

TEERING OFF

MAKING THE ROUNDS ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

The golf choices may be few, but they are real gems.

BY THOMAS DUNNE



A bird's-eye view of Farm Neck Golf Course's third and fourth greens, overlooking Sengekontakt Pond.

Martha's Vineyard, with its postcard villages, grand beaches, and secluded country lanes, has long been one of the most desirable summer retreats in the country. With the exposure it regularly receives from celebrity visitors such as President Obama (affection for the island is nothing new among American presidents, as commanders in chief dating back to Ulysses S. Grant have vacationed here), the Vineyard's population routinely soars tenfold in the peak season. Private enclaves have sprung up in response to this influx; nonresident visitors can face challenges in securing everything from beach access to a simple seafood lunch.

Given the Vineyard's small size (about 87 square miles), it's not a major destination for golfers, but the few options that do exist are a real pleasure. Highlighted here are one private club, one semiprivate club, and one hidden gem

that might best be classified as “other.” Residents are deeply concerned with preserving the island’s natural beauty—and have the political leverage to enforce rules and regulations—so good environmental stewardship is at the heart of golf on the Vineyard.

Most golfing visitors are likely to start out at **Farm Neck Golf Club** (508-693-3057). As the only 18-holer on the island that allows public play (the nine-hole Mink Meadows in Vineyard Haven is also open to daily-fee players), it can get extremely crowded, creating scenes complete with vigilant rangers waving red flags to hustle lagging groups along. Still, it’s quite a good course. The front nine, designed by the prolific New England architect Geoffrey Cornish, debuted in 1979; the following year, it was extended to 18 holes. Farm Neck’s creation was a major victory for island environmental groups who fought throughout the ’70s to prevent an immense housing development—over 800 lots on 500 acres—from destroying the area’s exceedingly attractive but fragile landscape, glacial kettle terrain that tumbles down to the tidal Sengekontacket Pond, which in turn is separated from the Nantucket Sound by a sliver-thin barrier beach.

Patrick Mulligan, the architect of Farm Neck’s back nine, wrote of creating a course that would be “Yankee in mood: tough, almost stingy, but fair.” A nice description, and one that holds true today. After a pair of straight-

away but heavily bunkered openers, the course shows its softer side at the third, a manageable short par-4 backdropped beautifully by the pond. The next hole, a short par-3, again plays gently down to a green that’s both padded up and tilted back toward the tee, creating an appealing “infinity edge” with the water beyond.

Farm Neck’s best and most memorable hole, though, is the low-lying par-5 eighth, which begins with an intimidating marsh-crossing tee shot. With the Sengekontacket bordering the entire right side of the hole and thick forest on the left, players must tack as close to danger as possible on either their first or second shot in order to avoid losing the angle created by the dogleg’s swing to the left. The par-4 12th asks the golfer to link a pair of shots in an interesting fashion as well. A long, straight tee shot will travel through the fairway into the drink, so it’s a matter of laying up with less than a driver but still getting far enough down the hole that the approach, an aerial play over the same body of

Farm Neck satisfies a golf craving, but **VINEYARD GOLF CLUB** represents the next level.



President Obama at Farm Neck in August 2015. His love of Martha’s Vineyard golf is well documented.

water, is relatively unthreatening. In general, Farm Neck uses water as a design feature very well, encouraging risk-reward calculations from strong players while always keeping a safe path available for short hitters.

For the casual golfer—someone posted at the Winnetu Oceanside Resort mother ship for a family beach week, say—a round at Farm Neck will more than satisfy a golf craving, but the private **Vineyard Golf Club** (508-627-8930) represents the next level. Best known for being one of the few 100 percent organic golf courses in the country, Vineyard allows an unaccompanied guest to play if he or she is sponsored by a member, though as one might expect, this is harder to pull off in peak season. The club’s rolls are currently full, but it does keep a waiting list for potential future members.

Vineyard Golf Club dates to 2002, but its course is essentially brand-new. The original design, by the venerable British architect Donald Steel, was compromised during the construction process by the last-minute discovery of an endangered species of moth. This led to a change in the routing plan that produced a pair of poor holes, separated by a rhythm-breaking 1,600-yard shuttle ride.

Steel’s design didn’t function as well as the members had hoped. As board member David Baum says, “When the course originally opened, it was absolutely beautiful—carved out of the forest and lined with fescue. It had U.K.-style revetted bunkers, but it turned out they were poorly suited for our all-organic regime. The fescue lining the fairways was overcome by clover and weeds and became unplayable. If the course got too much water, weeds would also grow between the layers in the bunkers, and we couldn’t just spray Roundup on them. On the other hand, if we dried them out to kill the weeds, the bunkers themselves would break down.”

In 2012, the club, having acquired a parcel of land that would solve its routing issue, hired architect Gil Hanse to replace the two problem holes, but as the membership watched his progress, the scope of his design brief gradually broadened. A totally rerouted and reinvented front nine opened in mid-2013, with the back nine following in the spring of 2015.

The results are spectacular. Vineyard Golf now resembles an American cousin to the great heathland designs of suburban London and should quickly gain renown as one of the best courses in New England. As in Surrey, England,



Edgartown, on the water, encompasses Chappaquiddick Island, home to the Royal Chappy golf course.

there are no ocean views here; the club is three miles inland from Edgartown. The entire property is surrounded by forest and tilted just slightly back toward the clubhouse, rendering the vista from the porch similar to that of an audience member’s view of a stage, with nothing but pure golf ground on display.

Hanse and his crew stripped away rough to reveal the native sand, creating vast waste bunkers. This makes a strong visual impact, but it also limits the opportunity for weed incursion. Wayward golfers therefore now have far fewer occasions to hunt around in frustration for lost balls. This, along with a tight routing that seldom finds the next tee more than a few steps from the previous green, has shaved half an hour from the average pace of play. That might be the best outcome of all, for as Hanse points out: “When people are on the Vineyard, they want to be on the water and with their families. The last thing they want is a long round of golf.” That said, with creations like the downhill, drivable par-4 14th—an instant classic where the player’s decision-making is often strongly influenced by the day’s hole location—Vineyard Golf offers a round to be savored, not rushed through.

The most charming golf experience, though, can be found by taking the 527-foot ferry ride over to Chappaquiddick. On this exclusive island is a private backyard course, the mock-heroically named **Royal & Ancient Chappaquiddick Links** (508-627-2729), which accepts visitors. The trick is getting there. The Chappy ferry allows only three cars at a time, so the course’s owner, Brad Woodger, will meet standing passengers (who have made advance arrangements) at the landing and shuttle them the two-plus miles to the course in his ’71 Volkswagen bus.

Those who make the crossing will discover a quirky toy box of a course, served by a Lilliputian clubhouse known as the Crow Bar. With seven par-3s and two par-4s set on just 18 acres, Royal Chappy plays to a demure 1,325 yards. Golf has been enjoyed on this sandy oceanfront ground since 1887, and the natural pitch and roll of the terrain conspire with steady breezes, tiny greens, and some vexingly positioned trees to create more than enough interest for an afternoon’s hit-and-giggle.

While conditions can be rough around the edges, the R&A has a handful of legitimately good holes. The 120-yard second calls for a tight draw that must land just beyond the

deepest bunker on the course in order to trundle down onto a green not much bigger than a card table.

The fifth emerges from a protected corner of the property and plays toward an exposed green with two well-executed diagonal tiers. The seventh plays similarly to the second, but it’s defended by a hilariously irrelevant grass bunker that’s been assigned a name—a handmade wooden sign next to it reads Cat Box. And the 285-yard ninth, with its sloping fairway and charmingly situated green, is a solid short par-4 that plenty of better-known courses would be happy to count among their 18s.

Royal Chappaquiddick isn’t a great course or even a modern golf experience, but that’s exactly what makes it special. It’s a family course; little kids and beginners of all ages are very welcome. It’s a place to play untucked and barefoot, with five clubs in a Sunday bag. Some might not have noticed, but courses like this have slowly been disappearing from the American golf landscape. For those who started the game young, Royal Chappy is bound to inspire memories of those carefree evenings when the game, in its simplest form, was all that mattered. Nothing could be more in tune with summer life on Martha’s Vineyard. ♦