

GREAT WEEKENDER

HIGHLAND

It takes a bit of getting to, but the North of Scotland is an absolutely

BY KEVIN BROWN

SWING

stunning area blessed with amazing golf courses



Although both soda and water mix well with whisky, it's just possible that golf goes better than either of them with Scotland's favourite export.

Courses and distilleries are fairly well scattered throughout the country but there is a happy blend of both up in the north-east of Scotland in an area known as Speyside.

The Spey, the fastest-flowing river in Scotland, hurtles down from the Cairngorms, through spectacular scenery before entering the Moray Firth.

Along the way it passes the highest concentration of distilleries in Scotland and flows close to a few of the finest golf courses in the world.

As if that's not enough, the Spey is also one of the greatest fishing rivers in the world. Nearly 10,000 salmon and about half as many sea trout are caught by rod and line on the Spey every year.

And so a round of golf in the morning followed by a spot of fishing in the afternoon and a dram or two in the evening is the dream Speyside scenario.

The golf is also pretty special. Much of the headlines are taken by Royal Dornoch – understandably. This is a true giant of the game, a course up there with St Andrews in terms of a course you have to play before you die.

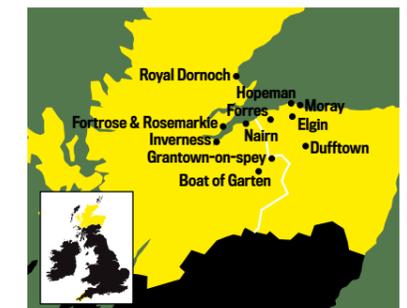
It's gorse-lined, rumped fairways and super-slick, sloping greens are an awesome challenge which visitors from all over the world are utterly charmed by.

Just behind Dornoch in terms of star status is Nairn, host of the 1999 Walker Cup and a course blessed with arguably the finest greens in Britain.

Also well worth a mention in this regard is the new kid on the block, Castle Stuart. Crafted out of sensational land near Inverness by Kingsbarns creator Mark Parsinen, this is sure to feature high on future Top 100 course listings.

These are the high-priced star names, now we take you on a tour of the wonderful support cast in the Highlands.

WHERE THE COURSES ARE



1 BOAT OF GARTEN

Par 70, 5,648 yards

Situated on the edge of town between the river and the steam railway, Boat of Garten can trace its illustrious history back to 1898 when the original six holes were laid out over pure heathland.

Two holes were added in 1910 and 20 years on extra land became available and the legendary James Braid submitted his design. Since it was opened in 1932, the 18-hole course has been tweaked a little but the remarkable individuality of the holes is still unmistakably present in the delightful design that threads through the silver birch, heather and gorse.

All the holes are christened, some with names that are almost unpronounceable to everyone other than a native Scot. The

signature 6th is said to have been Braid's favourite. In providing wonderfully lofty tees, several of the holes – but in particular the 6th and 12th – make full use of the available elevation, of which there is plenty.

A feature of the course for which Braid can't take any credit is the spectacular mountain backdrop provided by the Cairngorms. Another natural asset is the abundant wildlife – hares and deer are a particular feature.

Factfile:

Location: 27 miles south east of Inverness. **Tel:** 01479 831282.

Web: www.boatgolf.com

Green fees: Mon-Fri: £35. Sat-Sun: £40



■ Still need more information? For more information on the region check out www.greaterspeyside.com and www.speysidedistillery.co.uk



2

Moray – a classic Scottish links.

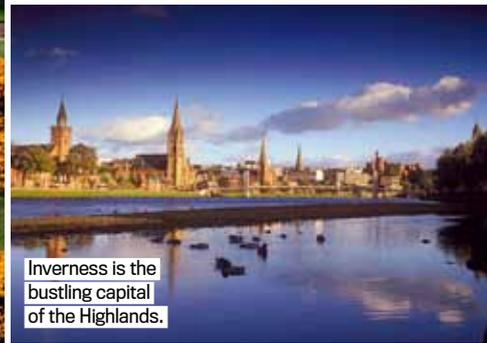


Whisky tasting is pretty much obligatory here.



3

Glorious views and lush fairways at beautiful Elgin.



Inverness is the bustling capital of the Highlands.

2 MORAY OLD COURSE

Par 70, 6,228 yards

Keeping out of trouble at Moray is tricky as the wind invariably whistles in from the adjacent Moray Firth.

Gorse threatens throughout and the revetted bunkers look almost appealing by comparison.

Despite encountering such inevitable grief, this truly thrilling course - designed by Old Tom Morris - is absolutely stunning. From the moment you tee off until you putt out on the elevated final green in front of the clubhouse, you can't fail but fall under the magical spell of this glorious links.

You can't ignore the roar of the Tornados screaming into Lossiemouth air base, but the noise won't put you off putting on the true greens. The ludicrously low green fees makes it possibly the best bargain in Scotland.

Factfile:

Location: 6 miles north of Elgin. **Tel:** 01343 812018. **Web:** www.moraygolf.co.uk **Green fees:** Mon-Fri: £49.50. Sat-Sun: £60.

Where to stay

■ The recently refurbished Garth Hotel in Grantown of Spey combines old world charm with modern comfort. Most of the guests are golfers (there's a dedicated club store) and the rest are walkers. (www.garthhotel.com).

■ The three-star Sunninghill Hotel is close to the centre of Elgin. The welcome is warm and the food superb. (www.sunninghillhotel.com).

■ For pure luxury try the magnificent Knockomie Hotel near Forres - and enjoy The Malt Library. (www.knockomie.co.uk)

3 ELGIN

Par 68, 6,148 yards

As part of their centenary celebrations in 2006, Elgin staged the fastest ever round played over their scenic parkland as an army of members raced round in a relay in 14 minutes and 50 seconds.

But frankly, that was a waste, because it's such a lovely course and shouldn't be rushed round. The opening hole, 454 yards off the backs, is an accurate indication of what's to follow as there are eight par 4s over the 400 mark.

The holes - both long and short - are neatly separated by lines of trees that help create a cosy feel.

Lush fairways, first-class greens and glorious distant views all contribute to a genuinely exceptional golfing experience. It's hardly surprising that Elgin has hosted the prestigious Northern Open three times. A quality track.

Factfile:

Location: One mile south of Elgin. **Tel:** 01343 542338. **Web:** www.elgingolfclub.com **Green fees:** Mon-Fri: £37. Sat-Sun: £39.

OUT AND ABOUT

Six off-course attractions...

- ★ There are dozens of whisky distilleries in the area. Although it might not be wise to visit them all, you should try and take in at least one. Benromach, which is just outside Forres, is small, friendly and welcomes visitors.
- ★ Johnstons of Elgin have been making cashmere and other fabrics since 1797. The tour of their factory is fascinating but don't dwell too long in the shop or you'll spend a fortune.
- ★ There's no shortage of castles. One of the finest is Cawdor Castle, near Nairn.
- ★ Gordon & McPhails shop in Elgin is often described as the 'Harrods of the North' and provides a refreshing antidote to modern supermarkets.
- ★ The Olive Tree Chocolate Visitors Centre, eight miles east of Elgin, is full of sweet surprises.



4 Forres - combines the talents of Braid and Park.



5 Glorious Granttown-on-Spey.



Visit Benromach whisky distillery.

SIX MORE TO TRY

These Highland crackers are also worth checking out

Royal Dornoch

What: If you love quality links golf you'll be in heaven here.
How much: Until Sept 10: Mon-Fri: £85 a round & £130 a day. Sat-Sun: £95/£140.
Contact: 01862 810219.

Nairn

What: This magical links has bags of pedigree and will simply blow you away.
How much: £85 a round & £125 for two rounds.
Contact: 01667 453208.

Hopeman

What: This demanding links overlooks the Moray Firth and was transformed from a nine to a full 18 holer in 1985.
How much: Mon-Fri: £23. Sat: £30. Sun: £22.
Contact: 01343 830578.

Inverness

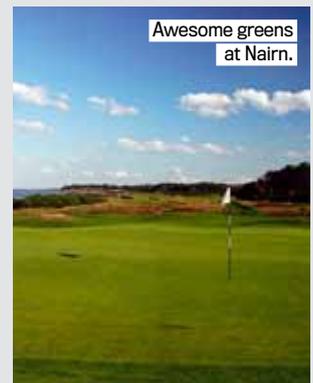
What: A rolling parkland track with a top mixture of holes.
How much: £38 a round & £52 a day.
Contact: 01463 239882.

Dufftown

What: With a par of 64 and under 5,000 yards, quirky Dufftown is short and sweet... and great fun.
How much: £20 a round/day.
Contact: 01340 820325.

Fortrose & Rosemarkie

What: James Braid's hidden gem is breathtakingly plotted on the Chanonyr peninsula.
How much: Mon-Fri: £36 a round & £54 a day. Sat-Sun: £43/£55.
Contact: 01381 620529.



4 FORRES

Par 70, 6,300 yards

Two of Scotland's greatest architects have combined their enormous talents to create the gloriously pretty Forres. James Braid designed the original nine and Willie Park expanded it to 18 in 1912.

As you survey the opening 300-yard par 4, you might mistakenly imagine that you're in for an easy time. Although short by today's standards, the course defences include plenty of bunkers, substantial trees and tricky greens.

After the first four holes - relatively short and undulating par 4s - the course levels out somewhat and the principal requirement is to keep the ball away from the menacing trees lining the fairways.

Built on sandy soil and with splendid views over Findhorn Bay and the Moray Firth, the course never floods with only one serious water hazard, on the 16th.

Factfile:

Location: 1 mile south east of Forres, off B9010. **Tel:** 01309 672949. **Web:** www.forresgolfclub.co.uk. **Green fees:** £35 a round & £50 a day.

Highland snippets...

■ The River Spey is the fastest-flowing river in Scotland.

■ In fact the Spey is unusual in that it increases speed as it flows closer to the coast.

■ Whisky is spelt without an 'e' in Scotland and Canada but it's with an 'e' in the US and Ireland.

■ Salmon find their home waters by sense of smell. They also rely on ocean currents, tides and the gravitational pull of the moon to navigate their way through the ocean back to the stream or river where they were born.

■ The dark colour of whisky comes from the wooden barrels in which it matures.

5 GRANTTOWN-ON-SPEY

Par 70, 5,710 yards

A short walk from the picturesque Scottish highland town from which it gets its name, its history goes back to 1890 when the club rented pastureland 'for the purposes of golf' for one shilling a year.

With wonderful views of the distant Cairngorms, the course splits into three equal sections.

The first six holes are over fairly flat and open parkland. It then tightens considerably over the second six, which pass through hilly woodland. The closing stretch is over undulating parkland. The undisputed signature hole is the 9th, a 275-yard downhill par 4 that is blessed with a spectacular backdrop of pine trees and the beautiful Cromdale Hills.

The superb food in the clubhouse restaurant is as good as you'll find in a club.

Factfile:

Location: On the north-east edge of town. **Tel:** 01479 872079. **Web:** www.granttownonspeygc.co.uk **Green fees:** Mon-Fri: £29 a round & £36 a day. Sat-Sun: £34/£41.

Strange but true: Dufftown's 7th hole is one of the shortest in the UK - it's just 67 yards though players do have a deep gully to negotiate.