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# SOUTHERN Comfort

Outdoor recreation is on full display in the “Show-Me-State” at Big Cedar Lodge

♦ BY ROBERT KAUFMAN

Mark Twain once penned, “Do not tell fish stories where the people know you; but particularly, don’t tell them where they know the fish.”

Whatever tale is being told, the truth lies in the degree of embellishment by the storyteller. Believability belongs to the listener. But when the story concerns an entrepreneur who casted his career selling fishing tackle in the back of his father’s liquor store and went on to become the founder and CEO of Bass Pro Shops, America’s largest outdoor-recreation retailer, the legend of Johnny Morris requires no further exaggeration.

Growing up surrounded by Mother Nature’s vast wonderland of forests, rivers and lakes covering the Ozark Mountains in Missouri, the 69-year old ardent conservationist, often referred to as “the Walt Disney of the Outdoors,” possessed an uncanny vision to help guide him reel in more than 4,600 acres overlooking Table Rock Lake, eight miles south of Branson, MO, for developing a premier

wilderness playground. In 1987, after Morris purchased the land for \$5 an acre, Big Cedar Lodge has since evolved into a major windfall luring more than 1.5 million guests annually to connect with the great outdoors.

When the humble Morris bought the key to Big Cedar Lodge, the intent was to open a fishing camp as an incentive for his customers and employees. However, the self-made retailing mogul soon had his sights set on a more ambitious plan that would turn him into a niche luxury hotelier. Three decades later, Morris’ dream continues to unfold at his hilltop four-season paradise.

The first hint of arrival hits you in the face with a two-lane, wooden arch gateway displaying signage for “Big Cedar Lodge, America’s Premier Wilderness Resort” and “Johnny Morris’ Top of the Rock Ozarks Heritage Preserve.” Once entered, you access a territory filled with a collection of accommodations, including waterfront log cabins (*most feature Jacuzzis and wood-*

*burning fireplaces plus expansive living areas for attracting larger families*), cottages and three lodges, an assortment of restaurants, a variety of nature-based activities including fishing, boating, shooting, hiking, spa and wellness offerings. Fun Mountain provides a refuge to bowl (16



*lanes with a unique underwater ocean experience*), rock climbing, laser tag, video games, bumper cars and more to keep the youthful spirit flowing.

Culture-minded visitors are treated to Morris’ staggering acquisition of artifacts paying homage to the Native Americans who made their home in these Ozark Hills and, though it’s located an hour away adjacent the Bass Pro Shops headquarters in Springfield, MO, the latest item on Morris’ menu is Wonders of Wildlife National Museum & Aquarium, the largest, most immersive and wildlife attraction in the world. His incessant ingenuity even allowed him to turn an unexpected natural hazard into an attraction after heavy rains opened an enormous sinkhole on the property in May 2015. It has since grown to 141 feet deep and 270 feet wide but instead of being advised to fill the hole, Morris directed his team to keep exploring with the hopes of discovering a secret passageway and



Falls Lodge at Big Cedar Lodge





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uncovering a massive cave system running through his property.

Regardless what Morris uncovers or develops at his rustic retreat, the end result is nothing short of “wow!” But as is so often heard on late-night infomercials, “wait, there’s more!”

Morris may have had little, if any interest in golf, however, he did recognize that many golfers love to fish and hunt. By combining his two outdoor sporting passions and golf, plus all the additional resort amenities in one place, Big Cedar Lodge not only serves as a major tourism boost for the Ozarks but is on track to become America’s next great golf destination.

“Johnny may not play as much golf as he’d like but he does love the game and certainly wants to expose more of the world to what the Ozarks and Big Cedar has to offer,” says Steve Friedlander, veteran PGA Professional and newly appointed Vice President of Golf Operations at Big Cedar Lodge. “Golf is a natural attraction because golfers tend to be outdoorsman and conservationists, as well, and when you have five of the greatest names in golf designing and building courses for you, that makes people perk up and want to come see this place.”

The Forbes-listed billionaire who, seemingly, operates in a money-is-no-object world, has compiled a



Mountain Top Golf Course

treasure chest of some of the highest profile golf course architects in the business. Gems like Tom Fazio, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Ben Crenshaw & Bill Coore, and a new headliner beginning to make his mark in the design world, named Tiger Woods.

Currently open for play are Fazio’s 18-hole Buffalo Ridge Springs, Player’s 13-hole, par-3 Mountain Top and Nicklaus’ nine-hole, par-3 Top of the Rock, where the green fee includes a ticket for a Disneyesque-style 2.5-mile golf cart ride to the adjacent Lost Canyon Cave and Nature Trail to experience stunning rock formations, Amish bridges, waterfalls, and a four-story cave complete with a Bat Bar serving John L’s Lemonade. Also donning

the landscape (*adjoining the sinkhole*) is the Palmer-designed night-lit driving range boasting 16 target greens and Arnie’s Barn, Palmer’s 150-year old barn dismantled from his home in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and reassembled at Top of the Rock to serve as the 19th hole.

Coming in Spring 2018 is the Coore/Crenshaw 18-hole course followed in 2019 by Woods’ 18-hole Payne’s Valley, honoring the legacy of Missouri’s homegrown PGA Tour player Payne Stewart. Welcome to golf nirvana!

At Big Cedar Lodge, where seeing is believing, a one-of-a-kind wilderness community is being created that will eliminate any doubt on the tale of Johnny Morris. Hook, line, and sinker!



Buffalo Ridge



Cabins Through Autumn Trees