

Florida holds the key...

James Mason visits nine fabulous golf courses that make him feel grateful that he took up this glorious game in the first place...

On the shore line, Gasparilla's 16th hole

In Florida you have a choice of some stunning tracks – parkland, stadium, links and courses where the sea can lap away at your ankles – all waiting for you to enjoy.

Streamsong Blue

Arriving at the beautiful clubhouse, I survey the dunes and get the feeling that the ocean is just hidden from sight – even the gentle breeze that you associate with a links course is there, tugging at my senses.

I make my way up through one of the dunes and as I walk out on to the tee the course unravels before me and



it certainly has the wow-factor. The views are stunning – lakes-trees-and-just-seeing-for-miles stunning.

The movement of the land and the complexes on the greens, the sand and the tight-cropped fairways all add to the impression of a links. The dunes and wasteland are from years of mining phosphorus. The quarries have filled over the years with rainwater and the mounds that sprang up from the digging have just grassed over. But with the sandy base, that's what gives it that links feeling.

Streamsong Red

This is a walking course so you don't have to worry about long schlepps between holes. The Red is a tougher proposition than the Blue, but the aesthetics of the course are no less stunning. The dunes are all in place and that links feel is there.

Get out early and the light is beautiful and the course is truly stunning. I look back from the bridge that takes you to the 2nd fairway and it's moments like these that I feel truly blessed to play the game of golf.

There are some great driving holes, none more so than from the elevated 7th tee over water and dunes.

The Ocean Course at Ponte Vedra Inn & Club

The course was designed by Herbert Bertram Strong – with a name like that he couldn't be anything else but British – and Robert Trent Jones undertook a redesign in 1947 which Bobby Weed updated in 1998.

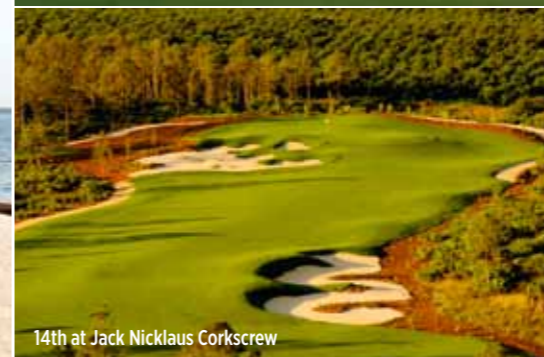
The first tee has a carry over water, which continues the length of the hole down the right and is a tough opener at 415 yards. It's a strategic test with 99 bunkers and water on all but four holes. It's no wonder the USPGA has used this track five times for US Open qualifying.

Reunion Resort Jack Nicklaus Course

As I stand on the first tee the beauty of the morning takes my breath away. The early morning sunlight is still burning off the dew and the trees glitter their array of orange, green, gold and purple and produce long shadows across the fairway – another of many great moments on this trip.

There are many superb holes and all the par 3s are strong, with my favourite being the 210-yard 16th played to a raised green over water and is all carry from the back tee.

Streamsong Red 1st hole



14th at Jack Nicklaus Corkscrew



Tough start at Ponte Vedra's Ocean Course

Harmony Golf Preserve

This Johnny Miller-designed track is operated by Troon Golf and has won awards for its environmental quality.

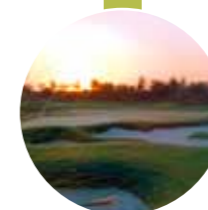
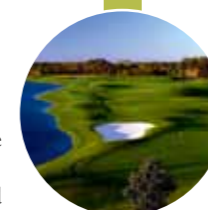
Standing on the 1st tee, I certainly get a different feeling from a lot of the more clinical Floridian courses: with wild grasses growing on the right and mounds on the left. There is water on all but two of the holes – the first and 18th – but it's not always in play. Johnny Miller has done a great job here and the relaxed atmosphere is indicative of golf in Florida.

King and Bear

This layout was designed by probably the two best golfers that the world has seen, Arnold Palmer (The King) and Jack Nicklaus (The Golden Bear).

Both have their favourite holes, Arnold's is the risk-and-reward 360-yard 15th with water all along the right-hand side. Jack chooses the demanding 467-yard 16th through pines to a large sloping green.

Mine is the 412-yard par-4 12th known as Hidden Lake. The big juicy tasty red iced apples in a barrel on the 10th tee are one of the many touches here that turns a great day into a memorable one.



Top Left: Iced apples await you at the 10th at the King and Bear course at the Hall of Fame, so does Arnold Palmer's favourite hole, the 15th, pictured bottom left.

Top: Johnny Miller's Harmony Golf Preserve, with the Jack Nicklaus course at Reunion below.

Gasparilla

It's hard not to love Gasparilla and the pace of life on Boca Grand – it's like a little piece of the Caribbean moved to the Gulf Coast. Gasparilla is not tough and it gives you a chance. But what makes this a must-play course is the setting.

When you play your second shot to the par-4 329-yard 3rd green you first experience Gasparilla Sound, the stretch of water that separates Gasparilla Island to the mainland. When you stand on the 16th green, take a moment to look back over those holes along the Sound. As the great Bobby Jones once said, take time to smell the flowers – or in Gasparilla's case that sea air, and be thankful you took up the game.

Dunes

If you like island greens and plenty of water you will love the Dunes. But if you are prone to losing a golf ball or three, this will be a challenge. I play off five and lost three balls to the liquid beast. Water is such a feature here that the practice range is a lake that you hit floating balls into!

There are some great little holes on this track with plenty of risk-and-reward. Island greens, island fairways – this course has the lot, with plenty of wildlife to see on the back nine that is a designated wildlife preserve.

Old Corkscrew

With all the trees, this course reminded me of being back in England. Of the two nines, the back nine is the stronger and gets underway with the stroke-index-one 10th. This is followed by a very tough par-5 that has water down the left and is played to an elevated green, and at 547 yards all but the longest hitters are making this baby in two.

If the 7th is the longest par 3, the 189-yard par-3 12th has to be the best short hole on the course, played over water to a green that has plenty of movement. Add in the thunder, driving wind, rain and the threat of lightning that we experienced and believe me, it's a tough hole.

It's a tough run of holes from here, with the 16th being a personal favourite – at only 396 yards, it's all about placement.

Old Corkscrew was a fitting finale to this trip and offered everything you would want for players of all abilities. At only \$50 (£29) that will probably be the best value for money you will find anywhere. ■

ESSENTIALS

How to get there

Monarch airlines fly from Gatwick London – Sanford International Orlando and BA and Virgin Atlantic to Orlando International

Where to play

Streamsong Resort Blue and Red Courses

W: streamsongresort.com

The Ocean Course at Ponte Vedra Inn & Club

W: pontevedra.com/florida_golf_resorts/oceancourse

King & Bear Course at World Golf Hall of Fame

W: worldgolfhalloffame.org/visit-the-museum/world-golf-village/golf
GF: £66

Golf at Harmony Golf Preserve

W: harmonygolfpreserve.com

GF: \$20- \$30

Nicklaus Course at Reunion Resort

W: reunionresort.com/golf/courses/nicklaus

GF: \$100 - \$160

Gasparilla inn and course

W: the-gasparilla-inn.com/act_golf
GF: £67

Dunes Golf & Tennis Club

W: dunesgolfsanibel.com

GF: £23

The Old Corkscrew Golf Club

W: oldcorkscrew.com

GF: £29

TPC Sawgrass

W: tpc.com/Play

GF: £150

Where to Stay

Streamsong Resort

W: streamsongresort.com

Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort and Spa

W: sawgrassmarriott.com

Reunion Resort Kissimmee

W: reunionresort.com

Gasparilla Inn & Club

on Gasparilla Island

W: the-gasparilla-inn.com

South Seas Island Resort

W: southseas.com

Gasparilla Inn & Club, Gasparilla Island

