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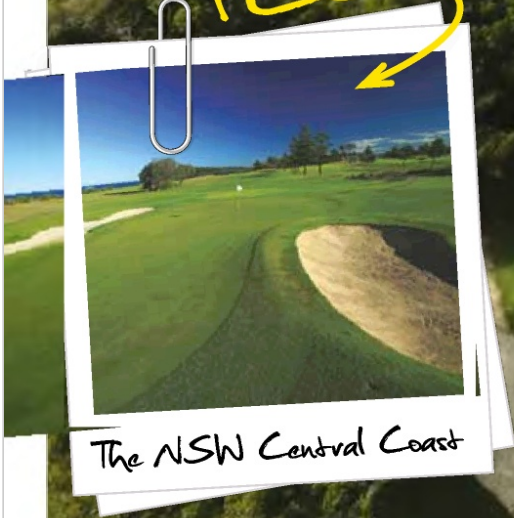
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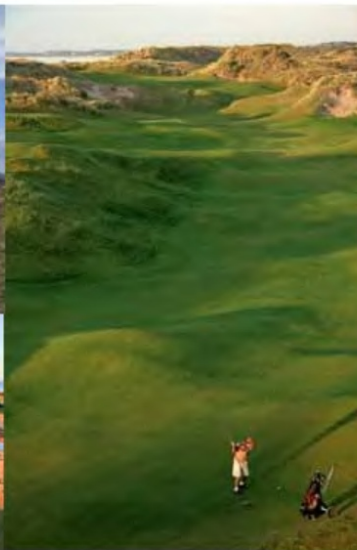
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COVER PHOTO:

Margaret River Golf Club

EXPLORING ALABAMA'S ROBERT TRENT JONES TRAIL

Michael Green

THE thrill of playing to an island-green is not something you get to experience very often. Some students of golf architecture will say that's a good thing, but there is no denying the excitement of seeing one for the first time. And then having to play it.

So when I stood on the tee of the sixth hole at The Judge Course at Capitol Hill, a thought came over me: Is this place for real or have I just stepped into a golf

computer game? It was an epic sight that got the knees knocking, knowing that anything less than a decent shot would see my ball find a watery grave.

It turns out this sort of epic golf is commonplace along Alabama's Robert Trent Jones Trail and I got a good look at a number of these spectacular tracks on our way to The U.S. Masters earlier this year.

The RTJ Trail (as it is usually referred to) is a collection of 26 golf courses (or 468 holes) spread across 11 locations in

the southern U.S. state of Alabama that has fast become one of the state's most popular tourist attractions since opening in 1992.

But why is it such a big deal and why should you be adding it to your list of great golfing destinations?

Firstly, all 11 locations are open to anyone to play. This is a big deal in the USA where the majority of great golf is hidden behind locked gates, accessible to members only. While each course along the trail is unique, each site is



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The Judge Course at Capitol Hill



to be the birthplace of the civil rights movement. If you can drag yourself away from the golf for a while, it's well worth a look around.

The Judge is one of the most extraordinary golf courses I've ever played. It's often featured on golf simulators and computer games, and if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I would have assumed it was something dreamed up by some golf-loving computer programmer.

The opening hole is one of the most amazing I've seen. The view of the narrowing fairway from the elevated tee is a daunting sight and it's a tense introduction to the round.

But the incredible looking holes don't stop there with water hazards surrounding 14 of the 18 holes on The Judge, including the island-green 6th and

encased under the RTJ Trail banner and are incredibly affordable for this quality of golf in the U.S.

Secondly, did I mention it's epic golf? Undoubtedly some of the golf holes I played along the RTJ Trail are the most spectacular I've ever played. Occasionally I wondered if I'd accidentally stumbled into one of those fantastical golf calendars where someone would paint golf holes onto some of the world's most dramatic settings.

Beginning our journey in New Orleans, I left Bourbon St behind and headed straight for Cambrian Ridge; about a

four hour drive out of Louisiana, briefly through the state of Mississippi and into Alabama.

Consisting of three distinct nines, I played the Sherling and Canyon nines and wasn't disappointed. It's stunning golf that was exemplified just four holes into our round when the all-water carry par-3 4th had us shaking in our golf shoes.

And while the RTJ Trail is unashamedly target-style golf, it wasn't without options. The 5th, 6th and 7th hole stretch on the Sherling course at Cambrian Ridge all offer obvious, safe choices to get your

ball in play while offering a big reward if you can take the dog-leg on. In such a spectacular setting, even the most conservative golfer will have a hard time knocking back the seduction of a heroic, memorable golf shot.

But if you're wanting to face heroic, memorable golf shots a little more frequently, make your way to The Judge Course at Capitol Hill.

Capitol Hill is just 15 minutes out of Montgomery; the capital of Alabama and a city steeped in American history. During the Civil War it was the capital of the Confederate States and is considered

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Clubhouse at Grand National

plenty of mind-boggling water carries. Arguably my favourite hole is the 245 metre, par-4 11th hole which features a split fairway (by a water hazard) that could see you change your mind two, three, maybe four times on the tee.

The run home has some magnificent scenery that will leave you wondering just how The Judge was built. The tee boxes and bridges of the par-3 12th hole are worth the green fees alone that are only just usurped by the beauty of the hole itself. The tee shot at the par-5 15th test every golfer on the planet, and will leave you feeling inundated even before you hit your tee shot.

It's with some regret that I did not have time to play the other two courses at Capitol Hill; The Legislator and The Senator. Home to the LPGA's Yokohama Tire LPGA Classic, the Senator is a links-



The 6th hole at The Judge Course at Capitol Hill

style golf course and a favourite of many on The Trail.

The last stop on our brief tour was The Lakes and Links courses at Grand National, near the western border of Alabama. Both courses were in stunning condition with The Lakes course in particular, a picture postcard with 12 holes hugging Lake Saugahatchee to form some spectacular holes. The par-3's are magical and you'll need your golf brain firmly switched on to resist the urge to bite off more than you can chew at the 12th and 16th holes.

Each stop on the RTJ Trail is home to

friendly staff who provide the sort of service we're not familiar with in Australia. Drop your bags, park your car and by the time you return they'll be loaded up on your cart and ready to go. Yes, tips are expected but it's an environment you should experience at least once.

The wonderfully grand clubhouses feature fully-stocked pro shop, bar and a place to get lunch. Don't forget to kick back in the rocking chair on the verandah after a round. It's the perfect place to contemplate that heroic shot you pulled off, or maybe the one you didn't.

I occasionally longed to play a few low,

running approach shots or a bump-and-run style shot we're more familiar with in Australia but this is not what the RTJ Trail is about. Unashamedly, the Trail was created to be a major, epic test of golf where (as the website states) golfers will remember that "one brilliant shot that (momentarily) conquers a hole".

If you're on your way to The Masters or passing through the southern states of the USA, it's worth checking in at some of the stops along the RTJ Trail. It will be one of the most epic golf experiences you'll ever have. •

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