

Coming up TRUMPS

Exclusive photography: Kevin Murray

The arrival of the stunning new Trump International Golf Links confirms Aberdeen as a thriving centre for challenging, top-flight seaside golf. Rob Smith takes the test...

There is a long-running debate that relates to which is Scotland's better coast for golf: west or east. The east has tended to include the stretch from Carnoustie to Dunbar via Fife and Edinburgh. Now, the creation of Trump International Golf Links has extended its reach up and beyond Montrose with Aberdeenshire a genuine golfing attraction in its own right.

One of the joys of golf is that its siren call takes you to places you otherwise might not have visited. A lifetime ago, I detoured up this coastline en route to a holiday in the Highlands to play at Cruden Bay and Royal Aberdeen. They were massively impressive then and have since improved, more than ably complemented by the likes of Murcar and Fraserburgh. Now, a quarter of a century on, the addition of

Trump International Golf Links has made this sandy expanse of coastline to the east of the Grampians an alluring golfing draw.

Whilst there is plenty of enjoyable inland golf in the area, my journey here is devoted to its wealth of premier league links. Just three years old but mature beyond its years, Trump International Golf Links is already winning praise from near and far. Martin Hawtree →



Cruden Bay's 4th

has used the dunes to their very best effect in routing a remarkably varied and thrilling course. I cannot think of another links where, despite playing many other courses in the intervening period, a year later I was still able to picture every hole.

There is no question it is tough, but even if it beats you up as much as it did me, it makes a willing masochist out of you. The bunkering is severe in places but always a joy to behold, and the conditioning is as good as it gets. There is no standout hole because quite simply they are all excellent; the par 3s are superb. If I sound effusive, I make no apology because this is an instant classic which pays its respects to the past whilst offering something quite new. It will surely host something pretty serious

before too long and I would unreservedly recommend it to anyone who loves golf.

The new clubhouse is under construction and in a peaceful spot beside the entrance drive is the elegant McLeod House Lodge and Hotel. This offers the most comfortable and stylish accommodation as well as fine dining, and plans have recently been submitted for a substantial extension. A frequently changing variety of stay-and-play packages are also on offer, some of which include golf at one or more of the neighbouring courses. Elaborate afternoon teas are served, with or without champagne, and the restaurant offers dishes that are innovative without being too fussy.

Having hosted the 2011 Walker Cup, Royal Aberdeen was the venue for last year's Scottish Open, won by Justin Rose. The historic links was admired by the huge crowds and millions watching on TV all over the world. The Society of Golfers at Aberdeen was founded in 1780 and granted royal status in 1903. It is the sixth oldest club in the world and it re-located to play over the glorious Balgownie links in 1888.

Although it was modified a little in its formative years by a succession of the leading architects of the time, it remains a true, old-fashioned and timeless out-and-back links.

The opening hole takes you over to the shore from where the next eight run due north right through the dunes. If the wind is from the south, this is where you need to make your score, especially at the par-5 2nd and 6th.

The two short holes could not be more different: a beast at the 3rd which can be unreachable, and a beauty at the 8th protected by an armed guard of no fewer than nine bunkers. The back nine is on more elevated ground with blind shots, hidden troughs and tricky greens. Into the wind, it is exceptionally tough and always an absolute treat.

Good neighbour

Right next door and close enough to swap scorecards, is another excellent test, Murcar Links. So adjacent are the two courses that an overhit approach at the 3rd hole here could take you onto the 10th tee next door. The connection extends to the original architect, Archie Simpson, who was then both professional and head greenkeeper at Balgownie, and who was engaged to design the layout. Subsequent changes by James Braid and George Smith fashioned the course as it is today, a fabulous and traditional links with elevated tees, gorse and wide views out to sea.

Perhaps a shade more forgiving than its neighbour, scoring is dependent upon how well you manage the tough par 4s. One of these, the 7th, is an absolute cracker: your drive has to cross two burns and then stay left of the ditch before playing up to a green protected by two beautifully revetted bunkers. Keep the ball in play and you will do well; let the wind get a hold of the ball and you will struggle.

Moving a little further up the coast, is the distinctive and really quite unusual links at Cruden Bay. I was totally charmed by its surprisingly different nature and feel; a little more undulating with some truly outstanding panoramic views as well as an appealing sprinkling of idiosyncrasy.

Yet again, the area has a rich golfing heritage with the sport played over the dunes prior to the club's formation in 1900. The original layout was designed by Old Tom Morris with assistance from Archie Simpson, and it was subsequently remodelled by Tom Simpson and Herbert Fowler.

Despite more recent tweaks, their work is largely still in evidence, and it is enormous fun from the off with the first three holes running out to the river that runs up through the town. The 4th is a wonderful short hole,



Royal Aberdeen's 17th

“Into the wind, it is exceptionally tough and always an absolute treat”

flanked by the water, and there then follows an eclectic array of quite diverse holes, some close to the beach, some up in the dunes. Recent re-shaping at the 9th, 10th and 16th is now in play, and the course is one of those that keeps you smiling no matter how you play. If you had to decide whether this is more of a strategic test or an entertaining round of golf, the result would be a high-scoring draw.

Historical

Scottish golf has real strength in depth, and our final stop on this particular journey is further north, up on the corner of the coast at Fraserburgh. Another club with a fertile history, there are records indicating that golf was played over this land more than 400 years ago. With a sporty nine-holer to one side of the road, the main Corbie Hill course runs between it and the towering dunes and was moulded into its current form in the early 1920s by James Braid. Three new holes were built nestling alongside the dunes in the 1950s, and there are rumpled fairways, awkward run-offs and pot bunkers.

It is a delightful links which stands up extremely well in comparison with its more illustrious neighbours. With only three par 4s over 400 yards, it is not long, but when the wind is blowing and the rough is up, it is an altogether different proposition. The view from the 3rd tee takes in just about the whole course as well as the town and its harbour. This is affordable links golf that is less likely to steal quite so many of your golf balls as its more southerly neighbours will.

There are several other varied and interesting links running along the Aberdeenshire coast, a coastline which now sits right up there with Ayrshire, Fife and the Lothians as a must-visit region for Scottish links players. Include a stay in the excellent accommodation at Trump International Golf Links and you have the icing on a particularly delicious cake.

Murcar's 7th



ESSENTIALS

Staying

■ **Trump International Golf Links**
W: trumpgolfscotland.com

Playing

■ **Cruden Bay**
Stats: par 70, 6,287 yards
W: crudenbaygolfclub.co.uk
GF: £100 per round, £135wd per day

■ **Fraserburgh**
Stats: par 70, 6,308 yards
W: fraserburghgolfclub.org
GF: £45wd per round, £60wd per day; £55we per round, £70we per day

■ **Murcar**
Stats: par 71, 6,516 yards
W: murcarlinks.com
GF: £100wd per round, £125we per round

■ **Royal Aberdeen**
Stats: par 71, 6,885 yards
W: royalaberdeengolf.com
GF: £156wd per round, £220wd per day

■ **Trump International Golf Links**
Stats: par 72, 7,428 yards
W: trumpgolfscotland.com
GF: £215 per round with reduced rates for hotel, Scottish & local residents, and replays



Fraserburgh's 2nd