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A clear course: George Cobb's routing avoids the marsh and coast.

It's a **Win-Win**

On Bald Head Island, both developers and environmentalists have lots of reasons to be happy

BY BOB CULLEN

I like to consider myself both a golfer and an environmentalist. I'm the kind of guy who carries his clubs in the trunk of a hybrid car and keeps an informal count of the number of bird species he's seen as he's played. But more and more often, I feel like a friend to both the Hatfields *and* the McCoy's. Too often I'm presented with an apparent and painful conflict between being green and being on the green.

In Ireland not long ago, I watched Tom Doak sketch the routing for an exciting new course on a stretch of rugged linksland

twenty-five miles from Tralee. That project has gone nowhere; one reason is the high cost and hassle factor of fighting opposition from Irish and European environmentalists. (In the same region, Greg Norman had to re-route Doonbeg to protect a snail so small that you could keep a family of them on the top of a golf tee.) Doak told me that back in the States, his second eighteen at Stonewall Golf Club outside Philadelphia required more than twenty environmental permits; a decade earlier, his first course at Stonewall had needed about five. Certainly no one planning a course in this century does so without anticipating a long and thorough environmental review, and it's safe to say that many of the world's great courses could never be built today.

So it was with both anticipation and trepidation that I recently planned a week on Bald Head Island, North Carolina. If ever a place seemed destined to force me to choose between golf and the environment, this was it.

Bald Head sits on the southernmost tip of North Carolina's Cape Islands, at the mouth

COURTESY OF BALD HEAD ISLAND

of the Cape Fear River. Confederate blockade-runners once plied the adjacent waters trying to get supplies up the river to the port of Wilmington. The island is shaped a bit like a fork, with three tines of dry land poking into a maze of creeks, marshes and wetlands. A maritime forest, its trees stunted by the salt breeze, covers much of the lee side of a central dune that spans the six-mile length of the thickest tine.

I had a bit of history with the island. Back in the 1970s, I was a cub reporter for the Asso-

rumbling up and down the central dune. The developer, unannounced, had decided to preempt the governor by beginning construction. The story I wrote appeared on front pages around the state. It helped launch my career.

At the time, I was in the stage of life where a young man's clubs often gather dust in his parents' garage because there isn't enough time and money for golf. Perhaps not coincidentally, my sympathies then were largely on the side of the environmentalists. I thought

there were already enough beach houses and golf courses on the coast—and not enough parks.

That sentiment had kept me from revisiting Bald Head Island for several decades. When I finally decided to go back, I was curious to see what had been done to the island—and fearful that I'd find another place with houses jammed along the beach and golf greens jutting into a suspiciously brown and sickly marsh.

MY CONCERN STARTED to ebb when I boarded the ferry to Bald Head Island. After three-plus decades of development, there's still no way to take a private car onto the island. You take the boat. Once there, you walk, skate, bike or ride a golf cart.

In thirty years, the island's developers have permitted the construction of about a thousand homes. They're mostly wood-frame, two-story houses, with little of the glitzy architecture of the Hamptons. They have simple decks where you can catch the breeze off the water and, from the river side, watch the odd freighter churning to or from Wilmington. There are a couple of stores and restaurants. The old lighthouse still towers over everything.

The single golf course on Bald Head comports with this sense of restraint. It was designed by George Cobb, who was once the



House proud: Most of the wood-frame homes are attractive but modest.

As I walked the golf course, I saw some of the benefits of Bald Head's sensitive approach.

ciated Press in North Carolina and Bald Head was the subject of a political controversy. Bearing just a lighthouse and a few abandoned Coast Guard buildings, it was considered the biggest piece of pristine land left on the Atlantic Coast. The governor at the time, Bob Scott, wanted the state to buy it for a park. The legislature, though, was inclined to let a developer start turning it into a resort.

One day in 1971, I drove to the coast and took a small fishing boat to the island. I found miles of beaches unmarked by anything but shorebird talons. I also found bulldozers

architectural consultant to Augusta National. (He did the par-three course there.) Cobb's routing stays well clear of the marshes and beaches. It meanders within the maritime forest, with a few greens and tees set around the ridge formed by the island's principal dune. There are no fairway bunkers. The prime hazards are the lagoons that drain the fairways.

The golf club, owned by its members, tries to be a good steward of its land. The greens are a relatively coarse strain of old-fashioned Bermuda. They're slower, grainier and bumpier than greens with the more modern hybrid grasses. But they require less fertilizer and fewer chemicals than those hybrids do. When the weather gets hot, the club doesn't insist that the superintendent keep them slick. It encourages him to raise the mower blades and give the grass a break.

I found, over several pleasant rounds, that I could get used to the greens. And as I walked the course, I could see some of the benefits of Bald Head's environmentally sensitive approach. Winged creatures flit from the marshes to the course and back again. Ospreys catch fish and feed their young in trees by the seventh

fairway and the thirteenth tee. A noisy flock of white ibis roosts on a bank behind the sixth green. In fact, one species, the iridescent black glossy ibis, seems to prefer the edges of the course's lagoons to the wild marsh. When I saw one, I added it to my golfing bird list.

I know there are environmentalists who would, if they could, tear down all of Bald Head's houses, let the golf course go to seed and turn the island into a pristine nature preserve. I know there are developers who, if they got hold of the property, would add hundreds of houses and condos, build another golf course with a lot of marsh carries, and lobby the state for a bridge to the mainland. After my visit to Bald Head, I sympathize with neither camp.

I think both golfers and environmentalists need a little of the restraint I saw on Bald Head Island. There's no reason why golf courses and wildlife can't coexist. All that's required is for each side in the debate to respect the other's arguments and interests. Bald Head seemed a place where that has happened, a place where I could be both a golfer and an environmentalist, without apologies. I enjoyed the feeling. •

>>> Trip Planner: Bald Head Island



In the dunes: cottages for rent

PLAYING The **Bald Head Island Club** (301 South Bald Head Wynd; 910-457-7310, bhigolf.com), designed by George Cobb and dating to 1974, is fun and scenic. It's also plenty challenging, at 6,855 yards from the tips

and a slope of 139. Walking is permitted, and there is a good practice area with grass tees. The greens fee is \$110.

STAYING Most visitors to Bald Head Island rent cottages. They're available via the island's web site, baldheadisland.com, or by calling the realty office at 800-432-7368. Cottages generally rent by the week during the summer months, with prices upward of \$3,000. If you're interested in a shorter stay or you're traveling as a couple, rooms are available from **Theodosia's** (800-656-1812) and the **Marsh Harbour Inn** (800-680-8322), both small and well-appointed hostleries with a view of the marina at Bald Head Village. Rates range from about \$150 to \$300 per night.

DINING The most elegant of the island's restaurants is the **Shoals Club** (800-559-1594), in a sprawling, clapboard beach club

overlooking the ocean at **Frying Pan Shoals**. Be sure your rental agreement makes you a temporary member. The place for casual dining is **Eb & Flo's** (910-457-7217), overlooking the marina. Eat on the deck and watch the ferry come in.

TRANSPORTATION If you're going by yacht, take the inland waterway to Southport, North Carolina, and turn east. Bald Head Island is two miles or so offshore. If the boat's in drydock, you can drive to Southport and look for the signs to the Bald Head ferry. Parking is available near the ferry landing for \$7 per day. Ferries run every half hour during the summer, every hour off-season. A round-trip ticket costs \$15, and the trip takes about twenty minutes each way. Once on the island, your cottage will likely be equipped with a golf cart or two. If not, they're available for rent near the marina.