

GOLF TO A TEE

IF THE RECENT BRITISH OPEN GOLF CHAMPIONSHIP, HELD AT ROYAL PORTRUSH IN NORTHERN IRELAND FOR ONLY THE SECOND TIME SINCE 1951, HAS GIVEN YOU A TASTE FOR GOLF – AND WHISKEY – FOLLOW GOLFING BROTHERS ANDREW AND PAUL MARSHALL ON A JOURNEY AROUND IRELAND'S BEST

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This page: Golfers tee off at the opening hole at Ardglass Golf Club

Opposite, top: Ardglass Golf Club

Opposite, bottom: Portstewart's par-4 on the Strand course is one of Ireland's best opening holes



From some of the world's best links courses, legendary Irish hospitality, plus a visit to the home of Irish whiskey, the north of Ireland is a top destination for a golf trip. From Dublin airport we drive two hours up Ireland's north-eastern coast into Northern Ireland, to the first course of our trip – Ardglass Golf Club. This spectacular, old-style links and clifftop gem hugs a rugged headland on the County Down coastline, offering sea views from every hole. The course begins with a bang, where a line of cannons point the way to the green of the 1st. Holes 11 and 12 (the Amen corner of Ardglass) are particularly exciting, set across from Coney Island – made famous by Van Morrison – and on clear days you can see past the Irish Sea to the Isle of Man.

Protected by water on the right and wind bushes on the left, at the 11th it's essential to hit three straight shots to reach the green in regulation. As the course guide says: "Play this hole with the same ball and be happy!" The 12th is arguably the course's signature hole; the view from the elevated tee, with a backdrop of the Irish Sea and the majesty of the brooding Mourne Mountains, is worth the green fee alone.

Ardglass is home to one of the oldest and most distinct clubhouses in Northern Ireland and Ireland – a castle that dates back to the 15th century. We hole out on the final green and then enjoy some cold beers at the rooftop

turret bar. As the late-afternoon sun casts long shadows across this memorable course, we raise our glasses to the days ahead. Our accommodation for the night is the Slieve Donard Resort & Spa situated immediately adjacent to the world-famous Royal County Down Golf Club, home to the 2015 Irish Open.

The following morning, we continue driving northwards to join the stunning Causeway Coastal Route to play the second course of our trip: the Strand course at Portstewart (home to the 2017 Irish Open), which boasts arguably the best opening hole in Irish golf. Played from an elevated tee with topography that bucks and plunges like a raging river, I need to focus on my ball and avoid being distracted by the stunning coastal views.





Clockwise from top: The Bushmills Inn is an excellent base for golfers; try some Bushmills whiskey with your porridge at breakfast when you stay at the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle; the still-man tests for quality among the traditional copper stills at Old Bushmills

sticking with it, and they did invent it after all. Their version, like their accent, is gentler and more beguiling.

The heart of the whiskey-making process is the stillroom. Inside, it's around 25 degrees and the atmosphere is thick with alcohol. As we arrive, the still-man is busy at work testing for quality among the traditional copper stills. The principle behind distillation is simple, to separate alcohol from water. At a precise moment the still-man collects the pure spirit. "The cut-off point is a trade secret," he says with a grin.

The oak casks in which the Irish whiskey matures are those once used for bourbon, sherry or port, which helps provide not only the whiskey's colour but also its flavour. Casks may remain undisturbed for up to 25 years. In the process of maturation, a portion is lost. This is known as the "angels' share". After visiting the stillroom and the bottling section, our guide announces that there will be a taste test in the distillery bar.

It is here that we learn the proper way to drink Irish whiskey. The experienced whiskey drinker will often say: "If you want to drink whiskey you drink whiskey. If you want to drink water, you drink water. You never mix the two." At the end of our visit, we can't resist buying a bottle of Bushmills 16-year single malt (matured for 16 years or more in a combination of American

bourbon barrels, Spanish Oloroso sherry casks and Port pipes), before heading to our accommodation for two nights at the nearby Bushmills Inn.

On day three, as Royal Portrush Golf Club first comes into view round a curve in the Causeway Coastal Route, it provides us with a magical sight with its green fairways hiding among shaggy-topped dunes and the great headland of Inishowen contrasting vividly with the low line of the Skerries and the sea beyond. Established in May 1888 and included in every list of the world's top 100 courses, Royal Portrush's Dunluce course has long been regarded as a great test of a golfer's skill. It hosted the British Open in 1951, when England's eccentric Max Faulkner lifted the trophy, and in July, it was home once again to the prestigious championship.

There are plenty of great holes at Royal Portrush and it's truly difficult to choose just one. On the front nine, the 5th with its cliffside green is a worthy contender, but on the back it's got to be the 16th, known as Calamity Corner. This testing hole calls for a long shot over an 80-foot ravine to reach the green. Once we finish our rounds, we enjoy soup and sandwiches in the clubhouse dining room, and on the way check out 2011 British Open champion Darren Clarke's winner's medal and Rory McIlroy's

scorecard of 61 that he shot (aged 16), when he won the 2005 North of Ireland Amateur Championship.

In the afternoon, it's time for some more off-course attractions, and top of the list is a visit to the famous Giant's Causeway, Northern Ireland's only UNESCO World Heritage Site. Made up of thousands of hexagonal pillars that climb out of the Atlantic Ocean, this stunning natural formation was created by Finn MacCool, an Irish giant that lived along the Antrim Coast. The logical and less romantic version is that about 60 million years ago there was intense volcanic activity along the coast, after which the lava cooled very quickly. The uneven cooling rate resulted in the basalt contracting into the characteristic hexagonal and octagonal pillar shapes you see today.

The Giant's Causeway may be the star of the Causeway Coastal Route, but other worthwhile attractions include the stunning Carrick-a-Rede swinging rope bridge that spans a gaping chasm between the coast and a small island used by fishermen, and the haunting ruins of 16th-century Dunluce Castle perched precariously on the edge of a rocky headland. Later that evening at the Bushmills Inn we spend a convivial evening by an open peat fire, sampling Bushmills whiskies and swapping golfing tales with other guests.

It's a memorable start to a wonderful links dominated by huge dunes peppered with plenty of testing holes. One of these is the 6th, aptly named Five Penny Piece, and with a green not much larger than a snooker table, it can be anything from a rescue club to a gap wedge depending on the wind. It's been a tough nine holes, so we head straight to the windswept bar near the 10th tee to enjoy a smooth Bushmills whiskey before tackling the excellent back nine.

THE HOME OF IRISH WHISKEY

In the afternoon, it's time to discover more about the region's other draw – Irish whiskey. It is difficult to explain to the uninitiated the pleasures of this smooth amber fluid. James Joyce wrote of "the light music of whiskey falling into a glass – an agreeable interlude". An old Irish toast gets straight to the point: "Too much of anything is good for nothing. Too much whiskey is barely enough." Amen.

A 'must do' while in the area, is to make the pilgrimage to the place where it all began, Old Bushmills (1608), the oldest licensed whiskey distillery in the world. Here, inside

the distillery on this cool spring day, we take a guided tour to learn more about Bushmills whiskey. "We get visitors from all over the world taking a Bushmills tour," says our guide, literally walking and talking us through the whiskey-making process, one that takes malted barley, grinds it up into a mash with water and then distils it before putting it in casks to mature.

Whiskey drinkers worldwide can thank a band of Irish monks for their favourite tippie, who in the sixth century brought back from the Middle East the 'alembic' used to distil perfumes, but soon adapted it to a more recreational use in the creation of the still. By distilling the essence of barley they created a golden spirit, "Aqua Vitae" – the Water of Life, or in Gaelic, "Uisce Beatha".

"Many people confuse Irish whiskey with Scotch," says our guide inside the Malt House. While the Scots roast their barley over open peat fires (which gives Scotch its distinctive smoky taste) and distil it only twice, the Irish roast their barley in closed kilns and distil it three times. Our guide also points out that the Irish spell whiskey with an 'e'. No one quite knows why, but they're



Opposite, below: Giant's Causeway

This page: The Dunluce Course at Royal Portrush

USEFUL WEBSITES

North & West Coast Links:

With decades of experience, North & West Coast Links are experts in organising quality golf trips to Ireland's north and north-west region. Contact John McLaughlin or Paul Collins who can help arrange a bespoke golf trip for you and your mates, or join one of their organised itineraries. Depending on the size of your golf group, there are various transport options, from a self-drive, four-seater Mercedes V-Class vehicle, to a chauffeur-driven Taurus vehicle (6-12 golfers), and a full-size chauffeur driven coach (12-28 golfers). Accommodation options can range from comfortable guest houses to luxury hotels. For more details, visit www.northandwestcoastlinks.com

Old Bushmills: For more information about the whiskey distillery and guided tour details, visit the website: www.bushmills.com



Castlerock Golf Club 10th green
Right: 18th green and clubhouse at Ballyliffin's Glashedy Links



The following morning, after enjoying a full Irish breakfast, our fourth round awaits at Castlerock Golf Club's Mussenden Links, situated further west along the Causeway Coastal Route, and only a 30-minute drive from Portstewart and Royal Portrush.

Founded in 1901, this historic links, set amid tall sand dunes besides the picturesque River Bann estuary, is a worthy neighbour of the aforementioned courses and will test every facet of your game.

One of the standout holes is the 4th, called Leg O'Mutton, which requires a tee shot struck over a burn, with a railway line lurking to the right and a tricky pot bunker in front of a raised green. Great courses have great closing holes and Castlerock's short dog-leg right 18th is a beauty. We enjoy a 19th-hole pint of Guinness before taking a short drive west to Magilligan Point,

=] where we board the Lough Foyle car ferry to Greencastle back in Ireland, and then continue north-west across the scenic Inishowen Peninsula to the village of Ballyliffin, and our bed for the night at the Ballyliffin Lodge & Spa.

Ballyliffin is such a beautiful and intriguing

spot, that six-time major champion Nick Faldo used to visit it before playing the British Open and at one time was so smitten with the place he tried to buy it – on the cheap, according to locals. A remarkable 36 holes meander through this most beguiling of links land, with rocky outcrops, perfect greens and enchanting views of the coast. Principally designed by Mother Nature (with upgrades by Faldo including new bunkering, tees and enlarged greens), the classic Old Links undulates in the glory of its natural terrain. The rippling fairways give the course a unique character and charm, and it's the type of place where you can easily imagine the golfing forefathers striding along the sheep-cropped turf with hickory clubs.

The more recent Glashedy Links (designed by Pat Ruddy and Tom Craddock) is fashioned

around the incredible dunes on predominately higher ground above and beyond the Old Links, offering stunning views as you play. Ballyliffin's Glashedy course was a worthy stage for the 2018 Irish Open, which

Scotland's Russell Knox won after beating New Zealand's Ryan Fox in a play-off. Here, we tee it up with two other golfers we meet – Jo from Belgium and Scott from America, and engage in a thoroughly-enjoyable matchplay contest. The challenges never let up – negotiating cavernous peat-riveted bunkers, large contoured greens, and fairways that twist and roll between towering dunes.

It's been a tight contest all day and the Marshall brothers are one up standing on the tee of

18th. Paul is safely on the dance floor in two and I am already anticipating the taste of that winning Guinness or Bushmills whiskey and sliding some euros into my wallet. Paul takes two putts to secure a par and then it's over to Jo. He's also on the green in two and stalks his putt like a hungry lion. He lines it up and takes one last look at the cup. Amazingly, he holes it for birdie to halve the match and the place erupts like the final scenes of the Ryder Cup. It's a golfing adventure on a brilliant course and a fitting finale to our golf and whiskey trip...

FLIGHT DETAILS

Flybe has flights to Dublin from Cardiff, Doncaster Sheffield (until 25th October), Exeter and Southampton.

WHERE TO PLAY

Ardglass Golf Club
www.ardglassgolfclub.com

Portstewart Golf Club
www.portstewartgc.co.uk

Royal Portrush Golf Club
www.royalportrushgolfclub.com

Castlerock Golf Club
www.castlerockgc.co.uk

Ballyliffin Golf Club
www.ballyliffingolfclub.com

WHERE TO STAY

Slieve Donard Resort & Spa
 This 100-year-old Victorian property is one of Ireland's most stunning and luxurious golf hotels and is situated immediately adjacent to the world-famous Royal County Down golf club, home to the 2015 Irish Open. The property boasts a luxurious spa (16 treatment rooms, a 20-metre pool and vitality rooms), fine dining or relaxed bistro-style and a sumptuous breakfast featuring a full Irish or perhaps porridge with a dash of Bushmills whiskey.
www.hastingshotels.com/slieve-donard-resort-and-spa

Bushmills Inn
 This multi-award-winning luxury four-star accommodation in the heart of Northern Ireland's Causeway Coast is an excellent base for golfers, being well situated for Royal Portrush, Portstewart and Castlerock. This former coaching inn oozes character, from intimate 'snugs' with aged timbers to the secret library and the cosy glow of an open peat fire. The AA Rosette Restaurant blending 'new Irish cuisine' with the finest North Antrim fresh produce overlooks the garden courtyard.
www.bushmillsinn.com

Ballyliffin Lodge & Spa Hotel
 Set in the heart of Ballyliffin village with spectacular panoramic views of Malin Head and the Inishowen coastline, the four-star Ballyliffin Lodge makes an excellent and comfortable base for playing Ballyliffin's two courses, which are ideally located within 1km of the hotel. After a tough day on the links, enjoy the facilities at the award-winning leisure complex including a 17-metre pool, sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi, or book a spa treatment or massage.
www.ballyliffinlodge.com