

THE GULF COAST OF FLORIDA

Our man **David J Whyte** is back on the road in the USA and, this time, he's touring the Florida coast looking for fun with the sticks

David J Whyte David J Whyte

IT'S ALL ABOUT TIMING! I was attending the PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando and planning to spend a few days golfing along Florida's Gulf Coast when, what do you know, Gasparilla is on, the biggest event of Tampa's social calendar.

Tampa is the largest city on Florida's Gulf Coast and Gasparilla, a 'Pirate Parade & Party' has been hitting the city's streets since 1904. The event is linked to the legendary José Gaspar (a.k.a. Gasparilla), a Spanish pirate who trawled Florida's Gulf Coast in the late 1700s looking for booty.

The 'Parade of Pirates' is populated with local cutthroats and brigands (through the working week, mild-mannered reporters and bank clerks) who descend upon Tampa armed to the teeth with beer cans, big fat cigars and armfuls of brightly-coloured beads to distribute as they carouse through the city's streets and 'party' well into the night. Davy Jones would be spinning in his locker!

It was an extra fine start our trip - but I needed to lie down for a couple of days afterwards!

Golf on the Gulf

There's some really good golf all along Florida's Gulf Coast although you need to know what you're doing! The majority are private and in the US, private actually means private, not like our 'private' clubs who mostly take in anyone with the price of a green fee. What you're looking for is 'public play' or resort courses - of which there are still plenty!

Tampa Resorts

Innisbrook and Saddlebrook are two exceptional golf resorts close to the city of

Tampa both offering twin courses. I sampled the Copperhead Course at Innisbrook, a veteran of the PGA Tour's Valspar Championship. Not your typical, flat Florida course, the Copperhead offers a hilly terrain that is noticeably challenging.

Saddlebrook's two Arnold Palmer courses are more relaxed and playable. But the Tampa track that was my takeaway was Rogers Park, just a mile or so from famous Busch Gardens, Tampa's safari-themed amusement park. Rogers Park is set in the middle of 'the hood', a predominantly black community full of 1950s Florida houses. Surrounded by the Hillsborough River, the course was developed by a group of black caddies who worked at private clubs and wanted a piece of the action themselves.

We rolled up at Rogers and were immediately made to feel at home. James behind the counter in the Pro Shop was an ultra cool dude, dressed sharp and sassy like a young James Brown. "Next time y'all come," he shouted. "I'm gonna play with you!" That I can guarantee would be an experience!

Rogers Park is a very playable course with some great holes but the atmosphere here's the thing. This is how golf should be - a community asset. You'll pay around \$38 for the privilege so it's great value, too!

Other courses in the Tampa area worth checking out are Black Diamond, Southern Hills and World Woods.

Sarasota

There's a sign at the bottom of Main Street in Sarasota that reads 'Landing of the Scots.' I was intrigued! In the winter of 1895, a group of Edinburgh families were 'sold a pup' by Scottish land developer, Sir John Gillespie.



Old Corkscrew Golf Club in southwest Florida, above, and, inset, The Rookery at Marco Island.



FOLLOW DAVID
For more information on David's travels including videos of most places he has visited go to linksland.com

For £100, they were offered “an estate of 40 acres in that marvellous land, and a town lot besides!” What they got was no sign of a town whatsoever and mosquito-infested swamps. To top it all, that winter, it snowed! Most of the families said ‘stuff this for a game of soldiers’ and caught the next boat back to Ecosse.

Sir John did the decent thing and sent his only begotten son, John Hamilton Gillespie, to try and remedy things. Young Gillespie was a St Andrews man and keen golfer. Synchronous to building his first house, young John created a single fairway with a green at either end to ‘keep his hand in’. This turned out to be one of the first courses to be built in North America. In 1905, he constructed a further nine-hole course. Keeping up the theme, the Gillespie family’s third home was called Golf Hall on the corner of Sarasota’s Golf Street and Links Avenue. You might say John Gillespie was a golf fan!

Today, Sarasota is Florida’s cultural capital offering opera, theatre, museums and art. It also sports perhaps the best beach in America, Siesta Key, which stretches for around eight miles. It attracts sun-worshippers galore, especially in the Florida high-season, which lasts from early January to around Easter.

While we were here, the Suncoast Classic had come to town, an inaugural iteration of the Web.com Tour so worth a look. The event is in its infancy so the field was slim but I reckon it’ll grow, especially if they return to this amazing golf course! Lakewood National Golf Club has two relatively new Arnold Palmer-approved courses. Again, on Florida’s flat terrain, they’ve done a really nice job in pushing the earth around to create some very interesting, challenging holes. We walked the entire course following the Suncoast action and will definitely be back armed to sample this new course.

If you’re planning on playing a lot of golf in the Sarasota area by the way, the Suncoast Trail Card, costing just over \$60, gives significantly reduced green fees at a number of courses in the area including Lakewood National.

Longboat Key Club

Two courses not on the card but well worth a visit are the duo of Harbourside and Links at The Resort at Longboat Key Club. You have to stay at the resort to play but that’s ok. With miles of beach at your beck and call, what’s not to love?



The ‘Scots’ sign at the bottom of Main Street in downtown Sarasota



David bumping into David Leadbetter



Dining at The Little Bar & Restaurant

Heading down Interstate 75, there are a couple of courses worth stopping for; Old Corkscrew, an aptly named Jack Nicklaus Signature course just south of Fort Myers, or indeed Raptor Bay nearby on the coast close to Bonita Springs.

Naples

Naples might well be the highlight of our trip! It’s a super-wealthy, rapidly expanding city but there’s plenty room for ‘normal’ folks. We stayed at the two-star Lemon Tree Inn just two minutes from downtown’s 5th Ave and were totally delighted. It’s like a motel from a 50s movie set with an old Florida charm that’s not so easy to find these days. Neither is it expensive. Another great accommodation is the Green Links Golf Villas at Lely Resort. With two courses surrounding the property, the Flamingo Island & Lely Mustang, it’s 36 holes of fun right on your doorstep.

Also in Naples is the Tiburón Gold and Black courses, both Greg Norman layouts that show a lot more ‘teeth’. You’ll pay plenty to play for the privilege but if you’re feeling flush go for it! Tiburón, of course, means ‘shark’ in Spanish and there’s plenty of water on both courses. The Gold is the meanest... it’s not long but you need to be accurate off the tee and pin sharp into the undulating greens. This is part

of the Ritz-Carlton enterprise which means exemplary service and course conditions. They even have their own brand of craft beer!

Marco Island

Finally, we arrived at Marco Island, the last stop on our Gulf Coast golfing tour staying at the Marriott Marco Island. Marco Island’s got a nice vibe, a sunny, retirement community with miles of beach on one side and the Everglades National Park on the other. There are again two courses on offer, the Rookery and Hammock Bay. I played the Rookery which I had done years ago. It’s a bit more built-up with condos these days but still a great experience.

I’d been searching for a taste of Old Florida and I’m afraid in this rapidly expanding part of the world, I was struggling. However, the Marco Island Historical Museum with its Key Marco Cat and information on the Calusa Indians and the Everglades took me back a bit further than I expected. But it’s a superb facility that I highly recommend you must visit. Fascinating stuff!

David flew British Airways from Edinburgh to Orlando via London and hired from Sixt.com at Orlando International Airport. Sixt’s ‘no hassle’ policy was gratefully noted - as was the upgrade!