



Wild Irish

Go west, golfers, go west! BY MICHAEL KONIK

*Oh, I'm a happy tourist
Upon the Irish links,
When I make a hole in one
I always buy the drinks.
There's plenty to imbibe here,
Like creamy Guinness stout;
We drink it by the pint-full,
And then we dance and shout:
Oh, hidey-didey-didey-didey
So drink up, ye lads!
The golf is mostly splendid,
A challenge in the wind;
Ye'll make a double bogey—
Fear not: Ye haven't sinned.
Good cheer, good men, good courses,
Lassies fine and fair,
How I love to go a-golfing
In the Irish air!
Oh, hidey-didey-didey-didey
So drink up, ye lads!*

DRINK IT IN DEEPLY, with big, hungry gulps. Drink it all in: The brisk sea air. The moody sky above. The peaty ground below. The splendid desolation. The greenness.

This is golf in the northwest of Ireland, where one always finds oneself asking for more, please. More rugged, primordial sand dunes. More golf holes running toward the crashing surf. More pastoral tableaux, populated by sheep and cows and ancient stacked-stone walls. More loveliness.

The northwest of Ireland is a land of poetry. Various counties call themselves Joyce country, Yeats country, Synge country, and it's a rare day here, on or off the links, when you don't encounter something or someone poetic. A monument. A quip. An unexpected turn of phrase or bend in the fairway. It's almost enough to make the most dedicated hacker throw down his sticks and start composing Irish drinking songs.

*I went to Connemara-
A links there I did find.
When I saw the 13th hole,
I almost lost me mind.*

A delightful (and sensible) way to see the best golf courses in the north of Ireland is to fly into Shannon International Airport, in the west, and make a leisurely, clockwise loop, starting at 9 o'clock on the Ireland dial. There, in County Galway, you'll find **Connemara Golf Club**, built on austere land rubbing up against the Atlantic Ocean. This is a true links, with nothing growing upon it that ever reaches more than 3 feet high—unless you count the rough in summer. No trees. No flower beds. No demure hedgerows. Just flattish, scrubby land beaten down by eons of exposure to the elements.

For Peat's Sake

CONNEMARA GOLF CLUB Ballyconneely,
Clifden, County Galway; 353-95-23502;
e-mail: links@iol.ie

Connemara isn't the greatest links in the northwest of Ireland—it lacks the spectacular dunes of some of its sister courses—but it's representative of the area's spooky isolation. In this part of the world the livestock appear to outnumber the people, and when you're playing

CARNE GOLF LINKS Carne, Belmullet,
County Mayo; 353-97-82292;
www.carnegolfinks.com

ENNISCRONE GOLF CLUB Enniscrone,
County Sligo; 353-96-36297;
www.enniscrone.com

COUNTY SLIGO GOLF CLUB Rosses
Point, County Sligo; 353-71-77134;
www.countysligogolfclub.ie

DONEGAL GOLF CLUB MURVAGH
Murvagh, County Donegal; 353-73-34054;
www.donegalgolfclub.ie

BALLYLIFFIN GOLF CLUB Ballyliffin,
Inishowen, County Donegal; 353-77-76119;
www.ballyliffingolfclub.com

golf here in the bracing breeze, it's easy to feel like the last man—or foursome—on Earth. At the 13th, a petite jewel of a par-3 surrounded by stark limestone outcroppings, first-time visitors might feel disoriented for a moment, wondering where they've come from and where they're going—both literally and figuratively. This spatial dislocation, some claim, is the work of the smooth local whiskey that shares the golf club's name. But experienced duffers know a remote Irish links can do funny things to your soul.

*We drove on to "Belmullet,"
The local name for Carne;
The sand dunes there are massive,
Big as an elephant's barn.*

Just try to get a tee time at Ballybunion these days. (Good luck!) Alternatively, should you wish to play among gigantic mounds the size of a respectable New York City brownstone, visit the **Carne Golf**

Links, in Belmullet—which is more or less a straight shot, albeit with a 3,000-mile carry, across the Atlantic from the U.S. East Coast. This otherworldly golf course, the last creation of the prolific Irish architect Eddie Hackett, is so remote, so far away from anything that resembles a traffic-choked metropolis, that it often seems utterly deserted. Indeed, this is usually the case in the far west of Ireland. Even in the dry times—which allegedly exist—it's quite possible to turn up at a club like Carne without a reservation and get yourself a game.

That such a links as Carne should be so underplayed is both puzzling and, I must confess, delightful. Playing through (and sometimes, it seems, within) the cavernous spaces between the dunes, an American accustomed to real estate developments masquerading as golf courses might feel as though he's stumbled into a haunted moonscape, an extraterrestrial wonderland that happens to have 18 holes cut out of it. The fertile land around the fairways supports wild orchids, thyme, primroses and plenty of wispy stands of lovegrass in which naughty ball-stealing leprechauns may hide; it also has more elevation changes than the average seaside links. From various points at Carne, understandably distracted players get awe-inspiring views of Blacksod Bay and the spooky islands lurking there. It's a magical place, where every hole tells a story.

The green complexes, like those at Ballybunion, are mostly set into natural amphitheaters cut out of the dunes, and are eccentric and enjoyable like their more famous precursor's, with plenty of mounds and humps off of which to bounce chips and pitches. When I visited not long ago, the turf quality was poor on the putting surfaces—but, I hasten to add, not bad enough to seriously compromise a visit to a special corner of the world, a place that anyone who fancies primal golf ought to experience.

*The next stop on our journey
Was lovely Enniscrone.
The wind, the rough, the sand here
Will surely make you moan.*

A round at **Enniscrone Golf Club** is a lot like lovemaking: When it's good, it's great, and when it's not so great, it still ain't bad. Originally another Hackett links, Enniscrone underwent a redesign not long ago in which Donald Steel added half a dozen new holes—there are 27 total now—and greatly improved the routing. The new holes here, curiously, run through the better, more dramatic ground, the land near the shoreline and among the dunes. The older holes occupy flatter (but by no means flat) ground. While I thought the new Steel holes at Enniscrone were more interesting and memorable, the old Hackett ones are still fun, mainly because the green complexes are so scenic and the fairways roll and bubble here as at the Old Course in St. Andrews.

But Enniscrone, unlike its Scottish forefather, boasts tremendous elevation variances, which produce more than a few blind shots over ridges and around dunes the size of your average northwest Ireland city hall. Bring a local caddie or prepare to be mystified. And absurdly happy, nonetheless.

*If a test it is you're seeking,
Head for Rosses Point—
"Best course in northwest Ireland"
So I this one anoint.*

County Sligo Golf Club—which the locals call Rosses Point because of the links location on a peninsula sticking out into the Atlantic—has been around for more than a century, the last 75 years or so under the auspices of the great Harry Colt, who gets credit for the course we enjoy today.

Only the lower portions of the layout can be properly called “linksland,” but the higher, heathland portions of County Sligo—notably at the second green and third tee—afford some of the most delectable views in the region. Turn one way and you’re peering out at the ocean. Turn another and you’re confronted with the great tabletop mountain called Benbulbin. And everywhere you look, you see the countryside that inspired W.B. Yeats for most of his life. (Indeed, the bard’s resting place is not far from the club.) County Sligo itself has a touch of the poetic about it. The golf here is seductive and entrancing, and it makes you want the day—and life—to never end.

The course feels highly “found,” as though the hand of man had little to do with the landscaping. As I toured Sligo, I frequently got flashes from other great links courses of the British Isles, like Gullane, Cruden Bay, North Berwick, St. Enodoc and Royal St. George’s. Vexing burns run through or beside nearly half the holes—and on some of them, notably the dogleg, Carnoustie-like 14th, the creek intersects the playing area twice. With the wind howling off the water, Sligo can be a devilish test. No wonder the annual West of Ireland Amateur Open Championship is held here every Easter.

*For inland tests of golfing skill,
Of how you strike your ball,
Get yourself up the road
To County Donegal.*

One of the great—but specious—marketing terms the American golf industry has coined to enliven new courses without any trees upon them is “inland links.” Most of these courses tend to be 1,500 miles from the nearest sea, which, I suppose, still qualifies for the *inland* part of the slogan. **Donegal Golf Club Murvagh** and **Ballyliffin Golf Club**, two courses in the north of Ireland, in County Donegal, are the real deal. The bulk of the courses, particularly Murvagh, are miles from the water. But the sea’s influence can be felt on every hole in the form of gargantuan gusts and magnificent sandhills. (And from high points you can at least view the shimmering surf.) Murvagh (another Hackett gem) and Ballyliffin (which has 36 holes, including 18 new ones by Pat Ruddy and Tom Craddock called the Glashedy Links) both have spectacular greens, Prestwickian blind shots, nasty rough, and enough bumps and humps and bounces and jumps to turn a day in the northwest of Ireland into an itinerant circus on the grass.

The only question that persists, long after visiting players have retired to a local pub for ale, reminiscences and perhaps some extemporaneous poetry, is this: When can I return?

*Tell me, Lord, I need to know,
Why days like these must end—
Haste me back to Ireland,
And send along a friend. 🍷*

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