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Lewis & Clark Links

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by Ginny Prior



An avid golfer and North Dakota native shares her tips for hitting the greens along the state's unique Lewis & Clark Golf Trail.

I'm a Dakota girl who loves golf. Like so many prairie towns, the one of my birth has a golf course, a breezy nine-holer with gently rolling fairways and caramel-colored sand greens. Play is by the honor system. You put your money in the box and cart your clubs to the No. 1 tee, perched on a plateau with a sweeping view of the area. As a youth, I had never been to any of the nearby towns, but there they were, spread out before me like a patchwork quilt of silos and steeples. It was here that my love for the game was born.

Fast forward to today, and you will still find those sweet country courses with some new neighbors, as well. These sophisticated, nationally recognized courses carry North Dakota character with greens fees as friendly as the folks who live here. North Dakota golf has distinguished itself in another way: The Lewis & Clark Golf Trail lets you play 20 extraordinary courses that lie along the route Meriwether Lewis and William Clark blazed some 200 years ago. Working from east to west, you could play them all in 10 days or less—they are that strategically placed. But what's the hurry? You might as well explore the sights along the way.

It is fitting to begin near Bismarck, where Lewis and Clark made their winter camp at Fort Mandan and met the young Indian woman Sakakawea. Today, it is golf making history, with seven nearby courses and *Golfweek* magazine's top-ranked track in the state, Hawktree. Acclaimed architect Jim Engh combines a Scottish-links style with challenging changes in elevation, three lakes, black coal slag bunkers and four tee boxes on each hole. The seventh hole is a blistering 569 yards from the longest tee, and figures in both water and wicked doglegs. Hawktree's head pro, Chuck Ruppert, calls it a risk-reward par 5. "The tee ball sets up the hole. Hit it as far down the fairway as possible; don't cut off the dogleg to the right, which could result in a lost ball. Depending on the lie," Ruppert says, "the decision to go for the green is the risk with water and sand ahead." Adding to the fun are our prairie winds, that can bedevil—or help— even the best golfer.

Like a one-two punch, Bismarck's Riverwood is a contender when it comes to testing your mettle. The manager of the Lewis & Clark Golf Trail, Bob Kallberg, calls Riverwood an incredible value. "It's the course where Tom Lehman won a tournament in 1982 when he was an aspiring PGA pro (he shot an even par 216), and it will cost you all of \$20!" With cozy, tree-lined fairways, you need an arrow-straight shot off the tee to play competitively. The ninth hole is a demon at 451 yards with wetlands on the left, a forest on the right and a dogleg that leads to a severe green. Make the par 4 on this one, and you might consider giving up your day job.

Bismarck scores a hole-in-one with its other courses, too. There is the Tom O'Leary near North Dakota's state capitol building that lets you hone your short-game skills. Apple Creek is a par 72 with a Midwest front nine (tight with lots of trees) and a more open back nine. Pebble Creek is a links-style course with five water holes and big, fast greens. Plan on staying long enough to play the circuit and take in other great attractions. Ride on the Lewis & Clark Riverboat at sunset, visit

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General Custer's last command post and his home in Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, or tour the art deco "skyscraper of the prairie," the 19-story state capitol.

Dakotans are seen as practical folks who know the value of money. Certainly, great golf for less than a buck a hole is something to crow about. Continuing along the Lewis & Clark Trail you find seven super courses that fill the bill. Linton Country Club, just southeast of Bismarck, has a \$15 greens fee for 18 holes, two of which are long par 5s. Painted Woods in Washburn has incredible views and a pretty little creek that draws balls like a magnet. A must-see in town is the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center, and just up the road is The Fort Mandan Historical Site where Lewis and Clark wintered from 1804 to 1805. Westridge is the best bargain on the trail at \$13 for 18 holes (\$15 on weekends). Water hazards abound and, in fact, big water is just minutes away at Garrison Dam.

Two of Kallberg's favorite holes come up next. "The opening shot at Square Butte Creek, in Center, is a par 3 from an elevated tee," he says, "which has you teeing off with probably a pitching wedge to a green about 100 feet below." Wind can be a factor here, and so can the creek if you overshoot the green.

Next up on the trail is Hazen Golf Club. Its signature hole is billed as "the shortest par 5 in North Dakota" and is actually a par 3 that measures 200 yards from the back tee to the green. Mature trees line the fairways, and the Knife River comes into play on two holes. Hazen is on the migratory flyway, making it an excellent birding spot.

On the south side of Lake Sakakawea near Beulah is Black Sands Golf Course (also known as Beulah Municipal). Beware of the bunkers on this little beauty. Four holes have water hazards and the elevation is all over the place.

Lake Sakakawea is home to two other courses, Riverdale and Edgewater. Riverdale has all-day play for just \$7, and Edgewater is a scenic nine-hole country club on the north side of the lake in New Town. The eighth hole (par 3, 185 yards) is one of Ruppert's favorites. "The tee ball is slightly downhill with a skinny green and Lake Sakakawea in the background." New Town also is the site of a Lewis & Clark signature event, August 17–20, with historical re-enactments and live entertainment.

While the Missouri River pretty much dictated where the expedition would go, you have the option to veer off the official golf course path, here, and head north to Minot. Your reward is a first-class golf course, Souris Valley, where wooded fairways and the Souris River play prominently in at least six holes. It is one of five golf courses in Minot, where many of the hotels feature stay-and-play packages—even combining spa treatments. Minot also is a birders' paradise with its proximity to five national wildlife refuges. While North Dakota has rarely been confused with Scotland, you can almost hear the bagpipes playing at The Links of North Dakota (aka Red Mike). Perched on the bluffs overlooking Lake Sakakawea, you will use everything in your playbook to make par on this course, with its quirky, high winds and gripping prairie grass roughs. Ruppert likes the No. 2 hole with a blind tee shot (aim over the middle bunker). "A good tee ball leaves your second shot with Lake Sakakawea in the background—a beautiful sight. The pin position is best on the left side of the green."

Another course with native grass rough is Medicine Hole, the newest golf property on the trail. Architect Engh had fun playing with the elevation changes on this one, near the Killdeer Mountains.

For the golfer who cannot get enough before the snow blows, Heart River has one of the state's longest playing seasons. Just west of Dickinson, the park district reopens this award-winning course from November through February if weather permits. Nearby, Pheasant Country Golf Course features a par 3 at 250 yards, along with a 450-yard 10th hole that dogs golfers with a blind shot across the river from an elevated tee.



Bully Pulpit Golf Course.

Some folks would say I have saved the best for last. Were he alive today, Teddy Roosevelt might agree. Bully Pulpit in Medora is the essence of the game, a course that combines eye-popping scenery with championship play that beckons you back, time and again. Kallberg calls the par 4 14th hole a "card wrecker." "The narrow fairway slopes from left to right, and depending on which tee box you use, there is a long second shot to an elevated green," he says. Theodore Roosevelt National Park is nearby, and there is plenty to do in this Badlands town.

It was not long ago that the words North Dakota and golf were rarely used in the same sentence. Now they are "linked," so to speak, by golf writers everywhere. It is a far cry from the days of my youth—when golf balls were a quarter a pack and big-headed clubs were the ones you borrowed from your dad. North Dakota has come of age, and golf is its hottest game these days.



Hawktree Golf Course.

For more information about the Lewis & Clark Golf Trail, visit lewisandclarkgolftail.com or telephone 701-222-1938.

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