From the tranquility of Cobble Beach to the barhopping action of Blue Mountain, there’s much ado on the stretch from Owen Sound to Collingwood

By Ted McIntyre

Beautiful cars adorn the parking lots of great golf courses like fine jewellery—baubles testifying to a facility’s stature among the sport’s cognoscenti and well heeled. But the automobiles that grace the property of Cobble Beach Golf Resort one weekend every September are something else entirely.

Here, during the annual Concours D’Elégance in the humble community of Kemble on the Bruce Peninsula, just minutes from Owen Sound, you might find everything from a 1903 Stanley Steamer to a 1987 Lamborghini Countach 5000 QV. “We had three cars
probably worth $30 million within 50 feet of each last year,” reveals Cobble Beach chairman and founder Rob McLeese, whose personal stable includes a yellow 1971 Porsche 911 Targa.

An event attracting rare and vintage automobiles that traces its heritage to 17th-century French aristocracy who paraded horse-drawn carriages in the parks of Paris during summer weekends, the Concours D’Elégance (French for “competition of elegance”) at Cobble is one of a mere handful of such showcases around the world.

But as fascinating a spectacle as it might be, the drives preferred by most visitors here split the fairways, not roadways. Tracing up an down an escarpment and along the waterfront, the wonderful Doug Carrick design at Cobble Beach is sculpted to emulate the rugged hummocky terrain of the world’s classic links layouts, strewn with pot bunkers, closely mown chipping areas and hollows around greens and an often-wind-buffeted routing that invites a bump-and-run approaches at several turns.

“Group of Seven painter Tom Thomson grew up just around the point there, and there’s a gallery of his work in town.” We’re staring out over Georgian Bay from the 7th tee, the highest point of the property, and Cobble Beach owner Rob McLeese is gesturing to the unseen community of Leith across this giant icicle-shaped inlet of Georgian Bay. “You can’t beat these views, eh?”

McLeese seems to be seeking approval, but there’s already an acceptance amongst the remainder of our foursome that this is indeed a special place. Clearly some of Carrick’s best work, the award-winning routing is seamless but never repetitive; its conditioning superb. Each nine closes with a coastal hole, although the downhill par-3 17th gets most of the photos, with a pond to the right, the sound beyond and the resort’s signature lighthouse in the immediate background.

A resort community set along 1.6 kms of Georgian Bay shoreline, Cobble has placed sustainability and the environment at the fore, including a clubhouse that employs geothermal heating and cooling, and a golf course that uses a third of the pesticides and water of a typical golf course.

The clubhouse, which doubles as an inn, with 10 well-appointed, high-ceilinged, spacious suites above and a spa and gym below, might boast the best cuisine in the entire stretch from Collingwood to Owen Sound. Executive Chef Tim Johnston has been here seven years, employing a farm-to-table philosophy that actively avoids antibiotics and features an epicurean presentation that looks too perfect to possibly be edible.
With the exception of a decidedly uninspired spa treatment, the service during my May stay, including the fabulous Maitre D’, Ted DeCorso, similarly impressed. But it’s also easy to bask in a little alone time at Cobble, from an extensive trail system to skipping stones along the glassy bay—the reliable pile of perfectly thin, smooth-edged projectiles having lent Cobble Beach its name.

Less than an hour due east, just outside the town of Thornbury, is the region’s other famed 18, The Golf Club at Lora Bay—a creative and picturesque collaboration between golf architect Tom McBroom and former PGA Tour star Tom Lehman. Drifting along the Nipissing Ridge, incorporating wildlife preserves and purposefully preserved elements such as apple orchards and century-old barns, the design honours historic rural Ontario as it gradually builds in momentum, with highlights including the par-3 15th, with its arresting 200-foot plunge from the 192-yard tips into the forest below.

While the Georgian Bay views are dazzling from that perch, were I granted a wish for Lora Bay, it would be a good windstorm or perhaps some—and I’m using air quotes here—“winter kill” in order to clear out some of the bayside treeline to open up the views. For now, the concern of destabilizing the slope that overlooks the water is keeping all the growth in place that unfortunately obscures much of that beautiful coastline for golfers.

As accommodations go, if there’s a subdued sophistication to Cobble, there’s an unbridled enthusiasm at Blue Mountain a few minutes down the road from Lora Bay. Hundreds of accommodation options surround a pulsating mini-Whistler-type village of shops and restaurants, with activities ranging from watersports and caving to a mountain coaster and ziplining.

“The village is so much fun—there’s always something going on. It’s got a real resort feel to it and is a great place for bar-hopping,” notes Steve Harron, the publisher/editor of Grey-Bruce Golf (greybrucegolf.com). “And Monterra GC there is a really underrated Tom McBroom design that gets overlooked.”

While Cranberry Golf Resort and nearby Bateaux Creek are also recommended by Harron for golfing guests, exceptional bargains in the region include Meaford GC—an 82-year-old club nestled in the rolling
hills between Collingwood and Owen Sound—and The Ferns Golf Resort near Markdale, about 50 minutes away. With walking fees peaking at $49, the latter is set in the Rocky Saugeen River Valley and carved through a 150-year-old hardwood forest.

And then there’s Legacy Ridge, formerly Owen Sound G&CC, the front nine of which was laid out by Stanley Thompson in 1920, with the second nine added in the 1970s. “In terms of scenic values and history, it’s sensational,” says Harron. “With those big tall maples on the front nine, there’s a feeling that you could be playing 80 years ago.”

With 3 p.m. twilight rates, you can ride during a weekday for $55 or walk for $39, making it one of the best bangs for the buck in the region.

Looking for something else to keep you occupied? “Coffin Ridge Boutique Winery is a cool, classy place between Owen Sound and Meaford where you can sample wine on a big deck overlooking the vineyards with Georgian Bay in the distance,” Harron notes.

Foodies, meanwhile, should explore a new Mexican restaurant in Owen Sound, Casero Kitchen Table, owner of a near-perfect 5.0 rating on Google thus far. “It was a former donut shop,” Harron says. “It opened abut a year ago and has a garage door that opens up in warmer weather.”

Then there’s Ted’s Range Road Diner in Meaford. Housed in a Quonset hut, it looks like it would make a lovely Hell’s Angels hangout were it not for the fact that this farm-shed of a structure belies a remarkable menu that’s chock-a-block with expertly prepared delicacies, from bison and fresh game and Yorkshire pudding.

And don’t forget the water! “There are some great waterfall tours in the area, and if you’re a bit of an adventurist, there’s the Grotto at Cyprus Lake Provincial Park, where you can climb down through a hole in the rock and explore an underground cave.” But that’s for strong swimmers only, Harron stresses.

And there’s always the beaches of the surrounding bay—a breathtaking backdrop to any activity in the area, not the least of which is golf.
“With the rapid elevation changes of the Niagara Escarpment and spectacular views of Georgian Bay, this is exciting terrain for golf,” McBroom told Canadian Golf Traveller a few years ago. “We might be witnessing the birth of the next great Canadian golf destination.”

But keep an eye out in September, when those million-dollar views might also include the cars.

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