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TOP 100 SPOTLIGHT

Trump International

Two years after being the first to play Donald Trump's much-hyped new links, Chris Bertram returns to review its development.

The driveway that takes you from the A90 north of Aberdeen down to the clubhouse of Trump International is well over a mile long. This journey along £2million worth of tarmac – that was the staggering cost of constructing the driveway alone – is ample opportunity to dispense with any prejudices and pre-conceived ideas about the links you are about to play.

And clearing one's mind of subjectivity feels a worthwhile process ahead of a round at Trump Links given the extraordinary nature of the birth of this new course in north-east Scotland. One might assume any golfer who has arranged a game here is intent on enjoying the links and the experience, but there is also the possibility their journey has been made with less benevolent motivations in mind.

That is what can happen when Donald Trump is involved; he creates huge publicity for his businesses but his demeanour can also offend. And if ever there was a population likely to be offended by Trump, it is the Scots. Even if he is not a bombastic blowhard, to

introspective Scots, he can seem like that. Yet he deserves credit for managing to create a golf course on the virgin sand hills of Balmedie, for these days it is an exacting task. Many ponder it, but only the patient and diplomatic or the brazen and persistent succeed. So, setting aside the 'noise' surrounding the project – which I accept might to some sound a little too convenient – golfers (as well as the local economy) should be glad the New Yorker succeeded where others have stalled.

At the very least, all should approach the 1st tee of Trump International with an objective mind.

It is often nice to catch glimpse of the course during a drive to the clubhouse; a little appetiser of what is to come. But equally, it is a nice surprise to have seen nothing before boarding the 1st tee. That is the case at Trump International and few will be disappointed by the sight of this opening hole, with huge dunes lining both sides of the fairway. Trump waxed lyrical about "the great dunes" as he constructed the links, and he was not exaggerating; this is awesome terrain, the like of which is not seen elsewhere in Scotland – and especially not on the east coast. Wind and water currents mean the biggest dunes are usually found on west coasts – think of

LEFT: The high-octane 14th, with a fairway winding between avenues of huge dunes.
BELOW: The more sedate and cerebral 2nd.



Ballybunion compared to Portmarnock, or Hillside relative to Brancaster — and only in Aberdeenshire are they anywhere near this size in Scotland. Trump Links has the highest, at up to 130ft, and as you gaze down the 1st you cannot believe these dunes are not the site's largest.

From its elevated tee — which is a frequent feature — you thankfully have plenty of room with which to make your first swing of the day a successful one. Only very strong players will have a chance to 'get up' to a green that sits higher than the fairway — even off the 491-yard Blue tees. Most will be wedging on with their third but they must take care to try to find the correct tier of the green.

From there you climb onto another elevated tee and while you may well be intoxicated by the view of the beach and sea to the left, you can't afford to be thoughtless because the stream that cuts across the fairway can only be comfortably flown by long hitters — especially as it plays into the wind. That leaves a solid mid-iron approach to a green with no sand, swales instead providing the interest and difficulty.

'The 3rd green is so close to the beach that some of the beach ended up on it'

The first of a stellar portfolio of short holes is next, where the various tee boxes dotted around the dunes offer very different angles of attack. They all play to a green sited barely 20 yards from the beach, so close in fact that last winter quite a bit of the beach ended up on the green. . . Such is the price to pay for holes with premium locations. The price to pay for missing this upturned saucer green is either a dextrous chip or a hopeful splash out from the evil bunker on the right.

The last hole on an opening run that takes us to the most southerly point on the course is another par 5 littered with bunkers. The danger is initially the Blairton burn that winds down the right but even if you avoid it with a good drive, you must then use your nous and your skill to place your lay-up away from the cluster of fairway pots. They felt a little too random and anyone unable to fly them — all but the very best, given we are still into the wind — receives no value for a good drive. Against which, designer Martin Hawtree might reasonably argue, this is stroke one and a proper three-shotter even in the fast conditions Trump Links are seeking.

Indeed, Links Superintendent John 



RIGHT: The green of the par-4 12th. **BELOW AND BOTTOM:** Two views of the outstanding opening hole, one from the elevated tee and one from behind the tiered green. **ABOVE:** The gorgeous par-3 3rd, perched close to the beach and with an evil bunker.



TRUMP'S VERDICT

'The Donald' exclusively tells us why he is now on a links spending spree.

I knew Trump International would be fantastic — and it is! But seeing it in reality even surpassed my imagination — and that's saying something. It's an absolutely incredible location and we made it even more incredible. My favourite hole at Trump International is the 14th — that has not changed over time. But honestly, they're all amazing.

It is a different feeling to build your own course, rather than acquire one someone else built. I'm a builder and I love the challenge of creating something, whether it's a building or a golf course.

However, there's a different yet rewarding

I love links courses and I love golf, so it follows I'd build one (a seaside course) eventually. It was in my long-term plan for my golf portfolio, but it could definitely be considered a stimulus for another links course — which has turned out to be Doonbeg, and then Turnberry. The more you know about them, and the more you play them, the more there is to like about them. But Doonbeg is really special — I never thought it would ever be available.

And Turnberry is considered one of the greatest courses in the world. It is a special place too, and

'The process to get Trump International built was absolutely worth it'

challenge of renovating what has already been established. It can be a dramatic departure from what exists, or a remodelling — either way, it is a creative enterprise and creating the best courses in the world is a great feeling.

The process to get Trump International built was absolutely worth it. It's all working out and any hardship was worth it. It will always be worth it. According to many, I have built the greatest golf course anywhere in the world — and that is a special feeling.

it's an important place. It was an opportunity, as far as I was concerned. It is a fabulous property in a great location. We're going to bring a new level of luxury to the hotel and we aim to make it the finest golf hotel in the world.

Do I prefer playing a links or a parkland like Doral? That's a tough choice — they are different and yet very rewarding in their own ways. Both locations are beautiful but vastly different. It's fortunate that I can choose to play both of them.



Bambury, an Irishman whose geniality camouflages his expertise, is ready to make this links burn. "This is our first season stressing the fescue and it's now mature enough to keep moisture between 10 and 15 per cent," he tells *Golf World*. "I'd expect several months of extremely hard and fast conditions this summer. If we get a dry spell we will be stressing turf to its limits! Season 2011/2012 was about establishment. 2013 was about developing the root system. 2014 and beyond is about conditioning. We will have fairways at 9mm this summer. All our conditioning is for hard and fast playing surfaces."

Of all the early judgements on Trump's links, possibly the most ill-advised were on its set-up and conditioning. Money and expertise can take a new course a long way, but ultimately there is no short cut, no substitute for time. This is the north east of Scotland, remember, where the growing season does not kick in until mid May.

In fact, these factors considered, it is in remarkable condition, with the fescues in the fairway and greens knitting and playing nicely despite the setback of a very tough 2013 winter. The rye/fescue walkways have yet to settle down and do stand out; Bambury admits these "are still a big talking point... they are the one area where we won't be stressing the turf".

It is a minor point, and there is much more to like than dislike at Trump Links;



ABOVE: The par-5 4th has an array of bunkers in the fairway (hidden from view here) and an undulating green, which is the course's most southerly point. **LEFT:** A view from the elevated tee of the long and well-bunkered 18th hole. **RIGHT:** The stunning short 13th, the only hole to play from west to east at Trump International.



NORTH SEA BEAUTY

One of Scotland's most scenic short holes.

The 13th, 229 yards, par 3

There are a lot of candidates to fill this slot, which we allocate to an especially outstanding hole on the course. Certainly, the 1st, the 5th, the 6th, the 14th and the 17th are five other strong possibilities without even thinking deeply about it. This is undoubtedly a course packed with highlights, as one might well have predicted given the owner's personality.

The 13th stands out because it plays across the site, in contrast to the other 17 holes, and also because it encapsulates all the aspects that make a hole great.

It is certainly pleasing on the eye, with the North Sea visible



Walking off the back of this par 3, you pass between two dunes onto the amazing 14th.

beyond the green and the dunes that sit to its rear.

It's also challenging, usually playing with a crosswind and at 229 yards off the tips, it is no flick with a wedge. Indeed, it is a meaty 178 yards off even the front tee.

And for the highly skilled player, it is strategic – because you really want to leave yourself an uphill putt on a green that incorporates a myriad slopes and mounds. In fact, especially when looking from the back as you walk to the 14th, it looks as if a square of green baize has

been placed over a load of large, randomly-scattered stones.

This quality par 3 wasn't created easily. While the hole leaped out at Martin Hawtree in his initial walks round the site, the area was especially unstable and not fit to host golf traffic. It required hundreds of marram grasses to be hand planted in order to stabilise the site. You

can't tell such work was required as you play from the elevated tee down to the exposed green. All you are thinking about is the exceptional nature of this picturesque par 3.

for instance, the 5th is a sporty par 4 of 353 yards off the Blues (just 386 off the tips) – and, like the 7th, even shorter at only 281 yards off the tips, puts paid to any notion this is a slog. It is monstrous 7,430 yards off the Black tees but even within that parameter are cute holes such as those two, made exacting by the humps and bumps around the greens.

With the magnificent par-3 6th – sandwiched in between, this is a three-hole run of rare calibre. The lower-octane 8th and 9th are also admirable, offering a more nuanced 20 minutes with which to lower our heart rate before walking past the clubhouse and entering what is – ludicrously, given what we have just enjoyed – the more explosive half.

It begins with a clever uphill par 5 into a horseshoe of dunes where a right-sided drive avoids a blind approach. It continues with a drive from what feels like the highest point on the links on a robust par 4. And then it maintains momentum with a downhill tee shot framed by the North Sea and a very busy green complex. Feeling pleased with the world, you

'When this new links gets bouncy, it is difficult to imagine most not being utterly seduced by her'

then play across the site when the 13th (see left) comes into view. Walking off the back of its sloping green, you pass between a little gap between the dunes and emerge to a dramatic scene. It feels as if you have passed through an archway to the Secret Garden; ahead of you a strip of fairway wriggles between flanks of dunes the size of which raises the eyebrows. It is not difficult to understand why Trump rates it as his favourite hole, because if you enjoy the spectacular, you'll love the 14th.

Bambury thinned out 10m of marram on both sides of the fairway in 2013, and you are especially grateful on this tee. You know the towering dunes make the fairway appear more narrow than it really is, but you are still tentative. Once down on the fairway, their height and density is demonstrated by the total lack of wind.

Turning to head for home, the classy 16th has a row of bunkers in the front

bank of another angled green – a more cerebral addition to the par-3 collection. Little will probably be heard about the 17th but, played out of the dunes and at the mercy of the prevailing wind, it is a tremendous, heavily-bunkered hole that culminates on a long narrow green beyond the gully that runs up the left.

It is a better hole than the 18th for this golfer, although few will forget the climax, played from an elevated tee down to a fairway littered with traps. It is a long way into the wind and seemed the greenest, least linky of the fairways. A dry summer will see the fescues turn brown. Indeed, when this new links does get that bouncy, running nature, it is difficult to imagine most not being utterly seduced by her. **GW**

KEY INFORMATION

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Green fees: £195 all summer and £125 in April, October and November.