

Ayrshire & Arran

An ancient world of mystical courses and spectacular views await those who visit Scotland's west coast for this year's Open Championship.

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LEFT PAGE -
CLOCKWISE FROM
LEFT: Prestwick Golf
Club-18th hole & the
Clubhouse; Sunset
at Royal Troon Golf
Club; Royal Troon
Golf Club.

RIGHT PAGE FROM
TOP TO BOTTOM:
Turnberry Golf Club-
8th hole, Kintyre
Course; Turnberry
Golf Club-8th hole,
Ailsa Course.

The Open returns to Ayrshire's bonny, bonny banks this summer for the 145th time at the illustrious Royal Troon Golf Club along Scotland's west coast. With no fewer than three Open Championship venues including Turnberry's Ailsa Course and the historic Prestwick Golf Club on top of the earlier, they've hosted 35 Open Championships. That's pretty good going when you consider there have been only 144 in total and St Andrews has hosted only 29.

Historically, golf came to Scotland's west coast much later compared to the game's start in the east. It was with the coming of the railway that Ayrshire fully grasped the game. But boy, once it did, it fairly set the heather alight. I'm not saying West is best but as Old Tom Morris did famously spout when he first gazed upon the rippling dunes of Machrihanish on the West's Kintyre Peninsula, "This was ground 'Created by the Almighty to play golf on.'"

Ayrshire's natural links bordering the Clyde Estuary are certainly suited to the game. If you fly in to Prestwick Airport you instantly get the picture. We're talking wall-to-wall greenery; Or take the train from Glasgow and you'll lose count of the number of golf holes you pass.

THE OPEN VENUES

Prestwick Golf Club was the very first venue for The Open Championship when in 1860, Old Tom Morris and members of Prestwick came up with the bright idea of inviting a handful of Scottish professionals (then known as caddies) for a match across their rudimentary 12-hole course. Only eight contenders showed up and went round the course three times in the one day.

Willie Park, Sr. from Musselburgh won with a score of 174 beating Old Tom by two strokes. Prestwick Golf Club still celebrates its rich and fascinating history. You can see

replicas of the original Open Championship Belt and Claret Jug on display in the clubhouse. Prestwick hosted the Open no fewer than 24 times before it became too difficult to move crowds safely around the hilly terrain.

Like any old timer, the course can be a bit crotchety at times in that there are blind holes everywhere and funny twists over much wrinkled fairways. But that's all part of the excitement and I highly recommend you stop by and pay homage.

Turnberry has become yet another Trump property. Love him or loath him, Donald Trump does get things done and the plans for both the hotel and golf courses are nothing short of spectacular. They include some serious adjustments to the Ailsa course which has purists shanking at the thought but actually, we will end up with a far better routing - and that's saying something.

The most noticeable changes occur at No. 9, a humpbacked par 4 which was always a bit unfair in my



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opinion. Now, it will be one of the most exhilarating par 3’s in the world playing across a rocky bay with the outstanding Turnberry Lighthouse contributing to a jaw-slacking backdrop. Changes to the 10th and 11th are equally imaginative and impressive incorporating the shorelines more than they did before. The course is due to open again on June 1, 2016 and personally I can’t wait.

And that leaves us with a very quick word about Royal Troon, this year’s host venue for the Open Championship. For a long time I found Royal Troon too difficult especially off the tee with acres of rough and apparently little else. Now thanks to a few more rounds with my good friend, Stewart Watt, owner of South Beach Hotel in Troon, I’m a convert. This long and dashing links really does demand superlative play off the tee but once you find your feet with the big stick it’s quality all the way. The first few holes are relatively easy followed by an amazing string of excellence from around the 5th through to the 13th before it calms down again.

WEST COASTAL DELIGHTS

What you need to keep in mind is that golf in Scotland is a character building process. Because Scottish courses offer so much depth of interest, natural variation and elemental challenges in the shape of ancient rippling links that have little to do with man’s artifice.

Dundonald Links isn’t so ancient but it’s very much a natural piece of rolling links and challenging venue especially if the wind is up, as it most often is. The challenge is in gaining length and adjusting to Dundonald’s frighteningly fast fairways and extra large greens. Long drivers will delight in this new style of old Scottish links but be careful you don’t overdrive into trouble.

Then, just across the railway, next to the beach is Western Gailes. Like Goldilocks’s porridge, this course is ‘just right’; it’s a full-on links tucked into gorgeous duneland with wonderfully natural turf, which gives your irons that satisfying thump. The shapes and turn of every hole keeps you on your toes and I would go as far as to say this is probably ‘the best of the rest’ in terms of the top courses in this area.

Glasgow Gailes is next up, a decent test but dare I say not quite as charismatic as Western Gailes. Meanwhile, a few miles up the coast, West Kilbride is another fine links with amazing views of the Island of Arran. Irvine Golf Club is a great example of a course that doesn’t feature on most hit lists but should. The first few holes are slightly

quirky especially the 3rd, 4th and 5th but they are zesty little challenges with a twist in their tail. I loved this course - I’ve only played it the once and would play it several times over to savour its nuances.

Besides Royal Troon, Troon’s three municipal courses are the envy of every town council around the globe. Lochgreen is the best but take on Troon Darley and know what it is to be dragged through a (gorse) bush backwards. It’s not that bad but there are few more challenging short courses in Britain. Troon’s Kilmarnock Barassie is a stone’s throw away - a lot easier and more relaxing.

Sticking with municipals, a trip down to the town of Ayr must include a visit to Belleisle Park. There are two good courses here. Seafield is more links in nature while Belleisle most definitely parkland. Touring professionals of old used to book a round at Belleisle when they were in the area, so great was its reputation. The big course is a massively satisfying parkland with some exceptional holes like the Par 3, 6th or the long Par 5 at the end, one of the best finishing holes I know.

Back to Prestwick and you’ll find St. Nicholas and St. Cuthberts, two saints who evidently took umbrage with the committee at Prestwick Golf Club and set up on their own. St. Nicholas is the more sporty and linky with a wonderful subsoil yet again being so close to the sea while St. Cuthberts is further inland.

LEFT PAGE -
CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP: Belleisle
Golf Club, Seafield
Course; Western
Gailes Golf Club
- 7th hole; West
Kilbride Golf Club;
Lochgreen Golf
Course; Dundonald
Golf Club.



MILE HIGH CLUB

If you plan on attending the Open Championship at Royal Troon this year, here’s a package that will set you flying. Mach Dunes Helicopters lets you ride a luxury helicopter to and from the Open at Troon while enjoying the sumptuous surrounds of The Village at Machrihanish Dunes, one of Scotland’s most tranquil, exclusive spots. Only 20 minutes by air, you’ll have no car parks, no long walks and luxurious accommodation, world-class golf, dining and service away far from the crowds.

Contact: machrihanishdunes.com/the-open-championship-experience

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TOP TO BOTTOM:
Corrie Golf Club;
Broddick Golf Club;
Shiskine Golf Club -
5th hole.

ACROSS TO ARRAN

From every coastal golf course in Ayrshire, the views of The Island of Arran act as magnets. Hop onto a ferry with a car and be there in less than an hour for less than £50 for a car and two adults.

Referred to as ‘Scotland in Miniature’ because of its mountains to the north and pastoral plains to the south, this Lilliputian isle not only offers a complete break from the busy mainland but also incredible food, delectable whisky, stunning vistas and no less than seven golf courses. And each is completely unique.

You land in the town of Broddick and five minutes later can be teeing up at Broddick Golf Club. It’s a short course by mainland standards but offers breathtaking views to Broddick Castle and across Broddick Bay as well as some scintillating holes. By all means, this is holiday golf - as is all the golf on Arran but then that’s why you should come here - for a real vacation away from the vicissitudes of mainland life.

The next course, Corrie Golf Club, is a midget but with a mammoth setting. Sheltered by Goat Fell (Arran’s main mountain) with its tiny greens and amazing sense of sheer peace and tranquility, it is definitely worth sampling. The same can be said of Lochranza Golf Club where herds of red deer barely blink as golfers stroll by leaving them to munch the sweet rough grass. On the south side of Broddick is Lamlash Golf Club, again with breathtaking vistas of the Holy Isle, now a Buddhist retreat. Carry on south and you’ll reach Whiting Bay, rather steep to begin with but lots of fun holes on offer high above town.

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Hagen and Co. took it with good humour and played the wee 9-hole Machrie Bay course with its stunning views to The Mull of Kintyre and met with whole-hearted approval of the locals who had gathered to watch their celebrated visitors. There are very few simple little 9-hole

courses anywhere in the world that can say, ‘Walter Hagen played here!’

There’s one other course on Arran that golfers simply must sample. I’ve played it a dozen times and coincidentally that’s exactly how many holes there are at Shiskine Golf Club, a lovely little links on the island’s west side. There are golf pundits purporting that 12 might just be the ideal number of holes for a golf course. In the beginning, Prestwick Golf Club only had a dozen and Jack Nicklaus has been promoting a 12-hole circuit on his home patch in Ohio as being the perfect length. In Shiskine’s case though this argument is somewhat spurious. Once you’ve sampled the sheer joy of these stupendous links holes, you immediately want to go round again. Maybe 24 should be the magic number. 🍷

www.ayrshiregolfscotland.com



AYRSHIRE’S PLEASURES

CULZEAN CASTLE was President Eisenhower favourite hangout during and after World War II. Now, you can stay in the impressive Eisenhower Apartment as a paying guest or simply walk the gardens and take in the views of this impressive pile. www.nts.org.uk

Whether you’re into poetry or not, the very best day out in Ayrshire is to be found at the ROBERT BURNS BIRTHPLACE MUSEUM where, by pre-arranged appointment they will have a piper waiting and a haggis lunch served by costumed locals, complete with whisky. It’s hair-raising stuff and Sandy, our guide made the entire visit unforgettable. www.burnsmuseum.org.uk (contact Clair Grant)



Established in 1868, A. D. Rattray are independent whisky bottlers who run a 5-star Visitor Attraction, THE A. D. RATTRAY WHISKY EXPERIENCE AND WHISKY SHOP in South Ayrshire, just before you reach Turnberry. There you can have a proper tasting or fill your own personal bottle straight from a cask. www.adrattray.com

WHERE TO STAY



For me, there’s only one place to stay in Troon and that’s SOUTH BEACH HOTEL. Perhaps not as fancy as some of its neighbours, it’s run by Stewart Watt and family who are great golfers and make you feel extremely welcome and at home. Tel: 01292 312033; www.southbeach.co.uk

Another great recommendation is CARLTON HOTEL in Prestwick. It’s stylish, quite modern and very reasonably priced. www.carlton-prestwick.com

TURNBERRY HOTEL will open again this spring and as long as The Donald hasn’t run away with his money it will no doubt be resplendent. We’ll do a special report just as soon as it reopens but suffice to say, in the past it was one of the best in Scotland - especially for breakfast. www.turnberry.co.uk

WHERE TO EAT

Troon, Prestwick and Ayre are chock full of great little cafes and restaurants. It seems to be part of its holiday town heritage. Head for any of Buzzwork’s four fine establishments. They’ve set the standard.

ELLIOTS BAR & RESTAURANT
132 Main Street, Prestwick, Ayrshire KA9 1PB; Tel: +44 (0)1292 677 677;
www.elliots-prestwick.com

LIDOS CAFÉ, BAR & RESTAURANT
11-17 West Portland Street, Troon KA10 6AB; Tel: +44 (0)1292 310 088; www.lido-troon.com

TREEHOUSE BAR & GRILL
67-69 Sandgate, Ayr KA7 1BZ; Tel: +44 (0)1292 288 500; www.treehouseayr.co.uk

SCOTTS
Troon Yacht Haven, Harbour Road, Troon KA10 6DJ; Tel: +44 (0)1292 315 315;
www.scotts-troon.com