygoing resort courses that will appeal to players of all skill levels. And one can rest tired muscles in the nearby natural hot springs at the end of a rigorous day.

Bear Mountain's Valley course (photo: Andrew Penner)

VANCOUVER ISLAND GOLF TRAIL, B.C.

Stretching from Victoria to Campbell River, the Vancouver Island Golf Trail epitomizes what a golf trail should offer: challenging courses, fantastic resorts and awesome adventures to experience along the way.

After basking in the beautiful weather of Victoria and exploring her seaside charms (the Inner Harbour and whale watching are must-dos), start your island journey at Bear Mountain. With two top-notch Jack Nicklaus-designed courses that are open year-round, the quality of the golf here can't be beat.

While the original Mountain Course at Bear Mountain is tough-as-nails, the newer Valley Course, featuring wider fairways and dramatic downhill shots, has quickly become a personal favourite. After your last hole, set out for the Cowichan Valley. Do a little wine tasting between courses: There are more than 15 wineries tucked away in this pastoral region.

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Perhaps the greatest virtue of the Vancouver Island trail is its four distinct sections. It's ideal if you only have time to explore one or two areas, saving the rest for a future trip. For example, in the North Island—an area ripe for exploration and easily accessible from Comox Valley Airport—plan an awesome weekend with rounds at Storey Creek and Crown Isle courses, plus salmon fishing at Painter's Lodge.

In golf as in life, beauty really is in the eye of the beholder. But Storey Creek in Campbell River, with its towering trees, should appeal to all. And Crown Isle, located just minutes from the airport, never disappoints (nor do the post-round pints on its picturesque patio).

Nova Scotia's majestic Cabot Cliffs course (photo: Evan Schiller/Cabot Links)

CABOT TRAIL, NOVA SCOTIA

As you approach the seaside 16th hole at Cabot Cliffs, the first thing you'll notice is the flickering flag, placed perilously close to the edge of a six-storey cliff above the swirling sea. It's quite possibly the most scenic golf hole in the world: A soaring giant set along the wave-battered shores of Cape Breton.

Nova Scotia's revered Cabot Trail, a 298-kilometre highway that rims Cape Breton, isn't an official golf trail. But it certainly feels like one to me, with the heavenly two-course feast of Cabot Links and the Cape Breton Highlands, a Stanley Thompson-designed treasure that has been lauded for decades. And the fast-growing, links-loving fan base that has experienced golf on Cape Breton would agree.

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To complete your Cape Breton crusade, tack on Bell Bay Golf Club in Baddeck (a Thomas McBroom design that often flies under the radar) and The Lakes Golf Club at Ben Eoin, near Sydney.

For your side games, explore pretty fishing villages along the trail, stuff yourself with local seafood, and visit historic gems like the Fortress of Loisbourg and the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site in Baddeck. And, of course, enjoy one of the most scenic drives in the world: the Cabot Trail itself.

Happy trails at Legends on the Niagara (photo: Niagara Parks Golf)

NIAGARA GOLF TRAIL, ONTARIO

Anchored by one of greatest natural wonders in the world, Niagara Falls is a flagship tourism destination. Yes, every Canadian should visit these falls at least once in their lifetime. Fortunately, the Niagara Falls Golf Trail boasts eight terrific courses that are every bit as thrilling as the *Hornblower* boat tour at the base of the famous falls.

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The grand dames of the trail are Grand Niagara Golf Club, a 7,425-yard Rees Jones design that borders the Welland River, the Whirlpool Golf Course, a parkland classic designed by the great Stanley Thompson, and Legends on the Niagara, a gorgeous facility just minutes from the falls that boasts impressive layouts by Doug Carrick and Thomas McBroom.

With enough post-round playtime options, including countless wineries and amusement parks, the Niagara Golf Trail has all the hallmarks of a classic Canadian golf getaway.

STASH YOUR STICKS

How to travel with golf gear

- To fly, a golf travel bag needs to be under 23 kilograms
- Pack only a few balls and consider leaving behind a couple of clubs you rarely use
- Consider an ultra-light carry bag to save some weight
- Alternatively, a hard-shell case is heavier, but your sticks will be safer
- Leave your golf shoes behind and just pack comfortable running shoes—they can go on and off the course
- To reduce the chance of club shafts breaking during transport, tape them all together with duct tape

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