

Seaside Splendor in Wales

By Greg Jourdan

In the fall of 2010, Celtic Manor in Newport, South Wales will host the 38th Ryder Cup. The posh Welsh resort will have its new Twenty Ten course on display, so the world can witness competition on a parkland design in a country rich with pure links golf along her coastline.

Awarding Celtic Manor the honors as host site marks a new era for Ryder Cup venues. In addition to the first time the Welsh will host the event, Twenty Ten is the first course ever created solely for the slugfest between the British Isles and the United States.

While Celtic Manor will provide an exceptional springboard to drama during next year's Ryder Cup, some other courses are more appropriate examples of the finest Welsh golf experiences. Obviously, most of those golf clubs are along the seaside, which is the reason Wales is losing her "best kept secret" status. If you are visiting during the 2010 Ryder Cup, the Twenty Ten course will obviously not be in play, but if that course is the only one the American team plays, then you will win the golf experience match.

In a country where the sheep outnumber loyal subjects, the Southerndown Golf Club (www.southerndowngolfclub.com) leaves little to argue that ratio. Through common land rights, hundreds of grazing Welsh Badger-faced sheep, who do not pay a green fee, share equal access to the fairways, greens, and even patio. Although your cleats will need a thorough scraping after the round, the experience is quite entertaining. If you happen to hit one of the wool-coated spectators, which is highly likely, simply play it as it lies. If your ball happens to land in a pile of dung, then play it with the flies. The novelty of sheep, however, is not the true appeal of Southerndown. The course affords splendid views of Bristol Channel, and while it currently plays to a reasonable 6,449 yards, when play first began at Southerndown in 1907, it was the longest course in the British Isles at 7,170 yards. The current layout was tweaked by professional Willie Park, Jr. (1913-14) and H.S. Colt (1919-20). Bramble and gorse line each hole, but the links are not too tight to give the big stick a healthy swat.

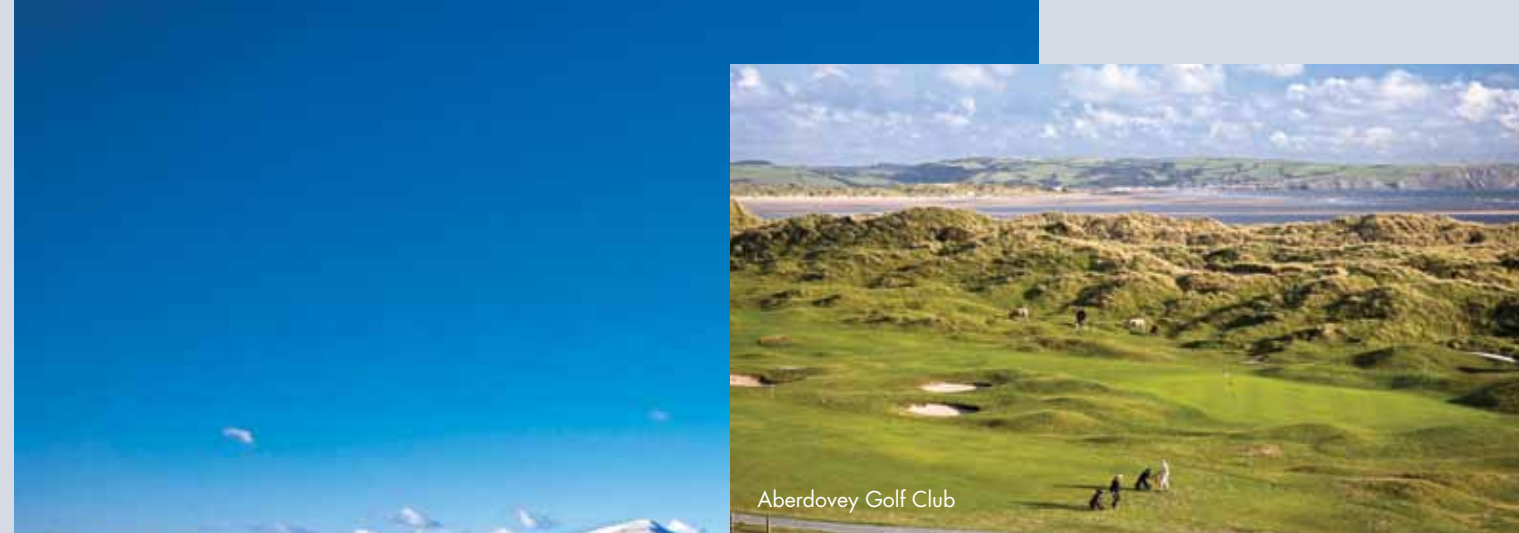
Royal Porthcawl Golf Club (www.royalportcawl.com) may not be as recognized as many other seaside tracks in the British Isles, but their stock will rise as the international golf media taste the buffet of Welsh links. Located just west of Cardiff Royal, Porthcawl was established in 1891. It is difficult to imagine a finer, more demanding



Porthmadog Golf Club



Conwy Castle



Aberdovey Golf Club



Royal St David's Golf Club

links course. Moreover, the club hosted the Welsh Amateur Championship in 2008, and had the 2010 Ryder Cup been awarded to Royal Porthcawl, our boys would have had their hands full on a course with bunkering as severe as the gale force winds that would negate the game they play on the PGA Tour. In addition to providing the gusts that reinforce the phrase, "Nae wind, Nae golf," the Glamorgan coast is also an attraction for surfing. Watching the long boarders provides just a taste of the waves of excitement waiting on one of Wales' finest tests of golfing skill.

Royal Porthcawl is a year older, but golf's recorded history in the British Isles has its foundations firmly planted at Aberdovey Golf Club. British golf writer Bernard Darwin regarded Aberdovey (www.aberdoveygolf.co.uk) as his club. He played golf here as a lad and throughout his life; these golf holes are the likely inspiration for Darwin's career as a golf writer. The links at Aberdovey are laid out along Cardigan

Bay in a traditional fashion. The opening nine heads out, the returning nine heads back to the clubhouse. But do not mistake Aberdovey's links as a series of parallel holes along the dunes. The routing is accordion-style, so the boastful breezes wreak havoc in every direction you take aim, especially for those players who haven't learned to bump-and-run it near the turf.

Just north of Aberdovey peering out across Tremadog Bay is the Porthmadog Golf Club. Porthmadog (www.porthmadog-golf-club.co.uk) has 18 holes, but only the back nine are seaside. The front half of Porthmadog is a disappointment, a modest parkland loop with less character than most run-of-the-mill municipal courses across Chicagoland. However, the back nine is seaside splendor and the polar opposite of the opening nine's blandness. It is worth the wait when the rippling turf and dramatic dunes reveal themselves from the tenth tee box. One will quickly forget holes one through nine by the time the 11th tee is pegged. This par-3 plays to the edge of Samson's Bay, and at 220 yards, many players will have a difficult time concentrating as the sea breezes rattle confidence. Porthmadog's links land has a hypnotizing effect on any breathing golfer's psyche. Please keep this in mind when you play Porthmadog: the front nine is less painful than a time-share pitch; however, the back will rank as one of your favorite golfing experiences, period.

Royal St. David's Golf Club (www.royalstdavids.co.uk) in Harlech rests between the imposing Harlech castle and Tremadog Bay. St. David's play 6,601 yards and to a par of 69. The links are flat, but offer a tremendous amount of movement with rippled fairways and nasty bunkers on the first nine holes. The second nine takes golfers into the dunes and produces an experience equal to the best golf in Wales. It would be a crime not to finish your round with a tour of the Harlech Castle that affords excellent views of the course, and with a little climbing of narrow medieval stairs, you will find a perfect place to shoot a few pictures of the course with the bay in the background.

Just north of Harlech, on the Llyn Peninsula, is a Welsh treasure that is an experience that cannot be replicated. Nefyn & District Golf Club

(www.nefyn-golf-club.co.uk) still sparks my heart with her unique atmosphere and is an overwhelming dose of Welsh culture and links golf. Nefyn's site is simply breathtaking, with the links set on a cliff top peninsula that could easily be called the eastern sister to Pebble Beach. However, the experience is far from the high-end resort ambiance that permeates Pebble Beach. The first hole runs along a one-lane



Conwy (Caernavonshire) Golf Club

road which leads to a tiny seaside village that attracts locals and those on holiday to the beach and cliffs. It does take a few holes to get used to families and beach goers sharing the course, but after a cold ale in the village (which is encouraged by Nefyn staff), golfers will begin their love affair with one of the grandest courses in the British Isles. My only regret is I did not spend another day at Nefyn and her truly enamouring links.

Conwy (Caernavonshire) Golf Club (www.Conwygolfclub.com) is another special day in the seaside town; in fact, these links are a wonderful appetizer for the Welsh buffet of golf. With views of the town rising above the estuary, Conwy Golf Club allows golfers to toe the waters of links golf with generous fairways, not to mention a chance to practice playing a

game that will punish pin seekers looking to attack pins with an aerial assault. The pot bunkers are hellish and sod-faced; the fairways are firm and brown. Conwy is about keeping your ball low and avoiding crippling bunkers and gorse. Beyond a great opportunity to stretch those coach-cramped legs, these links are also a historic landmark where troops gathered before the Normandy Invasion during World War II. You can still see the concrete fortification that was used for target practice.

If you haven't been to Scotland or Ireland for that bucket list golf trip, it is difficult to understand why so many golfers are quick to correct those people, or even golf courses, that throw the term "links golf" at any facility that is wind-swept, lacking hardwood, and has craggy bunkers on rumbled fairways. That is until one has

experienced *pure* links golf. The layout of the Twenty Ten Course at Celtic Manor is decidedly American in style and strategy; it should not be confused with typical Welsh golf and the treasures that dot her coastline where some of the UK's finest seaside links are waiting to re-educate American golfers about the gross misuse of the term "links" here in the colonies.

The Welsh people seem to have their priorities straight. What you will not find is a nation of people with cell phones glued to their ears, thumbs wiggling text messages in lieu of real conversations, and individuals too busy playing with technology to stop and have a chat with a Yankee completely enamored with Roman walls, medieval castles, and of course, pure links golf.



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