

# Welcome



**113½** Number of 18-hole courses along the Grand Strand. **133** Number in 2003. **87** Average score by golfers visiting within the past two years.\*

**O**N A LATE-WINTER day about 15 years ago, my friend Ray, who had been studying the Weather Channel since Christmas, called to invite me on a spur-of-the-moment golf trip to Myrtle Beach. If I had been moping inside my house instead of standing on a ladder, knocking ice off a gutter, I would have told him to forget it, out of fear that my wife would murder me for even asking. But my wife was the one who answered the phone, and—you figure the odds—she said, “Why not?”

We left for the airport at 4 in the morning, and when we

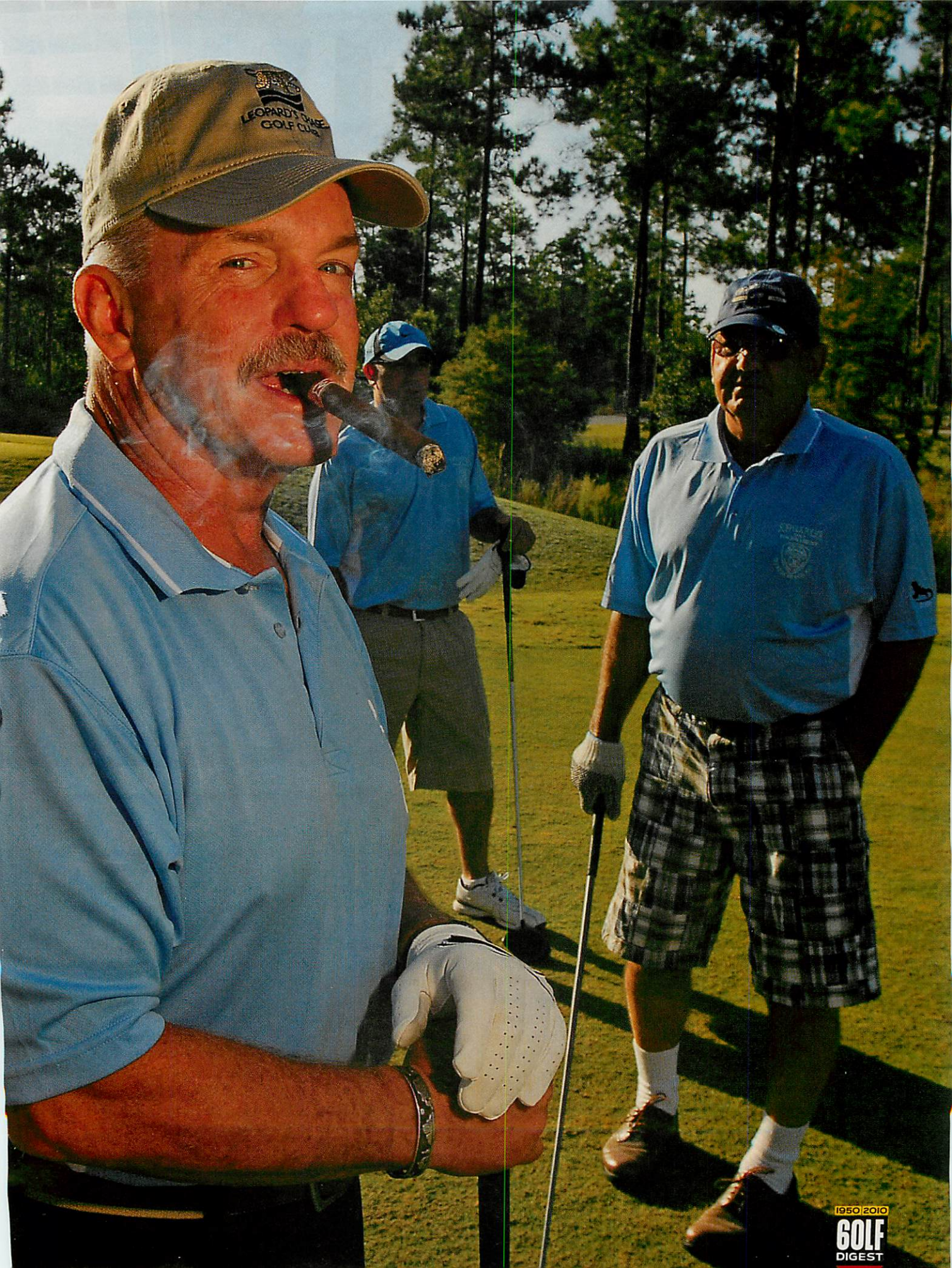
got close to Newark, N.J., I sensed that something wasn't right. As they say in the movies, it was quiet—too quiet. Thick fog covered the city, and, suddenly, I understood the problem: No planes were taking off or landing. Ray and I parked in the short-term lot, then took seats at the gate with a hundred or so other restless middle-aged men. The airline postponed our departure time by 30 minutes, then by 30 more, then by 30 more. At 9 or so, a couple of guys decided, what the heck, to have a beer. Many more guys, and many more beers, followed. Morning became afternoon. Tee

times came and went. Gradually, the waiting area got very loud; then, less gradually, it got pretty quiet. When our plane finally took off, toward evening, eastern New Jersey was running low on alcohol, and the guy in the seat next to mine was snoring with a slur.

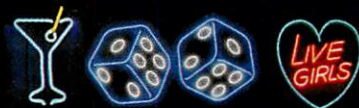
But here's the great thing about Myrtle Beach: It was nighttime when Ray and I and our golf clubs arrived, yet we were still able to play, at the Tupelo Bay Executive Golf Course, where the back nine is illuminated and stays open until 11 p.m. And we played the next day, too, on a regular course, despite an unexpected

change in the weather. (A freak morning snow shower turned into heavy rain, then into hypothermia.) That night, after dinner, we went shopping at Martin's Golf & Tennis, a Myrtle Beach institution that's now part of the PGA Tour Superstore chain. We wandered the aisles for more than an hour, testing new putters, wedges and drivers, trying on rainsuits, and stocking up on cheap balls. And the next day we played again, in weather that wasn't quite so miserable. Then we flew home, rested and refreshed.

Most of my golf buddies have Myrtle Beach memories



LEOPARD'S HOLE  
GOLF CLUB



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of their own, not all of them fit for publication. When I first joined my club, there was a group of men who went every year. Now most of them are either divorced or dead, and several are no longer members. They did actually play golf on those trips, despite the suspicions of some of their then-wives, but most of the stories I heard were about bars and strip joints. (One of those guys—by way of introducing what he said was a golf-related anecdote—asked me if I knew what a lap dance was.) Another group of (mostly younger) guys still goes almost every year, usually at Super Bowl time.

They take a more balanced approach to golf travel: 36 a day, followed by staying up all night. One year, they bought a grocery-store sheet cake, to snack on during the football game, and one of them got so angry at something happening on the field that he threw the cake at the TV. Most of the cake slid to the floor, but quite a bit of the frosting, which was green, stayed stuck to the screen. They watched the rest of the game like that, through gaps in the frosting, without bothering to wipe it off.

Golfers who've never been to Myrtle Beach often think that it's a resort, like Doral. But it's nothing like that; it's more like a way of life, or a parallel universe, and it can seem overwhelming if you don't know your way around. When I first visited, in the early '90s, two

things surprised me. The first was that the Grand Strand—as the metropolitan Myrtle Beach region is known—is vastly larger than it looks on the maps on the place mats in the breakfast stops. The entire golf area stretches along 60 or 70 miles of coastline and extends into North Carolina, and you have to be careful, when you plan your itinerary, not to create logistical ordeals for yourself and your rental car. The second surprise was that so many of the golf courses were terrific. The greens in Myrtle Beach can be ragged, especially during frost season, and a disproportionate number of the golfers seem to take a negative view of filling divots, raking bunkers and finishing in less than six hours. But there are lots of very good places to play, and most of them don't cost a fortune, es-

pecially now. Even during the boom times, a Myrtle Beach golf trip could be cheaper than staying at home.

Yet the main appeal of Myrtle Beach is not that it's a bargain but that it's so unashamedly devoted to the heartbreakingly pedestrian fantasies of the average American golfer. Tee times and bar stools are inexhaustible, good used golf balls are easier to find than fresh vegetables, and everything is divisible by four. My first night in Myrtle Beach, my brother and I unlocked the door of our motel suite and, almost immediately, heard a golf ball roll across the floor of the living room above ours. It's like something from a "Star Trek" episode: a planet where every life form is loud, overweight and telling a joke about Tiger Woods. You don't

## Is there any place more devoted to the average golfer's fantasies?



have to remove your hat when you go indoors, and if you feel like drying your golf shoes by turning them upside down on the shade of one of the lamps in your motel room (or on the dashboard of your rental car) no one will think much worse of you. And, best of all, for a golf-starved Northeasterner at certain times of the year, Myrtle Beach is a reminder that summer will be back in almost no time at all. —DAVID OWEN

### THE INSIDE STORY

Nobody knows Myrtle better than the groups that return every year. Golf Digest's **Peter Finch** and **Matt Ginella** recently joined up with five of these annual outings. Meet the groups, and see what you can learn from them, on the following pages. ➔

