

GOD BLESS THE USA

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Our intrepid traveller
David J. Whyte kicks
off his US road trip
in Michigan

I'M PARTIAL TO AN AMERICAN ROAD TRIP. I've done a fair few and keep going back for more. This time, I was heading for the Midwest State of Michigan, not the most obvious golf destination you might think. But think again!

Detroit

I flew into Detroit, a city I'd previously preferred to avoid due to its tough reputation. "Things have changed," a Michigan friend told me. "Detroit has been transformed." Once the richest per capita city in America, Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013, the largest municipal crash in US history with an estimated debt of up to \$20 billion. However, in spite of the many tough years before and after that crash, Detroit is finally back on the map and looking better than ever.

Motown Museum

My first stop was the Motown Museum where Berry Gordy established a new music genre in the 1960s with artists such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Martha & The Vandellas, The Isley Brothers and The Jackson Five. They did it all from two rather run-down houses just off Detroit's Michigan Avenue. Today, you can take a walk down memory lane and peer lovingly at the 1950s furniture and makeshift recording spaces. Down in the main studio, our guide had our group singing a very ropey version of 'My Girl'.

I had lunch downtown and could see why young people were flocking back here, buying loft apartments and setting up businesses. Not so long ago, the good people of Detroit didn't come out of their offices at lunchtime. Nowadays, it's hard to find a seat on a park bench and the outside restaurants are booming. Downtown Detroit has been rejuvenated, rebuilt and rebooted. There is culture in the form of the Detroit Institute of Art and lots of quirky, independent shops and restaurants.

Of course, there is also the automotive industry, or what's left of it. Henry Ford is largely responsible for our present car-crazy world and his company still ►►



The Links course at Bay Harbor, one of three layouts at the resort, was the first to open and had the distinction of being the most expensive nine-hole course ever built

► manufactures trucks in nearby Dearborn. A trip to the Henry Ford Museum is a 'must' followed by the charming Greenfield Village. Finish off your day with a visit to Ford Rouge and get an inside look at the factory. It's one of the best adverts for Ford you'll find.

There's golf nearby at TPC Michigan, an 18-hole championship course designed by Jack Nicklaus. I dropped in for a look but didn't have time to play.

The Loop

Michigan is 'mitten-shaped' and I was roughly going up the east side then back down the west. I was heading for a course at Forest Dunes called The Loop, the world's first 'reversible' course. I know they have previously played the Old Course backwards but, at The Loop, you'll play it clockwise one day and anti-clockwise the next... all year.

The Loop is the brainchild of Tom Doak, the American designer who lives only an hour away. Doak got the idea when studying in St Andrews and had been itching to try it out.

I teed up on the Red course first. It's a solid test and the Black even more so. The surprising thing, though, is how different the two 'loops' are - even though you're covering the same ground. I reckon it'll become as famous as Bandon Dunes or Florida's Streamsong, two other remote golf complexes that the Americans have taken to their hearts. What I liked about it was the 'minimalist' approach, letting the land present itself with little manipulation. It must make greenkeeping a lot simpler. The Loop is a great track. It's also part of Forest Dunes Golf Club which offers a superb 18 holes in its own right through the forest and around lakes. There's great on-site accommodation so if you come this way, stay for two or three nights.

Summer Golf

Northern Michigan witnessed a course building boom in the '80s and '90s and now there are more superb, 'signature' courses per capita than anywhere else in the USA.

What makes Northern Michigan so popular? A couple of things. During the summer when most of the US is baking, it keeps its cool usually in the mid-70s or low 80s. Being that much further north, it also stays lighter longer, long enough to fit in a second round if you're so inclined.

Beyond that, it's a lovely part of the world and the people are particularly friendly. There are hundreds of crystal-clear lakes and the shores of Lake Michigan itself, plus there's Sleeping Bear Dunes, voted the most beautiful spot in all America, and charming little towns to visit.

Mackinac Island

I left my hire car in Mackinaw City and caught a Shepler's Ferry across to the famous Mackinac Island, famous because it doesn't allow motorised vehicles. Instead, there are 600 horses and God-knows-how-many bicycles. There are also two golf courses, The Jewel and one of my all-time favourites, Wawashkamo Golf Club. Built by Alex Smith of Carnoustie in 1898, it is one of Michigan's oldest active courses, laid out in a links style and largely unaltered since the start. You can play its nine holes and 18 tee boxes with hickories from the golf shop. I asked Chuck, the pro, how Wawashkamo got its name. "When the Indians saw the Scotsmen playing golf for the first time," he told me, "they cried 'Wawashkamo' which means 'Walk a crooked trail.'" *I know how that goes!*

Mackinac Island is the most charming place. It's packed with tourists during the day but at night they go away, leaving this delightful retreat to those that stay. The Grand is the island's most famous hotel but I prefer the Chippewa on Main Street, especially for its Pink Pony Bar, the most popular spot of an evening.

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Back on the mainland, the place to stay is the Inn at Bay Harbor, a salubrious hotel overlooking Lake Michigan. There are 27 holes at Bay Harbor but, in truth, there are so many magnificent courses up here, you're spoiled for choice.

I particularly like the Links and Quarry sections of Bay Harbor followed by the Heather Course at Boyne Highland. Another one to consider further south on Lake Michigan is Arcadia Bluffs Golf Club, an exceptional test and I believe they're building a sister course there.

Then there's Belvedere Golf Club just beyond the delightful little resort town of Charlevoix. It's maybe not so much on the travelling golfer's radar yet it's one of the most historic and renowned clubs in the state. Designed by William Watson, it's also where golf legend Tom Watson spent his childhood summers and I believe he's still a member. Belvedere is semi-private so be sure to organise a game in advance

either by email or phone and experience an American classic.

Traverse City

Travelling south again, I made a point of staying around Traverse City, Northern Michigan's fun-town. You can visit wineries or perhaps 'Little Bohemia', the bar where Walter Hagen held court in his twilight years and from where he called Arnold Palmer to congratulate him on his first Open victory. "The biggest thrill I got when I set a British Open record of 276 strokes at Troon, was to have Walter Hagen phone me from Little Bo's in Traverse City to congratulate me," said Palmer.

I could have hung out in this part of Michigan forever but I had to keep rolling south towards Chicago and continue my tour across America. Along the way, there were two other golf complexes I needed to check out. The first was near the town of Kalamazoo. It's called 'Stoatin Braes'. I couldn't believe they'd named a course that and thought it must be an Indian name. No, it comes straight from Glasgow's Southside... the director of golf suggested it to John, the owner, and it stuck. They saw it as meaning "something that was grand in Scotland" and so they figured it would do. The brand new 'Stoatin Braes' is head and shoulders above the other courses in the area already.

Harbor Shores

My final outpost on this round-Michigan trip was Harbor Shores, a coastal community consisting of Benton Harbor and St Joseph's.

The Harbor Shores course is interesting as it's divided into four unique sections. There's a dunes section where you get good elevation changes from the tee boxes, then a lake section, then into the trees, then the final five holes is the river section along the Paw Paw River. The best hole on this Jack Nicklaus design is the long par-4 11th which plays up to a well-raised green with a great swale running through the middle. I was delighted with a birdie on this hole and, on the occasion, my playing partner showed me a YouTube video of the opening round with Jack and Hale Irwin. Hale challenges Jack saying the green was unplayable. I'm not going to tell you the rest - look it up yourself but, suffice to say, my birdie here tasted all the sweeter.

So, that was my tour of the Midwest state of Michigan and it was truly delightful. It's a long way to go to get from Detroit to Chicago but if you want to explore one of America's premier summer golf destinations, you should take the diversion. The next day, I drove into Chicago to visit an old pal who'd studied in Scotland and played a couple of courses in the Windy City. Then I was off again. Next stop: Colorado Join me for the next leg of my trans-America sojourn. ●

NEXT ISSUE COLORADO



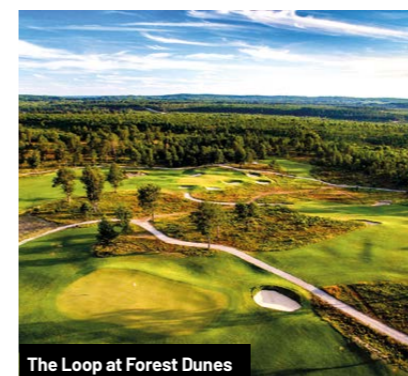
The brilliantly-named Stoatin Braes course at Gull Lake View Golf Club, which is in the equally brilliantly-named Kalamazoo



The Quarry at Bay Harbor, known as the venue's 'diamond in the rough'



The quaint pro shop at Belvedere Golf Club



The Loop at Forest Dunes



Harbor Shores Golf Club



The Donald Ross course at Boyne Highlands, one of four courses at the award-winning venue