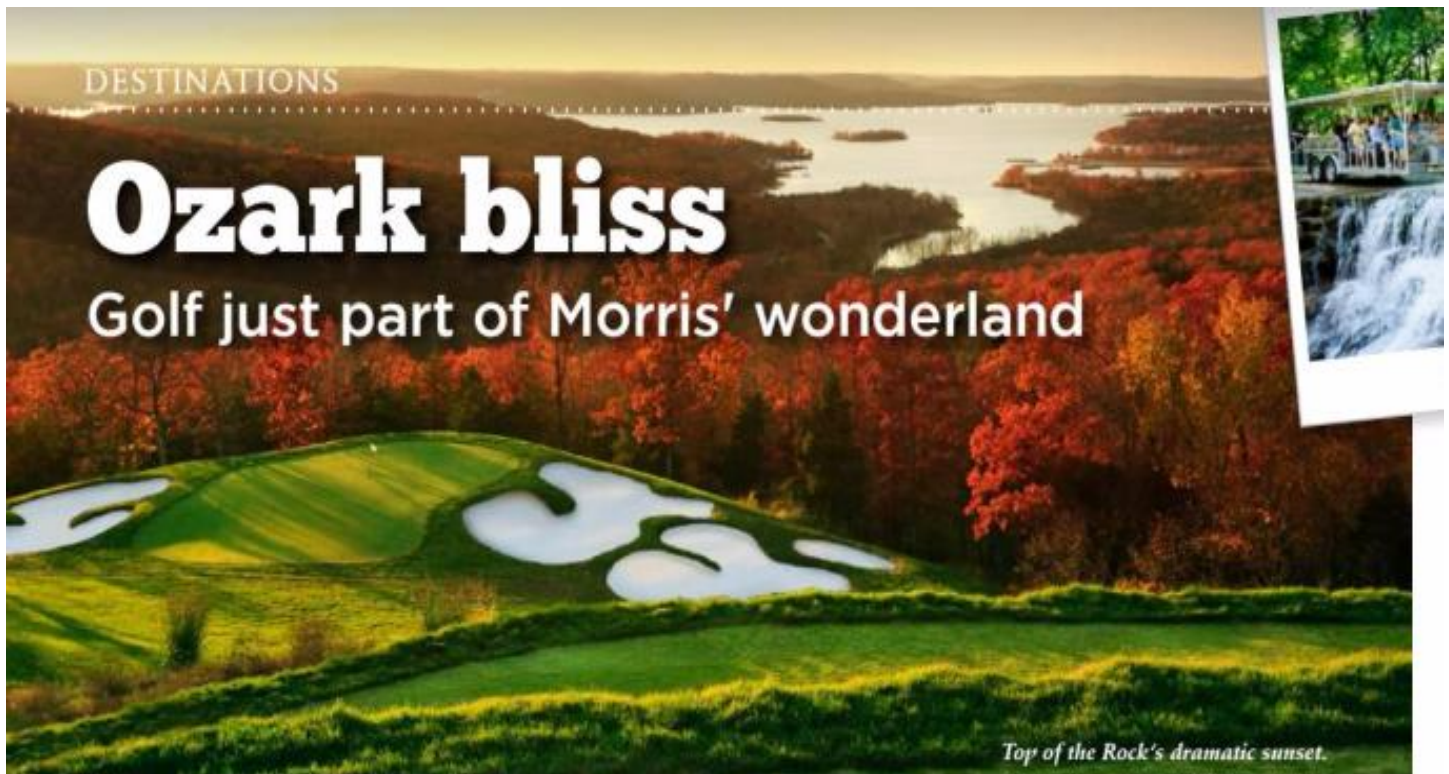


Ozark bliss

Golf just part of Morris' wonderland



Top of the Rock's dramatic sunset.

BY KEN MACLEOD

Come for the Hell Pig, stay for the golf.

That slogan is highly unlikely to gain much traction among visitors to Johnny Morris' ever-expanding and maturing collection of attractions based around Big Cedar Lodge near Branson, but it works for me.

One of the most fascinating aspects to any trip to Big Cedar is the lifesize dioramas and skeletons of terrifying creatures that once roamed the Ozarks, now on display at the Ancient Ozarks Natural History Museum. Giant meat-eating pigs, huge cave bears and mastodons, giant cats and beavers make one wonder what happened not to the dinosaurs, but to all the powerful mammals that would have made life on the fairways a little more exciting and treacherous.

Amazingly, the museum, which includes world class collections of Indian, western and Civil War

artifacts and represents Morris' historical interests, is just an often overlooked side venture for many of the visitors to the area. The entrance is below ground in between the two main restaurants at Top of the Rock and despite having a friendly cave bear to show you the way, many folks can't pull themselves off the decks at Osage Restaurant with its spectacular views overlooking Table Rock Lake.

A recent trip to the area confirmed that Morris, founder and owner of Bass Pro Shops among other ventures, hasn't stepped off the gas when it comes to developing this area of his beloved Ozarks and doesn't intend to for quite some time to come.

Let's start with the golf. The Jack Nicklaus designed Top of the Rock may be the

best par-3 course in the country, but it may soon have a rival just a few miles back north in the 12-hole Gary Player Course, which is set to open in the spring of 2017.

"It will rival what we have at Top of the Rock," Smith said. "It's going to be a world-class short course with some unbelievable holes."

The Buffalo Ridge Springs Course, complete with buffalo in adjoining pastures, has seen significant change and improvement since Morris purchased the former Branson Creek. Caves and rock formations have been opened up to viewing, the blind tee shot on the third hole has been redone into a viewable downhill dogleg left par-4 and conditions on the course are immaculate.

The highly-anticipated Ben Crenshaw-



Dogwood Canyon Mill



Cave Interior Falls



Top of the Rock

SEE MORE



Dogwood Canyon Water Crossing



Museum - Hell Pig

Bill Coore designed Buffalo Springs Ridge Course, which occupies much of the ground of the former Murder Rock Course and ridge land to the north and east of the former Murder Rock clubhouse, is tentatively scheduled for a 2018 opening. Crenshaw told Golf Oklahoma this summer that it is coming along beautifully.

Visitors to Top of the Rock can not only enjoy the golf, restaurants and practice facilities, but they should take the Lost Canyon Cave & Nature Trail, expanded greatly with new attractions this year and more to come. The giant sinkhole created when part of the Himalayas putting course collapsed last spring is being dug out with the hope of yielding another amazing cavern and cave for visitors to explore.

Nature and outdoor enthusiasts will find much more in Morris' empire than what is available at Top of the Rock, however. Just a few minutes away is the Bass Pro Shops Outdoor Academy, a state-of-the-art gun range for skeet and clay shooting capable of hosting large corporate events and meetings. An old rodeo arena out back

now serves as a stage and seating for concerts can comfortably hold up to 8,000 or so guests.

Another 20-minute drive away is Dogwood Canyon Nature Park. You can hike, take fly fishing lessons or take a guided tour that includes close-up encounters with elk and bison in this beautiful wooded setting. The main building includes interactive classrooms for children, a huge tree house, fine restaurant and a work-



Buffalo Ridge

ing grist mill on the Indian River where corn meal is produced, packaged and sold.

Timber bridges at Dogwood Canyon were built by the Amish craftsmen Daniel Schwarz and family, the same crew who moved Arnold Palmer's barn from Latrobe to Ridgedale and have given the clubhouses at all the facilities the same sturdy, rustic feel.

There are all manner of packages available both for those staying at the world-renowned Big Cedar Lodge and for those who are not - check bigcedar.com for more information. One of the more popular golf packages combines a round at Top of the Rock with a round at Buffalo Ridge, including carts, range balls and the cave tour, for \$215, caveat being both rounds must be played in the same day and it is available Sunday through Thursday.

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