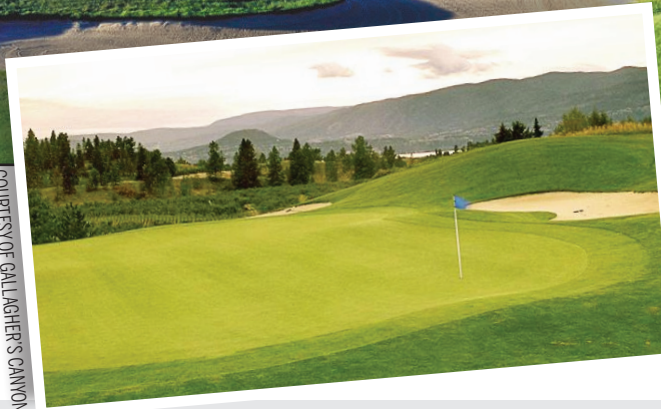


BACKSWING

Kelowna courses close and classy



The 13th hole of the Bear, above, is a beauty, with bunkers dotting the fairway and a water hazard on the left. The sixth green at Gallagher's Canyon, right, offers stunning views.



Shark flavour to hit B.C. menu

Ogopogo, meet the Great White Shark.

Former PGA Tour superstar Greg Norman is mapping out the holes for the newest golf course project in the Kelowna area, a championship layout with stunning views of Lake Okanagan.

Located in Peachland, Ponderosa Golf Course is currently under construction

and will likely open next summer. It will be Norman's first design in B.C. and will feature what course officials believe is Canada's longest hole — a downhill monster that could measure more than 700 yards from the back tees.

Norman, a 20-time winner on the PGA Tour and now an accomplished course architect, makes frequent

visits to the property to keep an eye on the progress.

"When we open, they talk about this being one of the top courses in Canada," said developer Norm Porter.

"They're already certain it's in the top five courses he's ever done, and they want to make it the top course he's ever done."

— Wes Gilbertson

It's a busy Monday morning, and I'm getting dirty looks from several business-types at the Calgary International Airport.

In a sea of shined shoes and power suits, perhaps my golf shirt and khaki shorts make me a marked man.

While the briefcase brigade hustles to attend meetings and seminars, my next commitment is a tee-time just two hours later in Kelowna, B.C.

Although I've already dropped off my clubs at the oversized baggage carousel, the business-class travellers can obviously tell I'm going golfing, and some of them aren't doing a very good job of hiding their envy.

"This is just a playground — it truly is," said Eric Thorsteinson, a longtime Alberta resident and now the executive professional at Black Mountain Golf Club in Kelowna.

"I just think of it as the Vegas of Canada. It's where you can go and have fun and escape away for a few days."

The best part is the 'escape' only takes about an hour.

On this day, my direct flight leaves the ground in Calgary at 7:08 a.m. Thanks to the time difference, I land in Kelowna at 7:10 a.m. Not even a half-hour after the wheels hit the runway, I'm unloading my clubs at Sunset Ranch Golf



✉ wes.gilbertson@sunmedia.ca

📱 @GilbertsonGolf

& Country Club, a tree-lined track that ranks as a favourite with the locals.

It certainly wouldn't be a surprise if I was reunited with other sun-seeking Albertans on the first tee. They could, however, be headed to Okanagan Golf Club, Tower Ranch, Shadow Ridge or Kelowna Springs.

In fact, of the 15 courses that fall under the umbrella of Golf Kelowna, a half-dozen are located within about a 10-minute drive of the tarmac.

Apparently, it's easy to spot the swingers who just hopped off an airplane.

"By the cab, yeah," chuckled Neil Schmidt, the head professional at Tower Ranch.

"We get a few suitcases that we'll store downstairs, so we can accommodate that type of traveller, for sure."

Dan Matheson, the GM at Okanagan Golf Club, esti-

mates it's a two-minute commute from the taxi pickup or rental-car lot to the clubhouse at his 36-hole facility, although he cautions it could take up to four minutes (gasp!) if you hit a red light.

Several holes at Okanagan Golf Club's Nicklaus-designed Bear course actually overlook the runway, a reminder that you're really not that far from home.

"One of our most popular times to see Alberta golfers is April and May, because often times, with this year being a classic example, the winter is long and the golfers get the bug and they start coming out here and playing," Matheson said.

"We hear things like, 'It's so green, it's so lush, it's so warm, and you don't have any snow.' Or all of the above. For them to come out on a one-hour flight and be on the course in a golf shirt and, typically, a pair of shorts, that's a pretty nice thing."

"To be only an hour away from a place but feel like you're on a vacation — because you *are* on a vacation — and be golfing courses that are green and lush and with plenty of other activities for the afternoons or evenings, it's a pretty easy way to take some of the stress out of the regular work week."