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THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME



A GOLF TRIP TO ANYWHERE ON THE PLANET? OUR MAN MAKES A CASE FOR ROYAL COUNTY DOWN BY DAVID OWEN



IF YOU COULD TAKE JUST ONE GOLF TRIP, anywhere in the world—the golfer’s version of the Three Wishes Problem—where would you go? You might feel almost a moral obligation to choose the Old Course at St. Andrews, but there are other possibilities. I once told some golf buddies that if my wife ever threw me out they’d find me circling the West Links of North Berwick, on the southern shore of the Firth of Forth, waiting for her to beg me to come home. But if I truly had a single-destination global golf pass I’d do what I did recently: I’d travel to Northern Ireland and lose myself on the course that native players call Newcastle and the rest of us know as Royal County Down. (*It’s No. 4 on Golf Digest’s World 100 Greatest Courses list, page 107*). ➔

NO. 4 / 228 YDS



I first played it in 2000, on a trip with five friends. Our itinerary was mediocrity-free—it included Portstewart, Royal Portrush, County Louth, The Island, Portmarnock and The European Club, all wonderful—but County Down stood out. The opening holes run along the Irish Sea, but you mostly infer the presence of the water, rather than observing it directly, until you climb to the fourth tee. The Mourne Mountains loom to the south like something out of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the bunkers, which are savagely rimmed with mar-ram grass, could be portals to another dimension. I returned three years ago, at the end of a trip to a different part of Ireland, after realizing that if I spent an afternoon driving halfway across the country I could play it twice before flying home. I took a photograph that appears at the top of each page of my Golf Digest website (myusualgame.com), and every few weeks someone emails me to ask: *Where is that golf course?* This past November, I went back.

Golf was first played at Newcastle in 1889, on nine tiny holes that ran partly over land now occupied by three clubhouses and the Slieve Donard hotel. Soon afterward, the founding members of the County Down Golf Club agreed to pay Old Tom Morris “a sum not to exceed £4” to double the number of holes. Morris is often given credit for the course we play today, but it’s not certain that anything significant from his era still exists, with the possible exception of the practice green, which might have belonged to Morris’ 17th, a one-shotter called Matterhorn. In the early 1900s, a member named George Combe lengthened

the course and made many lasting improvements, and Harry Vardon and Harry S. Colt made more. For all that, much of the course seems self-designed: On the first nine, especially, you feel as though you are exploring a linkland dreamscape rather than advancing through a sequence of holes. The most photographed, painted and talked-about hole is the ninth, a long par 4, on which you drive over a precipice to an unseen fairway, 80 feet below. When my threesome first played it in 2000, our caddies stood at the top of the dune on the ideal line, to give us a target and to spot our drives, and after each shot they swept their arms back and forth in front of their chests—a signal that in baseball means “safe” but in Irish (we discovered) means “You’ll never see that ball again.” After that, we knew.

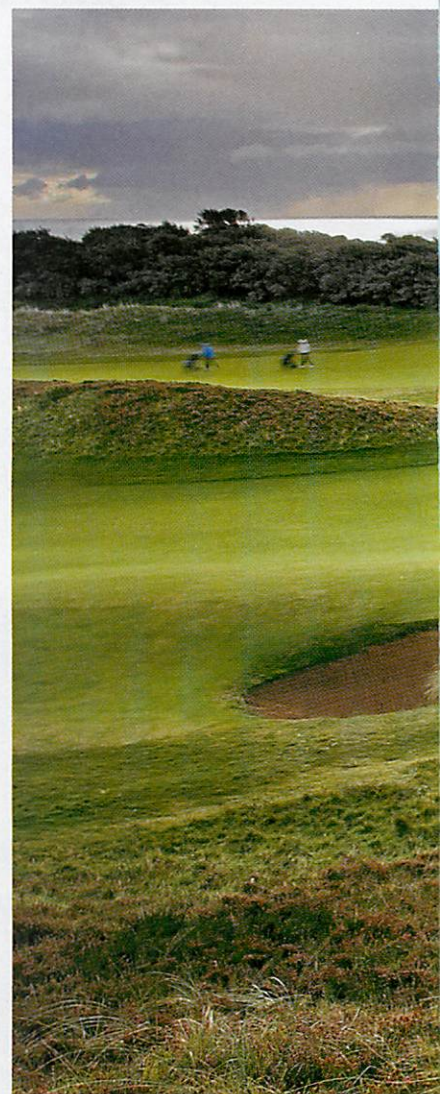
VIEWS SO WONDERFUL THEY’RE DANGEROUS

To get to Newcastle, I flew to Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland, and drove north. (Belfast is closer but has fewer non-stops from the United States.) The car trip is just over an hour and a half if you stick to the motorway, but I had time so at Newry I turned southeast, onto the A2, which in that part of the country is also known as the Mourne Coastal Route. Irish roads are narrow under any circumstances; they become narrower if your eyes are repeatedly drawn to the hills and out to sea—a danger that day, because the sky was so clear that I could see the Isle of Man, halfway to the English mainland. My parents once visited Ireland with

another couple, and on an especially harrowing stretch of road my mother, who was sitting in the back seat with the other wife, yelled at my father to stop steering so close to the edge. He innocently raised both hands, to remind her that, in Ireland and the United Kingdom, the driver sits on the right, not the left.

A benefit of entering Newcastle from the south is that, as you approach the town, the curve of Dundrum Bay unspools before you. The steeple of the Slieve Donard, which opened in 1897 and was named for the tallest of the Mourne Mountains, stands out like a navigational beacon, and the dunes that enfold Royal County Down are visible just beyond it. The Slieve Donard has one of the coolest features of any hotel I know: signs in the lobby that point to the golf course, which is a short walk down a hallway, past the spa, out the backdoor and across a parking lot. As soon as I’d checked in, that’s where I went.

I had arranged beforehand to play with Kevin Markham, an Irish writer, photographer and freelance marketing guy, whom I’d met at Portstewart in 2012, when he joined my friends and me for a game while his wife waited in the clubhouse, reading a book. Markham has done something that I would like to do: He has played every 18-hole golf course in Ireland, plus virtually all the nine-holers—and he has written a guide based on that experience, called *Hooked*. (His Royal County Down entry is subtitled “perfection every step of the way.”) Kevan Whitson, the head professional, joined us for nine holes, though without his clubs. He was nursing tendinitis in both arms and



was saving his elbows for an upcoming two-week golf holiday in Mauritius, off the coast of Madagascar. With guidance from him—he told me where to aim my drive and my second shot—I eagled the first hole. (In journalistic jargon, withholding an article’s most important fact until well into the story is “burying the lead.”)

Among my other playing companions at Royal County Down that week was Johnny Browne, a member and three-time club champion, most recently in 2009. Browne is a physician and a student of



golf architecture. He told me that one of the keys to avoiding disaster at Newcastle is playing nearly every approach shot either to the front of the green or just short. Another, he said, is understanding that every hole is a slight dogleg, although the bend is often concealed. The course has more blind shots than any modern architect would tolerate, but, as Browne observed, a shot is blind only the first time you play it, and then only if no one has told you where to aim. Indeed, since the earliest days, one of the course's many enticements has been the ap-

peal of scaling a dune, after hitting a drive, to discover how closely the hole that exists coincides with the hole as imagined.

Browne grew up in the Belfast area—where the vast majority of the club's members live—and discovered Royal County Down during family seaside holidays in Newcastle. His father was also a golfer, as are both his brothers. "Someone would ask my father how his game had gone that morning, and he would say, 'Well, Arthur topped it off the first tee, and I hit left'—and he would go

on to describe not only all his own shots but every shot in the four-ball, for all 18 holes." Browne learned to play links golf on the club's second course, called the Annesley, which intersects the championship course but is nearly 2,500 yards shorter. I played it one afternoon with Shaun Killough, who is a past captain of the Mourne Golf Club, and a friend of Killough's. Mourne was established in the 1940s for residents of Newcastle, who are generally considered, by the main club's members, to be less clubbable than their Belfast brethren; it has

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its own, relatively modest clubhouse, which is situated between the Slieve Donard and the first tee of the championship course (but isn't visible from it). Mourne has 350 members, who can play the Annesley course whenever they like and the championship course on any day but Saturday—and all for a little over £800 a year. “It’s the best golf deal in the world,” Killough said.

Mourne Golf Club and Royal County Down Golf Club are both men-only. There’s also a Royal County Down Ladies Golf Club, which has a small clubhouse of its own, near the first tee of the Annesley course. Women are welcome on the championship course, but even from the forward tees some of the carries and elevations can be daunting for shorter hitters, and members of the ladies’ club, Killough said, play the Annesley course almost exclusively. He also told me, with incredulity, as we walked from the 18th green to the Mourne clubhouse for a beer, that the women’s clubhouse is *alcohol-free*.

ANY ADVENTURE NEEDS SIDE TRIPS

Newcastle isn’t the only worthy golf destination in County Down. On Wednesday, when the championship course was closed to visitors, I drove 20 miles up the coast and played a round at Ardglass Golf Club with Ian Duff, a longtime member, past captain and occasional caddie. The Ardglass clubhouse is an old castle, and the opening hole—whose tee

box appears to be an extension of either the castle or the Irish Sea—is worth a trip by itself. It’s not much more than 300 yards from the longest tee, but you have to drive over a boulder-strewn beach and up a rocky precipice, and there’s a life preserver hanging ominously from a stone wall at the 75-yard mark. And the next hole, a cliff-top par 3 on which the tee is separated from the green by an apparently bottomless chasm, is a corker, too. The wind was blowing hard, and everyone was bundled up—so much so that when we caught up to Duff’s wife, who was playing with three other women, he didn’t recognize her.

The next day, I drove still farther up the coast, to the village of Strangford, through a region that a sign described, accurately, as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. I took a small car ferry to the Ards Peninsula, on the other side of Strangford Lough, and there, in wind that was so strong it made conversation problematic, I played Kirkistown Castle, a century-plus-old links course, whose current routing was created in 1934 by James Braid. My playing companions were Kevin Gallagher and Jonny Breen, who had run into each other at the grocery store that morning and decided that doing anything other than playing golf would be a foolish waste of time. (Nearly everyone I played with on my trip was named Kevin, Kevan, Jonny or Johnny.) Kirkistown was the original home course of Rory McIlroy’s teacher, Michael Bannon. One of McIlroy’s golf bags is displayed

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EVAN SCHILLER

LEFT: NO. 3 / PAR 4 / 477 YDS / RIGHT: NO. 4 / 228 YDS





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in the clubhouse trophy case, and McIlroy himself has a history at the club. He played in a team event there in 2005, when he was 16 years old and had just shot 61 in a tournament at Royal Portrush, a couple of hours farther up the coast. The weather was grim during the team event, and when word got around that McIlroy was five over par there were skeptics who suggested that his Portrush record had been a fluke. But then he finished birdie-birdie-eagle and continued into his future.

That weekend, I played Royal Belfast Golf Club with Alan Stout and Keith Salters, members with low-single-digit handicaps. Both had played in that same tournament at Kirkistown Castle, and Salters, who had been in a group behind McIlroy's, told me, "I was 10 over with a few holes to go, and when I heard that Rory was five over I felt better about it. But then Rory finished level, or nearly." Royal Belfast was founded in 1881 and is the oldest golf club in Ireland. (McIlroy's childhood course, Holywood, is just down the road.) The club has a gorgeous clubhouse, which used to be the home of somebody important, and a refreshing attitude about frost: "We ignore it," Stout said. The course was designed by Harry Colt, who also designed Belvoir Park—pronounced "Beaver Park"—a few miles away, in a suburb on the city's south side. I had played Belvoir the day before with my County Down companion Johnny Browne, who lives in an apartment

overlooking the 18th hole and, when he feels the urge, has an easy 45-minute commute to Newcastle.

On Friday, Browne and I teed off at Royal County Down at 8:40, the earliest tee time that day, and played so fast that we caught up to the greenkeeper and an assistant, who were changing the cups and using a whip to sweep microscopic mower residue from the putting surfaces, all of which were virtually in mid-season condition. On Monday, to avoid a similar collision, Browne booked us for 10 minutes later. Before teeing off on the 11th hole, we relaxed our pace further, by climbing into a jungle of whins and briars to look for a century-old relic that a caddie had told me about in 2011: the remains of a small stone building, which the maintenance crew had uncovered during an aggressive gorse-removal project. We found it, at some risk to our clothing, although it was so overgrown that we couldn't see much more than one corner. Later that day, Harry McCaw—a past captain of Royal County Down and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews—told me that he thought the structure might once have served as the literal "club house": the place where early players stored their clubs.

The standard complaint about Royal County Down is

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that the second nine doesn't measure up to the first, and the standard response is, Well, what could? The problematic holes are the closing ones, and although you can make a case, shot by shot, that each is a worthy companion to all the others, it's nevertheless true that the surrealism of the setting begins to dissipate on the 14th tee. One difficulty is visual: the 14th is where the course emerges from the dunes and you first become aware of the residential subdivisions across the street. It's hard not to wish, as you turn toward town, that the club's founders had appropriated 50 or 100 more acres of the wildest linksland, which continues another two miles up the coast. (Most of the dune area to the north is now part of the Murlough National Nature Reserve.) Or maybe Donald Trump could be persuaded to buy up the adjacent neighborhood and dump a few million tons of sand on top of it. Still, any such criticisms should be considered minor gripes. Royal County Down is sublime.

Browne and I, despite our archaeological detour, finished in a little under 2½ hours. We had lunch in the visitors' wing of the clubhouse (which has better views than the members' areas and doesn't require a jacket and tie). We were joined by Browne's Uncle Des, who had spent the morning on the Annesley course. "Did you play any golf at all?" Des asked—meaning "Did you do more than beat it around?"—and Browne said, "A little, in the middle; not otherwise." Browne had to attend a meeting at Belvoir Park, and he asked me how I was planning to spend my afternoon. I said I might try a course I'd noticed a dozen miles south of town, called Kilkeel, and after we'd said goodbye I loaded my

clubs into my car. Then, at the first roundabout, I suddenly thought: *What am I doing?* I went all the way around, and returned to the club, and teed off on the championship course again.

I didn't play quite as fast by myself as I had with Browne in the morning, but only because I took more time to savor the blue sky and the sun, which was slanting obliquely across the dunes. I still had the course virtually to myself. November probably isn't the ideal month for a golf trip to Northern Ireland, but a case could be made. The weather is iffy, but it's iffy in August, too, and the green fees and hotel rates are tantalizing. (On Nov. 1, the visitor's fee at Royal County Down drops from £180 to £50.) The links courses of the British Isles aren't often spoken of as a cold-season alternative to Myrtle Beach, but why not? I've seen more snow in South Carolina than I have on the coast of Northern Ireland.

When I was putting on the 13th green, Eamonn Crawford, the links manager, drove up on a tractor, with which he had been aerating a fairway. He introduced himself. He'd been a little grumpy when Browne (a friend and occasional playing partner of his) and I caught up to him on Friday, because at that hour he hadn't been expecting interference from golfers. But he was smiling now. "In 1975, I came here to work for a week," he told me, "and I've been here ever since." He said he used to see old greenkeepers who had been on the job for 50 or 60 years, and had always wondered how they could stand it. "Now I myself have been here 38 years, and I have no plan to go anywhere," he said. "It's a hard place to leave." ♣