

SPORTS

Ranking Michigan's top 10 golf resorts and destinations Up North

Carlos Monarrez Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

It doesn't get much better than playing golf during summer vacation Up North, where cooler temperatures, late sunsets and beautiful scenery offer the perfect environment for unforgettable rounds.

But where should you go?

There are countless options for golf and lodging in northern Michigan. With so many excellent choices available, the Free Press offers a ranking of the top 10 golf resorts Up North that factor in the excellence of the courses, and the variety of entertainment, lodging and dining at each resort.

No. 10: Mackinac Island

Hardly anyone thinks of Mackinac as a golf destination, and rightly so because the quality of the island's two courses is far from a championship experience.

But what the island's 27 holes lack in elite pedigree or challenge is made up for in uniqueness. The Jewel is the Grand Hotel's cozy and pretty 18-hole course that requires a 15-minute horse-drawn carriage ride between the two nines that Jerry Matthews designed and redesigned.

At Wawashkamo Golf Club, you can step back in time to 1898 and play the nine-hole course near the top of the island that uses multiple tee boxes to create an 18-hole experience of 5,949 yards. The flat and spartan course probably looks much like it did more than a century ago. You can rent a set of hickory stick clubs for \$45.

You get all of this while you stay at the crown jewel of Michigan's vacation spots and eat the best fudge on the planet.

No. 9: Island Resort and Casino, Harris

Here's an offering for all our gambling enthusiasts, with a casino onsite at a true blue Upper Peninsula destination.

Let's start with the golf options at this resort located just west of Escanaba. The most famous of Island Resort's two courses is Sweetgrass Golf Club. It offers links-style features paired with traditional parkland design.

Sweetgrass has a unique variety of greens, ranging from double greens, Redan (well protected by bunkers) and Biarritz (with a gulley). But the most memorable is the island green on the signature 15th hole.

Sage Run is a beautiful alternative to Sweetgrass, with a distinct character brought on by elevation changes, blind shots and rugged bunkering. If all that isn't enough challenge, the course tips out at a whopping 7,375 yards.

The full-service casino offers everything you could want: a poker room, gaming tables, slots, bingo and the TwinSpires Sportsbook with a sports bar.

No. 8: A-Ga-Ming, Kewadin

It's hard to believe this four-course resort began life as a humble nine holes in the early 1970s. A-Ga-Ming takes its name from the Native American word for "one the shore," and the shore of spectacular Torch Lake is what this resort is all about. The resort features the Torch Course, Sundance Course, Antrim Dells and Charlevoix Country Club.

The Torch is the original course expanded to 18 holes in 1986 by former owner Bill Sieben-thaller and his friend Chick Harbert, the 1954 PGA Champion. It's a classic course from an era that defined treelined parkland golf, but with nice elevation changes and some of the best lake views anywhere.

Sundance is an impressive links-style design opened in 2005 and features wide fairways, heather-clad mounding, vast bunkers and large, undulating greens.

Just 10 minutes up the road on US-31 there's Antrim Dells Golf Course, an older, classic Matthews parkland design that provides views of Grand Traverse Bay.

Another 20 minutes up US-31 brings you to Charlevoix Country Club. The formerly semi-private, 6,500-yard course opened in 1993 and serves as another tribute to upscale parkland golf with water hazards on nearly every hole.

No. 7: Shanty Creek Resort, Bellaire

This year, Shanty Creek added Hawk's Eye Golf Club to its stable, bringing the total to 90 holes on five courses on this sprawling 5,500-acre property, which is almost 8 square miles.

You can't go wrong on any of the courses. Even the older designs of Schuss Mountain from 1972 and the shorter 6,200-yard, par-71 Summit course from 1965 still hold up. But you can't miss Shanty's two jewels: Tom Weiskopf's Cedar River Golf Club, and the Legend by Arnold Palmer.

Weiskopf hit a home run with his first design in Michigan, offering golfers equal amounts of



The famed 18th fairway and green, just after sunrise, on The Heather Golf Course at Boyne Highlands in Harbor Springs. PROVIDED BY BOYNE HIGHLANDS



An aerial photo of Arcadia Bluffs Golf Club 12th hole green and fairway near Arcadia Township. MANDI WRIGHT AND JUNFU HAN/DETROIT FREE PRESS



The sixth hole of the Loop's Red Course is part of a reversible course at Forest Dunes Golf Club in Roscommon, Michigan. PROVIDED BY EVAN SCHILLER PHOTOGRAPHY

scenery and strategy on a course that features five par-3s and five par-5s.

When the Legend opened in 1986, Palmer reportedly said, "If a golfer is a 12 (handicap) in Detroit, he shouldn't be a 20 here." Indeed, Palmer stayed true to his architectural philosophy of designing the Legend as an impressive, beautiful and challenging course that remained playable above all else. The Legend provides elevation changes, wide fairways, good bunkering and views of Lake Bellaire.

There are several indoor and outdoor pools at the resort, E-bike rentals to explore trails, disc golf and a spa.

No. 6: Crystal Mountain, Thompsonville

If a course is good enough to host a pro tournament for 19 years, it's surely good enough for any golfer. That's the case with Mountain Ridge, the signature track designed by former Michigan golf coach Bill Newcomb that has hosted the Michigan PGA Women's Open for nearly two decades.

Mountain Ridge and its sister course, Betsie Valley, combine to give Crystal Mountain 36 holes. Mountain Ridge lives up to its name and then some, with incredible heights and vistas sprawled among northern Michigan's soaring pines.

Betsie Valley is the resort's original course and is noticeably more forgiving with wider fairways and greens that aren't protected as severely, offering open fronts to greens and easier bunkers.

The charm of Crystal Mountain is the resort's theme-park vibe that's perfectly suited for a family vacation. The crown jewel is the one-acre outdoor water playground that features a 4,200-square foot pool, water basketball and three lap lanes.

Take the Loki chairlift to the top of the

mountain and sled down a 1,700-foot curved track on the Crystal Coaster Alpine Slide. There's an adventure course, zipline, climbing wall and even archery tag with foam tips. There is also tubing, tennis and pickleball.

No. 5: Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, Acme

It all starts with the Bear, Jack Nicklaus' diabolically difficult 1985 design 15 minutes away from downtown Traverse City. If the Bear's terraced fairways, tiered greens, moguls, mounds and deep rough don't send you running for an 80-minute stone massage at the renowned spa, mount up and try your hand at the resort's two other courses.

The kinder, gentler Spruce Run is the resort's original course that began life as nine-hole Acme Public Golf Course. It became an 18-hole course in the 1970s and was redesigned into its current state in 1979 by Newcomb.

If you want a challenge somewhere between the Bear and Spruce Run, try the Wolverine. Gary Player's challenging design offers two distinctive nines with wetlands on the front nine and hardwoods, rolling hills and a view of East Grand Traverse Bay on the back nine.

There's an abundance of dining options, but don't miss the upscale Aerie restaurant lounge that offers everything from sliders and Budweiser to a \$159 Tomahawk steak and a bottle of Opus One for \$430.

No. 4: Treetops Resort, Gaylord

The old favorite still provides the epitome of what people think of when they think of Up North golf: Elevation that provides breathtaking vistas of bucolic majesty amid the forests of Gaylord.

Treetops offers five courses, highlighted by

the Premier, Tom Fazio's only design in Michigan. The Signature and the Masterpiece also provide challenge and excellence. But the secret is the Tradition, which is a flatter, player-friendly course that gives you a break if you've had a rough go of it on the three other courses. As a bonus, you can play the Tradition on a GolfBoard, a surfboard-style cart.

But it's a crime against golf if you visit without playing Threetops, one of the most unique nine-hole courses in the world. With all the elevation changes, including a 145-foot drop on the third hole, it's the closest thing in golf to riding a roller-coaster.

No. 3: Forest Dunes, Roscommon

Forest Dunes is unapologetically all about golf. Its own website even states: "You won't find a pool or spa here, just 54 memorable golf holes cut through the northern Michigan forest. Some say we are in the middle of nowhere, but that's what we like about it."

From the time Forest Dunes' original 18-hole Tom Weiskopf course opened in 2002, the accolades came pouring in from every major golf publication. And they haven't stopped with the addition of Tom Doak's ingenious Loop in 2016. The reversible course plays clockwise one day and counter-clockwise the next, thus you get the Red and the Black Loops, two distinct courses on one piece of land.

The Loop ranked 39th on Golfweek's 2021 top 100 public courses in the U.S., one of Michigan's four courses listed. Weiskopf's design ranked 54th.

Forest Dunes isn't about golf snobbery and proved as much by adding the Bootlegger Short Course in August, a 10-hole par-3 designed purely for fun and named after Detroit's Purple Gang that smuggled alcohol from Canada during Prohibition and owned the course's property in the 1920s and '30s. Holes measure between 65 and 150 yards and feature greens designed to funnel balls toward pin locations.

No. 2: Arcadia Bluffs, Arcadia

Arcadia Bluffs is probably Michigan's most famous destination golf course. It deserves that reputation for its scenic majesty on the shores of Lake Michigan and its immaculate playing conditions that present a fun challenge on its links-style course.

During my visit a few years ago, the general manager explained the subtle secret behind why golfers love Arcadia Bluffs. He said the fairways are wide and forgiving for tee shots, and they are raked backward in order to prop up balls as if they were sitting on plush carpet. Groundskeepers also kept the greens rolling true by painstakingly removing poa annua with penknives almost every evening.

Arcadia added the South Course in 2017. Dana Fry's throwback links-style design with rectangular tees and square greens are reminiscent of historic Chicago Golf Club, an 1894 masterpiece by C.B. Macdonald. The original course is now known as the Bluffs course and both recently earned a spot on Golf.com's top 100 public courses: The Bluffs at No. 46 and the South at No. 56.

No. 1: Boyne Golf, Harbor Springs

This shouldn't be a surprise because this isn't a fair fight. Boyne offers something for everyone: Great golf on "10" unique, high-end courses.

You're here for the golf and that's what Boyne does best, starting with the Pebble Beach-style Links Course, one of three nines at the premier 27-hole Bay Harbor Golf Club. If you count each nine as one course and added them to Boyne's seven other excellent 18-hole courses, you get what the resort bills as "Michigan's Magnificent Ten."

The Links plays on the shores of Little Traverse Bay and presents equal amounts of beauty and challenge. A round at the Links paired with the Quarry or the Preserve can easily run over \$200, but the splurge is worth it.

The Heather is one of four courses at Boyne Highlands and remains a timeless beauty designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. in 1966 and is the first of the Boyne courses. The Donald Ross Memorial pays homage on each hole to golf's most famous architect. Arthur Hills has a beautiful namesake course, and the Moor might be the most challenging with doglegs that demand precision off the tee.

Boyne Mountain's two courses are distinct. Like the Memorial, the Monument borrows traits from architectural icons on its layout. The Alpine offers panoramic views of Deer Lake and hosts the annual Michigan's Tournament of Champions.

Arthur Hills also updated Crooked Tree Golf Club in Petoskey, which sits on the bluffs above Little Traverse Bay and offers beautiful views of the water.

Contact Carlos Monarrez at cmonarrez@freepress.com.