

Galena a golfer's retreat

Tucked away in northwestern Illinois, Galena offers golfers of all skill levels tee boxes with a view and stunning topography. **PAGE 8**



travel

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The North course opened at Eagle Ridge in 1977. The view from the 11th hole hints at the elevation changes that make the courses challenging but fair, just the way golfers like them.

Galena area a golfer's feast

Stunning topography, pristine courses and comfortable lodging make Eagle Ridge Resort an appealing choice

By Steve Mills | TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS



The last time I wrote about a golfing trip, it was after my annual trek to Alabama to play the famed Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail with

an ever-growing group of friends. It's a vacation I dream about each autumn as the golf season in Chicago winds to its chilly, inevitable close.

But my three local golf pals and I make another trip every year; this one early in the golf season and, more often than not, to the Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa. As spring arrives, my thoughts always turn to this golf destination.

Just east of Galena, in the northwest corner of the state, Eagle Ridge offers one of the best deals in the state, not to mention the kind of topography Illinois golfers rarely experience.

There are stunning elevation changes, such as the 180-foot drop on the 14th hole of the General; from the tee you can see Iowa and Wisconsin, though, truth be told, they look the same as Illinois—all farmland—from up so high. Or the 80-foot drop over one corner of Lake Galena on the North Course's eighth. Or that massive rise up the General's back- and heart-breaking 17th hole.

There are fabulous conditions: well-kept tee boxes, manicured fairways and pristine or near-pristine greens on all four courses, and friendly staff in the pro shops, on the courses and elsewhere.

And the lodging and food are excellent. Although Eagle Ridge has an inn, my group has never stayed in it. We opt for one of the well-appointed town houses at Eagle Ridge, mostly two- and three-bedroom homes that are quite comfortable, although a little heavy on the country chic.

Each is equipped with a gas grill on the back porch too. So the last couple of years, we have lugged up a cooler filled with steaks, potatoes and a vegetable, beer and wine, and after a full day of golf—usually 36 holes, if not 45 holes—retired to the town house to clean up and fix supper.

Galena has a number of good restaurants, but our meals have proven hard to beat.

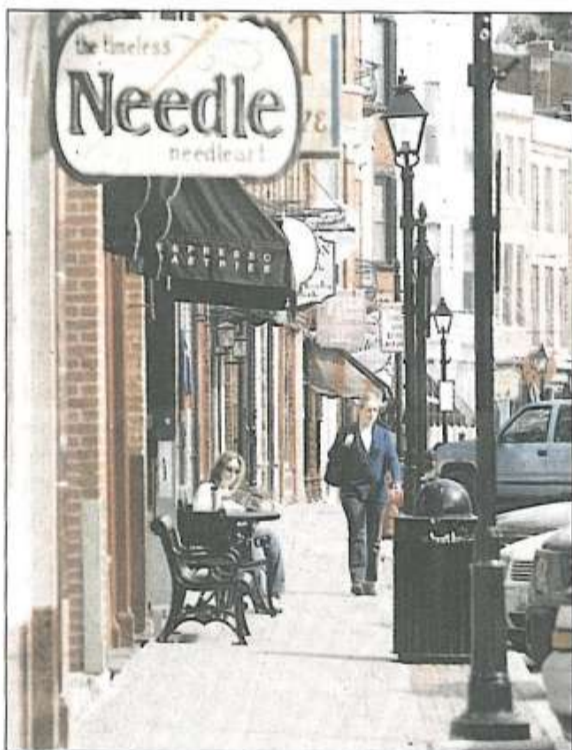
Breakfast and lunch come on the course. The package deal we buy includes a buffet breakfast; picture a bunch of men, all in groups of four, all wearing golf caps, all crowding around an omelet station.

Lunches are easily had in the restaurants at the courses. Sandwiches are excellent.

But it's the golf that draws you to Eagle Ridge. Set on nearly 7,000 acres just outside Galena, Eagle Ridge is close enough to Chicago—3 to 3½ hours—to make a quick getaway.

The ride is not bad, either. Once you get past Rockford, you wind through farmland newly dotted with wind turbines, enough fast food to make you sick but some good local restaurants that make stopping worthwhile. There are a few golf courses along the way too; we've taken to playing nine holes on the way there or 18 on the way home, occasionally.

Eagle Ridge has four courses to choose from. The General is its premier course, and it frequently is mentioned in best-course lists routinely compiled by golf magazines.



Golfers and nongolfers alike can get away from the game on Main Street in Galena. **STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS**

The General also costs an additional \$25 or \$30 to play. It is money spent wisely.

The other courses are the North, South and East. The East is a lovely nine-hole layout.

All four courses are outstanding, with holes that are challenging yet fair—a mantra for golfers—and that feature some exquisite views of the countryside.

If I had to select a favorite, it would be the North. That's only because I have had some of my best rounds on it. The General is a very close second, though I do not mean to suggest that the South and East courses are in any way wanting. All the courses have many great holes.

If you select the package that my group buys, you can manage to play enough golf to choose a favorite yourself. That package is a spring special that very generously extends into late May. It includes two nights of lodging and usually three rounds of golf. We purchase one extra round and, each late afternoon, usually rush over to the East to complete our day with nine holes on its often uncrowded fairways.

If you are not a golfer, there is still much to do at Eagle Ridge, though I base this on the brochures and what I see rather than personal experience. Getaways with my group have been devoted to golf. Frankly, I can't imagine going horseback riding or hot-air ballooning or even submitting to a massage or spa treatment. Boating and fishing are available too.

I do not think we would go in the winter, either. But if we did, we could cross-country ski, ice skate, go sledding or take a sleigh ride. I can picture Eagle Ridge in the winter, the golfers gone, the tranquil, rolling hills covered with snow. It sounds lovely.

But, hey, it's spring!

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Denise Johnson practices on the North golf course, one of four at Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa, near Galena.

If you go

Getting there

It's about 150 miles from downtown Chicago to Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa, not a bad drive. Take the Kennedy Expressway to the Northwest Tollway. Ride on that until you hit Interstate 39 South to U.S. Highway 20/Rockford. Take U.S. 20 west to Eagle Ridge Drive, then take a right onto the property.

Playing there

Greens fees before May 20 range from \$95 on the North and South courses during the week to \$105 Friday through Sunday. The General, the resort's premier course, is \$125 during the week and \$135 Friday through Sunday. After May 20, the rates rise to \$125 on the North and South courses during the week and \$140 Friday through Sunday. The General is \$145 during the week and \$155 Friday through Sunday. The package we purchase during the week is the World Class Golf Package. It puts us in a three-bedroom town home, gives us a generous and tasty breakfast buffet on two days, and three rounds of golf. The General requires a \$30 upgrade. The total for four people is \$1,449.

Staying there

There is excellent lodging on site. Choose from an Inn room or one of the many two- and three-bedroom town houses that comfortably sleep four. Some of the rental homes have as many as eight bedrooms; they are fairly luxurious. Lodging also is available in Galena, 6 miles from Eagle Ridge.

Dining

The town houses on the property have full kitchens and gas grills. If you don't want to cook, Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa features good restaurants. The Woodlands Restaurant is Eagle Ridge's more upscale eatery, in the Inn. Spikes is more casual, a great place for a burger and a beer, a salad or even something a little more complicated from a fairly full menu. Spikes is at the General golf course.

Information

The people at the Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa have proven very helpful over the years at putting together a package. Call them at 800-892-2269, or go their Web site, eagleridgeresortonline.com.

I recommend booking the specials early, especially if you hope to snag tee times as close as possible to the end of the special period, when the weather is likely to be warmest.