

Want an adventure
in links golf at
its full-blown,
brawny best?
Make your way
to the Northwest
Corner of the
Emerald Isle.

IRELAND'S

WILD

CARD

BY *DAVID DESMITH*
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *L.C. LAMBRECHT*

IF

YOU WERE TO jump into a dinghy—with your clubs, of course—and row across the sea to

Ireland, your nearest place to set ashore would be the wild and windswept Mullet Peninsula in the Barony of Erris, County Mayo. There, in the town of Belmullet, you'd be richly rewarded for your labors. Because just a short jaunt from Belmullet town center lies Carne Golf Links, home to 27 of the more dramatic links golf holes that spiked feet have ever trod. As I was to discover, getting there by car isn't much easier. But the payoff for making the journey to the rocky coast of Ireland's "Wild Atlantic Way" easily eclipses any effort expended. By the time my golf buddies and I ran out of days, I almost felt unworthy of the glorious week we'd spent.

This part of the Emerald Isle isn't often the first choice of visiting golfers, who typically trek to the southwest—or up to Northern Ireland. And that's one of the things that makes playing here such a pleasure. You're more likely to tee off behind a group of bright-eyed parish priests, as I did at Ballyliffin, than a gaggle of bag-tag-hunting Americans.

But the main reason to journey north and west is the courses themselves, which share a landscape straight out of a science fiction film. The dunes here are massive. There are dunes on top of dunes on top of dunes. So elevation changes play a bigger role here than on sea-level links.

Carne is a perfect example. Irish course architect Eddie

"By the time my golf buddies and I ran out of days, I almost felt unworthy of the glorious week we'd spent."



Cruit Island 6th hole



Hackett created a masterpiece here—18 holes that wind up, down, and astride dunes so immense that you feel like an ant tiptoeing in the shadows of giants. There’s a majesty to Carne that I’ve felt in few other places, and it’s not just the scale of it. It’s the combination of scenery, serenity, and the heady challenges that every shot presents. Holes like the par-five 10th, which takes you up and away from the clubhouse into the course’s vast dunescape, and the exacting downhill-then-uphill par fours at 11 and 12, leave you wide-eyed as you chart your way through them to the edge of the Atlantic.

On May 1st, those three holes will become the Hackett Course’s opening trio, as the club debuts a second 18-hole routing, the Wild Atlantic Dunes Course. This new track will incorporate nine holes from the Hackett Course and nine that comprise the Kilmore Course (created in 2013), which are even more other-worldly than their forebears. The Kilmore nine’s par-five 5th (which will play as the 8th on the Wild Atlantic Dunes Course) takes you on a giddy journey through a deep valley that bends steadily to the right before dipping downward and setting up an approach shot to a small, kidney-shaped green. It’s one of the most enchanting holes I’ve ever seen—the kind you wish to play again and again.

With these two routings, Carne will be able to offer players a choice of two 18-hole experiences, while the Kilmore nine also can be booked separately. After a single day there, I wished I could remain for the entire week.

We had tee times elsewhere, though. So we ventured north along the coast from Carne to your next must-play links course. Enniscrone Golf Club begins on land that’s comparatively flat before sweeping up into the higher dunes that have made it a picture-postcard favorite for decades. I thought the three holes from 12 to 14 alone were worth the trip. The par-four 12th calls for a blind tee shot over the crest of a ridge and a second shot to a wide but shallow green shelved into the face of a gigantic sandhill. At 13, you turn around and play straight downhill to a ribbon of fairway winding between some smaller, marram-topped hillocks before wedging to a green set in its own isolated dell. Then, at 14, “Valley of Diamonds,” it’s back uphill again as you tackle a par five that sweeps ever upward and to the right and dares you to take the tiger line. It’s heady stuff, and there’s much more of it on practically every hole.

A short drive from Enniscrone on

Ireland’s customarily narrow country roads brought us to County Sligo Golf Club, also called Rosses Point after the wind-blown peninsula the course calls home. Site of the West of Ireland Championship, where Padraig Harrington and Rory McIlroy both kicked off their careers with victories, The Harry Colt course sits in the shadow of mighty Benbulbin, a towering, flat-topped mountain immortalized in the poetry of local resident William Butler Yeats. Sligo is every inch a championship course—all 7,259 yards of it. Here, you don’t plod your way through high dunes, but you do encounter lots of elevation change and lengthy holes that will test anyone’s long game. The 17th, a par four calling for a big second shot up a steep hill, is just one of many unforgettable holes here. Sligo is not to be missed, even in the kind of driving rain we encountered.

From Rosses Point, it’s another short hop north to Donegal Golf Club, a.k.a. Murvagh. Hackett and fellow Irishman Pat Ruddy both had hands in crafting this jewel of a links, which is routed in two loops: an opening counter-clockwise circuit that takes you along the edge of the sea, and a second, clockwise, inner ring. Together, they add up to 7,456 yards of tumbling, plunging, rollicking fun. Holes like the 202-yard, par-three 5th, “Valley of Tears,” can be scorecard-wreckers if you’re not accurate with your tee shots.

The rugged links at Narin & Portnoo will be even more rugged (and even more delightfully quirky) when the course reopens this summer after a substantial redesign from American course designer Gil Hanse. The landscape here doesn’t have a single square inch that’s flat. Hanse’s new shore-hugging par-four 8th, with its tumultuous, vertigo-inducing fairway and seaside green site, is destined to become one of Ireland’s most deified holes.

Few travelers will make the detour to play the achingly scenic nine-hole course at Cruit (pronounced “Crutch”) Island Golf Club, but you should, if only to test your skill on the par-three 6th, where your tee shot soars across a rocky inlet to a green perched on a cliffside. It feels like the edge of the earth, and it pretty much is.

Next up for us was Rosapenna, the area’s only full-fledged golf resort. There’s a hotel here, in addition to 36 holes of brilliant links golf—with 18 more on the way. The rumbly-tumbly original course from Old Tom Morris runs along the shore of Sheephaven Bay, while the newer, brawnier Sandy Hills course (you

Clockwise starting top left: County Sligo 13th hole; Narin Portnoo 9th hole; Enniscrone 2nd hole; Portsalon 2nd hole.



Ballyliffin (Glashedy) 14th hole

can imagine where it got its name) powers through the site's heaving dunes, with ball-swallowing marram grass beckoning from every corner. There's not a weak hole to be found, and it's likely that there won't be one on the Tom Doak-designed St. Patrick's Course when it opens here in 2021, either.

Staying on our northward heading, we arrived next at Portsalon Golf Club, which dates back to 1891 but underwent modernization from Pat Ruddy in 2000. Portsalon has the quiet feel of a local golf club and occupies an idyllic, roller-coaster landscape that was custom-made for links golf. The day we played it, we encountered a five-club wind that put driver in my hands on the 174-yard, par-three 12th and turned another standout hole, "Matterhorn," from a middling-length par four into a driver-driver-wedge battle to stay upright.

Finally—and many would say I've saved the best for last—there's Ballyliffin Golf Club, where the club's shorefront Old Course and its newer "links in the sky" Glashedy Course constitute what I consider to be the

best one-two punch in Irish golf. Here, at Ireland's northernmost club, the big dunes are back, and as you play up and into them on the Glashedy's first three holes, you feel transported at each step to new heights of links golf glee. They held the Irish Open here in 2018, and the world got to see what devotees of Ballyliffin have known all along—that the variety of holes, challenges, and views at this most hospitable club put it in the top echelon of Irish golf experiences. Like all the fantastic offerings in this part of Ireland, it's a wild ride you can't wait to go on again.

Northwest Ireland doesn't lack for creature comforts, either. Throughout the area, my mates and I found no shortage of very welcoming pubs and hotels. The Mount Falcon Estate, for example—with its noble manor home, spa, and range of sporting pursuits from fishing to falconry—has hosted the likes of Tiger Woods and Mark O'Meara. How they let us through the door, I'm still not sure. But I'm eager to return. Even if I have to row there. 