

My 10 favorite public golf courses you won't find in the top 100 rankings

Share this article: [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [e](#)

Comments: [»](#) 2



By Jason Scott Deegan
Senior Staff Writer
Jul 20, 2015

Every time [Golf Digest](#) and [Golf Magazine](#) public rankings of the country's top 100 public courses, I scour the lists like every other serious golfer.

I check what courses I've played and where I might want to go next. More and more, these lists give me a good chuckle. My top 100, no doubt, would look different. That's just the nature of the rankings. They're so subjective that they're almost irrelevant.

Don't treat these lists as the gospel of golf travel. They're merely a guide. There are plenty of worthy candidates that didn't make the cut. Here are 10 of my favorites:

Cedar River Golf Course at Shanty Creek Resorts, Bellaire, Mich.

I go back and forth over which is the best course at [Shanty Creek – The Legend](#) by Arnold Palmer or Tom Weiskopf's [Cedar River Golf Course](#).

I'll let Cedar River bask in the spotlight this time. It's got some bold bunkering and a nice risk-reward hole at no. 7. The par-5 finishing hole is a brute.

Deacon's Lodge at Breezy Point Resort, Pequot Lakes, Minn.

Palmer named [Deacon's Lodge](#) as a tribute to his father. It used to be a regular in the [Golf Digest Top 100 Courses You Could Play](#) in the mid-2000s before changing ownership in 2012.

It remains one of the top draws in the Brainerd region north of the Twin Cities. The natural layout skirts three water hazards – the Shaffer, Lynch and Douglas Lakes.

Sugarloaf Golf Club, Carrabassett Valley, Maine

This Robert Trent Jones Jr. classic, dating to 1984, boasts a top-100 pedigree, garnering attention throughout the 2000s from both national golf magazines, once ranking as high as 30th in the country by [Golf Digest](#) in 2005. I've heard rumors of conditioning issues, so that could be what's holding it back.

Even though I haven't been there in a decade, I still remember [Sugarloaf Golf Club's](#) backwoods setting and dramatic 300-foot elevation changes in Maine ski country. Jones nicknamed the first six holes on the back nine along the Carrabassett River the "String of Pearls." The really cool drivable 10th hole gave up its only hole-in-one in 2009.



Cedar River at Shanty Creek Resorts in Bellaire, Mich. is a worthy candidate that didn't make the big magazines' top-100 cut. (Jason Scott Deegan/Golf Advisor)

Rick Smith Signature Course at Treetops Resort, Gaylord, Mich.

I've got a conspiracy theory about why Treetops courses don't end up in the top 100. Its three best courses are all so similarly good that raters just don't know which one deserves to be put on a pedestal. The result is that [Treetops' Rick Smith Signature](#), [Tom Fazio Premier](#) and [Robert Trent Jones Sr. Masterpiece](#) get lumped together. One downhill tee shot after another makes the Signature fun to play for all.

Conservatory at Hammock Beach Resort, Palm Coast, Fla.

I visited Hammock Beach for the top-100 [Ocean Course](#) by Jack Nicklaus and came away more impressed by Tom Waton's big greens, wetlands and bunkering on the [Conservatory Course](#), which hosted the PGA Tour's Ginn sur Mer Classic in 2007-08.

If you don't believe me, check out the mostly five-star user ratings on Golf Advisor. Here are a few comments I pulled – "One of the best courses I've ever played," and "I would rank this as a top five course that I have played in the state of Florida."

Mid Pines Golf Club, Southern Pines, N.C.

[Mid Pines Golf Club](#), an original Donald Ross course dating to 1921, did essentially the same thing as [Pinehurst No. 2](#) did prior to the 2014 U.S. Open.

Architect Kyle Franz restored Mid Pines in 2013 by using aerial photos as a blueprint to uncover sandy native areas that had been lost over time and return the greens to their original sizes. Like Pinehurst, the rough was removed and the fun of the ground game was revived.

The South at Mauna Lani Resort, Hawai'i Island, Hawaii

The [Francis H. I'i Brown South Course at Mauna Lani Resort](#) has two ocean-front par 3s at no. 7 and no. 15 with some serious wow factor. The other holes that cut through the lava rock are pretty good, too. I'm told the locals prefer the [North Course](#). Not this mainlander. Mauna Lani hosted the Senior Skins Games from 1990-2000.

Tidewater Golf Club, North Myrtle Beach, S.C.

[Tidewater Golf Club](#), celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, isn't that far removed from the Golf Digest top 100 (2009-2012), so the extensive 2014 renovation project that installed new miniverde greens and expanded every fairway could propel it back to the big leagues again very soon.

The eight spectacular holes that play along the marshy waters of the Intracoastal Waterway and Cherry Grove showcase some of the best views in [Myrtle Beach golf](#).

Olympic at Gold Mountain Golf Club, Bremerton, Wash.

[Olympic at Gold Mountain Golf Club](#), a John Harbottle III design, is the rare municipal course that gets more five-star reviews than four stars on Golf Advisor.

The beauty of the isolated Kitsap Peninsula is striking – the snow-capped mountains, the tall pines, the wild swings in terrain. Both nines end with strong holes featuring greens guarded by ponds. I'm not long enough to drive the 18th green. It's always a hoot to try.

Old Corkscrew Golf Club, Estero, Fla.

It takes a real great design in Florida to win me over, and that's what Jack Nicklaus delivered at [Old Corkscrew Golf Club](#) north of Naples. Five-star reviews almost outnumber four stars 3-to-1 on Golf Advisor.

This very demanding layout with a wicked-high slope winds through wetland and scrub pines in the southwest Florida outback, where there are no homes. The layout is littered with heroic shots to greens hanging precariously into ponds and lakes. I tend to take the safest routes to keep from losing a half dozen balls.

Jul 20, 2015