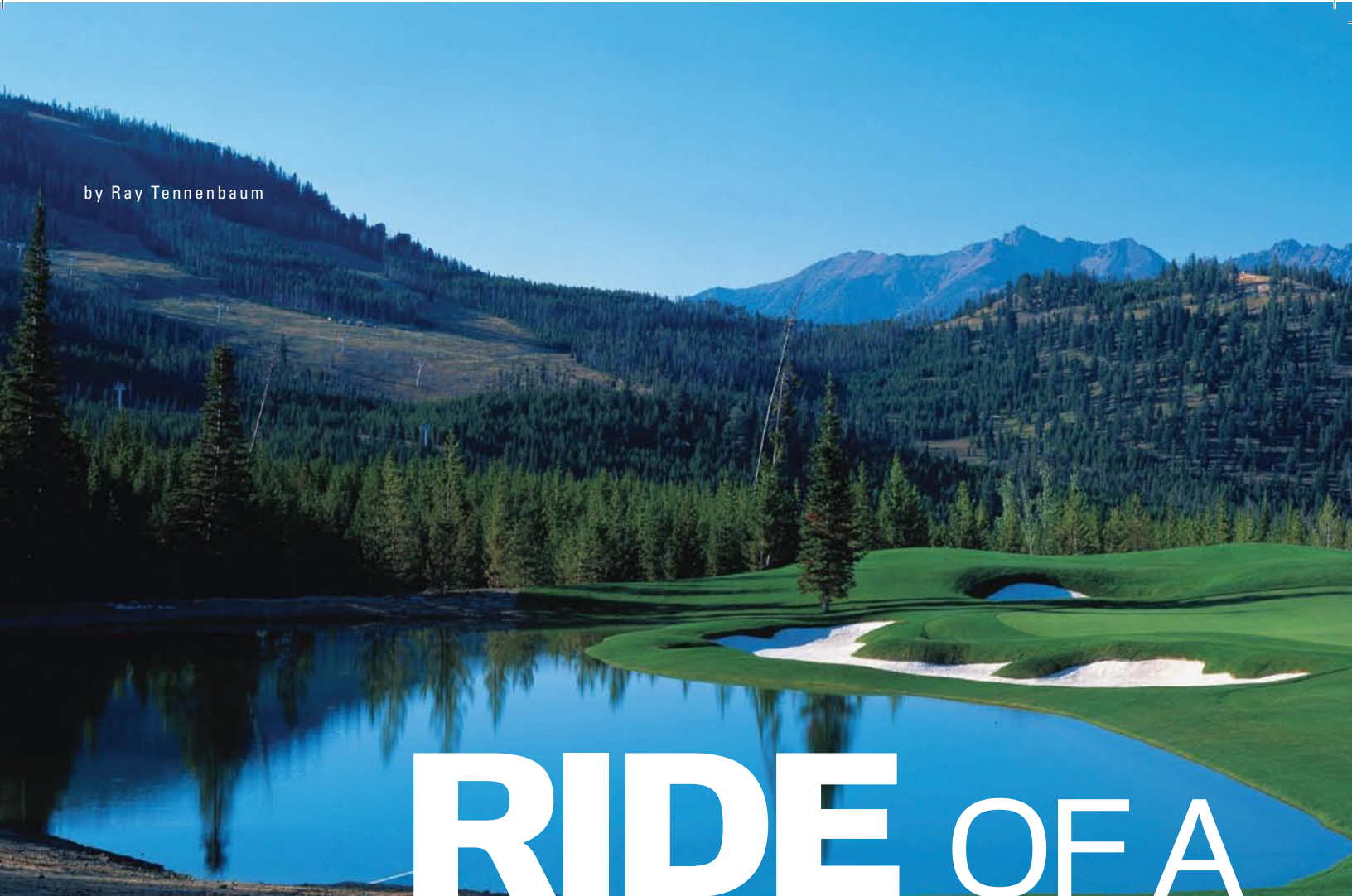


by Ray Tennenbaum



Above: The mountain West reveals its visual power at the Tom Weiskopf course at Spanish Peaks, an exclusive club in southeastern Montana.

Photo by John/Jeneane Henebry

Right: The author's road-guzzling Guzzi parked on the first tee at Idaho's Whitetail Club.

RIDE OF A

With His Handlebars Pointed to the Pacific, an East Coast

On my motorcycle, I am the King of Rage, anonymous in my insect helmet, buzzing well over the speed limit, worrying old ladies in Pontiacs while their grandsons grin at me out the side window.

Scenery flies by like the world's greatest iMax movie, although potentially lethal. Primal adrenaline — bug juice, feeder of the feeding frenzy — rises in me. Being closer to The End gives me a halo — I am a potential oil-stained angel — especially for the avengers, the reckless, ruthless and careless, the ones you watch out for: the guy in a shiny 5.9-liter Dodge truck towing a big cab over the two-lane at 95 miles per hour, giddy about racing me while burning a gallon every seven miles; the college girl in the fast lane texting from her cellphone; the dad with his brats wrestling in the back, tailgating you at 85 out of sheer hellish boredom.

When I was growing up on Long Island, "West" usually meant the other side, as in West Babylon. And even when I visited New Mexico or California (haven't even been

to Portland), I usually skipped the middle — the rich, flavorful cheese inside. Covering every inch of the way out there to see just exactly how the West begins gave me one more excuse to follow the sun.

Months spent tracking down a motorcycle I've always wanted — a 2003 California Aluminum, from the venerable Italian manufacturer Moto Guzzi — supplied me with the vehicle. And my dad's death nine months earlier gave me another purpose. My old man was not a motorcycle guy, but I guess you could say he was a cerebral sports-car guy. The equation was easy to solve: my Moto Guzzi = Dad's Citroën.

And luckily for me, the last few years have seen real-estate entrepreneurs mounting developments near the tonier western ski resort destinations, then hiring big-name golf course designers to sculpt centerpieces. They need me to look at the golf courses and the properties — I need green oases to rest my weary backside and play golf.

Gotta go.

Round about Ohio is where I began sniffing the West, the interstate crossroads



LIFETIME

Scribe Gets an Iron-Horse View of Great Northwest Golf

restless with traffic fleeing the cities. Ask Chicago if it's the West, and it'll shrug its broad shoulders and hide a smirk. Even the beautiful cities along the Mississippi Valley still look back.

Nah, it isn't until the Dakotas that the fruited plain gives way to rocks, and bleak ageless beauty replaces the merely fertile. Good place for a bug like me. Get to the Badlands, and your curiosity moves you off the interstates, onto the two-lanes that skitter up and down mountains and alongside little rocky streams through scrubby pine forest.

The valley of Big Sky, Mont., just over the Wyoming border from Yellowstone, is bustling with lines of construction trucks when I enter the town from Route 191 around 6 o'clock in the evening.

I turn up the mountain road, where the cute hotels and condos give way to fir trees and steeper inclines, and it starts getting kind of cold. I better pick it up if I'm going to get to my room at the Spanish Peaks clubhouse before the deer come out. At the entrance, well up the side of the mountain,

I identify myself to the security guard assigned to escort me up the road, which isn't much fun navigating, since a lot of it is still dirt.

Don't really know what to expect. I've been told the staff has the night off, and the parking lot seems to consist of concrete slabs alternating with rocky ruts. I park the Guzzi on its side stand and follow the watchman with his flashlight to the door, which he pushes open.

Inside, I look up to find myself in a sort of timber cathedral, with huge, polished logs supporting a three-story ceiling. Low-key lighting keeps the feeling intimate in a surrounding that brings almost immediate comfort. The space is divided generously into a large, congenial bar-lounge (perfect for post-round drinks), a game room with fireplace and a most pleasant formal dining room.

I bid the watchman a cheerful good night. Except for a married couple that I've been told is in another room, I have this big beautiful pleasure palace all to myself. I sneak behind the bar to pour myself a



glass of good bourbon, push open one of the broad glass doors that lead onto the porch overlooking the golf course, and relax on a cushioned lounger, zipping up my leather against the August nighttime chill. I've brought my iPod with me, but decide against plugging in the earbuds. Instead, with my drink, a cigar, and the rising moon for company, I sit enjoying the mountainside peace, opening my ears to bask in the moonlit silence, looking out over the ponderosa pines up the slope, silver and still.

RIDE OF A LIFETIME



God's Country: Old Sol sets over the Jack Nicklaus Signature Course at Pronghorn, an upscale golf community just north of Bend, Ore.

The next day, I head out to play the nine completed holes on the new Tom Weiskopf course. The site is a good place to get your bearings: the ultra-luxe Yellowstone Club is located just over the ridge (appropriately, since Spanish Peaks' aim is to position itself as a Yellowstone Club for the rest of us). The course is a good vantage point to see the ski trails, near at hand to Spanish Peaks' ski-in/ski-out residences.

The peculiar challenge of building a course in the mountains yields its own reward, and the Spanish Peaks team is working deliberately to avoid the burnt fairways and mold damage that result from poor drainage — mountain golf pitfalls we've all seen.

The golf course once again demonstrates Tom Weiskopf's ability to make the most of the scenery. It's not supposed to play like a beast — never dares you to cut off a

dogleg over a 260-yard canyon. Instead, it is designed to be a solid home course: pretty, comfortably low-key, a gently encouraging challenge. Your progress through the round is rewarded with postcard panoramas of the forest valleys below, or of the hamlet of Big Sky. A tee-box view might align you toward an uphill vista with mountaintop ski trails, or the bald point of Lone Peak above. Generous fairways roll through wide clearings on the mountainside pine woods, at a polite remove from homesites, ensuring a feeling of an agreeable mountain hike.

Elevation changes are handled with aplomb — when you shoot at the signature hole, a downhill 190-yard par 3 placed against a scenic valley backdrop, you feel like you're sailing down through the valley air, over the pond below, landing safely on the steeply two-tiered green.

That afternoon, I saddled up with the

public-relations representative and enjoyed an hourlong horseback tour of the property, climbing up and down the inclines and byways through the pine woods just west of the golf course and the clubhouse.

After a shower at the clubhouse — my room was furnished in soothing earth tones, tasteful but uncomplicated, plus a fancy clock radio with an iPod jack — I venture down to sample the clubhouse's restaurant offerings. A good meal on the American road isn't difficult to find, but getting a fine one is a challenge, and a week of scrambled eggs and pancakes had me giving up hope. What I got at Spanish Peaks was a carefully and expertly prepared eating experience — local ingredients combined subtly but unpretentiously, probably the best dining of the trip. And thanks to the superbly-chosen stores of wine and beer, the perfect libation is never far from hand.

Destination: Sun Valley

Next morning, the Guzzi and I fight a fierce wind through western Montana, which doesn't quit until Idaho Falls. Another 50 miles west and I'm tracking into the sun across the bottom of a desert basin, mountains and butte looming across the dusty plain. It's a soothing, sweeping ride, until Craters of the Moon, a black lava rock formation, when a MOTORCYCLISTS: EXERCISE

Resort, my second stop. It's almost night by the time I reach Ketchum this Friday evening. It's no surprise that the restaurants at are packed: peak season in the renowned winter hideaway is now summer, thanks to mountain biking and fishing.

Perfectly appointed as a Tyrolean village, down to potted flowers and dirndl-clad waitresses, Sun Valley manages its old-fashioned charm without quite edging

great George von Elm in 1938 was eventually updated by Robert Trent Jones Jr. in 1978. (Jones' lead designer on the project, Don Knott, is building Sun Valley's new Gun Club course.) Deceptive angles and camouflaged approaches force you to think twice before pulling a club — like on the par-4 No. 4 hole, at first glance a straightforward slight dogleg left with a stream on the left and bunkers and high grass alongside a hill to the right framing a fairly generous fairway. However, the tee is tilted ever so slightly to the right, and that, along with your anxiety about hitting it into the creek, results in all kinds of psychokinetic energy pushing your tee ball rightward.

The Joneses put together the kind of challenge that brings out the best in a golfer, forcing a thorough appraisal of the shot and its risks. From the tee of the demanding 10th, the challenge is clear: You need to place your tee shot on a sliver of fairway — preferably the very end of it, and a little bit right wouldn't hurt because the green is uphill, at least two clubs' elevation behind a complex of deep, wide bunkers up the left side of the hill.

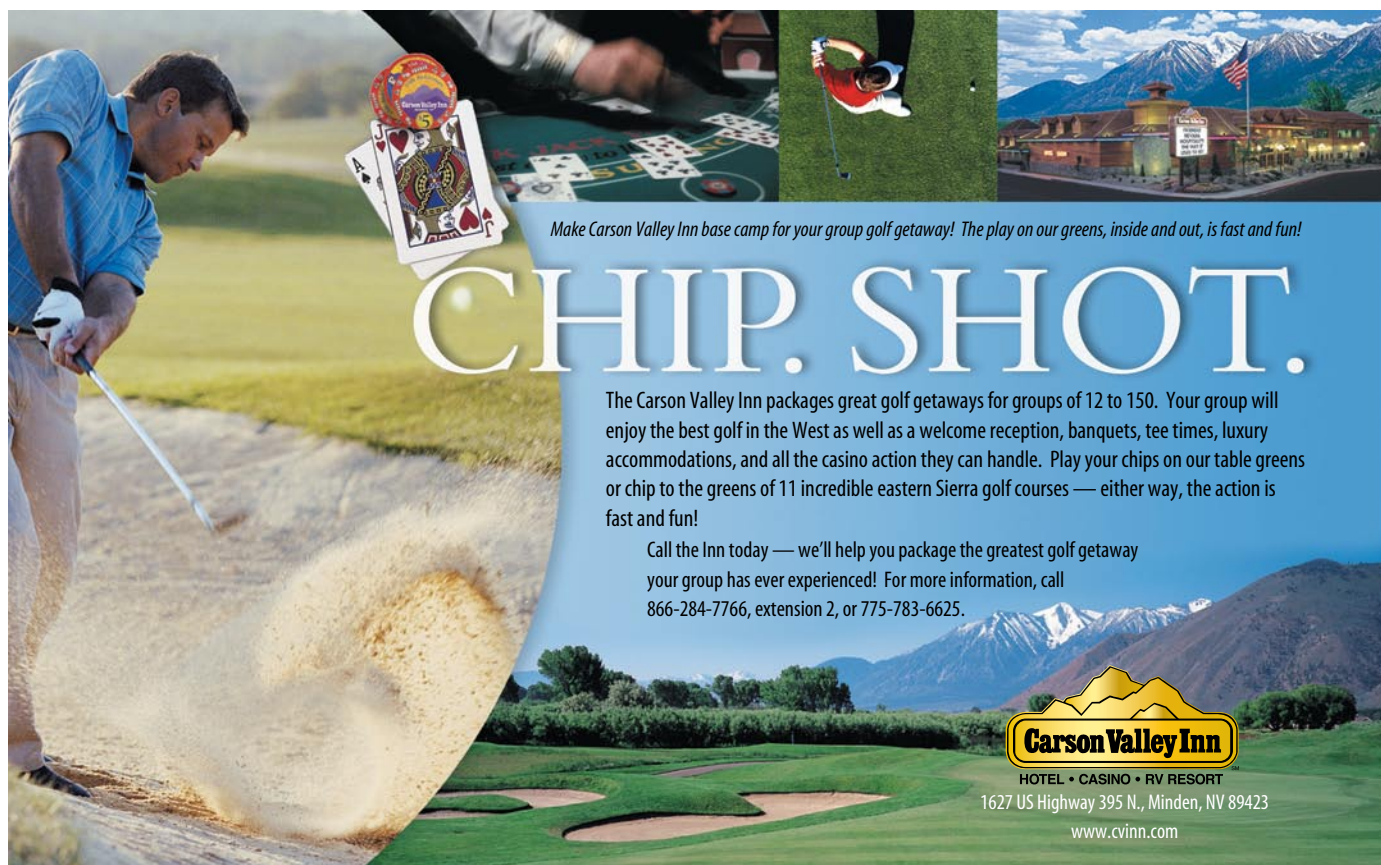
*I enjoy the mountainside peace, opening my ears
to bask in the moonlit silence, looking out over
the ponderosa pines up the slope, silver and still.*

EXTREME CAUTION sign announces 10 miles of road construction, with loose dirt, coarse, shifting gravel, and a jerk in a Ford pickup eight feet behind me who seems to want to push me over the indicated 35 mph speed limit with his bumper.

Smooth brown round peaks seem to bubble up from the steppe along the road after the turn north toward the Sun Valley

into campiness.

In the shadows of world-class ski trails, golf has been a bit of a sleeper, but not by any fault of the golf course, which is in the first rank of American resort courses. You'd expect a place as outdoorsy as this to boast an athletic golf course; what's surprising is Sun Valley demands strategy. What began with nine holes designed by Utah amateur



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RIDE OF A LIFETIME



Sun Valley's golf course has matured superbly, and it's helped by able, courteous service. Course operations are smooth and friendly but resolute — thanks to the marshals, our round took about four and a half hours, pretty good for a noon start on a Saturday in August. With a brand-new course under construction, Sun Valley is poised to make a bid to be one of the best golf resorts in the Northwest.

On Saturday nights during the summer, the resort puts out a buffet, followed by an outdoor ice show with the biggest names in skating. Now, normally figure skating is about as interesting to me as a visit to the dentist, but the ice show was produced with lots of athletic appeal, plus enough laughs and knowing show-business self-mockery to make it fun even for a hard-hearted Brooklynite.

Destination: Whitetail

The next morning, I tear out of Sun Valley headed north through the Idaho wilderness, anticipating some of the best roads of the trip. Far-off, cinnamon-colored Castle Peak looms ahead, as beautiful an obstacle as I could ask for. The yellow speed restriction signs become more frequent, changing

Big Sky Bounty: Smack in the middle Idaho, near McCall, is the Whitetail Club, one of the marquee courses in an up-and-coming golf-rich state.

from a gentle 50 hint to 35, then 20 and even 10 (underlined with the big U curve), but they only spur me to start indulging my greed for speed, stealing past lumbering SUVs. The joy in conquering these curlicues of asphalt comes (please don't tell my mom) from the triumph over the possibility you might not get there. Your nerves pick up as the air cools, and between the wind and the increasing rhythm of the switchbacks, you're not sure whether it's the cold or the adrenaline rush accelerating your heartbeat, but your judgment is sharpened, too.

Even my GPS seems to grow dizzy in the high air and twisting mountain roads — up here in the peaks of the Rockies, you switch back and forth with such frequency it's hard to know what direction the road is taking you. As the crow flies? As the crow laughs at you, perhaps, progressing one mile for every 10 you zigzag.

But who cares anyway? Each sharp bend brings a new glance of wilderness, rocks, pine and creeks. I was just as happy to miss an important turn, adding almost three hours to the trip, including one poignant juncture where I found myself looking at a trip down some 40 miles of dirt road to get back on track. Instead, I prudently backed up and headed south to Boise, then after a quick spell on the freeway, rode the hundred or so miles north up Route 55 to McCall. The afternoon was drawing to a close, and the hotel was nigh empty when I tracked dust into the lobby of the Whitetail Club, grinning like a goofy Brooklyn biker cowboy coming down from a speed rush — they were expecting me, the woman at the desk told me, cheerfully handing over my key.

I hastened to my room, though "royal suite" might be the better word. When the Whitetail Club hotel underwent a \$25 million renovation in 1999, the number of rooms went from 116 to 77 — this one had a kitchen, dining room, living room and fireplace, along with two 25-inch television sets (one for the bedroom and another for the living area) and bathrooms set with marble. I actually started missing my girlfriend — that's how sensational the sleeping area

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www.whitetailclub.com / 800-657-6464

Yards	7,149	6,575	6,096	5,023
Rating	71.4	69.0	66.9	61.7
Slope	125	121	114	101

Pronghorn

www.pronghornclub.com

Nicklaus Course Par 72

Yards	7,381	6,702	5,265	
Rating	76.1	73.4	71.5	68.7
	150	144	136	132

Fazio Course Par 72

Yards	7,447	6,871	6,429	5,866
Rating	75.8	72.7	70.4	67.8
Slope	148	139	131	125

was: 20-foot-tall ceiling, with thick, plush curtains, plus lighting options worthy of a Broadway show.

I quickly changed into a bathing suit and went for jump in the lake before the sun disappeared into the mountains across the water. Except for a newlywed couple and a few teenagers jumping on the float out past the first set of buoys, I had the beach to myself, nearly getting drunk on that cool lake water.

The hotel is really part of Whitetail's broader appeal to sell lakeshore parcels. So is the marina, open exclusively to property owners — and the new golf course, opened

***Whitetail is where,
you might say,
the deer and the
antelope play golf.***

just across the road in 2002, where the next morning I met Superintendent Jay Neunsinger for an affable round. The courtly Neunsinger keeps the fairways and greens in meticulous condition, which helps make the Whitetail Club a unique way to see McCall's forest and grasslands. Corridors lined with birch and maple wrap around collection ponds, then skim alongside scenic fields of wildgrass stretching to the horizon, shifting a verdant ridge, say, or a snow-capped mountaintop in the backdrop for your approach shot. This, you might say, is where the deer and the antelope play golf.

The large greens are receptive, with big swales just to make things interesting. The 17th, a medium-long par 4, calls for a right-to-left tee shot. From there, you've got a mid-iron carry to a wide green and landing area surrounded with water and fronted by a cross-bunker — it looks a little tougher than it plays.

Destination: Pronghorn

The next morning, my route takes me through the vast, steep pine forests of western Idaho, and into Ontario, Ore., where I catch it in the nose — first running into the perfume of onion fields, then a pungent smack of peppermint. Within an hour, the scenery has changed to sandy brown, a barrenness covered with far-off buttes and



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RIDE OF A LIFETIME

scrub brush. More traffic and accelerating stands of fir trees bring me to the outskirts of Bend, where the planned residential community of Pronghorn is taking its place alongside some of the Northwest's most popular second-home golfing developments.

Pronghorn is cultivating exclusivity — only members (that is to say, property-owners) can play on the Nicklaus course, completed in '04. The new Fazio course is even more exclusive — it's closed to fractional owners. (That might be the only downside to fractional ownership — the Pronghorn residence club homes are configured luxuriously, with high-end sound systems and all the ultra-modern conveniences you could ask for.) At these prices, you would expect excellent golf.

After a long career checkering new fairways all over the world, Jack Nicklaus, jock among golfers, seems to have adopted a bit of the trickster in his design persona — maybe as a defense against those accusations he was designing devilish target-golf courses in the '70s and '80s, confusing the superheroic with the heroic. Could be that's what his habit of leaving things like trees and rocks in the middle of fairways is all about. At any rate, let it be said once again that Nicklaus evolved into a very sensible designer, and the result is intelligent design



that embodies the most playable virtues. The velvet playing surface — one scratch golfer said the perfect, greens-like conditions of the fairways here prevented him from taking a full divot for the first few rounds he played — contrasts with gnarled, burly juniper

Soaring Luxury: The clubhouse at Spanish Peaks could keep a guy off his bike for weeks, if there weren't other courses to play down the road.

trees and fierce rock outcroppings along the edges.

Inspiration is abundant here. Take the No. 3 hole, a striking, medium-long par-3 — a modified redan hole with an ample landing area placed right of the green — not a hard par, but not an easy bogey, either.

And two medium-length holes on the inward nine exemplify the skillfully-conceived demands of this design — the 12th, a short par 4 that proceeds straight across a snaking, downhill fairway, then up over a deep waste area inlaid with rocks and trees to an narrow, hummocked, elevated green, is followed by the 13th, an excellent cape hole bending left-to-right around a pond. It's not a dogleg so much a gooseneck, so launching a drive toward the narrow greenside gullet of the fairway green is a considerable risk. On the other hand, setting up for an approach from farther back is also tricky — there's a little pot bunker in the middle of the fairway right where you might leave a shot with a fairway wood, and the longer your drive, the better your angle into the green. A slim beard of rough separates the green from the drink, and the treacher-

Luggage to Go: No Sidecar Necessary

Since there's basically no safe way to carry golf clubs on an extended motorcycle trip, a club-delivery service is the answer. The options for sporting travelers have increased in the wake of recent history, as more golfers, surfers and bicyclists look to make the most of vacations.

This wasn't my first experience using a club-shipping service, but it certainly was the best. While traveler's shippers generally work the same way, contracting with international fulfillment companies like UPS and FedEx, they don't work equally well: a few years ago, another luggage shipment service delivered my clubs late to a golf course in remote part of New Mexico, forcing me to rent a set.

This time, Luggage Forward (www.luggageforward.com) came through, twice. The day I left, I got a lift with some friends to the garage in New York where I was keeping my motorcycle. We forgot to take the clubs out of the trunk of their car — and I didn't realize it until they were 50 miles away. To keep ahead of any potential problems, the company tracks your clubs at each step, with a service representative confirming pickups and dropoffs with a phone call. In this case, when

Aaron called from Luggage Forward to confirm my itinerary, I asked if they could switch the site of the following day's pickup from New York City to Connecticut. "No problem."

When I showed up at the Spanish Peaks golf shop a week and a half later, the staff informed me there had been a problem with my canvas travel bag, though fortunately my clubs were undamaged. I asked to see the bag: it had been torn almost completely along the bottom seam. I called Luggage Forward, somewhat apprehensively, and the representative quickly eased my concerns, telling me I'd be reimbursed the cost of the bag.

As airline-safety restrictions have tightened over the last few years, business has picked up. "Taking luggage is not cost-effective for carriers, and we don't anticipate they will be giving luggage a higher priority soon," says co-founder Zeke Adkins. Business travelers in particular are taking advantage of the flexibility of club delivery to make the most of work-related travel. "When people are going to a city on business, club delivery offers the opportunity to add a stop or a side trip without needing to carry their golf clubs to the airport." — RT

ously sloping green complex is deceptive, especially if the wind is in your face, so — if in doubt, take more club.

As much fun as the Nicklaus course is, it's upstaged by Tom Fazio's design. No knock on Jack, but nobody moves dirt prettier than Fazio, the blockbuster mogul of golf architects. Decorated with countless jagged-edged bunkers bearded with long, golden grass, Fazio's Pronghorn vision is a desert retreat of sweeping, lonely

***No knock on Jack,
but nobody moves dirt
prettier than Fazio,
the blockbuster mogul
of golf architects.***

horizons and carefully-shaped fairways. Water features on many holes, such as the 423-yard No. 6, where a creek winds down the lefthand side of the fairway into a collection pond in front of the back tees — there's plenty of room on the right side of the fairway, but a bunker left adds to the risk of trying to draw your tee shot nearer the bubbled-shaped green.

Other details make Fazio's Pronghorn a very entertaining and spectacular experience.

When his construction crew dynamited open a pair of lava tubes underneath the No. 8 hole, Fazio encouraged them to open it further — the result is in a memorable medium-length par 3 playing downhill over a miniature canyon to a green sunk into a rock cliff. The lava tube, now opened into a cave below and to the right of the green, is open for a little mini-splunking hike (Pronghorn is considering using the little cave as an impromptu wine cellar, though it might just as nicely double as a little miniature-golf bonus chute).

Destination: What's Next?

I'm glad I came. But next morning, it's time to turn the bike toward Seattle and enjoy some Western-style city life, before backing down to Portland, then back up through the Gorge of western Washington.

Will I stop at the Grand Coulee Dam? I dunno. But I gotta go. **FG**



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