

Heaven is a Place on Earth

Despite its rich seam of top-quality golf, one region of Ireland tends to get overlooked. Rob Smith heads up the relatively undiscovered western coast to see what he has been missing...

Photography Getty Images, Rob Smith



Enniscrone's par-3 11th hole

Having enjoyed my fair share of golfing trips, for many years there had been one particular destination which had somehow escaped my turf-damaging attentions. Think of Ireland as a clock face, and we are looking at the coastline between 9 and 12 – from the counties of Galway up to Donegal – or in golfing terms, from Connemara up to Ballyliffin. Packed with enticingly named clubs, this genuinely breathtaking countryside is both blessed and cursed by its relative remoteness. In late September I embarked on an ambitious odyssey to play a number of its courses, three of which are in the current *Golf Monthly* Top 100, five which feature in the Next 100, and a couple more which were included in December's 100 Hidden Gems special.

The West of Ireland Airport at Knock is an ideal place to start as, although enjoying a major upgrade, it is quiet and handily situated less than an hour from Galway and Sligo. I headed south to the former, an important tourism centre which acts as a gateway to the scenic splendour of the county. After an excellent dinner at the quayside Ard Bia restaurant and an early night, I was looking forward to my first port-of-call, the wild and rugged links at Connemara.

If ever there was an appetite-whetting drive, the road from Galway is it. As you head through evermore glorious scenery into what could easily pass as the middle of nowhere, you wonder whether there really will be a golf club waiting at the end. But of course there is, and clearly the pilgrimage is one that golfers are keen to make. The main championship loops are the older A and B nines, designed by Eddie Hackett in 1973, and I played these in front of two New Yorkers who told me they had never seen golf in such an amazing place. The 'three-club wind' probably counts as a still day at Connemara, and following an excellent opening hole, the next few are less dramatic before things take off from the 8th. The back nine is full of variety with great views, tempting drives and plateau greens. The short 13th is an outstanding, natural par 3, and following a rare birdie at 14, I was even more pleased with my par at the tough 16th as it included a drop from the burn which guards the green.

AND SO IT BEGINS...

As you head over the hill and get your first glimpse of the dunes at Enniscrone, you know you are in for something special. I played with club manager Pat Sweeney, a knowledgeable host whose habit of using the putter for anything from within 150 yards is slightly unnerving at first. This Hackett design enjoyed some substantial modifications by Donald Steel about ten years ago to make more use of the dunes and is now seriously good. Following a hugely deceptive opening drive into an area that makes the 1st at St Andrews look tight, the course heads into, along, out of, and back through the dunes. It is bursting with character, infinitely varied, and a course I cannot wait to play again. I particularly liked the 9th along the estuary and the back-to-back short par 4s at 12 and 13, whilst the 15th is so tough being stroke index one simply doesn't do it justice.

The approach to Carne, just beyond the coastal town of Belmullet, again makes you feel you are

entering uncharted territory. Following a tough opening hole, the following few holes are fine enough but perhaps less striking. However, from the unusual par-3 7th to an elevated green, things just get better and better as the drama really unfolds at the start of the back nine. This opens with an outstanding par 5 up and through dunes, before an awe-inspiring tee shot between two more towering sand hills at the next. The closing six holes are all superb with the last four bordering on sublime. This was Hackett's last design and is a fitting testament to one of golf architecture's leading figures. There is an ongoing project to finish another nine through the dunes; when this is done, it will be a must-play. To be fair, it is already.

County Sligo, known as Rosses Point, was the only course I had played before and I was keen to return as it has lived fondly in my memory. Being a Colt fan, I am always keen to play his courses and with the exception of the opening three holes, this is another gem. The 4th is a perfect example of a short hole that doesn't need bunkers, whilst the 9th is an equally fine example of one that benefits from them. Elsewhere, the views of the Ox Mountains and the golfing test are outstanding. When you reach the far end, you really feel as though you are in a different world. Standing on the tee of the short 13th, I was surprised to recall the shank I had hit onto the beach in 1992. Isn't it odd how history repeats itself? Stroke index 2, the 17th is a great example of a bunkerless – but still very demanding – par 4. The course is every bit as good

as I had remembered and I hope it will be less than 19 years before I return again.

It is now Sunday morning on the west coast of Ireland. It is October, the sun is shining, and there isn't a breath of wind. I am suspicious! However, I have no need to be as I emerge through the forest to the Donegal club at Murvagh, yet another exquisitely situated Hackett design. Today we are on a lush promontory to the south of the county town, and once again I am nothing but impressed by what lies ahead. The course consists of two loops of nine; perhaps presented the wrong way round as the front nine is more attractive and dramatic than the back. However, this is a minor quibble as once again there is a superb array of golf on offer surrounded by yet more mountains and seascapes. Afterwards, I enjoyed a Guinness with four members and got the impression that this is a very friendly place to play.

A CHANGE OF PLAN

If the sun had smiled unseasonably on me the day before, it was now time for the golfing gods to exact some revenge. A howling gale and heavy showers accompanied my drive to the even more out-of-the-way Narin & Portnoo, but then cunningly eased off in order to tempt me out to play. Club manager Connor Mallon kindly supplied a buggy in case shelter was needed... which it was! Whilst there are one or two less remarkable holes, those from 6 to 12 are tremendous, and the back-to-back par 5s

COURSE GUIDE

Ballyliffin
Glashedy par 72, 6,327 yards, €90
Old par 71, 6,261 yards, €80, Day ticket for both courses €130
T: 00 353 74 937 6119
W: ballyliffingolfclub.com

Carne
 par 72, 6,339 yards
GF: €65 to €90
T: 00 353 97 82292
W: carnegolflinks.com

Connemara
 par 73, 6,339 yards
GF: €65 to €100
T: 00 353 95 23502
W: connemaragolflinks.com

County Sligo
 par 72, 6,421 yards
GF: €95 to €150
T: 00 353 71 917 7186
W: countysliligolfclub.ie

Cruit Island
 par 68, 5,618 yards
GF: €25 per day
T: 00 353 74 954 3296
W: cruitislandgolfclub.com

Donegal
 par 73, 6,445 yards
GF: €60 to €105
T: 00 353 74 973 4054
W: donegalgolfclub.ie

Enniscrone
 par 72, 6,372 yards
GF: €65
T: 00 353 96 36297
W: enniscronegolf.com

Narin & Portnoo
 par 73, 6,307 yards
GF: €50 to €75
T: 00 353 74 954 5107
W: narinportnoogolfclub.ie

Rosapenna – Sandy Hills par 71, 6,383 yards, €80
Old par 71, 6,283 yards, €80
 Day ticket for both courses – €130
T: 00 353 74 915 5000
W: rosapenna.ie



Carne: Eddie Hackett's final design



County Sligo: a Colt classic



Unforgettable: Cruit Island's 6th hole



Narin & Portnoo: a superb setting



Donegal: "A very friendly place to play"

at 14 and 15 are as scenic and demanding as they come. I was particularly pleased to hit the green at the short 7th – the course's Postage Stamp – whilst the rain was at its most torrential and anti-social. What better indictment than to play a course in quite lousy weather, enjoy it immensely and be very keen to return?

Although not officially on my itinerary, I couldn't resist the opportunity that afternoon to take the scenic detour to the nine-hole hidden gem at Cruit Island a few miles up the coast. The clouds had cleared, but the wind was now gusting at a borderline unplayable pace. Regardless, I had to play. There are blind shots, short par 4s, small greens and quirkiness by the bucketload. Anywhere else, the course would be great fun, but would win no awards. Here, in this magnificent setting, you cannot help but smile. If there is a more stunning location for golf in the UK or Ireland, I have yet to find it.

It was now time to head further up the coast to the excellent combination of something old and something new at the expansive Rospenna resort. After a beer with local Top 100 panellist Tim Browne, a generous meal in the restaurant and a night in the spacious, restful, golfer-friendly hotel, it was time to tackle the Sandy Hills links with director of golf, Frank Casey Junior. An informed and informative host, Frank guided me round this imperious Pat Ruddy design. Opened in 2003, it is the loftiest in the *Golf Monthly* Top 100 on my trip at a well-justified 39th

On the tee of County Sligo's short 13th I recalled the shank I hit onto the beach in 1992. Isn't it odd how history repeats itself...

place. The appropriately named course runs through some of the most glorious, towering dunes, and is blessed with as strong a set of 18 individual holes as you will find. Unusually for a newer course, there is just the one starting point, but this means that once you are away you can lose yourself in the twisting, turning routing with its elevated tees and greens, marram-shrouded mounds and photogenic views over the bay and mountains beyond. Maintained in fine order, it is as enjoyable as it is tough, as stimulating as it is challenging. The Old Tom Morris course

provides a surprising contrast with two distinct nines, each quite different both from Sandy Hills and from one another. The front nine, the Strand, covers some of Old Tom's original layout, but has been redesigned first by Ruddy and subsequently Tom Doak with refinements still taking place. The back nine, the Valley, is a re-sequencing of Morris' original holes and offers excellent, traditional links play.

My final destination was the two wonderful designs at Ballyliffin where the not-very-old Old Course was substantially remodelled by Sir Nick Faldo a couple of years ago. This now provides an excellent, and again surprisingly different, accompaniment to the highly-rated Glashedy Links. Overnight I had been woken several times by rain lashing against the window in gale-force winds, and for a time I worried that I might not get to play. Happily, despite one or two near-drownings, I managed to get round these two cracking courses. One advantage of a gale-force wind



13th hole – Ballyliffin Glashedy Links

is that you dry out in no time at all. The Glashedy, designed by Ruddy and Tom Craddock, is rightly considered the tougher test. Evidence of the wind came at the 404-yard 3rd where, admittedly from some way short of the green, I managed a three-putt four. On the 158-yard, downhill 14th, my tee shot was almost certainly travelling backwards by the time it landed halfway to the green. The Glashedy Links is a true championship course with large, testing greens and greedy bunkers. Nonetheless, it is a joy to play with some very demanding two-shotters, three very distinct and memorable par 3s, and as good a closing hole as you will find. There is a strong argument that the Old is more fun and it provides the perfect complement, full of allure and character whilst still a proper test. There is no doubt that Ballyliffin is one of the very best 36-hole facilities out there.

TIME OF MY LIFE

Eleven courses in eight days is a tall order, so my advice would be to take more time or make a number of visits. Better still, both. There are other fine tracks which I didn't get time to visit. And whilst there is quite a drive between some clubs, this is a bonus because the countryside, loughs, mountains and sea views throughout Galway, Mayo and Donegal are captivating. The hospitality, service, atmosphere and welcome at the golf clubs, hotels and restaurants is consistently high and there is much to see and do. With today's more customer-friendly and flexible approach to green fees, the golf is now excellent value and a good number of the clubs and hotels offer great deals at various times. It really can pay to shop around. After 30-plus years of golfing trips, I would venture to say that this is the best compilation of attractive courses I have ever encountered.

TRAVEL & ACCOMMODATION

GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus and Ryanair operate regular, low-cost flights from various locations in the UK to the Ireland West Airport at Knock in County Mayo. Further north, the City of Derry airport has links to London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow.

Ballyliffin Lodge, Inishowen

T: 00 353 74 937 8200

W: ballyliffinlodge.com

There are fine, elevated views of the two Ballyliffin courses from this warm, friendly four-star hotel. Hearty fare is provided in either the Holly Tree Restaurant or Mamie Pats Bar, whilst the Rock Crystal Spa and the Fitness Centre offer therapeutic treatments to ease those post-golf aches.

Harvey's Point, Donegal

T: 00 353 74 972 2208

W: harveyspoint.com

This superbly appointed lakeside hotel is first-class in every respect and has some of the finest and most spacious accommodation you could ever wish for. The lovely restaurant sweeps down to the shores of Lough Eske and offers a superb array of mouth-watering local produce to feast upon.

Hotel Meyrick, Galway

T: 00 353 91 564041

W: hotelmeyrick.ie

Situated in the heart of Galway, this elegant Victorian hotel provides easy access to the city's rejuvenated riverside restaurants and bars and makes for an ideal start or end point for a golfing tour of the region.

Mount Falcon, Ballina, Co Mayo

T: 00 353 96 74472

W: mountfalcon.com

This impressive country house estate makes an excellent base and is popular with anglers. Tiger Woods and Nick Faldo have stayed here, and Enniscrone, Carne and County Sligo are an hour away. The dining is as fine as it gets.

Rosapenna Hotel, Co Donegal

T: 00 353 74 915 5301

W: rosapenna.ie

The spacious four-star hotel was built with the golfer in mind and is just a short stroll from the clubhouse. Local seafood is the restaurant's speciality and there are great views over Sheephaven Bay. There are some excellent offers for half-board accommodation with unlimited golf on the Old Tom Morris Links.