

Great public golf is so easy to find in South Carolina that occasionally even some of the best get lost in the crowd.

Not every venue commands international standing like Kiawah Island Resort, enjoys annual television exposure like Harbour Town Golf Links in Hilton Head, or sits on a high traffic corridor like Grande Dunes in Myrtle Beach. Sometimes it takes a turn off the beaten path to discover the full extent of the state's golfing wealth. And as any traveler worth the price of his backpack knows, the hidden gems often sparkle brightest in the memory.

BY TRENT BOUTS

THE BEST GOLF COURSES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED...

HIDDEN

GEMS

The **WALKER COURSE AT CLEMSON UNIVERSITY** is one such place. Well known to Upstate golfers and home of the 2003 NCAA golf champions, The Walker Course barely raises a ripple in discussions elsewhere in the state. Designed by Georgia-based D. J. De-Victor, the course sits on gently rolling terrain behind the university with the closing holes adjacent to Lake Hartwell. The par three 17th is striking not just for expansive water views, but also the unique bunkering that, coupled with the green, mimics the Clemson Tiger paw. The course is always well presented by its Head Superintendent, Don Garrett, a past president of the Carolinas Golf Course Superintendents Association, and serves as one of few in the state designed to maximize accessibility for golfers with disabilities.

If The Walker Course is the anonymous jewel in the Upstate, semi-private **MOUNT VINTAGE PLANTATION AND GOLF CLUB** is another quiet achiever inland. Situated just above North Augusta, Mount Vintage has 18 of Taylors, SC architect Tom Jackson's finest holes. A former stop on the LPGA Tour, the course is hardly anonymous but it is often a revelation to those who do make the trip. Seven members of the South Carolina Golf Course Ratings Panel placed Mount Vintage in their top

10 courses in the state. The developers often quote Byron Nelson describing Mount Vintage as a "magnificent layout," and who would dare argue with such a great.

Undoubtedly though, it is harder for a rose to appear special in a garden than in a vase. And nowhere is the Palmetto State's golfing garden lusher than it is along the coast. From Myrtle Beach in the north, through Charleston, and down to Hilton Head, golfers enjoy lavish choice. So much so that many visitors spend a week playing outstanding facilities and go home without a clue of how much they are missing. Kiawah Island Resort has five courses alone, including the Ocean Course, which hosts next year's Senior PGA Championship and the 2012 PGA Championship.

On the road to Kiawah an auto "roundabout" leads to a left turn to the resort, but also offers a right turn to the lesser known **SEABROOK ISLAND RESORT** with its **CROOKED OAKS AND OCEAN WINDS** courses. Seabrook Island's courses will never host a major championship, but that doesn't mean adventuresome golfers won't find a championship test there, and championship conditions. Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed the Crooked Oaks course that weaves between ancient live oaks and pine forests on the way to small,

HIDDEN GEMS THE SC GOLF RANKING PANEL'S OFFICIAL CHOICES:

- **WALKER COURSE AT CLEMSON UNIVERSITY**
- **MOUNT VINTAGE PLANTATION AND GOLF CLUB**
- **SEABROOK ISLAND RESORT: CROOKED OAKS AND OCEAN WINDS**
- **FRIPP ISLAND GOLF AND BEACH RESORT**
- **PRESTWICK COUNTRY CLUB**



Opposite page: Prestwick Country Club was named a Golf Digest "best kept secret" in 2004. Photo provided by Prestwick.

This page: Fripp Island Golf and Beach Resort's hole #9. Photo provided by Fripp.





testing greens. Jones' mantra was always "hard par, easy bogey" and he made no exception with Crooked Oaks. The course underwent extensive, expensive and excellent renovation in 1999. The Willard Byrd-designed Ocean Winds course is often regarded as the more picturesque of the two opening out over magnificent marshlands and ocean views.

Another island duo worthy of more attention than they receive are the courses at **FRIPP ISLAND GOLF AND BEACH RESORT** near Beaufort. Fripp's Ocean Creek course was the first at the hand of PGA Tour star, Davis Love III, and as such launched a budding design career that has since given South Carolina other prizes such as the Love Course at Barefoot Resort and The Patriot at Grand Harbor near Greenwood. Recognized by several national publications in "best new course" ratings upon its opening, Ocean Creek

— as its name suggests — incorporates plenty of water that is attractive to the eye ... as well as golf balls. Trivia buffs will enjoy a plaque near the fifth tee that marks the site where Forrest Gump saved Lieutenant Dan in the Oscar winning film.

Fripp's Ocean Point course was designed by the late George Cobb, formerly of Greenville. The course has since undergone renovation to include new salt-tolerant paspalum fairways, but Cobb's original routing continues to afford spectacular access to the Atlantic Ocean. Exploring these two courses will not disappoint, quite the contrary.

Another gem frequently passed over because of all that surrounds it is **PRESTWICK COUNTRY CLUB** in Myrtle Beach. A joint effort between Pete and P. B. Dye, Prestwick is an unashamed doffing of the cap to the original Prestwick in Scotland. Pot bunkering, high

mounding, and undulating fairways all bring to mind the game where it began. Standing out among the 100 plus courses open to public play along the Grand Strand is difficult, but Prestwick has made its mark after switching from an all-private facility. Golf Digest went so far as to name Prestwick as one of the nation's five "best kept secret" courses in 2004, a secret on its way to becoming public knowledge.

So, the hunt should be on for golfers who want to discover the hidden gems among the treasure trove of courses in South Carolina. Discovering these lesser-known jewels will surely bring a far richer life on the links to any golfer who is up for the adventure. **SCM**

Above: Fripp Island's Ocean Creek hole #6 offers spectacular ocean views. Photo provided by Fripp.