

The surrounding grassy dunes at the course create shelter in a dramatic natural setting



# Two years on, the Trump card wins

Hosting visitors from 40 countries last year, the course north of Aberdeen has been hailed by golfers and critics as a landmark achievement, says **Alex McDiarmid**

**F**or a place that has seen a storm of controversy, it exudes a surprising tranquillity that begins with the mile-long, well-manicured drive down off the A90 ten miles north of Aberdeen.

This sweeps down to the smart new mini-clubhouse – with its big dining-room windows looking over the dunes out to sea – before presenting you with the 7,400 yards of Trump International Golf Links that has already won a raft of accolades in its two short years of operation.

Sir Nick Faldo and Scottish Open winner Justin Rose have both described the course as “amazing”; Colin Montgomerie calls it “one of the best – if not the best – links courses I’ve ever played”; it hosted visitors from no fewer than 40 countries last year; and Golfweek magazine put it right at the top of its 50-strong list of best-designed modern courses, ahead of five St Andrews courses.

It’s a clear picture of success and if the critics and experts have been kinder than some vocal opponents, the weather has been benign too, though it has to be said that this is midsummer. Nonetheless, such a northerly location might seem susceptible to the will of other seasons, and it’s hard to imagine billionaire Donald Trump not taking this into account when he plumped for this area – out of 200 he viewed and considered all over the world.

“The weather gives us very little trouble,” says Christopher Campbell, the course’s Head Professional responsible

for the operation of the golf course. “We can count on one hand the number of times in a year that the haar [cold mist] rolls in from the sea to disrupt the playing programme and it is minimal.”

The surrounding high, marram-grass-spiked dunes could have much to do with that, creating natural shelter as they do. Natural is a key word, too, in terms of the course’s unique character. While it has been defined and refined by acknowledged expert Martin Hawtree, its design respects the dramatically undulating character of the topography, creating unique hole-by-hole challenges and pace changes. Hawtree himself says: “When you go round it and play you will find it is one of the most extraordinary golf links sites you will have seen or ever will see.”

Donald Trump himself echoes that: “I knew it would be fantastic – and it is. But seeing it in reality surpassed even my imagination – and that’s saying something.”

Which is why there is no signature hole as such, says his relatively local professional who served at Skibo Castle, London and Cyprus before being persuaded to return to Scotland, where he now works closely with links superintendent John Bambury. “All the holes are special, because they are framed by these dramatic dunes.

Indeed the peak of one dune is so high – at something like 60 feet – that one American golfer needed reassurance that the dunes weren’t artificial; “all as nature

intended,” says Mr Campbell.

Following the natural surface as they do, the holes vary considerably in length – from each other – but also from their own tees, as each has six different starting points. “That’s something of a modern twist,” he adds, “but the lie of the land offers such generous fairways and real physical twists so that all the holes are challenging as well as scenic.”

The team at the Menie estate are particularly proud of their accessibility – with an open-to-all system without required membership but real flexibility in pay-and-play accommodation which means you can turn up at any time and be on the green stuff almost immediately. Accessibility also includes the location being “only 20 minutes from Aberdeen airport, so the UK domestic market can get here very quickly, as can international visitors flying in just over an hour from Heathrow or Gatwick”.

Offered on-site accommodation is the handsome on-site MacLeod House and Lodge, a restored 14th-century baronial

mansion. It has 19 rooms and is part of the top Stay & Play price of £425 for overnight accommodation, breakfast and a round of golf on the championship course. The tee time rates, while – depending on seasons and desired options – rates fall steadily to £75 for Aberdeen residents keen to enjoy a round of this new golfing experience on their own doorstep.

While the course might not have a signature hole, the guests’ pocket guide gives a special mention to hole 3 (par 3, 108-205 yards) “which produces great anticipation as the player walks towards the green down a sunken grass path, slowly becoming aware of the sound of waves as the magnificent North Sea is revealed. The hole is sheltered by the surrounding dunes and is the closest point on the course to the sea as it laps against the sandy shoreline just a few feet from the green. Take a moment to truly appreciate the splendour of this fabulous hole.”

It is this splendour that the owner has been anxious to protect and preserve in his drive to make the “magnificent” Aberdeenshire course – in his own uncompromising words – “the world’s greatest golf course”.

What’s more, Mr Trump is keeping up the momentum of his ambition to be golf’s greatest human driver by purchasing the Doonberg resort in Ireland and the famous Turnberry resort on the South Ayrshire coast. But the Aberdeenshire exercise remains extra-special for him, with the clue being in his own words: “It’s 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 remarkable.”

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**Christopher Campbell, Head Professional at the course, says that its location ensures minimal weather disruption**

