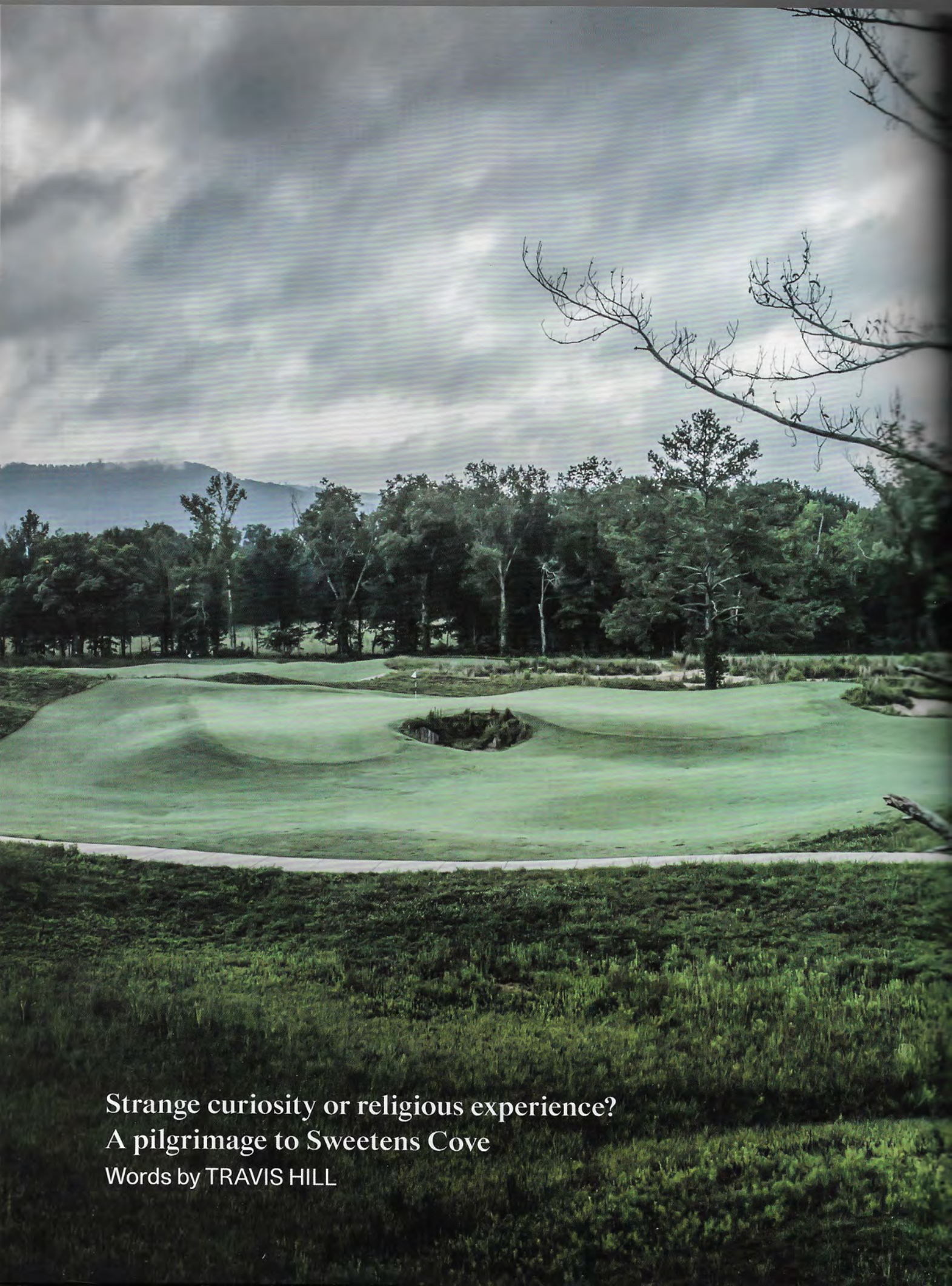


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Strange curiosity or religious experience?  
A pilgrimage to Sweetens Cove  
Words by TRAVIS HILL



To the

Place

We

Belong

## “You guys go to the good Subway or the bad Subway?”

It stopped us dead on the red-gravel parking lot. There wasn't much to eat outside of fast-food chains in South Pittsburg, Tennessee, but two Subways? And one was somehow better than the other? Now that was local knowledge.

“Hope you chose correctly,” shouted Patrick Boyd, GM of Sweetens Cove Golf Club, from behind a glorious plume of lemon-tart vape smoke. “Where'd you go?”

It was clear he wasn't going to let the question go unanswered, so one of my companions put his clubs down and responded somewhat hopefully that we'd gone to the one next to our hotel.

“Ha! That's the bad one!” he laughed as he scanned the sky from the porch of a small green-and-yellow cabin sitting next to a line of golf carts. The cabin, a prefabricated structure possibly shipped straight from a Home Depot, functions as clubhouse, gift shop, maintenance barn and, most importantly now, rain shelter. “You guys have seven minutes before it starts pouring. Better get in here.”

You either get Sweetens Cove or you don't. Rob Collins' brash design is hundreds of miles from any traditional golf mecca and comes with a complicated history, bold membership strategy and absolutely no frills.

To be fair, most people don't get it yet. On its surface, Sweetens Cove is a nine-hole track in rural Tennessee. When I tried to explain that it's on the forefront of a golf architecture revolution and could be the future of how we play the game, I got mostly cockeyed looks questioning my sobriety.

“Some of the locals don't even know what they have here,” Boyd said. “They can't figure out why we would charge a little more than the 18-holer down the street.”

But for those who had heard rumors or read the fawning blog posts from diehards who had made the trek, the response was unabashed envy. “Sweetens is more than golf,” a friend who had played there whispered. “It's a religious experience.”

Like most miracles, this one happened in a sparsely populated area that most golfers would never expect. South Pittsburg is a town of roughly 3,000 about 25 minutes outside of Chattanooga, nestled among the tall pines and chubby oaks of the Appalachian foothills along Battle Creek. The land is unquestionably stunning, but Fast-Food America is inescapable and the course is less than 10 minutes off an I-24 exit that's a jarring combination of tree-packed hills towering over strip malls, discount stores and, as we would come to find out, the first of multiple Subways. The Shoney's breakfast bar opens at 6 a.m., y'all.

You can't miss the exit for Sweetens; just look for the Walmart-sized Big Daddy's Fireworks emporium. We gaped



PHOTOS: BRIAN OAR



The path to golf enlightenment just might run past a liquor store and a stickered road sign in rural Tennessee. Sweetens Cove is home to a dizzying array of architectural wonders, from links-like native grasses and wooden walkways protecting the massive green on No. 4 to the cavernous "Devil's Asshole" bunker on No. 5.



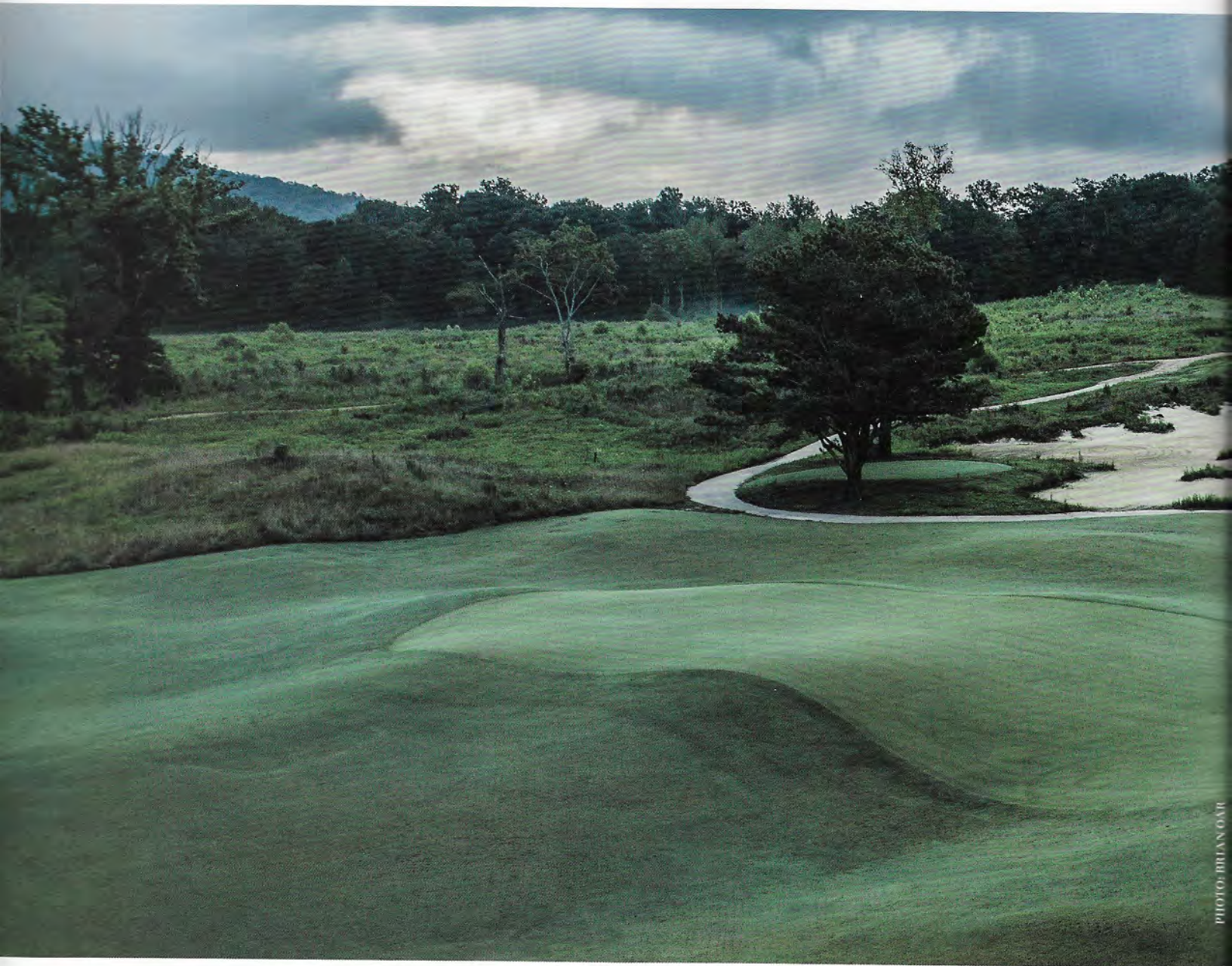


PHOTO: BRIAN O'NEIL

at a giant neon man with red lips, blue jacket and bolo tie promising us the best “BANG” for our buck as we drove to our Hampton Inn.

That kind of welcome will knock anyone sideways, and the approach to Sweetens shouts that this is not your standard golf course. Rather than get a new sign announcing where to turn from North Cedar Road, someone just put “Sweetens Cove Golf Club” stickers barely concealing the old Sequatchie Valley Golf & CC ones.

After a mile or so on a shaded two-lane road, the humble red-wood and gold-lettered Sweetens Cove sign appears on the right. The course sits at the base of the small valley, that green-and-yellow cabin the only building overlooking it.

There's no main gate. No driving range. No practice putting green. But there was Boyd, clouds of vape smoke

curling out to touch the gray mists of the Tennessee morning.

“When this clears,” he said, “you’ll see one of the best opening holes in the world.”

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The summer rain was pounding and the lightning too close for comfort. Seven of us were jammed in the cabin: our trio, another twosome who came from out of town on a similar fact-finding mission, a Sweetens member and Boyd. The twosome was soggy from sprinting in from the storm. We had heeded Boyd's call, so were mercifully dry save for a perpetual layer of sweat.

It was just after 1 p.m., and Coors Lights were flowing.

**The finish at Sweetens is a beautiful roller coaster. In the foreground, it's best to steer clear of the stomach-churning dip in the center of the Biarritz green complex at No. 8. In the distance, you can fly it right at the Redan green of No. 9, but with that massive bunker in play it may be best to take it up the right side and let it funnel to the hole.**



Trey Moon, the member, puffed on a cigar and hooked his phone into the Bluetooth speaker. With the kind of politeness in mixed company found only deep in SEC country, he skipped past the University of Alabama fight song and settled on Sturgill Simpson. Boyd produced a bottle of Blanton's bourbon.

This, it became clear, is a crucial part of the Sweetens experience. You don't just play mind-bending golf; you drink it, breathe it and talk it. We sat in fold-out chairs, fiddling with Boyd's menagerie of clubs scattered in the cabin and trading our best yarns as the smell of wet wood, cigar and lemon-tart smoke hung in the thick air.

Boyd and Moon can argue about golf course architects and architecture like music critics argue about the virtues of Steely Dan. (They did that too, with Boyd calling them the "best American studio band in history.") Money games, courses they've played, legends at Lookout Mountain (the Seth Raynor design down in Chattanooga that serves as the heart of the local golf scene), PGA Tour pros they know for a fact "can't do shit from 60 yards and in."

Enter the fray at your peril. One of the guys offered that

he was a member at Presidio in the Bay Area. Boyd set his trap. "Really? You ever play Gleneagles out there?" He had not. "No? Man, I don't give a shit if you've played Olympic or Harding Park or Presidio; if you haven't played Gleneagles, you don't know anything about Bay Area golf! I'd set you up with a money game there, but they'd eat you alive." A quick laugh before the next topic: the top five courses in San Diego.

\*

Boyd was right. The par-5 first hole at Sweetens is a downhill rush of an opener. The course tips out at around 3,300 yards, but with four varied sets of tees, you can create new experiences on every loop. We started from the back and fired drivers down the slope into a flat landing area on the right, already intimidated by the shorter but much riskier path down the tree-lined left side.

For architecture fanatics, Rob Collins is already something of a legend. The first hole at Sweetens immediately shows why: He produced a stunning green





complex that somehow folds a Redan setup on the left into a punchbowl on the right. There are bumps and humps and almost limitless ways to play your approach.

That's the point. "The design philosophy was to basically build an inland links golf course," Collins later told me, "heavily inspired by our favorite courses in England and Ireland, and influenced by [Seth] Raynor and [Alister] MacKenzie's work. I was particularly interested in the 1932 version of Augusta National, which was a wide-open course with short grass everywhere, but had really quirky, wild green complexes and forced people to make decisions on their second shots. I love the idea that you can pretty much hit it anywhere and you're always playing golf, but you might not like your angle. Really we just put everything we liked in a blender and out came Sweetens Cove."

Walking off the first hole, we were sold. The hype was real. We vowed to play as many holes, in as many different ways, as possible. Boyd even hinted that the course allowed for a secret routing, akin to the off-the-menu menu at In-N-Out Burger. We were salivating.

The first nine holes flew by and we marched from the ninth green right back to the first tee for another round. We navigated the wonderfully awkward lone water oak in the front of the third green. We played blind tee shots over the massive, furry-edged bunker on the short, par-3 fourth into one of the largest Himalayas green complexes any of us had seen, allowing the hole to be played anywhere from 120 to 190 yards.

We successfully avoided the frightening "Devil's Asshole" bunker in the front of the fifth green. Then we dropped balls into the Asshole just to see if we could actually play them out onto the green. (We could not.) The only real water danger comes in on No. 6, with the left side of the green jutting out into the calm little hazard. The hole is so gorgeous that I wasn't even that upset when I rinsed one my second time through.

Spectacular bunkers and death-defying green-side slopes protect No. 7, and it hammered all of us both times we played it. We stayed on the eighth green for longer than we



(Opposite) It can, at times, feel like some trees have their own gravitational pull. The third green at Sweetens is a wide expanse and the layout offers several routes to land safely aboard. And yet here we are, face to face with the lone water oak guarding it.

(This page) Rob Collins designed the varying tee boxes at Sweetens to give players myriad options and experiences. The first nine holes can be a completely different ride than the second—or the third. There's also a secret routing, because membership has its privileges.

(Overleaf) The old Sequatchie Valley Golf & Country Club never looked like this. Collins played with multiple green complexes in his design, including the winding Himalayas green on No. 4. Nicknamed "King" for King Oehmig, the local legend who helped Collins secure this project, it can play anywhere from 120 to 190 yards.

should have, going to the far end and trying to putt across the gaping, 40-degree Biarritz complex. The par-3 finish is a blast—a short Redan that allowed you to fly it right at the stick or run it up the right side of the green to see if it will track all the way down to the hole.

The only thing that stopped us was hunger. No food in the cabin, though. Just water, Gatorade, Coors Light and Boyd's jazz on the Bluetooth.

The clouds were pouring over the pines guarding the valley, and we were off to Bad Subway.

\* The rain felt like it was easing up, but Boyd wasn't slowing down. "First time I played Bandon, I played 100 holes of fuckin' hickories," said. "Changed my life, man."

Boyd is the re-breed who can fire off a wild statement like that and still be credible. A massive man with a booming voice to match, he has spent most of his life in the game. Before coming to

Sweetens, he was vice president at the highly respected Scratch Golf equipment company, a custom club fitter that went out of business despite having a star-studded client list including pros like Ryan Moore. Boyd still plays with a set personally built.

He's the type of lifer who has been dealt his share of professional highs and lows by the game, but still retains a zealot's love of it. When Boyd believes in something, he goes all in. He freely admits that Sweetens is the only reason he's still in Tennessee, and he has no problem spending 80 hours a week around this little cabin, managing every aspect of the business, taking care of members, explaining the magic of the course for the 1,000th time to newcomers like us.

So when he said he was disappointed in the weather, it meant it. He wanted us to see the course when it was firm and fast. He believes that the true character of the design shows when it's baked out, creating an even truer links-style experience. Boyd is a stick; he can play. At my absolute best, I'm barely average. And yet Sweetens is designed so that we can both have a great time. Beyond its natural beauty, the real joy of the course is in the various ways to play it. With the wide fairways carved into the valley, it gives beginning players a chance while providing new, strategic challenges even to members who play often.

That is the wider importance of Sweetens. As golf courses around the country close more often than open, Sweetens is part of a small but growing number of short courses that quietly combat what many believe ails the game: It plays fast—you can spin through nine holes in under two hours—it's reasonably priced and, perhaps most importantly, smart design work makes it fun and memorable.

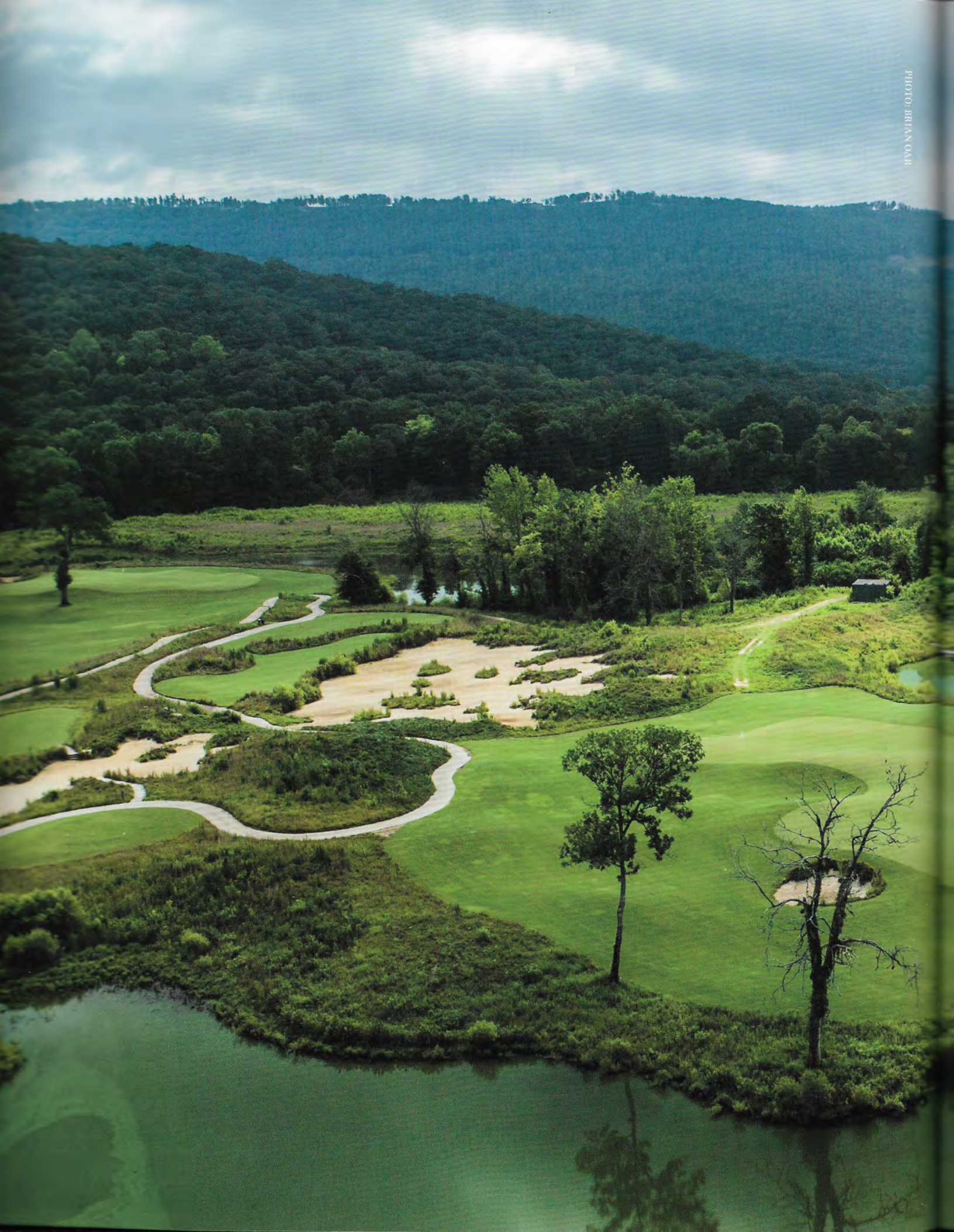


PHOTO: BRIAN OAR



(This page) Among his many duties, Sweetens Cove general manager Patrick Boyd (in black) has also become the most reliable weatherman in the valley. The cabin overlooks his kingdom, and he knows it better than anyone other than architect Rob Collins. He understands that the best way to push through a rain delay is with fantastic bourbon and even better conversation about courses conquered, underrated architects and the power of hickories.



Refreshingly, there was no grand talk of ways to #growthegame in the cabin. These guys aren't interested in saving golf. They know what they've got here, even if some of the locals haven't yet figured it out. You either get Sweetens or you don't.

"There's some blue sky!" Moon hollered.

"We'll be back on the course in 10 minutes," Boyd decreed.

There very nearly wasn't a Sweetens Cove at all.

Collins, who is originally from Tennessee, always wanted to get into golf course design. After a graduate landscape architecture program at Mississippi State, in 2005 he went to work for Gary Player's design company as an on-site design coordinator. But work dried up after the 2008 recession and he was forced to move back to Tennessee to take landscape design jobs outside of golf to make ends meet.

In 2010, King Oehmig—a Tennessee golf legend—was heading up a project down the road at The Course at Sewanee. Collins desperately wanted to jump in and help. King did him one better and introduced him to Bob Thomas, whose family owned Sequatchie Concrete. The family also owned Sequatchie Valley Golf & Country Club down in South Pittsburg and

wanted to redesign their nine-hole track. It was flat, run down and had a drainage ditch running through it. When he stepped on the property in 2011, Collins saw all of that. But he also saw opportunity.

He spent nearly 500 days on site overseeing every inch of the design, moving dirt, experimenting with green complexes and meticulously shaping bunkers.

Just when things began turning around, the bottom fell out on Collins again. In 2013, with the course nearly complete, the owners halted production. They suddenly no longer wanted to be in the golf business. "Which basically tore my heart out of my chest," Collins said. He did everything possible to save what he had built to that point, including trying to maintain it by himself, for free, but the course went fallow. Finally, the property owners asked Collins if he wanted to lease the course from them.

"At first," Collins admits, "I said, 'Hell no, I don't want to lease the course. Are you crazy?' But in 24 hours I did a complete 180. I thought it was worth it to try."

After a long negotiation, Collins came away with control of his creation in May 2014. His team revived the course and it

reopened as Sweetens Cove in October 2014. He nicknamed the fourth hole "King" after the man who helped start it all.

"It's been a labor of love for me," said Collins. "My wife half-jokingly refers to it as my third child."

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The afternoon rain came and went as it usually does in southern Tennessee, leaving the soaked course basically to us. Moon and Boyd grabbed the speaker and some carts and joined us for some off-the-menu action. We would have been happy to play the scorecard routing again, but our hosts unlocked an entirely new and equally spectacular golf course.

We felt like VIPs getting away with something illegal when we turned around and played from the second tee back into the first green as a short par 3. It was downright thrilling to switch the angle and play from the eighth tee into the ninth green as a par 5. At one point Boyd led us to his special spot in the seventh fairway, where we played from 185 yards into the Biarritz eighth green. There were more secret holes, but I want him to invite us back. You understand.

\*

There are about 40 members at Sweetens, and they like it that way. Collins and his team don't chase new ones. They appreciate the intimate, in-crowd feel at the course and so do members like Moon.

"One of the things that makes it special is that there were a handful of really talented and dedicated people who put a lot of hard work into it," Collins said. "It's like a mirror: All of that energy and time reflects back at you when you play it. The course has this vibe that's entirely unique."

It's pure golf. If some newbie showed up and asked about a cart girl, he'd get laughed back to Chattanooga. But if a diehard made the effort to come out and wanted to know how to play No. 4 when the pin's in the back, Collins and Boyd would gladly have a 40-minute conversation. Even if you start as a complete stranger, if you get it, you're quickly part of the family. ●

(Above) The team behind Sweetens Cove isn't interested in saving the game. They believe that if you build something incredible, the rest will take care of itself. Even if you're 10 minutes from Big Daddy's Fireworks.

