



**WATERVILLE**  
The 16th hole at this course in southwest Ireland overlooks the Atlantic Ocean.

TEEING OFF

As golfers make their way to Ireland for a new season on the links, they will discover that the country's major drawing cards have been rapidly evolving in recent years—and for the better. There's a qualitative difference from the country's last boom, during the Celtic Tiger years, from the mid-'90s through the mid-aughts. "During that period, we went from 280 courses to well over 400," says Marty Carr of Carr Golf, one of Ireland's leading golf tour operators. "Most of the developments were championship parkland designs—the likes of Mount Juliet, the K Club, and Druids Glen. But American demand is synonymous with links golf." With these new courses in place, the current run of development has seen the seaside icons stepping up their game both on and off the course.

## AN IRISH GOLFING BOOM

The perennially popular golf destination is undergoing major development, which is good news for three of its biggest courses.

BY THOMAS DUNNE

Clubs have made a concerted effort to upgrade the overall experience. A few years ago, people took note when Wilma Erskine, Royal Portrush's influential manager, enlisted members to come out in their club blazers to greet visiting golfers. Small welcoming touches—the valuables pouch and yardage book, the lunch included with green fees—began to spread. "Our customers are paying 200 euro for a day's golf—they're not average Joes," Carr adds. "They can go to Los Cabos or one of Mike Keiser's places in America. We're competing on a world stage." Of course, the locals have much to gain by rolling out the red carpet—overseas visitors subsidize annual dues, rendering membership at some of the finest links in the world at a cost that would make most American private club golfers envious.

And as the euro and greenback near parity, 2017 is shaping up to be a banner year for the island's revamped courses.

#### **BALLYBUNION: A BOLD RENOVATION**

In September 2014, **Ballybunion Golf Club** hired John Bambury, who had been serving double duty as course manager of a pair of Donald Trump's golf properties (at Doonbeg, in neighboring County Clare, and in Aberdeenshire, Scotland), to be its new course manager. The next spring, Bambury was tasked with a renovation project where the stakes could not have been higher—rebuilding all 18 greens on the club's famous Old Course and converting them to the fine fescue turf that's the hallmark of classic links golf. The work would be done all at once, leaving no room for experimentation or error. Adding to the difficulty, it would take place on a crash schedule during the winter of 2015–16.

As golf renovations go, this was emergency surgery, but the club was determined to reopen in the spring. In an interview, Bambury said a piecemeal approach would lead to inconsistent conditions—possibly for years to come—which could damage the club's reputation. "Everyone comes to Ballybunion with the loftiest of expectations," he says. "For visitors, this might be their one bucket-list trip, so it has to be right."

Poor drainage was at the heart of the matter, as certain greens became overly soft after as little as one centimeter of rain. Rather than fast-draining sand, the Old's greens sat atop silts and clays. Working alongside golf architect Graeme Webster—who also designed a new green complex for the epic cliff-top seventh hole—Bambury oversaw a crew of 80, including shapers, dumper drivers, and engineers. Having used GPS to map the surface contours, the crew set to work excavating the heavy soils and clearing out ancient rabbit warrens. After installing a new sandy soil profile, Bambury explains, "we then overlaid the new data points onto the preconstruction data points. A green was not passed unless we had a 100 percent match." Last year saw an intense regimen of

overseeding and top-dressing to protect the young greens against the onslaught of golfers, and while they rolled a bit on the slow side, they looked as healthy as can be. Ballybunion's gamble appears to have paid off.

#### **ROYAL PORTRUSH: BRITISH OPEN PREPARATIONS**

On Northern Ireland's Antrim Coast, **Royal Portrush Golf Club** recently completed a closely scrutinized project of its own. Royal Portrush



With the current run of development, 2017 will be a **BANNER YEAR FOR IRISH GOLF.** Clubs have made an effort to upgrade the experience.

is the only club outside of Great Britain to have hosted the British Open (back in 1951), so the Royal & Ancient's announcement that it would return in 2019 was greeted with applause from the Dunluce course's legions of fans. But the logistical challenges of hosting a major championship have increased since the 1950s; the R&A would need acreage for corporate hospitality and other amenities.

Working with architects Tom Mackenzie and Martin Ebert, the club took the opportunity to provide this space and improve Dunluce in one go. Purists initially shuddered at the idea that Harry Colt's design could be "im-

proved," but it was often noted that the course had only a so-so finish. (This situation is common among vintage links, which frequently return to the clubhouse over plainer ground.)

To replace the 17th and 18th, the architects located land for two new holes beyond the current sixth. The new seventh is a grand par-5 that snakes uphill just inside the wall of the primary dune formation. Paying homage to what will be lost, the architects found a natural feature in which to re-create Big Nellie, the enormous catcher's mitt of a bunker that menaced tee shots for decades on the 17th. This works well, especially since the holes are oriented similarly in relation to the wind—just as before, the golfer will still consider aiming for Big Nellie and hope that the wind pushes the ball left to safety.

The reworked eighth is another strong addition. Players must decide how much of the dogleg left to carry without falling down the dune wall into oblivion. Drives that bail out safely to the right face a longer approach and bring a greenside bunker into play. The two new holes are scheduled to open in late June.

#### **WATERVILLE: A GROWING VILLAGE AND A NEW COURSE**

At the southwestern terminus of the Ring of Kerry, Waterville has long held cachet as a secret getaway for golfers and anglers. With its simple street layout, the small town is easy to hold in memory, but it's been rapidly developing of late. A few blocks from the statue of Charlie Chaplin, who often holidayed in Waterville, there's a two-year-old boutique hotel, the **Sea Lodge Hotel** (rooms from \$150), which is run by a brother-and-sister team. Meanwhile, chef David Farrell, a veteran of New York's Smith & Wollensky, is moving his renowned seafood and dry-aged steak restaurant, **Dooley's**, into a larger, more central location in the shuttered Huntsman Hotel.

At the same time, the village's anchor, **Waterville Golf Links**, is conducting a major renovation of its vintage 1970s clubhouse. The first phase, pulling out the front of the building to increase square footage of the pro shop and

**BALLYBUNION**  
The 15th hole  
on the club's  
Old Course



locker rooms, is under way, with a knock-on effect that will be visible on the golf course next spring. Waterville's thrifty superintendent, Michael Murphy, has used the sod from the ripped-out lawn areas to create sod-walled pot bunkers out on the links. "Nothing ever goes to waste here," he says. Waterville is already an extremely beautiful links; depending on a golfer's taste for formalized hazards, the bunker project will make it even more so. While revetted bunkers still require maintenance, they do a great job of keeping sand inside the hazard—not a minor concern in a location this windy.

While the focus here has been on the wave of renovation work taking place around the country, a noteworthy new course will be debuting this summer too. **Hogs Head**, just a five-minute drive from Waterville Golf Links, was developed by a pair of New York-based corporate restructuring executives with the motto

"Built by friends, for friends...for fun" This makes things sound somewhat more casual than they really are. Hogs Head is a private club with cottage accommodations, and while it will accept some visitor play, the policy details haven't been determined.

The course is partially built on the site of the former Skellig Bay, a heavy-soiled and pedestrian layout that didn't last a decade. The entire property has been sand-capped (110,000 tons' worth) and transformed beyond recognition. Although the course is not a true links, the sand-capping will allow it to play like one, and on this exposed headland it's likely to be a club or two windier than lower-lying Waterville—so expect a stout challenge.

The course was created by Robert Trent Jones Jr., and based on our walking tour last fall—the course was still growing in—it will gain a reputation as one of his best. Hogs Head is loaded with classic design features de-

ployed in unconventional ways, including a Biarritz-style green on the par-5 sixth—the Biarritz green, with its tiers separated by a deep swale, is usually a par-3 template—and the tiny punchbowl green at the end of the long par-4 ninth. Sharp eyes will pick up references to the likes of Carnoustie, Winged Foot, and Pine Valley along the way, as well. Coolest of all might be the pair of greens set hard along the coast at the par-3 13th—according to Jones, the alternate green on the left was created for days when rough surf sends too much spray onto the primary target.

"Hogs Head represents everything I know about design," Jones says. Although that statement can't possibly be true—he has been creating golf courses around the world for more than half a century—it's a reflection of the happiness he clearly felt at having a client who gave him the freedom to throw the kitchen sink at the golfer. ♦