

Missouri Golf Mecca

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Eight top designers, five courses, one resort

From Springfield, Mo., drive about 50 miles south on U.S. Highway 65, through a green pastiche of cornfields and pasture, and the land around you begins to rumple. Pine-capped ridges rise into view. Roadside billboards point the way toward Branson, famous for its theaters and live music.

But you're headed for a different kind of entertainment, in the craggy folds of the Ozarks about 10 miles south of Branson, at a destination whose owner is bent on developing the country's next must-see golf retreat. That Big Cedar Lodge, an outdoorsy resort in an unassuming swath of the Show-Me State, could earn such an honor might seem unlikely. But so is the story of the man behind the plan. Johnny Morris, an up-from-nothing billionaire, grew up in this region, loving its wildness and never feeling an urge to leave it. At 69, he still resides here and remains true to his humble roots, which means he isn't big on talking about himself. But a good deal about him is well-known.



In 1972, in his early 20s and earning a modest keep in the emerging sport of pro bass fishing, Morris had a bootstrapping business idea. Struck by the fact that average anglers couldn't easily buy the equipment used on the tournament circuit, he started selling lures and bait from a counter in his father's Springfield liquor store. He called his operation Bass Pro Shops, and though the space it filled was barely larger than a closet, it had enormous appeal. Like the fabled fish-that-got-away, the shop got bigger every year.

As Bass Pro Shops expanded — now more than 100 retail locations in the U.S. and Canada — Morris branched out into other business interests. Among his acquisitions: Big Cedar Lodge,

which had gone through other owners and iterations but held a place in Morris' heart because he had hunted and fished in the surrounding wilderness as a kid.

When Morris bought the property in 1987, he looked at it as he looks at everything: through the lens of his love for the outdoors. The resort would be committed to conservation, its grounds a wonderland of unspoiled places where visitors could reconnect with nature. All manner of activities would be encouraged, so long as they involved getting out in the fresh air. At this juncture of the story, golf comes in.

Morris discovered the allure of golf the first time he walked a course as a young man. Golf transported people to stunning places, and left them there for hours in good companionship. In that way, it resembled fishing. Golf could be a celebration of the natural world — and Big Cedar could be a showcase for it.

“Everything Johnny has done out here is driven by his love of the Ozarks and his eagerness to share it with the world,” says Steve Friedlander, Big Cedar’s vice president of golf. “How do you get people outside, experiencing and appreciating the beauty of this area? One way is by creating the world’s next great golf destination. That’s what Johnny is out to do.”

To bring his vision into being, Morris has done a lot of his own heavy lifting. But he has also enlisted help from several of the game’s most prominent figures. Tom Fazio, Jack Nicklaus, and Gary Player have all designed courses at Big Cedar, and Arnold Palmer built a world-class practice facility. Every spring the resort also hosts the Bass Pro Shops Legends of Golf, a popular team event on the PGA Tour Champions circuit. That’s a lot, but there’s more to come.

Tom Watson has crafted a putting course set to open by fall. (In 2015, a sinkhole claimed the first one he designed for Big Cedar.) An 18-hole layout by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw is slated to open in September. Then, another blockbuster will follow a year or so later: the first fully public course designed by Tiger Woods. No wonder the buzz. Read on for a closer look at the courses.

New to Play



The Mountain Top Course



In a game working hard to become more inclusive, design trends point toward family-friendly fun. This 13-hole, par-3 course by **Gary Player**, which opened last August, fits that bill with expansive tees but no tee markers, which means you can peg each hole from anywhere you please. Played from the front of the boxes, the course is wonderfully forgiving (you'll need little more than a wedge and a putter); but stretched to its full distance, it's an engaging challenge for anyone, all the more so because you're free to attack the greens from various angles. The views of the Ozarks astound. But so do the sights on the course itself, a walking-only layout with good reason. You'll want to stroll the metal bridge that winds through ancient limestone outcrops, bringing you around and up to the elevated 10th tee. Another uphill walk awaits on the closing 13th hole, and it's a good one, taking you to a multitiered green in a natural amphitheater just below the clubhouse. Depending on the quality of your shot, expect applause — or friendly heckling — from those watching from above.

Fun fact: A natural history buff with an eye for detail, Morris helped conceive the winding metal footbridge that takes a snaking route between the third green and fourth tee. The rock formations on either side of you date back more than 300 million years.

Coming Next



Ozarks National

In the modern era, no golf architecture duo has earned more accolades than **Bill Coore** and **Ben Crenshaw**, whose portfolio includes such heralded layouts as Sand Valley (Wisconsin), Bandon Trails (Oregon), and Old Sandwich (Massachusetts), as well as a widely praised restoration of Pinehurst No. 2 (North Carolina). Known for their minimalist approach, Coore and Crenshaw make a point of working lightly with the land. Given the rocky and rugged land at Big Cedar, they have advised



Morris to expect a rough-hewn look, with firm, wrinkled fairways, browned out in patches, furry-

lipped bunkers, and large, buckled greens. For his part, Morris has said he wants a course that underscores the region's distinctive landscape, with its "changing terrains, distant views, and wooded paths." He hired the right pair for the job.

Fun fact: Between the fifth and 16th greens stands a century-plus-old stone house, overlooking a lake stocked with bass. When the course opens for play this fall, the refurbished house will serve as a lodging option for guests, replete with an indoor fireplace and an outdoor fire pit on a patio that peers out across the course.



Payne's Valley

Though its ribbon-cutting is still more than a year away, this course is the source of fevered anticipation. Not only is it **Tiger Woods'** first fully public design, it's laid out through a distinctive setting, its fairways fringed by wild rock outcrops and furrowed mountain ridges. A few of the holes are already grassed in and their verdant outlines provide a sense of Tiger's design philosophy. The fairways will be wide, but the wiggle room they grant you off the tee will diminish the closer you get to the greens, where an array of false fronts, bunkers, and deceptive contours will bring a fine-tuned strategy into play. Morris named the course in honor of the late Payne Stewart, a Missouri native and three-time major champion who left behind a legacy of charitable giving.



Fun fact: When you finish 18, you're not quite finished. A bonus 19th hole, an eye-catching par-3 designed by Morris, will feature an island green ringed by streams with a waterfall as backdrop, weeping down exposed rock walls.

Perennial Favorites



Top of the Rock



Designed by **Jack Nicklaus**, Big Cedar's oldest course opened in 1996. It's also the first-ever par-3 layout to be included in a PGA Tour-sanctioned event (a portion of the Bass Pro Shops Legends of Golf event plays out here). True to its name, the course sits perched atop a rocky peak, with uninterrupted views of the Ozarks. The enormous lake in the near distance is Table Rock Lake, and if you like bass fishing you'll want to cast a line there. You'll find plenty of water on these nine holes, too. It comes dramatically into play on the downhill sixth hole, which requires little more than a 9-iron or wedge but demands precision: It's an island green. Other hazards take the form of alabaster sand traps — large, white paw-prints reminiscent of the bunkers you've seen on broadcasts from Augusta National — while other challenges present themselves through elevation changes, nowhere more so than on the nosebleed second tee, which plunges to a green more elusive than it appears. For a par-3 course, this one asks a lot of questions of your game. In your search for answers, try warming up at Top of the Rock's Arnold Palmer-designed driving range, which has 16 target greens, multitiered tees, waterfalls, and recessed lighting, so you can keep practicing well into the night.

Fun fact: The giant sinkhole (80 feet wide and 35 feet deep) that opened here in spring 2015 has grown even larger now as exploratory crews continue digging it out, creating a sightseeing spectacle that doubles as a window into the region's geologic past.



Buffalo Ridge Springs Course

Formerly known as Branson Creek Golf Course, this property came into the Cedar Ridge fold in 2013, when Morris bought it and hired **Tom Fazio** to help him overhaul it. Where Fazio brought his golf design savvy to the project, Morris contributed his knowledge and appreciation of the surroundings. The resulting layout features realigned approaches, repositioned bunkers, and striking water features (the waterfall cascading down the right side of the 17th hole ranks among the most scenic hazards anywhere), along with a routing that opens to more arresting vistas. It's vintage Fazio, postcard-pretty but capable of baring its fierce teeth. Though kept in prime condition, the course has a lovely, surly edge to it, dotted with limestone outcrops and flanked by knobby oaks, its fairways pinched by wind-whipped native grasses. The par-3s are a terrifically varied bunch, and the lengthy 615-yard, par-5 14th, with a creek guarding its right side and layered rock formations ringing the green, is as stout and memorable as any hole on property.



Fun fact: Left of the opening fairway, you'll likely get your first glimpse of the bison herds that roam the grassy hills beside the course. Not to worry: A wire fence separates you from them.

OFF-COURSE ACTIVITIES

Big Cedar, a sprawling property spread along 4,600 acres of hills, lakes, hollows, peaks, and caverns, delivers a near-lifetime of wilderness for exploration. If you only have a few days, it's worth making a list. Aside from fishing, hiking, biking, and horseback riding, the resort has a spa, five swimming pools, shuffleboard, and sand volleyball. A shooting academy offers classes in sporting clays, skeets, wobble trap, you name it, and a marina at Table Rock Lake rents ski boats, pontoons, party barges, pull tubes, wakeboards, water skis, and more. Kayaks, canoes, and paddleboards are free. Alongside Top of the Rock golf course, a heritage site of the same name serves as an extension of the resort. There, the Ancient Ozarks Natural History Museum houses Morris' vast private collection of regional artifacts. Displays range from Civil War memorabilia to faithful taxidermy clones of saber-toothed tigers, short-faced bears, and other creatures that once roamed this territory. Of all the exhibits, none grabs your attention like the life-size statue of a woolly mammoth. Its thigh bone alone measures longer than any putt most of us have ever made.