

# Montana, Glory of the West

**By Dave Lockhart**

Known for skiing, fly-fishing, and big game hunting, our 41st state is a nature lover's dream with mind-blowing golf. This is America's fourth largest state, but only 48<sup>th</sup> in population density. Even though this is Big Sky Country, getting there is swift; the legal speed limit on most highways is 80 mph. Montana has dynamic golf surrounded by unspoiled country without Chicagoland traffic. A gaper's delay in Montana usually involves a moose crossing the road or the golden light illuminating the mountain peaks. The clean mountain air renews your soul. Maybe that is why folks here say this is "the last best place on earth."







Tom Weiskopf at Black Bull

We started our golf adventure at Arnold Palmer's first-ever golf design, the appropriately named Big Sky Resort Golf Course which opened in 1973. A friendly, almost links-like layout that rests at the base of the Big Sky Mountain Range; this is the perfect place to begin your golf trip. The King may have had some thoughts about the two Open Championships he won on the windy links of Great Britain when he carved out this track where the breeze can certainly be a factor. You can get your game going if your driver is treating you right as the course sits at 6,500 feet of elevation. There could also be some interested spectators watching your game: moose, deer, and beaver are just a few of the wildlife that are roaming along the scenic and flowing West Fork of the Gallatin River. The Big Sky Resort Golf Course is a nice introduction to your western journey; it is sensibly priced, scenic, and just might be the place for your low round of the week.

At The Club at Spanish Peaks, you can expect to play one of the best mountain golf course experiences in the Western U.S. Before Tom Weiskopf began designing the golf course at Spanish Peaks, he wanted to get a feel for the old west, so he explored the massive 3,000-acre parcel on horseback. Weiskopf touts many virtues of the course, "The owner gave me the best land to choose from, the trees are huge, there's no housing, and the views are unparalleled." Players will encounter plenty of deeply gratifying challenges, and yet beginners and weekend warriors will enjoy themselves as well. It can be hard to keep your eye on your ball as you find yourself looking out to the Gallatin Range, the Spanish Peaks, and the summits of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, which is 50 miles away. On top of the world at 7,000 feet, it feels as if it is just you, the golf course, and big sky.

There are a handful of forced carries, excellent par 5s (the second is unique with a hidden green behind a hillside), and of course Weiskopf's obligatory drivable par 4. Spanish Peaks delivers an excellent combination of playability and challenge by featuring generous landing areas, undulated greens, and flat out fun holes. It is interesting to note that you are in the wild here, and to back that up, every golf cart is equipped with bear deterrent! Thankfully, I did not see any of those big fellas this time. The glorious log cabin clubhouse is a treat in itself with delicious food celebrating Big Sky country. No trip to Montana is completed until you tee it up at Spanish Peaks, annually recognized in the top ten best courses in the state.

[www.spanishpeaks.findyourbigsky.com](http://www.spanishpeaks.findyourbigsky.com)

Old Works Golf Club in the humble town of Anaconda (nearby the city of Butte) stands as an unbelievable example of what was and what is. This perennial top 100 Jack Nicklaus Signature public golf course was a huge copper smelting mine that started in 1883. In the early 1990s, the bizarre and beautiful transformation began. Flue and oven remains can be found throughout the layout, and fairways border and wind their way through the slag. Many of the bunkers incorporate black slag, which makes it truly unique. The course is right in front of you: fun and fair in a stunning panorama. The rambling and beautiful Warm Springs Creek definitely comes into a play on a few holes, and a couple of other good-size water hazards are out there to keep you honest as well. You can almost feel the miners and the furnace operators working here in what had to be extremely difficult conditions in helping

build the backbone of our country. Come out to play and rejoice with Old Works this year as they celebrate their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Thanks to the Golden Bear for putting his golden touch on this compelling piece of land that you will never forget.

[www.oldworks.org](http://www.oldworks.org)

Tom Weiskopf leaves another strong golf print in the vibrant college town of Bozeman with Black Bull. The track is laid out on property that features natural wetlands and gentle elevation changes making the course very walkable and pleasurable. The jagged-edged (he likes to call them scalloped) old school bunkers have become a signature feature at Weiskopf courses, thus plenty of them can be found here. They seem to tie the holes together so that the course flows seamlessly throughout your round. Weiskopf is a major champion, winning the 1973 Open Championship at Royal Troon, and there is a certain links-like quality to this satisfying layout that winds through a stylish housing development. Furthermore, it was constructed on the historic Leachman Black Angus Ranch. It was here that people travelled from all over the world to purchase one of Jay Leachman's award-winning bulls. The streets in the community are even named after his prize-winning studs.

There are a handful of water features strewn across the property, but the engaging putting surfaces are the centerpiece at Black Bull. Weiskopf says, "they are probably some of the best conditioned greens I have ever putted on." Moreover, if you want to get serious about your game, he added, "The practice area is one of finest I have ever been involved with, it is unbelievable!"

Building to a crescendo, each hole adds more drama and challenge, with the climax coming at the eighteenth green. This is the number-one handicap hole playing at 426 yards to an uphill green. If you card or birdie on this this brute, then I am sure you will not have to buy any drinks at Black Bulls' rustically elegant Corral Clubhouse. Glorious conditions take center stage here at Black Bull, Bozeman's premiere private golf community built in the heart of the Gallatin Valley. Members can enjoy tennis, fitness, and a beautiful outdoor swimming pool.

[www.BlackBullBozeman.com](http://www.BlackBullBozeman.com)

Our Big Sky tour also included a couple of accessible private courses. The Reserve at Moonlight Basin is a new Jack Nicklaus design that is a wild ride of elevation filled with stunning unspoiled mountain views. The holes literally traverse the mountain where you rarely see other holes, or people for that matter. Nicklaus gave plenty of room off the tee, so you can spray it with minimal consequence. If you like challenging putting surfaces, then this may be the place for you. Every green is filled with twists and turns, humps and bumps, and roll true as a Montana sunset. For you big knockers off the tee, you might want to tip it out and try the Mill Creek tees at a robust 7,982 yards. The 14<sup>th</sup> hole is a par-3 at 286 yards. And yes, it plays downhill! The mark of any great golf course is the way it finishes. The 16<sup>th</sup> is a majestic par 3 as you face a green surrounded by bunkers and stately pines. Another picturesque elevated tee greets you at 17. This copious hole plays a lengthy 777 yards from the back tees, but remember it is downhill with thin mountain air and firm turf, so the ball will run like an Olympian! Not many courses feature a drivable 18<sup>th</sup> hole, but here at The Reserve that is just the case, and good luck on the topsy-turvy putting surface.

[www.MoonlightBasin.com](http://www.MoonlightBasin.com)

A great way to break up your trip is to head down to one of the world's natural wonders at Yellowstone National Park. An easy drive of slightly over an hour from the Big Sky Resort area, you will find this massive scenic park featuring the famous Old Faithful geyser. Here the buffalo really do roam. As we were leaving the park, we spotted a lone bison in the distance, so we pulled over to observe one of our nation's living treasures. We sat in the car and shot video as the bull came closer and closer. He came within a couple of feet of us, and then he turned and walked directly behind the car. Priceless!

You will not be buffaloeed getting to Montana, as it is easier than you think. United Airlines has direct flights jetting from O'Hare to Bozeman, Montana, in just under 3.5 hours, which leaves plenty of time to get in a round, or a mosey down to Yellowstone National Park. In the town of Bozeman, there is an astonishing 302 days of sunshine. A week that mixes an Arnold Palmer course, stellar Tom Weiskopf designs, and a couple of rugged Jack Nicklaus layouts is just about as big as it gets in golf. The last great place on earth is waiting for Chicagoans to heighten their golf experiences in Big Sky Country.