

A  
SIGHT  
FOR  
SQUARE  
EYES

Dana Fry's new South course at Michigan's Arcadia Bluffs resort is a radical homage to CB Macdonald and Seth Raynor's Chicago Golf Club

Star developer Mike Keiser's most famous insight into what makes golf resorts successful is his pithy comment: "One course is a curiosity, but two makes a destination." And it is pretty obvious that, if you want golfers to travel a considerable distance to your property and stay for several days, to have more than eighteen holes to offer is a huge help. However good a course might be, variety is the spice of life. One would not necessarily get bored playing Pacific Dunes over and over again for a week, but the appeal of having Bandon Dunes, Bandon Trails and Old Macdonald to choose from can't be denied.

At the Arcadia Bluffs resort on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, they've spent much of the last two decades trying to prove that Keiser's line is not true. And they have

done a pretty good job. In a typical year, the lakefront course designed by Warren Henderson and Phil Smith plays host to over 25,000 rounds of golf, a remarkable number for a venue so far north and with a correspondingly short season. It's true that northern Michigan is something of a Mecca for golf, with Alistair MacKenzie's legendary Crystal Downs less than half an hour away, and Mike De Vries' acclaimed Kingsley Club not that much further. Both these courses are private, but there's no doubt that quite a lot of Arcadia Bluffs guests pay them – and others – a visit when they're in the area. Nevertheless, the Bluffs is unarguably one of the most successful golf resorts in America, evidenced by the construction, in the last eighteen months, of a second lodge, with 16 extra guest rooms.

So no-one can be particularly surprised that owner Rich Postma should choose to build a second course. But getting the right second course isn't entirely straightforward. You want to do something different from your first offering, but to change too radically risks making your guests wonder why the two are connected. And when the property for the second course is pretty dramatically different from the first, that problem is intensified.

At Arcadia Bluffs, to replicate the first course in any sense was not an option. Henderson and Smith's design is to any normal course what a blockbuster action movie is to Brief Encounter. It fronts onto Lake Michigan at the top of the bluffs for which the place is named, and the earthmoving has created enormous faux





Photos: Arcadia Bluffs Golf Club



Upon first seeing the site, Dana Fry told owner Rich Postma they could build a course similar in look and feel to Chicago GC. Even before meeting Fry, Postma had thought the same

dunes and deep, steep sided valleys through which the holes run. It is hugely popular, exciting and entertaining, but if what Bill Coore and Tom Doak do is minimalism, then this is maximalism writ large. No orthodox course could possibly out bluff the Bluffs, especially as the site chosen for the second is a mile or so inland from the existing property.

Yet, in its own way, the new South course at Arcadia Bluffs, designed by architect Dana Fry, is just as radical as its predecessor. The property is just about all sand – as is the case for so much of northern Michigan – and what Fry and his team have done with it looks like nothing most of its guests will ever have seen before.

Last summer, a few photos started to leak out on social media and elsewhere

on the internet, to a reaction of ‘What the #@&! is that?’ from incredulous viewers. The first word that springs to the mind

although rarely seen by outsiders (the club’s membership is tiny and a guest invite is among the most highly sought-after tickets

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of anyone who sees pictures of Arcadia South is ‘square’. For what Fry has built is a love letter to Chicago Golf Club, one of the oldest clubs in America, possessor of a CB Macdonald/Seth Raynor course that,

in golf), is universally regarded as among the world’s finest. And Chicago GC is surely the most famous example in existence of a geometric course, which is to say one where most of the lines are straight. Lots of us

are used to squared off tee boxes; for good or ill they are widely seen as a mark of a traditional, high quality course. But square greens? Rectangular bunkers? Fairways cut straighter than a highway through the desert? Not so common.

Dana Fry told GCA: “On my first visit to meet Rich Postma and Warren Henderson, they drove me up to the far north side of the property which is the highest point of the site. The property was around 50 per cent covered in old apple orchard trees and secondary growth trees. From this vantage point you could see across the entire property. I told Rich that if we cleared the site it would look very much like the land at Chicago GC and that we could build a course to look very similar in look and feel.

“Rich loved that idea and said let’s do it. What I didn’t find out until much later is that he had a similar thought before he met me. We quickly decided not to copy holes, but we did try to recreate the look and feel of the golf course. The property is 315 acres with no development. Two trees remain on the interior of the site. The flat-bottomed traps with steep faces, the straight lines in the fairways and greens and the areas of native grasses between holes all give the similar feel to Chicago GC, as do the massive putting surfaces that average just over 9,000 sq ft in size.”

Nonetheless, although the squareness is clearly the defining visual feature of Arcadia South, it is not the most important characteristic from a playing point of view. Yes, there are places on the greens where if a ball runs into a corner – or a flagstick is placed in one – there will be some fun and games. But in all honesty, if it were possible to close one’s eyes to the landscape while playing golf, you’d hardly notice the squareness.

For my money, the two characteristics of the course that define how it will play are the bunkers and the greens. As to the former; Fry’s fairways are wide, and it is true that on the courses by Macdonald and Raynor that he is seeking to emulate, bunkers biting deep into the fairways are commonplace. But in our modern world of golf, we are more used to hazards that flank play, even to the extent of ‘fairway’ bunkers that have no actual connection with the fairway, and should really be called rough bunkers.

This is emphatically not the case at Arcadia South. I’m prepared to bet that a high proportion of resort guests will never have played a course with so many bunkers in the direct line of play. It’s truly a throwback to the early days of golf design, where cross bunkers were used on virtually every hole. As such, there is strategy everywhere; the bunkers form barriers to progress that golfers must plot their way either over or around.

There are plans for a substantial caddie



*On the new South course at Arcadia Bluffs, flat-bottomed bunkers with steep faces have a similar feel to Chicago Golf Club*

programme for the South course; I think many golfers will be grateful for someone who can instantly give them yardages to reach and carry bunkers. To hit a seemingly nice tee shot and see it run five yards too far into a bunker will be common on this course, unless golfers plan their routes carefully. Fry’s design is classic strategic golf; no tricks, nothing especially funky, except the look of it, but just strong, interesting golf architecture.

are much larger and not so severe. But still, this is a course where you tangle with a pin cut close to the edge of a green at your own risk.

The consequence of this is that I think the course will be really quite difficult – or at least, can very easily be made quite difficult. It isn’t epically long; the site has about sixty feet of elevation change, but no steep inclines, so it will be an extremely comfortable walk. And, as I said

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I said that the other defining factor was the greens; perhaps I should have said the course as a whole. A large proportion of the golf course is convex; fairways shed at the sides into low areas that, in time, will be mostly fescue rough. And the greens too are designed to shed. Only Pinehurst No. 2, of courses I have seen, has greens more crowned than Arcadia South, although Fry’s surfaces are in no sense as punishing as those at the North Carolina venue; they

earlier, the fairways are very wide indeed. But those greens, and the hazards that protect them, mean that making a score will require precision in approaching and quality recovery shots when the approach goes wrong. Perhaps that is the final big difference between Arcadia’s two courses. The first one looks terrifying, but is actually more playable than it seems at first glance; while the second seems more low-key, but packs quite a punch in its squareness. **GCA**