

Golfweek

Best of Golf 2018: Emerging regional resorts prove again that golfers seek memorable playing experiences

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November 30, 2018

Golfers like meatloaf. They also like \$2 beers, intense shower pressure, big bars of soap and comfy beds. They don't like dainty dinner portions, stuffy service, ATM fees and resort taxes. And they sure as hell don't like throw pillows.

Those are some of the lessons the Keiser family has learned since it opened **Bandon Dunes Golf Resort** nearly 20 years ago. Michael Keiser Jr. said one of his best educations came while caddying at Bandon Dunes shortly after his father, Mike, opened the resort.

"I learned the most because our guests told me exactly what they liked and didn't like," Keiser Jr. said.

Those lessons and others have helped inform the Keiser family and the management team at KemperSports in the construction of **Sand Valley Golf Resort**, the most prominent in a collection of new resorts that recently have sprung up in far-flung destinations, leading itinerant golfers to call up Google Maps in search of tiny towns such as Nekoosa, Wis., Ridgedale, Mo., and Seneca, Ore.

In southwest Missouri, Bass Pro Shops founder Johnny Morris this month is opening **Ozarks National**, the latest Bill Coore-Ben Crenshaw collaboration, a few miles from his sprawling Big Cedar Lodge on Table Rock Lake. What started several years ago as a curiosity – a spectacular nine-hole par-3 course at

Top of the Rock – quickly mushroomed into 58 holes of golf, and Tiger Woods and his design team are building an additional 18 holes.

That’s a pretty compelling story to tell avid golfers in Midwest cities such as Kansas City, St. Louis, Oklahoma City and Memphis.

“People may think we’re down here in southwest Missouri and there’s not much around us, but really, we’re centrally located,” said Todd Bohn, Big Cedar’s director of agronomy. “If you drive three hours in any direction, you’ll reach a major city.”

These remote resorts are the most recent descendants of Bandon Dunes, which proved that golfers will go off the grid in search of memorable experiences.

“At one point in time, the idea of traveling to a destination five hours away from an airport was unheard of,” said Colby Marshall, general manager of **The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch** in eastern Oregon. “Bandon Dunes changed all of that.”



(Bandon Dunes)

While Bandon Dunes has an international clientele, particularly during peak season, Keiser said it still “is really a regional destination – California, Oregon, Washington, Vancouver.” These new resorts might develop national reputations, but as Bohn suggested, the drive-in market is the backbone of their businesses. Sand Valley’s core rationale was its proximity to hundreds of thousands of golfers in major Midwest cities; Chicago is the resort’s biggest market, but Minneapolis is making a lot noise.

“Minnesota golfers travel,” Keiser said.

Silvies Valley is more remote; part of its appeal is the chance to explore what Marshall calls “the frontier part” of Oregon. Golfers arriving from Bend, Ore., or Boise, Idaho, the nearest mid-major markets, will spend up to 3½ hours on desolate stretches of road on their way to the 140,000-acre resort.

Having made the effort, Silvies Valley’s guests are rewarded with a unique golf experience – architect Dan Hixson’s reversible course and goat caddies on the rugged McVeigh’s Gauntlet short course.

Golf, however, is only part of the experience at Silvies Valley and **Big Cedar**. These destinations drew some inspiration from Bandon Dunes – Hank Hickox, a consultant at Silvies Valley, was Bandon’s former general manager – but they accentuate their regional differences in ways large and small.

Morris, for example, is all about celebrating the beauty of the Ozarks, where he was raised. In advance of the opening of Ozarks National, Bohn said Morris personally has been supervising tree thinning around holes such as Nos. 4 and 17 to create infinity-green settings, with long views of the mountains.

“We understand that details matter,” Bohn said. “We try to think of everything we can do to make everyone’s visit joyful, and it all starts with (Morris).”

At Silvie's Valley, guests who aren't playing golf can do all of the things one might expect on a large western ranch: shooting and fishing, wagon rides, even cattle roundups and goat herding. Throughout their stays, they'll be dealing with staff members who live that lifestyle.

"We want that local, down-home (flavor)," Marshall said. "We don't want that to be trained out of folks."

We want it to be very natural, and it is. This is the reason why people talk about western hospitality. It is something people grow up with. You look people in the eye, you shake their hand, you say 'hello.' This is something all our team members have grown up with."

This reflects a lesson the Keisers learned long ago: Don't overcoach your staff. Sand Valley GM Glen Murray previously worked at Ritz-Carlton, which has rigid, homogeneous standards, right down to the phrasing the service staff uses in dealings with guests. He understood that wouldn't work at Sand Valley.

"Friendly local, authentic service is a way to distinguish ourselves," Keiser said. "Find stars and let them shine. Don't try to make them conform to a service standard."

You know what else doesn't work at Sand Valley? Those throw pillows, or what the KemperSports staff refers to as "throw-'em-on-the-floor pillows." Golfers said they were a nuisance, so the Keisers eliminated them.

Whatever these emerging regional golf destinations are doing, it's working.



Silvie's Ranch offers guests a reversible course and goat caddies. (Silvie's Ranch)

Silvie's Ranch this month is opening the 13,000-square-foot Rocking Heart Spa and is building 10 to 12 vacation cabins that will be ready for sale next year.

At Big Cedar, Morris is building a new clubhouse for Ozarks National that should be ready by spring. The Woods course, called Payne's Valley in honor of native son Payne Stewart, could be ready by late 2019.

He also is preparing to build a lodge at Top of the Rock that should be tailor-made for golf groups.

Sand Valley is busy as well, adding 52 rooms (60 beds) for 2019. Tom Doak recently was hired to build a fourth course, Sedge Valley, and David McLay Kidd is expected to build a putting course, possibly next year. Having figured out those other details – meatloaf and soap and throw pillows – Keiser wants to focus on the main job: creating memorable golf experiences.

“Everything else is superfluous and might even distract from what we worked so hard to build,” he said. **Gwk**

(**Note:** This story appears in the November 2018 issue of *Golfweek*.)



(Ryan Farrow)

Top 5 Golf Life Moments in 2018

5. Pinehurst No. 4 ready to co-host 2019 U.S. Amateur following Gil Hanse redo.
4. Overlooked southwest Scotland gets a tourism boost with The Machrie’s reinvention.
3. Five years after being wiped out by a historic flood, Alberta’s Kananaskis Country’s 36 holes reopen.
2. Well-funded Drive Shack emerges as a potential challenger to Topgolf.
1. David McLay Kidd’s Mammoth Dunes (above) debuts to wide praise at Sand Valley.