



Travel Chronicle, Pt. 1

CHAMBERS BAY





There's a rich history of golf in the land of lattes and tall trees. But it wasn't until Bandon Dunes opened 16 years ago that faraway golfers truly discovered what the natives always knew: Champions and passionate duffers have walked the fairways of the Pacific Northwest for more than a century.

Ben Hogan won his first major title at the Portland Golf Club in 1946. As recently as 1998, Vijay Singh won the PGA Championship at Sahalee, in the suburbs of Seattle. Chambers Bay, on the outskirts of Tacoma, is the buzziest new chapter in the story of the Pacific Northwest. Hang with golf people long enough, and you'll hear the course almost always mentioned in the same breath as Bandon Dunes and Streamsong. The link between these three links-golf nirvanas is made so often you might miss some crucial truths about Chambers Bay. One, unlike Bandon and Streamsong, it is a stand-alone course, not a sprawling, luxe resort. Two, a municipal course built with taxpayer bonds, it belongs not to a hungry entrepreneur but to the proud, hardworking people of Pierce County, Washington. Three, it is not remote. The opportunity to play Robert Trent Jones Jr.'s lavishly praised Chambers Bay—which was built on a picked-

over sand-and-gravel pit abutting Puget Sound and is annually ranked among the greatest public golf courses in America—is as simple as touching down 20 minutes away at the bustling Sea-Tac International Airport.

Freight trains chug past Chambers Bay every half-hour or so, a reminder that you're in a hub of industrial commerce, not a cloistered, sand-hills sanctuary. Although the small city of University Place is the actual home of Chambers Bay, Tacoma claims it as its own. It's a blue-collar town, but a proud and thriving one. When you venture to places like Bandon or Streamsong—or Pinehurst or Whistling Straits or any other golf outpost—you're dependent upon their amenities and almost singularly focused on golf. In a city as food-rich and—it's gotta be said—quirky as Tacoma, golf is just one of the adventures available to you. For that matter, Chambers Bay is just one of the region's golf adventures available to you. A flexible calendar and some imagination will lead you to courses of unimaginable beauty, with names (like Gamble Sands and Gold Mountain) to match. So pull up by car or boat or plane, and be ready for a different kind of fun.





Friday

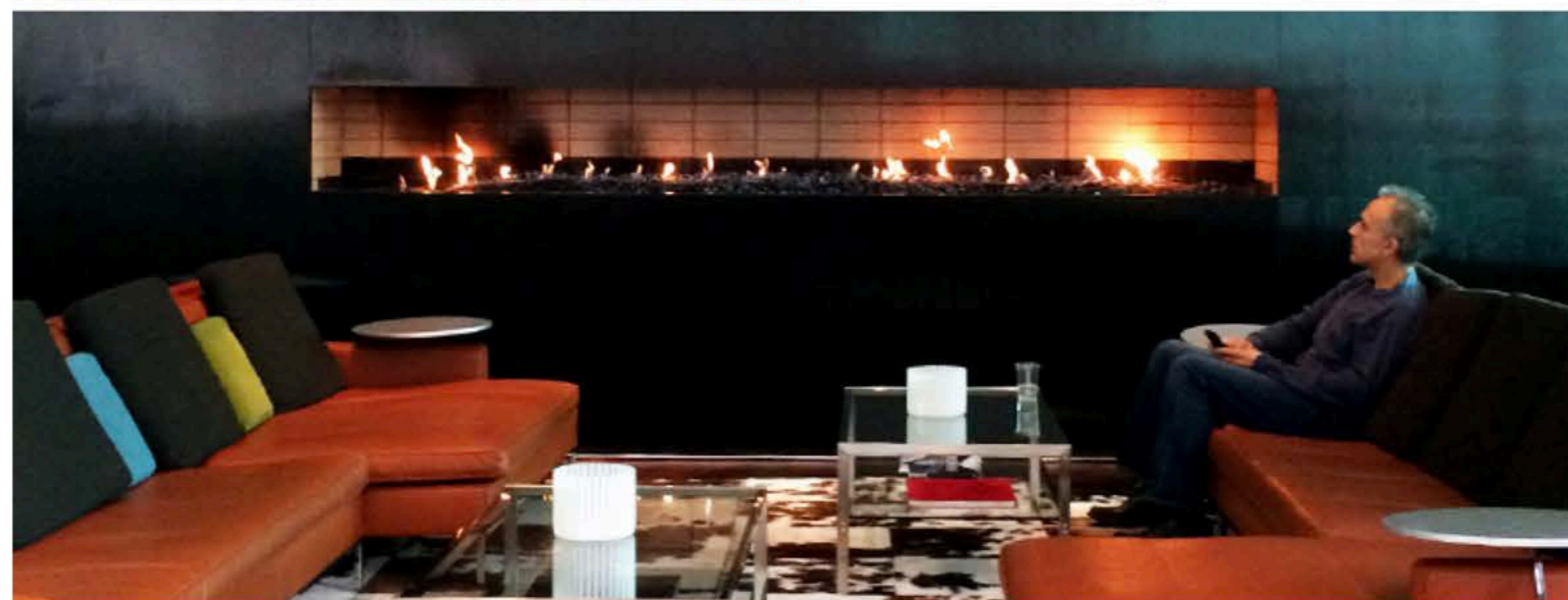
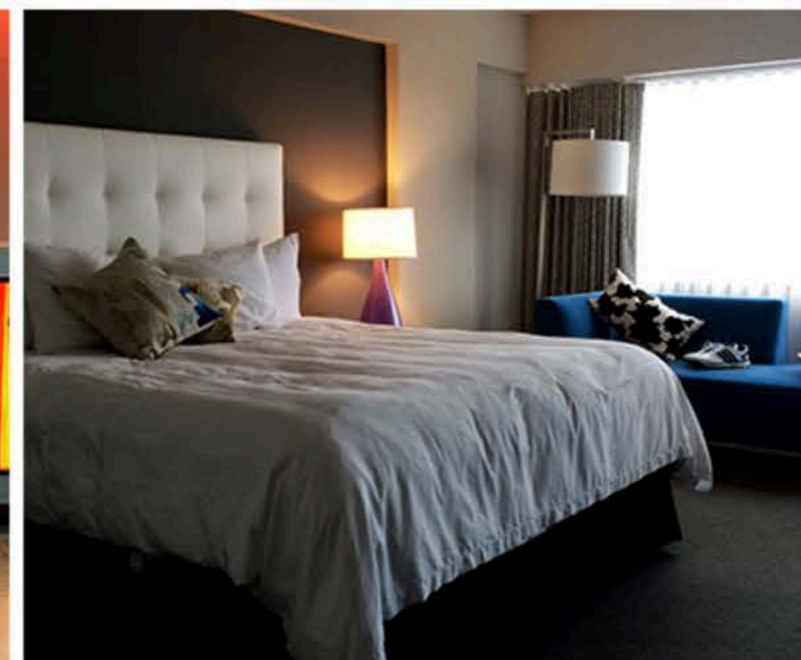
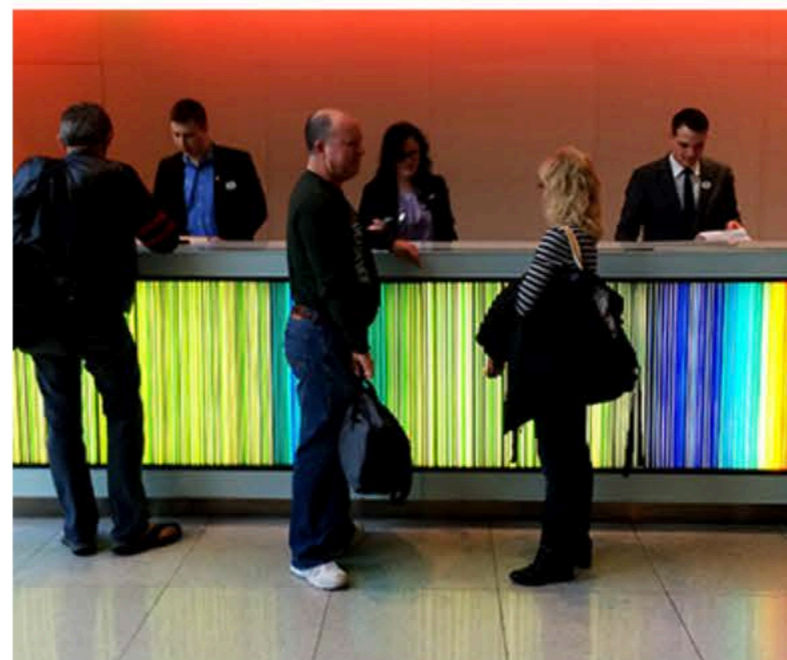
CHAMBERS BAY





Noon

Check in at Hotel Murano in downtown Tacoma. The city's comfiest digs are its classiest too. Nothing is over the top in unpretentious T-Town. *Tasteful* and *modern* are what it's all about at the Murano, whose lobby/lounge vibrates with bright color, glints with glass sculptures by local artists (including Tacoma native Dale Chihuly), and boasts a gorgeous screen print by master painter and photographer Chuck Close.





1:00 p.m.

The rooms at the Murano are so cushy, you'll be tempted to kick back with the Golf Channel, but there's a city to explore. The churning Port of Tacoma can be spotted from your hotel window, and that watery view will tell you why spring and summer in the Pacific Northwest are so special. A must-stop, 15 minutes west of the inner city, is Gig Harbor, where kayakers, fishermen, vacationers, and feathered friends gravitate to the outdoor deck at Tides Tavern. The waterfront bar and restaurant is all good vibes, as well as your gateway to two Tacoma essentials: seafood and beer.





3:30 p.m.

But you didn't make this journey just for the fish tacos. Chambers Bay is the magnet, and even on a day when you're not playing the course, you'll want to get a look at it. Pull into its parking lot and the first thing you'll notice is the modest clubhouse. The mystique surrounding Bobby Jones' links course has grown from the day it opened in 2007, but it's a muni, not a glitzy, multiple-course destination.

In fact, it's all right there in front of you. Wander 30 yards from your car and, just beyond a low, chain-link fence, the course sits in a massive bowl that plunges hundreds of feet, extends north and west for some 250 acres, and edges up to Puget Sound. Gazing down on it, you won't need a map of the holes; every one of them is in view from this sky-high perch, which draws a steady stream of hikers, dog walkers, and curiosity-seeking tourists. You'll be stirred, a little perplexed, and stoked to hit your first tee shot.







5:00 p.m.

Craft brewing is exploding in the Pacific Northwest, and Tacoma likes a cold one as much as any city in America. The Narrows Brewery is around the corner from Chambers Bay, and it's the perfect spot—a little dreamy, a little working-class, and redolent of the sights, sounds, and smells of seaport life—to digest what you've just seen. Locals dominate the place, and they'll tell you how much pride they take in having a world-class links within their city limits. They're definitely happy to talk golf, but first they'll want you to tee up a 10 Barrel Apocalypse IPA. And a Fake Lying Imposter Amber. And a Galloping Gertie Golden. And...

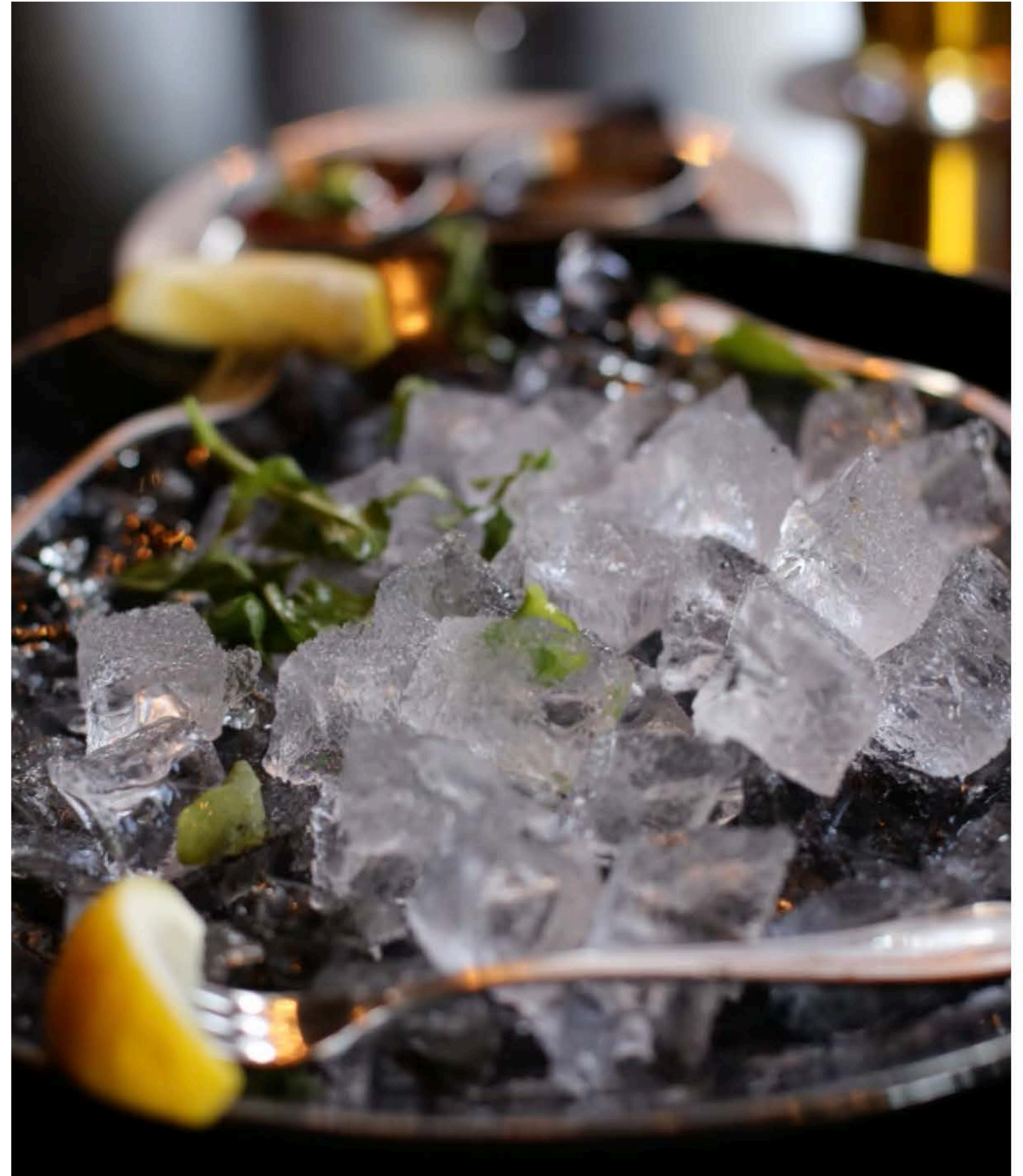




9:00 p.m.

A jazz quartet has taken over the lobby bar of the Murano, and so have dozens of salespeople from Mary Kay, all of them in town for a convention. The place is swingin'—a little *too* swingin' for someone set to pick up a club at sunrise. But there are a number of other attractive options two city blocks from the Murano, on Pacific Avenue. Dylan, the hotel's eager, ever-resourceful valet, likes to steer guests to a dive-y Italian joint called Meconi's. If you prefer bites from south of the border, sample the Mexican food and Tacoma's best selection of tequilas a few doors down at The Matador.

The Pacific Grill is a more upscale scene, and you'd expect that from what is routinely called Tacoma's finest restaurant. What you don't expect is the best eatery in town to be the biggest bargain too. "Say again. Half price?" I ask Johnny, who tends Pacific Grill's sleek, semicircular bar, which, tonight, is packed with couples, singles, hipsters, golfers—even hipster golfers. Johnny assures me that nearly every delectable on the ample bar menu is 50 percent less than the stated price. This isn't some happy-hour tease; it's a deal in place nearly all hours of the day and night. There are four locally brewed beers on tap, and two pints of Georgetown Rogers Pilsner perfectly complement my meal: a dozen oysters pulled from the nearby Pacific, a kale salad with prosciutto, and a piquant two-hander called Juny's Cuban Sandwich. The restaurant—low-lit, invitingly moody, alive with conversation and discreet electronica—is a spot you'll come back to if you survive your first dive into Chambers Bay.





Saturday

CHAMBERS BAY





7:00 a.m.

Bluebeard Coffee Roasters, a few minutes up the hill from the Murano, in Tacoma's resurgent 6th Avenue district, is a fantastic place to hang when you're not in grab-and-go mode. You know how some places just immediately impress you as being a nexus of interesting people? That's Bluebeard, which, this morning, serves my need for a quick Americano and (a counterpunch to last night's kale) a sugary-sweet, freshly baked doughnut.





8:00 a.m.

“Oh, honey!” That’s my playing partner cheering on my piped first tee shot at Chambers Bay. To get down into the bowl that holds the course, golfers pile into a shuttle, where the energy, even at this early hour, is potent. “I played it once when it first opened,” says the middle-aged Tacoman sitting next to me. “I had to get back here and give it another look.” If you plan to rip your first drive, you’d better put in a few minutes on the range, which is the van’s first stop after its nearly vertical descent.

The range at Chambers isn’t much to get wide-eyed about. It’s embedded in an industrial site, one still clanking with activity. But it’s enough to get a feel for how the wind, moisture, and cool temps coming off Puget Sound will affect your game and choice of clothes. I’m playing it in the spring, when rain and strong winds are unpredictable but likelier than not. In the summer, the treeless course offers not a leaf of shade, and the heat can be intense. My Ashworth wind-lined sweaters and twill pants are getting it done today. In July and August, I’d have my golf shirts and cotton-blend shorts in tow.





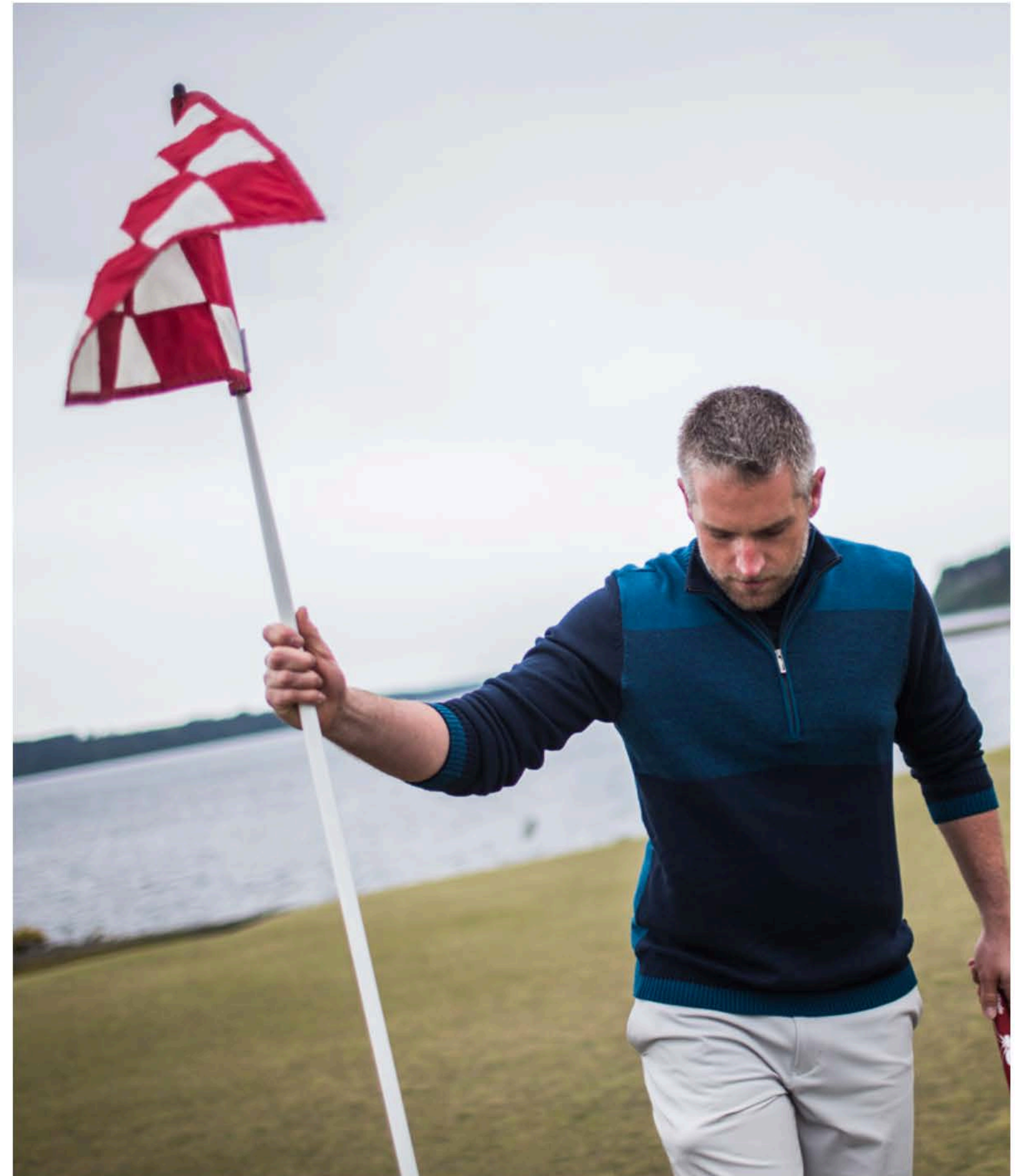
On first blush, the course is an enigma. It has the outward look of a traditional, carved-from-the-earth links layout, but nearly every hillock, ridge, dune, swale, and sand trap has been meticulously built by hand. It's fascinating for that reason—and faintly eerie. Concrete ruins from the site's gravel-pit past fleck the course, and its panoramic routing makes it feel Herculean.





And that's the way it plays. It's a testy course—in today's softer, more forgiving spring conditions, somewhere between a typically rolling links-golf experience and a target-golf escapade. Like most beneficent architects, Chambers Bay designer Robert Trent Jones Jr. gets you off to a comfortable start on #1 ("Puget Sound"). But he brings in the funk on #2 ("Foxy"), with its narrow fairway and acres of sand that make any left-leaning approach a nightmare. The par-3 third ("Blown Out") affords you your first glimpse of the Lone Fir, which rests between the Sound and the back edge of the 15th green. It's the only tree on the course, and even *this* one didn't make it. In the middle of the night, less than a year after Chambers Bay opened, vandals took an axe to it and left a divot the size of a catcher's mitt. Arborists managed to revive it, and its trunk is now protected by a steel corset. As if she were paid to be there, a bald eagle sits high in its branches this morning. Even the locals I'm looping with are stunned. You'll wish you had that bird's wings for the climb from the third green to the fourth tee.

Like the up-and-down city of Tacoma, there are radical elevation changes at Chambers Bay, and none will test your cardio skills quite like this one. But how else to experience the death-defying tee shot on the par-3 9th ("Olympus"). The highest point in the routing requires a tee shot that lands on one of the lowest spots on the property, assuming you can sky your five-iron to a tricky, double-tiered green.





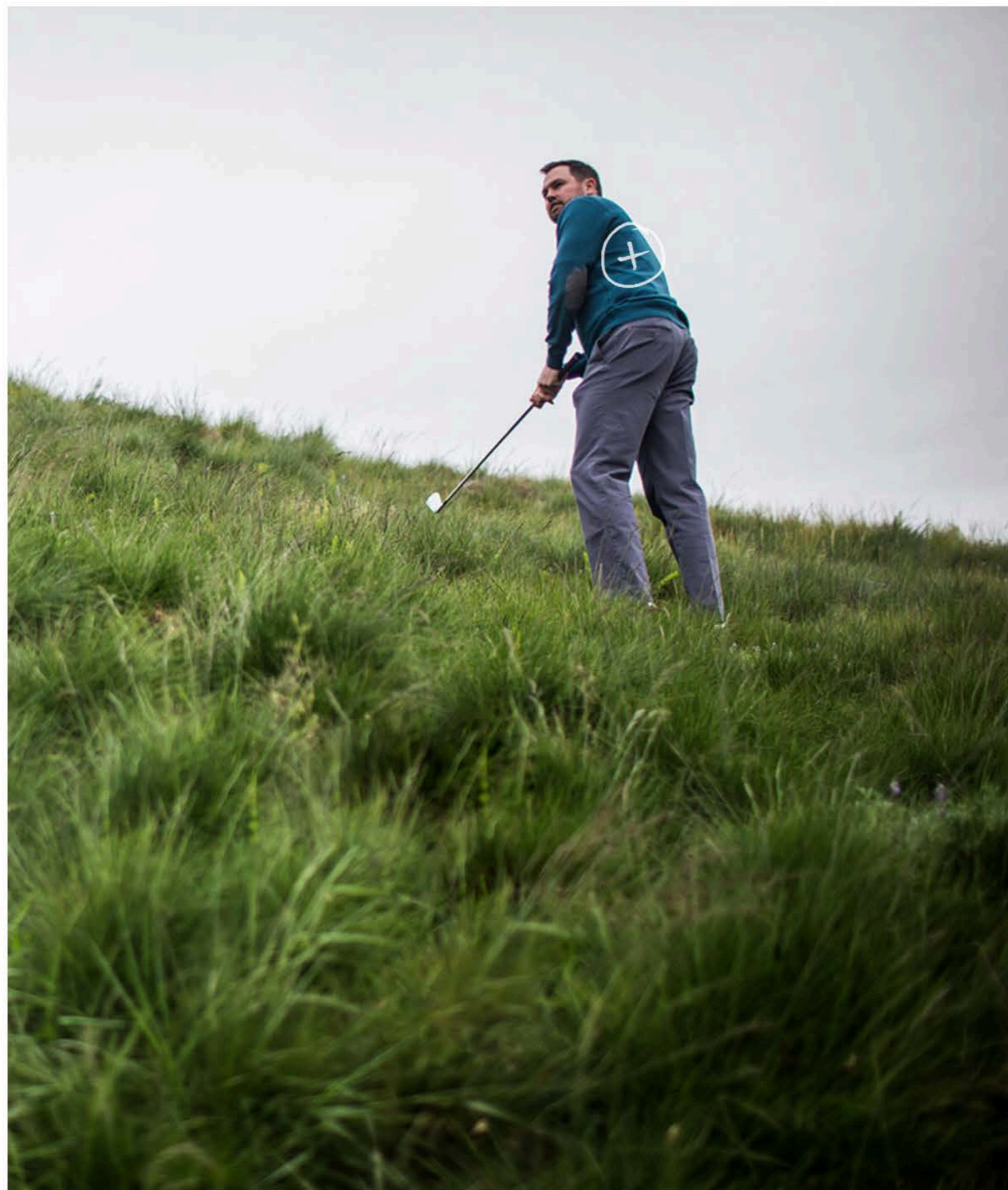
PACIFIC-NORTHWEST TRAVEL CHRONICLE, PT. 1





The back nine is where the magic takes hold. Holes 14 through 18 bring together the sight and feel of the water and ruins, and run you right up against the rail line that punctuates each round with the steady clatter of trains. It's where you'll encounter "Cape Fear," an approachable, downhill par 4 with one really frightening feature: "Bobby's Bunker," a sandy, hellishly deep gash in the middle of the fairway. You might hit your first center-cut drive of the day, and it'll be dead.





As my group waits its turn on the long par-3 17th, we watch a duffer in front of us gouge out monstrous chunks of turf with each failed attempt he makes to get his ball in the air. It's emblematic of dual-personality Chambers Bay, a championship-level links meant to test the world's best players, but trod on each year by thousands of earth-moving high-handicappers. "A toupee!" one of my partners shouts as another wince-inducing divot comes hurtling off of the hacker's club.

There's only one place for this guy: a pit the caddies call "Chambers' Basement." The 14-foot-deep bunker—take a moment to digest that: 14-foot *deep*—sits in the fairway of the very long finishing hole, right about where your second shot will want to land. End up in that sinkhole, and you may as well resign yourself to YouTube infamy because one of your buddies *will* film you trying to thrash your way out of it. For that matter, you'll have thrashed through the entire round. Chambers Bay wants it that way.







1:00 p.m.

A quick-turn lunch is mandatory if, in one day, you're hoping to pull off 36 holes at two distant courses in Tacoma. The Chambers Grill, tucked in next to the pro shop, dishes out a first-rate burger topped with a pickle bent into the shape of a jib, a nod to the Chambers Bay logo. Now, gotta sail!





3:00 p.m.

One persistent-but-silly knock on Chambers Bay is that it is not “a Pacific Northwest course.” That is, it is not a Pacific Northwest *parkland* course with sparkling lakes, pillow-top putting surfaces, fairways framed by pines and firs, and wild unpredictability. Even a short golf trip to this region has to include a loop on one of these lush tracks, and the best bargain in Washington state, Gold Mountain, is a manageable drive from Chambers. It features two layouts; the tougher of them is a gorgeous, emerald maze called the Olympic Course, and by the time you get to its back nine, you’ll wish you’d taken up forestry instead of golf. The difficulty of some of these narrow holes—especially after playing wide-open Chambers—is almost gleefully comical, and when the wind starts blowing hard, well...





My round reaches its hilarious nadir on the 15th fairway, where I face a downhill approach to a sliver of a green fronted by a lake and guarded in the back by a trap the width of a house. I'm hitting into the teeth of such a ferocious wind that I've got only one truly desperate option: a full-throttle three-wood from 140 yards out. And it barely gets there. An image of hot wings suddenly pops into my head. Each successive hole raises the degree of difficulty and heat. Fifteen is "abusive." Sixteen is "nuclear." Seventeen is "code red." And 18, an evil, drivable par-4, is "suicidal." When I stagger back to the clubhouse, an angel-faced attendant named Spencer greets me, but no words are necessary. I look at his beaming mug; he eyes my ashen face. Then we laugh.

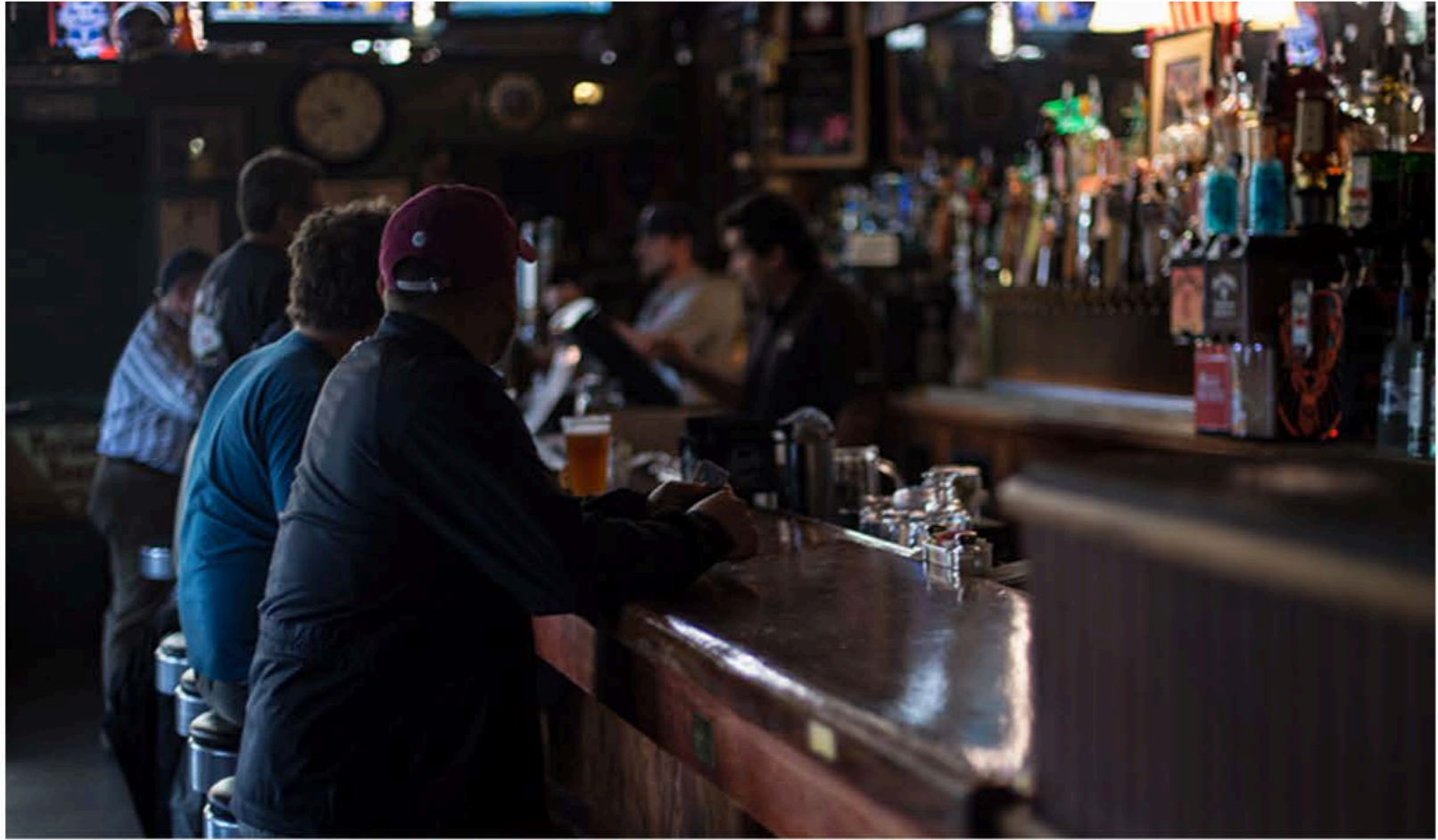




9:00 p.m.

Only a lethal craft cocktail can right the delicious wrongs of Gold Mountain, and Marrow—one of a handful of superior dining spots on Tacoma’s 6th Avenue—offers a drink dreamed up by Dumbledore. “I’ll have the Trinidad Alamagoozlum, please,” I say to Jacob, Marrow’s impeccably groomed, elaborately tattooed barman. A lady-killer with the chiseled looks of Adam Levine, he’s one of those mixologists who works his shaker with one hand. To a techno beat. His Alamagoozlum—a strange brew of genever, orgeat, dry curaçao, rye, cherry, and bitters—does its job, because Marrow’s young crowd, saturnine interior, short ribs, and Dijon beignets begin to look hallucinatory and beautiful. “Jacob,” I say, pushing my empty glass in his direction, “could I possibly bother you for another Azmalumagooz?”





10:30 p.m.

The Swiss Restaurant & Pub looks like what you'd find if Dante had written *Footloose* and not *Inferno*. What goes on at this thumping, bumping Tacoma institution is so beyond polite description that all I'll say is: Go. "Where are you from?" a woman in a loud-print blouse and candy-apple-red lipstick asks me, wedging herself up to the bar. She kick-starts her night with a shot of tequila. "New York," I tell her. "I was just there!" she shrieks. "We went to the Eiffel Tower!" If Carolyn is a little turned around geographically, the rest of this crowd—aged 21 to 61, dressed in heels too high, tops too ornate, and bling too blinding even for 2 Chainz—looks like they're home. Troy, the 50-something, money-fisted, blond-tipped, goateed doorman lets the ladies in for cheap and actively encourages the havoc. Skee-Ball machines rumble and clang, billiard balls crack, orders of something called Spudnicks come orbiting out of the kitchen. It's the kind of place where the bartender's stylebook is borrowed from Sonny Bono, Bloody Marys are served with green beans, the dance floor pulsates with rainbow colors, everyone looks like a KISS fan and...they're having the time of their lives. Seriously, what happens at The Swiss should stay at The Swiss. As I leave, the temperature is rising—and the band burns down the house with "Uptown Funk."





Sunday

CHAMBERS BAY





7:00 a.m.

You've never quite breakfasted until you've breakfasted with a member of a medieval recreation group. James Johnson, another unrepentant Tacoma eccentric, is kind enough to share his booth with me at the Old Milwaukee Café, a dive so popular with locals but so limited in, you know, *seats*, that a wait is as dependable as their Frisbee-sized blueberry pancakes and egg-tastic "Scramlettes." James, nearing 50, with the frame of Dr. Phil and the bangs of Lloyd Christmas, likes to dress up as a Viking at The Society for Creative Anachronism events. His girlfriend goes for the 12th century Byzantine look. They both like to gently yank the chain mail of SCA newbies. "My lady likes *your lady's goblet*," James, in tunic and helmet, once thundered to a greenhorn. "Cool, man," the guy replied, not grasping the Dark Ages shtick whatsoever. "We got it in Vegas!"





8:30 a.m.

Familiarity is key to playing any course well, so you'll want to tackle Chambers Bay twice—especially given the number of oddball bounces, quizzical rolls, blind shots, and flamboyant bunkers on RTJ's verdant chessboard. Yesterday's caddy gave me precise yardages and brilliant reads on my bending putts. Today's looper, a kid named Chad, is keen, but he's carrying a bag for only the second time at Chambers, so it's the blind leading the blind. But this time, the holes take better shape in my mind. "Hazard's Ascent" (#4) is a thrilling uphill par-5 where everything moves left to right, including the dogleg. "What goes up must come down" summarizes the insane elevation shifts (200 feet from top to bottom) and terracing that RTJ imposed on the blank canvas he was given. From the height of the tee box on the perfectly named "Free Fall" (#5), I hammer it back downhill to a green protected by a bunker, front and dead center. On "Humpback" (#7), another treacherous climber, there's a problem. We're three holes from the turn-stand outhouse and young Chad, looking panicky and pale-faced, has got to, well, go. He drops my bag and runs like Forrest Gump over the nearest hummock, but I'm the one who should be nervous. "Humpback" and "High Road/Low Road" (#8) are two of the toughest holes on the course—long, narrow, and lined with junk. "What do you call that stuff?" I ask one of the course's agronomists, after the round, about the sloping, tangled native area that runs along #8's endless fairway. "Crap," he tells me. "Because that's what you feel like when you hit into it and when you have to hit out of it."



All is forgiven when we reach the stunning par-3 15th, with its sweeping view of Puget Sound and the most exquisite of tee-shot alignments, the Lone Fir, which stands watch over the water and the putting surface. If your timing is just right, a train will rip through as you size up your putt. They appear every half-hour or so, and, far from a distraction, the gentle clatter of boxcars heightens the most mesmerizing elements of Chambers Bay: the water, the unceasing sound of gulls, the radiant light, and fescue for miles. A spell is cast and it will linger long after you've said goodbye to the Pacific Northwest.





1:30 p.m.

It's time to come clean about the eats in Tacoma. They're great, and some of the best are in absolutely funky places. The Eleven Eleven, in the city's gritty Hilltop neighborhood, is the dive of all dives—and one of the first stops I'll make on my next visit. You don't ask for sparkling water at a joint like this. Depending on which way the sun hits it, it's either a dim watering hole or the home of phenomenal chili and booze-absorbing sandwiches, a place where, in the words of my bartender, "judges and lowlifes sit elbow-to-elbow." After a morning on muscular Chambers Bay, The Brutus (pepperoni, salami, ham, cheddar, and Swiss grilled on a French roll, topped with tomatoes and Caesar dressing) is the way to go.





3:00 p.m.

There are amazing golf courses in the Pacific Northwest—Pronghorn, Crosswater, Pumpkin Ridge, and the tracks at Bandon Dunes, to name just a few—and at least a handful to points east and northeast of the Seattle-Tacoma area. A trek to these twin cities would be diminished if you didn't get to Wine Valley in Walla Walla or Gamble Sands in the mountains of Brewster, Washington. The four-hour drive to each of these courses is worth it because the going is as good as the getting there. I'm rolling the dice on Gamble Sands, the runaway winner of 2014's assorted Best New American Golf Course awards.

