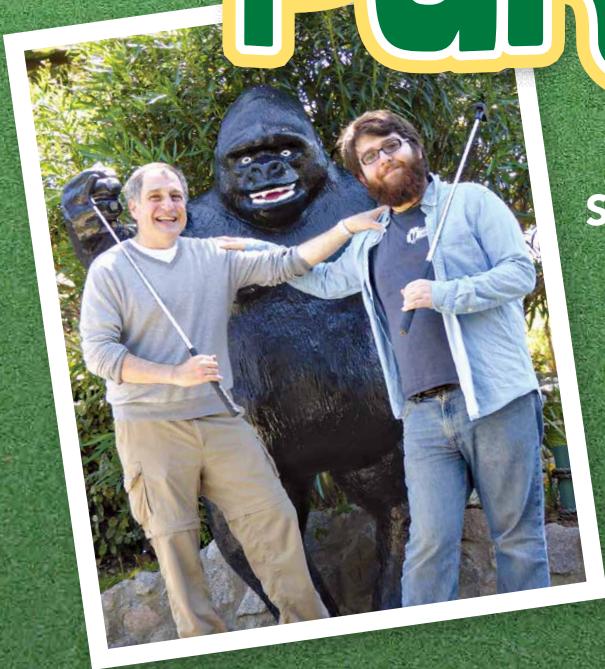


The golf may be miniature, but the challenges are big on Myrtle Beach's many courses. Inset: The author and his son finish up their golfing weekend at Jungle Lagoon.

PUTTER'S PARADISE

A father-son trip leads to South Carolina, where miniature golf courses reveal strokes of genius

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY BLEIBERG





Mount Atlantis was the last course designed by Jim Bryan, known as the father of modern miniature golf. Built around a former department store, it's populated with tiki statues, sea monsters, and dodo birds.

From the peak of a concrete fake mountain at the center of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, you'll find a sweeping view of the Atlantic Ocean, but right now, I'm too distracted to enjoy the scenery.

Instead, I take a breath and try not to notice the towering tiki statue to my right watching my every move or the giant dodo bird ahead of me that appears ready to pounce.

With the ocean breeze blowing my hair, I pull back the putter and tap a ball, sending it on a slow descent down a carpeted slope. The ball hesitates at the top of a concrete hump and then continues down the backside, dropping confidently into the cup.

It's my third hole-in-one of the day, and my son, Harrison, is incredulous. "Are you kidding me?" he says, adding a salty phrase that proves to me that he's no longer a little boy.

I smile and lean down to retrieve my lucky periwinkle ball. It's turning out to be a great weekend.

The two of us had arrived that morning to celebrate the end of his junior year of college with a father-son golf getaway. But since neither of us plays golf, we've opted for

something different: a trip to the miniature golf capital of the world. Given that 2016 marked the 100th anniversary of the pastime, it practically feels like a pilgrimage.

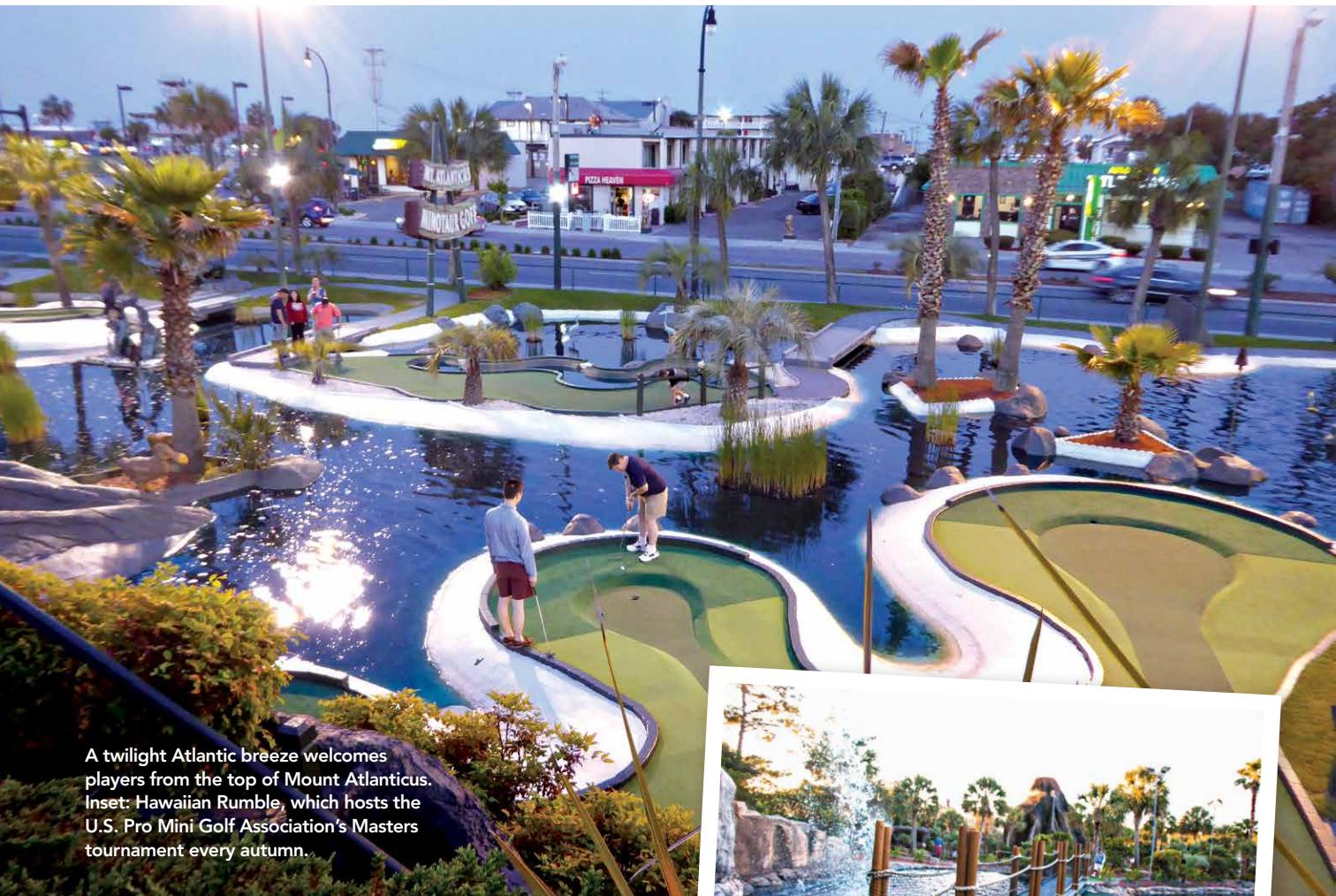
Over two-and-a-half days, we are to play 10 courses, tapping brightly colored balls past dinosaurs and giant Venus fly traps and ducking under waterfalls colored Ty-D-Bol blue.

TEE FOR TWO

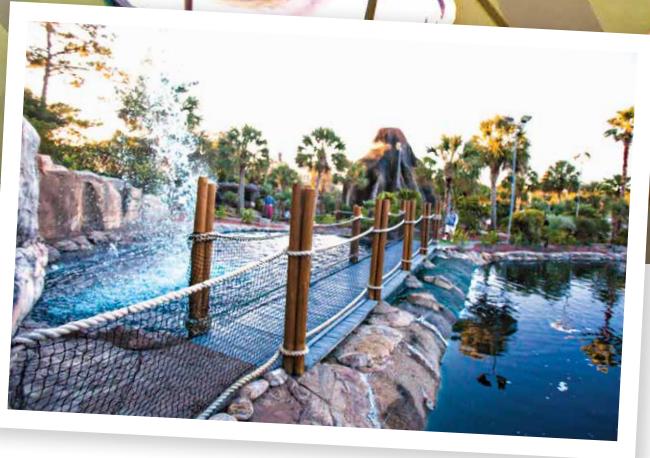
Make no mistake: We had found the epicenter of the sport. What Florence, Italy, is to Renaissance art, Myrtle Beach is to mini golf. With dozens of courses, the South Carolina holiday spot can challenge even the most proficient putter.

Green-carpeted putting palaces have flourished here for decades, a counterpoint to the area's 100-plus real golf courses that attract hundreds of thousands of vacationers year-round. Yet even in an era of virtual reality, this low-tech amusement still thrives.





A twilight Atlantic breeze welcomes players from the top of Mount Atlanticus. Inset: Hawaiian Rumble, which hosts the U.S. Pro Mini Golf Association's Masters tournament every autumn.



"It's one of the few things a family can do together. It doesn't matter if you're a 2-year-old or an 80-year-old," Bob Detwiler tells us the next day before we tee up at Hawaiian Rumble.

His North Myrtle Beach course is legendary, centered on a volcano that shoots out propane gas flames and shakes the surrounding greenery. The Rumble hosts the annual U.S. Pro Mini Golf Association's Masters tournament, a fall event attracting players from around the world.

Harrison and I eagerly tackle this local version of Augusta, but we seem to be a little out of our league, both of us stumbling on the long, curvy 16th hole, where tournament players often choke and lose their lead.

The course is one of many in the area designed by the late Jim Bryan, who *Sports Illustrated* magazine once called the "father of modern miniature golf." Until Bryan, miniature golf courses were relatively straightforward affairs. The playing area was framed by painted two-by-fours and incorporated such simple hazards as windmills and slopes. But in the 1960s, Bryan, an English professor who grew up in Myrtle Beach, began to spray concrete over towering metal frames to create mock mountains. Golfers would putt their way in, up, around, and through these geologic wonders.

COURSE FOR ADVENTURE

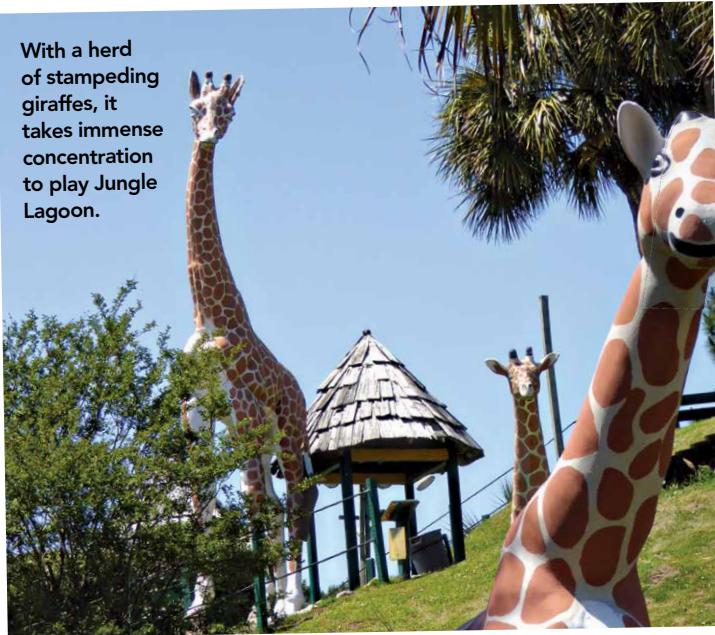
Courses soon began to take on elaborate themes.

Consider Professor Hacker's Lost Treasure Golf, which Harrison and I had played that morning. Our adventure started with a train ride past skeletons and ruins to the top of an artificial hill. Transported to adventurer mode, we no longer were mere vacationers taking a break from the beach but archaeologists searching for hidden German gold during the First World War. Putting now felt patriotic, like we were playing for the free world.

"Anybody can hit a ball in a hole. We try to make it something special," says Joshua Mauck, our cashier and train engineer.

And then there's Mount Atlanticus, the Bryan-designed course where I nailed those three aces the first evening. Bryan's daughter told me via email that her father considered this course to be his masterpiece. Built from a former department store, the course sends golfers up several stories

With a herd of stampeding giraffes, it takes immense concentration to play Jungle Lagoon.



SCORECARD

Myrtle Beach and North Myrtle Beach are home to 51 mini golf courses. Following is a sampling. Check out visitmyrtlebeach.com or explorenorthmyrtlebeach.com for more information.

HAWAIIAN RUMBLE

3210 Highway 17 S., North Myrtle Beach.
(843) 272-7812; hawaiianrumbleminigolf.com.

PROFESSOR HACKER'S LOST TREASURE GOLF

1705 Highway 17 S., North Myrtle Beach.
(843) 272-5467; losttreasuregolf.com.

MOUNT ATLANTICUS

707 North Kings Highway, Myrtle Beach.
(843) 444-1008; myrtlebeachminigolf.com.

DRAGON'S LAIR

1197 Celebrity Circle, Myrtle Beach.
(843) 913-9301; myrtlebeachfamilygolf.com/dragons-lair.

JUNGLE LAGOON

404 Fifth Avenue S. (843) 626-7894;
junglagoon.com.

For information about TourBook guides and TripTik Travel Planners, visit a AAA branch or go to AAA.com/maps.

so they can play down the slope of an unexpected beachside butte. And that was just the beginning.

Bryan created a course mythology, explained in detail on our scorecard. Harrison and I pause on a swinging bench provided for players waiting their turn to putt, marveling at the kingdom awaiting us. Armed only with plastic-headed putters, we are about to explore a landscape populated with sea monsters and zebra-striped cows.

"I don't have words for this," says my awed son, who is rarely speechless.

One visit isn't enough. We return the next evening to play its second 18-hole course, and by then, Harrison has found his groove, confidently putting his way down a faux alpine stream for a hole in one, which are becoming worryingly commonplace.

On our last day, we stop by Broadway at the Beach shopping and entertainment area to play Dragon's Lair's Viking course. Music from hidden speakers rises to a crescendo when we step aboard a ship anchored in a man-made lake. It adds drama to our play, which is now quite competitive.

Next we drive to Jungle Lagoon, an early Bryan, showing touches that would become signatures of his courses: a practice putting area and a winding layout that doubles and triples back on itself.

It's a hot, windless afternoon, and as Harrison putts, he's distracted by a fly that lands on the ball. He asks for a do-over.

I hesitate, but he is, after all, my offspring. Reluctantly, I allow it.

My decision is a huge mistake. As we play past a herd of life-sized giraffes, he's putting with new confidence. When we reach the final hole, he pulls ahead of me, winning by one stroke.

Now it's my turn to mutter something under my breath, and I turn to my son.

This trip, I tell him, is over. It's time to go home.

Birmingham-based freelance writer Larry Bleiberg dreams of shocking his neighbors someday by building a miniature golf course in his backyard.

