



<p>1 ROSS BRIDGE (★★★★½) \$148, rossbridgeresort.com, 800-593-6419</p>	<p>2 OXMOOR VALLEY (RIDGE) (★★★★) \$64, rtjgolf.com</p>	<p>3 OXMOOR VALLEY (VALLEY) (★★★★) \$64, 800-949-4444</p>
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Map By John Burgoyne

* Star listings from 1 to 5 are derived from [readers' Best Places To Play ratings](#).

As I drove through suburbia, past a church, a park and through a new housing development, I came upon a castle. The Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa opened in 2006 with 259 guest rooms (starting at \$189 per night), 11 suites (\$300 a night), dining options, and a 12,000-square-foot spa. With its dark-wood interior, formal lobby and bar area, efficient service, spacious rooms and high-speed wireless Internet, it's got a sophisticated feel.

And the Renaissance is right on the golf course. You can access the golf shop from the hotel elevator.

Ross Bridge is the third-longest golf course in the world, and my plan was to play from the tips, for no other reason than to say I did. Then I considered the wind, which was blowing about 15 miles per hour, and the temperature, which was 45 degrees in early November, and the number on the scorecard: 8,191 yards. I stuck my first tee in the ground between the orange markers, which played 6,783 yards.

Ross Bridge is like nothing I've ever seen before. It's a golf course that has been pulled and stretched in every direction. I've never felt so small. Think Gulliver's Travels. As you stand in a fairway, you feel like it's Gulliver's home course, and you're one of the Lilliputians who tied him down. Critics will say it's too big. Walking Ross Bridge is not an option, though you will get plenty of exercise hiking from its cartpaths to its greens. I like something that's unique, so I loved the experience, regardless of the excess space and big green fee.

"Ross Bridge is our highest price point on the trail because it costs more to mow an extra 6,000 acres," Bronner says. "But we built this course to hold a tournament. For a spectator, you can see a number of holes from the same spot." The 13th hole, 698 yards from the tips, is as long as a workweek. The tee box feels like Monday, and the flag is Friday. I teed off from Wednesday, which is only 540 yards, and I still could manage only a 6.

Just down the street from Ross Bridge is Oxmoor Valley and another 54 holes of fun. I played the Ridge and Valley courses. Both are \$64 during peak season, and both are worth it. Here, trees and narrow landing areas come into play, as do rolling fairways, elevated tee shots and greens. The Valley course doesn't have as many spectacular views, which is why I prefer the Ridge course. Both present challenging finishes to your round. The Valley's 441-yard 18th is nicknamed "the Assassin" because it's uphill and into the wind; it's a graveyard for good rounds. The Ridge wraps up with 592 yards of trouble along the left side of the fairway. I finished my trip a big fan of Birmingham. There are 10 more destinations on the trail I still haven't seen, but not returning to Ross Bridge would be a big mistake.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE



CHAMPAGNE WISHES... The spa at Ross Bridge has bamboo floors, low lighting, couples treatment rooms and a variety of services, including hot-stone massages and "the ultimate 75-minute caviar facial" for \$195.

HOG HEAVEN I'm not a gearhead, but I didn't want to leave the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum (*right*). About 25 minutes from Ross Bridge is a five-floor display of 1,220 motorcycles and 50 Lotus cars (\$15 for adults; \$10 for children; free for kids 3 and under). The oldest of George Barber's personal motorcycle collection dates to 1902. "They all run," says Brian Slark, the museum's technical director.

CAN I DRIVE?

Next door to the Motorsports Museum is the 2.8-mile track they use for the Porsche Sport Driving School. (There's shuttle service to and from the airport and to and from the resort.) Open 140 days a year, and with a fleet of 50 new Porsches, it's the Augusta National of car classes (\$1,795/one day, \$2,995/two day). Notable students: Corey Pavin, Bernhard Langer and Loren Roberts.