

Bonita Bay Club



With five courses and a host of other amenities in a spectacular natural setting along Florida's southwest coast, this member-owned enclave fosters an active and social lifestyle

MEMBERS WHO BELONG TO CLUBS with 36 holes consider themselves very fortunate to have two courses from which to choose. Those providential feelings grow exponentially as the number of holes increase, so imagine how nice it must be to belong to a club with 90 first-class holes at your choosing? There are very few resorts in the country with five courses, let alone private golf clubs. But there is Bonita Bay Club in southwest Florida.

"I can't tell you how much I enjoy the diversity," says Max Lummis, who's been a member at Bonita Bay since 1998. "You never get bored with all the choices. They're all so dif-

ferent, too. Each has its own unique challenges and beauty. I can't imagine belonging to a club with one course now."

Located between Naples and Fort Myers, Bonita Bay sits on the east side of Estero Bay, a Gulf of Mexico inlet and aquatic preserve. Three of the courses, all designed by Arthur Hills and immaculately maintained, make up the West Club and sit inside the lushly landscaped, 2,400-acre development. The most popular of the three is Creekside, which, like all of the Hills courses, is an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. "The members take great care in preserving what's here," says Director of Golf Michael Weiler, noting that weekly birding tours are conducted on the courses.



Sabal Course,
12th hole, 423 yards



Cypress Course, 18th hole, 453 yards

"There's a very close relationship among nature, golf, and living here."

Creekside features broad, sweeping fairways with mounds on the sides of fairways to keep balls in play, making it fairly forgiving off the tee. The premium is on approach shots since water guards half the greens. The Bay Island Course is by far the most scenic and challenging of the three layouts, with many of the holes bordering marsh rich in wildlife. The par threes are particularly dramatic and testing, starting with the 207-yard 3rd that's all-carry over the edge of a lake, and the island-green 12th. The Marsh Course has an intriguing routing with back-to-back par fives and par threes in succession on the front (holes 5 through 8), and another pair of back-to-back par threes on the back (16 and 17). The layout

isn't long—just 6,483 yards from the tips—but it does require accuracy.

The two courses at the East Club, Sabal and Cypress, were both designed by Tom Fazio, and are located on 1,035-acres of cypress wetlands and pine flats, with no residential development. When the courses opened in 1999, the East Club became the first private 36-hole facility to get a Certified Bronze Audubon Signature Sanctuary designation (it was recently recertified). A round of golf there is as much a shot-maker's delight as it is a nature lover's.

The tighter Sabal Course, which has five par fives and five par threes, features fairways with a lot of movement, deep bunkers, and greens with false fronts. The heart of the course is a stretch of holes from 9 to 11, which play around a 37-



Marsh Course, 9th hole, 425 yards

The Bay Island Course is by far the most scenic and challenging of the three layouts, with many of the holes bordering marsh rich in wildlife.



The Clubhouse. Below: Full-service marina

acre lake, with a quarry wall guarding the big, two-tiered green of the 414-yard 9th. The 555-yard 11th is a strong par five that runs along the entire length of the lake with the green perched about 20 feet above the south end.

The Cypress Course isn't quite as undulating as Sabal but it's the longest of the club's quintet. And while the fairways are quite generous, the greens have enough falloff to punish stray approaches, like on the 231-yard 5th with its green elevated on top of a coral stone retaining wall and a lake running up to the left side. The 453-yard 18th is perhaps Bonita Bay's most brutally beautiful hole, requiring two strong shots to reach a putting surface surrounded by bunkers and water. Behind the green is the lodge-style clubhouse that's an intimate and welcoming place to gather afterward for lunch or a drink.

It's an unassuming counterpoint to the grand 55,000-square-foot West clubhouse that includes several dining options, a large and well-stocked golf shop, lounge, card room, and spacious locker rooms. In the main dining room, seven bay-window alcoves provide long fairway views, while eight murals depicting scenes from Estero Bay frame the octagonal, coffered ceiling.

The recently renovated clubhouse is the social hub of Bonita Bay, hosting all manner of activity, from dinner five nights a week in season to the Friday night, live-music "POETS"—which stands for "Phooney On Everything Else Tomorrow's Saturday"—dinner party. "There's a great social component to the club," says Club President Cindy White, a member since 1995. "We have an active membership who loves to have a good time. It's what makes it a special place. And even though it's a large club, there's a small-club feel to it because our members are



so friendly. If there are new members at a POETS night, the other members will introduce themselves and welcome them to the club."

Members took over the club in 2010, hired a new general manager (Dan Miles, who came from legendary Medinah Country Club), and the enhancements haven't stopped. A major capital-improvement plan has dramatically upgraded the club's appearance and functionality. The 18 Har-Tru courts

at the tennis club, for example, now have a state-of-the-art subsurface irrigation system that maintains ideal conditions without need to stop play and water the courts. With 25 league teams and one of the busiest social and competitive tennis calendars in the country, that's no small thing.

There's also a marina, beach club, and 12-mile network of biking and walking paths, as well as a 10,000-square-foot fitness center (also recently redone) with heated pool, a staff of trainers and massage therapists, and exercise classes. "I love the ability to do whatever you want within reason one day and then do something completely different the next day," says Nick Romano, a club member and resident at Bonita Bay for six years. "You

can play tennis on Monday, go fishing out of the marina on Tuesday, go to the beach on Wednesday, play golf on Thursday, go to the fitness center on Friday. It's a total life experience."

With so much going on at Bonita Bay, just about the biggest dilemma members face is choosing what to do each day and which course to play when they do decide to tee it up. "The golf experience is without equal," says Weiler. "Every course is good and different. Combine that with the physical beauty of Bonita Bay, and it's pretty tough to beat."



Marsh Course, 2nd hole, 372 yards

Bonita
Bay
Club

LOCATION

Bonita Springs, Florida

YEAR FOUNDED 1985**WEST CLUB****ARCHITECT**

Arthur Hills

BAY ISLAND COURSE**PAR** 72**YARDAGE** 6,910**CREEKSIDE COURSE****PAR** 72**YARDAGE** 6,632**MARSH COURSE****PAR** 72**YARDAGE** 6,483**EAST CLUB****ARCHITECT**

Tom Fazio

CYPRESS COURSE**PAR** 72**YARDAGE** 7,059**SABAL COURSE****PAR** 72**YARDAGE** 6,813**CONTACT**

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