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AWAY GAME: ATLANTIC CITY

Boardwalk Empire

Atlantic City has quietly built itself into a worthy golf destination



Atlantic City Country Club's 157-yard 17th has a hidden green.

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BY RON KASPRISKE
PHOTOS BY STEPHEN SZURLEJ

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Gamblers don't mince words when they say Atlantic City is *not* Las Vegas. But if you're a golfer, that's not a bad thing. Las Vegas is a gambler's paradise that just happens to have some good golf courses sprinkled about, but you could say the opposite of AC. Within a half-hour drive of the city's legendary boardwalk—which is still intact despite Hurricane Sandy's best efforts last fall—are 20 public courses. More impressive is the diversity of designs. During a long weekend you can tee it up at two old-school major-championship venues, three Scottish-links-inspired courses, another routed through a vineyard, and even a Pine Valley knockoff. Take that, Sin City.

It's OK if you never thought of the southern coast of New Jersey as a destination for a buddies golf trip, says Charles Fahy, general manager of [Atlantic City Country Club](#). That's because before 2012, even AC courses struggled to realize the tourism they could attract if they banded together. But last year the 17-course Greater Atlantic City Golf Association ([playACGolf.com](#)) began a campaign to generate business. It was derailed briefly by Sandy: Casinos shut down for five days, and the beaches and many courses needed TLC. But the recovery is complete, and the association is making a big push to lure golfers, including custom packages based on the size and needs of each group. It's not quite as organized as, say, Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday, but the Atlantic City group is quickly learning to compete with more established golf destinations using a combination of good golf, affordable prices and ease of use.

If you go, put Atlantic City Country Club at the top of your playlist. The par-70, 6,577-yard course dates to 1897 but has been updated several times, including in 1999 by architect Tom Doak. He did his best to restore many original features, including firm, undulating greens and tall, native grasses that frame bunkers and fairways. Willie Park Jr., the British Open champion in 1887 and 1889, is often credited as the primary designer, though at least four others are responsible for this classic layout. ACCC is routed along marshland and back bays and has the feel of a classic Northeast country club, which it once was. The course has been open to the public only since 1998 when Hilton Hotels bought it. Caesars Entertainment now owns it.

As you play several holes along the shoreline, the neon-and-concrete kingdom of AC looms in the distance. The front nine is a brute with four par 4s longer than 445 yards. One of those, the opening hole, charmingly uses a portion of the practice putting green as its tee box. The back nine is much shorter (3,125 yards compared to 3,452 on the front) but also a lot tighter as you wind your way around the marsh. Several shots bring the hazard into play, and the 157-yard 17th is a blind shot over massive sand dunes.

ACCC is the area's priciest course (\$225 on weekends, \$195 weekdays), but the experience is worth it. It promises to be a fun and challenging round, and you'll feel like you've entered a golf museum in the clubhouse. ACCC played an important part in the history of American golf. Not only did the terms birdie and eagle originate from rounds played there in 1903, but the course was the site of six USGA championships, including the 1901 Amateur and the 1948 Women's Open won by Babe Didrikson Zaharias. Bob Hope regularly played the course. So did boxer Joe Louis and quarterback Joe Namath. Arnold Palmer spent a couple of summers there in the 1950s while serving in the Coast Guard nearby. Everything from the wood lockers to the spike marks on the 19th hole's floor lets you know that you're experiencing a piece of golf's past.

The [Stockton Seaview Hotel & Golf Club's Bay Course](#), a 6,247-yard, par-71 layout, has a similar look and feel to Atlantic City Country Club, playing along Reeds Bay with views of the distant AC skyline. Five holes use the marshland as part of their defense. Architect Bob Cupp should get credit for doing a nice job of restoring the original design started by Hugh Wilson and completed by Donald Ross in 1915. Like most Ross courses, the smallish, tricky greens make up for any lack of length. And like ACCC, a visit to Seaview comes with a history lesson: It hosted the 1942 PGA and has been home to the LPGA's ShopRite Classic since 1986. What was once an elite private club is now a 36-hole resort. Room prices start at \$129 for a weekend night in mid-April.

COURSE GUIDE

- 1 Atlantic City C.C. ★★★★★**, \$225, [accountryclub.com](#), 609-236-4411
- 2 Vineyard Golf at Renault** (not yet rated), \$95, [vineyardgolfatrenault.com](#), 609-965-2111 (ext. 800)
- 3 Twisted Dune G.C. ★★★★★**, \$99, [twisteddune.com](#), 609-653-8019
- 4 Stockton Seaview Hotel & G.C. (36 holes) ★★★★★½**, \$109, [seaviewgolf.com](#), 609-748-7680
- 5 Sand Barrens G.C. (27 holes) ★★★★★**, \$109, [sandbarrensgolf.com](#), 609-465-3555

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Map: Kagan McLeod & Jonathan Rivalto



Atlantic City Country Club's locker room.

Connections to the past seem to be a theme in AC. It's hard to spend time here and not think about whiskey, bootleggers and the Prohibition era. Nor does it seem out of place to tee it up on a course that pays homage to golf's Scottish roots. Sure, you could get a little feel for what Pine Valley is like at [Sand Barrens Golf Club](#) in nearby Cape May, but any trip to AC should include a round at Twisted Dune.

It looks like a links course, feels like a links and even plays like a links. But I'll stop short of calling it a links. There are too many modern features to make you think you've been transported to County Fife, Scotland. Nevertheless, [Twisted Dune](#) offers enough gnarly lies, bump-and-run opportunities and sand to satisfy. The par-72, 7,248-yard layout has all the bunkers and waste areas you can handle. You'll be shaking sand out of your shoes for weeks. Wind is the course's other defense, which can be problematic on a long closing nine. Even from the white tees, you'll often find yourself hitting hybrids and woods for second shots. Luckily, you can chase them onto many of the greens because there aren't a lot of forced carries. Oh, and speaking of the greens, take a refresher course on lag putting before coming. They're huge.

If you prefer modern layouts, Vineyard Golf at Renault, west of Atlantic City, gets points for creativity and playability. It's part of a resort and winery, and its big Tuscan-style hotel gives the impression that the course has been there for decades. Actually, the par-72, 7,213-yard course has been open only since 2004. Renault is a big course sprawled over 225 acres. Many holes offer risk/reward options with water coming into play on seven holes and hazards designed to make aiming at the premium part of the fairway or green a gutsy play. The most unforgettable hole is the nasty, dogleg-left seventh. You have to play over the vineyard off the tee to a narrow landing area. Trust me on this: Wine grapes are not good to eat.



The Vineyard's 207-yard 13th.

The back nine is hillier and more memorable in terms of shots, including the downhill 12th, guarded by water and sand right of the green,

and the double-dogleg, par-5 18th.

You're probably wondering about the wine. Well, let's just say that if you've sampled the best from Napa, Tuscany and Bordeaux, Renault's selection might not make it past the spit bucket. Still, the novelty of drinking New Jersey wine is worth it for the story. In fact, that's the real charm of a golf trip to Atlantic City: the stories. I'm not going to go all Bruce Springsteen on you here, but AC is a piece of Americana. From the decaying inner city, to the outdated boardwalk casinos, to Lucy, the six-story elephant that has become a landmark, there are few golf destinations that offer the charm, history and, yes, cheese factor of AC.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

ROLL THE DICE

Looking for a gambling experience similar to Vegas? The most popular casino is the Borgata on the north end of town. But the casinos along the boardwalk in the center of town are great for sunsets and people watching. Try Caesars first.

CHECKED OUT

You can eat at any number of big-chain restaurants in the casinos, but for a real experience, head out on Black Horse Pike to the Library III. The steaks are good and affordable, and the scene in the lounge is worth any wait for a table (think the Regal Beagle from "Three's Company").

WHERE'S NUCKY?

If you're looking for scene locations from HBO's hit show "Boardwalk Empire," you'll have to travel to the boroughs of New York City. But if you want a taste of Prohibition life, head to the Knife & Fork Inn (*right*) or the Irish Pub (and ask to see the bootlegger's trap door).



Courtesy of Knife & Fork Inn



Lucy the Elephant is an AC landmark.

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