

Ultimate Road Trips: 3 Dream Golf Destinations a Car Ride Away



Photo: Joann Dost

Pebble's seventh fronts the cerulean Pacific.



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The idea of tossing your clubs into the trunk and hitting the open road for a golf trip has never been more appealing, especially with record-low fuel prices. Whether you're driving your own wheels or touring around in a rental, freedom—and the first tee—beckons. Based on the quality of the destination and the sheer thrill of the journey itself, here are the three best golf road trips in North America.

San Francisco to Pebble Beach (115 miles)

Way

Whichever route you use to head south from San Francisco, you'll eventually wind up on scenic California Highway 1, which then deposits you on sublimely beautiful 17-Mile Drive—golf's greatest thoroughfare. The best \$10 you'll ever spend will give you access to the private road (it's free for hotel guests), which twists through the Del Monte Forest, emerging early and often at the Pacific Ocean and the entrances to a collection of earth's greatest courses.

Play

The venue for five U.S. Opens and 70-plus years of PGA Tour events, Pebble Beach Golf Links (pebblebeach.com; \$495–\$535) indisputably remains a bucket-list track as it approaches its hundredth birthday. No more thrilling, spectacular stretch of holes exists anywhere than Pebble's fifth through 10th. And can anything in golf compare to that stroll up the par-5 18th as it curves to the left around Carmel Bay? Other must-plays are Spyglass Hill (pebblebeach.com; \$395–\$435) and Spanish Bay (pebblebeach.com; \$270–\$310). If you can somehow call in the ultimate favor to get onto ultra-exclusive Cypress Point Club (ranked No. 2 in the world), you owe it to yourself to do so.



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Stay

Compelling options abound on and around the Monterey Peninsula. Our pick is Pebble Beach Resorts (pebblebeach.com; from \$670). As a hotel, the Inn at Spanish Bay shines brightest with its modern, airy digs, outstanding sea access and outdoor fire pits that are ideal for cocktailing. Its off-the-main-road location means it's free of Homer-and-Marge types looking to snag a photo. Spanish Bay's sibling, The Lodge at Pebble Beach, offers our favorite room, the Sloat Suite (\$2,600–\$3,960 per night), which overlooks the 18th green and the Pacific.

Taste

Awash in dark wood, trophies and tournament memorabilia, the Tap Room inside The Lodge at Pebble Beach is perhaps the greatest 19th hole of all. A round at Pebble, followed by a Tap Room burger and an icy draft beer, is a perfect day. For more ambitious fare, go upstairs at the Lodge to Stillwater Bar & Grill for Monterey Bay Red Abalone and sweeping views of the ocean.

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Snap

Get your camera ready for marker number 16 on 17-Mile Drive: The Lone Cypress awaits. An enduring image of the West Coast, this 250-year-old wind- and wave-lashed tree clings to a granite outcropping that jabs into the Pacific. It evokes resilience, hope and beauty.

Explore

Essential sites start with the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the architecturally rich town of Carmel-by-the-Sea and the Joullian Vineyards Tasting Room in Carmel Valley, where Tom Watson's brother, Ridge, is vintner. Pasatiempo Golf Club (pasatiempo.com; \$260–\$292), a 1929 public-access Alister MacKenzie layout, is worth the detour to Santa Cruz, about 60 miles south of San Francisco and less than an hour's drive north of the Monterey Peninsula.

Chicago, Ill. to Kohler, Wisc. (145 miles)

Way

It's a straight shot up I-94 from Chicago to Kohler, but once you hit Milwaukee you're routed north on I-43. If you're searching for serious scenery as you leave Chicago, start on aptly named Lake Shore Drive. In Evanston, take Sheridan Road north through the country-club suburbs along Lake Michigan. Eventually, you'll reach Lake Bluff, where you'll head a few miles west and start your interstate driving and your journey to Kohler.

Play

Rippling fairways, walls of sand, fescue-cloaked hillocks and bluff-top holes along the water call to mind southwest Ireland. Except that Pete Dye's Whistling Straits (americanclubresort.com; \$395–\$500) is apple-pie American and has hosted the PGA Championship three times. A major venue in its own right is the resort's Blackwolf Run River course (\$200–\$285), twice a U.S. Women's Open host. Pete Dye's typically hard edges, ligament-snapping rough, steep, grass-faced bunkers and holes that skirt the Sheboygan River are highlights. Whistling Straits' Irish course (\$140–\$195) and Blackwolf Run's Meadow Valleys (\$140–\$195) make for worthy companions.