



Southwest Scotland PILGRIMS' WAY

James Mason reaffirms his devotion to Scotland by enjoying some wonderful scenery, quirky design ideas and a beguiling blend of modernity and history

Going on a golf tour to Scotland always has that feel of making a pilgrimage. The country has so many great courses, all steeped in the history of the game, that it's hard to decide where to go and play. No matter what part of Scotland you go to, you'll almost certainly feel the need to go back. That's why I see golf in Scotland as a journey more than a destination. Each time you visit, it's like picking up your stamp on a pilgrimage route such as Spain's Camino de Santiago.

This particular journey saw me visiting the south-west of Scotland, a tale of seven courses in seven days, taking in old and new. The omens seemed especially good when I spotted the female pilot on the flight from Glasgow to Campbeltown wearing a FootJoy glove as we came into land!

DUNAVERTY

Compared with some of today's monster tracks, Dunaverty weighs in at only 4,799 yards. But if you think you're going to beat this beautiful links into submission you'll be mistaken. What Dunaverty lacks in length, it certainly makes up for in strategic demand.

The course was founded in 1889 and is sited on ground around Dunaverty Rock, which offers some spectacular views – none more so than on the 3rd, with Dunaverty Beach running along the right, or the 11th

from its high vantage point, where you can see the Mull of Kintyre and the Ulster coastline on a clear day.

I played on a grey rainy day, but I must say, when I sat down in the little clubhouse, which is a throwback to the 1930s, I had a chuckle. One thing that will stick long in the memory is the square greens!

MACHRIHANISH

Next up is Old Tom Morris' course at Machrihanish. The club was originally known as the Kintyre Golf Club and came into being in March 1876. Golf had been played on the links before then, but the meeting that took place at the Argyll Arms Hotel made things official. The course was extended from 10 to 12 holes, on the advice of Charles Hunter of Prestwick, and then to 18 by Old Tom Morris in 1879, when the first hole was moved to its current location. It's a stunning opener – there aren't many better in the world, let alone Scotland. It's played across the beach, which is in play and runs all the way along the left of the hole. Cut off as much as you dare!

Other standout holes are the 4th – 121 yards from an elevated tee – the tough par-4 7th at 476 yards off the very back tees, and the 341-yard 8th. The 558-yard 10th is a superb start to the back nine, and kicks off a

great run of holes to the 166-yard par-3 15th.

MACHRIHANISH DUNES

If Old Tom can be happy with his creation at Machrihanish, then David McLay Kidd must be elated with his contribution. While it's hard to compare from generation to generation, I feel the Dunes will one day be the number one course in the area. It's a stunning track, with some fantastic routes through the dunes. There aren't too many better settings than this.

It's hard to imagine that little modern equipment was involved in building this course. The only developments to take place were the shaping of the tees and greens – the fairways are as natural today as the

terrain has always been, but have been cut with mowers, while Hebridean black sheep assist in keeping the rough down.

TURNBERRY

Unfortunately, the weather was so bad that instead of taking the 40-minute Kintyre Express ferry over to Turnberry, it was the long route round and a three-hour journey by road. It's a beautiful journey to take, or so I'm told – I was asleep on the floor of our minibus! Well, what's a golf tour without a couple of late-night drinking sessions? We hit Turnberry in a 30mph wind, with no let-up in the rain, so after a hearty meal it was waterproofs on and out into the storm.

To say I loved every minute, every shot, every blade of grass, lost ball, wet grip, leaky waterproof, would be an understatement, I'd do it all again, in the same conditions, in an instant. Yes, it's another stamp on my pilgrim's book – but it was so much more than that.

DUNDONALD LINKS

Dundonald Links opened for play in 2003, but if you didn't know it, you'd think this course had stood here for hundreds of years. I'm a big Kyle Phillips fan – the way he combines natural links-style golf with modern methods, seeding and irrigation makes his courses some of the best modern tracks in the world today.

On the day I played it, I found the fairways to be fairly generous, but you could see how they could be pulled in to toughen it up for the big events. Considering the weather we've had this year, the large, undulating greens were fantastic – rolling fast and true. The yellow gorse that lines the fairways was in full flower – beautiful to behold, but it can kill your scorecard with just one visit.

WESTERN GAILES

You can feel the sense of history when you walk into the clubhouse at Western Gailes, and the members still have a rule that they must turn up in a jacket and tie and leave wearing a jacket and tie. But don't worry, that rule doesn't extend to non-members.

It wasn't until 1930 that play was allowed on Sundays, an astonishing 33 years after the

course was founded by four Glasgow-based golfers who came across the perfect piece of land next to Gailes train station on the railway line to Glasgow.

On 11 November 1897, Western Gailes was born and with no designer in place, the greenkeeper Mr Morris was given the task of having nine holes ready by early the following year, with the full 18 holes opening that June. I must admit, after walking off the 18th green, I'm not sure if Mr Morris was a greenkeeper or a genius – his design stands up there with any of Dr Alister MacKenzie's, Harry Colt's, Donald Ross' or James Braid's.

It's a course that will challenge you mentally and physically and test every club in your bag. Whatever you've read and been told about the famous run of holes along the sea from the 5th to the 13th, it's all true and more. You really do have to experience playing them yourself – they're some of the most enjoyable holes you'll ever play.

EARL OF MAR COURSE AT MAR HALL RESORT

The third hole is impressive, with the River Clyde and Old Kilpatrick Hills as its backdrop and the Erskine Bridge to the right. It makes for a dramatic view, especially with the boats bobbing along the water. The 14th is the signature hole and you can see why: it has a high tee, again with the Clyde as a backdrop. The bunkering and a solitary tree make for the perfectly sculpted hole. I'm sure many a photo is taken here.

This Dave Thomas-designed course is only two years old and it's still bedding in. It's totally different to the major courses that you'll play here, and is not trying to compete with them. Only four miles from Glasgow Airport, Mar Hall is the perfect place to stay on the first or last night of your Scottish tour.

So there you have it. Seven great courses, all with a different feel, history and personality. You may never complete your pilgrimage – there are so many courses to play – but one thing's for sure, you'll certainly enjoy treading its well-worn path, and swapping stories of birdies and bogeys with other disciples along the way. **GM**



Ugdale Hotel, Machrihanish

ESSENTIALS

PLAY Dunaverty Golf Club

GF: £28wd, £30we
Stats: par 66, 4,799 yards
W: dunavertygolfclub.com

Machrihanish

GF: £30-£62
Stats: par 70, 6,462 yards
W: machgolf.com

Machrihanish Dunes

GF: £30-£55
Stats: par 72, 7,175 yards
W: machrihanishdunes.com

Turnberry

GF: Ailsa £180wd, £199we
Stats: par 70, 7,211 yards
W: turnberry.co.uk

Dundonald Links

GF: £40-£95wd, £50-£95we
Stats: par 72, 7,100 yards
W: dundonaldlinks.com

Western Gailes

GF: £60-£125 (Mon-Sat), £95-£125 (Sun)
Stats: par 71, 7,014 yards
W: westerngailes.com

Earl of Mar Course at Mar Hall Resort

GF: £35-£60
Stats: par 70, 6,507 yards
W: marhall.com

STAY The Ugdale Hotel

W: machrihanishdunes.com

Barcelo Troon Marine Hotel

W: pumahotels.co.uk/hotels/scotland/barcelo-troon-marine-hotel

Mar Hall Resort

W: marhall.com

