

Golf Insider: Scotland's Machrihanish Dunes

Designer David McLay Kidd talks about the course's seaside design, how to play it and his favourite hole.

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The fifth green at Machrihanish Dunes, photo by Clive Barber

[Machrihanish Dunes](#) was the first links to open on the west coast of Scotland in 100 years. This is notable as there are so few true links courses, most located in the British Isles, which make up almost half of the best courses in existence. Synonymous with the game's invention, they're typically located on sandy, oceanfront land exposed to salt spray and wind.

This remote southern end of the Kintyre peninsula inspired Sir Paul McCartney, who has a farm in the area, to record his 1977 Wings hit, "Mull of Kintyre."

Nicknamed Mach Dunes, the 7,082-yard course flows effortlessly to, from and along the sea, inviting golfers to step back in time and enjoy the game in its purest form—you against the elements. The experience recalls the days when legendary golf pro and course designer Old Tom Morris helped expand Machrihanish Golf Club, the neighbouring links, way back in 1879.

Acclaimed Scottish-born architect David McLay Kidd (who also designed [The Castle Course](#) at St. Andrews and [Bandon Dunes](#) in Oregon, where he now resides), was Southworth Development's obvious choice for the project. As a child, Kidd spent summer holidays roaming this seaside turf where he would eventually build what he calls the world's most natural golf course.



David McLay Kidd,
illustration by Tony
Healey

How to play the course: *"For most North Americans, links golf is a mystery. Even the great Tom Watson told me he was frustrated by the apparent unfair nature of the bounce. But he embraced it [and] grew to understand it, then use it. The wind and the bounce can be your allies, but you must learn to use them."*

Designer's choice: *"The fifth, a short par 3 played across the prevailing onshore wind. The tight green with a good backstop benefits the bold; short is where all the trouble lies. It's the hole with the killer view along the prettiest beach I've ever seen—it's filled with childhood memories."*

Creating this field of dreams was not without its obstacles. Kidd and his team had to abide by strict environmental rules laid down by Scottish National Heritage to protect rare plant species, including the pyramidal orchids visible to golfers in summer.

"The land was so environmentally sensitive that, when I suggested building a golf course, they practically laughed me out of the room," recalls Kidd. "But I argued that the land was zoned under agricultural rules, so there was nothing to safeguard the orchids. They could have been lost. My proposal routed the fairways through corridors that would protect the flora in perpetuity."

This required moving minimal dirt, digging no drainage or irrigation, using no pesticides and employing a herd of feisty black sheep to "mow" the rough. This eco-attuned, back-to-basics approach is reflected in the course slogan: The Way Golf Began.

Of the course's 259 acres, just seven were disturbed by construction. Since it opened in 2009, Kidd and his father, Jimmy, who, for 20 years, was the estates and golf courses manager at

Gleneagles have made many tweaks. Five greens at Mach Dunes have been rebuilt since it opened, and both Kidds constantly tinker with its bunkers.

David sums up these efforts: "We followed the lie of the land. We did not lay out the course and make the land change with it; we designed each hole around the natural terrain. We are returning golf to how it should be played. No longer is it a gentle walk in a garden; it will be a full-fledged mountaineering expedition."

Getting there: [WestJet flies to Glasgow](#) once a day from Halifax starting April 30.