

4 years after devastating fire, Boyne Highlands has renaissance

Susan R. Pollack

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Harbor Springs — Five days before her long-planned trip to northern Michigan, Cheryl Watkins broke her hand playing pickleball.

That didn't stop her and her husband, Rick, from driving seven hours from suburban Indianapolis to join nine friends on their second annual, all-inclusive golf vacation at Boyne Highlands resort in Harbor Springs.



I met them midway through their getaway, relaxing by the heated pool and hot tub, apres golf. And, despite her wrist splint, they were taking full advantage of their five-night “Great Escape” package, which features breakfasts, dinners, activities such as free pedal boat and chairlift rides, and almost unlimited golf at Boyne’s trio of resorts near Petoskey. Of 10 championship-caliber courses, only three require an upcharge, including the premier Bay Harbor Golf Club, rightly renowned, the Watkins say, for its gorgeous views of Lake Michigan.

“Rick and I golfed an extra round together yesterday on the Donald Ross course after our group scramble,” said Cheryl, whose score, even with an injured hand, was better than mine. “The doctor assured me that swinging a golf club couldn’t hurt me anymore. I’m getting a full cast next week.”

The couple, who said they were considering adding horseback riding or ziplining to their activities, stayed at Boyne Mountain last year and were among the first wave of guests to stay this summer in the newly remodeled north wing of Boyne Highlands’ main lodge. They described their accommodations as “super nice, excellent.”



More than four years after a devastating fire that destroyed 70 rooms, the Highlands property is undergoing a transformation from a 1960s-era ski lodge to an upscale boutique hotel, complete with marble bathrooms, padded headboards, motion-sensor lighting, in-room Nespresso machines and other contemporary amenities.

“It’s not just a remodel, it’s a rebuild... a renaissance in a way,” says Bernie Friedrich, vice president of golf and resort sales for Boyne Resorts. The goal, he explains, is to bring the nearly 60-year-old hotel back to its original 4-star status when it was the nicest in the region.

Additional improvements to the ivy-covered, Tudor-style main lodge are on the way, including a four-season sushi- and steakhouse by late next summer and a European-style, multi-level spa a few years down the road. Also on the horizon are expanded, state-of-the-art conference facilities.

The Highlands recently installed a \$200,000 outdoor TrackMan Range system that helps golfers of all skill levels by providing radar-based feedback on ball speed, distance and direction. It complements the resort's high-tech swing analysis and club-fitting programs.

To enhance playability, Boyne is in the midst of a selective renovation of its acclaimed golf courses, which are touted in top golf magazines for their variety, challenge, elevation changes and spectacular views, especially during the fall color season.



The vista from the 13th tee on the Arthur Hills course at the Highlands, for example, is jaw-dropping, stretching across 4,000 acres of trees from nearly 400 feet up -- without a building in sight.

Fourteen bunkers were removed at another scenic Arthur Hills layout, Crooked Tree Golf Club, perched on bluffs high above Lake Michigan's Little Traverse Bay. Thanks to generous forward tees, it has long been my favorite Michigan golf course — and is even more fun to play now.

The Moor, one of just two walkable courses in the Boyne collection, boasts widened fairways and more accessible greens, making it a delightful start to a “golf your brains out” getaway.

Arizona-based Danny Scott, who golfs all over the world as half of America's Golfing Couple, was impressed with the high quality of the 10 Boyne golf courses. “They're all so well-conditioned it's hard to pick a favorite,” he says. “They're all great.”

At Boyne Mountain in Boyne Falls, the fun begins even before your golf game on The Alpine and The Monument with a scenic, 10-minute cart ride up the mountain along a mile-long path, with dramatic finishing holes overlooking Deer Lake.

Between rounds, golfers can soothe weary muscles at The Spa at Boyne Mountain or at its family-friendly indoor waterpark, Avalanche Bay. Thrill-seekers can rent mountain or electric bikes and tackle 26 miles of trails at either Boyne Mountain or Boyne Highlands.

In the alpine-themed Mountain village, photographs at Forty Acres Tavern tell the story of how Boyne's visionary founder, Everett Kircher, bought the first 40 acres for \$1 in 1947 from William Pearson, a potato farmer-turned Michigan state senator. "Anybody damn fool enough to want to build a ski hill, well ... I'll give you the property," Pearson is quoted as saying.

Today, the Boyne Resorts collection of ski and golf resorts stretches from Maine to British Columbia in Canada, and boasts some 10,000 employees.

At Boyne Highlands, we saw white-tail deer and fawns on several fairways, plus a quartet of sandhill cranes on The Heather, a Robert Trent Jones, Sr. classic. We also spotted a noisy flock of cranes flying overhead as we dined, socially-distanced, on the Seminole Pub patio overlooking the 18th hole of the Donald Ross Memorial. They were among the few — but not the only — birdies we saw on our five-day Boyne golf adventure.

One night, we drove 20 minutes into downtown Petoskey and watched the sunset over Little Traverse Bay while savoring tasty mushroom-studded Forest Floor soup and smoked pork chops at Palette Bistro.

Forays to some of the Petoskey region's dozen wineries and breweries are options for those seeking a golf break. Two favorites are Boyne Valley Vineyards, with a treehouse tasting deck, and Pond Hill Farm, where activities include a kid-pleasing squash rocket launcher.

We met Richard Morton of Jupiter, Florida, on the Alpine at Boyne Mountain on his last day of a weeklong golf buddy getaway. He said he's eager to return with his family next year.

Morton's group rented cottages at Crooked Tree, playing there before taking on Bay Harbor's trio of 9-hole courses, the Links, Quarry and Preserve. "Looking out across the bay it's a lot like Scotland," he says.

Accustomed to Southern golf, Morton was impressed with Boyne's cooler climate and playing conditions. "The golf courses aren't crowded, the pace of play is awesome and the low humidity, that's the big thing," he says. "It's such a great break from the summer heat."

For more information, check boyne.com or call (855) 688-3286. Ask about special fall golf packages.