

MODERN LUXURY

# MEN'S BOOK

CHICAGO

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# Out of the WOODS

Bass Pro Shops owner Johnny Morris hired a personality as big as his own to construct the latest golf course at Missouri's Big Cedar Lodge.

BY JOHN SCOTT LEWINSKI

Tiger Woods sits down with his golf course behind him. He sums up with the ease of swinging a pitching wedge what it's like designing a property for Missouri's Big Cedar Lodge and owner Johnny Morris.

"Johnny makes it clear. If you think money is going to be an issue, you'll have no issues."

The 14-time Major Championship winner is on hand at the sprawling Ozarks retreat to announce the construction of Payne's Valley Golf Course—a unique 19-hole fully public access golf course that will be the first completed in the world by Wood's design firm, TRG Design. Named for Missouri golf's favorite son, late PGA legend Payne Stewart, Wood's creation will join Big Cedar Lodge's already impressive course collection.

Big Cedar is a passion project for Morris, the founder of the Bass Pro Shops empire. The green getaway rolls through a collection of valleys and plateaus in and around Ridgedale, near Branson in Southern Missouri. From the log gatehouse to the homey reception hall to the full-service spa, the architectural design, furniture, landscaping and decor look like an upscale version of Bass Pro Shops' iconic retail stores. But, the message repeated in the brochures and in-room service guides makes one concept clear: Morris wants Big Cedar Lodge and any extension of it to honor the terrain, history and culture of his Ozarks birthplace.

In 1987, 15 years after starting Bass Pro Shops, Morris bought a small patch of land along the waters of Table Rock Lake. Formerly Devil's Pool Guest Ranch in the 1940s, the spot seemed the ideal place to establish a fishing camp for Morris' family, friends and employees. Over the years, the entrepreneur expanded his operation into a place outdoor



lovers could visit to connect with nature via fishing, boating, hiking, shooting and golf.

Today, Big Cedar fills 4,600 tree-filled acres and packs in 260 rooms, including suites, cottages and private log cabins. Seven dining spots and all-day room service keep the patrons well fed. To work off the calories, the fitness center offers classes with professional trainers.

Big Cedar's outdoor activities revolve around Bass Pro Shops Long Creek and Bent Hook marinas on the nearest finger of Table Rock Lake. Guests can rent a boat for their own fishing excursions or take advantage of the expert angling guides. If the pescatarian scene isn't on the menu, the grounds include a fully stocked stable for riders at nearby Dogwood Canyon Nature Park and the Bass Pro Shops Outdoor Shooting Academy, complete with professional clay shooting instructors.

Even with all of the fish on the hook, the shotguns on the rack and the deer heads on the wall, Big Cedar is rapidly becoming America's most unique and elite golf destination. It's already one of the only properties in the world to boast facilities and courses designed by golf's "Big Three" (Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and



From top: Falls Lodge holds 65 rooms with balconies that look out over the treetops; a Native American statue in the center of a reflecting pool at the Top of the Rock bluff overlooking the Ozarks; the new Carriage House Cottage.

CARRIAGE HOUSE PHOTO BY EDWARD C. ROBINSON III



Clockwise from left: The well-appointed living room in the historic Carriage House Cottage; Top of the Rock golf course has three dining options: Osage Restaurant, Arnie's Barn Restaurant and Buffalo Bar; the Governor's Suite accommodates 10 to 12 people throughout its 2,500 square feet, perfect lodging for families and large golf groups.



PHOTOS BY EDWARD C. ROBINSON III

Gary Player), and it's set to add three additional courses before 2020.

Nicklaus created the Big Cedar signature course, Top of the Rock—a nine-hole, par-3 track that hosts the Bass Pro Legends of Golf Tournament on the Champions tour. Nearby, the 18-hole Buffalo Ridge Springs Golf Course was redesigned by Morris with Tom Fazio to make the best possible use of the Ozarks landscape. Finally, Player laid out the new Mountain Top Course—a 13-hole, family-friendly links experience allowing players to take on every hole as either a par-3 or a par-4 challenge.

Spring of 2018 will see a new Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw course take up residence. Once Woods' vision opens in 2019, it'll be tough to challenge Big Cedar's status as keeper of America's top public golf course collection.

Morris could've polished up all of these brawny mountain attractions and sat back to count his money, but he takes his commitment to Ozarks culture, history and ecology seriously. Last year, he restored Dogwood Canyon Nature Park—10,000 acres of mountains, waterfalls, caves and wetlands—and put the acreage aside from development to create the region's largest privately held nature preserve.

At Top of the Rock, Morris assembled experts to acquire regional historical artifacts. Backed by the deep pockets of Bass Pro Shops, the curator team built the Ancient Ozarks Natural History Museum, which holds the largest private collection of Native American artifacts, photography, art and costumes in the world.

Back at that tour of what will be Payne's Valley, Morris is all smiles as Woods shares his plans for his first creation nearby. The boss' joy makes it obvious that the Bass Pro Shops baron isn't done growing Big Cedar, but he will protect his beloved Ozark home along the way. *Two-bedroom cabin \$269 per night, Governor's Suite \$1,100 per night, Top of the Rock nine-hole course rate \$135, Buffalo Ridge Springs weekend course rates from \$110, bigcedar.com* ■