

Reliving the memories of youth in auld Aberdeen

I used to come up to Aberdeen regularly as a student visiting other student friends. Maybe it was the time of life or too many wild nights out on the town but the sparkling granite city has never lost its appeal.

The area has flourished since then, unprecedented oil prosperity instilling a slick, urbane aspect to what was once an auld, grey fishing toon.

Café bars and designer restaurants have replaced the dank old pubs and greasy chip shops we once frequented. Theatres and music festivals, exclusive shops and upmarket art exhibitions . . . ah, what has happened to the Aberdeen of my youth?

There's still plenty of evidence of auld Aberdeen and a stroll down Union Street or a pint or two in the Prince of Wales re-establishes a sense of time and place. Okay, it may not be the 1970s but the beer's still good and the seagulls still the size of 747s! Now I'm back as a middle-aged golfer, happy

to have a look at old haunts and reminisce on Elysian days but also eager to explore the highly-regarded courses along the Aberdeenshire's coast.

The area has hit the headlines recently with the announcement of a new golf resort to be built in Stonehaven, just south of Aberdeen. In two years' time, the Ury Estate is to become home to a Jack Nicklaus signature golf course within magnificent Mearns countryside and with commanding views over the North Sea. Ury House, at present a ruin, will be the centrepiece of this £40m development to include extensive hotel and leisure facilities.

Alongside this, for some months now, there has been a simmering hubbub surrounding Donald Trump's plans to build what has been described as the world's greatest golf course, 10 miles north of the Granite City.

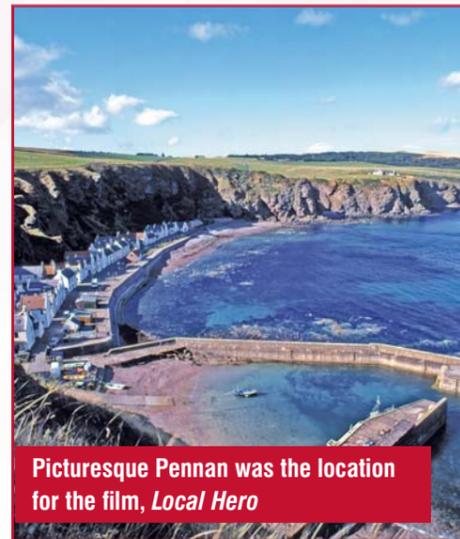
All of a sudden, Aberdeen and Grampian is the place to build golf courses and, despite

some local reservations, two world-class golfing operations will do the area no harm whatsoever.

We drove up to the north-east by car but there are a few alternative routes to this corner of Scotland. Aberdeen Airport still has a small-town appeal and is well connected to London, Manchester, Birmingham, Dublin and several Scandinavian and European cities.

Low-cost fares are available from airlines such as British Airways, Ryanair and EasyJet. Letting the train take the strain is a good idea. The Caledonian Sleeper service leaves London Euston just after 9pm and you can alight in Aberdeen the next morning, rested, breakfasted and ready to hit the fairways. Taking the sleeper can effectively add two days to your trip, as you do the travelling overnight.

Our first port of call was Stonehaven Golf Club, a handy stop-off before you hit the big city.



Picturesque Pennan was the location for the film, *Local Hero*



The 17th green at Stonehaven hugs the edge of the cliff

Stonehaven is a charming little harbour town with its course built on a dramatic headland.

It is short and exceptionally cheap at £18 per round; perhaps not the most demanding playing proposition but a good warm-up round and lots of fun, with dramatic cliffside views.

The city of Aberdeen should be your base if you are looking for evening entertainment and fine restaurants. The choice of hotels, restaurants and nightlife is prodigious.

Aberdeen's hotel prices often drop at the weekends. Being a busy business centre, the workers go home on Friday, leaving lots of empty rooms. Book a bargain on www.aberdeenhoteles.org

The city, meanwhile, is also surrounded with good golf, the best among them and indeed the best in the area being Royal Aberdeen Golf Club's Balgownie Links. Whether you should play here first is worthy of contemplation. For a course of this calibre, there could well be a case for saving the best until last.

There is little doubt why the Scottish Seniors was held here in 2005 and the Walker Cup is coming in 2011. The front nine at Royal Aberdeen is surely the best stretch of links golf in Scotland, most likely the UK and perhaps the whole world. This is true coastal golf on superlative terrain in every way, delightful and terrifying at the same time.

To be honest, it is not a place for a high handicapper. Even on a calm day, the outward stretch is not easy to steer.

From the tees, a barely visible ribbon of fairway winds through high dunes, flanked by swaying marran grass and snarling gorse.

The fairways reflect the rolling waves that lap or most-likely thunder onto the beach only a few yards away. Your stance could be upon a peak or in a trough, and if there is a wind, well, how often isn't there a fairly brisk south-westerly tugging at golfers' caps and trolleys?

I must say, though, I just love this golf course. The back nine isn't quite as perfect as the front but it would be impossible to keep up such a standard. Nevertheless, Royal Aberdeen's Balgownie Links maintain their challenge to the bitter end and, if you're tired – and you will be – the 18th is an arduous closing hole.

There is a humorous tale of how Japanese golfers wandered from the ninth green at Royal Aberdeen and continued play on the fourth at next-door Murcar Links.

They realised something was amiss by Murcar's 12th, their 18th, with no clubhouse in sight. I myself have perpetuated this urban myth, not knowing if it was really true, but you can certainly see how it could happen. The two links courses stand cheek to cheek, with only an insignificant plastic chain dividing them.

Murcar therefore maintains the same seaside terrain as its regal neighbour, at least from the fourth to ninth, then dodges inland and back until the 12th, where it turns for home.

Royal Aberdeen's 17th hole emphasises that the course is not for high-handicappers



This is another fine test of golf in immaculate condition.

We drove north to Newburgh on Ythan. From our window in the Udney Arms Hotel, Newburgh's little links course looked enticing. But there are bigger dunes to encounter a few minutes north at Cruden Bay.

Udney Arms Hotel, by the way, is one of the north-east's premier stopovers for golfers. Guy and his family have run the hotel for several centuries, or at least as long as I've known them – and do a tremendous job of hosting golf explorers from around the globe.

They claim that sticky toffee pudding was invented here and who are we to question such an appetising assertion. They are certainly generous with the portions. Accommodation prices are most reasonable.

We were first to tee off at Cruden Bay that morning, with a group of elderly locals behind us, a two-ball aiming to surge ahead of any ancient four-ball match. But those old worthies kept us in range and on our toes.

There's a knack to playing a course like Cruden Bay that only comes through experience.

Although I've previously played the course, it takes a few rounds to remember the keys to a number of quirky twists and blind corners.

But there are few finer links courses, with magnificent views across the Bay of Cruden.

They've built a new ninth tee box on the hill above the eighth and 16th which affords a fine view of the course and it really is one of the best golfing views in Scotland. From here you can appreciate the exaggerated, lumpy, bumpy terrain of the course.

The Aberdeen and Grampian area tends to reflect the character of its locals in that they rarely blow their own trumpet. That's a pity because courses like Fraserburgh or Peterhead should be better known.

Peterhead is a full-blown seaside course although it opens alongside the Uggie River and its first four holes are a bit agricultural. The rest of the layout is excellent, with some bold holes built into a sandy valley.

The back nine is the most interesting, longer and more testing. The 16th is a tough hole, descending into a valley with thick grass on either side and a raised green encircled by seven deep bunkers. Bump-and-run is therefore not an option.

The club is the 18th oldest in the world, with its original nine holes laid out by Willie Park Jnr in 1841.

Fraserburgh as a pure links course is really quite a surprise. On the card it looks short but on the ground it really is a solid golf experience. We were delighted with it, particularly its par threes.

They claim that this is the seventh oldest golf club in the world, with written evidence of golf being played in the area back in 1613.

Inverallochy, only four minutes from Fraserburgh, is another links course, with greens the size of kitchen tables. It's great fun and ideal for a bit of after-dinner entertainment. Remember, Scotland in summertime stays light till after 11pm.

Just beyond Fraserburgh is the seaside village of Pennan. Here they filmed *Local Hero* and the pub and phone box that featured prominently still exist. But it's the breathtaking location of the village squeezed between tall cliffs and the sea that catches the eye.

The Alastair MacKenzie greens at Duff House Royal are not a kick in the pants away from those of that other course he designed. What's it called again? Oh yes, Augusta National. Across the seven-arched bridge of the River Deveron, Duff House Royal Golf Club is the most noted course in this area, close to the sea but pure parkland.

Flat and easy to walk, it is renowned for its lush fairways and large bunkers. But it is the greens that stand out and it is here you need to be most respectful.

Some are exceptionally large and at least double-tiered, as was Dr MacKenzie's caprice back in the 1920s when he redesigned this James Braid layout.

The 16th is an outstanding hole, a long par three of 242 yards, with the river on the right where it is perfectly reasonable, no, advisable to play short and chip or putt safely on.

We ended our tour in one of the most

delightful spots on the Moray Coast. Cullen's ancient fishing village is full of delightful old cottages, many no doubt holiday homes now but charming all the same.

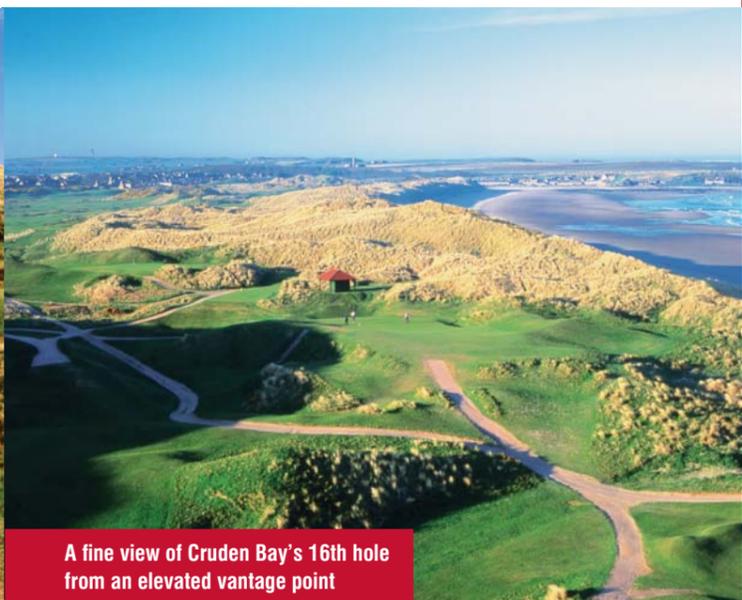
The harbour is cheery and the town is famous for its Cullen Skink soup. But it's the golf course that commands most delight.

It's not a challenge by any means but an absolute riot to play.

We stayed at the delightful Seafeld Arms Hotel in town, enjoyed their fabulous food and hit the fairways again for another helping of capricious Cullen Golf Club.



The eighth hole at Royal Aberdeen is part of the best stretch of links in the world



A fine view of Cruden Bay's 16th hole from an elevated vantage point

Where to stay

Our choice here is two middle-market hotels of good quality offering great prices and exceptional food.

They are ideally suited for a two-centre golf tour of this area.

Udney Arms Hotel, Main Street, Newburgh, Ellen, Aberdeenshire. Scotland. AB41 6BL.

Phone 01358 789444, email reservations.udnyarms@ohiml.com or visit www.udny.co.uk

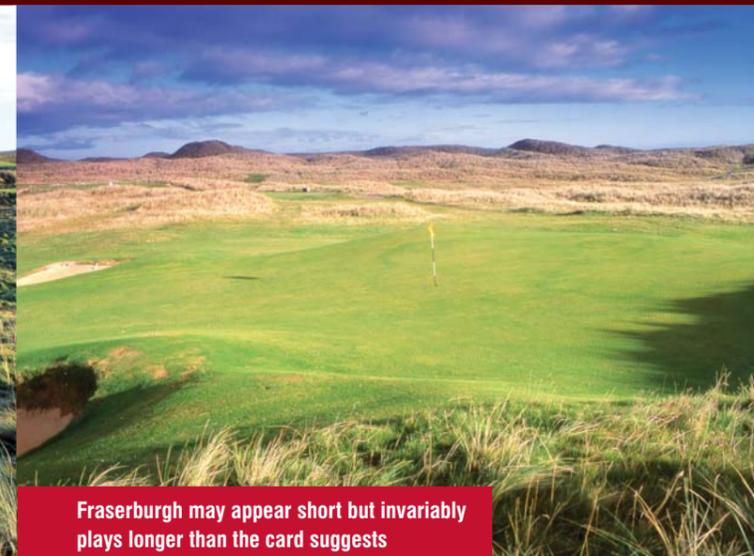
The Seafeld Arms Hotel, 17-19 Seafeld Street, Cullen, Buckie, Banffshire. Scotland. AB56 4SG.

Phone 01542 840791, email info@theseafeldarms.co.uk or visit www.theseafeldarms.co.uk

For further information on the area, visit www.agtb.org



Peterhead is one of the oldest courses in the world



Fraserburgh may appear short but invariably plays longer than the card suggests

COURSE FACT FILES

STONEHAVEN

Address: Cowie, Stonehaven. Scotland. AB39 3HJ
Tel: 01569 762124
Email: stonehavengc@btconnect.com
Website: www.stonehavengolfclub.com
Length: 18 holes, par 66, 5,103 yards

COURSE FACT FILES

ROYAL ABERDEEN

Address: Balgownie Links, Bridge of Don, Aberdeen. Scotland. AB23 8AT
Tel: 01224 702221 (tee reservations), 702571 (clubhouse)
Email: admin@royalaberdeengolf.com
Website: www.royalaberdeengolf.com
Length: 36 holes - Balgownie Links, 18 holes, par 71, 6,229 yards; Silverdown, 18 holes, par 64, 4,021 yards

COURSE FACT FILES

FRASERBURGH

Address: Corbie Hill, Philorth, Fraserburgh. Scotland. AB43 8TL
Tel: 01346 516616
Email: secretary@fraserburghgolfclub.org
Website: www.fraserburghgolfclub.org
Length: 18 holes, par 70, 6,308 yards

COURSE FACT FILES

CRUDEN BAY

Address: Aulton Road, Cruden Bay, Peterhead. Scotland. AB42 0NN
Tel: 01779 812285
Email: cbaygc@aol.com
Website: www.crudenbaygolfclub.co.uk
Length: 18 holes, par 70, 6,395 yards

COURSE FACT FILES

PETERHEAD

Address: Craigewan Links, Peterhead. Scotland. AB42 6LT
Tel: 01779 472149
Email: enquiries@peterheadgolfclub.co.uk
Website: www.peterheadgolfclub.co.uk
Length: 18 holes, par 70, 6,173 yards

COURSE FACT FILES

CULLEN

Address: The Links, Cullen, Buckie. Scotland. AB56 4UU
Tel: 01542 840685
Website: www.cullengolfclub.co.uk
Length: 18 holes, par 63, 4,610 yards

COURSE FACT FILES

INVERALLOCHY

Address: Inverallochy, Aberdeenshire. Scotland. AB43 8XY
Tel: 01346 582000
Length: 18 holes, par 66, 5,370 yards