

## Above and Beyond: Is the Highland Course at Primland the Best Mountain Track in America?

by [Brian McCallen](#)

For years, at least since Bobby Jones endorsed its charms while escaping the summer heat of Atlanta in the 1920s, the Cascades Course at The Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia has reigned supreme as the finest resort mountain course in America. Designed by William Flynn in 1923, the Cascades is a classic, a lovely, lay-of-the-land design. This is where Hot Springs native Sam Snead refined his syrupy swing and came of age as a golfer. Host of several USGA events, the Cascades is ranked No. 17 on *GOLF Magazine's* 'Top 100 Courses You Can Play' list. It occupies the No. 24 slot on *Golf Digest's* 'America's 100 Greatest Public' courses roster.

Surprisingly, American's premier mountain golf course, a one-of-a-kind creation that crowns a knob encircled by oblivion roughly 100 miles from Hot Springs, appears on neither publication's list. Tucked away in the remote southwest corner of Virginia, the Highland Course at Primland, unveiled in 2006, could not have been conceived 80 years ago. The mules or machinery used by Flynn would have expired before they reached the summit. The Cascades is stately, but a little sedate. Primland is simply spectacular. It delivers views, thrills and challenges that far surpass what the Cascades can deliver.

Before we explore this extraordinary layout, a little history. In 1977, Didier Primat, a French billionaire and outdoor enthusiast, was looking for a large parcel of land in the Southeast. He came upon a 12,000-acre parcel on the outskirts of Meadows of Dan, a rural Virginia town in the Blue Ridge Mountains. *Amour coup de foudre*—it was love at first sight. Here was a place for Primat, his family and friends to hunt, fish and ride horses in a verdant, peaceful valley at the terminus of Busted Rock Road. Primat also liked to ride his all-terrain vehicle to the high point of the property for the astounding 360-degree views of knobs, ridges and the Piedmont Plateau that stretches for miles into North Carolina.

The idea of building a golf course to serve as a focal point for the sportsman's getaway was eventually discussed. Many of the industry's top designers were contacted. One of Primat's board members was acquainted with Donald Steel, the English scribe turned golf designer who had authored 70 courses in more than 20 countries.

Unlike the other architects interviewed, Steel was most interested in exploring the site's summit. Mountaintops are usually rocky, which is why most so-called "mountain" courses are actually valley courses routed in the foothills. Upon learning that a peach orchard had once been cultivated on the site's plateau-like pinnacle at 2,985 feet, and realizing after several exploratory walks that there was enough room to push holes onto splayed fingers of land high above a deep gorge, Steel and his then-associates, Tom Mackenzie and Martin Ebert, set about routing the course.

A scratch player in his prime, Steel, now 72, played on the Cambridge golf team, won the President's Putter at Rye Golf Club in three different decades and also qualified for the 1970

Open Championship. For many years, Steel advised the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews on course set-ups for the Open. (Mackenzie and Ebert now perform that role, as admirably demonstrated in their revisions to Turnberry's Ailsa Course prior to the 2009 Open Championship). Exposed from a young age to the game's premier seaside links, Steel knows what it takes to build a championship-caliber test of golf that nevertheless can accommodate all styles of play.

Building courses on the tops of mountains requires technical solutions to difficult problems, but Steel was sold on the scenery. If he had to use a little dynamite to dislodge a rock ledge on the first hole to broaden the fairway—he had never before resorted to explosives—he would do so for the greater good of the project. “It wasn't a golf course you could build in a hurry,” Steel harrumphs, and perhaps only a billionaire could have seen it through to completion.

The Highland Course at Primland blends easily into the landscape, its manmade landforms sculpted to blend with the existing contours. “Primland sits on top of the world, enjoying scenic views that stretch the vocabulary,” Steel says in his soft Middlesex accent. “This course design has been a highlight of my career since its location, while strikingly obvious in hindsight, did not jump out at me at first after the first several site visits and estate tours. But once I strode over the plateau, with views which reminded me of the highlands of Scotland, I knew this would test the mettle of golfers who want to play courses that would challenge the professionals.”

*A bird's-eye view of the nation's finest mountain course*

Steel describes Primland as “one of the few courses where we worked hard to make it easier rather than more difficult.” Marked in places by sharp elevation changes, the terrain itself poses a formidable challenge. “Golf is the art of the possible,” Steel declares. “Here the idea was to ease the demands, not strengthen them. I’m not particularly technical, but I feel I have a good eye for land and how it can be adapted for golf. We really had to make the most of this fantastic setting.”

Working with a light touch, Steel and his team massaged the land to produce a course that gives players what the Golden Age designers called “the thrill of nature.” Average duffers can lose more than a few balls at Primland without proper course management, but no one complains or gets upset. They’re too busy savoring the layout’s extraordinary thrills, both on and off the fairways.

Traveling from the first tee to the second green, Steel slows down and points to the right, to the Pinnacles of Dan. These cone-shaped rock spires, partially covered in vegetation and resembling an irregular row of giant teeth, rise over 1,000 feet from the floor of the Dan River Gorge. The prospect is dazzling. Ron Whitten of *Golf Digest* was accurate when he described the layout’s setting as “the least-known, most spectacular riverbed landscape in America.” We also hike beyond the green at the fourth hole to a drop-to-oblivion lookout called Buzzard’s Roost, there to enjoy an unobstructed view of the gently rolling Piedmont and Winston-Salem’s modest skyline in the far distance.

There is at Primland what Steel calls an “invigorating variety” to the holes, mainly because the design team was not bound by convention. “There are no rules in golf course design, you know,” he confides to me as we drive round the course. Even if there were, he would have broken every one of them to build his links in the sky.

For example, Steel points out that three of the first six holes are par fives. The first and third holes are both short par fives that can be birdied by good players. Yet Primland is anything but a sweet English trifle. The course and slope rating from the tips at 7,034 yards is 75.0/147 (par 72). Tees are marked for difficulty like ski trails in the Swiss Alps, from Black (most difficult) to Red, Blue and Green. The innovative Black/Red markers, a combination of tees totaling 6,771 yards, gives single-digit handicappers a taste of the full test without burying them in an avalanche of big numbers.

There are only 39 bunkers at Primland, a design feature that Steel believes has been “horribly overdone” in the modern era. Because of their rolled-down grass faces, the sand in these deeply recessed bunkers is barely visible. Certainly they are not a focal point. A few of the holes have but a single bunker. Three holes—13, 14 and 15—have no sand at all. None is required.

There are other anomalies. On any other course, three left-to-right dogleg holes at the finish—holes 16, 17 and 18 swing around the rim of a gorge cleaved by the Dan River—would be considered repetitive. Here, they have an air of inevitability and, given their difficulty, invincibility. Steel describes the burly par-four 18<sup>th</sup> as “a rousing finishing hole, lined on the right by a last reminder of the breathtaking scenery.” If the scenery is breathtaking, so are the

contours in the sprawling, 13,000-square-foot green that sits in a hollow below the newly opened Lodge at Primland, which offers an ethereal two-way view of the golf course on one side and the valley below. (More on the Lodge later).

As for the greens, Steel felt a blistered “potato chip” style was the best look for the roly-poly site. “These greens wouldn’t work everywhere, but due to the savage nature of the site, they do here,” Steel explains. The generous (some would say fiendish) slopes on Primland’s greens, coupled with their lightning quickness, combine to produce some of the most outlandish and entertaining putting challenges in the East. These surfaces, some gathering punchbowls, others giant lolling tongues with multiple tiers, others bearing evidence of buried elephants, are embraced by ridges, swales and spilloffs. Great touch and imagination are required to succeed. Consider these greens a last line of defense in the timeless battle between designer and player.

If Primland’s greens are slippery, the close-mown slopes and swales around them are no less so. Players can employ the bump-‘n-run, Texas wedge, utility punch, flop shot, accidental skull, you name it. No one way is correct. According to Steel, “I wanted to create interesting areas around the greens that could be cut short. Much like a genuine links, I wanted players to have the opportunity to play a variety of shots around the greens.”

As becomes readily apparent during the round, the Highland Course, while only three years old, is more traditional than modern in its presentation. The longer holes offer risk-reward options that invite players to take an aggressive or cautious line off the tee. Of Primland’s five par threes, four of them call for tee shots played from an elevated perch across a valley to a hilltop green. It’s peak-to-peak golf. In the words of Steel, these one-shotters “are wonderfully invigorating and satisfying when you hit the shot to match.”

The Highland Course is living proof that golf course architecture, in the hands of the right practitioner, is an art. The broad corridors are carved from a mixed deciduous forest, mainly hickory, oak, poplar, maple, locust, pine and black gum, with an understory of rhododendron and mountain laurel that bursts into bloom in the spring. The fall foliage display, at its peak in early-to mid-October, is stunning, though most golfers choose to visit in summer, when temperatures at Primland are much cooler than those at sea level. Jones would have loved the place.

As for wildlife, birds of prey—hawks and buzzards—ride the thermals high above the layout. Ring-necked pheasant and wild turkey are a common sight alongside the fairways. Milo, sorghum, clover and winter wheat are planted to nourish these and other game birds. Whitetail deer populate the forest, as do black bear, bobcat and coyote.

Given the distance most players will have traveled to reach this secluded hideaway, starting times are spaced 20 minutes apart so that golfers can experience the epic layout in leisure and solitude. Five-hour rounds are the norm. No one complains. Sensory overload has a way of rendering golfers mute. In truth, a round of golf at Primland is like playing in a national park. All you hear during the round is....nothing. Pure silence. Maybe a few birds chirping, a squirrel scampering across the forest floor, the faint murmur of the Dan River far below in the gorge. That’s it. There are very few places where the accumulated stress of modern life peels away of its own accord. Primland is one of them.

If golfers are pleased by the field of play, so too are outdoorsmen. Hunters and fishermen typically rent one of the property's 10 rustic homes or cabins, each named for a native critter. From September through April, hunters arrive for upland-style wing shooting for pheasant, quail and chukar partridge. (Primland has been an Orvis-endorsed wing-shooting lodge since 1990). Spring gobbler hunting is a big draw. There's also a large herd of whitetail deer on the property, with many big bucks among them. Expert guides accompany each hunt. More shooting? Sporting clays offer varying targets along a mile-long course.

Fly fishermen can angle for native brook trout in the Dan River. In addition, the tail waters of the Pinnacles Reservoirs are stocked with trout and bass. Orvis-trained guides are available, and all manner of hunting and fishing gear is available in the Orvis Pro Shop.

In addition to the mountainside homes and cabins, Primland also offers a trio of deluxe Fairway Cottages located alongside the 10<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> fairways of the Highland Course. Spacious and comfortable, these cottages have cathedral ceilings, exposed beams, hardwood floors, stone-faced fireplaces and French doors that open to wrap-around decks overlooking the course.

The resort upped its lodging ante significantly in September, 2009, when the 72,000-square-foot, LEED-certified Lodge at Primland opened. Commanding a high ridge, the Lodge looks to distant peaks in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In time, I believe it will come to be recognized as the most beautifully situated hostelry in the Southeast.

The design of the Lodge was approved by Primat shortly before his death in July, 2008. Primat, who loved the region's history, insisted that timber be salvaged from old tobacco-curing barns in Virginia and North Carolina and recycled throughout the Lodge. These burnished woods add warmth, charm and character to the building. Anchored by a honey-colored stone foundation, the Lodge's board-and-batten exterior is faced with rough-sawn lumber and cedar wood shingles. The roof of the Lodge looks like slate, but it's actually fabricated from recycled tires. The fanciful carved woodwork below the roofline, a Tyrolean motif, is a tip of the hat to the Primat family's residence in Switzerland. Encircled by hand-laid stone walls, the Lodge does not lack for grandeur, but like the golf course, it looks like it belongs here.

Within are 26 spacious, earth-toned suites in several different floor plans, most with reclaimed wood walls and ceilings. All have exceptional views from their balconies or terraces. The Lodge's stylish Great Room is accented by a pair of matching fireplaces, stone floors and large area rugs. The two-story, glass-walled wine room adds a touch of drama. Dining is superb. The Highland Bar, one of the coziest 19<sup>th</sup> holes anywhere, was built from rare wormy chestnut and looks to the 18<sup>th</sup> green.

In addition to a wide range of amenities that include a full-service spa, an indoor pool, fitness center, boardroom, theater and an intimate dining room called Elements, the Lodge's most distinctive feature is a tall round tower, inspired by areas silos, that houses the window-walled, 1,800-square-foot Pinnacles Suite. Atop the tower is a dome-like observatory where guests can peer into the night sky through a high-powered telescope. There is little if any light pollution at Primland—on a clear moonless night, the sky is pitch black and paved with stars. (Guests can

<http://theaposition.com/Articles/9/8/1/Above-and-Beyond-Is-the-Highland-Course-at-Primland-the-best-mountain-track-in-America>

request that the telescope be aimed to specific constellations). Primat insisted that the property's landscape lighting be designed to minimize the upward escape of light.

The final word on this elite sporting getaway belongs to the visionary creator of its golf course. "There is a remoteness about Primland, a sense of escape, that is absolutely special," says Steel. "It may be a hard place to get to, but it's a tough place to leave." Especially on a beautiful fall day with the trees robed in brilliant shades of yellow, orange and crimson, and especially with the Lodge's introductory rate of \$199 per night, double occupancy.