BY BARRY SALBERG

MARVELOUS MARIN

The county north of San Francisco Bay is rich in golf and culture

It's simply one of the most eye-popping, exhilarating vistas on our planet. You drive south on 101, through the Waldo tunnel, and then suddenly it's right there—San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the San Francisco city skyline in all its splendor. It's a visual treat that those who commute from Marin get to enjoy on a daily basis. But then again, living in Marin is something special unto itself.

Known for its liberal politics, affluence, iconic architecture and stunning scenic palette, Marin is one of the oldest counties in the state, consisting of 520,000 square miles, and a relatively few 258,000 residents. Often characterized by a cultural mindset that's a bit different from other places, it's been cited as having the fifth highest income per capital in the country, and has long been a haven for artists, entrepreneurs, musicians, tradesmen, and various creative types. Mountain biking was said to have been invented in Marin on the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais. George Lucas created Lucasfilm and Skywalker Ranch there, and used Fourth Street in downtown San Rafael for the cruising scenes in American Graffiti. Nowadays, rockers like the Grateful Dead, Grace Slick, Sammy Hagar and various others all reside in Marin County. Comedian Robin Williams grew up in Marin, so did singer, Huey Lewis—and so did I. Other than some occasional golf and a few high school reunions, my ties and trips to Marin over the years have been limited. So it was...
with a special affinity that I was able to rekindle some memories, and update my acquaintance with the local golf scene.

The truth is, much of Marin—particularly the western portion—is still quite rural and agricultural, geographically dominated by undeveloped open space, forests, waterways, beaches, ranchlands and wetlands. Most of the action—and the population—is in the eastern part of the county in a string of small, upscale communities and cities running north-south along Highway 101. Near the middle of this stretch is the famed Marin Civic Center, the last major work of celebrated architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Along with the futuristic-looking Eichler homes in nearby Terra Linda, it is emblematic of so much that is Marin—progressive, visually compelling, innovative, expensive, and clearly unique. The Civic Center has been used as a background setting in various science-fiction films, and for those who don’t know, the Eichler homes—built in the 1950s and ’60s—are reminiscent of something from “The Jetsons” animated TV series.

Yet, for all of Marin’s architecture, artists, singers, writers, ranchers, foodies, farmers, fishermen, blue collar tradesmen, upscale corporate types and new agers, golf too, has long been a part of the fabric of the county, with a variety of six public options and two excellent private facilities. Before the concept of “executive course” ever existed, there was Mill Valley Municipal Golf Course, a nine-hole layout built in 1919. Situated in a prime residential area, it is very much a microcosm
of the city of Mill Valley itself — woodsly, classic, and decidedly old-school, like Muir Woods with a golf course in the middle. "Yeah, I played it a lot," says Lewis, of Huey Lewis and the News fame. "The real estate is to die for, you can only imagine what it's worth — the county is Indian Valley Golf Club, something much more reflective of rural Marin. Built in 1957, this one has more than an out-in-the-country feel. No lavish homes, no surrounding real estate, just a nearby horse ranch as the only sign of civilization as you make it idyllic, a gorgeous walk, a wonderful design and plenty of fun." The story goes that a wealthy benefactor donated it to the city with the proviso that it would always remain a public golf course. Today, it is maintained by the city and managed by well-known Marin teaching pro, Doug Acton. He took over the concession two years ago, gutted the old pro-shop, built a modern teaching center, and went about the business of re-invigorating the spirit of this unique facility. Locals have given him rave reviews, noting the dramatic upgrade in course conditions and the overall operation.

At the north end of those final miles westward from downtown Novato. But the golf here is first rate — hilly, scenic, quality pro shop, excellent course conditions and a variety of holes, many with steeply elevated tees. And it may be the only course with an elevator on one of the holes to transport intrepid walkers to an otherwise unwalkable vertical grade up to the next tee. Also in the north end is what is probably regarded as the premier daily-fee operation in Marin, StoneTree Golf Club. Built in 1999, on the site of the old Renaissance Faire at the gateway to wine country, it is among the upper echelon of public operations in the Bay Area. A group of architects are credited here, including Johnny Miller, and Northern California's elder statesman of golf, Sandy Tatum.

Far more plebian, but certainly no slouch, San Geronimo Golf Club has undergone several ownership changes since its inception in 1967. A new group took over in 2009 and the facility has incurred a dramatic transformation. Voted best public course by readers of Marin's Independent Journal, and the Pacific Sun, San Geronimo is operated by General Manager Jennifer Kim, who's made a concerted effort to cultivate and nurture a genuine sense of community that goes well beyond golf. "We made it more of a family-friendly and community place," says Kim, who brought on high quality, affordable Friday family dinners, live music on the weekends, artwork from local artists on the clubhouse walls, junior golf programs, and the establishment of a family garden. "Half the valley here is in shade, but now they can grow their own produce on our facility," she explains. "It's not just a golf course anymore, but a community gathering place."

One of the pioneers of upper-tier public golf in the Bay Area, Peacock Gap Golf & Country Club was the place to be when it first opened in 1957. Debutante balls were held there, and PGA Tour star Billy Casper was the pro associated with the course. Located in a modern high-end housing area right off San Rafael Bay, it was a genuine reflection of upscale Marin, proud of its billing as being "semi-private." Meanwhile, McAlister Park Golf Center, named for former San
exclaims Lewis. “Sausalito used to be the coolest little town in the ’50s and going into the ’60s, and then it got overrun and turned into Lahaina for a minute. Now it’s becoming revitalized with new restaurants and a new scene, and it’s actually becoming more of a town now.” Among his favorites: Poggio, the Blue Rock in Larkspur, and the venerable Marin Joes in Corte Madera. I would add a couple of my own tips, if you’re anywhere near Novato, Marvins—consistently voted best breakfast in Marin—and Boca.

Also, if you ever get a chance, check out jazz singer Wanda Stafford, who’s been playing gigs in Marin for years. And while many of the haunts and institutions of my youth are long gone—old timers will remember downtown San Rafael Macy’s, Las Gallinas driving range, the turtle races at Zack’s in Sausalito, King Cotton, Bergie’s, Nave Lanes, Shakey’s in Terra Linda, Village Music, George’s Pool Hall, Uncle Charlie’s and the Red Kettle—golf still remains a constant, and Marin prevails as one of the great places on earth. It’s fitting that a hippie-styled rainbow frames its entrance as you first cross over from the Golden Gate Bridge—because certainly for many Marinites, there is indeed a pot of gold at the other end.

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Rafael mayor, John McInnis, contains a double deck driving range, nine-hole executive course, practice center, batting cages and a restaurant that always seems to be jumping.

As for Marin’s private courses, Meadow Club is an Alister MacKenzie design that dates back to 1926. “It’s a treasure,” proclaims Lewis, who’s been a longtime Meadow Club member. “Maybe the one thing that keeps Meadow from being a Crystal Downs, is that it has side-by-side adjoining fairways—but that’s exactly what makes it so fabulous to walk! In terms of walking a golf course, I don’t think it gets any better in the world.” The other private operation, Marin Country Club, built in 1959, was updated by the late John Harbottle just a few years ago. Set in a highly upscale residential neighborhood, it is the embodiment of a true club-like atmosphere, with a family sense, and a history of a younger, hipper, membership.

Stories of its annual Carnalve costumed golf tournament are legendary throughout the county.

But beyond golf, Marin offers a myriad of other recreational choices including world-class hiking, dining, shopping, a vibrant live music scene, and a variety of outdoor activities. Bed and breakfasts abound, with Sausalito presenting a solid handful of award-winning boutique hotels. “There’s a zillion great spots, the restaurants are off the charts,”