Rio and the Olympic Course
A True Insider’s View

All eyes of the world will be trained on Rio de Janeiro when the Games of the XXXIst Olympiad get underway in early August. For the first time in over a century, golf will be part of the Games. With that in mind, we recently caught up with Gil Hanse, the designer of the Olympic Golf Course, to sound him out not only on what to expect from the layout as the competition unfolds, but also to ask for his insider travel tips.

Here’s what Gil had to say:

GO: When you were selected to design the Olympics Course, you pledged to live in Rio. How long did you live there and how many times have you gone back?

GIL HANSE: I lived in Rio for seven months with my wife and our youngest daughter, and after that timeframe we decided it was best for them to move back to the United States. At that point I would travel to Brazil every month during construction and stay on site anywhere from 10-14 days in a row. Looking through my passport, I have made 33 trips to Brazil during the planning, construction, and grow-in of the golf course.

GO: What struck you about the golf course site when you first saw it and how did it fit your eye?

GH: The chief characteristic of the site was that it was all sand and it contained a great number of wonderful indigenous plant species. The combination of this plant palette and the contrast between the exposed sand and the plants really created the visual cues that we would work with throughout the project. The upper portion of the site—encompassing holes 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17 and 18—all had great contours for golf. We didn’t have to do much earth
Cobble Beach Golf Resort
Another Remote But Worthy Canadian Getaway

Ever since the first eighteen at Cabot Links debuted in 2012, and certainly even more so following the marvelous reviews of Coore-Crenshaw’s Cabot Cliffs, golf travelers have been plotting expeditions to Nova Scotia’s remote Cape Breton Island. We’ve led the chorus touting the thrills of this Nova Scotia outpost, but Cabot isn’t alone—Eastern Canada offers plenty of other worthy, if somewhat less astounding, golf destinations. Factor in the strength of the US dollar and our neighbor’s legendary hospitality, and a visit to the Great White North is hard to resist.

Last fall we succumbed to temptation and tried another somewhat remote Canadian destination, this time on Georgian Bay in Ontario—Cobble Beach Golf Resort & Spa. We’re glad we did. The resort boasts a stunning eighteen by Canadian architect Doug Carrick and is just outside of the town of Owen Sound, about two and a half hours northwest of Toronto’s Pearson International Airport (YYZ). With nice on-site cottages and a ten-suite inn that encompasses the golf shop, Cobble Beach has everything you need for a pleasing getaway.

Cobble Beach is one of the best designs in Doug Carrick’s impressive portfolio. We’ve admired his work at The Carrick in Loch Lomond, Scotland, Predator Ridge in British Columbia, Angus Glen outside of Toronto, and Bigwin Island and Muskoka Bay in the Muskoka Lakes cottage country due north of Toronto. In Owen Sound, he showcases views of Georgian Bay on a rousing site that provides excitement and a well-calibrated challenge for players of all abilities.

The golf course is the centerpiece of a 574-acre master-planned residential development. To date, only about 50 homes have been built, and only a fraction of those are on or near Carrick’s layout. Plans ultimately call for 1,000,000 units as well as a waterfront aquatic center, fitness center, market, and shops centered around a village green.

Winters are long throughout Ontario and the Grey-Bruce region sits squarely in the lake-effect snowbelt. Golf season technically runs from mid-April through October, but shoulder season can be dicey. We visited at the beginning of October last year and encountered ideal conditions, but if you want to maximize your chances for pleasant weather, stick to May through September.

Although Toronto’s Pearson Airport is the gateway for US commercial fliers, those with access to a private plane should look into using Wiarton Keppel Airport (YVY), about 20 minutes from the resort. Cobble Beach also has a helipad and a large dock suitable for arrivals by seaplane or boat.

Cobble Beach Golf Links (Rating: B+) has been a hit with traveling golfers since its debut in 2006. Doug Carrick was given a grand site to work with on bluffs that lord over the southwestern shores of Georgian Bay. Built on what was formerly an old farm, the routing traverses a wide swathe of varied terrain that is great for golf and continually provides views of the bay.

As we pulled our cart up to the 1st tee, the starter offered us an apple, made sure we had water in our cooler, checked that the GPS was working, and provided an introduction to the layout.

(EDITOR’S NOTE: While the course’s terrain is manageable for walkers, the routing includes some relatively long green-to-tee transfers that are hardly noticed when riding, but can be dull to traverse on foot. Consider this a cart course.)

Cobble Beach, a par-72, can play as long as 7,134 yards and as short as 5,221 yards from four sets of tee markers. The front nine ascends a hill and tracks inland before returning to the bluffs. Though not as dramatic as the back nine, the opening holes are quite pleasing and (as of now) unencumbered by course-side
housing. Elevated tee boxes reveal spacious, rumpled fairways that lead to green complexes defended by pot bunkers, false fronts, closely-mown surrounds, and collection areas. When conditions are dry, you’ll get considerable run out on the ball. It all makes for good fun.

While the length of the carry off the tee can pose problems on several holes (the 2nd, 7th, and 11th come to mind), Carrick’s trademark wide fairways will keep higher handicappers in the game, provided they select the proper tee boxes. The challenge ramps up on approach shots that call for strategic decision making. Cobble Beach’s large greens are quite receptive, and a bump-and-run entry is often the preferred play. Still, it’s not easy to get the ball in the hole on these moderately fast (the greenskeepers aim for 10.5 on the Stimpmeter) and often dramatically contoured putting surfaces. If you don’t play to the correct segment of the green, you’ll be hard pressed to avoid a three-putt.

As we eased into the round, we chased wild turkeys off tee boxes and reveled in the bracing lake breezes. The course climbs to its highest points at the 6th green and 7th tee. The view from the terrific, all-downhill par-five 7th, with Georgian Bay straight ahead, is one of the round’s most memorable. We do wish that the 9th, a three-shooter that runs along the bluffs, didn’t also parallel the irrigation pond from tee to green—when the wind is up, take extra caution here.

On the back nine, the winds off the bay become stronger and the challenge sterner. The long, relentlessly uphill 10th is a bear of a par four laid out on canted, hump- and hollow-filled ground. Beware the bunkers on the left if you try to cut the corner. The slick green tilts severely from back to front.

This begins a sequence of wonderfully varied holes. The shorter par-four 11th features yet more intriguing fairway rumbles and water left. Fifteen, a short (253 to 343 yards) downhill and downwind par four called “Temptation,” seduces many long hitters into going for the green, but a boulder-strewn creek thwarts efforts that come up short. The signature par-three 17th plays downhill toward the bay, behind a green set beside a lighthouse. The round concludes with a true three-shot par five that follows the bluff from tee to green.

To score well at Cobble Beach you must know how to play in the wind and stay out of the sand. Carrick dotted the course with 100 bunkers, and while most are quite small, many are deep, and the sand is dark and heavy.

Cobble Beach averages about 100 rounds per day in season. The stated pace of play is 4 hours and 25 minutes. Conditioning is first-rate and the course drains very well. Cart-path-only days are rare.

Practice facilities include an excellent grass driving range, a chipping area, three practice bunkers, and two putting greens that replicate what you will encounter on the course. The Halfway House offers burgers and wraps, but its only seating is on the patio.

Editor’s Note: If you are looking for a second course on your visit, Legacy Ridge Golf Club (Rating: C+) is located midway between Owen Sound and Cobble Beach. Originally a circa-1920 nine-holer by the great Stanley Thompson, a major renovation and expansion in the 1970s led to the current par-71 layout that stretches from 4,711 to 6,201 yards. Legacy Ridge can be useful for a family knockabout or a warm-up game before checking in at Cobble Beach, but be advised that conditioning may be suspect. In hindsight, we would have rather played an extra round at Cobble Beach. legacyridgegolf.ca.

At Cobble Beach Golf Resort (Rating: A-) you can stay right in the Nantucket-style clubhouse and walk downstairs to the golf shop and dining room. The Inn at Cobble Beach offers 10 nicely appointed, individually decorated suites upstairs, with guest registration, the golf shop, and the Sweetwater Restaurant on the ground level, and the spa and fitness room one floor below. The Inn’s choicest room is the Sutton Suite, which has a bedroom area as well as an octagonal sitting room overlooking the bay. Families might find the Sarawak Suite a viable option. This split-level suite features a sitting room with a sofa bed and a bedroom with a king bed downstairs, and a queen bed and queen sofa bed in the loft. Complimentary Wi-Fi is available throughout the resort.