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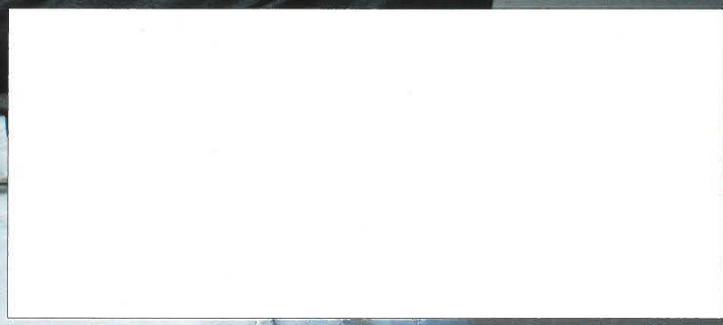
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August 2017

TRAVELIN' JOE

WITH JOE PASSOV



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Missouri Tiger

The Ozarks' Big Cedar Lodge is ready to join the destination elite



Big Cedar Lodge
RIDGEDALE, MISSOURI

- » BUFFALO RIDGE SPRINGS
- » GARY PLAYER'S NEW MOUNTAIN TOP
- » TOP OF THE ROCK
- » AND MORE TO COME!

Mountain Top, a Gary-Player designed par-3 course, is the first of three new projects that'll eventually make Big Cedar Lodge a must on your golf bucket list.

» FOR MOST of its existence, the lure of Big Cedar Lodge was world-class fishing. These days, however, Big Cedar's owner Johnny Morris—founder and CEO of Bass Pro Shops—has a hook that's equally compelling: world-class golf. The current offerings were sufficiently strong to catapult Big Cedar Lodge into Silver Medal status in GOLF Magazine's 2016 Premier Resorts Awards. Yet, it's the golf to come that have many of us speculating—salivating, really—that in two short years this Ozark outdoor paradise could rival the best in the U.S.

Situated amid the lakes, woods and surrounding Ozark Mountain wilderness 40 miles south of Springfield (home of Bass Pro Shops' "granddaddy" store and headquarters), in southwestern Missouri, Big Cedar Lodge dates to 1921. It remained mostly a rustic retreat until 1987, when Morris purchased it and began its tasteful transformation. He aspired to create a haven for families to immerse themselves in nature via fishing, boating, hiking and shooting. Golf was added to the recreational roster in 2013, when Morris acquired nearby Branson Creek, an acclaimed 2001 Tom Fazio creation that was a fixture among our "Top 100 Courses You Can Play" lists. Fazio and Morris upgraded Branson Creek, rebuilding bunkers, incorporating exposed rock formations, adding and expanding water features and changing the name to **Buffalo Ridge Springs**. It's an apt description, as several holes provide vistas of roaming bison, courtesy of the adjacent, 10,000-acre Dogwood Canyon Nature Park.

Later this year, Big Cedar Lodge will welcome **Mountain Top**, a Gary Player-crafted 13-hole par-3 course. It's walking-only, designed to promote family fitness and togetherness, and is accommodating to low-trajectory shots. It's also gorgeous, zigzagging through rugged rock outcroppings and featuring handsome long-range

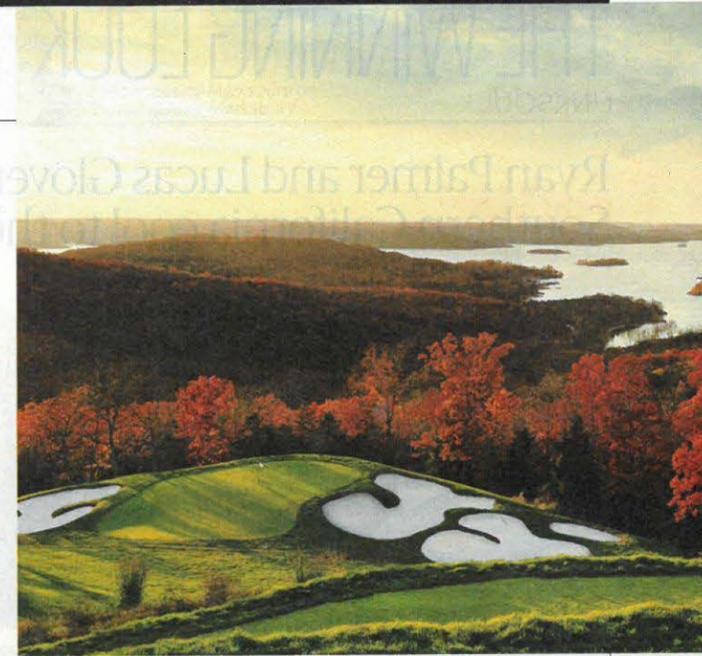
views of surrounding hills and trees.

Of the new course, Player told me, "It's spectacular. It could be the best par 3 in the world."

Mountain Top won't be the only short-course option at Big Cedar. Situated between the Lodge and Buffalo Ridge Springs lies **Top of the Rock**, a Jack Nicklaus-designed par-3 track. Top of the Rock is an elevated showstopper, with several holes peering down at Table Rock Lake and endless forest. Hole for hole, Top of the Rock is the most memorable par-3 layout in the country. With its many lakes and gigantic sand sprawls, however, it's not as perfect a fit for family and beginner play as Mountain Top will be. Top of the Rock co-hosts with Big Cedar Lodge and Buffalo Ridge Springs during the PGA Tour Champions' Legends of Golf, the first Tour-sanctioned event to include a par-3 course.

Even with a Tour stop, two stellar short courses and a Fazio gem in his

Whether you're tackling Top of the Rock (right) or taking in the views (below), Big Cedar Lodge oozes Ozark Mountains magic.



portfolio, Morris knew that he needed more championship golf to attract serious buddy trips. Best then to bring in golf's hottest design team, **Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw**. The men behind Sand Hills, Kapalua and Friar's Head are currently shaping a layout that will debut in 2018. A preview I experienced in late April revealed land that would yield excellent variety in strategy, stances and views.

And Johnny Morris isn't done. On the eve of the 2017 Legends event, Tiger Woods dropped by to unveil his plans for his first public-access design, called **Payne's Valley**. The 7,234-yard, par-72 course, named to honor Missouri golf hero Payne Stewart, is slated to join Big Cedar's rota in 2019. Tiger told me that the common themes for this course, as with his other designs, are playability, variety and using the ground as a friend. "But here," he added, "I think the main feature is going to be the flashed-up bunkering. If we do it right, it'll be eye-catching."

Toss in an existing Arnold Palmer-designed practice area, a new Payne Stewart Learning Facility (designed with help from Coore-Crenshaw), a potential return of a Tom Watson-designed "Himalayas-style" putting green and an expansion of the hotel and its facilities, and you have the hottest resort in golf. Gary Player already calls it, "the greatest resort in America." Gary, we'll report back in 2019.

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