

TRUMP

INTERNATIONAL GOLF LINKS

DAVID J. WHYTE WALKS THE 'GREATEST GOLF COURSE IN THE WORLD' AND TELLS US WHY IT MIGHT BE SO. BY DAVID J. WHYTE



OPENING PICTURE: Trump International Golf Links - 13th Hole. INSET FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Trump International Golf Links - 13th & 3rd Hole.

Scotland's northeast corner has never enjoyed the golfing limelight as much as other Scottish regions such as East Lothian, Fife or Ayrshire. Royal Aberdeen Golf Club and Cruden Bay Golf Club are illustrious attractions but travelling golfers often failed to include these Northern Lights. All this is set to change with the opening of Trump International Golf Links, set midway between Royal Aberdeen and Cruden Bay Golf Club and about 8 miles north of the City of Aberdeen.

Donald Trump is a colourful, oft-controversial character who has created a business empire of prodigious proportions. It was Trump's keen personal interest in the game of golf that led to his involvement in a dozen US golf properties. In 2005 his golfing gaze turned towards Europe. "My mother was born in Scotland," Trump told me. "She came to the USA at the age of 19 and soon after married my father. But she was always going back to Scotland. She loved it! And so I was really keen to do something here."

Trump's team scoured 141 different sites but it was obvious early on there was only one place that would fit the bill; a stretch of natural links just a handful of miles north of the City of Aberdeen. "When I saw this piece of land I was overwhelmed by the imposing dunes and rugged Aberdeenshire coastline," said Trump. "I have never seen such an unspoiled and dramatic seaside landscape and knew that this was the perfect site for

Trump International Golf Links."

In 2006, Donald Trump bought the Menie Estate complete with a baronial mansion and 2,000 acres of pristine coastal links, announcing that here he would build the 'Greatest Golf Course in the World'. It was a mission not without difficulties, challenges to the intrepid Trump that were a natural part of the process. The application for the £1billion golf resort was initially rejected by the Aberdeenshire Council leading to the unprecedented situation of the Scottish Government calling in the application and finally approving it.

On several recent visits to the site, I have to admit, in all my years as a golf journalist and photographer I have never seen anything quite like it. The 'Great Dunes of Scotland,' as Trump has dubbed them, crafted over centuries by wind and waves, are an awe-inspiring milieu for any golf course. Cruden Bay, Murcar and Royal Aberdeen Golf Club share the same stretch of dunes but Trump, as you would expect has acquired the most exaggerated section.

The dunes here are immense, some rising as high as a 5-storey building. It's a mesmerising sight when you first encounter it. Besides the exuberance of the dunes, the unique presentation of the holes is quite remarkable! Multiple tee boxes perch like miniature, manicured lawns atop marram-grassed mounds. They take up diverse positions changing not only the distance but playing strategies of each hole. Luxurious, grassed walkways descend to the fairways, giving golfers





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the “green-carpet” treatment as they progress toward their shots.

The 1st looks like it will be an easy opener, playing along a valley just inside the coastal ridge. A medium Par 5, the green should be reachable in two shots for the aggressive player. But most will be happy to kick back and appreciate the quality of this initial encounter. The course’s tempo swiftly increases with the ever-present refreshing breezes.

The 3rd, a Par 3 is a truly remarkable hole, opening up the first proper vista of the North Sea. The sound of the waves rushing against a long sand beach will help loft excitement. The intimidation here is the prevailing wind coming straight at you with the waves of the North Sea close by. You’ll feel very exposed on any of the tee boxes. This will surely emerge as one of the best-regarded Par 3’s in the game.

Not to be undone, the 4th rises up like an eagle, surely one of the toughest playing propositions on the course. A Par 5 with up to 563 yards at its disposal, each tee option offers a unique approach as well as spectacular views south towards Aberdeen. The fairway is wider than average but with a burn snaking along its full length, it will seem much narrower.

Now the course turns north again catching the prevailing tail wind. A sequence of fast flowing holes pour across this remarkable dune landscape and the player will be buoyed up on the breeze. But care will be required especially on holes such as the 6th, a short, mesmerising ‘sucker-punch’ with a simple green set in an ocean of ancient dunes that can easily mislead. The 7th might complete the move to throw your score, a short Par 4 where the green looks tempting from the tees, but deep swales and hollows await the misplaced shot.

The final two holes on the front

nine seal the deal, two dynamic Par 4’s that will attest the credibility of the course, leaving you buoyed with respect and in anticipation of the even more pronounced back half. Martin Hawtree, the course architect said when he first saw these natural dunes: “It was the most dramatic stretch of duneland I’d ever seen. I just soaked myself into those dunes and felt the layout as I walked the site.”

If the front nine offers one of the finest stretches of links golf ever encountered, the back nine is a set of exuberant sandhills some towering as high as small office blocks. These huge bear-like shapes bristle with trepidation. How did they manage to weave a golf course into such a radical landscape? The long Par 5 10th is a relaxed introduction before entering the deeper, wafting, marram-topped wonderland. The 11th tees occupy the highest point on the course and from here you stand in awe. It won’t be easy to cast such distracting visions aside to play a tee-shot. The views now come thick and fast with the North Sea appearing again at the 11th green and the 12th tees.

Hole 13 is another of the course’s astonishing, inimitable Par 3’s cutting at right-angles across a narrow valley of rippling linksland. A spectacular hole, played from any of the tees directly towards the sea, the vista will revitalise any flagging impulses. The walk through the dunes to the 14th tees with cumulative glimpses and sounds of the North Sea finally gives way to one of the finest prospects of the course. Its stunning setting will make this hole a firm favourite with majestic dunes hugging a narrow ribbon of green and a breath-taking expanse of North Sea to the right. The fairway follows a natural valley up to the green. Trump International Golf Links offers 18 spectacular holes; this may well be considered its foremost.

Turning south again towards the clubhouse and into the prevailing wind, a testing finale demands players keep a steady pace – and never

especially into the wind. The final three holes are perfectly placed to catch those losing their grip on concentration and strength. The penultimate is a long Par 4 rising steadily from tee to green with more movement on the green than the average on the course, but is also among the largest.

At last we arrive at the finish. And what a finish it is! The ultimate hole is the longest and possibly the most demanding of them all especially with the wind coming at you. On one of the largest dunes on site, six tees are arranged like a gun battery on the south-facing slope. From the higher tees, the coast and skyline of Aberdeen is in full view. To the left are two large winter lochs, which are a feature seldom seen on a links course, but very much a part of the natural dune ecosystem. The hole is all about strategy, choosing a line of play that will provide the best access into the green. This is perhaps the sternness test but what a wonderfully exhilarating experience to cement for the many who will certainly deem this to be one of the greatest golf round of their lives.

Meanwhile, besides the nearby links of Royal Aberdeen, Cruden Bay and Murcar, the region of Aberdeen & Grampian will be a great place for visiting golfers offering a taste of quintessential Scotland. Here you find the highest density of Scottish Castles, Malt Whisky distilleries and historic houses along with the finest local produce Scotland has to offer. The supporting cast also includes some of the finest hotel properties in and around the City of Aberdeen, the Oil Capital of Europe and a friendly, lively base for enjoying the area and its golf courses. Trump International Golf Links, combined with this remarkable part of Scotland, has created something truly special; perhaps they’ll be attesting over the next year or so that this is the ‘Greatest Golf Destination in the World.’

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Trump International Golf Links -
13th, 5th, 14th & 3rd Hole.