

72 HOURS IN...

Machrihanish

In a land made famous by Paul McCartney's 1977 ballad lie three courses that make for one of golf's most soulful links pilgrimages. Chris Bertram heads north.

It would be misleading to suggest there isn't a little bit of effort required for this long-weekend golf break. If you want your trips to be easy, it probably isn't for you.

On the other hand, if you want character, soul and a sense of adventure, be assured that you will be reliving 'The Machrihanish Trip' with your friends for years to come.

The hard yards occur in getting there, because once you are actually

on the gloriously remote Mull of Kintyre, travelling to the three links we cover here is very straightforward. The difficulty is that while Kintyre is linked to the mainland, the geography means it feels like an island. Getting there is part of the charm though, and there are three equally characterful routes.

If driving, you loop around Loch Lomond and snake down a long, winding road blessed with peerless

views of mountains and lochs.

Alternatively, you can cut the corner of the dog-leg by using the CalMac ferry either direct from Ardrossan in Ayrshire to Campbeltown or hopping over via Arran. The third option is to fly into Glasgow and then from there to Campbeltown, which is minutes from both main courses.

None of these three options could be considered an easy ride, but the rewards are assuredly spectacular.

DAY ONE

Machrihanish Dunes

On arrival in Machrihanish you realise that while one adventure has ended, another is about to begin. For if you do as we recommend and stay at the Ugadale Hotel in the hamlet itself, you blissfully overlook Machrihanish Old.

The Dunes though, despite being attached to the Ugadale, actually requires a 10-minute transfer (the hotel minibus will oblige if you have flown in).

The evolution over the past seven years of this new addition to the Machrihanish scene has been both interesting and significant.

The American owners, Southworth Development, have a tendency to quietly get things right and their loving parenting of their seaside offspring has been one of the last decade's success

stories in British and Irish golf.

Having been assiduous in the development of the prized linksland under the instruction of famed architect David McLay Kidd (who used to holiday here as a child), it is true they may have opened when it was somewhat ambitious to do so.

Strictly heeding advice from Scottish National Heritage meant the fairways were more narrow than they might have liked (the gorgeous 11th remains tough to hold, because the club continue to respect the environmentally-delicate marshland on the left) and the initial routing not exactly as desired. But, seven years on, it is a links whose ascent up our GB&I rankings is not over.

The links has settled in beautifully and is now able to bear the brunt of the harsh weather which sweeps across uninhibited by virtue of its outlying location. In new greenkeeper Simon Freeman, formerly of The Machrie on

Islay, they have a man with experience in dealing with west coast conditions.

Mach Dunes is a proper, pure links that is all about awesome natural bunkering, fairways laced with humps and hollows, enjoyably eccentric greens and an excellent variety to the exam; it is tremendous fun among this oasis of fescue and marram.

It is not a course where you feel keen to select individual holes for description, as it fits together beautifully and offers an enchanting overall experience. The back nine is arguably a touch stronger for this golfer, yet others may easily take more pleasure from the front half.

The experience remains quirky and on a day of tough weather will test your fortitude and your patience. But even in inclement conditions it is an experience that lives long in the memory.

We will focus on it in depth next year, but don't let that stop you going before then; Mach Dunes has never looked better. ▣

The exquisite short 5th, with the hamlet of Machrihanish visible in the distance beyond the green.

DAY TWO

Machrihanish Old

From the Ugadale Hotel it takes you no longer to reach the 1st tee of the Old than it does to say “I’ve looked forward to this for a long time”. And the original Machrihanish course is unlikely to be a letdown even with years of anticipation.

I first played here in 2004, then again in 2012 alongside one of the team from Mach Dunes who was over from America; it is notable how well the two clubs get on, working together to make this a destination rather than competing as so many golfing neighbours foolishly do.

Machrihanish lags few others in terms of history, with golf first played here in 1871, even if it wasn’t until Old Tom Morris extended the course to 18 holes that it was transformed into the course of today.

The stories of Old Tom’s long journey from St Andrews to lay out the links add a nice mystique, but his input is worth more than mere decoration, for one of his decisions was to create a new 1st hole, with a drive hit over the corner of the beautiful sandy beach below the elevated tee. It is one of the iconic opening tee shots in the game, not just pretty to look at from its lofty position on the edge of the coast, but also a super early strategic question. While the sandy bay looks intimidating on first inspection, you soon realise in practice that you can bail out right and indeed virtually find the fairway with a roofed drive. That, though, leaves a seriously exacting, long approach – hence the temptation to take a little risk and aim further left to gain the reward of a mid-iron into the beachside green.

It begins a tremendous start, with holes of great variety and charm. If you asked 10 golfers to rank the likes of the 4th, ‘Jura’, played from tee to green with a valley in between, the aptly-named ‘Punch Bowl’ 5th, and the cunning, sporty par-4 6th, ‘Balacava’, there would be significant disparity in the orders.

On the back nine the strategic par-5 12th, ‘Long Hole’ might be the stand out, but it is hardly alone. Were Machrihanish not to end on a modest note with a pair of par 4s compromised by the neighbouring nine-hole course, it would be 10 places higher in our GB&I Top 100. It is not, though, the kind of place to worry too much about Top 100 lists, but a rare retreat from the all-consuming nature of modern life. ▣



ABOVE: A view from behind the green on the 6th hole at Machrihanish, a mid-length par called ‘Balacava’ by virtue of its clever elements of disguise. **BELOW:** The 4th, the first short hole at Machrihanish, is called ‘Jura’ after the tiny island that sits to the west of Kintyre and on which a spectacular new course is currently being built.





Dunaverty hugs the coastline on the tip of Kintyre with a links comprising significant changes in elevation.

DAY THREE

Dunaverty

Our final stop lacks the GB&I Top 100 prestige of the other two courses on the itinerary here, but it does not lack for pedigree and is very easy to like.

It was founded in 1889 by those farming the land surrounding the hamlet of Southend, which is right on the tip of Kintyre and whose notable landmark is Dunaverty Rock, a site for fortification that once sheltered Robert the Bruce. The castle is long gone though, raised to the ground by Covenanters who besieged the Royalist garrison.

Dunaverty's course was initially all laid out beyond Conieglen Burn but was redesigned before the Second World War and then revitalised after it had fallen into disrepair. The 'new' holes next to the clubhouse might lack the aesthetic appeal of those perched on the beach or, more pertinently, high above it, but they do include on their fringe arguably the very best of Dunaverty. The blind, short 4th played to a slender green situated in a dell is the kind of hole that today's course architects dream of.

The 4th begins the best section of a links that is routed on predominantly sandy terrain whose marked fluctuations in elevation give rise, literally, to breathtaking coastal views in the manner of Crail, Portpatrick and Castle Stuart.

The 6th is another fine par 3, with the beach to the right and evil hollows short of the green that are frequently in play, given this is an uncharacteristically stout 245 yards. It is followed by another short hole featuring a rare bunker – we counted just one on each nine – guarding a saucer-shaped sloping green. Then the dog-leg 8th, with Sanda Island in the distance, plays along a narrow fairway with gorse aplenty in view off the tee.

The back nine then twists and turns and rises and falls as you thread your way home, offering even better views if not quite the same calibre of hole. The highlight is 'The Burn', the 412-yard 17th with out of bounds all the way down the right that ends on a back-to-front sloping green positioned over the road and the burn.

Curtis Cup player Belle Robertson, who developed her golf skills here, probably had little trouble with it. For the rest of us, it is a six waiting to happen. **GW**

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Where to play

w: machrihanishdunes.com,
t: 01586 810000
w: machgolf.com,
t: 01586 810213
w: dunavertygolfclub.com,
t: 01586 830677

Where to stay

There is no real debate here – stay at the Ugadale Hotel in Machrihanish. An historic hotel refurbished with modern amenities to ensure a luxurious stay, it is backed up by plush cottages ideal for a group of four or more. It has a gym and Serenity Spa too. Mach Old is 25 yards away and Mach Dunes is 10 minutes' drive.



How to get there

If you live north of Manchester/Leeds, drive all the way. It's a special experience detailed in our introduction. For those in the south of the country, fly in to Glasgow and you are ideally placed to drive around Loch Lomond then down the Mull or fly to Campbeltown, while flying to Prestwick is perfect for the Ardrossan ferry.

When to go

It's Britain, so you don't need us to tell you about the vagaries of the weather, but it is worth noting that the Gulf Stream keeps Kintyre incredibly mild all year round. Personally, I'd recommend it in April or as late as mid October to snare an amazing deal (Mach Dunes do lots of them).

Inside knowledge

We really like the island-hopping experience of Ayrshire-to-Arran-to-Kintyre and if you take that route, refuel for your afternoon round at the Sandwich Shop opposite Lochranza ferry slip on Arran. Not just a sandwich bursting with fresh ingredients, but the best lunch view ever on top.