

A SCOTTISH CLASSIC

Machrihanish Dunes

When this new links opened in 2009, it made the Kintyre peninsula in Scotland a ‘must visit’ for golfers.

Every July, a unique 18-hole tournament is held on the southern tip of Kintyre, Scotland, in the tiny village of Machrihanish. What makes this event so special is that it’s played over not one, but two courses. You tee off on the 1st hole of mighty Machrihanish, with its knee-knocking opening drive across a corner of the beach, then play the rest of the front nine of that world Top 100 track before jumping a fence (literally) and playing nine more holes on the Machrihanish Dunes course next door.

Called The Shepherds Cross, this sell-out event epitomises why this corner of Scotland is so renowned for its links golf.

Here, in a place that time has all but forgotten, you play among, around and over towering dunes on holes the likes of which you simply won’t find anywhere else.

Machrihanish has been labelled (actually mis-labelled) one of golf’s hardest places to reach. But despite that – or maybe because of it – it’s unquestionably one place every golfer should make it a point to visit.

Of course, Machrihanish isn’t new to the golf map. Old Tom Morris laid out Machrihanish links in 1876, travelling from St Andrews and staying an unheard-of three days to do his design work there. But it wasn’t until 2009 that the area became a bona fide golf holiday destination, when

Machrihanish Dunes gave visitors two top links to play. And as anyone who has played in the Shepherds Cross will tell you, a better one-two punch you will not find. It was to another Scotsman, David McLay Kidd, that the design responsibility at ‘Mach Dunes’ was given. And a fitting assignment it was. Kidd had spent summers in the area with his family, and had inherited a love for golf and golf courses from his father, Gleneagles’ golf course manager Jimmy Kidd.

David grew up playing the Machrihanish course, and both father and son recognised the even brawnier dunes to the north of the old course would be a fine place for a second 18. How right they were.

If anything, this ‘new’ course plays “older” than its antique neighbour; this is because it was built on a Site of Special Scientific Interest, which meant many of the shortcuts and tricks modern course designers often use were not at Kidd’s disposal. Instead, he identified 23 natural holes on the existing primordial landscape and chose the best 18. Then the course was ‘built’ by hand. Of the 275 acres upon which the course was created, only seven – that’s right, seven – were disturbed in the making of Mach Dunes. It’s a throwback to the way its renowned neighbour was laid out by Old Tom – and the result is every bit as enthralling.

“The hardest part of creating Machrihanish Dunes wasn’t the build,” said Kidd. “God laid it there, we just planted the pins where they fell. The hardest part was being able to work golf through the incredibly fragile environment and to protect it forever and always. In my world, conventional golf construction requires you take down all the vegetation, take up all the

Rooms to match the golf

The Village at Machrihanish Dunes boasts luxurious two-bedroom cottages and two recently restored and historic four-star hotels – The Ugadale Hotel, adjacent to the 1st tee at Machrihanish, and The Royal Hotel overlooking Campbeltown Harbour. Each of these early 20th-Century marvels offers world-class comfort and a rare level of service. Fine dining is provided in The Kintyre Club and Harbourview Grille restaurants, while it is impossible not to enjoy food and refreshment in the Old Clubhouse and Black Sheep pubs.

soil, re-grade everything how you see it, build up the tees, put drainage in, put very extensive irrigation in, build greens, plant lots of plants. What did we do at Machrihanish Dunes? We did almost none of that. It is as I found it. What you will play out there is almost the same as when I

wandered across there as a boy.

“We mowed the fairways – there was no reseeding. We stripped off some turf for the greens, that’s true, but we really didn’t build greens at all. There’s no drainage underneath them. The irrigation system is the simplest it could possibly be – pop-ups around the greens and some hose points here and there.

“What you’ll play at Machrihanish Dunes today really is the way golf began.”

From its drivable, dogleg-left opening hole to its uphill, tough-as-nails finisher, playing ‘Mach Dunes’ is an 18-hole thrill ride full of rolling fairways, blind shots over dunes, vexing bunkers fashioned out of old rabbit scrapes, green sites that defy the imagination, and greens and tees perched at the ocean’s edge that provide endless opportunities for gaping at the sheer beauty of the setting.

In short, it offers the makings of an unforgettable day.

In 2014, Mach Dunes brought in Simon Freeman from The Machrie to be the course’s new head greenkeeper, and the results have exceeded all hopes.

An expert in the nurturing of links turf and someone with intimate knowledge of the vicissitudes of the weather patterns on the west coast of Scotland, Freeman’s knowledge and guiding hand have taken the young course to a wonderful new level.

If you haven’t played the course in a while, you’ll be amazed at the dramatic leap forward taken at this young links gem.

It’s said that links can take up to a decade to settle into their best form; at ‘Mach Dunes’, they arrived well ahead of schedule.

When you do visit, you will also be amazed by the standard of accommodation now on offer in this cozy little corner of Scotland (see side-box).

In short, whether you are visiting this magical area for the first time or making your 20th pilgrimage to Machrihanish, the golf holiday that awaits you there is destined to be one of the most memorable you will ever enjoy. And like the players in the annual Shepherds Cross, don’t be surprised if you find yourself returning again and again. ■

QUICK GUIDE

THE CLIMATE Well, it is typically British, so not worth trying to second guess. But while the west does get its fair share of rain, the Gulfstream helps it escape really cold weather.

GETTING THERE Three options: an amazingly picturesque drive up and round Loch Lomond; a boat from the mainland; or fly to Campbeltown.

MORE DETAILS www.machrihanishdunes.com



The Ugadale is yards from the 1st tee of Machrihanish's iconic 1st tee.



Inside a typical bedroom at the stylishly-refurbished Ugadale.



The 18th green brings an unforgettable round to a climax.

The 17th green beautifully illustrates the natural, fun side of Mach Dunes.