

The Laymen's Guide to New York City Golf

By Nico Earhart

I've never been a country club guy. While that might change further on in my life, as I get older and the thought of limitless golf on uncrowded courses starts to appeal to me more, but for now, I am still a man of the muni's and public links. So that's why, when planning a weekend golf trip by myself to New York City, I decided the most interesting approach, and the one that would allow me to place my finger firmly on the beating pulse of the New York City golf scene, would be to schedule my rounds at the local stomping grounds of golfers from all five boroughs. What better way to get acquainted with city players, than to travel to their local tracks and to spend a few idle afternoons trudging around their courses, and to steer clear of the sterile, cookie-cutter country clubs that surround the island? Plus, I'd have never been invited to any of those places anyway...

Day one greeted me with weather that would have seemed more at home in my original home turf of Los Angeles – mid 70s with a few wisps of clouds floating languidly along the Hudson – I was assured it was the best weather the city had seen so far this year. My driver and I made our way deep into the Bronx, to the Pelham Bay/Split Rock golf facility, where the wiry projects and antiquated high-rise buildings fall away into single-family homes and quiet little neighborhoods. Arriving at the course still full from the 2-star Michelin restaurant I had dined at the previous night (one of the many perks of golf trips taken to NYC; they had an eight course pre-fix dinner option, but we opted for the much less opulent six-course choose-your-own) I found my group and made my way to number one. It seemed that everybody on the course knew everyone else on the course, and I was the strange outlier paired up with Chico, Vinny and

Frankie, a three-some that would have appeared right at home in any installment of the Godfather trilogy.

The course was in great condition and cost me a fare that couldn't be argued with anywhere in the United States, let alone one of the most expensive cities in the world – my \$43 green fee included two beverages and a lunch which I took with my new-found friends after the round was over. The pace was perfect; we managed to get through eighteen in just under four hours (although I was told that even on a Thursday, if we had tee'd it up after twelve, it could have taken over five). The course wound its way through stands of distinctly eastern oak trees, and on a few of the holes, views of the city (about 13 miles away) could be majestically soaked in. The highlight of my day, however, was an eagle chip-in on the par-five 9th in front of a small crowd of onlookers fiddling around the practice green. Chico, the self-appointed leader of our group, had garishly announced to the crowd that the chip was in fact for an eagle, so I was content to have appeased them with my short-game prowess.

On the second day I woke to a view obscured by low-hanging clouds and a thick mist that weaved between the raised buildings of the Manhattan skyline. It looked cold, the rain was threatening, and my internal clock had gone haywire with time change; but I had to press boldly on into the sprawl of Staten Island, where I would be playing my second round at the Silver Lake Golf Course. It was a narrow, tree-lined track with ample water hazards, and a fun series of lengthy par-threes that played well over 220 yards. It wasn't one of the nicest courses I've ever played, but the price was reasonable, the pace lightning-fast and the greens were in good shape and rolled true. The course also possessed a decidedly small-town feel even though it lay only a dozen or so miles from Manhattan. For affect, long rows of grape vines had been planted around

the steeper, unsuitable slopes of the course that produced, I was assured by my playing partners, the worst wine in New York State – I passed on buying a bottle and making my own assessment.

Knowing that my two days on the municipals would leave me yearning for a course more picturesque by day three, I decided to splurge and book a slot at Trump's links course at Ferry Point in the Bronx (I had also heard that public courses around the city were notoriously slow-playing on the weekends, and figured the price might scare most people away and keep the pace one step above a snail's). Having spent time in Ireland and Scotland on traditional links courses before, I felt a fair comparison could be made. Needless to say, this course did not disappoint in any way, shape or form in its adaptation of linksland golf. This was true links golf in its most pure form – close to the sea, cavernous bunkers with high-rimmed edges, guarded by strong winds, no trees and, hence, an obscured sense of depth perception, nary an even lie on the entire course to be found and zero elevation change. Shots to the center of the fairway were rewarded with balls that lay two or three feet below or above the feet. Some of the best shots hit all day seemed to hold up on the fringe of the green just long enough for me to spy them for a moment – before they slid down into spacious collection areas.

It was the most challenging course of the whole weekend, but it was also in the best shape, had the truest greens and provided a back drops of the city that could have made anyone into a professional postcard photographer. The last three holes all provided views of the Whitestone bridge, with the jugged teeth of the Manhattan skyline behind it. This course lacked the charm of the other two courses, and the price was slightly astronomical of my personal enjoyment, but it's a round that won't soon be forgotten. If a golf lover finds his or herself in the vicinity of New York City, and has a few hundred dollars to burn, there's only one course you need to book.

So the high rollers of New York can keep their exclusivity and snootiness to themselves on their perfectly manicured private clubs. There's still plenty of cheap, well-laid out courses for the rest of us. You'll find me out there with Vinny, Frankie and Chico in less than a New York minute.