

Travel and Adventure: Ireland's gorgeous courses a treat for American golfer

by *Tod Leonard*

This is how the dream golf trip in Ireland began:

Thirty hours removed from my bed in California and feeling a bit fuzzy after little sleep on the flight, I arrived at Lahinch Golf Club on Ireland's southwest coast on a sunny and warm September afternoon, the week before the country's first visit to the grand golf stage known as the Ryder Cup Matches.

PLAYIN' ON THE GREEN - Old Head sits 300 feet above the ocean, with a red-striped lighthouse, ruins of houses and castles and a 10th-hole approach shot played over a 5,000-year-old Druid burial ground. CNS Photo by Tod Leonard. **AIM FOR THE LIGHTHOUSE** - In Ireland, golf is king, with some of the world's most interesting courses, including Old Head Golf Links and its seaside holes. CNS Photo by Tod Leonard. **A ROUND UNDER THE CLOUDS** - A two-ball (twosome) pull their trolleys (pull carts) at Lahinch Golf Club, the 'St. Andrews of Ireland.' CNS Photo by Tod Leonard. They call Lahinch the "St. Andrews of Ireland," but it didn't much remind me of the Home of Golf when I stepped up to the rather plain and modern-looking clubhouse.

In just a matter of minutes, though - before I swung a club - I learned how different Irish golf would be from what we know in America.

I was required to check in with the club secretary, who asked very pleasantly if I'd sign a guest register. The secretary sent me to the pro shop to retrieve my trolley (pull cart), and I was instructed to join the three-ball (a threesome) on the nearby first tee.

The first golfer to see me was a fit, handsome fellow in his early 50s who was wearing a bright red polo shirt. He rushed over to shake my hand and said his name was Donald.

"Where are you from?" he asked in a lilting Irish brogue, immediately warming me. I'd been afraid I would get stuck with a group of Yanks in my very first round.

"San Diego," I said.

"Me, too!" Donald replied, and then didn't seem to be the least bit offended when my eyes shot from my head, as if I'd just seen the ghost of Old Tom Morris.

It turned out that Donald McDonnell, native of County Kerry, didn't live in San Diego anymore. He had worked in La Jolla, Calif., in the '90s in the biotech industry, but was now was a professor of cancer biology at Duke University.

McDonnell had returned to Ireland to enjoy a buddy trip with two friends from the States. They'd made the sojourn frequently over the years, and that would become a theme - other than the spectacular golf and fantastic weather sent from God - for my seven-day, six-course trip across the country.

Americans make a lot of buddy trips to Ireland.

Scotland is still tops on many golfers' lists because it has St. Andrews, and more of its courses are on the British Open rotation. But Ireland has experienced a huge golf boom in the last 20 years. It can first thank Tom Watson, who upon his first visit touted Ballybunion's Old Course as one of the greatest in the world.

More recently, Tiger Woods and Mark O'Meara have made golf and fishing trips to Ireland the week before the British Open, and Payne Stewart was so beloved there he was made the honorary captain of Waterville Golf Club only months before he died in a plane crash in 1999.

Ireland boasts more than 440 golf courses, about a quarter of which were built in the 1990s. Yet, the allure for so many Americans are the seaside links, strewn among grassy dunes. There are only about 150 true links courses in the world, and Ireland claims about one-third of them.

Many of the best of those tracks are in Ireland's southwest, down on the Ring of Kerry, which Golf Digest called the "World's Best Golf Trail." That was the counterclockwise horseshoe loop, from Shannon to Dublin, I planned for myself.

Lahinch was a fantastic introduction, a colorful town perched on the Atlantic Ocean and known for, besides golf, its prime surfing. Its 115-year-old course was a short walk from its main street.

Scotsman Old Tom Morris first devised Lahinch Golf Club in 1892 as nine holes, but Alister Mackenzie, designer of Augusta National and Cypress Point, later became one of several to update it.

Two of Old Tom's greatest holes remain though, and they are all you need to know about the whimsy of Irish golf.

The par-5 fourth has a sizable dune in the middle of the fairway called "Klondyke" that requires a high and hopeful shot over it. A worker has to stand on that hill all day to signal when players can come through.

"King George, the Fourth," McDonnell said with a twinkle in his eye. "He was demoted from the fifth hole, so they had to give him a pay raise or he said he'd quit."

The very next hole is a short par-3, "Dell," whose green is completely obscured by a hill. An utterly blind shot awaits. Only a white stone marks your line of attack.

See these holes anywhere in the States and you'd think the designer was sloshed when he drew them up. Here, you shake your head with delight.

From Lahinch, it was on to Ballybunion, a ferry ride across the River Shannon and a short drive south. (A note on driving: It's mostly white-knuckle stuff in Ireland, with roads as wide as beach towels being traveled by massive tour buses. Suggestion: Get the smallest car that will fit you and your clubs. Second suggestion: Go for it! Don't take the golf package route and look like the pampered American with the personal assistant stepping out of the van.)

At Ballybunion's Old Course, founded in 1892, I hooked up with three friendly guys from Chicago. They'd played there before and so warned me about slicing into the graveyard that runs hard against the fairway on the first hole.

An amazing place, Ballybunion. It's No. 11 on Golf Digest's world course rankings, and yet some of the holes on the front side have a trailer park next to them. Then you get near the water, weaving around the craggy dunes and abundant heather, and it's like only golf exists, not civilization.

A trip to Waterville was next. When I arrived late in the afternoon, a stiff wind was blowing as storm clouds gathered. The weather matched my mood as I stood sadly in front of the club's life-sized statue of a grinning Payne Stewart. My outlook was brightened that evening, however, when the desk clerk at the Butler Arms Hotel pointed to the bar area and told me about Woods, O'Meara and Stewart drinking and singing around the piano some years ago. Payne did love to sing.

At Waterville, I was fortunate to hook up with Charlie Schroeder, a writer from L.A. who had also acted. (He'd played a boyfriend of Charlotte's in an episode of "Sex and the City," whose nickname on the show could only be repeated in a British tabloid.)

Charlie was great company, and while a few friends in the States had raved about Waterville, we admitted to being only mildly impressed. What will stick with me is the last stretch of holes along the water. The day had turned almost balmy, and with palmlike plants around the greens and a lush, green island visible across the water, it actually felt like we might be in Maui.

"Wow" would be the word saved for the next day for Charlie and me. We would repeat it dozens of times in a useless attempt to express our giddy pleasure at Old Head Golf Links.

Old Head is Pebble Beach squared. It has to be seen to be believed. We got a perfectly clear and windless day, and it could be the best golf experience of my life. I don't want to consider what it would have been like with fog.

Some wealthy guys bought the rugged jutting of land, shaped like a dinosaur's head, 300 feet above the ocean, in the mid-'90s and turned it into a golf course. Half the holes are so perilously perched on the cliffs you think you might just tumble off.

It's fantasy golf. There is a red-striped lighthouse on the point, ruins of houses and castles on the grounds, and the 10th-hole approach shots are played over a 5,000-year-old Druid burial ground.

We took way more photos than golf shots, and when we caught the lead group on the 16th tee, it was none other than Donald O'Connell and friends, grinning madly. "This is better than sex!" Donald shouted. "Just don't tell my wife that!"

The penultimate stop took me to the east coast on the Irish Sea. An hour south of Dublin, famous Irish golf writer and raconteur Pat Ruddy designed the European Club in 1992 as one of the country's last true links. It was Ruddy, in a tie and jacket, who greeted me in the pro shop and later shared his vision over pie and ice cream.

Ruddy loves people who love the game, and that's one of the reasons why the European Club has 20 holes. "If there's land for more, why stop at 18?" Ruddy said.

Unconventional and very hard - that's the European Club. Example: The 12th hole, beautifully set next to the beach, has a green that's 127 yards long, setting the scene, Ruddy says, "for the restoration of the art of the great three-putt as opposed to the disappointing version of the same."

Only one course awaited, and it would be the perfect finish. There are many in Ireland who thought Portmarnock Golf Club, north of Dublin, should be Ireland's first Ryder Cup course. But the K Club forked over the fortune to host, and golfers who want to play Portmarnock at least once in their lifetime should be grateful.

The first golfers played Portmarnock in 1894, and everything from the red-roofed clubhouse to the flat, natural holes speak of its age and grace. It is definitely the most British Open-style of courses I played, with its natural humps in the fairway and scary-deep bunkers. There are few blind shots, but no easy shots. Ben Crenshaw called the tight but treacherous par-3 15th "the shortest par-5 in the world."

Off the tee first that morning, I'd walked my round blissfully alone in a brisk 2.5 hours. As I got back to the parking lot, my fellow Americans were beginning to arrive by the van load as the first of torrential rains for Ryder Cup week began to fall.

Soaking up the solitude in the clubhouse, a framed picture caught my eye. The grainy black-and-white

photograph was of the great Harry Vardon playing at Portmarnock. The year: 1899. My sentiment at that moment: Thank you, Ireland. Golfers don't get it better than this.

PLOTTING YOUR COURSES

Looking for a little golf when vacationing in Ireland? Here's a list of some of the Emerald Isle's best courses:

Lahinch Golf Club

Green fee: \$185

Web site: www.lahinchgolf.com

Ballybunion Golf Club

Green fee: \$195

Web site: ballybuniongolfclub.ie

Waterville Golf Links

Green fee: \$195

Web site: watervillegolfclub.ie

Old Head Golf Links

Green fee: \$350

Web site: oldhead.com

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The European Club

Green fee: \$195

Web site: theeuropeanclub.com

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Portmarnock Golf Club

Green fee: \$245

Portmarnockgolfclub.ie

Tod Leonard writes about golf for The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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