

Whistling Straits-The Straits
Kohler, Wisconsin

Architect: Pete Dye (2004)

	Par	Rating	Slope	Yardage
Black	72	76.7	151	7362
Blue	72	74.2	144	6909
Green	72	71.9	137	6459
Red	72	66.9	125	5396

Overview:

The Kohler/Whistling Straits resort is something to behold, it has first class accommodations, great food, wonderful service, and four, count em, four Pete Dye golf courses. But the thing that put this place on the map is The Straits course which has already hosted two PGA Championships, a U.S. Senior Open, and will be the host to the Ryder Cup in 2020.

There are two things that are startling about The Straits. First it is essentially a links style course in the middle of America and second, everything you see that makes this a links style course, except for the ocean sized Lake Michigan over your shoulder, was manufactured by man. The not so startling fact is that Pete Dye had the audacity to conceive and pull off the first two. The fact that he was convinced he could create a links style layout from scratch with office building sized sand dunes, massive waste areas peppered with endless bunkers, and acres and acres of native links type grasses on what was essentially a pancake flat piece of lakeside ground, formerly an air force target range, is beyond audacious-it was almost egotistical. But Pete has never suffered for lack of self confidence and damned if he did not pull it off. He even has the signature sheep wandering the course to make it feel like you are playing an old links course in rural Ireland.

Besides the engineering feat of importing and placing about 8,000 truckloads of dirt from Indiana to sculpt the land, Pete had to conceive of a routing to expose as many of the holes as possible to the lake winds to create the real look and feel of links golf in Michigan. It is a figure eight routing with the front nine going south along the lake shore and then looping back upon itself to catch more shoreline on the way back in. The back side does the same thing going north along the shoreline and looping back for more shore on the way back to the clubhouse. This puts 8 of the 18 holes with direct interface to the lake and another six within eye view. The influence of the wind off the lake can be profound and since the holes go in both directions on both sides you rarely get but a couple of holes in a row with the same wind effect.

Pete did his homework and integrated many of the important strategic links characteristics so that the course can be challenge no matter the wind direction and you have a chance to be successful as well. As with most links courses these greens are very long which allows the greens staff to place the pin on the front when the wind is in your face or in the back when the wind is helping-this will make it easier for you to use the green surface to manage your shot into the green. Most of the 500 bunkers are well out of the playing area but the positioning of ones in the driving areas, layup areas, and greensides are staggered so that there always seem to be tactical bunkers in play no matter the prevailing wind. There is open access at the front of most greens to give you the bump and run option if a lower approach shot is in order. The only failing is the turf is not as firm

as you expect on a links course so sometimes those bump and runs will bump and check. Most significantly, the towering dunes and massive waste areas adjacent to the fairways and greens create visual intimidation that make TPC Sawgrass look tame. This psychological collateral can be very significant if you let yourself get too fearful of playing the right shot.

The par threes on this course are all stunners-forced carries over huge waste areas to precipice greens with the backdrop of the lake behind. This lack of topological backdrop can make frame of reference of the shots hard to discern. The wind influence on the three pars is at it's max because they are the most exposed holes on the course. There are a number of serpentine par fours where Pete used the large dunes to obscure your vision of the target-this is especially true if you hit your drive on the wrong line on the doglegs. The way he wends these holes through the dunes and sets the green complexes against massive backdrops and falloffs creates that links feeling of risk and reward on almost every shot. It takes some moxie to play this course successfully.

The greens are massive and have lots of slope and tiering. In many cases being on the wrong section of the green is like not being on the green at all. You have to resist playing to the safe side on many of these holes otherwise you will be three putting all day long. Green speeds are affected by slope and grain, but wind is not to be forgotten because it can accentuate the curve and speed of a putt drastically.

The caddies here are top notch-they are truly professional caddies who understand the course and the tactics for playing it successfully. Heed what they say and ask lots of questions-you need to hit every shot with full confidence out here if you want to play to your handicap.

Don't forget where you are-I recommend the kilbasa at the turn with some kraut-it is almost indigenous to the region.

Hole-by-hole (Blue/Green tees):

#1 Outward Bound Par 4 366/355 yards

The course begins with a relatively tame right to left leaner. The bunker on the right frames the landing area so if you hit it right center off that you have about 130 in. The green sits slightly below you on a 5 to 11 angle so you will be looking right up the green from this drive position. The bunkers short left and behind the green are a no-no this early in the round so a gentle draw feeding up the length of the green is the intended favorite.

#2 Cross Country Par 5 578/518 yards

Another nice warm-up hole before the real challenge begins. This hole is strewn with bunkering all the way up both sides-get used to it since you will see this all day. The drive here needs to be left edge to get a clear look up the hole to the layup area. If you drive down the right there is a huge mound that Pete and Alice left on the corner that will make the second shot blind. Layup is to around 100ish-there is a deep pot bunker at around 35 yards that makes going for this green with a long shot a bit of a risk. Green is set back to the left and hangs over a deep recession off the left of the green with more sand-there is a bail out pitching area short and right of the green you can work with.

#3 O'Man 3 176/163 yards

The three pars on this course are just linksy awesome. They all have full exposure to the effects of the lake and the visual intimidation of greens perched over an abyss. The hole plays slightly downhill and I think it is one club less than the measured distance before you take in gale effect. The key on this one is the angle of the green set to your teeing area and the dramatic roller coaster contouring of this green. You have to work it right to left to take advantage of the 43 yards of green length presented. It also banks to the left so anything landing in the first third of the green will feed back and left. Getting close to the hole is the clever use of this topographical feature.

#4 Glory Par 4 443/416 yards

Now it is getting serious. This is a visually intimidating look from the tee with very clever shot lines. It seems you want to favor the left on the drive but you don't since the fairway pitches left and something on the left edge will be tumbling down into the oblivion of sand and grass. If you have succeeded in hitting it down the right and letting it feed to the very end of the narrow landing area you have a carry shot over another bit of oblivion to a green hanging precariously on the edge of Lake Michigan's cliffs. The approach is a long club so you aim front right and let it feed to the left onto the green. Par here is worth an extra Bud Light after the round.

#5 Snake Par 5 550/526 yards

This is the only bad hole on the course-clearly they ran out of land and decided to wedge a jigsaw puzzle hole to fill out the par requirement. The hole itself is completely out of context as well-it seems like it was pulled from some gated community course in Boca and dropped here. Drive straight away to center ignoring any of the drastic turns of the hole coming up. Now you hit a layup up the right side about 200 yards toward the next tee box, avoiding the river they put in on the left to cut off direct access to the green. Narrow green is a cape setting jutting out into the river but collared by sand in front. There is a bail out pitching area short and right if you need it. Not a very inspiring hole.

#6 Gremlin's Ear Par4 355/344 yards

OK, quickly back to the linksy format you were playing earlier. This looks like the Gremlin's Ear. The landing area for the drive is deceptive-it is very wide left of the fairway bunker but there is long grass there that makes the second problematic. Too tight to the right and you have a blind shot at the green. Drive is center to the end of a landing area right before a very deep crevice between this landing area and the green. Now you have to take on the oblivion again because the shallow green is draped across the top of a huge grassy depression with evil pot bunkers. If the pin is on the left you can aim at the pitching area left and let it feed onto the front left. If it is middle or right there is no conservative approach. Lots of contour in this green.

#7 Shipwreck 3 192/176 yards

Again the name is totally appropriate...there are the skeletons of drunken sailors short and right of this green. Like the first par three green hangs out over the lake and there really is no choice but to pick the right club and aim at the center of the green. Steep hillside frames the back left but the grassy depressions in the hill are as intimidating as the bunkers. Pete sure did some sculpting out here.

#8 On The Rocks Par 4 451/413 yards

This is a long and difficult par four challenge that reminds me of #10 at Pebble Beach. Drive is to a blind landing area on the left-avoid going down the right for fear of engaging the steep drop-off on that side to the dunes et al. Like the second on ten at Pebble you have a long club out over the edge of the bad stuff to a green set back in the right corner against the lake. Be bold-you have no choice really-the green is 47 yards long so you have a lot to work with.

#9 Down and Dirty Par 4 403/386 yards

You are turning back inland for a short rest at the house. You drive it to left center and it will feed to the right as the landing area drops toward the green. Anything right off the tee brings a bevy of bunkering into play and a blind shot at the green because a large tree on the hill up the right. Now the hole drops mightily down the hill to a fabulously visual dell green setting below. This green is very narrow and hangs over three small, deep pots just left of the green. The approach is best shaped right to left and working up the green. Time for a frosty root beer and some indigenous fare. Remember you are in Wisconsin so if you are not going to eat cheese eat sausage. It is actually the kilbasa that I would recommend-you will need plenty of the frosty to quell the spices.

#10 Voyageur Par 4 359/320 yards

I love the look of this hole that starts the inward half. You drive from a perched tee across an abyss to a fairway that is perched even higher above you. Pete stuck a pot bunker dead center of the landing area at about 115 from the green. The aiming point for me is over the pot that is embedded in the face of the fairway edge which would take you to a line just right of the pot in the middle. This gives you a wide look back up the hill at the even more perched green. Hell this hole should have been named "Perch". Green sits on a 4 to 10 angle to the left so the best shape is a draw starting at the front right edge and following the curvature of the putting surface. I think this is a good scoring opportunity in spite of all the apparent danger.

#11 Sand Box Par 5 552/516 yards

Now the Dye's get a bit wacky-this hole has more turns and twists than the streets of Le Mans but the posted speed limit is much less. You want to drive it kind of straight out at the bunker left of the silo in the distance. No shaving of the first turn of the hole is advised-trolls are lurking there among the dunes to eat your ball. Now you will notice a "fortress bunker" on the left that starts about about 100 yards out and goes almost all the way to the green. Layup is to about 115 just past the U-shaped bunker sticking out on the right at 120.

The green is elevated from you with a steep face short and left so you have to elevate the approach into the green and make it do the “down boo-boo”. I found this green has lots of contour in it so you may have a put with a big swerve and a steep incline to traverse.

#12 Pop Up Par 3 138/120 yards

Just another one of these three pars with the green wind surfing over the lake. The shot is short-only about 140 but the 46 yard green has two neighborhoods that are connected by a subway line. You have to elevate your shot into the section with the flag or this is three putt city. Balls landing in the middle will bound into the back bunkers and there are no up and downs from there. Front left of the green is steep and falls off to the left. Oh, by the way, don't be short.

#13 Cliff Hanger Bluff Par 4 370/343 yards

It is getting to belt tightening time-this hole is generous on the left but extremely tight on the right which is the shortest but not the preferred line to the hole. Drive it straight to left center and you will have a look down the ramp to a dangling participle of a green which is, surprise, perilously close to the water. The shot in can land in the front third of this one and feed up the green to the flag which is ramped back to front.

#14 Widow's Watch Par 4 357/341 yards

This hole will momentarily turn away from the lake but it is a sharp 90 degreeish dogleg back toward the lake on the second shot. Drive it straight away to right center to get a look back to the green set to the left. Tee balls on the left end up in a low area and there is a huge mound that blinds your view to the green from there. Another pretty long green but it is set on a 7 to 1 angle back to the right so it seems like a fade would fit the bill into this green. The bunkers protecting the right side of this undulating surface are fierce so the miss is short and left of the green.

#15 Grand Strand Par 4 449/419 yards

From here on out you will be tested on every hole to maintain your scorecard but you cannot play conservatively in this stretch because doubles are awaiting to prey on any timid shots. This is the number 4 index hole but it easily could be number 2 if you ask me. Very long, very uphill, very tight and a bit of a zig-zag to boot. It is really a 4.75 par if you ask me. Drive straight away and long-don't miss right because the sandy areas there are impossible to recover from. If you are in the fairway you now have a very long shot across another annoying cross bunker at about 7 yards into a green that is stuck up in a raised alcove to the left. Another deep green-which if the wind is blowing can be helpful to contain your effort-with very serious contours so don't be surprised to see your ball wandering off line once it is on the ground.

#16 Endless Bite Par 5 519/500 yards

Arguably an opportunity hole, but not without taking a serious bite out of crime as the name of the hole indicates. Drive to center and then your layup is to the right about 200 to the top of the corner at 80 yards where the hole turns to the left again. Now another deep green stands sentinel above the dunes, sand, and lake to the left. If you layup properly you should get a scoring chance here.

#17 Pinched Nerve Par 3 216/190 yards

These are two of the most technical and difficult finishing holes you will ever play and that is just if the wind is not howling. First a bit of distraction. Notice on the back of the tee there are all these divots pointing away from the green out into the lake behind you. This is one of those guy challenge things-there is a rock in the water about 150 yards out that the lake birds like to perch on-it is your challenge to try to pick them off the rock with a seven iron. Childish but fun.

Now turn 180 and look at one of the coolest par three challenges you have ever seen. Of all the intimidating par 3's you have played today-this is the most intimidating. For all the obvious reasons that you are hitting a 190 to 200 yard shot over a sandy abyss to a green that is an office building above the lake. Good news is that the hole is downhill and mitigates the carry distance a club. The green is 43 yards long with two very distinct areas. Your approach should be from the right but there is a huge mound Pete absentmindedly left on the front right of the green that you have to carry to use the front of the green to feed the ball up the slope to the back tiers. Truth is a fade is a better shape but it takes kishkas of steel to flight it over the left oblivion and then land it back onto the surface. If you happen to miss this green left you need a 75 degree wedge to get it up onto this green. Even Mickey does not have this shot.

#18 Dyeabolical Par 4 435/413 yards

Sort of a goofy hole but it has reach eye feature to it. The tee sits high up on the left and you drive it down the right as close to the end of the fairway as you can. You can overhit this fairway since it is a downhill shot if you are not careful but you have to challenge the edge. If you are on grass with a relatively flat stance the next shot is very challenging across the transition to a green that is set to the left adjacent to Seven Mile Creek about 20 feet below. The shot in to this four leaf clover green is a draw-but putting it in the right clove is a real accomplishment. The clubhouse sits right above this green and there will be spectators who watched you manage this last hole. Putting out for par can be a very gratifying experience.

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