

◌ NORTHERN ◌ EXPOSURE

'The Troubles' in the past, Northern Ireland is becoming a destination that rivals the Old Sod's more iconic venues.



One tends to become impervious to the breathtaking scenery when golfing in Northern Ireland. The rolling hills, the sand dunes that seem to touch the sky, the mountain vistas and the panoramic ocean views are everywhere.

Yes, I'm speaking of Northern Ireland. Most tourists who visit the Old Sod gravitate to the Ring of Kerry in the southwest. But touring Northern Ireland, along with the northwest of Ireland across the border, offers its own matchless brand of beauty, especially at championship golf courses like Royal County Down, Portstewart, Ardglass and Royal Portrush, which has been selected as host for the 2019 British Open championship. In the northwest are Rosapenna, Enniscrone and Ballyliffin, to name just a few.

I made my first extensive visit to Northern Ireland last fall, with a less-than-ideal beginning. Upon arriving at Boston's Logan Airport to check in for a 9 p.m. departure, the Aer Lingus employee informed me that there was a "little" delay. My flight would be leaving at 8 a.m. the following morning. Oh, the joys of air travel.

BY ROB DUCA

Royal County Down offers dazzling views of Dundrum Bay and the town of Newcastle.



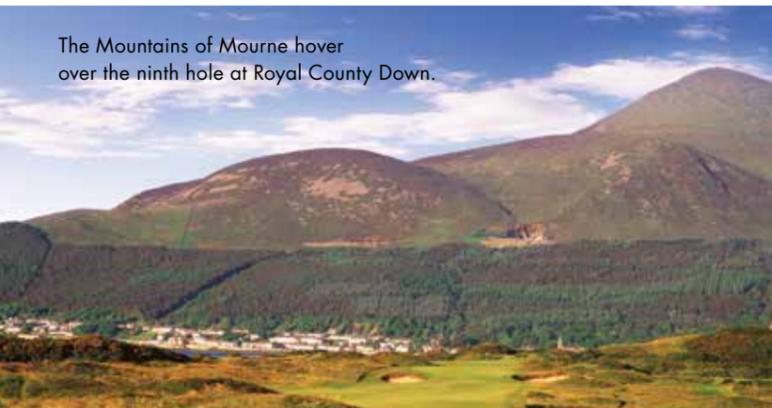
It was nearly midnight by the time I reached my hotel the following evening, with the entire first day wiped out by travel. That meant missing a tee time at Portmarnock Golf Club, the historic links course south of Dublin. But my weariness was alleviated upon checking into the luxurious Slieve Donard Hotel, which sits alongside the Mountains of Mourne, Dundrum Bay and the village of Newcastle.

The trip was organized by Carr Golf Travel, an Irish-based tour company that specializes in tailor-made golf excursions in Ireland, Scotland and England. The company is owned by the sons of Joe Carr, perhaps the most famous amateur golfer in Ireland's history. Our tour took us through Northern Ireland and the northwest of Ireland.

Located 90 miles north of Dublin, the "Slieve," as locals call it, is within walking distance of one of the world's great links courses, Royal County Down. Founded in 1899 and partially designed by Old Tom Morris, Royal County Down is consistently ranked among the top five courses in the world, and it's easy to see why. It is truly a masterpiece of links golf, both strikingly picturesque and exceptionally challenging. Narrow ribbons of fairways surrounded by purple heather and golden gorse wind their way between sky-high sand dunes, while the famous "bearded bunkers" feature lips of red fescue and heather. Nearly the entire front nine offers panoramic views of the bay.

One would think the golf venues would be all downhill after playing County Down, but that would be incorrect, for the next day took us to Royal Portrush. We were greeted by "Irish weather" which meant 40-to-50 m.p.h. winds and heavy rain. It was difficult to maintain balance during the swing, but it was easy to see what a marvelous challenge the course presents. Locals debate about whether County Down or Portrush is more demanding. Flip a coin. Each layout is thrilling. The par-4 fifth is one of the world's celebrated holes. From the elevated tee, one looks down upon a dogleg right fairway bordered by sand dunes and bunkers, while the green teeters on the edge of a cliff that overlooks the ocean. The par-3 16th, appropriately named "Calamity Corner," is a terrifying 230 yards, all of which is uphill and into the wind. Hit that green and there is reason to celebrate.

The Mountains of Mourne hover over the ninth hole at Royal County Down.



The Kitchen Restaurant, Mount Falcon Estate.



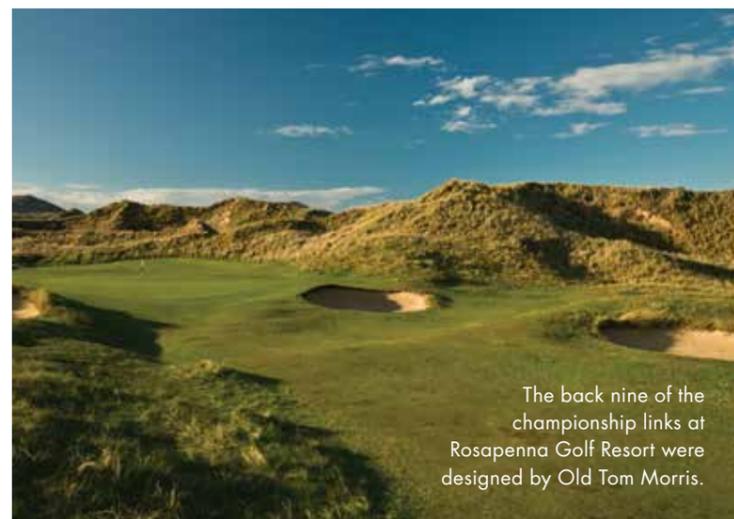
Mount Falcon Estate, located on the banks of the River Moy.



Golf was first played at Portstewart Golf Club in 1889.

Frankly, I was in a celebratory mood every day I arrived at the first tee, for the region is blessed with astonishing golf courses. At Rosapenna, I walked in the footsteps of Old Tom Morris, whose design of the back nine remains intact. At Enniscrone, I encountered the tallest sand dunes I've ever seen, with most of them framing the fairways and leaving me in splendid isolation. At Portstewart, I was treated to more dazzling ocean views that ran parallel to cliff-side fairways, with eye-popping scenery in every direction. Each one of these courses is the definition of links golf, with deep rough, high dunes, treacherous pot bunkers and undulating greens.

But the region offers more than golf. I visited the walled city of Derry, the site of so much violence during "The Troubles" that began in the late 1960s. Chilling reminders remain to this day, with "Entering Free Derry" signs and murals on the sides of buildings depicting the horrors. One can't help but reflect when looking down upon the site of Bloody Sunday, an incident in 1972 when British soldiers killed 13 unarmed civilians during a protest march. Thankfully, those days are gone, even though the pain has not completely receded.



The back nine of the championship links at Rosapenna Golf Resort were designed by Old Tom Morris.

After leaving Derry we headed back into Ireland to play Rosapenna and Enniscrone, eventually landing at the Mount Falcon Estate, where I took a tour with a certified falconer and walked with a hawk that sat on my hand. During the eight-day journey, I also toured the 400-year-old Bushmills Distillery, sampling the extensive range of malts, and visited the Giant's Causeway, a geological wonder with over 40,000 interlocking basalt columns that were formed 60 million years ago. Driving along the spectacular Causeway Coast in Northern Ireland we passed Dunluce Castle, which sits on the edge of a cliff and has served as a filming location for the popular television show "Game of Thrones."

There is a fair bit of driving involved from site to site, especially if you want to check the finest golf courses off your list. But the lodging options along the way are plentiful and varied. For a true taste of Ireland, the Bushmills Inn is the perfect spot to unwind after a day on the golf course. The fireplaces are always lit with inglenook turf fires and hayloft snugs, while the secret library or one of the numerous other hidden nooks is perfect for a nightcap. Traditional Irish music is on tap in the gas-lit bar, while the award-winning restaurant is housed in the original 17th century stables and wine cellar. The sign above the bar says it all: "No WiFi here. Speak to each other!"

The Rosapenna Hotel & Golf Resort provides a more upscale option. It dates to the 19th century and is set alongside Sheephaven Bay, just minutes from the golf course. Mount Falcon Estate, located on the banks of the River Moy, is luxury at its finest. This converted castle was completed in 1876 and served as a private residence until 2002. It reopened as a luxury estate in 2006 and sits on more than 100 wooded acres. In addition to the aforementioned falcon tour, there is fishing for salmon and rainbow trout at the on-site lake, clay pigeon shooting and archery. The hotel also features The Kitchen Restaurant, a fashionable restaurant housed where the original kitchen used to be.

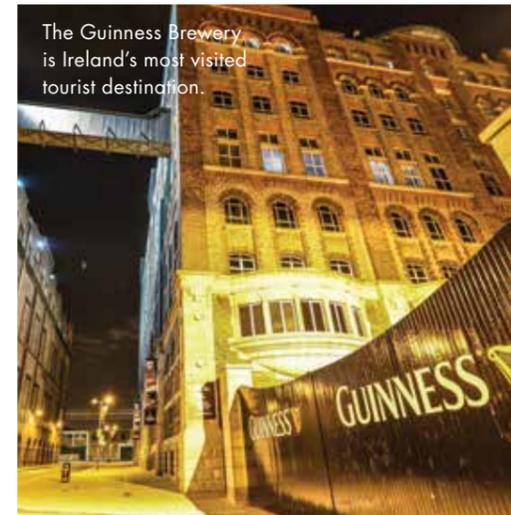
After eight days of world-class golf, elegant lodging, five-star dining, magnificent scenery and historical venues, I headed home with the realization that what I had experienced was the tip of the iceberg. To these eyes, Northern Ireland and northwest of Ireland was truly a revelation. ☺



Royal Portrush Golf Club will host the 2019 British Open.



The Bushmills Inn.



The Guinness Brewery is Ireland's most visited tourist destination.