

England's Golf Coast

It was June 27th, 1988, when the world's most ferocious fighting machine, Mike Tyson, knocked out previously undefeated Michael Spinks in 91 seconds. Spinks never fought again.



Caldy Golf Club Overlooks the Ocean

My buddies and I felt like a Tyson victim early in our inaugural round at Northwest England's West Lancashire Golf Club, dealing with spattering rain, steady 40-mph winds and gusts approaching 50. It's not easy to hit even an oversized driver when the ball is oscillating on the tee.

Spinks-like, one of my cowed companions engaged the hotel concierge the next morning, actually considering flying home, never to visit a genuine links course again. But Sphinx-like, the rest of us remained composed, and resolved to solve the riddle of the links. Fortunately both the winds and my skittish cohort calmed somewhat, and we went on to enjoy a marathon ten-round, six-day tour of some of the finest links and parkland golf experiences to be found in the entire UK. It's more than a marketing slogan that this concentrated area of prime golf real estate is branded England's Golf Coast.

Andrew Witherup is the head professional at the highly regarded Formby Golf Club and a native of this golf-intensive region, which is situated between the towns of Blackpool to the north, Liverpool to the south and about an hour from the international airport in Manchester. "We are very lucky to have such a wonderful concentration of great courses in this area," states Witherup, who has been a professional for more than 20 years. He is referring to the numerous venues to be found outside the concentrated trio of "Royal" links courses -

Birkdale, Liverpool and Lytham & St. Annes, which collectively have hosted the British Open Championship 30 times since 1897.

"While our Open venues are well known, we also have great courses like West Lancashire, Formby, Formby Hall, Formby Ladies, Hillside, Southport & Ainsdale, Hesketh and many others," Witherup said. "And of the whole lot, really just Hesketh and Formby Hall would be characterized as parkland courses. All the rest are traditional links courses, which is what makes them so attractive to our many overseas visitors."

The 36-hole Formby facility where Witherup presides is well worth a visit, the contrast between the regular course and the Ladies course a primary attraction. The "big" course wraps around the perimeter of the Ladies facility, which allows men as guests, but not members. While Formby stretches 7,000 heaving up, down and around yards, with cavernous bunkering and long-range ocean views, the petite Ladies course seems a trifle, just one tee box (red, of course) set up at 5,400 yards.



A Bonny Day at Caldy Golf Club

But the Ladies Course is menaced by one hazard in particular that will wreak havoc with the scorecard and tighten one's grip on the teeing ground, even if the chosen driving club is nothing but a mid-iron. And it's a delightful (albeit debilitating) irony that the overriding difficulty on the Ladies Course is a lady's name: Heather.

To the uninitiated, heather is synonymous with fescue. But while the latter is a wispy and pliable stalk, heather features wire-like roots and thick buds. It may be

low to the ground, but extricating an errant golf ball even from ankle-high heather is no given, and the only truly prudent play is to chop it out laterally as best as one can. Trying to advance towards the target will often result in the ball remaining in the heather, bogeys become doubles or worse, and this 5,400-yard trifle in its own unique way becomes as daunting as nearby courses that host the world's most important tournaments.

For example, Southport & Ainsdale is the first course in the world to have hosted the Ryder Cup twice, in 1933 and 1937. Famed British golfer James Braid, the five-time Open champion, is the architect of this hard-running links, with its unusual par-3 starting hole, and mountainous par-5 16th, with a blind second up and over a huge hummock in mid-fairway. Like a number of the area's venues, S&A is ranked as one of the UK's top-100 golf courses. And in the esoteric category of enjoying a post-round pint on the back patio, with the sun streaming lower in the sky and the welcome distraction of watching golfers finishing up on the 18th green just below, it's a solid top 10.

Charlie Grimley is a tourism official and golf development manager for England's Golf Coast. "Our area is often overlooked, because overseas golf visitors usually think of either Scotland or Ireland before they think of England. But over here you'll spend more time on the fairways than on the motorways, because the courses are in close proximity." Grimley grew up in the area and is a longtime member of Southport & Ainsdale.

"Normally you can play golf here all year round, we have very little snow. Because the courses are sand-based the drainage is excellent. At West Lancashire, they offer a full refund of the green fee if you walk off the course with any mud on your shoes. That's how well the courses drain. And in summer, you can play well into the evening."

We knew that to be true, as my gang strode to the tee at underrated Hillside, not five minutes from Birkdale or S&A, at 5:30 p.m. Greg Norman once called the inward nine at Hillside, which is the co-host of this summer's British Amateur Championship, the finest in Britain. The 10th is a petite par-3 playing uphill, the next a sweeping dogleg of a par-5, with a miles-wide view from the elevated tee box. The holes run down and then up, very self-contained, and as the day faded thankfully so did the wind.

When we crested the hill behind the penultimate green to the final tee box and saw the clubhouse lights twinkling in the distance, we were thankful to have had the stamina and fortitude to carry ourselves and our bags from mid-morning all the way past 9 p.m. Though without the hearty post-round pub lunch at nearby Birkdale and a couple of fortifying pints, it's doubtful we would have had the energy to carry us over the finish line.

Speaking of Royal Birkdale, it was the finest course of the 10 we were privileged to visit. The opening hole features a semi-crooked corridor of a fairway with a mischievous bunker on the left elbow, exactly where one wants the ball to finish. Towering sand dunes, sea views and a sense of containment are hallmarks of Birkdale, which is as much a mysterious nature walk as championship golf experience, and every single-file footpath leading from green to tee unfolds with a sense of wonder and anticipation as to what's around the corner.

Not so the case at Royal Lytham and St. Anne's, which is another historic Open venue but not quite as pulse-pounding in the playing. The great English golf writer Bernard Darwin once said of Lytham, "It has beautiful turf but not much else of beauty." While a bit more pedestrian in appearance and locale, what sets Lytham apart is the quantity and cavernous nature of its bunkering.

There are two things on the "must-do" list before embarking on a UK golf trip. Pack waterproofs and all manner of cold and wind-resistant clothing, and work on the sand game. All through the Northwest and at Lytham in particular, a sharp sand game is not only a prerequisite for reasonable scoring, but an absolute necessity if one even has hopes of finishing a hole with any score at all.

"There are more courses in England than in Scotland, Ireland and Wales combined," concludes Grimley. "And in this area, our standards of golf courses are amazing, and so is the proximity. Several are literally right next to each other, and many others are 10 or perhaps 20 minutes away. There are 250 courses in the entire Northwest, but our consortium only represents the best of the best. So visit our website to learn more about this golf-rich and very lively region." Given the difficulty of the terrain, the penal nature of the hazards, the vagaries of the weather, and the unpredictability of the ball's bounces, golfers who are fed a steady diet of links golf are often superior players - what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So it's not surprising that as of this writing the top two players in the world are Englishmen (Luke Donald and Lee Westwood). Their fellow countryman Paul Casey is also among the world's best, and if one adds Northern Ireland into the mix (with the last two U.S. Open winners, Rory McIlroy and Graeme McDowell) players from GB&I currently fill out half the slots in the world's top 10.

These ultra-talented Tour pros are living proof of a fact that every perceptive American golf traveler, freshly pummeled by a stint on their windswept links, should be quick to realize: If you can play well there, you can play well anywhere.

For more information, visit www.englandsgolfcoast.com.



Formby Hall at Night
Lodging Options

Lively Southport is the central address for enjoying the many fruits of England's Golf Coast, and there are numerous options for dining, shopping, clubbing and nightlife. Lodging options also abound, and while these three recommendations are in close proximity to each other, each offers a different style, character and price point.

- Formby Hall Golf Resort & Spa features a somewhat interesting parkland course right on property, but with its trees and scattered ponds, a far different experience than the true links courses in the region. But the hotel is very nice and features an excellent gym, pool and spa, a variety of eateries. A £15 million-pound refurbishment in 2008 has resulted in some new polish for this four-star, 62-bedroom hotel. www.formbyhallgolfresort.co.uk
- The Vincent Hotel is in the heart of downtown Southport, and it has a cool, urban vibe, despite the fact that the town's population is under 100,000. Rooms are sleekly modern; it has a top-floor gym, a hip lobby bar with dozens of compelling photographs and a great breakfast buffet. www.thevincenthotel.com
- Bay Tree House is just a five minute drive from The Vincent, but this cozy, six-room B&B is a totally different experience. It's more affordable, eclectic and far cozier than the other lodgings mentioned, with its modest entry hall, narrow stairways and smallish, though extremely well-appointed, bedrooms. The second "B" in B&B is taken quite seriously, as the morning repast is extensive, delicious and made-to-order. www.baytreehousesouthport.co.uk