

Travel Article

Richard Williamson • Fort Myers, FL

This article was published in an English-language European travel magazine targeted toward the high-end German golfing vacattion market. It featured a golf club in Naples, Florida, that was developed by a coalition that included The Ritz-Carlton Resort group and Greg Norman Golf Development.

The pale sun slants shadows across the late-winter morning dew as smoky whisps of morning fog curl off the lake and stroll the fairway like half-seen ghosts in the distance. A perfect morning. In a perfect place.

For golf.

Florida is famous worldwide for its fabulous weather, it’s great beaches, and theme parks that draw millions. But Florida has another side, a quieter, more genteel personality that golfers have come to rate as among the very best places to play anywhere on the planet.

When it comes to golf, few people know more than “The Great White Shark,” Greg Norman. As a player, he is one of the most respected in the game. And he has translated his prowess on the links into success in business. When he teamed up with Ritz-Carlton Hotels and Florida home and community developer Watermark Communities, Inc., to create a golf new golf course, the golf world took notice. The result is Southwest Florida’s 800-acre, 27-hole, Tiburon Golf Club in Naples.

Situated just 20 miles south of the Southwest Florida International Airport on the balmy Gulf of Mexico under perpetually blue skies, Naples is a natural wonderland. The city is one of America’s most prestigious places to call home or spend a holiday. A seemingly endless coastline of mangrove islands and white sand beaches is home to countless species of migratory birds, gentle manatees, and some of the best sport fishing in the United States.

It is also a haven for golf. With more than 70 courses in the area, golfers can always find a course that suits their playing styles and preferences. Since its opening in November 1998, Tiburon Golf Club has fast become the favorite of vacationing and resident golfers alike.

Part of the reason for Tiburon’s unparalleled popularity is its novel course design. Greg Norman’s unique vision is a refreshing change of pace in the world of golf course design, where tradition very often wins out over innovation. As his 29th course worldwide and only his seventh in the United States, Tiburon may well be his crowning achievement.

“Greg Norman has a different philosophy for making courses,” says David Fry, Senior Vice President of Amenities for WCI. “He concentrates on taking advantage of the native terrain and plant life while making sure the result is both beautiful and playable.”

Indeed, Tiburon seems as if it was carved out of the sun-drenched countryside. The transitions between the natural, protected wetland areas adjacent to the course and the manicured fairways and greens is seamless yet striking. Towering cypress stand knee deep in water and clutches of pine trees creak in the breeze. Overhead, an egret’s vast wings flare as it dips toward the grass at lakeside. It’s all commonplace at Tiburon. Players become immersed in a carefully constructed, painstakingly maintained world where golf and nature are merged.

Throughout the property, native foliage was left intact as much as possible to take full advantage of its inherent beauty and also to promote the idea of preservation and thoughtful coexistence of the golf club and the ecosystems that surround it. The line between golf property and nature preserve are intentionally blurred, making the golf experience at Tiburon more than simply a walk in the park. Sometimes, you have to remind yourself that only 100 yards away, across a stretch of faultless green, is a flag and a hole.

Also unique to Tiburon is the use of special hybrids developed by Greg Norman’s own turf company. Green surrounds are a species of bent grass used on most courses for their greens. That means you can putt

from distances unheard of at other courses. Or you can choose a chip-and-run tactic with great effect. But take care: the ultra-low-cut surrounds will allow a ball hit with a little too much steam to skip over the green, adding a stroke or two to your game.

The course itself is a mixture of forgiving fairways and treacherous bunkers. Golfers must negotiate the treacherous ground around Norman’s distinctive stacked sod wall bunkers, whose deep lips can confound even the best practitioners of the sand wedge, and devilishly tricky coquina sand waste bunkers that guard the fairways.

Norman designed it to play like a British Open links course, firm and fast, but without the frustrating thatch of rough that confounds even the pros. Balls tend to run more than on most courses. That means that an errant shots have nothing to grab onto on their way out of bounds, making for a much more demanding game, one that promotes accuracy and a light touch over hard-hitting power.

Surprisingly, high-handicap golfers thrive at Tiburon while the course offers more of a challenge to low-handicap golfers. In part, this is because Tiburon plays differently from typical courses. Golfers with strategies ingrained after years of play will find they must re-think how they approach each shot. It makes for equally lively and exciting play for experienced and beginning golfers.

And that is the primary lure of Tiburon: it’s a tough course, but all who play it want to come back to play it again and again.

“People leave here feeling like they’ve experienced a new kind of golf,” says Rick Newman, WCI’s Director Club Operations. “Pros and amateurs alike. It’s instantly their favorite course.”

Playing Tiburon will be much easier in the near future. In the fall of 2000, The Ritz-Carlton Beach Resort in Naples, already ranked as one of the top-3 beach resorts in the world, will be joined by a sister property at Tiburon. Naples will have the unique distinction of being the only city in the world with two Ritz-Carlton hotels.

The Ritz-Carlton Golf Lodge will feature 295 rooms and the level of quality and hospitality that only the Ritz-Carlton can provide. Its completion will coincide with that of the new 30,000 square foot clubhouse. The elegant, Mediterranean-styled building will be the hub of golf course operations at Tiburon and serve as home to formal and casual dining areas and a 3,000 square foot pro shop. It will also feature a fully-equipped fitness center and locker rooms.

“There really isn’t a comparison to anything in the country. It’s a category of its own,” commented Tiburon General Manager Gary Wilcox. “Tiburon will offer the best golf courses, hotel facilities and residential opportunities of just about anywhere.”

While the golf course at Tiburon is open for business, the residential areas are only just starting to be developed. With the year-round and part-time housing market in Naples booming, the city has quickly become one of America’s most sought-after addresses. For over 50 years, WCI has been a major contributor to the high-quality housing that has fueled that growth. Tiburon promises to be one of the jewels in its crown.

WCI Plans a range of residential options, with about 600 housing units ranging from condominiums (starting at \$225,000, with penthouse models beginning at \$400,000) to elegant luxury villas. A small enclave of single-family homes will be built in the Norman Estates. With a pricetag starting at \$1 million, the Norman Estates represents the pinnacle

of golf course living, with home sites nestled among Tiburon’s lush, native flora. The homes themselves are lavish examples of contemporary Florida living, with bold splashes of Mediterranean color and elegant architecture bathed in rich Naples sunlight.

Membership at Tiburon doe not require owning a home there. In fact, to date, none of the club’s members are residents of the community. “Most members live in other golf course communities in Southwest Florida,” says Membership Director Wendy Gexler. “We’ve found that people come to Tiburon for a day of golf, like what they see, and want to join as soon as possible regardless of where they live.

“Compared to some of the older properties in the surrounding community, membership rates are among the most reasonable,” Gexler adds. “Tiburon represents a tremendous value to the kind of person who really loves golf and wants to play at the very best club in Southwest Florida.”

The very best club also features the very best golf instructor in the game today. Good news for players who need to brush up on their swing! Tiburon is home to the prestigious Rick Smith Golf Academy. Rick Smith, acknowledged as one of the very best golf instructors in the world, has as his pupils 1998 US Open Champion Lee Jantzen, 1998 PGA Champion Vijay Singh, and leading money-winner Phil Mickelson. Even David Duvall, one of the hottest players on the circuit in recent years, regularly takes lessons from Smith.

Using modern, high-tech methodologies to augment a well-established teaching philosophy, the Rick Smith Golf Academy can help a novice get over the frustration of those critical first swings or help a seasoned player improve his game. The professionals at the academy also teach the mental aspects of golf in addition to the physical: game strategies and tactics are reviewed and analyzed by the pros to suggest ways to shave strokes from the scoresheet.

Great golf and excellent facilities are one thing, service is another. Tiburon’s staff stands out from the crowd when it comes to personalized service and attention to details. As member Peter Mendelson puts it, “The moment I was a member, the staff—I mean the *entire* staff—knew my and my wife’s name and greeted us when we walked in. They are remarkable.”

The result is a warm and friendly place to play some of the very best golf if Florida. As Tiburon grows, its reputation will keep pace, guaranteeing it a spot on golf’s must-see list. Players of all levels agree. Tiburon Golf Club is one of the finest courses anywhere. And with the addition of the resort and home amenities, it will be like a little piece of golf heaven in Naples.