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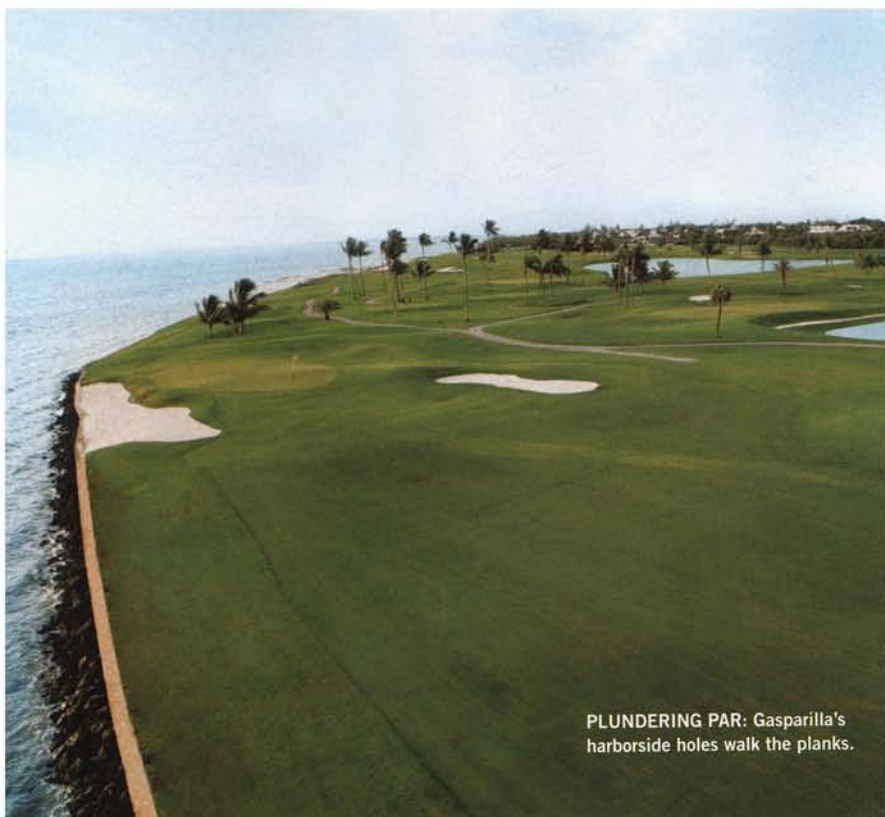
A Photographic Essay By Dick Durrance II

Can You Solve "The Games of Golf"?

It's Back! (See page 8)



PLAY AWAY



PLUNDERING PAR: Gasparilla's harborside holes walk the planks.

The Bucs Stopped Here

Set in a pirate's cove of yore, Florida's Gasparilla Inn & Club surrenders a booty of golf, tarpon fishing and politesse.

By Jon Lawrence

LEGEND HAS IT THAT RATHER THAN BEING CAPTURED DURING AN ILL-FATED raid, the pirate José Gaspar (a.k.a. Gasparilla) ended his own life by jumping from his galleon in the Gulf of Mexico with an anchor knotted snugly around his waist. My theory's a little different. I think a triple bogey on Gasparilla Inn & Club's reachable par-four 10th prompted José's final leap. A flippin' 7 after piping your tee shot pin-high just off the green? Heck, you'd jump too.

Okay, so Gasparilla's demise predated the building of the club by a more than a century. Besides, he'd never be able to hang at the place that bears his nickname. His plundering persona would be a little too, shall we say, rough around the edges for this barrier-island bastion of old-school civility midway between Tampa and Naples.

The Inn's slogan is "Florida As It Was Meant To Be." Having lived here only three years, I'd say that tagline more appropriately fits the stretch of Dale Mabry Highway where the girls from Mons Venus dance across the street from Raymond James Stadium. But my less prurient side imagines the DuPonts, Firestones, Morgans, Fords and other tycoons who, beginning in 1911, filled the guest registry in search of a genteel alternative to the industrial cacophony and

brutal winters of New York and Boston.

Genteel. That's the word.

It perfectly evokes the sense of cultivated and well-bred casual elegance that literally engulfs this resort, from your first stroll up the porch steps of the 60-room Inn where a hospitality specialist from Jamaica greets you, to the main dining room where gentlemen must wear jackets in "season" (late December through March), to the golf clubhouse where there are no tee times. That would be crass—and completely unnecessary.

I specify "golf" clubhouse because there's also a structure catering to the property's two world-class croquet courts. I chose not to play, mostly because my trousers were more a tepid ecru than the required bright "white." Plus, there is extraordinary golf to be had.

The course was re-designed and re-worked by Pete Dye in 2004. With an assist from Hurricane Charley, he removed a number of huge Austrian pines from the three seaside holes, 14 through 16 to reveal a big honkin' water hazard known as Charlotte Harbor. "His real contribution was fixing the drainage and replacing the bermuda with paspalum," says superintendent Jeff Strother. "It's the grass that helps create the "wow" factor," he adds. And he's right. Like carpet but smoother and more salt-water tolerant.

The railroad ties and island greens that define Dye's most infamous Florida courses—TPC Sawgrass and Southern Hills Plantation—thankfully don't show up here. Rather, it's the green complexes that protect par, or worse. The routing is logical, if not predictable, with the exception of back-to-back par-threes that are accessed via a short bridge over the bayou. Even the several medium-length par-fours require something less lofted than an 8-iron in. Add a number of blind tee shots with shaved, dramatically contoured areas around nuanced putting surfaces and you have a good old-fashioned scoring dilemma.

Locals and members have access, although they play primarily on the weekends, so it's pretty wide open most of the time. With only about 12,000 rounds a year, other than March, if there's slow play, it's because you're playing slow.

A historic wood-frame inn serves as the

centerpiece on this island nestled next to the quaint village of Boca Grande, about a four-minute stroll from the property. The beach club, workout facility, and spa face a normally placid Gulf of Mexico, but come May and June, the Silver King returns. Huge pods of 100-lb. tarpon find their way back to Boca Pass, stalked by dozens of boats of paying customers with strong lines and rods. Capable of swimming speeds of up to 70 mph and providing Kodak moments as they leap from the water trying to shake the hook, tarpon are world-renowned here. My playing partner, Dwight from Connecticut, swore that the real task is not hooking your fish, but rather landing it before the monster hammerhead sharks disembowel it.

While Gasparilla's general ambience is gracious, pretense is left behind for the most part. If the more formal atmosphere of the main dining room is not your cup of tea, try the Pink Elephant. Families often stay at one of the 17 cottages that mirror the decor of the inn, with understated pastels, like the signature saffron that's tastefully muted when employed in the interior design, growing seemingly brighter as it makes its way to the beach club. This isn't that ubiquitous kitschy yellow that's so tragically de rigueur at Miami area resorts. There's a difference—and at Gasparilla Inn & Club, it's palpable.

I will say that the resort's decidedly Republican roots—which recently manifested themselves in former owner and Bush family confidante William S. Farish III—seem at odds with the tip-included billing system. While the intent is to free guests from having to carry cash and eliminate the perpetual oiling of palms, it seems like service socialism to have the entire staff—regardless of effort—to share in the largesse.

But such is the policy at many upscale resorts. It also keeps with the modern-day tradition of Gasparilla Parade of Pirates, celebrated each January with a multi-boat "siege" of downtown Tampa and the sharing of trinkets, doubloons and other plunder during the pageant. It's great fun—and nobody's tethered to an anchor. **MS**

Jon Lawrence is the co-host of In the Fairway, which airs Saturday mornings during golf season on KKFN-104.3 FM.

Info to Go

The Gasparilla Inn and Club
the-gasparilla-inn.com; 800-996-1913