

↓ A sunset view highlights the gorgeous movement in the 9th green.

Classic Course

Machrihanish Dunes

If it's a soulful, natural experience you enjoy most, you need to make the scenic journey to the Mull of Kintyre, says **Chris Bertram**.

On the opposite coast to the hype, controversy and awe-inspiring holes of Trump International Golf Links in Aberdeenshire sits a very different model in modern golf course development.

These contemporary Scottish links are both owned and were developed by Americans, but the manner in which the courses at Machrihanish Dunes and Trump International were created was markedly different.

While the latter has generated enormous publicity – both positive and negative – before, during and since it was built, Machrihanish Dunes has followed a quieter path.

Its owner not being a high-profile media figure who now happens to be President of the United States of America helps in this regard of course, but there are also differences outside the ownership's profile.

Mach Dunes, located on the mystical Mull of Kintyre made famous by Paul McCartney's 1977 ballad, was also created in a highly sensitive environmental area.

Here, the bywords during 'construction' – used here in the loosest sense of the word – were sensitivity and preservation.

"Mach Dunes was the most minimal build ever," designer David McLay Kidd tells NCG. "Even Old Tom would have been impressed!"

"It took a mere six months to 'build' but I'd say it was more of an amendment to the existing land than a true build. The land is so sensitive that even driving heavy equipment over the ground in some places would damage the precious orchid bulbs just under the surface.

"What I did was start the golf course; time will slowly move it forward, as it does on all great links – the Old Course is still being tweaked after 600 years."

In fact, McLay Kidd describes the 'construction' as "part

build, part mow”, so keen was he and the owners, Southworth Development, not to disturb the delicate ecology of this Site of Special Scientific Interest.

This eagerness led to Mach Dunes being a fairly unforgiving mistress when she first opened in 2009. The routing of the holes was restricted and fairways were pinched in to affect as little of the land as possible.

As a result, admirably only seven of the 259-acre site were disturbed in creating Mach Dunes.

McLay Kidd, a romantic with a keen interest in the game’s history, will tell you this translates to tees and greens being refined and the fairways largely left as they were; in short, an authentic stab at how the game began in Scotland in earnest over a century earlier.

Certainly, with fertilisers forbidden, it was raw. To anyone familiar with the finely-manicured nature of the rest of our leading courses – even the seaside ones – the early experience of Mach Dunes will have been a shock. It especially meant it was an exacting challenge, not least off the tee.

Nearly a decade later, it is more polished than on its opening day in 2009, not least because of the wider fairways that make it more forgiving off the tee – but this is still not another of those aforementioned uber-manicured venues.

That is neither the experience McLay Kidd intended or that desired by Caledonia-phile David Southworth, who owns it. It is also, in all honesty, not really possible given the environmental sensitivities mean fertiliser is used far more sparingly than on Muirfield, Turnberry et al.

Nostalgia and romance

This was a project close to McLay Kidd’s heart, because building sand castles on the beach in the little hamlet of Machrihanish was often where he spent his childhood summers.

His father Jimmy, then greenkeeper at Gleneagles, favoured the area owing to the presence of the ancient links of Machrihanish in the middle of the hamlet. Little did father and son know then that three decades later they would be able to build a course in the dunes a mile along the coast.



↑ The 11th green sits close to the sea on what is a stellar start to the back nine at Machrihanish Dunes.



↑ Try to look at this view from the 16th tee and not want to be there right now.

+ Essential information for your trip

Getting there

● This is such a key aspect of the Mach Dunes experience that we’ve mentioned it in the main article. Don’t let it put you off, is the main gist of our suggestion; it’s awkward but great fun. We love the idea of you driving (possibly via a hire car from Glasgow) round Loch Lomond and down the Kintyre peninsula. Genuinely a breathtaking journey. But using the ferry – possibly via a day on Arran – is just as scenic. The less romantic but on paper more efficient option is flying to Glasgow and then into Campbeltown.

Where to stay

● Machrihanish might be remote, but you are not short of splendid places to stay. The club own a hotel that is 30 yards from the legendary 1st tee of Machrihanish Old. The Ugadale was painstakingly renovated and is a stylish and comfortable base. The Ugadale cottages 10 yards away are an amazing option for groups. There is a gym, first-class restaurant and wonderful ‘pub’ on site. What more could you want... Then there is the Royal Hotel in Campbeltown if you want a (slightly) livelier location.

The costs

● Machrihanish Dunes is not ludicrously expensive. A round is £75 or £95 for the day but drops to £67.50 for hotel of cottage residents. What you should really do is take up this truly sensational offer; B&B accommodation in the Ugadale hotel, unlimited golf, one soup and sandwich lunch per person at the Golf House, and a miniature bottle of locally distilled whisky. A weekend stay in a Classic Room is £106 (£86 for the second night) or £101 (£81) midweek. The Cottages are £91 and £71 (four sharing).

‘McLay Kidd was blessed with the site for Mach Dunes – “It is not a walk in the garden but a full mountaineering expedition,” he says.’

Initially the new course in Machrihanish was being driven by Australian Brian Keating but it took the drive and capital of Southworth Development to make the idea a reality. The minimalist nature of the ‘construction’ meant it was little over 18 months between start and finish.

Despite its early rawness, it was largely well received. And in addition to its conditioning being refined, its routing has also been altered – with significant success.

But don’t think all of the fun has been removed at Mach Dunes in a bid to make it appropriately playable for the demanding but perhaps less adventurous modern golfer.

The minimalist build made blind shots inevitable and those exciting moments still exist, much to this golfer’s delight. For those that don’t enjoy them, there are marker posts to guide you. But if you’re the kind of intrepid golfer who has made



↑ The 7th green illustrates the often funky greens here.

their way to Machrihanish, you likely won’t mind some blind shots. In fact you’ll almost certainly relish them.

That’s because getting to Machrihanish is a story in itself. The simple truth is, it’s not all that easy. It’s not on an island, but getting there feels as if it is.

There are three ways to do it: drive or fly to Glasgow then fly to Campbeltown and be picked up by Mach Dunes’ minibus; take the most scenic car journey of your life to loop around Loch Lomond and then snake down the Mull of Kintyre (which takes three hours from Glasgow); or take the ferry from Ardrossan to Campbeltown. There is a second ferry option, going from Ardrossan to Arran – where you can enjoy some or all of its seven alluring courses, headlined by Shiskine – and then a short second ferry to Kintyre.

For most of Britain’s golfers, it is significantly harder to reach than getting to The Belfry or Sunningdale. But the rewards outweigh the effort, because in addition to Mach Dunes, Dunaverty – a fun clifftop course – and the original Machrihanish lie in wait.

Blind shots and strong par 4s

The latter was created in its current form when Old Tom Morris turned the existing course into an 18-holer in 1879.

“The Almighty Maun hae had gowf in his e’e when he made this place,” he said after inspecting the site, and after playing its seminal opening nine, you’ll understand why.

McLay Kidd was similarly blessed – “It is not a walk in the garden but a full mountaineering expedition,” he says – and relished working the raunchy dunescape to create numerous holes of great drama.

So it is that even on short shots there is often lots going on, with green complexes bursting with slopes, tiers, mounds and gullies. Some might find it verging on too funky, the rest of us – not desperate to mark a card – will just enjoy the fun.

Today’s routing (the two loops that return to the clubhouse have been swapped twice since opening) flows melodically to

Did you know?

Weather watch
Simon Freeman is doing a super job as Mach Dunes’ greenkeeper... but does know the climate well – he was previously at The Machrie on nearby Islay.



Add another 18

More top links
Machrihanish’s original course is one of Scotland’s most intriguing and fun places to play. The front nine has few if any peers in GB&I and you can’t help but fall in love with it from the moment you’ve hit the iconic first tee shot. Dunaverty is a funky and scenic course that is balancing on the edge of cliffs.

↓ The green of the short 5th, looking towards Machrihanish.



and from the sea offering six greens and five tees alongside the beach across both nines.

With three holes right along the coast, the back nine usually gains most plaudits but the opening half is far from tedious. This golfer might even prefer it.

Natural, admirable and likeable

The 1st, for example, is a perfect opener; a mid-length dog-leg to a funky green partly tucked behind a mound. After two stiff holes that head south down the edge of the site, one of Mach Dunes' best spells reveals itself.

There's a wonderful short par 4 to a secluded green; a short hole towards the beach, with the eponymous village and Machrihanish Old in the background; then another super one-shot hole away from the beach. Blind shots and robustness characterise the last three on this varied nine.

The second half opens with a downhill fairway that leads to a green in an amphitheatre that is sufficiently secluded to offer respite from even the strongest breeze.

Next, the drama of the oceanside holes is unveiled, starting with the 11th, a classy hole along the beach to a small green.

There is only a single par 3 and one par 5, a muscular offering along a dune corridor that begins a stern closing trio.

To follow, the penultimate hole starts with a blind tee shot over a dune to a bumpy fairway and an approach over a gorge, before the cross-site 18th returns you to the neat clubhouse, where you can chew over one of the most natural, admirable and likeable modern courses in Britain and Ireland, one that proves noise isn't required to be successful.

Architect insight

“The beach is five miles long and I know every rock out there and every dune” By David McLay Kidd



My grandmother started going to Machrihanish after the Second World War and then brought her daughter, my mother, who brought her husband and then their family. Me. So we've been on that beach for 60 years.

In the days before budget air travel and package holidays, this is where people used to holiday. In an even earlier era, this is where the rich folk in Glasgow came on vacation. By the time we came here, the Ugadale was a shell and I used to wonder what it looked like in its prime. Now I know.

So my summer childhood was spent on the beach. I know every rock out there and every dune – although they do change now and again. The beach from

Machrihanish to Westport is something like five miles and I know the whole stretch. We'd follow the beach round but there was only one course, Machrihanish Old, so we'd see these dunes and say 'it's a shame there wasn't more golf we could play'.

Now, in little old Machrihanish, there are two world-class hotels, a second course, cottages – all completed and opened by David Southworth. It gives me great pride to have been a part of it. And it will only get better; over time the people of Scotland will rediscover the Mull of Kintyre and a more simple way of holidaying.

Because of the restrictions we had, more than any other course, this one will take time to mature for it to move towards its potential.