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The greens at Waterton Lakes are more difficult than they appear. (Photo: Guy Nicholson)

## COURSE REVIEW

# Why Waterton Lakes is a must-see course for golf

# architecture enthusiasts

Alberta's Waterton Lakes offers raw, unpolished links-like golf at its finest.

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**By Alex Hunter** - **CREATED: MARCH 17, 2026**



As long as the golfer's attention is seized by the adventure of the golf course from start to finish, you have a captivating golf experience worth celebrating. Waterton Lakes, a remote golf course situated in Waterton Lakes National Park in southwestern Alberta, is one such example.

A three-hour journey from Calgary might hinder its chances of being included on "bucket list" discussions, and while affiliated with Stanley Thompson, you aren't likely to find his notable bunker styling used at other Rocky Mountain masterpieces like Banff Springs or Jasper Park Lodge. Nevertheless, an immensely fresh breath of simplicity awaits. Golf, without the unnecessary frills, in one of the world's most magical settings, is a winning combination.

Alberta's mountain golf courses are notably celebrated in Canada and beyond, yet the inclusion of Waterton Lakes on such lists and celebrations is often reserved to the most well-travelled golfers. It is here that the lack of distractions from tourist buses, lengthy rounds and an overwhelmed tee sheet enhances the experience. The course's remoteness is a refreshing tonic for those seeking a more laid-back, at-one-with-nature journey.

Established as a Dominion Forest Park in 1895, later becoming Canada's fourth National Park in 1911 when the National Parks Branch (known today as Parks Canada) was established, Waterton Lakes National Park is the stunning southern cousin of Banff National Park. At the time, the National Parks Branch was headed by a gentleman named James B. Harkin, who is largely responsible for the development of the plethora of golf courses in Canada's National Parks. That does not include Jasper and Banff, which were developed by Canadian National Railway and Canadian Pacific Railway, respectively.

**Course: Waterton Lakes**

**Location: Waterton Park, Alta.**

**Architect(s): William (Bill) E. Thomson (1922), Herbert Knight/Teddy Wagstaffe**

(1932), Stanley Thompson (1952)

Peak rate: \$67

Harkin understood that golf courses could be used as a tourism venture to promote the parks, both domestically and abroad. His contributions, along with others such as James Smart and James Henry (J.H.) Atkinson, brought a great deal of attention and tourism to Canada's national parks.

Following the First World War, Harkin enlisted the services of William (Bill) E. Thomson to build the first National Parks golf course at Waterton Lakes. Thomson was a Scottish golf professional responsible for establishing and running the original nine-hole golf course in Banff. His work there predates Donald Ross's 18-hole routing and Stanley Thompson's subsequent renovation and additions to the famed Banff links. Thomson's nine-hole golf course at Waterton opened in 1922.

According to hearsay, in 1929 Stanley Thompson was asked to develop a plan to expand the nine-hole Waterton golf course. If, however, there is documented evidence to support this, it remains undiscovered to researchers. The *Lethbridge Herald* and *Canadian Golfer* reported that the course expanded to 18 holes, 6,100 yards in 1932;

neither record mentions Thompson contributing to the project. One would think, considering Thompson's fame and ego at the time, that he would have been mentioned in at least one of the pieces. The *Lethbridge Herald* then reported on June 15, 1932, that superintendent Herbert Knight, golf professional Teddy Wagstaffe and other members of the parks team were responsible for the layout of the new nine. The crew opted to have the new addition wind itself around the perimeter of the existing layout. On Dominion Day (July 1) 1932 all 18 holes officially opened and fees were either 50 cents for 18 holes, one dollar per day or three dollars for a week! A mere \$10.58, \$21.15, and \$63.46 today when accounting for inflation.



The setting is spectacular at Waterton Lakes Golf Course. (Photo: Guy Nicholson)

In the mid-1940s, Thompson is confirmed to have visited Waterton Lakes at the request of National Parks manager James Smart. In archival documents, Thompson writes to

Smart, saying that he is familiar with the golf course, but omits mention of any prior work done. Curiously, perhaps, Thompson suggested that the course be moved to a new location, rather than make renovations to the existing routing. He deemed that the routing was not desirable and that the better land by the hotel was more suitable. This move, thankfully, never materialized. Between then and his eventual completion of a renovation plan, Thompson was written to by Smart urgently to complete plans for the golf course. It appears his request to move the golf course site, and charge significantly more funds of the government as a result, perhaps caused delays in Thompson's work.

In 1952 plans for the golf course at its existing site were finally produced. These plans included a transition to the highly desirable feature of grass greens – up until this time they were oiled sand based. A number of Thompson's recommendations are said to have been executed, but not the plan in its entirety. His last visit to Waterton Lakes took place in November 1952, a year before his death, making Waterton Lakes the final golf course that he worked on. And, unlike so many of his golf courses in Canada, it has remained more or less untouched since.

Frankly there is nothing else in Canada remotely similar to Waterton Lakes. It's raw, unpolished links-like golf at its finest. The architectural features are mostly low-profile with relatively few bunkers; as such, the topography and surrounding landscape create most of the visual and strategic interest. Despite being less heavy-handed than most of his other work, Thompson's influence, and that of early golf course architecture principles, are evident throughout the routing. Green settings and mounding offer glimpses into the past without being neutered by the substandard practices of the dark ages.

## **Featured holes and course details**

Waterton Lakes National Park is described as the junction where the Rocky Mountains meet the Prairies. This is an apt description for the golf course, too, which is laid across a gently rolling plain over which Mount Crandell looms. Taking a broader view, the golf course is situated on a bench northeast of the town site, overlooking Lonesome Lake, with Vimy Peak, The Prince of Wales Hotel and the glacial waters of the Waterton Lakes all to its south.

The golf course embodies the natural elements of its setting to deliver a quiet solitude that is often found at some of the game's most hallowed venues. It's clear that its stewards have long recognized that the setting is good enough on its own and that any signs of artificiality would only detract from it. With the mountains looming, the ever-present wind rustling the trees and golden fescue, and the ball bouncing along the firm fairways, the playing experience is pure bliss, reminiscent of the fine links of Scotland even. Despite the surrounding mountains or rolling terrain, the course is eminently walkable and, as with most, best experienced this way.

**Second hole, 485 yards:** The collection of half-par holes is one of the golf course's strengths. At only 485 yards, this is certainly a short par 5 for today's standards, let alone at elevation greater than 4,000 feet above sea level. The tee shot is framed by the glowing fescue and Mount Crandell hovering directly above. The approach up and over the diagonally bisecting hillside is blind, and, from the tee, there is little reference as to where the green is situated. Three bunkers surround the green, which is gently canted from right to left.



**Third hole, 316 yards:** With the fairway rising from the tee to a plateau before falling back down to the green, this hole plays opposite in concept to the second. This shorter par 4 is drivable with the right wind conditions and a favourable bounce (or two). Waterton's location, sandwiched between the mountain ranges, is conducive to windy conditions, with it being a constant factor in a game here. Aiming down the left side provides the best opportunity to find the green, which is slightly propped up. A lonesome bunker slightly short and left adds complexity to any decision from the tee, as does the mounding behind the green, which muddles with depth perception from the fairway. Don't forget to ring the bell as you come off the green, even if no one is around.



**Fourth hole, 221 yards:** If the second is a half-par hole, its counterweight certainly comes at the long par-3 fourth. The uphill tee shot, framed yet again by Mount Crandell in the distance, is another blind one. With the same hillside found on holes two and three obstructing the sight of the green from the tee, a nearby platform provides an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the putting surface, should the need arise to acquaint oneself with the proper line of play. A set of shoulder mounds in behind adds a measure of flair to the small, front-to-back sloping green.

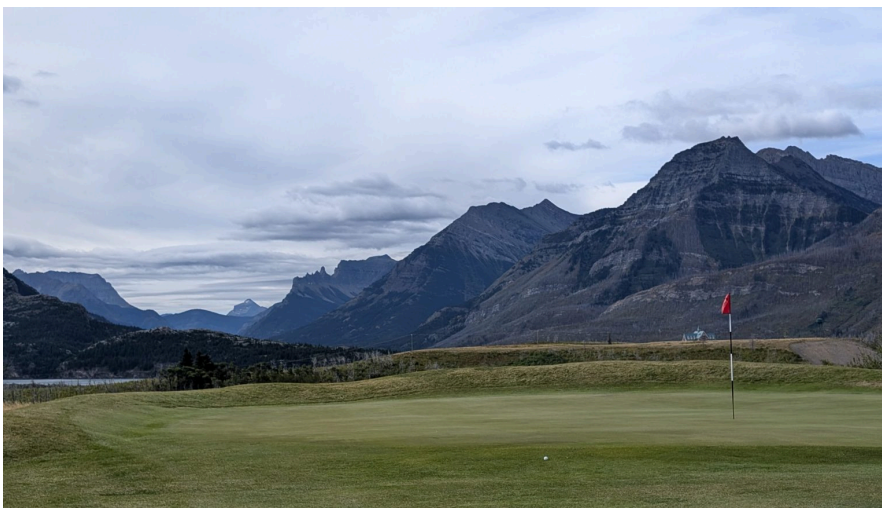


**Seventh hole, 244 yards:** Upon first glance, the seventh might look like a nondescript hole, but its sheer length is as daunting of a task as the course's many other features. Even though it plays downhill, the blustery wind is commonly head-on; therefore, a driver might be the club of choice, and it may still not be enough. Walking away with four is the likeliest scenario. Better luck next time!



**Eighth hole, 379 yards:** Stanley Thompson's protégé, Robert Trent Jones Sr., once claimed the straight hole is the most difficult in golf, for it requires players to hit not one, but two (or three!) straight shots. Certainly, straight shots can confound players who prefer to work the golf ball, complicating the feat of simply getting the ball from the tee into the hole. The eighth certainly falls into the straight hole category, and one that's complex to play strictly due to such windy conditions experienced at Waterton. Upon approach, the green sits perched right on the

edge of the hillside as if there were a sheer drop-off behind. Clever use of more shoulder-esque mounding to the rear helps contain low running shots. This is a good place to take a moment to stand at the back of this surface and soak in the surroundings – namely, the Prince of Wales Hotel and magnificent mountain range that are in full view here.



The routing does a good job of spreading around the topographical interest, with the front nine playing inside the back, both in a counterclockwise fashion. Thus, each half interacts with the elevation changes multiple times throughout their unfolding. It's the cleverest trick the architects used to define the golf course's stature and keep things interesting.

**13th hole, 157 yards:** At the 13th, a large coulee that must be climbed leads to a green pad inserted into the hillside. No more than

10 yards in depth, it is fronted by a fall-off and rear guarded by a steep bank, making this approach one of the most delicate. Of all the green complexes, that of 13 is apt to deal the most severe punishment for a misjudged tee shot. It is almost as if someone took an excavator and scooped out this green site to create a little bench for which a giant might come down from the mountains and take a rest. Exquisite.



**14th hole, 346 yards:** A narrow fairway is characterized by the divided forest and that of the valley through which the golf course plays. Set high above the coulee at the highest point on the property, and facing due south with the mountain range in full view again, the captivating scenery and natural land movement combine to deliver an exhilarating tee shot. With the fairway sloping sharply from right to left, the start line of the tee ball is demanding.



**15th hole, 419 yards:** If anyone ever criticizes the greens for being “flat, boring circles,” one would be confused by that criticism upon visiting Waterton Lakes. While a majority might have more subtle features that are defined by the broad slopes rather than large internal contouring, the 15th shakes that stereotype. The largest pad on the course slopes severely in many directions, with small wavy internal contours that befuddle and trick the eye. In 1932, this hole was characterized as one of the best in Western Canada – impressive given the nature of comparison to Banff Springs and Jasper Park Lodge – and with such a green site and surface, it remains obvious why.



**16th hole, 299 yards:** Perfectly shaped to the contour of the land and mountain in plain view, the fairway here cants from right to left with the dogleg, tempting the aggressive player to cut off as much as they can chew to reach the green of this short par 4. It's interesting that this tee shot is played from this angle, as just to the right of the 15th green stands the original tee for this hole. It provided a more direct, albeit blind, line of play to the green.



**18th hole, 396 yards:** If the prior 17 holes didn't leave an impression, the 18th is likely

to do so. Featuring another elevated tee shot to culminate the round, the correct manner of play is not immediately evident. A rather large trench disrupts the fairway all the way towards the ideal landing area and a section of dense mounding and fescue separates the ninth and 18th fairways. Playing out of the valley provides a shorter, yet blind, approach. Any approach shot is made even more tricky due to the elevated green that requires the golf ball to be hoisted into the mercy of the wind.



Those arriving armed with the expectation to find pristine conditions may be prone to disappointment. But this is proper golf – unusual, rambunctious, and unostentatious. That is what makes Waterton special and worthy of the adventure to get there.

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