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CASTS ITS SPELL**

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# Reynolds Lake Oconee is Just Right

By Dan Vukelich

There's something exciting about discovering a new golf destination, one that's warm and sunny, where the predominant colors are green and blue, where it's cool in the morning, not too hot in the afternoon and the winds are light throughout the day.

It's the golf equivalent of the Goldilocks Zone, what NASA calls a planet that's close enough to its sun to sustain life, but not so hot as to fry it.

When you find such a place, it's time for the road-trip planning to begin.

Such a Goldilocks locale exists in Georgia, about 85 miles east of Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, where decades ago Mercer Reynolds III launched a recreational paradise after the damming of the Oconee River.

The Reynolds Lake Oconee development, now owned by Met Life, boasts thousands of homes tucked into the woods, a Ritz-Carlton hotel, guest cottages and condos, fishing, boating, a shooting and sporting club, tennis academy, kayaking and a modern equipment fitting and training center, Reynolds Kingdom of Golf presented by TaylorMade, with the highest of high-tech gadgets.

And the golf? Reynolds's six golf courses were designed by a virtual Mount Rushmore of golf architects: Jack Nicklaus, Rees Jones, Bob Cupp – who designed two of the layouts – Tom Fazio and Jim Engh. (If you don't know Engh, he designed Carne Golf Links in Belmullet, County Mayo, Ireland, plus three U.S. courses on *Golf Magazine's* 2016-2017 list





Great Waters Hole 11



The Preserve Hole 3



The National Hole 15

of the Top 100 You Can Play.)

A la carte, Reynolds Lake Oconee’s green fees run between \$160 and \$280. Peak season is March 15-July 13 and August 29-November 30, but buddy-trip golfers know real road-trip values lie in stay-and-play packages. On that score, Reynolds Lake Oconee has plenty of deals starting at between \$219 and \$359 per person per night for a party of four in a two-bedroom condo or four-bedroom cottage.

All golf packages include breakfast, one round a day, cart, unlimited use of practice facilities, and discounted replays, free wifi, use of the fitness center and access to the best swing-analysis and club-fitting center this side of the PGA Tour.

Packages can be built around golf alone, golf and shooting, or golf, shooting and fishing/boating/tennis.

Like I said, let the trip planning begin.

Reynolds Lake Oconee is located in Greene County, Ga., about 70 miles east of downtown Atlanta. With only 17,281 people in the county, this qualifies as rural. The property started as 10,000 acres of undeveloped yellow-pine woodland but that all changed in 1979 when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dammed the Oconee River and turned it into Georgia’s second-largest lake.

This was a boon to Mercer Reynolds III, who envisioned his farmland, suddenly benefitting from 374 miles of shoreline,

turning into a residential getaway for golfers and other lovers of the good life. The concept of Reynolds Lake Oconee was born. The 19,000-acre Lake Oconee, with fingers of water extending into countless inlets, is now a spectacular sportsman’s paradise featuring plenty of undeveloped rolling pine forest still available to build that vacation or retirement home you’ve been dreaming about.

Over time, one golf course after another was added, and sporting grounds with clay shooting,

competitions and 75 different clubs, including a veterans’ group. The nearby towns of Greensboro, Madison and Milledgeville, plus Athens and Augusta – the latter is 82 miles down I-20 – offer all the shopping, dining and small-town charm you’d expect of Georgia.

It’s a place where an overcoat is rarely needed. Weather records for Greensboro, the nearest town, show that August generally sees temperatures averaging in the mid 80s. Through mid-November,



Oconee Hole 1

archery, fishing and boating were developed. The Ritz-Carlton Reynolds Lake Oconee, a five-star hotel with its own level of dining and spa pampering, was an early centerpiece of the destination. Reynolds found himself overextended in the Great Recession, which is how Met Life acquired the property.

There’s a different owner now, but the same vision. For residents, there’s a robust schedule of theater and music productions, art festivals and

temperatures stay in the high 60s to low 70s. The average low in January is 38 degrees – which means half the time, the nights are warmer. A season’s average snowfall is one inch.

By March, while Chicagoans brace for the season’s final snowstorm (or two), Greensboro’s weather is back into the high 60s to low 70s. Average snowfall: 1 inch. And the sun shines 217 days a year. As folks at Reynolds Lake Oconee like to say, “Come

for a weekend, stay for a lifetime.”

The golf is both ample and exceptional. Visitors have their choice of five pedigreed courses that play hide-and-seek with the shores of Lake Oconee as they wind through pine-studded hills. There’s a sixth course if you’re lucky enough to be invited by a member to play The Creek Club, a private club.

“Reynolds Lake Oconee is one of the most comprehensive golf facilities in the country,” said Wes Forester, the club’s director of golf. “With 117 holes

Nicklaus’ company started last June and is expected to be completed by fall. Like every course in the sprawling complex, the par-72 layout has multiple tees to guarantee everyone can find a fair test. In Great Waters’ case, distances vary from 5,272 to 7,073 yards, with the highest rating and slope 73.7 and 134, respectively.

The Landing was the first course in the Reynolds area, opened as Port Armor Resort & Country Club in 1986. Reynolds acquired the Bob Cupp design and

since it opened in 1988, this par-72 adventure has just 20 bunkers but plenty of false fronts and swales to make up for its lack of sand. It’s just 6,698 yards from the back tees, but the rating is a robust 72.3 and the slope 132 from there. Uniquely, The Preserve features a short course within a course. The Quick Six, a loop of six holes, each under 130 yards, can be played in about an hour.

The Oconee Course, a Rees Jones design routed mostly along the Lake Oconee shoreline, is the newest public course, opened in 2002. It stresses risk-reward via shots over inlets or corners of doglegs. Creeks or the lake itself come into play on nine holes of the par-72 test. Jones was involved in a 2013 renovation that reshaped tree canopies to open up fairways. From the tips, it’s 7,029 yards, rated 73.5 with a 137 slope.

The National has three nines designed by Tom Fazio, all featuring significant changes in elevation, some as great as 60 feet. The Ridge and Bluff nines were the original 18 holes in



Reynolds Creek Hole 5

to choose from the golf experience combines variety, challenge and natural beauty in a rare collection of courses suitable for players of all skill levels.”

Start with Great Waters, the Jack Nicklaus Signature Course that put Reynolds on the golf map in 1992. Twenty-six years later, it’s still ranked No. 41 on *Golf Magazine’s* Top 100 You Can Play list. The front nine is mostly parkland but the lake tests you on nos. 11 through 18. A renovation overseen by

renamed it in 2005, then renovated it in 2006 and 2013. The par-72 course has a bit of a linky Scottish feel. Amazingly at its debut, it was ranked No. 2 in Georgia – second only to Augusta National. It can stretch to 7,029 yards with a 74.4 rating and 138 slope from the tips.

Cupp was brought back to design The Preserve, with U.S. Open champions Fuzzy Zoeller and Hubert Green adding their insight. Updated three times



The National Cottages



The National Tavern



Sandy Creek

continued on page 30

**Reynolds Lake Oconee**

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1997, with Fazio adding the Cove nine three years later. The National was named by *Golfweek* as one of America's Top Residential Courses shortly after opening. The original 18 is a par 72 of 7,034 yards at the max, with a 73.8 rating and 138 slope.

Finally, there's the Creek Club. Named for the Creek Indians and designed by Jim Engh, this private club within a club opened in 2007. A channel of Richland Creek comes into play on 14 holes. Unique is the par-5 18th, with three separate greens that change the character of the second and third shots. It's a par 72, playing as short as 4,737 yards to 7,079 yards. The tips rating is 72.1 and a slope of 131.

But wait, there's more. You know those equipment vans at PGA Tour events? They have one at Reynolds – TaylorMade's original traveling tour van, actually, where custom clubs can be made by a master clubmaker on the spot. It's at the Reynolds Kingdom of Golf, which also has a 16-acre range, three-hole short game area, and three open and four enclosed heated hitting bays equipped with TrackMan 4 launch monitors.

To best graph your swing, the Kingdom uses Gears, a full-swing club-and body-tracking system popular among PGA Tour professionals, club fitters, and manufacturers. Your swing is captured in full 3D from address to follow-through via video at 240 frames per second. Putting is analyzed via the Quintec putting launch monitor, and lasers are used to aid alignment.

Guests at Reynolds Lake Oconee have a variety of lodging choices, starting with The Ritz-Carlton Reynolds Lake Oconee, a 251-room five-star hotel. It's a short walk from the lakefront and steps from the Linger Longer Steakhouse, an upscale dining experience. The Ritz-Carlton has two other restaurants on property along with five culinary options within the community.

Family and buddies-trip lodging choices include The Village at Lake Club Pointe, which offers two and three-bedroom condos just yards from The Ritz-Carlton; The Landing Cottages, three- and four-bedroom cottages in a nearby Reynolds community; and The National Club Cottages, each designed to accommodate eight people comfortably. All National Club Cottages have four bedrooms, 4½ baths, and a full kitchen, plus two open living spaces and porch areas. Guests enjoy daily housekeeping service.

By far the favorite of visiting buddy-trip golfers, the National Club Cottages are a sand wedge away from The National Tavern, a vibrant craftsman-style farmhouse restaurant/brewpub loaded with local beers and great food. Inside, there's a stacked stone fireplace. Outside, there's a fire pit and a lighted practice green for the night putters among us.

Beyond golf, there are myriad options for fun.

On the 100-acre Sandy Creek Sporting Grounds property is a five-stand. That's shooting slang for an elevated open-sided shelter above a pond. Clay discs are launched by remote control into the shooter's field of view from five different angles upon the command "pull." There's a separate 20-station clay-shooting course, an archery range, an air-rifle range and a kayaking and a private catch-and-release fishing lake.

Sandy Creek is the brainchild of Justin Jones, a Welsh sporting-clays champion who worked with The Greenbrier in West Virginia and Gleneagles in Scotland to develop similar sporting properties. He's also tutored members of Britain's royal family in the sport of shooting. Guests are given basic instruction and safety equipment before being handed Beretta over-under 20-gauge or .410-gauge shotguns and shepherded by instructors through the various shooting locations.

Nearby, a restored wood-beam barn dating back to the 1820s serves as an entertainment and wedding venue.

Finally, anglers will be pleased to learn Lake Oconee has an estimated 433 pounds per acre of largemouth bass, white bass, bream, crappie and catfish – twice the fish population of a typical Georgia lake. Four full-service marinas and The Ritz-Carlton offer rentals of jet skis, ski boats, fishing boats, fishing tackle, fishing guides, canoes, kayaks and paddleboards. There's also tubing, water-biking and wakeboarding.

All of this is overseen by a familiar face to many Chicago golfers. Mike Scully, previously the director of golf at Medinah Country Club, is the general manager of Reynolds Lake Oconee, overseeing the entire operation.

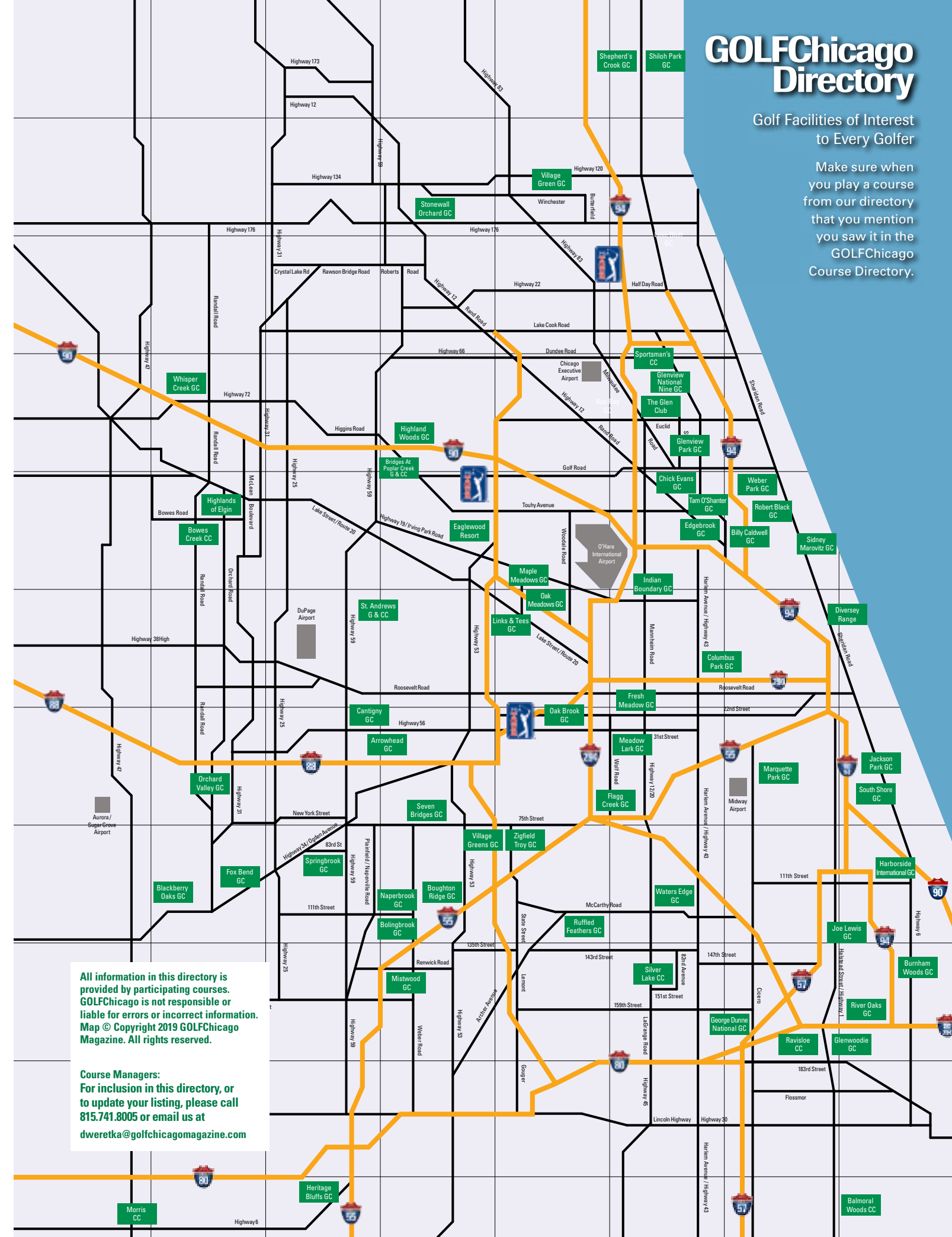
Goldilocks and golfers alike say Reynolds Lake Oconee is just right.

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