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## Teeing it up in Mobile, Alabama

Top courses, low prices make area a golfer's paradise

By **MIKE KELLY**  
SPECIAL TO THE BLADE



The Magnolia Grove Golf Course in Mobile, Ala., is part of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. (MICHAEL CLEMMER)

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MOBILE, Ala. – Retirees and golf.

It's the most natural of pairings, but here in Alabama, there's a quite different connection between the two. Here it's the retirees – or more precisely, retired public employees and teachers – who own most of the top golf courses in the state.

Alabama is home to what may be the most famous collection of public golf courses in the world, known collectively as the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. Designed by legendary course architect Robert Trent Jones, Sr., and

financed by the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the RTJ Trail, which opened in 1992, includes 26 courses on 11 sites throughout the state – from the rolling hills of northern Alabama to the wetlands and woods of the south, near the Gulf of Mexico.

The massive financial investment – more than \$220 million – was aimed at spurring tourism and business development in the state, and it seems to be doing the job. Hundreds of thousands of northern golfers who might once have headed to Florida or the Carolinas for vacations in late fall or early spring now choose Alabama. In the past 15 years, the state's tourism dollars have soared from about \$1.8 billion to nearly \$10 billion annually.

And the quality of the courses, coupled with their reasonable greens fees (average: \$50), have helped earn the Trail rave reviews from national publications. The New York Times calls the collection of courses "some of the best public golf on Earth," while Golf magazine describes it as "the American golfer's equivalent of Disney World." Golf Digest magazine chips in too, placing Mobile in its Top 10 areas in the country for year-round golf.

Along with the golf courses, the RTJ Trail includes a number of upscale hotels and resorts, all of which are affiliated with either Marriott or Renaissance.

During a visit to Mobile (that's Moe-BEEL to the natives) in March, I played at two of RTJ's southernmost sites, Magnolia Grove in Mobile and Lakewood Golf Club, across Mobile Bay in Point Clear. And to sample some of the other golf options in the area, I visited two non-RTJ courses: Rock Creek and TimberCreek.

### **Magnolia Grove**

Put very simply, the 54 holes here are tough, tough, tough, even with four sets of tee boxes on each hole. The fairways are tight, most of the greens are elevated, and there are more than a few forced carries. It's a stiff test of golfing ability, and when you're playing it for the first time, you'll want to bring along an extra sleeve or two of balls. Even on the par 3 Short Course, most average players will find themselves using woods more often than irons off the tee.

It's no surprise that this challenging layout has been hosting professional tour events for years. In May, the 2010 Bell Micro LPGA Classic will be played at Magnolia Grove.

### **Lakewood**

The two 18-hole courses here are more than 60 years old, but both were renovated in 2005. They're right across the street from the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, which happens to have the top-rated spa of any Marriott property in the world. The signature par 5, 14th hole on the club's Azalea course has an island green surrounded by a four-acre lake.

Two potential drawbacks at Lakewood: The courses are open only to guests staying at the Grand (\$139-\$179 a night), and the golf prices are much higher than those at other RTJ courses. But then again, did I mention that 20,000-square-foot, world-class spa?

### **Rock Creek**

This semi-private, 18-hole course in nearby Fairhope, Ala., is more than 7,000 yards long and has plenty of trees lining its fairways, but it's not ridiculously tough for higher-handicap golfers. Its rolling terrain is reminiscent of a mountain course in North Carolina. Especially notable is its signature No. 2 hole: The 434-yard par 4 drops 70 feet from tee to fairway, and after a forced carry over a marshy area, the green features a 30-foot-high bulkhead wall.

### **TimberCreek**

This 27-hole, semi-private course is in Daphne, Ala., just across the bay from Mobile. It seems designed more for casual golfers, and is much more forgiving than the Robert Trent Jones courses. There are plenty of trees along the rolling fairways, of course, but there are fewer places where an errant shot can lead to serious trouble.

During our visit, we stayed at the historic Battle House Hotel, right in the middle of downtown Mobile. Built in 1852, the Battle House stands on the site of Andrew Jackson's headquarters during the War of 1812. Once the center of high society in the city, it closed in 1974, but following a multimillion-dollar restoration it reopened in 2007. It's now rated as one of the top 125 hotels in the country by National Geographic Traveler, and one of the top 500 hotels in the world by Travel + Leisure Magazine. The rooms start at \$159 a night.

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