

Mastering The Masters

A newbie finds plenty of plaid, pars, and pimento cheese at one of our nation's most prestigious golf tournaments

BY JESSICA FENDER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KERRY MALONEY

A river of pastel polo shirts washes past me. The emerald turf beneath my feet is somehow bouncy and cushiony all at once. And the fresh morning air hums with the electricity of barely contained excitement. You don't have to know a thing about golf to know you're on hallowed ground at Augusta National—which is good, because I don't.

Putting it kindly, I'm an unlikely candidate to attend The Masters, the prestigious golf tournament held each spring at the Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia. I'm more brewpub than country club, so my knowledge of the sport of kings (they call it that, right? *Editor: Nope, that's horse racing*) begins and ends with *Caddyshack*. So, I've got that going for me.

But sometimes you need the fresh eyes of an outsider to confirm that yes, beneath those 80-plus years of perfectly manicured tradition, The Masters is a total blast—even for golf noobs.

So that I'm not alone in utter cluelessness, I've invited my friend Kerry. Dressed head-to-toe in eye-popping plaids and the event's signature gold and green (because, golf?), we file through the club gates at around 8:30 a.m. with a much-needed chaperone. We're attending the Par 3 Competition, a just-for-fun contest the day before the tournament begins, when both current stars and golf legends play. The day's to-do list is simple: Snap epic selfies, grab souvenirs, eat all available snacks, and maybe watch a little golf. In that order.



Clockwise from center: The author collects an array of Masters-themed snacks to prep for a day of spectating, shopping, and cheering on players. The Masters pimento-cheese sandwich is as legendary as the course's manual scoreboard. The author and her photographer-pal Kerry Maloney share their golf-centric fashion sense. Attendees come to meet their favorite golf stars as well as to fill up on the famed Georgia peach ice cream sandwiches.



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Because cell phones are banned on the course, the author and other attendees use old-school landlines to brag about being at The Masters.

Masters Class

Local or visitor; man or woman; first-timer or Augusta veteran, everyone we encounter is totally pumped to be here. The giddiness is infectious.

“Hey, woman! I’m at The Masters!” I hear a fellow attendee, a gentleman from Phoenix, exclaim mischievously to his formerly sleeping wife on the other side of the country. We’re standing at a bank of curly-corded landlines where guests can make free “Can you believe I’m at Augusta National?!” calls. Cell phones, like running and shouting, are forbidden here. In true millennial fashion, I have no numbers memorized except 911, but Kerry calls her mom and grandma.

The cell phone ban also means we’ll have to take our selfies the old-fashioned way, with cameras, which are only allowed on practice days.

Our fabulous guide, Staci Cooper, an ambassador for the city of Augusta and a tournament regular, expertly steers us to the club’s two best photo opportunities: the massive manual scoreboard at the entrance and the iconic clubhouse at Founders Circle. At the front of the line for the latter, we have just enough time to admire the club’s stately magnolia-lined driveway before professional photographers take our selfies for us. Classy!

In general, wandering around Augusta National feels

like strolling through golf Disneyland, with tidy sprays of flowers, courteous staff who work with clockwork precision, and acres of meticulously cropped grass as far as the eye can see. The grounds are so exceptionally flawless, in fact, that they’ve acquired their own urban legends. *I heard that groundskeepers freeze the azalea bushes to keep them perfect for the tournament and underground fans dry the greens after it rains—and so on.*

The sun is out in full force, and I remember two days too late to pack a hat. Thankfully, there are dozens of hats, T-shirts, pins, pens, beer cozies, bag towels, and even garden gnomes at Augusta’s massive gift shop. Some designs change year-to-year, making a shopping trip an event in itself.

“This is my Black Friday,” I hear a man behind me half-joke as we get to the front of the long line and enter the brightly lit chaos. It’s the second Masters for Ocean City, Maryland, resident Jeff Adkins, and he’s all smiles. “The last time was nearly a decade ago.”

Augusta National tchotchkes are available exclusively at the club, which is members-only the rest of the year. Mementos are so prized, we occasionally spot folks reaching into course trashcans to rescue the logoed plastic cups. Kerry and I decide it’s time to snag a few of those cups for ourselves (from the cafeteria) along with some lunch.

The food at Augusta National is legendary, but nothing more so than the paper-wrapped pimento-cheese sandwich, a delicacy of shredded sharp cheese, mayo, and mystery spices on white bread. Like everything Masters-related, it's cloaked in decades of tradition. Unlike a lot of other Masters-related things, it costs just \$1.50. In fact, all food here is inexpensive; Kerry and I pocket a few Masters-logoed cookies, moon pies, and caramel popcorn to pad out our souvenir haul.

"We'd better get those peach ice cream sandwiches first," Staci cautions as we head toward the register. "They'll go quickly." It pays to know a pro. The palm-sized frozen treats are studded with sweet chunks of real peach. We're in Georgia, after all.

On Course

With our biggest priorities accomplished, it's finally time to watch some golf. We tick off the must-see sights on the tournament course—the famous Amen Corner, the bridges over Rae's Creek, players skipping balls along the pond at Hole 16 during their practice rounds—and hustle back to our seats.

At Hole 7 of the Par 3 course, trio after trio of the sport's top golfers play by. Staci dishes on the current stars: Jordan Spieth is a favorite. Bubba Watson has a rep as a funnyman with a wild wardrobe, although Kerry and I are dressed crazier than he is today. I practice spotting the balls as they sail through the air, and I am really, really bad at it.

Then, the next round of names goes up on the scoreboard: Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, and Tom Watson.

"Ladies! This is the group to watch," a group of young guys seated nearby calls out to us, but even *we* know these names.

A hush falls as Nicklaus hits first. Up next, Player swings, sending the ball arcing over the fairway and thudding softly onto the green. Eyes wide and nails bitten, I watch the ball rolling, rolling, rolling briskly toward the hole.

Everyone is out of their seats, cheering and jumping.

Golf legend Player, at 80, just became the oldest person to make a hole in one at the Par 3. We watch two more exhilarating "aces"—as we golf fans call holes in one—from our seats. By the time the event is over, the grand total comes to nine holes in one, nearly doubling the competition's previous record.

Granted, I have nothing to compare it to, but I walk back to the car fairly certain I just watched the most thrilling day on the course ever.

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In the Swing

There's much more to Augusta, Georgia, than golf, whether it's a stroll along the picturesque Riverwalk, exploring local art galleries, taking a canal tour, or partaking in some fresh brews at the local growler bar.

Masters tickets are among the toughest tickets to score in all of sportsdom. If you're not lucky enough to win one of the small number offered at face value by the golf club through a lottery (ticket.masters.com), prepare to spend up to thousands. Ultimately, if you can't attend The Masters (this year's is April 3–9; augusta.com or masters.org), here's how you can DIY an experience without a ticket.

- Sample what might come closest to the pimento cheese recipe originally served at Augusta National (it's a long, controversial story) at local fried chicken franchise **Wife Saver**. *Various locations.* wifesaverrestaurants.com.



- Get into the swing of golf's long tradition at the **Augusta Museum of History**, which tells the storied past of the area's oldest golf clubs, including Augusta National. *560 Reynolds Street. (706) 722-8454; augustamuseum.org.*

BOTTOM: SEANPAVONEPHOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

