

# IRELAND

## LAND OF LINKS

Harsh yet beautiful, the links of Irish golf courses makes a remarkable natural landscape for memorable golfing vacations.

WORDS & PICTURES BY DAVID J WHYTE





**LEFT PAGE:**  
A site for "Game of Thrones" filming; Titanic Belfast Light Show at The Kingsroad.

**RIGHT PAGE-  
CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP:**  
Royal County Down Golf Course; Portstewart Golf Club; Castlerock Golf Club; Royal Portrush Golf Club.

Ireland presents a number of distinguished golfing experiences and there are a number of ways of tackling them; whether it is to concentrate on one area such as the Southwest or try and pick off as many of the Emerald Isle's trophy courses during a more extended stay.

Whichever way you choose, you're sure to have a wonderful time, no small part due to the charm of the Irish. There are few people on earth who have such a warm, whimsical disposition.

### KINGDOM OF THE NORTH

I've been visiting Ireland for the past two decades. I love it almost as much as I do my native Scotland. To help you plan a visit to the Emerald Isle, let me prescribe what I think are the best courses in both the Republic and Northern Ireland and show you how you can combine them to make the most of your golf vacation.

Let's start with the north. For "Game of Thrones" fans, this is where the majority of the brooding, dark scenes were filmed and the local tourist authorities have done a wonderful job in mapping out the filming locations for the series fans.

Follow the "Three-Eyed Raven" through Westeros (aka Northern Ireland) where crumbling castles and ancient landscapes evoke a magical mood. Portstewart Strand in County Londonderry is just one of the sights used for filming - a sweeping stretch of beach where several scenes were filmed.

It also happens to be the backdrop to the 148<sup>th</sup>

Open Championship held at Royal Portrush Golf Club this summer. Dunluce Links, the club's championship course is one of the most outstanding, challenging golf venues in all of Great Britain and Ireland, especially when the wind blows - as it nearly always does.

The Open was first held at Portrush in 1951 and, extraordinarily, it has never been back since. Until now. It will be fascinating to see how the tour pros cope with the high dunes, added length and possible high winds.

Next to Dunluce Links is the Valley Links, traditionally the home course of Royal Portrush Ladies but where many a youngster such as Graeme McDowell, who was born in Portrush, cut his golfing teeth. The course has undergone significant improvements recently and I believe it is now a test well worth including on your exploration of this part of Ireland.

There are two other courses nearby that you should also consider. A few minutes west, Portstewart Golf Club is a must and if you have time, also take on the delights of Castlerock Golf Club too. This is considered the lesser of these three Country Antrim coastal courses but, for my money, nestled as it is amidst the high sand hills and with a stiff wind blowing, Castlerock can be the most daunting.

### BELFAST

I have been constantly surprised by Belfast these recent years. What I like is the blend between old and new. It is as exciting a city as you will find; far more sophisticated than I first considered with an excellent standard of restaurant and some time-honoured pubs you simply must check-out such as The Crown Liquor Saloon, The Perch, Kelly's Cellar and the inimitable Duke of York.

"Titanic Belfast" is also a must-see visitor museum and memorial to Belfast's maritime heritage based around the dockyard where the ill-fated RMS Titanic was built.

### ROYAL COUNTY DOWN

30 miles south of the city, Royal County Down is rated as one of the finest links golf courses on the planet. We arrived the day that they opened for booking for the





2020 season and the phones were ringing off the wall with golfers trying to grab a much sought after tee-time. Why is 'RCD' as it is dubbed, so popular?

A Scottish school teacher is largely credited for establishing the first 9-holes at RCD in 1889. Then Old Tom Morris came across the sea from St Andrews to extend the scholarly work to 18. I don't think either of those gentlemen would have had a terrible amount of work to do. This is golf terrain as God intended - majestic links just waiting to be uncovered.

Many alterations have been made since and the presentation today is impeccable in every way. Royal Country Down is the star in a stunning theatre of sky, sea, gorse and heather with the Mountains of Mourne dominating most views.

As far as playing the course, like Royal Dornoch in Scotland, the trick to scoring is not to attack RCD's signature raised greens but play short and maintain control, otherwise you'll have a similar shot coming back on again. The greens are firm and fast and in the summer months, they shave them down to a daunting three millimeters.

The bearded bunkers are another feature you'd rather not face. If your ball lies close to the front lip, the tall grass can add another foot, perhaps two, to try and vault.

There is a second course occupying the same stretch of seaside that I hadn't quite appreciated on previous visits. I don't imagine the Annesley Links gets a lot of play with visitors clamouring to get on the Championship course but I could see, during an early morning photo expedition that the Annesley must be an exciting test, much shorter and tighter with almost infinite shot-making possibilities and perhaps equally exciting views of the sea, mountains and lofty dunes.

### SLIEVE DONARD RESORT

As for local accommodation here, it doesn't get more local than Slieve Donard Resort & Spa with Royal County Down Golf Club literally right next door. This red-faced, Victoria edifice is owned by the Hastings family and I had the pleasure of having lunch with Julie Hastings, the group's director of marketing, on my last visit so I can confirm it is very much a 'family-run' affair.

In spite of its sprawling nature and Victorian vintage, Slieve Donard does a fantastic job of keeping up with the curve. It is a four-star facility with such character and atmosphere, we have little hesitation in recommending a night or two here combined with your golf at RCD.

### DUBLIN'S FAIR CITY

It is worth spending a night or two in Dublin especially to take in the Temple Bar district and the



excellent beer-and-museum experience found at the Guinness Storehouse.

The course to head for near Dublin is Portmarnock Golf Links, which is a superb 27-hole facility only a half-hour's drive from town. Set upon the two-mile long Portmarnock Peninsula, this is as natural and fair a links as you will find.

Wind is nearly always in attendance as the peninsula is flanked on three sides by water but, no matter how well or bad you play, Portmarnock is one of those 'more-ish' experiences where one round will never be enough.

It can yield to a good game but generally, you have to know where you're going and how you're going to get there to truly realise the joys of this sensational stretch of native links.

There are a few clubs surrounding Dublin such as the K Club or the European that I hate to say, I've never had the pleasure of playing, always being drawn towards the tracks of the south and west of



restaurants such as 'Fishy Fishy' or 'Man Friday' and so, do make time for lunch or dinner and a stroll around this delightful little seaside town.

**LEFT TO RIGHT:**  
Waterville  
Golf Links;  
Portmarnock  
Golf Links.

### THE SOUTHWEST

Swinging southwest now, you line up with some exceptional links experiences in a most wonderful part of the world. As I've mentioned before, Ireland is very much about its people and it seems the further south and west you go, the more charming and disarming the locals become. One of the best places to encounter the local culture is the town of Killarney.

There's no doubt, it is a tourist town and Saturday nights can be hectic with parties and other shenanigans going on. But find your way to a bar such as the 'Killarney Grand' or 'Murphy's Bar' where traditional music is performed and you are sure to have the time of your life.

What I love is how the locals, young and old suddenly spring up, unabashed and do an exquisite little jig together. It is part of the Celtic culture and still very much alive.

From Killarney, the Ring of Kerry is a beautiful drive where you can enjoy the scenery and native charm. Charlie Chaplin and his family holidayed here in the late 1950s, finding the friendliness and hospitality of the local people alluring. Here you also find Waterville Links and the new Hogs Head golf courses.

Not so long ago, a pilgrimage to Waterville usually meant an hour's drive, play the only golf course and drive back to Killarney. Now, with the addition of Hogs Head and some excellent accommodation, you can linger longer.

the country. I'm sure they are wonderful experiences but the drama that unfolds near the fishing village of Kinsale has, for me always exerted a stronger pull.

### THE OLD HEAD

The Old Head of Kinsale only opened in 1997, quickly becoming a must-play for thousands of visitors. Laid out upon a stunning rocky peninsula, there are few sites in the world that can match it in terms of dramatic terrain.

It was a glorious feat of golf architecture to fit 18-holes on to this craggy protrusion but somehow it works wonderfully. Surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, this course comprises of five Par 5s, five Par 3s and eight Par 4s and can be stretched to just over 7,100 yards from the tips but this seems irrelevant as you deal with unique conditions on every hole and indeed, every shot. It feels almost like playing in the sky and this is certainly my idea of heaven.

The village of Kinsale is renowned for its seafood





**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Ballybunion Old Course; Lahinch Golf Club; Tralee Golf Course.

Being so close to Ireland's most westerly point, Waterville played an important role in establishing Trans-Atlantic communications back in the late 1800s. Now it is mainly American golfers that make their way here to commune with Waterville Links.

This is a delicious example of natural seaside golf, the original course established in the dunes 130 years ago and the one we play today constructed in the 1970s with Tom Fazio doing a more recent renovation.

It is a sublime experience, rippling sandy surfaces surrounded by water with constant views of the nearby mountains, and surely one of the most peaceful and pleasing places on the planet. On the ground, it is a fair test with plenty of room on a genuine links terrain, one of the very best in Ireland.

Next to Waterville, Hogs Head is a new course built upon a hill overlooking the village. There was a course here previously but the two New York owners have spent so much on sand and shaping on this 200-acre headland, the course is a complete rebuild along with a 48-room lodge and 15 cottages added to allow golfers to spend a couple of glorious golfing days in this lovely spot.

The Riverside section of Hogs Head has an inland feel while the Seaside section is a much wilder

experience, more open to the elements. The course is very playable and most enjoyable.

Travelling north from Killarney, you come to Tralee, another course not to be missed. Arnold Palmer was given the green light to design this traditional links track back in the 1980s and he was reputedly passionate about this project.

Tralee is a roller coaster of great holes, no two alike and every one memorable, the opening holes playing down to the sea with incredible vistas. Every hole is a surprise and I would say, Tralee is slightly underrated compared to the more lauded courses along Ireland's west coast.

### GATEWAY TO THE WEST

We moved up to Adare Manor to access the triumvirate of Ballybunion, Doonbeg and Lahinch. Adare, as you will read in our 'Choice Resort' report in this issue, is one of the finest golf hotel operations this particular writer has come upon. Go there and be amazed and sample the course that will, to my mind surely host the 2026 Ryder Cup.

Ballybunion is exactly an hour's drive from Adare, its address being Sandhill Road, which comes as no great surprise. There is a grand assemblage of high sand dunes and sheltered, velvet valleys through

which the course weaves.

It is hard to believe but Ballybunion languished in relative obscurity for the first few decades of its existence before the Irish Open brought it to people's attention in the late 1930s. Now it is on everyone's bucket list with ex-President Clinton and so many top tour pros ranking it as one of the most enjoyable links courses in all of Ireland.

You can take your pick whether you go to Doonbeg or Lahinch next. They are equidistant from Adare Manor and two entirely different but incredible experiences. I'm going to hold my hands up and admit, I haven't played Doonbeg since Mr Trump took over some three years ago and in a pinch would probably opt for Lahinch.

No, sorry, I'd definitely vote for Lahinch. But you should play them both if you can. The last time I played Doonbeg, it was just going into receivership but I hear 'The Donald' has worked his magic on both the hotel and golf course and I fully intend to stay and play sometime very soon.

But Lahinch? Now, this is one of my all-time, all-star favourites. An uncontrived, rolling testimony to natural linksland, it might not be to everyone's taste. So simple are its characteristics and rustic are its

surrounds but it somehow all works in a cavalcade of exciting, oft eccentric challenges.

The rough nature of the place only provides contrast to the silky greens and fairways that you will play on. It can be frustrating on holes such as the 4th and 5th with their blind shots; the former Par 5 for its second shot and the latter from the tee on a blind Par 3. Goats wander freely usually munching in the rough and wild Atlantic weather often plays its part but this is one of my personal favourites in this part of the world.

So, that's our all-Ireland tour. And what about the Northwest? So many will be clamouring after it and I agree that there are some great little courses up there but I have to say, what we have described is the very best of Ireland. We'll have to leave the Northwest for another time. ☺



**Our Scottish-based golf travel correspondent, David J Whyte has put together a series of 'signature tours' of Ireland that combine the culture, cuisine and finest golf to be found in the Emerald Isle. For more information visit [www.linksland.com](http://www.linksland.com)**