

Within Driving Range

Autumn Splendor

Autumn in the Virginia mountains is nature's way of apologizing for a Middle Atlantic summer. The sky is blue, the air is crisp, the fairways are lush and green and the aeration holes have healed and now the greens are rolling fast and true. When you get a good round going on a fine course, you find yourself in the midst of a day you wish would never end.

You could spend the entire season canvassing the valley, admiring nature's grandeur and playing good golf courses. But realistically what are the chances? The next best thing is a day trip to play a little golf and catch a few eyeballs full of the Old Dominion's fiery ways.

Contributing writer Peter Smolens hits the road and plays some of the hidden gems of the region where Interstate 66 T-bones I-81. From his home in Manassas, it's an easy drive. Of course, he got in ahead of the surge in gas prices. Still, the value he discovered makes return trips worth the effort.



WITHIN DRIVING RANGE



ROCK HARBOR GOLF CLUB

MADE IN THE SHADE

You might not think a golf course so closely connected to a city would have much of a chance at superiority. Golf history has shown that municipal courses often suffer from lack of imagination, poor maintenance and uninspired management. Heritage Oaks is just a mile from Harrisonburg City Hall, and maybe that means the city fathers are keeping a close eye on it because this modern municipal designed by Bill Love is imaginative and challenging.

What has become a great success story for Harrisonburg took almost 20 years and came close to being a project left on the drawing board. Cecil Gilkerson, former head of the city's parks and recreation for more than 60 years, thought a golf course would benefit city residents.

In the 1980s, Gilkerson proposed that the city purchase a sizeable tract of land bordering Hillandale Park for the facility. At that time the City Council was not interested in the proposal.

But Gilkerson believed in the vision and in the early 1990s the proposal was revived. This time city council members were much more receptive to the idea. They had heard about the golf boom that was taking place all over the country. They commissioned a feasibility study, and based on that they put together a bond referendum.

That is when the trouble started. Some residents didn't like idea of their tax dollars being used to build a golf course. Calling themselves TAGS (Tax Against Golf Spending), a group fought the development process every step of the way. They went so far as to file a lawsuit. According to documents filed, they thought the golf course would, among other things, be a drain on the city's water supply, harm the wildlife that inhabited the area and bring in "unsuitable element" to the city.

But apparently the group was in the minority, and the bond passed and money was allocated for the project. Through a bid process from

multiple proposals, a package was put together awarding the design to Love and construction to Turf Drain Inc.

"When I first saw the proposed site I loved the location," Love says. "I thought the property with its natural rolling hills would make a good golf course. Between the city's finances and other limitations, I came up with a design that would satisfy all concerns."

Construction took about two years from groundbreaking in 1999 to completion of the golf course. Love used the existing flow of the land to fit the par 70 course to the land and saved money by not moving a lot of earth.

The stream and pond that traverse the property are natural, and to resolve the challenge of not using city water, the run off from a local water treatment plant feeds the irrigation ponds.

The front nine is par 34, but offers some very challenging holes, including the only par 5 on the front. Opportunities abound on the



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While the plethora of modern courses is always great to play it is becoming increasingly more difficult to find a true gem from the past, especially one open to the public for a reasonable price. Bryce is a nice change of pace. Seeing everything laid out in front of you makes you wish there were more of these courses left.

Bryce Resort was started in 1905 when William R. Bryce from Philadelphia moved to the Blue Ridge Mountains. From the humble beginnings of a few cabins that surrounded a lodge, Bryce has grown to a member-owned resort that includes a number of condos and vacation homes. Skiing was added in the early 1960s and the golf course opened in 1970, making Bryce a year-round resort.

DAUGHTER OF THE STARS

There's something about Shenandoah Valley Golf Club in Front Royal, all 27 holes of it, that captures you. Maybe it is mountain setting; or the solitude of the course; or the mesmerizing layout that is simple yet confounding. Maybe it's a little of all of those things.

Traditional is perhaps the best way to describe Shenandoah Valley. There are no tricked up holes, no water hazards of note, and no major obstacles to avoid other than the pine trees that line most of the fairways. Bunkers are not in abundance but they are strategically placed. It's one of those courses that looks pleasing and easy to the eye but turns out to be quite challenging.

The Valley's small, undulating greens might have something to do with that. The course places a premium on putting, which might be why most find it more difficult than meets the eye.

The White nine plays about a stroke easier than the other two, but combined with either, offers a solid 18 holes. The tougher combination is the Red-Blue layout. The Blue course requires the most drivers and calls for the most accuracy. The White and Red nines are the more traditional challenges with some narrow chutes.

"What makes Shenandoah Valley one of the great courses in the Middle Atlantic," says PGA head pro Richard Runyon, "is the fact that we can make this course hard, but for daily play we want

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back nine, especially at No. 14, a visually stunning dogleg with its green nestled behind the pond. Head pro David Johns thinks the 15th is the hidden gem of the course. From the back tee, you have to bust a drive to get to the corner of the dogleg and open up an approach to the green. The course finishes with two par 5s in the last three.

After only a few years in operation, Heritage Oaks has become a success in many ways. The wildlife returned following construction and golfers seem to be flocking to the course as well.

MOUNTAIN WONDER

The idea of golf courses flowing naturally across the land goes back to the first golf courses built – or rather trampled out – in Scotland. But the idea remains an effective one today, which is why the course at Bryce Resort in Bayse is such an enjoyable day.

Ed Ault subscribed to those original principals of design and routed Bryce across a valley floor, creating a mountain panorama effect all around it. Carved naturally at the base of Bryce Mountain, the course is one of the flattest mountain courses you're likely to play.

Although it is short, only 6,261 yards from the tips, it is fun and fair. Ault put in subtle challenges that can reach out and grab you if you're not accurate, and he lulls you by providing many scenic backgrounds, mostly Bryce and Great North mountains. But mostly Bryce is a simple, straightforward layout that gives everyone a chance to play well. Most greens are receptive to attacks via air or ground, and there are few forced carries off the tee. There is water to contend with in the form of

Stoney Creek, which comes into play on more than half the holes.

The golf course starts out fast with a solid par 5, that, according to golf pro Doug Zimmerman, is the signature hole of the golf course.

The hole is visually intimidating with Bryce Mountain to the right playing as a gradual dogleg to the right. To keep you honest, water runs down the right side of the fairway so the tee shot needs to be positioned left.

With a bunker and heavy rough guarding that side, the opener makes a daunting first hole. Stoney Creek then cuts across in front of a small, elevated green making this a solid three-shot hole. The creek then meanders – and menaces – throughout the rest of the course. On a few holes, Ault used trees and

bunkers to prevent players from cutting too much off the doglegs.

At Bryce, the key is to take advantage of scoring opportunities on the front nine, then hang on for an interesting ride on the back. Ault starts the back nine off with an extremely tight tree-lined fairway with a severely sloped fairway that kicks every ball to the right. Waiting at the bottom of the fairway is Stoney Creek. Zimmerman says the surprise of the back nine is the 13th hole, a challenging dogleg par 5 that is more uphill than it appears. Water runs down the left side and a bunker at the corner of the dogleg is there to capture drives of players trying to bite off more than they can chew. The small green is severely undulating and approach shots must remain below the hole.

Shenandoah Valley Golf Club



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family industry. The family already owns the rock quarry that is located behind the course, a construction company, an asphalt paving business and a farm.

The location of the golf course was a natural since local ordinances require the need for a buffer zone between the quarry and the rest of the world. In fact, during the weekdays you'll hear the rumblings of quarry work in the background while playing.

"For years I had discussed with my family about building a golf course on the family farm that is located farther out in the county," says Perry. "But then this property became available. It was originally an old apple orchard. With its natural elevation changes and location near the main road, I thought it would be perfect for a

golf course."

Perry designed Rock Harbor based on many different golf courses he has seen and played over the years. He used his regular construction crews, which created challenges. The key to building roads and parking lots is to make everything flat. While building the golf course, Perry had a hard time changing that mindset. He had to constantly remind the crew that golf course fairways have natural rolls. In the end, Perry resorted to doing most of the final shaping himself.

The result is a nice mixture of holes with water coming into play on almost half the golf course. The signature hole is No. 7, a medium length par 3 that requires an accurate shot to an island green. Two other holes on the front will keep you on your toes purely by

their length. The par 4 fourth stretches to 450 yards and is uphill from tee to green. The ninth is almost as long with out of bounds running down the left-hand side.

According to Perry, the current course routing is not the final design. Cut through an old apple orchard, the back nine is a mixture of holes that will be incorporated into the next course, including the mammoth par 5 12th, which comes in just under 700 yards, and the very short 13th hole, all 135 yards of it from the longest tee box.

Naming the course Rock Harbor might sound strange in landlocked Winchester, but the name actually has nothing to do with the rock quarry or water. It comes from an old house on the Perry family farm built in 1792 and known since then as Rock Harbor. *



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