

## Return to The Highlands - Part 2

Nairn, located in the quiet town of the same name, occupies just a slightly lower rung than some of the other renowned links venues in Scotland.



*Castle Stuart Borders Moray Firth*

However, the 1999 Walker Cup venue is delightful, a challenging seaside links originally laid out in 1887 by Andrew Simpson, with later renovations by Old Tom Morris and then James Braid. Our round began, appropriately enough, in a misty rain and cool temperatures blowing in off of the Moray Firth. The tremendous contrast between the slate-gray sea and the vibrancy of the yellow gorse lining the fairways distracted me from the fact that the caddie had mounted my bag into a pull cart, or trolley. Upon questioning, he ended the discussion by saying, "When I turned 70 I stopped shouldering the bag."

Whether pulling or carrying, we'd have been lost without him. The rolling, heaving fairways with bunkers that looked like cresting waves required assistance to negotiate. Scottish golf expert Malcolm Campbell claims Nairn is designed "only for those who can find the fairway with rapier precision." He neglected to mention that missing said fairways requires the use of a machete. Sometimes you're a bit better off in the first cut of rough, with a chance at a level lie as even the middle of the fairway can leave you on mounding where it's difficult to get a handle on stance and direction.

Iain Sharp is a dentist by trade, but moonlights as the club's marketing director. "Having been a member at Nairn now for over 20 years, I can honestly say I have

seen it in all its many guises. From the striking yellow broom of early spring, the low warm evening sun of summer outlining the relief and every contour of its undulating fairways, the color of the late autumn and, thankfully, thinning rough, and finally, to the crisp clear days of winter when more often than not, we are still on full greens, Nairn always poses new challenges and spectacular scenery.

"In high summer we have possibly the best putting surfaces in the country, along with spectacular scenery looking across to Ben Wyvis with the dolphins often seen leaping in the Moray Firth," Sharp waxed enthusiastically. "I count myself lucky to have such an esteemed course on my doorstep, and one day I may even learn how to play it!"



*Castle Stuart*

Sharp explained the his club's alliance with Castle Stuart and Royal Dornoch (the former some 15 minutes away, the latter about an hour and change) has benefited the trio via the power of collective marketing. "Highland Golf Links (HGL) is a premier golf destination to rival any other in Scotland," offers Sharp. "We have five fine hotels in our consortium, and coupled with the recent Trump development in Aberdeen and the long established Links at Cruden Bay and Royal Aberdeen, we now have a true jewel of a destination to rival Fife (St. Andrews and Kingsbarns), East Lothian (Muirfield, Archerfield and Gullane) or Ayrshire (Troon and Turnberry)."

Like Trump International north of Aberdeen, Castle Stuart is a fairly new venue. But the major difference between them is the fact that American golfers - unaccustomed and often uncomfortable with the prevalent gorse and fescue grasses found throughout Scotland - will be able to take a more relaxed grip on

the driver, as the fairway corridors are far wider here than at most every other venue under discussion.

"Castle Stuart is not a 'kick it through the uprights' type of golf course," explains managing Partner Mark Parsinen, writing in the course guide. He continues, "Castle Stuart embraces wide latitude of play off tees. The question is not getting the ball in play but rather about where advantages can be had." Phil Mickelson took full advantage at this summer's Scottish Open, his narrow victory a precursor to the stirring Open Championship he captured the following week at historic Muirfield. Phil doubtless enjoyed the opening holes close at hand to the Moray Firth, before transitioning to the back nine, further from the water on much higher ground.



*Aerial View of Royal Dornoch*

"We emphasize width of play, strategy off the tee, and the ability to be creative around the greens with lots of options," offers head greenskeeper Chris Haspell. "We give thin wispy roughs and not too many punishing bunkers, we protect from the green back rather from the tee out with humps, hollows, swales and rumple, just like any links course. Some of the fairways are 60-70 yards wide, but you need that here in a four-club wind. On a calm day you will still drop shots if you get out of position. Golf is meant to be fun. Personally, I hate playing anywhere with friends in a match-play situation and losing balls. It's not fun walking with your bag on your back to the next tee because you hit a shot just off-line and you can't find your ball in thick rough 20 yards from the middle of the fairway."

What is tremendous fun, despite the inherent difficulties on a blustery day, is an outing at incomparable Royal Dornoch, a simple drive north of Nairn and Castle Stuart, circumventing the city of Inverness. Depending on one's point of view, Dornoch is most famous as either the birthplace of architectural icon Donald Ross, or the notorious wedding site of entertainment icon Madonna. What's indisputable is that the links at Royal Dornoch, one of the oldest in Scotland dating originally from 1616, is one of the finest in the world.

The unprepossessing pro shop gives no indication of the magnificence that lies ahead. The course unfolds in front of and below the golfer from the third tee like the Elysian Fields. It's a logical, beautiful routing with holes strung along Embo Bay in the mouth of the Dornoch Firth. Old Tom Morris extended the course to 18 holes in the late 1800s, and it now plays as a par 70 of 6,500 yards. The course has some pronounced elevation changes, playing down into a long hollow heading out and then up a plateau coming home.



*One of the Beautiful Fairways at Royal Dornoch*

There's no ungainly mounding or terribly sloping fairway lies here. The course is wonderful because of its elegant simplicity. Unlike most Scottish courses with hazards that are hidden, most all of Dornoch's classic bunkering is visible from the tee or approach area. The greens are all on plateaus, and obviously inspired native son Ross on much of his later work in America, particularly his recently renovated masterpiece Pinehurst No. 2. There's horrendous trouble to be found in the gorse and heather for wayward shots, but a minimum of the capricious bounces that turn a good shot bad.

"The raised greens repel the ball that is not landed in the appropriate area and provide a challenge for even the best short game. Getting to the green is really only one part of the examination as many shots can be lost within just a few yards of the hole." So begins club general manager Neil Hampton.

"As you stand on each teeing ground one of the course's greatest attributes becomes apparent - apart from holes 8 and 17 where you have a blind tee shot (another links attribute) - all of the hole can be seen and therefore the task in hand is evident. A golfer sees what to do and is invited to place the ball in the correct position. Should your game be slightly off then you will see exactly where you have gone and what you have to do to remedy the situation.



*The Clubhouse at Royal Dornoch*

"The views are spectacular," concludes the GM. "The walk to the third tee is when the course opens out to show all of its charms, to the top of the hill at the seventh tee when everyone stops to take a picture looking back down the course, to the green at the 16th as you look over the beach and foreshore that stretches out in the distance and merges with the sea. There's nothing quite like it."

That said, there's nothing quite like golf in the game's birthplace. There are many millions of avid, enthusiastic American golfers who would consider a visit to Scotland daunting. It's too far afield, too foreign, too pricey, too cold, too rainy and too hard to decipher the burr of the locals.

However, for the adventuresome, those who eat and drink golf and want to experience the essence of the game, it's an easy decision. Why do we go to

Scotland? We go to play the quirky, unforgettable links courses, among the finest and most venerated in the world. We try to unlock the puzzle of these links with their ridiculous bounces, waving fields of heather, and imposing bunkers deep as storm cellars.

We go to drink creamy pints of Bellhaven's, put on and take off more layers than your grandma's wedding cake as the weather flicks from foggy to sunny to misty to windy to rainy to lovely as quick as a strobe light. We go to engage the locals at the pub, tuck into a full Scottish breakfast, put the bag on our back and tromp 36 hearty holes in a day. In short, we believers go because we must; to not go is out of the question, practically the whole green-and-ochre country is golf's utmost cathedral, and we are pilgrims, drawn to worship at its altar.

For more information, visit <http://golf.visitscotland.com> or <http://www.highlandgolflinks.com>.