

Links to the U.S.

Bandon Dunes – Golf as it's meant to be.



WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL PRENDERGAST

AFTER SPENDING three and a half days squeezing in 108 holes of breathtaking golf, it was clear that it didn't take some marketing guru three months at great expense to create a strapline that best embodies golf at Bandon Dunes.

Like the pure, links golfing land that greets you at the five courses perched on the cliff tops of the spectacular Oregon coastline (including a magical par-three course) that have sprung up over little more than a decade, the line was most likely just sitting there all along in the subconscious, waiting to be brought to light.

'Golf as it's meant to be', the message greeting you at the entrance to the pro shop at the main lodge, says it all. After all we had heard, and were about to experience firsthand, this simple, understated sentiment was the perfect introduction to a golf destination that is far from understated.

Bandon is quite simply: 'Golf as it's meant to be' and golf that you need to go out of your way to see – at least once.

Writing as I am for an audience on the other side of the world, I can appreciate the logistical considerations. We certainly procrastinated enough after an embryonic plan was hatched at the 2013 World Cup of Golf at Royal Melbourne, when an American friend visiting Australia for the first time helped sew the seed.

In between watching the tournament and introducing him to such layouts as Kingston Heath, Woodlands and St Andrews Beach, he kept up a daily 'Bandon' banter which eventually turned lethargy into strategy on our behalf. And we're forever indebted.

The man behind this glorious expression of golf is Chicago developer Mike Keiser, who was pointed in the direction of the spectacular property

of dunes, gorse and majestic coastal views from 100 foot clifftops on the isolated Oregon coast, when searching for the ideal land to develop his vision for 'golf as it's meant to be' in the U.S.

Keiser brought in a then unknown Scot David McLay Kidd to design the first course, Bandon Dunes, which opened to great acclaim in 1999.

Tom Doak's Pacific Dunes opened two years later and over the next decade Coore & Crenshaw's Bandon Trails (they were also responsible for the sublime par-three course, Bandon Preserve) was added and finally, Doak and Jim Urbina completed Old Macdonald in 2010.

While the quality of golf is widely acknowledged in prominent world course ranking lists, Doak noted the Bandon of today has surpassed anything that Keiser had in mind when he set out to pursue his passion.

"I think Mike would be the first to tell you that the resort has exceeded his expectations, by a lot. He was hoping it would become a special place but I know his biggest vision initially was just to have two courses," Tom said.

"He's proceeded incrementally to be sure that the size of the place never overwhelms the experience of being there that everyone has loved so much from the beginning."

Each of the designers, on all but the inland Bandon Trails, have taken advantage of the stunning coastline with uninterrupted views as far as the eye can see, with a series of jaw dropping holes played to and along the cliff edge.

Keiser's final addition to the Bandon collection was to pay homage to early 20th century course designer Charles Blair Macdonald and, particularly, his iconic National Golf Links of America – Keiser's favourite golf course.

The finished product is not only a seamless addition to the resort's armoury of memorable and exciting links holes but a walking education in classic course architecture. You'll find a Road Hole at 'Old Mac', albeit a straightaway version compared to the dogleg 17th at the Old Course, but with a green complex, devilish pot bunker and swales a close match with the original.

It was a shame that none of our foursome caught the 'Road Hole' bunker when we played, although earlier in the round, one of our group was overjoyed to have speared his approach into the pot bunker fronting the Eden Hole (see St Andrews 11th) at the 2nd.

An excitable reaction such as this was not only a feature of a round at Old Mac but across all the courses at Bandon. With all due respect to tennis, I thanked my lucky stars that I took up playing golf way back when as we bounced around energetically like kids with new toys.

In the summer months with firm, fast fairways and a constant ocean breeze prevailing, yardage books and distance markers were largely superfluous. Bandon's turf and tight fescue green surrounds brought back a comment five-time British Open champion Peter Thomson made to me some years ago: "There's a special skill to hitting the ball off tight, links fairways." >>



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I don't know if Mr Thomson has had the chance to visit Bandon but I suspect he'd heartily approve of what has evolved there.

Your first challenge is perhaps this most basic of fundamentals in playing the game – clipping the ball cleanly and squarely off tight, bouncy turf.

Hitting to a yardage on most occasions meant very little. Judging the strength of the wind, picking a spot to land the ball, where to play for position for the best chance of getting the next shot close and then, with which club to try to execute any of the above, best illustrates the 'fun' that lies in store, around every corner, on every course at Bandon.

None of the golf courses extend beyond 6,900 yards (6,300m) yet the wind and the sea air ensure your shot making and recovery skills will be thoroughly tested. Brute strength alone will not be rewarded as much as imagination and creativity.

As the designer of Pacific Dunes and Old Macdonald, Tom Doak clearly has a personal affinity and a strong sense of satisfaction with what has developed in a relatively short space of time at Bandon Dunes.

Credited with many great designs including Cape Kidnappers in New Zealand and Barnbougle Dunes in Tasmania, along with many important restorations of classic golf courses, Doak's influences have been many and varied but 12 months living in St Andrews in his early years inspired a passion for the ideals of links golf that have been replicated at Bandon.

"Aside from the great appeal of links golf, I think one of the things that's always driven the success of Bandon is the enthusiasm of the people who work at the resort," he said.

"As in Scotland, most of them have gravitated to the place because they are golfers or at least appreciate golf as an outdoors experience, so everyone is excited to be there and to hear what you think of the place.

"Naturally, that goes double for me; in working there off and on over 15 years. It's kind of like going home to see the family." ●
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