

THE LODGE AT Doonbeg

Learn the links in the most natural of landscapes golf has to offer. **WORDS AND PICTURES BY DAVID J. WHYTE**

We're in the west of County Clare, one of my favourite parts of Ireland. The quiet little village of Doonbeg looks over the vast Atlantic where the nearest port of call is New York. I first came here when Greg Norman had just finished building a golf course. The staff were eager-faced, happy to see visitors who changed their shoes in a Portacabin.

Today, the golf course, along with the outstanding Lodge at Doonbeg is a 5-star world-class destination. The dunes were perfect for it: the curving scimitar of Doonbeg Bay cutting out a terrain ideal for golf. Norman and his crew caringly laced a course to suit the untrammelled landscape and now it's settled and admirable.

However, some things do not change. Like the nonplussed, matter-of-fact nature of the way things are. The teaching facilities here are rudimentary, consisting of a warm-up range and small putting green next to the 1st tee. Curiously, this fits perfectly well with the ethos of links golf as prescribed by Brian Shaw, The Lodge's head PGA professional.

"We bring too much to the game as it is," he told me as we stood on the 18th green, the majestic Atlantic Ocean rumbling in the background. "It's not a practice range you need here, it's to get out and play the links." This encapsulates Brian's attitude to the game and the elemental nature of the course he works with.

"The way to play links golf is to feel it. You have to smell it. You have to eat it. And most of all you have to enjoy it. The person who doesn't know links golf and tries to play it in the same way they approach a country club or parkland course is in for a shock. It's very different! You have to learn about it; you have to respect it."

For many, this is how golf should be played. The seaside links is where the game began and it is still largely considered golf in its purest form. Links golf offers so many more challenges. It is natural and people haven't needed contrive it. Simply put, Man couldn't put together such


diverse, ever-changing elements. The course at Doonbeg, even though relatively new, offers all this.

"A links course is like a supermodel," Brian went on. "In the mornings it can be a bit temperamental, difficult to work with; sometimes even wild. You don't know what to expect. Everyday is different. You're going to stand on the tee and know it's an angry day for instance. So you think, 'how do I deal with this?' You can come back on a lovely afternoon and it's tame, it's going to behave itself and you have a chance to take it on."

A links course has got real character and if you don't respect it, as with a person, you're not going to get as much out of it. If you approach it properly, it's going to give you things, it's going to question your game and if you get it right, you get the rewards.

The great players understand this. That's why so many of them are interested in the heritage of the game. They understand what players of old were able to do even with their limited equipment. Lee Trevino, Ben Crenshaw, Henry Cotton, Peter Thomson; all those guys knew how important it was to appreciate a links course. That's what marked them apart. They 'read' the game so well. Nicklaus and Trevino both had that remarkable ability. They could read the course and read each shot. Nicklaus tailored his game to suit every single golf course he played. That's largely gone now. A lot of the modern courses don't have the character of links. They're built as resort courses, long at 7,600 yards. That's not the way the game was developed.

I don't think there are any signature holes on a links golf course whether it is Muirfield, Doonbeg, St Andrews or Ballybunion. You start at the 1st and finish on the 18th and it's the journey that makes it great. It's the sum of all the parts that makes a great golf course, not just the 4th or the 15th hole, or the great view at the 18th.

And that's how we should approach links golf. With a free spirit, eager to learn and work with the conditions no matter what they are. That's what we try and teach players here at Doonbeg. 





Brian Shaw's Putting Tips on a Links Golf Course

1. THE PUTTING GRIP

Let's start with how you hold the club. The grip is probably the most important factor in a good putting stroke. The Interlocking Grip is what most of us use on the course or the Overlap but both of these are liable to break down with a putting stroke. Stability is vitally important throughout the putting stroke and the best way to introduce and maintain this is by applying a straight forefinger down the inside of the grip, the left index finger covering the right gripping fingers. This stops your right hand taking over.

2. THE SETUP

Once we feel secure with the grip, then it's how we address or stand to the golf ball. The most important thing here is to have your eyes directly over the ball. A simple test is to take your stance and put another ball to your eye and drop it. This will show you where your eyes are in relation to the main ball. The ball position should also be forward in your stance to allow the putter to



meet the ball on the way up. This creates topspin, which is very important especially in links conditions and fast greens. The final element of the setup is posture. Don't slouch over the ball as you'll tend to rock forward. Take an athletic position, back quite straight with head over the stroke line. This is a good, sturdy position from which to make a sound, controlled stroke.


3. THE STROKE

Crucial in good putts is the pace and length of the stroke. What is very important here is to release the putter head. To achieve this we can't let our hands get ahead or leave them behind. But we do need to let the putter head go, release it. The butt end of the club should be pointing towards my belly button a bit like a belly putter. The problem with the belly putter though was it was very hard to gauge distance because it was stuck to your belly. The idea was correct but you need to release the club head also. So try and mimic the belly putter in keeping the butt pointing at your belly throughout the stroke.

4. PUTTING ON A LINKS COURSE

Here are Doonbeg and all links courses we encounter some difficult elements and therefore our putting technique needs to change to cope with these conditions. Wind and rain will affect the putting stroke so you must get closer to your work. The hands come closer to the body, shielding them from the wind and



rain. If you use a normal stroke in these conditions, the putter head would get blown off-line. Great links player such as Seve Ballesteros kept their hands close to their body in testing links conditions, taking a shorter stroke with a firmer grip. They take the hands back only to the right knee and then pop it with a more deliberate stroke. It's definitely worth practicing this if you are about to play on a links course. 

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Irish beauty perfectly blended with the charm of its common folk makes Doonbeg and its surrounds one unforgettable vacation.



OTHER COURSES IN THE AREA

We asked Brian about the other famous links courses in this area. “When you’re playing the 1st here at Doonbeg, you’re looking towards Lahinch. As you come back up the 18th you’re facing Ballybunion. These are two of the greatest links golf courses in the world. Combined with Doonbeg it’s probably one of the best collections of links courses in close proximity to each other anywhere.”

“Tom Watson declared Ballybunion a firm favourite when he started coming over each year to practice ahead of The Open. An equally big fan is ex-US President Bill Clinton whose statue stands outside Ballybunion’s Police Station. The course has some truly amazing stretches between ancient, high dunes and open coastlines. A lot of the tee boxes at Ballybunion are elevated whereas here at Doonbeg and at Lahinch, that would make things far too difficult in stronger, more blustery winds.”

“Lahinch is truly magnificent, a golf course that perhaps doesn’t get the credit it deserves. It’s possibly a future Walker Cup site and has already hosted some notable amateur events. It’s a very tough golf course, probably the hardest of the three with a few quirky corners such as the blind 4th where a marshal lets you know when it’s clear to play. But it’s a wonderful experience. Many people end up loving Lahinch.”

“All three courses in this area complement each other. They can all be equally as nasty or as beautiful. They will certainly teach you a thing or two. Each golfer will have a different experience on each golf course. And when they come back here to The Lodge at Doonbeg they’ll have different preferences and opinions. And that to me is what great links is about! Like a person, it is how you relate to it; how you get on with it.”

The Lodge at Doonbeg has only been in existence for eight years and the course, four more which is difficult to believe when you see its outline reminiscent of something from a Jane Austin epic, an ancient 18th century Celtic manor. It’s a sort of adult Disneyland; an interpretation of what its developers imagined international guests would imagine an Irish manor house to look like.

There are all the luxurious touches you expect from such a 5-star operation including an ever-lit peat fire at reception. But it’s not the trimmings that set this place apart. What is outstanding is the genuine kindness and friendliness of the staff. You get this throughout Ireland but I suspect more so here in this remote corner of County Clare. It’s known as ‘Irish charm’ throughout the world but here you find the genuine article at its source - and it’s most disarming.

The Lodge at Doonbeg pride themselves as being part of the local community and every Wednesday you are almost ‘shooed’ down to the village of Doonbeg to enjoy local food, culture and ‘craic’, a hearty slice of Irish life as it was and still is here in distant Doonbeg. At Comerford’s Bar in the Main Street, an older gentleman spontaneously burst into song, not for the entertainment of visitors or too many Guinnesses. This is just what they do in this part of Ireland and everyone stops to listen. ‘Set Dancing’ is also popular in the pubs, a form of Irish folk dancing based on quadrilles. This too goes on at Comerford’s most Wednesday nights. Then it is over to Tubridy’s Bar or any of the several hostleries in town. In the end, you don’t want to leave.

The Lodge at Doonbeg is a gateway to rich Irish experiences. We took to the River Shannon to dolphin-watch, not altogether a successful enterprise in this instance but it was enjoyable nevertheless. “They’re wild animals,” our captain kept insisting and they must be resting today. We were more successful walking along the beach or learning to fly-cast for sea bass. We discovered a secretive ‘perfumery’ amidst the Burren, an area of outstanding natural beauty, a sparse, bone-like landscape populated with unique wild flora and fauna. There are horse trails and mountain bikes available at the hotel as well as walks along popular tourist attractions such as the Cliffs of Moher. Whatever you do at Doonbeg, it’s sure to cast an Irish spell on you and have you coming back for more. 