

On a clear day the island of Islay is visible to the north-west. More pressing, however, is the challenge of hitting the green at the 15th, a spectacular oceanside par three



Machrihanish Dunes - best served raw

A trip to Machrihanish Dunes is a trip back in time – and you'll love it

The original course at Machrihanish, five miles west of Campbeltown on the western side of the Mull of Kintyre peninsular, has long been reason enough to make the journey to this remote but breathtaking landscape of western Scotland. But with the creation of Machrihanish Dunes, just a couple of miles along the bay, this mystical golfing destination is complete and offers the avid explorer of links golf a rare peek into the origins of the royal and ancient game – the course as natural in its surroundings as it is possible to find.

Machrihanish Dunes is the first links to be built on the west coast of Scotland in 100 years, and also the first to be built on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI),

which does bring with it certain restrictions in terms of green-keeping. However, for the Scottish architect David McLay Kidd the raw material really couldn't have been any better, and no fewer than 23 "natural" holes were identified in the original planning. From these, Kidd whittled it down to the 18 that today make up the 7,300-yard examination of pure links golf.

"We designed each hole around the terrain," says Kidd. "As for maintenance, we will do a little mowing, but mostly we rely on the wandering sheep to keep the fescue in check – just like the old courses used to. We are returning golf to the way it used to be played!"

That's the whole point of Machrihanish Dunes for me – golf as it used to be played, and I absolutely love it. I *get it*. Yes, off the back tees Mach Dunes can be relentless, and with six greens and five tees right alongside the



ocean, the wind is always going to be a factor. But there is a wonderful flexibility in the design of the course and a choice of teeing boxes allow you to tailor the challenge to suit your game.

This really is golf in the raw. But what you have to remember is that this is one of the most highly regulated golf courses in the UK – they cannot lift a finger here without permission. In the construction of the course, the green sites had to be identified as they existed within the dunes – there was no earth moving involved, they simply picked a site, peeled back the surface and laid turf to create a green. The same process applied to the teeing areas. Suitable flat(ish) areas were pressed and there you are – a tee. As for the bunkers, they were created naturally by sheltering cattle. Safe to say there's nothing manufactured about this place.

And it's important that you come here to experience what has been achieved with that knowledge in your mind. Some will hate it; others, like me, will love it. I find the whole project fascinating, and it's been exciting returning over the last 12 months or so to witness the way in which the course has developed, even in that short time. I love links golf and I love playing by the sea. Some people complain about bad bounces and greens that are not perfect – well, think of it as a different type of golf. One that really does make you think.

My single favourite course in the world is Royal County Down where there must be at least ten or eleven blind tee- or second shots, and everyone raves about the place for its history and heritage. Machrihanish Dunes is just a year-old and has some way to go, but as word spreads it will become known as one of those essential destinations for the connoisseur of links golf. Already, it is quite possibly the most fascinating golf course in the British Isles.

In fact, I liked it so much I bought a time-share, a lease ownership in the Machrihanish Dunes Village, where a cluster of Cottages that have been beautifully put together to cater for the needs of the golfer and his family – whether



they fly in for a weekend break or spend a week in the summer. A house by the sea and a links course up the road? For me, that's pretty much heaven.

If you love links golf you'll also love nearby Dunaverty. I'd heard so much about this little course over the years, but never actually travelled the extra few miles to the end of the Mull of Kintyre to play it. On this trip, I made it, and on one of the sweetest February days I can ever remember played what has to be one of the purest hidden gems in golf. It's not the longest golf course in the world, but the mix of holes is intoxicating and – on the day we had – the views are to die for.

How do you round off such a perfect trip? One of my passions in life is wine, and whenever I plan a trip with the boys I usually make room in the car for a bottle or two of something special over which to sit down at the end of the day and reflect on the golf. For Machrihanish I took along a new find – Psi, from the famous Dominio De Pingus estate in Spain's Ribera del Duero, the baby brother to Peter Sisseck's more famous wine, Pingus (which you won't find for much less than £350 a bottle). Everyone seems to love its rich, complex character – it was lucky I only took two bottles along on this occasion. A good time, good wine, was had by all. [Corney & Barrow supply it for under £20 a bottle.] See you out on the links soon. **Ronan Rafferty**
www.machrihanishdunes.com

(Top): Shades of Ballybunion, or perhaps Doonbeg? Machrihanish Dunes is an extraordinary project, a raw links that will inspire all lovers of this form of the game. As indeed, will nearby Dunaverty (1889), where the author is pictured on the 3rd tee