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QUICK TAKE: BIG DOINGS AT BIG CEDAR LODGE

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The wondrous limestone at Big Cedar's Mountain Top course designed by Gary Player creates a striking topography. (Photo courtesy of Big Cedar Lodge)

RIDGEDALE, Missouri – The good people at the resort known as Big Cedar Lodge have taken to calling it “America’s Next Great Golf Destination,” and I was initially inclined to dismiss those claims as hyperbole of the highest degree. But after taking a closer look at this rustic retreat, which is located in the Ozark Mountains of southwest Missouri and owned and operated by Bass Pro Shops founder and chief executive Johnny Morris, I now believe that those assertions are anything but exaggeration. In fact, they have got it exactly right, based on what Morris already has built on land he owns just 10 miles south of the kitschy entertainment center of Branson, Mo., and what will be coming online there in the next few years.

SPRINGS AT BUFFALO RIDGE & TOP OF THE ROCK

Currently, Big Cedar has two courses open for play. One is the very good Tom Fazio-designed Springs Course at Buffalo Ridge, which sports sweeping views of leafy hills and gaping hollows (pronounced “hollers” in this part of the world) as well as well-crafted holes that compel players to use all the clubs in their bags. It is also home to several small herds of buffalo.

And the other is a garden-like nine-holer called Top of the Rock that Jack Nicklaus laid out on a promontory high above a massive, 50,000-acre lake. In addition to being the places where recreational golfers play thousands of rounds a year, they are also the site of the annual and increasing popular Champions Tour team event known as the Bass Pro Shops Legends of Golf.



Top of the Rock is a visually stunning nine-hole par-3 course open for play now at Big Cedar Lodge. It is the first-ever par-3 course to be included in a professional championship. (Photo courtesy of Big Cedar Lodge.)

MOUNTAIN TOP

These are good layouts, to be sure. But what will make Big Cedar truly big in golf is the addition of three new courses over the next few years. Start with the 13-hole, par-3 Gary Player track dubbed Mountain Top. *(Three photos are below.)* Due to open this fall, it is a walking-only layout that promises to be as fun to play as it is scenic, with multiple tees and shots that require players to use everything from their sand wedges to their 3-woods.



OZARKS NATIONAL

Then, there is an 18-hole course that is expected to be called Ozarks National. Fashioned on neighboring land by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, it is just starting to be grassed and should be ready for play in 2018. Though it remains very much a work in progress, it is nonetheless easy to appreciate its potential,

and after a recent tour of that layout, I was pining to play it, especially the par-4 13th, which requires a drive over a “holler” some 60 feet deep to a wide and welcoming fairway and then a mid-iron for the slightly uphill approach to a spacious but well-bunkered green.



The construction of Ozarks National at Big Cedar is ongoing. The dramatic par-4 13th hole, shown here, requires a drive over a “holler” and is a favorite of John Steinbreder’s.

PAYNE’S VALLEY

Finally, there is the Tiger Woods creation known as Payne’s Valley, after the late World Golf Hall of Famer Payne Stewart, who grew up in Johnny Morris’ home city of Springfield just 40 miles or so to the north. Payne’s Valley is the first public-access course Woods will have designed. It will share a clubhouse with Mountain Top and include 18 holes as well as a so-called bye hole that can be used to settle bets. Though the project was announced only in late April, construction is well underway, with an anticipated opening in 2019.

Big Cedar will have quite a fivesome when that day comes, and as I contemplate all the resort will be able to offer golfers at that time, promoting it as America’s Next Great Golf Destination does not seem like a stretch.

I cannot wait to come back.