

Playing Through Northern Ireland



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Royal County Down, with the town of Newcastle on Dundrum Bay, behind.

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GOLF in the north of Ireland — a greenish, wind-tossed moonscape — often feels like an out-of-body experience, where the rules as we know them have been temporarily suspended. The rough, for example, bears no relation at all to the shaggy AstroTurf bordering the fairways on so many American courses, or even to the luxuriant mats that are so assiduously cultivated for United States Open courses. It's more nearly like what you'd



find in a particularly verdant vacant lot — thick, gnarly, thigh-high in places. The ball behaves differently too. It can roll forever, bounding like a hare along the tight, sandy turf. Or else, caught in a gust, it can imitate an ampersand, soaring straight up and then looping backward and landing not nearly far enough from your feet.

Multimedia - [Slide Show: A Round Up North](#)



The cliffs in Portrush form a background for hole No. 5 at the Royal Portrush course. [More Photos »](#)

The pleasures and rigors of links golf are no longer much of a secret. Ever since Herbert Warren Wind's groundbreaking New Yorker piece in 1964, "North to the Links at Dornoch," tour-bus loads of Americans have been zipping up and down the Scottish coastline and checking in even at once obscure venues like Nairn and Cruden Bay. More recently, the Irish Republic, with such talked-about courses as those at Lahinch and Ballybunion, has become a regular destination for golf pilgrims. But Ulster, the north of Ireland, is still a bit off the beaten track for Americans. This is in part because it used to be hard to get to (Continental now offers a

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nonstop flight from [Newark](#) to Belfast, which makes the journey much simpler) and in part because for so long the Troubles seemed to cast a pall over that part of the world.

But peace has prevailed in Northern Ireland since 1994, and even at the beginning of the marching season, when I happened to be there last summer, there were fewer reported incidents of jeering and name-calling than you'd hear on American talk radio. Meanwhile, the golf courses — Royal County Down, Portstewart and Royal Portrush in particular — are every bit as good as, or even better than, those in the south or across the North Channel in [Scotland](#); they're closer together and much less crowded, and the people there are even friendlier and more welcoming. Driving from course to course along the hair-raisingly narrow roads, you may feel that you are en route to something like the heart of golf — the place where the game is both harder and almost infinitely more rewarding.

There is no jam-up of carts at the first tee; there are no carts at all, in fact, and no cart paths either. The holes unspool not according to some designer's plan, circling the artificial lagoon and skirting the condos, but following a logic of their own, winding between dunes and sand hills, sometimes in view of the sea, sometimes inland, and you glimpse your fellow golfers only in the distance. There is no point in checking the forecast, because the weather loop seems to be on fast forward all the time, with mists and showers and low-hanging clouds suddenly punctuated by miraculous bursts of sunlight and bright blue sky.

You could arrange a golfing trip on your own and probably save some money, but it's a lot easier to leave all the details in the hands of a tour company. ***From the Internet I chose an outfit called Irish Pro Golf Tours; the owner, Enda Mulvany, and his partner, Barry Keane, turned out to be almost obsessively attentive.*** My friend Bob and I did our own driving and stayed two to a room in bed-and-breakfasts.

In the course of our five-day trip, Bob and I encountered other Americans only twice: a party from Fayetteville, Ark., playing at Royal County Down and a gang of free spenders who had tumbled out of a tour bus late in the afternoon at Royal Portrush and were in the process of harvesting all the merchandise in the pro shop. One guy was even hopping on one foot in the middle of the floor, trying on socks.

A CLERK at a gift shop in Bushmills couldn't help remarking that Bob and I were sensible Americans — because we were in Northern Ireland instead of Iraq — but everywhere we went we were greeted warmly; even at Royal County Down, the most socially exclusive club in Northern Ireland and the equivalent, say, of Muirfield in Scotland, which is known for being a little stuffy to visitors. But even Muirfield, like Royal County Down and Royal Portrush — indeed, like all the private clubs in the United Kingdom — makes a certain number of tee times available to guests. (In theory some clubs require visitors to have an official handicap certificate and a handicap no higher than the mid-20's, but no one ever asked to see ours.) Imagine showing up at Pine Valley or Cypress Point unaccompanied by a member; you wouldn't get through the gate, let alone be wished a good round.

At the two guesthouses where we stayed, Edenvale House in Newtownards, on Strangford Lough in County Down, and Hillrise Dhu Varren in Portrush (where, if you like, the porridge comes laced with whiskey), we were treated more as members of the family than paying guests. And at Portstewart we got on so well with our caddies that we wound up buying them a drink.

At Portstewart, as at many clubs in Ireland, the caddies are also members; an arrangement that immediately dispels any ambiguity about who is the master and who is the servant. For that particular day, for example, my master and my host — and my occasional swing coach as well — was a retired insurance salesman named Bill Millar, who hoisted my bag onto his own motorized golf trolley, which pulled equipment but not people, and patiently led me around.

Portstewart is the most scenic of all the courses in Northern Ireland, with a first hole — a dogleg right off an elevated tee that affords a view of an enormous beach and the ocean on one side and the River Bann on the other — that is often said to be the prettiest opener in Europe. (I think I'd reserve that honor for the first at Machrihanish, on the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland, which is actually visible from Portstewart on a clear day.) The second, where your tee shot has to thread between two towering sand hills, is almost equally dramatic, and in fact the whole front nine, ambling its way between the dunes and then out along the river, is an unfurling scroll of one outstanding hole after another.

What's remarkable is that seven of these nine are in fact new holes, built in 1992. They were designed not by some famous course architect but by a local member and schoolteacher, Des Giffin

The back nine is more exposed and less dramatic by comparison. The last few holes also play longer and harder in the wind, and we were there on an almost cloudless blue day, in so little breeze that it seldom required more than a one-club adjustment. It was such a pleasant day, in fact, that we were for a while accompanied by a flock of magpies and by a banded racing pigeon that seemed to have gone AWOL. We also spotted a fox, walking the third hole in the wrong direction, with a rabbit in its jaws.

There are two schools of thought about Royal County Down, an hour and half away in the resort town of Newcastle, on Dundrum Bay at the bottom of the Mountains of Mourne: There are those who regard the course, which was laid out by Old Tom Morris in 1889 and then tweaked by Harry Vardon before World War I, as simply the best in the world. Others, a vocal minority, object on principle. "Ah, I hate that place," my caddie at Royal Portrush told me. The issue is blind shots, of which Royal County Down has at least five off the tee — your line indicated only by a white aiming stone at the top of a massive sand hill looming in front of you — and there are several blind second shots as well.

THE blind hits didn't bother Bob and me too much, though we had a couple of anxious moments waiting to see whether our drives would clear the top of those mounds. The challenge was both the length of the holes and the narrowness of the fairways. Royal County Down, like most courses in Britain, doesn't come with those multiple, color-coded tee boxes that allow you to virtually customize a course. There are just two sets of tees here: long and longer. The course is 6,881 yards from the front and only a couple of the par 4's are under 400 yards. The fairways are slender and twisting, winding through gullies and swales, and are guarded by bunkers that are characteristically left untrimmed. On top they're as shaggy as Andy Rooney's eyebrows.

The rough here, the result of a cool, wet spring, was the deepest we encountered, and on my first attempt at extrication, I opened the face on my pitching wedge, took a hearty whack ... and whiffed. This was not your classic, swing-too-hard-peek-too-soon whiff, but rather a swing that went right under the ball, perching undisturbed, like an egg, in a little nestlike clump. The trick, I eventually learned, is to hover the club, square the face, swing through and hold on tight, popping the ball 50 or 60 yards back onto the fairway. Course management — you learn a lot about that at Royal County Down.

The difficulties of the course are more than redeemed, though, by its beauty. It is set in a landscape so wild in places that it almost feels desolate, so picturesque in others that it almost seems enchanted. Like so many great golf holes, the ninth here — a 428-yard par 4 with a huge drop from an elevated tee and with the green framed by the purplish Mountains of Mourne in the background, with the tower of the Slieve Donard Hotel in front and the bay off to the left — has the effect of making you feel both a twinge of nostalgia for the comforts of the clubhouse and a little stab of regret that you'll be going back so soon.

Castlerock, on the far side of the Bann, is visible from the fifth tee at Portstewart. It's less spectacular than its more famous neighbors, Portstewart and Royal Portrush, but well worth a visit. Tucked between a railroad on one side and the river on the other, it is remarkable for, among other things, the variety of ways the greens are

protected — perched on hills, nestled in dells and, on the 418-yard seventh, surrounded by an arrangement of mounds that looks just like the hole's name: Armchair. The greens here were the firmest we encountered and declined to receive what I thought were some perfectly good approach shots.

Our caddies were Bill and Billy, possibly the most taciturn fellows in all of Ireland. In my case their silence may have been occasioned in part by dismay, for in a light drizzle and against a two-club wind, I got off to a miserable start (the aftermath, perhaps, of a side trip we had made the day before to the nearby Bushmills distillery). But as the weather lifted and my game improved, Bill would occasionally murmur "fine shot" or "well played." On the 18th, he turned to me and said, with undisguised surprise, "That was a crackin' drive!" It was my best of the week — a downhill, wind-assisted 280-yarder — and in the clubhouse afterward I rewarded myself with something called a special bacon butty. It turned out to be a Northern Irish version of the B.L.T.

Portrush — or Portlush, as its sometimes called — is a seaside resort with terraced vacation villas climbing up a steep hill from the harbor, the kind of place where you can imagine a dozen William Trevor stories taking place at once. Because it stays light so late at this time of year, people spill out of the pubs onto the sidewalk and kids are still swimming in the harbor at 11 p.m. There's a little amusement park in town, and several tacky T-shirt shops, but for golfers the main attraction is one of the oldest courses in Northern Ireland and the only one ever chosen to play host to a British Open.

Royal Portrush, which was founded in 1888 and redesigned in 1947 by Harry Colt, begins innocently, with two holes that more or less run along the main road into town. But then at No. 5 it takes a dramatic turn from an elevated tee down toward the sea and back up to a green perched on the side of a dune with white chalky cliffs beyond. The course then winds its way back inland, twisting and undulating, until it comes to a heart-stopping pause at No. 14, called Calamity Corner. This hole, the hardest par 3 I've ever seen, plays 210 yards, uphill and into the wind, to a green on the side of a cliff. It's almost all carry, and anything right will plunge down 75 feet or more into unfathomable trouble.

UNLIKE neighboring Portstewart, Royal Portrush stays tucked in the dunes almost the whole way. It's not as scenic as Portstewart, or as dramatic as Royal County Down, and there's not as much fairway bunkering, though the comically large Big Nellie on 17 could double as an amphitheater. But the place has a seductive appeal all its own; it's the kind of course you replay in your head over and over again, because it demands such thoughtful shot-making.

And pinpoint driving. I struggled a little off the tee, at the 431-yard seventh, in particular, the hardest hole on the course, trying for extra length and instead yanking left into rough so dense that sometimes even my caddie, Bo, couldn't follow it. (Bo and his partner, Rory, a Lincolnshire giant of a man, came from the old school of caddies — the kind who smoke hand-rolled cigarettes and pride themselves on finding everything and knowing your yardage exactly, without looking in the book or counting it off.) After blowing a chance for birdie on the par-5 17th, I trudged up to my last hole of the week, the 457-yard 18th, a little spent, hacking out of the rough and then hitting an approach that Bo pronounced "not one of your best efforts." But after it continued, magically, to bound over the fairway and lurch up onto the green, he turned to me, smiling, and added, "But it will do."

I missed the par-saving putt, but even so, a pint beckoned. Bob and I retired to the upstairs bar at Royal Portrush, which overlooks the first tee and fairway, and as it rained for a while and then suddenly cleared, we began the slow process of returning to our accustomed selves — the ones who play the ordinary, earthbound kind of golf.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

With its wild and unpredictable terrain, Northern Ireland is a burgeoning golf destination with courses that rival those in Scotland. A greenish wind-tossed moonscape and welcoming faces await pilgrims that make the journey. Here, the Royal County Down course is beneath the Mountains of Mourne.



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Waitresses serve hungry golfers at the Castlerock clubhouse. The Castlerock is less famous than its neighbors Royal County Down, Portstewart and Royal Portrush.



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A golfer (Enda Mulvany – Irish Pro Golf Tours, President & CEO) attempts a putt on the 5th at Royal Portrush.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times
Portstewart is the most scenic of all the courses in Northern Ireland.



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Diners enjoy the view at the clubhouse at Castlerock.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Tallying scorecards at Castlerock.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The rough at Royal County Down was the deepest the author encountered, which is saying something.



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Looking for balls on the fourth hole at Portstewart, where the caddies are also members.

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