

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






World Golf Hall of Fame
Slammer and Squire

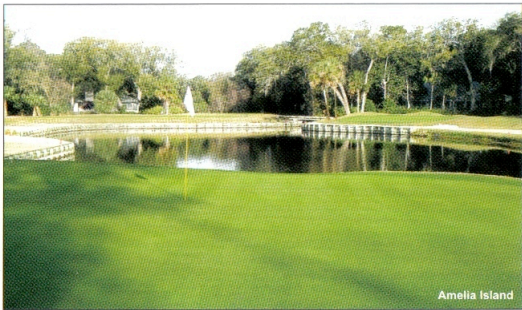
— left their mark on the two courses at World Golf Village. Bobby Weed worked with the Slammer (Snead) and the Squire (Sarazin) to create a 6940-yard course that offers five sets of tees for every level of golfer. The Slammer and Squire's front nine rambles through woodlands and features tree-lined fairways

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 Dyc/Weed collaboration, features five scenic ocean side holes, but the beach, tall grass, and a fence form a

buffer between the holes and the Atlantic. Add tiny greens, ocean winds, hallway-size fairways to the plethora of marshland, ponds, and natural bunkers and this short (6108 yards) par-70 course turns into a shot maker's course. Although the Ocean Links course is considered the Plantation's premiere course, the variety and quality at the other three courses offer golfers a different experience during their visits. Oak Marsh is another Dye design, featuring more "Dye-abolical" narrow fairways, hazards just about everywhere you look, bulkhead greens, and a closing hole with a green protected by three bunkers and a salt marsh. Arguably the most challenging of the Plantation courses, Oak Marsh winds through more marshland, live oaks, and tall pines. Long Point, a Tom Fazio offering, combines the inland marshland setting with a couple of oceanfront holes. The back-to-back pars 3s on the water — Nos. 15 and 16 — almost seem out of place, but give a nice variety to this 6706-yard, par-72 course. The newest course — well, new to Amelia Island Plantation — is Amelia River. Formerly a private course, the Plantation acquired the Tom Jackson design about five years ago. Situated a few miles from the main campus, Amelia River was built next to its namesake and features a closing hole that overlooks the river and sprawling tidal marsh. Thanks to huge live oaks, wax myrtles, rolling fairways, and plenty of doglegs, the Amelia River course is highlighted by its blind shots making it a course you'll want to play more than once. Amelia Island Plantation has long been known for its eco-friendly philosophy, and each course takes you not only on a trip through several magnificent golf holes, but an impromptu nature tour. Be on the lookout for alligators at Amelia River, hawks at Ocean Links, and plenty of shorebirds throughout the resort. Site of one of the few remaining maritime forests in the country, Amelia Island Plantation works to protect the environment throughout its 1,350-acre compound. It does so well that you'd never know that tons of interstate asphalt is just a short drive away.

These are just a sampling of some of the best golf found in the sunshine state. It's a drive worth taking. 



Amelia Island

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