

## The true romance of the Highlands

**T**his is a tale of romance, golf, love and more golf. Not that I ever would but, take out the references to golf, and this month's column wouldn't look out of place in one of those chick lit, short story magazines you see on the newsagent's shelf several yards to the left of this one.

Once upon a time (about 32 years ago in fact) when playing off a handicap of 12, I met the lovely Rose. Although she didn't, and still doesn't, play golf, she's always been willing to listen sympathetically to my sad tales of topped drives, fluffed chips and missed putts. And that's just one of the things I love about her.

We bought a house together in deepest East Sussex and although there are no good schools in the area or shops worth mentioning, there is the lovely links course at Rye and several decent parkland courses within range. Since Rye required ten members to support an application and the waiting list was longer than Bubba Watson's drives, I joined delightful Dale Hill.

Twenty-one years ago we were blessed with the birth of a beautiful daughter and I celebrated soon afterwards by capturing the August Midweek Stableford with an impressive 38 points.

My handicap tumbled to nine and although I was too busy playing in monthly medals, club knock-out competitions and society days to consider marriage, we were blissfully happy. Then last September, after an exceptionally solid round at Doonbeg, I walked with Rose along the magnificent sandy beach that borders the course on one side just as the sun was

setting. As we drew alongside the 7th, which I had parred only three hours previously with the help of a solid drive and sweetly struck seven iron to 14 feet, I suddenly felt the time was right to do the decent thing. And so when we reached the end of the beach and were immediately adjacent to the par-three 9th, I went down on one knee and proposed without making the Craig Stadler mistake of spreading a towel on the ground thereby 'building a stance' and incurring a penalty.

Since there was no stag 'do' in St Andrews, Turnberry or Carnoustie, I shall skip the details of our recent wedding and move swiftly on to the honeymoon. Ever alert to my hidden agendas, Rose was initially a little suspicious when I suggested Machrihanish. Like me, she's a big Beatles' fan and the close proximity to the Mull of Kintyre finally clinched it.

To be honest, the holiday didn't get off to the greatest of starts when our flight from Glasgow to Campbeltown was cancelled. Horribly prone to travel sickness, Rose didn't especially fancy the three-and-a-half hour coach journey but since there are no trains to the Kintyre peninsula and the next flight wasn't until the following Monday, there was no alternative. As it happens, the scenery was so spectacularly beautiful that by the time we reached our destination, we were rather pleased we hadn't flown.

Apart from the link with Paul McCartney, my other trump card when selling the deal to Rose had been the Ugadale Hotel. And it didn't disappoint. Extraordinarily elegant, it oozes class and comfort. And it's got a spa, which I'm given to understand is where wives go when

You don't have to be on honeymoon to enjoy the luxury of the recently-renovated Ugadale Hotel - or for that matter the magnificent raw links of Machrihanish






their husbands are playing golf. Speaking of which, did I mention that the hotel is bang next door to the famous old Machrihanish Golf Club and so as well as the sparkling sea, imposing mountains, sandy beaches and all that other stuff you get in Scotland, we could see the first tee from our room? (We could also see Sir Paul McCartney's home in the distance which, incidentally, looks like a huge clubhouse). An incurable romantic, I waited a couple of days before taking on Old Tom Morris's superb creation.

But Machrihanish is not just about one golf course. Certainly not... well, not since they opened Machrihanish Dunes right next door to it. As it is owned by the same nice people who restored the fabulous Ugadale Hotel, I thought it polite to play that one first. Like its neighbour, it's a true links and about as natural as porridge. Quirky and enormous fun, it apparently has been 'softened' since it opened a little while back but was still plenty tough enough for this newlywed. In case you're worrying, while I checked it out, my wife was, you guessed it, being pampered in the spa.

Surprisingly, there are lot of things to do in Machrihanish besides golf. Although with only two flights a day the plane spotting opportunities are somewhat limited, Campbeltown Airport is worth a visit if only to admire what is allegedly the second longest runway in Europe. And the absence of duty free shopping doesn't diminish the appeal of the terminal hut. If the locals are to be believed, there's also the original 'Long and Winding Road' made famous by the Beatles' hit, simply spectacular walks and quite magnificent beaches.

It just so happens that the best beach runs alongside the famous first hole at Machrihanish – thought by many to be the greatest opening hole in golf – and so I suggested to Rose that it would be interesting to view the beach from a slightly different angle. And so for the second time in as many weeks she said 'yes' and for the first time in her life accompanied me around a golf course.

I'd love to return to Machrihanish one day. Although you'll think me just too soft and sentimental, I'm thinking of taking Rose back there on our first anniversary to show her what I gather is the very best view of the Mull of Kintyre, which curiously is from the lovely links course at nearby Dunaverty. 

## BEST OF BRITISH

### MACHRIHANISH LINKS WITH THE PAST

Four-time Open champion Old Tom Morris described the quirky duneland of Machrihanish as "Created by the Almighty to play golf on" and, thankfully, little has changed since he marked out this traditional links using seagull feathers over a weekend in 1876. His legacy to the game has been enjoyed by golfers in their thousands. Taking the small prop plane from Glasgow you can reach Campbeltown in half an hour; for the hard-core, there is only one way to get here – and that's by car (or coach, as Mr & Mrs Agran discovered). The scenery on the twisting road from Glasgow is stunning, with pretty villages like Tarbut inviting regular stops. Allow three hours and enjoy the ride. Now there's another reason to make the trip to the Kintyre Peninsula, because sharing the same breathtaking ocean views with the adjacent "Old Tom Morris" layout, is the Machrihanish Dunes Golf Club – the first 18-hole golf course to be built on the west coast of Scotland in 100 years. Scotsman and course architect David McLay Kidd has created a real throwback of a links, and this one-of-a-kind layout, featuring six greens and five tees right at the ocean's edge, is one for the links connoisseur.

"We followed the lie of the land and let the terrain dictate the nature of the course in a bid to return golf to how it should be played" explains Kidd.

Realistically, you are not likely to score well on your first circuit of Machrihanish Dunes. And there are some golfers who will hate the place. But for any lover of genuine, quirky links golf it is a real gem. In addition to Machrihanish Old and Dunes, no trip to these parts is complete without sampling the delightful seaside links of Dunaverty, just 20 minutes' or so by car near the pretty port of Campbeltown – gateway to the islands of the Southern Hebrides, which include Jura and Islay, and the promise of more fabulous, quirky golf and traditional hospitality.

#### FACTFILE

##### GOLF COURSES

**Machrihanish Old**  
Tel: +44 (0) 1586 810 277  
[www.machgolf.com](http://www.machgolf.com)

**Machrihanish Dunes**  
Tel +44 (0) 1586 810 000  
[www.machdunes.com](http://www.machdunes.com)

**Dunaverty**  
Tel +44 (0) 1586 830 677  
[www.dunavertygolfclub.com](http://www.dunavertygolfclub.com)

##### WHERE TO STAY

The Ugadale Hotel, Campbeltown  
[www.machrihanishdunes.com](http://www.machrihanishdunes.com)

The Royal Hotel, Campbeltown  
[www.machrihanishdunes.com/Royal-Hotel](http://www.machrihanishdunes.com/Royal-Hotel)

GENERAL INFORMATION  
[www.visitscotland.com/golf](http://www.visitscotland.com/golf)