

SC ranks as top global golf destination by UK tourism group

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The RBC Heritage on Hilton Head Island is a regular stop on the PGA Tour each spring and a potent marketing tool for the South Carolina tourism industry. The landmark 18th hole (above) runs along Calibogue Sound. File/AP

South Carolina's tourism industry has scored a marketing version of a hole-in-one, having been named one of the top five golf destinations in the world for 2023.

The Palmetto State, which is home to more than 350 courses, is the only place in the U.S. to make the short list compiled by the U.K.-based International Association of Golf Travel Operators. The others that made the cut are Cyprus, Dubai, Los Cabos and Thailand.

It's the latest victory in a series of moves seeking to further leverage South Carolina's reputation as a year-round golf haven.

The game had an estimated \$3.3 billion impact on the state economy in 2021, supporting 38,000 jobs and providing \$18.3 million in admissions tax collections for that year, according to [data from the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism](#).

Roger Warren, president of Kiawah Island Golf Resort, which was the site of the 1991 Ryder Cup and the 2012 and 2021 PGA Championships, said what sets South Carolina apart is its favorable weather, a variety of scenic courses that can accommodate all skill levels, and a robust hospitality and tourism industry.

"We at Kiawah Island Golf Resort have long believed that South Carolina is one of the world's premier golfing destinations," Warren said. "It's gratifying to have that fact acknowledged by a well-respected authority on international golf tourism."

The International Association of Golf Travel Operators said its annual designation recognizes outstanding service, performance and quality throughout the global golf tourism industry. The 2023 winners were selected after more

than 500 tour operators from around the world voted for the places that delivered the best experiences last year.

CEO Peter Walton said that it was a positive thing to see “relatively small golf destinations such as Cyprus, Dubai and Los Cabos in the mix with the established giants of South Carolina and Thailand.”

State tourism director Duane Parrish said at courses from from Myrtle Beach to Hilton Head “you’ll spot license plates from states up and down the East Coast.”

“That net just continues to get wider and wider every year, as we welcome more golfers from across the U.S. and all over the world thanks to the hard work of our golf industry,” he said.

State officials estimate that golf generates more revenue than any other single entertainment or recreation activity in South Carolina. Visiting players spend an additional \$1.1 billion off the course, according PRT data.

Parrish’s agency invests roughly 20 percent of its total state advertising budget to promote South Carolina as a golfing getaway.

The state has has played host to several high-profile professional competitions in recent years, not including the annual RBC Heritage held each spring on Hilton Head Island. They include the PGA “major” championship at Kiawah’s Ocean Course in 2021, the Palmetto Championship and the CJ Cup near Ridgeland, and the BMW Charity Pro-Am in Greenville.

“The limelight brought by major golf events has driven demand for golf tourism in the Charleston area as well as the rest of the state,” Warren of Kiawah said.

“Hosting one of golf’s majors certainly contributed significantly to that, and the exposure such an event brings continues to fuel demand for golf tourism locally and throughout the state.”

Another is being teed up for the golf-crazed Grand Strand, which boasts more than 90 courses. Myrtle Beach tourism officials are negotiating to land the area's [**first-ever PGA tournament**](#) under a four-year commitment that expected to start in May 2024.