

Florida's I-95 Golf Trail

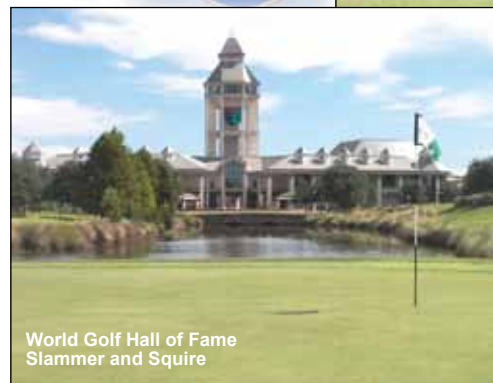
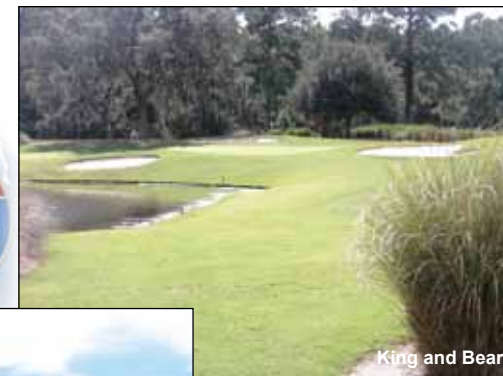
J. Eric Eckard

About 100 years ago, the tourism industry began to blossom in the United States, thanks in large part to the Ford Model T. Arguably the first affordable automobile, the Model T helped drive middle-class America to destinations across the country. No state enjoyed a bigger tourism boom in the early days of travel than Florida with its year-round warm climates, sandy beaches, and expansive forests. To accommodate these “tin-can tourists,” entrepreneurs built hotels, restaurants, resorts, and of course, golf courses. Today, Florida boasts more golf courses than any other state. Many are located along the Interstate 95 corridor, the East Coast’s main north-south highway that connects Florida to 14 other states.

Exit 79 on I-95 will take you to Palm Beach Gardens, home to the PGA National Resort and Spa, which recently completed a \$65 million facelift to its facilities including changes to its five golf courses, main entrance, meeting spaces, pools, restaurants, and spa. PGA National’s flagship course — the Champion — has been hosting the Honda Classic for the past four years. Before that, the Champion course has been home to a Ryder Cup event, PGA Championship, and 18 Senior PGA Championships. Originally designed by Tom and George Fazio in 1981, the course was redesigned in 1990 by Jack Nicklaus. To honor the Golden Bear, a three-hole stretch on the back nine — holes 15-17 — have been dubbed the “Bear Trap.” On paper, the three holes don’t appear challenging — two par 3s and a par 4. But wind, water, and deep bunkers play huge roles when actually playing through the “Bear Trap,” which are among the toughest three holes on the PGA Tour. With ten par 4s, long hitters might expect an eagle or two. Don’t. PGA National ranked it as the hardest course to eagle on the Tour in 2009. It plays 7048 yards from the tips, but with five tee boxes, you can play within your skill level. Although the Champion is PGA National’s crown jewel, don’t discount the other layouts. The Fazio’s also laid out the Haig and Squire courses in 1980 and 1981, respectively; Arnold Palmer designed the Palmer course in 1984; and Karl Litten designed the Estates course in 1984. The links-style Palmer course probably is the most forgiving of the five with wide, open fairways and huge greens. A 2008 renovation project included adding a second fairway to Palmer’s twelfth hole, giving golfers a risk/reward avenue to the green. Once you make it to the twelfth green, you’ll see a salute to the game’s Scottish heritage — a common green with hole number eight.



Visible from I-95, World Golf Village sits just off Exit 323 in St. Augustine. Home of the World Golf Hall of Fame, World Golf Village features two championship courses — the Slammer and Squire and the King and Bear. Four legends of golf — Nicklaus, Palmer, Sam Snead and Gene Sarazen —



left their mark on the two courses at World Golf Village. Bobby Weed worked with the Slammer (Snead) and the Squire (Sarazin) to create a 6940-yard course that offers five sets of tees for every level of golfer. The Slammer and Squire’s front nine rambles through woodlands and features tree-lined fairways

and plenty of bunkers. Coming up to the ninth green, the course opens up to afford numerous views of the World Golf Hall of Fame throughout the rest of the course. Water seems to come into play on every hole on the wetlands-heavy back nine. And it does — almost. With a pair on the front and two more on the back, all four remarkable par 3s have some type of water hazard. A couple of miles off-campus sits the King and Bear, a collaboration between Palmer and Nicklaus. After battling for years as players and then as designers, the two superstars came together to produce a true gem. You can see the influences from both the King and the Bear. Palmer’s huge waste bunkers highlight numbers three, ten, eleven, and eighteen. Several holes set up nicely for a power fade — Nicklaus’ bread and butter shot — particularly the Golden Bear’s favorite hole, the 457-yard par 4 sixteenth. Palmer’s favorite hole on the King and Bear course is the fifteenth, a short par 4 with an elevated green and water down the right side. After a round at either course — or both — a stop in at the World Golf Hall of Fame is worth the time. From the Trophy Tower to the Members’ Locker room to the replica of the old stone bridge at St. Andrews, the museum takes you on a trip from the early days of golf to the latest in golf technology. Exhibits include early hickory shaft clubs and gutta percha balls as well as memorabilia from the hall of fame inductees donated for display in the Members’ Locker room.

Just a short drive — less than 20 miles — off the interstate at exit 373, you’ll find Amelia Island Plantation in Amelia Island, with four distinctive golf course designs including a couple of Pete Dye layouts. Ocean Links, a Dye/Weed collaboration, features five scenic ocean side holes, but the beach, tall grass, and a fence form a

