

Best New Public: Over \$75

America's Best New Courses 2007



The Highland Course at Primland: An isolated corner of the golf universe.

By Ron Whitten

Photo By Stephen Szurlej January 2008

When the entry road is named Busted Rock and proves to be a twisting, turning, 10-mile logging trail, you begin to wonder why anyone would leave the safety of guardrails for a round of golf. But when the gatekeepers turn out to be a herd of deer, and the view from the parking lot leaves you transfixed like, yes, a deer in the headlights, you understand why the reclusive owner of the 12,000-acre Primland hunting preserve would choose to build a public golf course in this obscure portion of southern Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains.

The parking lot sits on the rim of a deep, narrow gorge formed by the Dan River. This might be the least-known, most-spectacular riverbed landscape in America, better than the Hudson Valley, superior to the Royal Gorge. Imagine a section of the Grand Canyon, its walls covered mostly in forest, except for some spires of rock protruding 1,000 feet and more above the riverbed. That's the Pinnacles of Dan. Stick a golf course atop this mountain, surround it on three sides by this deep gorge, and you have **The Highland Course at Primland**, Golf Digest's Best New Public Course \$75 and Over for 2007.

With such magnificent scenery, an overwrought golf course would have detracted. Luckily, British architect Donald Steel has never believed in showboating architecture. Aided by his then-associates Tom Mackenzie and Martin Ebert (who have since formed their own partnership, Mackenzie & Ebert), Steel routed holes along ridges, over chasms, down valleys and into sideslopes, always offering a safe alternative to every perilous carry. What artificial mounds exist are mostly within the generous, rolling putting surfaces.

The bunkering is likewise tastefully underdone. They're not quite British pot bunkers, but all are deep enough that no sand is visible, just faces of tall, fuzzy fescue. There is a stretch of three holes -- the 13th through 15th -- with no sand at all. The climax of Highland is an anything-but-redundant finishing trio of doglegs-right along a lazy bend of the Dan River Gorge. The 465-yard 18th is particularly daunting, uphill across a mountain slope to a saddled landing area, then down the tumbling fairway to the green below.

There's talk of relocating the 18th green closer to the rim, and chopping down a few trees along the right. This would create an East Coast version of the eighth at Pebble Beach, providing one long last breath of Blue Ridge beguilement.

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- 1. THE HIGHLAND COURSE AT PRIMLAND** • Meadows of Dan, Va. • Yards 7,034 • Par 72 • Fee: \$175 • Designers: Donald Steel and Martin Ebert • 276-222-3827 • primland.com
- 2. FALLEN OAK** • Saucier, Miss. • Yards 7,487 • Par 72 • Fee: \$300 • Tom Fazio • 877-805-4657 • fallenoak.com
- 3. GINN HAMMOCK BEACH (The Conservatory)** • Palm Coast, Fla. • Yards 7,776 • Par 72 • Fee: \$175 • Tom Watson • 386-246-6710 • hammockbeach.com
- 4. OLD CORKSCREW G.C.** • Estero, Fla. • Yards 7,393 • Par 72 • Fee: \$225 • Jack Nicklaus • 239-949-4700 • oldcorkscrew.com
- 5. THE LEDGES G.C.** • St. George, Utah • Yards 7,145 • Par 72 • Fee: \$110 • Matt Dye • 435-634-4640 • ledges.com
- 6. THE PRESERVE G.C.** • VanCleave, Miss. • Yards 6,774 • Par 71 • Fee: \$120 • Jerry Pate • 228-386-2500 • preservegc.com
- 7. THE G.C. AT DEVILS TOWER** • Hulett, Wyo. • Yards 7,111 • Par 72 • Fee: \$95 • Kevin Atkinson and Dick Phelps • 307-467-5769 • devilstowergolf.com
- 8. LAUREL HILL G.C.** • Lorton, Va. • Yards 7,010 • Par 71 • Fee: \$89 • Bill Love • 703-493-8849 • fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/golf/laurelhill
- 9. WE-KO-PA G.C. (SAGUARO CSE.)** • Fort McDowell, Ariz. • Yards 6,912 • Par 71 • Fee: \$195 • Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw • 480-836-9000 • wekopa.com
- 10. LEOPARD'S CHASE G.C.** • Ocean Isle Beach, N.C. • Yards 7,155 • Par 72 • Fee: \$195 • Tim Cate • 910-579-5577 • big-cats.com