

Eco-friendly golf course to open in Scotland

By Paul Kelbie

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The future of golf is in the past, or at least that's what the creators of the world's most environmentally friendly golf course believe.

When Machrihanish Dunes opens to the public next Spring it will be the first true links course on the west coast of Scotland for more than 100 years and the only one ever to be built on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).



The course will be the first true links course to be built on the west cost of Scotland for more than 100

Gone are the artificially lush coloured fairways and manicured greens so familiar to parkland golfers around the world, instead Machrihanish Dunes has gone back to the history books to create a course in keeping with the way golf began.

No chemicals, pesticides, heavy machinery or even artificial irrigation systems are allowed on the 270 acres of windswept sand dunes bordering the Atlantic with panoramic views of the islands of Gigha, Islay and Jura.

Instead nature and nurture have been combined to create a haven for both golfers and wildlife as rare Hebridean sheep graze the fairways and out-of-bounds areas protect rare orchids.

While Donald Trump awaits the Scottish government's decision over whether he can build a £1bn resort on the ecologically important sand dunes of Balmedie near Aberdeen, environmentalists and golf course designers have co-operated to create a champion-class course on the other side of the country.

Machrihanish, near Campbeltown and close to the Mull of Kintyre 18 miles from the coast of Northern Ireland, is already famous among golfers.

The existing Machrihanish course, which sits next to the new one and was designed by revered Victorian golfer 'Old' Tom Morris, is said to have the best opening hole in the world.

Created by David McLay Kidd, an influential golf course architect with a track record which includes the renowned Bandon Dunes course in Oregon, the Queenwood in Surrey and the new 'Castle' course at St Andrews, it is envisaged Machrihanish Dunes will benefit the local economy to the tune of more than £18m a year.

"We took a lot of convincing because the initial thought was this isn't something we want to hear about - a golf course on a SSSI," said Stan Philips, Scottish Natural Heritage's area officer for Mid Argyll and Kintyre.

However, after the developers carried out an environmental impact assessment and recorded every species of importance on the site, SNH were able to negotiate a design which avoided endangering scientifically important areas and preserve parts which had been under threat from trail bikers and other misuse.



Machrihanish Dunes will be the first golf course to be built on a Site of Special Scientific Interest

"The fairways went on the less interesting ground, the greens and tees went on the areas which weren't of any special interest and those parts of the site considered important were declared out-of-bounds," said Mr Philips.

Among the species of special interest Machrihanish is home to several species of orchids, some of them very rare - including March orchids, Frog orchids and Pyramidal orchids.

Many of the plant species need the grazing of animals in order to thrive and Machrihanish has found sheep provide the expert solution to maintaining the environment and keeping down the rough areas.

"Of the total 279 acres only seven acres have been altered or cultivated in any way," said Euan Grant, former head green keeper at the Old Course St Andrews, who is in day-to-day charge of the project.

"There is no artificial drainage anywhere on the course and the green keeping team is not allowed to use fertiliser, pesticides or any plant growth regulators on areas other than the greens and tees.

"We are not allowed to manage the rest of the site at all really other than mowing the fairways. Even the roughs are managed by sheep."

A flock of around 50 Hebridean Black sheep will feed and maintain the delicate ecological

balance of the area over the winter.

"It was important that we got Hebridean Blacks because there aren't many flocks of them left," said Brian Keating, the Australian businessman behind the £30m project, of the small, short-tailed, horned sheep adept at foraging scrub land.

"We've got nine just now but are expecting 50 of them this winter. They belong in this terrain and we wanted a species that was at home here."

Links were the first golf courses ever to be developed. Located in coastal areas, on sandy soil, amid dunes, with few trees and water hazards the game was built around the lie of the land.

"On a normal golf course you've got lots of heavy machinery running about all over the place but on this project that is out of the question," said Paul Kimber, architect with DMK Golf Design.

"It was a real balancing act between the needs of the golf course and the natural environment - but in the end it was extremely worthwhile.

"It was all done with a very light touch. We didn't remove any flora and didn't bring anything in which wasn't there in the first place.

"We used what nature has provided to shape the golf green and if the area was especially precious we would lift the turf by hand and put it back in exactly the same way after it was finished.

"It was very labour intensive. Machrihanish Dunes is probably the closest you can get to a hand built golf course today."

Following the success of working with environmentalists the Machrihanish team has already teamed up with developers Credential Holdings to create another champion links course called The Ayrshire close to the world-famous Royal Troon Golf Club.

"A links golf course is the only sustainable form of the game. We can't continue to build golf courses that cost zillions of dollars to maintain." said Malcolm Campbell, chairman of The Links Association which was set up to represent 172 real links courses around the world.

"It's just not feasible to put millions of gallons of water on a golf course everyday and over seed them at vast expense just to make them green.

"A links course is much cheaper to build and maintain, therefore making the game more assessable to people."