

Golf

Swingers paradise

Obsessive golfers may not immediately think of Argyll as one of the classic destinations for a golfing staycation, but they are blinkered and wrong, says **Richard Bath** – the area is one of the great hidden gems of our national game

Historically, if you were thinking of an autumn staycation built around golf, the chances are you wouldn't immediately think of travelling to Argyll and the surrounding area. Instead, you'd probably base yourself in Fife or Angus (St Andrews, Carnoustie, Kingsbarns, Lundin Links, Elie etc), East Lothian (Muirfield, Gullane, North Berwick, Archerfield etc), the Ayrshire coast (Prestwick, Troon, Turnberry et al), Inverness and the Black Isle (Dornoch, Castle Stuart, Nairn, Tain, Brora and Lossiemouth) or Aberdeen (Royal Aberdeen, Cruden Bay or Trump at Menie).

Yet Argyll and its environs are home to a great mix of top-notch and enjoyably homely courses. Indeed, if my recent trip to play the three majestically picturesque links courses

Main image: David J Whyte tees off at the 1st at Machrihanish Golf Club.

Below: Undulating dunes at Machrihanish.



Autumn
breaks

Argyll, Loch Lomond,
Campbeltown



at the tip of the Mull of Kintyre is any guide, there are few better places to play. Throw in the two world-class courses on Loch Lomond, the courses that pepper the coast, and the spectacular new offerings on Islay and Jura, and you suddenly realise that you have a real gem on your hands.

'It's a long way to come but once people get here they are always amazed at the whole experience,' says Jennie Dunn, the professional at Machrihanish. 'You've got three courses which are completely different, but all have wonderful views, and they never get really busy so you're not rushed. It's an amazing place, and once people have



been here and discovered it they tend to keep coming back.'

At the end of our trip to Campbeltown on the tip of the Mull of Kintyre to play Machrihanish Old Course, Machrihanish

Above: Stop for a bite at the Golf House at Machrihanish Dunes.

Dunes and Dunaverty, we found three remarkable links courses with some of the best views in Scotland. As Old Tom Morris, who designed Old Machrihanish, said of this stretch of coast: 'The Almighty Maun hae had gowf in his e'e when he made this place.'

The 5,971-yard Machrihanish, with its signature first hole involving driving over the beach – a hole described by Jack Nicklaus as the best opening hole in the world – is one of Scotland's grand old links courses and remains one of the finest golfing experiences in the country. With views over to the Paps of Jura, it is gloriously picturesque and ranked at 57 in *Golf Digest* magazine's top 100 courses in the world.

It may be less well-known, but the 7,082-yard Machrihanish Dunes was a revelation. Opened in 2009, it took a while to bed in, a process which involved changing the order in which the holes are played, but has now come of age. Indeed, with its excellent practise area and scarcity of players, many locals even



“Argyll and its environs are home to a great mix of courses



– whisper it – believe it is now on a par (pun intended) with Machrihanish itself.

The area’s third course is the least known and right on the southern tip of the peninsula. The Dunaverty is short (4,577 yards) and couthy, but is definitely worth getting to know. Wonderfully unpretentious and friendly, the course is perfect for less experienced golfers, while prices for a round start at £16 (Machrihanish start at £35, the Dunes at £40, making for some unbelievably good-value golf). Once again, the course is right on the water and has views out to Ailsa Craig.

You can fly to Campbeltown from Glasgow or catch the ferry from Ardrossan, but we drove: it’s just over three hours from Glasgow, and we broke the beautiful drive at the George Hotel in Inveraray. If you’ve got time, you could also take the ferry across from Gourock to Dunoon and then from Portavadie to Tarbert, which is a lovely route but more costly and time-consuming.

Once in Campbeltown, if it’s too wet or windy for golf, there’s always a tour of the town’s famous Springbank or Glen Scotia distilleries. As for places to stay, the Ugadale in Machrihanish is definitely the swankiest and most convenient hotel, while the

Clockwise from top left: Loch Lomond Golf Club sits on the bonnie banks; there’s lots to do in Campbeltown besides play golf; view from the 3rd green at Machrie; Dunaverty lies on the south coast of the Kintyre peninsula; in the sand at Machrihanish Dunes.

hobbit-style eco-lodges at High Trodigidal are superb and within an easy stroll of the Old Clubhouse, the pub next to the Ugadale, which is fantastic for pub grub and sharpeners. If you would rather stay in Campbeltown, the Ardshiel and Royal are the go-to options.

But Machrihanish is by no means the only option in Argyll. Indeed, there are endless options all along the coast, from Taynuilt to Tarbert and Craignure to Cowal, and all points in between. Helpfully *golfadvisor.com* has a full list of all 31 available courses, from the rough and ready to the more refined. And if your travelling companion doesn’t like golf, there is so much to do and see in Argyll that they need never be bored.

For serious golfers, the two courses on Loch Lomond provide some of the best golf in Scotland, although neither

are traditional links-style courses. Loch Lomond is an exclusive private members club so you can only play with a member, but the Carrick is a newer yet thoroughly rewarding course where rounds start from £50. You can either stay locally at a variety of hotels (my choice would be the wonderful Loch Lomond Arms at Luss), while Glasgow is 30 minutes away and the sumptuous Mar Hall is 20 minutes away over the Erskine Bridge.

On the subject of luxury, the famous old Willie Campbell-designed Machrie links course on the whisky island of Islay has had a ton of money spent on it of late and is well worth a visit. It helps that the course’s hotel, which reopens in the first week of August this summer after a multi-million pound overhaul, is now one of the best on the west coast, while the island is a mecca for whisky lovers.

Quite what is happening on the neighbouring island of Jura, where hedge fund billionaire Greg Coffey has built what has been widely lauded as one of the best golf courses in the country on his Ardfin estate, is less sure. The problem is that no-one yet knows whether he’s going to allow mere mortals to play it, so keep a watching brief.

But if Jura and Loch Lomond are two corners of Argyll and Loch Lomond which are less accessible, they stick out all the more for that because, for the most part, one of the joys of golf in Argyll is that it is unhurried and relaxed. The courses range from Championship quality to the next tier up from a ploughed field, yet virtually all have amazing views, a warm welcome and represent great value. The only surprise is that more people haven’t cottoned on.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT



Finn Falconry

Get up close with some feathered friends at Inverawe Country Park and learn the ancient art of falconry. You can choose between full-day courses or hawk walks which offer an introductory taster. You’ll be introduced to a variety of birds of prey and the different methods and equipment involved while being taught how to safely handle the birds. www.finnfalconry.co.uk

Jura Music Festival

A celebration of great music from a variety of acts along with informative workshops for aspiring musicians. From 21-23 September. Confirmed acts include Skippinnish, Pete Smoke and the Roches along with a couple of ceilidhs to really break in those dancing shoes. www.juramusicfestival.com



Loch Lomond Live

Set against a stunning backdrop, this brand new family-friendly festival on 22-23 September at Drymen is aimed at promoting local culture and features entertainment, attractions, live music, plus delicious food and drink. www.facebook.com/lochlomondlive

