



**RICHARD BATH**

'IT WAS EXACTLY THE SORT OF COMFORT FOOD TO PUT A SMILE BACK ON A TIRED GOLFER'S FACE'

PHOTOGRAPH IAN MACNICOL

**TABLE SERVICE**

**The Harbourview Grille**

The Royal Hotel, Main and Kinloch, Campbeltown, Argyll (01586 810000, www.machrihanishdunes.com)

**Bill please**

Starters £4.25-£8.95 Main courses £6.95-£39.99 Puddings £3.95-£5.95 Cheese £6.95-£9.95

**Rating**



**H**ERE'S a non-typical example of a conversation at Spectrum Towers. Pictures supremo (and enthusiastic foodie): "So Mr Bath, where are you eating this week?" Me: "I've finally found somewhere you'll never have been to - a little place called the Royal Hotel, way down in Campbeltown." Pictures supremo: "Sadly, and not for the first time, you're wrong - my folks used to run it in the 1970s. Is it still shocking?"

The news flash is not that my colleague seems to know every corner of this great land but that her *alma mater* is no longer rubbish. In fact, against all her expectations, the Royal Hotel is actually rather good.

It has taken several barrowloads of dollars from its new American owners to transform the place, but the end result is a hotel that is fit for purpose, with the purpose in question being to accommodate wealthy golfers - many of them from America and Sweden - who have visited this corner of the world to play nearby Machrihanish's famous Old Tom Morris-designed Old Course links course.

Five years ago, David Southworth, a US property magnate from Massachusetts, decided that the best way to spend the thick end of £20 million was to buy a slice of land next to Machrihanish's only golf course and build a second course on the dunes, Trump-style but without all the hysterical bellyaching and without threatening any aesthetically displeasing crofters.

Apparently the golf business is all about critical mass, so now there are two courses at Machrihanish, plus an idiosyncratic little local course at Southend. That's enough to get rich, private-jet-borne punters flying in to Campbeltown airport at Machrihanish (which was famously the only runway in Europe long enough to land the space shuttle) for an extended stay.

Now the area is marketing itself as Scotland's Golfing Triangle, with 12-man rigid inflatable boats carrying all manner of men in slacks to stellar golf courses at Machrie on Islay, Portrush in Northern Ireland (which is 27 miles



away) and Turnberry in Ayrshire (which is 23 miles away). Not only that, CalMac ferry services to Campbeltown from Ardrossan start this week, making available more top Ayrshire golf courses than Tiger Woods has had waitresses, including Open Championship venues at Prestwick and Troon.

Just in case you are wondering whether you had taken a wrong turning and ended up on the sports pages, there is a point to all of this, and it's that endless groups of rich blokes (and it is mainly boys on tour) are now descending on the tip of the Mull of Kintyre, with more set to follow, accompanied by ever-increasing numbers of golf-loving central-belters. Golfers, like normal people, need accommodation and grub, and the Southworth Corporation is setting about providing it.

A stone's throw from Machrihanish Old Course is the renovated Ugadale Hotel, with its super-plush fine-dining Kintyre Club (just down the road, the Putechan Hotel also offers some upwardly mobile dishes, but isn't part of the Southworth revolution). Most of the Scottish golfers who visit the area, however, and especially those with cars, tend to stay at the Royal Hotel in the dog-eared town of Campbeltown, which is a ten-minute drive from the courses and therefore much cheaper.

This has turned out to be a huge boon for anyone who just likes the area anyway, because a by-product of the Southworth Corporation's golf-centric development of the Machrihanish Dunes Village (which may give some sense of the long-term plan for a Trump-style golf-based housing development) has been to restore this neglected town centre hotel to its former glories.

In fact it might even be better than ever because the expensive renovation has ensured that while the place retains an earthy edge - visit its Black Sheep pub at midnight on a Saturday night and no-one's standing on ceremony - its huge rooms are superb and the in-house restaurant, the relaxed but contemporary Harbourview Grille, is very popular locally and well worth a visit, although you will probably need to book at the weekends.

As the hotel is right on the seafront, with the harbour a stone's throw away, it was no surprise that the menu contained more than a few options containing fresh seafood. Tom doesn't do fish so made do with a goat's cheese crostini, which disappeared as quickly and completely as most of my tee-shirts the next day. The verdict: an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

Paul's Cullen skink was superb: full of huge chunks of fish and with a velveteen texture that had him

searching for superlatives. I was a little more circumspect about my two large crab cakes, which were stuffed with crab meat and avoided the usual crime of being sandpaper-dry, but whose crumb coating was slightly but unmistakably overcooked.

The two ravenous golfers both had 10oz ribeye steaks for main courses and both declared themselves more than happy, while I chose the risotto of smoked salmon and spinach. This was a tricky one: it passed the usual test in that its rice was perfectly cooked, but the smoked salmon was barely smoked, if at all, while there was precious little spinach. On balance, though, it was exactly the sort of comfort food to put a smile back on a tired golfer's face.

We finished with yet more comfort food: a really good baked strawberry cheesecake with fresh berry coulis and the biggest and best Eton mess I've had for ages.

There certainly should be a next time around for me, especially with the new ferry service now making Campbeltown and Machrihanish far more accessible for drivers.

The Harbourview Grille is everything you need when you're spending all day outside: relaxing with good service and decent-value comfort food that hits the spot every time. ■

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