



Hooked on a little slice of golfing heaven

Short, cold, windy ... wonderful. Sean Guthrie discovers the delights which abound by the river Spey

The beaten track gets a bad rap in golf. There's little wrong with the trials found on the courses of South Ayrshire, Fife and the Central Belt. You could spend several lifetimes battering round the gorse-strewn public courses of Troon, for example, and never once lose interest. Comparing them to the eco disasters of coastal Spain, say, which host oodles of British golfers with the onset of autumn and winter, is like comparing Herman Hesse to Ian Rankin. So what if the weather frequently takes a hostile turn round Crail way? Big deal. Put on a jumper. Stop whingeing.

Like diet, though, it's beneficial to vary the challenges of golf, for your game if not your gut. That's why I'm horsing it up the A9 on a summer morning bound for the silver birch, broom and heather of the Boat, or Boat of Garten Golf and Tennis Club in full, at the start of the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail, a loose fraternity of clubs, distilleries and hotels trumpeting the simple joys of the area.

Arguably the best known of the five courses on the trail, the Boat was designed back in the late 19th century by the masterful James Braid, who knew a thing or two about playing tricks with bounce, distance perception and camber. There's nothing straightforward about the 18 holes other than the fact you have to control the ball – big but wayward hitters will find little to love about its 5,876-yard layout – and commit to every shot. Besides its anachronistic shortness the Boat demands another skill increasingly being made redundant by the march of golf club technology: the ability to shape shots depending on the geometry of the hole before you. While outright doglegs are few, most holes feature slopes, dips and mounds that will send disobedient balls bounding off into the heather. Miraculously, I pull a fade out of the bag here, a draw there, and find the rewards almost as appealing as the vistas of the Cairngorm massif to the southeast, its uppermost slopes lightly dusted in snow. I'm beginning to like Highland golf.

A brief skip up the A95 lies the next stop on the trail, Grantown-on-Spey. ▶

resort creation. Initially Southworth Development, which owns Machrihanish Dunes, has created the neat stone-built Ugadale complex, with a group of high-spec cottages, a cosy bar/restaurant and a golf shop just a few yards from the first tee of the old course.

The next phase will see the redevelopment of existing buildings, one a former hotel adjacent to the Ugadale complex, and the other a hotel in Campbeltown a few miles down the road. There is also scope to build cottages closer to the first tee, but the owners insist that will happen only gradually, not appearing as some carbuncle on the landscape. Their track record earns them the right to be believed.

This will never be an Algarve or Florida-style resort. With more than 50% of the market being domestic, followed by northern Europeans as the next biggest chunk, just outnumbering Americans, persuading Scots to make this pilgrimage will be vital. In which case there is perhaps another way of looking at how they are marketing this resort as The Way Golf Began. In the historic sense that seems

TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE

Machrihanish Dunes has a package comprising return flights with Loganair from Glasgow to Campbeltown, transfers, golf and lunch for £149pp. Visit www.loganair.co.uk/golf.

WHERE TO STAY

The resort has two nights in the Ugadale Cottages with three days' unlimited golf this autumn for £119pp. Visit www.machrihanishdunes.com or call 0800 151 3701.

absolutely justified, yet it was on a personal level, too, that it felt that way.

As much as this will appeal to American big spenders, it may also appeal to those who, like me, were weaned on holidays in rural Scotland, in places at the end of long, narrow B roads, but with ready access to a golf course.

Even heading into Campbeltown, with its old-fashioned toy shops and confectioners with jars of soor plooms, sherbert lemons and pear drops brought a delightful whiff of nostalgia. Admittedly the golf is a shade more expensive than it was back then, while Scots of my generation and older are probably too uptight to be entirely comfortable with the American-style marketing.

However in those terms, particularly when compared with the American-style courses that look so out of place on Scottish soil, a hint of Disney underlying the marketing of our golfing history is a small price to pay for a transatlantic partnership that seems committed to the integrity of the land on which this project lies. ■