The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses
Update 2017

In 1988, I printed the first edition of The Confidential Guide ... 40 copies of a manuscript printed on a dot matrix printer, cobbled together in an Acco binder, and mailed out to friends in the golf business as a Christmas present. Every other Christmas, I would send them updates as I saw more courses.

Since I've taken a year off from publishing to find time to travel for volume 5, I thought it would be nice to send out a retro-update to all of those who have subscribed to the new set of books. [It's a lot easier to do today, thanks to the magic of email.] Though Darius and Masa have not been back to the U.S. or the U.K. to see any courses not included in Volumes 1, 2, and 3, Ran and I have covered a few new courses, and I also offer *mea culpas* on a couple of courses I rated too low in print, after recent follow-up visits.

I traveled extensively this year doing "research" for Volumes 4 & 5, seeing a total of 65 new courses in Belgium, Germany, China, Hong Kong, The Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Guam, and Saipan ... and I've included my reviews of a few of those as a sneak preview of Volume 5 [available in September 2018] and Volume 4 [which I can't promise a date for, just yet].

For 2018, I've already booked trips to Australia, Iceland, and Norway, and my tentative plans include India, Sri Lanka, Japan, France and the Channel Islands ... and that's just from now until August!

Happy Holidays to all of you, and may you all get through 2018 without a single delayed flight.

Getting to Eighteen

I'm also working on a second book to be ready for next year: the first of two volumes about routing golf courses, via detailed case studies of all the courses I've designed.

"Getting to Eighteen" will cover my first eighteen courses, from the lost High Pointe in Michigan to the completion of Barnbougle Dunes and St. Andrews Beach in Australia. The book will include topo maps of every property, photos of the raw land and the finished courses, and a thorough explanation of why the holes are where they are on the ground, something I don't think any other architect has described in anywhere near the same detail.

This large-format book is going to be an expensive one to produce and to print, so we plan on making it a limited edition, one-time run, with the final number based on how many pre-orders we receive. We won't have a final price for it until we know how big it is, but expect it to come in around $250. We will start taking pre-orders in March or April, and that could be your only chance to get a copy, but if you are interested you can let us know by email at confguidegolf@gmail.com

Vol. 1 - GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND

SCOTLAND

Ardfin GC, Jura. Bob Harrison, 2017.

Private, estate courses like Ardfin offer the architect a chance to think outside the box and be truly creative; we include them here because they can contribute to the advance of golf architecture by taking such design risks. However, I do have reservations about including courses where visitors are usually not welcome, in a book that's generally a travel guide. It sometimes seems that the only people who can gain access to play these courses are raters, which suggests the primary purpose of the exercise is boosting the owner's ego, rather than contributing to the progress of golf. Such courses are likely to be overrated in the magazines, because that's how the raters who have been granted access are expected to reciprocate.

Ran is gaga over this course, stopping just short of saying that the ten-hole stretch from 5 to 14 is his favorite in the United Kingdom. [We see what he did there.] It's unusual for Scotland because the coastal setting on remote Jura is more rocky than sandy. The fun starts right away at the 2nd with a shot over an abyss. Importantly, the green is pushed well back from the edge so the shot can be played in all wind directions. And, yes, it does get quite windy in the Inner Hebrides. The course measures 6,800 yards and no one will think it is easy.

Play will be limited and knowing that up front, Harrison built a few tiny greens and added enough contour elsewhere for the greens to never need to get above 9 on the stimp. Ran's grade suggests there is a slew of world class holes. One hole he is particularly fond of is the short uphill 5th that plays to a bunkerless 80 yard wide fairway. Players drive away from a stone wall running down the right side of the hole, only to be thwarted by a single left greenside bunker and a green contour that reacts unkindly to shots from the left. [It sounds like the kind of hole Tom Simpson would love, and of course Simpson would be comfortable on such an estate.] Two of Ran's other favorites are the 392 yard 11th with a couple of clusters of exposed rocks in the fairway acting as central hazards, and the risk/reward 506 yard 16th with mesmerizing views across the water way toward the mountains of Islay. By comparing it to my Rock Creek, Ran has piqued my interest, but it's been a long time since any course was interesting enough to make me grovel for access. - 9 - - [2017]



The 11th at Ardfin plays gently down to the shore looking across to a deserted stretch of the Islay coastline.

ENGLAND

Blackwell GC, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. Herbert Fowler and Tom Simpson, 1923.

My late friend Woody Millen, a member at Piping Rock and Palmetto, was also an overseas member of Blackwell, which I'd never heard of. He always played it off as being more about the club than the golf course, but I knew him well enough to know the golf must be pretty good, too. The course is tightly packed into a small parcel between suburban Birmingham and open farmland – it's a par 70 and the longest of the three par-fives is 512 yards. As a consequence, they've planted a few too many trees to try and keep up the level of difficulty, as if the difficult set of short holes were not up to the task. The camaraderie of the club is no doubt enhanced by having the 10th tee and 18th green play up to within a few feet of the clubhouse, and the 1st tee right up against the building, so that all your friends are out to watch you finish [and possibly gamble on your approach to the last]. 6 - - - [2016]

***Burnham & Berrow GC**, Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset. Charles Gibson, 1891, with revisions by Herbert Fowler, Harry Colt, and .

My one previous experience at Burnham was on a cold rainy day in the winter of 1982; however a recent return visit proved that I had seriously underestimated the course. The three opening par-4's are a cracking start, with the approach to the punchbowl 3rd green one of the last remaining vestiges of the bold blind holes described by Bernard Darwin in 1910. The short 5th is one of the UK's finest, and you would not be able to convince a soul walking off that green that it is in fact the easiest of the four par-3's on the course. Some of the holes have a more modern feel, due to the water in play at the 6th through 8th and the very steep banks off the edge of the greens at the 13th and 14th. But my previous review that there aren't any must-see holes was emphatically wrong: holes like the 11th and 15th were the reward for going back.
6 6 7 6 [2016]

Cleeve Cloud GC, Cheltenham, England. David Brown, 1891, with possible modifications by Alister MacKenzie.

I do not often use the word "unique" in my reviews of golf courses, but Cleeve Cloud fits the bill. Laid out over the commons on top of Cleeve Hill, a thousand feet above Cheltenham, it is England's answer to Gullane but the scale is ever more vast because there are only 18 holes to wander over it, and you are much higher up. The fairways are grazed by sheep and cattle, so you should not wear your best golf shoes [or trousers!], and undoubtedly some people will be put off by that -- or by the difficult climb at the par-4 3rd, or by the several funky blind tee shots where it hardly seems to matter where you wind up. [You would be in good company: James Braid, who played a match here against Harry Vardon in 1902, would only say afterward that "You get a great view of Cheltenham."] But it would be a shame not to see the wonderful green sites of the 5th and 7th holes, the wild [if not very playable] 13th green which sits in between the mounded rings of an Iron Age fort, the back-to-back par-3 15th and 16th with their intimidating tee shots across ancient quarry works, or the sprawling vista from the crest of the fairway at the penultimate hole, with its green tucked in a bowl far below.

Above all, here is a chance to appreciate golf as you may never have understood it – an energizing walk over glorious open countryside, with some unique hazards to overcome along the way. And the scruffy "natural" maintenance also means that it's incredibly cheap to play. Indeed, there are few courses remaining today that present the sport as it was originally envisioned more clearly than Cleeve Cloud. 7 - - - [2016]

***Goswick Links GC,** Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland. Willie Park, 1890.

Our friend Benjamin Warren talked Ran into seeing this one; it certainly wasn't my brief write-up or grade from 30 years ago. It is one of those ends of the earth courses. When you are standing on the 13th tee, you truly are immersed in nature with nothing man-made visible for miles. The course's most famous hole is the tough two shotter 14th with its green in an attractive hollow but the front nine also has its fair share of moments, especially the stretch from 5 to 8. Unusual for a links, its three shot holes are an additive to the overall quality of the offering. 4 6 5 - [2017]



The ground short of the par-3 8th green is indicative of the rugged nature of Minchinhampton Common.

Hadley Wood GC, Beech Hill, Barnet, Hertfordshire. Alister MacKenzie, 1922.

North of London but just inside the M-25 ring road, the parkland Hadley Wood plays down and back up a couple of steep hills, with the watery short 10th in the fold at the bottom. The club has been slowly restoring MacKenzie's bunkering, but the course would be far more attractive if they would remove a bunch of trees for better views to and from the beautiful clubhouse, built in 1781. 5 - - - [2016]

Minchinhampton Old Course, Minchinhampton Common, Stroud, Gloucestershire. R.B. Wilson, 1889.

A cousin in spirit to Cleeve Cloud, Minchinhampton is also laid out across an open commons on a high hilltop, though not as dramatically: the hilltop is flatter, and here you don't have to play your way up to it and back down. There are no bunkers at all, and in months when cows and sheep graze the roughs, you can get away with murder off the tee. However on many holes, starting with the long opener, rugged hollows from old quarry works guard the greens tightly, so that missing wide will often get you in deep trouble. The short holes are especially memorable – three of them play across ancient quarry works full of little grassy moguls that come up quite close to the greens. The stretch from the 8th to the 11th is the best on the course, but my most memorable shot of the day was my second to the 12th, which I had to hit over the top of a half-dozen cows laying in the rough. I found the setting as charming as St. Andrews or North Berwick; I wish I lived in a little hamlet like this where you could just go out and play whenever you felt like it. 6 - - - [2017]

The Worcestershire GC, Malvern, Worcs., England. Alister MacKenzie, 1927, with major revisions by Fred Hawtree in the 1970's.

Set at the foot of the Malvern Hills, The Worcester is a parkland course with too many planted trees that block the views of the beautiful forested background. Nine holes were taken over during W.W. II for the construction of army hospitals; the buildings remained until the 1970's when the land was given back to the club, and Fred Hawtree designed new holes for the slightly changed parcel. Six of MacKenzie's original holes remain, plus a couple more greens that are played to from different angles than before. 5 - - - [2016]

The Cradle, Pinehurst, NC. Gil Hanse and Jim Wagner, 2017.

This 789-yard par 3 course has evidently become the rage in Pinehurst. Ran drives by it most days and it is invariably teeming with people of all ages and abilities. Since the resort doesn't allow carts and everyone is carrying, it sends a wonderful - and highly visible - message. It's not in the spirit of Bandon Preserve where you might wish to substitute holes from it to the main courses: rather, the longest hole plays 127 yards. They can make the 6th as short as 37 yards, and it's a delight to watch low-handicap players struggle to get the shot close, with the front of the green raised a mere two feet from its surrounds. Other highlights include using mounds at the 1st and 3rd to deflect balls to certain hole locations, something that definitely does NOT happen on Pinehurst No. 2.

I wondered aloud in my review of Bandon Preserve a year ago, when I gave it a 6, what the ceiling might be for a par-3 course on the Doak Scale? Ran thinks I may have set it too low, but since neither of us has seen the course the other favors, it's hard to tell how close we are. - 7 - - [2017]

Athens CC, Athens, GA. Ross course by Donald Ross, 1926, with revisions by Ron Forse.

The home town of the University of Georgia is much more interesting than I expected, but the city's premier club is the rare Donald Ross course I think I would get tired of if I played it regularly. It's a fairly hilly site and the fairways are all tree-lined, but the contours of the greens lack the flair of Ross's best work. 5 - - - [2017]

The Fields GC, LaGrange, GA. Mike Young, 1989.

The Fields was my friend Mike Young's first design, and he returned to buy it and operate it as an affordable daily-fee course after his original client passed away. It's a cool atmosphere with its small clubhouse virtually surrounded by golf; most of the front nine revolves around a central hill, while the back side tangles with a couple of ponds created by damming a deep ravine. Several greens drain out to the back or to other interesting spots; it's easy to tell the proprietor has always been a good player, but his course doesn't pound you over the head as so many of today's young architects tend to do. 5 - - - [2017]

Oakbourne CC, Lafayette, LA. Dick Wilson, 1955.

The premier club in Lafayette has a bit of a national reputation because it hosted the PGA Tour's Cajun Classic in the 1960's, which was won by native sons Lionel Hebert and his brother Jay, in different years. Lots of doglegs separated by large oaks make it a difficult test from tee to green; there is no water until the par-3 9th but then there are four more water holes on the incoming nine. 4 - - - [2016]

Squire Creek GC, Choudrant, LA. Tom Fazio, 2002.

The I-20 corridor across northern Louisiana is one of America's major truck routes, so it only made sense for James Davison to run his trucking firm out of there and, eventually, a Tom Fazio golf course for his employees and for a regional membership. Cut through an undulating oak and pine forest, Squire Creek's front nine is some of Fazio's best work, with two arms of the creek coming into play on nearly every hole from the 2nd to the 8th. The only part of the course that seems less inspired is the stretch from the 14th to the 17th, routed around a large lake that you could find on any course of this vintage. 7 - - - [2016]

Dixie Red Hills GC, St. George, UT. Ernie Schneider, 1965.

Set in a canyon with giant red rock walls on three sides, Dixie Red Hills is a dramatic location for a small nine hole course, but the golf holes don't get a lot out of the terrain. Fairways hugging the canyon wall fall away to the right as they dogleg left, so you're always playing away from the trouble instead of taking it on, and there are too many trees filling up the interior space. Nevertheless, the wide expanses of grass against the red rocks are a pleasant alternative to the difficult desert layouts elsewhere around St. George, and worth a visit just to enjoy the setting. 4 - - - [2015]

Entrada at Snow Canyon, St. George, UT. Johnny Miller with Fred Bliss, 1997.

The first desert course in Utah, the Entrada resort and housing development sits in a broad valley up against striking rock formations to the north. Many holes are laid out around desert washes before the "Devil's Triangle," the card-wrecking three-hole stretch from the 15th to 17th set in a black lava flow. The visual excitement of these holes is offset by the need to play very cautiously if you want to finish any of them without taking a "desert rule" drop. 5 - - - [2015]



The dogleg 3rd shows the stunning setting of Dixie Red Hills, and how the trees detract from it.

***Bel Air CC,** Beverly Hills, CA. George Thomas, 1926.

As I write we have just embarked on a complete restoration of Bel Air. Some are concerned we'll make the course easier, but the real goal is to restore the variety of holes like the long par-4 2nd with its fairway running up a hillside, the short par-4 9th that tempts you to drive over a ravine, or the famous Mae West 12th. You have not seen any of these holes, anywhere else.

Lincoln Park GC, San Francisco, CA. Tom Bendelow, 1902.

San Francisco's municipal courses are notorious for the shoddy care provided by the Parks Department, and Lincoln Park's sporty layout has suffered through decades of neglect, bordering on abuse. The tight, hilly layout features three short holes well over 200 yards and a bunch of par-4's less than 300, most of them climbing up or down the slope between the clubhouse and the Museum of Fine Arts. The 4th and 5th holes face the Pacific Ocean on a steep sidehill slope, while the 17th has a famous view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The layout itself would rate a 4 on the Doak scale, but in present conditions one cannot be so enthusiastic. 2 - - - [2016]

Presidio GC, San Francisco, CA. R.W. Johnstone and William McEwan, 1895-1910, with revisions by Herbert Fowler, 1921.

Fortified by the Spanish in 1776 to defend the harbor of San Francisco Bay, The Presidio was a prestigious U.S. Army posting from 1848 to 1994, when the base was closed and installed into the National Park System. A civilian club shared the course [and the upkeep] with the Army for many years; the club still operates but the course is open to the public now. It's very steep in several spots, and some new bunkering is so tight to the fronts of greens that it demands several unreasonable approaches. But, along with Wawona in Yosemite, that makes two golf courses within the borders of a U.S. National Park! 4 - - - [2016]

Ko'olau GC, Kaneohe, Oahu, HI. Dick Nugent, 1992.

Celebrated by the golf press of the day for its 155 Slope rating, the highest in the nation, Ko'olau is a torturous test of golf tacked onto a rain forest mountainside, just half an hour from Honolulu. Built originally by a Japanese conglomerate, it was bought out by a local church, which prized the large clubhouse as a space for a place of worship, and operates the course to try to generate money for the congregation.

So, it would be blasphemous for me to say what I really think of it, other than Lord have mercy for those who choose to play here. 0 - - - [2016]

Mid Pacific GC, Oahu, HI. Seth Raynor, 1926.

This secluded club and community on the north shore of Oahu is where President Obama relaxed to play golf during his presidential visits to the island. Fans of Raynor will find few vestiges of his famous templates. 3 - - - [2016]

Guadalajara CC, Mexico. John Bredemus, 1941, with many subsequent changes.

Set in the heart of the city, the Country Club is a lushly landscaped private park featuring all sorts of amenities from golf and tennis to swimming and equestrian sports, and many would happily pay their dues just to sit on the terrace for lunch and admire the view. The club is most famous today as the childhood stomping grounds of Lorena Ochoa, but the gently hilly terrain provides for interesting golf. Designer Bredemus, a virtual unknown outside of Texas, created a complex routing that keeps coming back to the foot of the hill below the clubhouse, where five different greens tangle with the creek that cuts through the property. 6 - - - [2017]

Hard Rock GC, Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Robert von Hagge, 1994.

This course was built as the centerpiece of the Playacar resort development and has only recently been taken over by the operator for the Hard Rock brand in Mexico, but the course fits the name: it's very narrow between trees, with a lot of sharp doglegs. There are homes bordering most of the holes, but the jungle is so thick you'd hardly notice. 4 - - - [2017]

Mayakoba Resort, Playa del Carmen, Mexico. El Cameleon course by Greg Norman, 2004.

With four luxury resort hotels set along a network of waterways created from ancient caverns, Mayakoba is a spectacular example of an eco-resort, and their golf course does a pretty good job of living up to its end of the bargain. Only a couple of holes utilize the waterways as hazards [due to safety considerations]; both nines work their way from the inland clubhouse through the mangroves and out to the beach and back. The course is less intense than Norman's usual fare, but still pretty tight off the tee, so you'll want to bring plenty of golf balls. 6 - - - [2017]

Vol. 3 - AMERICAS - SUMMER DESTINATIONS

***Cape Arundel GC**, Kennebunkport, ME. Walter Travis, 1922.

Neither Ran nor I carry a scorecard as we go around a course. It is more fun to look with your eyes and sort things out as you go. Occasionally though, that can lead to funny statements. After seeing Cape Arundel for the first time, Ran called Joe Passov and said, "How in the world is Cape Arundel not on the *GOLF* ballot?!" Joe responded, patiently, "Well, there just isn't much support for sub-6000 yard courses to be on it." That comment set Ran back - he had played the course with hickories, hitting the full range of shots into the greens (including some wood approach shots) and thought it was well-nigh a perfect course. It makes you wonder: does modern equipment add joy to the game, or just time? 6 7 - - [2017]

Keweenau Mountain Lodge, Copper Harbor, MI. Designed and built as a WPA project by local workers, 1935.

When the Depression closed the mines on the Keweenau Peninsula, jutting into Lake Superior from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, an entire community was out of work until the Roosevelt administration stepped in to build this small resort, with log cabin accommodations and a nine-hole golf course hacked from rock and forest. Many of the longer holes are doglegs and unfortunately make their turn around 200 yards off the tee, so better players will not enjoy having to lay up all day, but the stances in the fairways are full of intrigue. It would be a lovely place for a family getaway if you are ever in this remote corner of America. 3 - - - [2017]

***Minikahda Club**, Minneapolis, MN. Robert Foulis, 1898, redesigned by Donald Ross.

Minikahda has been diligently improving the playing experience to match its history. Trees are down, which has led to a renewed appreciation for the rolling landscape: as you stand on the elevated 10th tee, the convoluted landforms make it hard to believe you aren't close to the sea. Ran agreed with my take that the road crossing for holes 15-17 was not an ideal finish; he thought the sequencing would be improved if those holes became the 2nd through 4th, in part because the 436 yard 2nd is a ferocious hole to face so early in the round. But I don't remember some of the features Ran admired, such as the kicker slope onto the 12th

green, or the L shaped 17th green. Perhaps the snow flurries were distracting me. 5 6 - - [2017]

StoneRidge GC, Stillwater, MN. Bobby Weed, 2000.

The most interesting daily-fee course in the Twin Cities, StoneRidge is reclaimed from an old sand quarry to the east of St. Paul. The short par-4 1st with its quirky green and bunker in the approach serves notice that you're going to see something different, and the course delivers on that promise with an exceptional variety of holes and green shapes. However it does come off as a bit contrived, as the combination of waste bunkers and small pots doesn't register as natural. 6 - - - [2016]

***White Bear YC**, White Bear Lake, MN. Donald Ross and/or William Watson, 1912-15.

Ran finally got to White Bear and agreed with both Darius and me that it's the class of the Twin Cities, though he was not able to unravel the mystery of which designer is really responsible for it. He says he's got it in his top 100 courses in the world; Darius put it #61 in his latest update. 7 8 6 8 [2017]

***Cedar Rapids CC**, Cedar Rapids, IA. Donald Ross, 1915.

Those who associate Iowa with flat farmland would be dumbfounded by the rise and fall of several fairways here. In contrast, several holes laid out around Indian Creek are flatter than flat, but modern designers would envy the ability to utilize a creek so strongly in play. Ron Prichard's renovation has stretched the course to 7,200 yards, and may make it a contender in the rankings. 6 7 - - [2017]

Ballyneal GC, Holyoke, CO. Mulligan course by Tom Doak, 2017.

Our new, twelve-hole par-3 addition to Ballyneal plays to the club's established fondness for wild undulations and natural golf. Many of these greens are close to what we found in the natural terrain, be it as gentle as the slight fallaway of the 3rd, or the heaving undulations of the 7th; but we felt free to take more chances in our design because it's only a par-3 course, and no one would take it too seriously. All of which has reinforced my belief we should treat every project this way. It's worth the drive from Denver, all on its own. 7 - - - [2017]



The 2nd at The Mulligan is one of the more subdued greens, but still a lovely hole.

Vol. 5 - ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

MARIANAS ISLANDS

Coral Ocean G Resort, As Gonno, Saipan. ?Architect, 1988.

What's a three when you put it beside the ocean? Few of the holes make good use of the setting, but the par-3 14th at the far end of the course does play from an elevated tee along the shore, to a green down by the beach. 4 - - - [2017]

Kingfisher GL, Talafofo, Saipan. Graham Marsh, 1991.

Though other courses in the islands are more widely celebrated - perhaps because they advertise more - I was most smitten by Kingfisher. Obviously built on a budget, it has a bit of a minimalist appeal with relatively few bunkers or frills, but it's tight enough to make players think twice about aggressive play. The stretch along the ocean from the 14th to 16th was apparently even more spectacular before the typhoons that took out the 12th at Mangilao, and the turf down there can suffer from salt spray, but Kingfisher has a lot to like. 6 - - - [2017]

Lao Lao Bay GC, Kagman, Saipan. East course by Greg Norman, 1995.

Designer Norman pulled a rare gambit here, using the most picturesque land for the shorter of the two courses at the resort. After a gentle climb to the top of the property for the 2nd green, the rest of the front nine is exciting, with the par-3 4th hanging off a cliff and the next three holes down on the rocky shore. The back nine has a bit more of an "Army golf" feel, but the short 15th is another beauty overlooking the ocean. 6 - - - [2017]

Lao Lao Bay GC. West course by Greg Norman, 1995.

The West course is longer than its sister, weighing in at over 7000 yards, but in every other respect it's the inferior of the two tracks. At least, the many artificial ponds provide water for the East course. There are many better things to do on Saipan than to play here. 4 - - - [2017]

Leo Palace Resort, Yona, Guam. Bougainvillea/Plumeria nines by Arnold Palmer, 1990.

Palmer and Nicklaus have built courses side by side in more than a dozen places, and this is the only one I know where the Palmer course is clearly the star of the show. Leo Palace is a large resort catering to Japanese and Korean group business, and Bougainvillea is the best of its four nines, with difficult approach shots to the par-3 2nd and par-4 3rd. 5 - - - [2017]

Leo Palace Resort. Hibiscus/Orchid nines by Jack Nicklaus, 1993.

Nicklaus' original nine holes, the Hibiscus, is the most user-friendly of all the nines here -- almost downright dull -- while the Orchid is a wild ride through the steepest terrain on property, requiring several long carries off the tee and rock walls to hold up the fairways in places, not to mention some white-knuckle cart driving. The two nines were built several years apart, with the resort opting to build the last nine in-house, on severe terrain: it's really only suitable for a scramble, but I suppose the resort guests just take a sack of golf balls and try to lose count of how many they started with. 2 - - - [2017]

Mangilao GC, Guam. Robin Nelson, 1992.

Mangilao has been heralded as the top course in the islands, and even made a *GOLF DIGEST* list of the top 100 courses outside the U.S. I really wanted to like the course because I met Robin Nelson at our Archipalooza event in 2001, and his story of twice having to rebuild the par-3 12th over an ocean cove after typhoons scoured it clean will always stay with me. The hole he worked so hard to complete has now outlived him … it's a bit reminiscent of the 3rd at Mauna Kea, but shorter and prettier, with its green sticking out a bit further onto a point. The short par-4 11th high above the ocean and the par-5 13th along the shore are good bookends for their famous sibling. But the front nine, 200 feet higher on the cliffs, is totally skip-worthy, and the last two holes cram in all the mounding the back nine had refreshingly left out. Factor in the average conditioning and the horribly slow pace of play, and it's impossible to justify putting this course in elite company. 5 - - - [2017]

Marianas CC, As Matuis, Saipan. Designer unknown, 1982.

This modest private club sits high above the north end of Saipan, en route to the various war memorials. From the parking lot there is a great view of the harbor and the two-toned water inside and outside the protective reef, but the routing never makes any use of the scenery. 2 - - - [2017]



The dramatic 3rd at Clearwater Bay plays right out to a point jutting into the ocean.

HONG KONG

Clearwater Bay GC, Sai Kung, New Territories, Hong Kong. Peter Thomson and Ross Perrett, 2002, from an original 1982 course by T. Sawai and A. Furukawa.

At the southeastern tip of mainland Hong Kong, Clearwater Bay was carved from rugged, hilly terrain. The first three holes are spectacular: it begins with a long par-3 opener with the sea and mountainous islands as the backdrop for the green, a par-5 playing north along the coast with a bit of an awkward up-and-over second shot. Everything is set up to get you to the tee of the 402-yard 3rd, a true Cape hole playing diagonally over the cliff edge to the right, and then out to a tightly bunkered green at the very tip of a narrow peninsula.

But it can't all be as lovely as the start, and indeed the rest of the front nine consists mostly of trying to work one's way back uphill to the clubhouse, with the 7th, 8th and 9th all short, sharply-doglegged par-4's around irrigation reservoirs, a necessary evil but a poor contrast to the magnificent coastline beyond. The back is carved out of rock on higher ground near the clubhouse, but again, after a strong start, several holes play along narrow terraces, with awkward dogleg points so that lost balls are common on windy days. Visitors on a nice day will be thrilled to see it, but it's the sort of course that would become tiresome to play regularly. 5 – 4 - [2017]

Hong Kong GC, Fanling, New Territories, Hong Kong. Old course founded 1919, with many changes over the years.

The HKGC – which surrendered its Royal title after the transfer of Hong Kong back to China in 1997 – consists of 54 holes at Fanling in the far reaches of the New Territories, and an additional, older nine holes at Deepwater Bay. It's actually much closer to Shenzen than to Hong Kong Island.

The most senior of the three Fanling courses is a mixed bag. Its routing evolved over time as the road through the course became busier and playing across it became impossible, with the result that several of the outward holes feel a bit cramped, or turn awkwardly against the grain of the topography. Once you reach the pagoda halfway house at the turn, the character changes. The blind tee shot over a small, steep hill at the 10th is truly old-fashioned, and though the loop-the-loop crossover routing of the 11th through 13th holes probably evolved in the effort to lengthen the

course, it's an ingenious solution of the sort no architect is allowed to suggest today. The par-3 16th is the best hole on property, and the strong finishing holes make the back nine of the Old the best nine holes in Hong Kong. 5 5 5 5 [2017]

Hong Kong GC. New course by L. S. Greenhill, 1931.

The Hong Kong Open is played on a composite of the New and Eden courses, but of the club's three eighteens, the New course is the most consistently good. It's the longest of the club's courses, with spacious, tree-lined holes set in the center of a big valley; it's also the gentlest part of the terrain, and a refuge for members who prefer to walk their 18 holes.

There are several reverse-camber doglegs in the early going, so those who can shape their shots will find an advantage here. My favorite holes were the par-4 11th, a drive and pitch across a small stream to a perched green framed by the inviting halfway house, the par-5 14th which shares its green with the opening hole, and the 395-yard 15th with a perfectly placed fairway bunker that is deceptively difficult to carry. Sadly, a multi-story housing complex just starting to go up close to the side of the short 17th threatens to spoil the serenity of the New course. 6 – 5 5 [2017]

Hong Kong GC. Eden course by John Harris, Peter Thomson and Michael Wolveridge, 1970.

There are some fine holes on the Eden – the short 2nd confounds the pros, and the up-and-over par-4 18th doubles as the finishing hole for the Composite course. However, a recent land swap with The Jockey Club next door required building new 3rd through 6th holes, and the steep, narrow fairways of the addition clash with the gentler terrain found elsewhere around the course. 4 - - - [2017]

The Jockey Club Kau Sai Chau, Hong Kong. North course by Gary Player, 1995.

Twenty minutes' ferry ride from a small dock in the north-eastern suburb of Sai Kung, The Jockey Club is the sort of hugely ambitious project you'd only find in China … a new, public, 54-hole facility carved from rugged terrain on an island three miles (?) offshore. [The considerable construction funds were donated by The Jockey Club, which controls the racing book in HK, as a sort of insurance for their continued existence!]

The North course was built on the gentlest land, and is reserved for walkers only, a traditionalist gesture I was surprised to find, even in Hong Kong. This is not to say the course is easily walkable; the land is full of low ridges, with wet areas in between, and the holes alternate between cutting across the topography [with the resulting ups and downs and forced carries off the tee] and playing along the ridges [with lost-ball trouble at the sides]. It's very testing to walk, and to play.

On a nice day, the rugged beauty of the landscape is quite appealing, with two inlets from the sea coming back into the golf course at the par-3 3rd and 14th holes, and the jungly mountains of the mainland often serving as a backdrop. I just wish the course were more forgiving to play … on the two par-3 holes mentioned, in particular, drop areas near the green are de rigeur because there is nowhere to bail out from the tee, and many golfers would need a small bucket of balls to hit and hold these greens from 150-170 yards. It's a shame they didn't think a bit smaller, and build a course that people could finish; yet there were a bunch of smiling golfers on the ferry back to Sai Kung. 5 - - - [2017]

The Jockey Club Kau Sai Chau. East course by Neil Haworth with Brett Mogg, 2008.

For the third and final course in the Kau Sai Chau complex, they didn't think small; the east side of the island is the hilliest part of the property, and it was clearly a case of "go big or go home." The result is one of the most difficult courses to rate I've ever seen. It's well done for what it is, but it violates many of my ideals of what golf should be. For example:

There are 14 km of cart paths to get you around the course and up and down the hills. My tour guide suggested that twenty years ago, this course couldn't have been built because golf cart technology was not advanced enough to prevent daily accidents on these hills.

There are two spectacular holes – the long par-4 9th and the short par-5 10th – with substantial forced carries from the fairway to narrow targets on the far side, so that most amateurs will have to avail themselves of the cheater free drop on the far side of the ravines.

There are several back tees that are only playable for laughs, including the upper tee at the par-4 4th, the par-3 after it whose green is built for 120 yards but "also available" at 220, and the side-of-the-hill tee on the par-3 7th.

When you get to the seaside par-3 15th green, you are at the furthest point from the clubhouse – as if they lost count of where they were! So to get back you play three 500-yard holes with long cart rides in between. That includes a 40-meter climb to get to the 18th tee, so you can play your second shot out into space and back down the other side of the hill, one of the two really unappealing holes on the course.

Yes, there are really only two unappealing holes … that's the reason the course is hard to rate. There aren't a lot of great subtle features, but there are a lot of dramatic shots and opportunities for bold play, and you're just in awe that they got a course built here at all. It's a spectacular place to ride around on one's cart and soak up the view. If there had been other options available to them, I wouldn't hesitate to give this course a zero on the Doak scale, but in many respects they got the most they could out of the land they were given, and that can't be a zero, can it? 5 - - - [2017]

Shek O CC, Hong Kong Island. Golf from 1919, with recent revisions by Phil Ryan.

Until a few months before my visit to Hong Kong, I'd never heard of Shek O, a well-kept secret for nearly a century in a discreet end-of-the-road neighbourhood on the back side of Hong Kong Island. Until quite recently, few in the golf business would have taken seriously a 4500-yard course with overlapping holes, even one with a clubhouse and starting holes reminiscent of Cypress Point. It's a truly private club with a small membership -- they're the only golf club in Hong Kong that actually own the land underneath, per the terms of the 1997 handover, because Hong Kong Island was not originally leased from China but owned outright. If you can wangle an invitation to play in one of their weekend "games," you should jump at the chance. 6 - - - [2017]



Real estate at a premium: the long par-3 7th at Shek O plays right over the top of the previous green.

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BELGIUM

Royal GC des Fagnes, Spa, Balmoral. Tom Simpson,

Golf de Spa had been near the top of my list of courses to play for two decades, but thunderstorms only allowed us to walk it in the rain on the last day of my trip to Germany and Belgium. With five par-3's and five par-5's, it plays even shorter than what the scorecard says, but it's still hard to score: every time there is a downhill approach shot, the green falls away to the back and to one side. Standout holes include the par-5 opener, the 5th with its careening, sidehill approach, the short 6th with a wicked green, and the 250-meter par-4 17th with no easy way to get your ball to stay on the green. 6 – 6 6 [2017]

Royal Limburg GC, Houthalen. Fred Hawtree, 1968.

One of Masa's favorite courses on the Continent, Limburg is a lovely quiet setting at the edge of a forest, with each nine finishing out on open heathland. The large, deep greens are typical of its vintage, but there are a couple of smaller ones in the mix, and there are some interesting hole locations for important days; at 6900 yards it's also got a bit more length than its older neighbors. There are good holes of all lengths here: the par-5 5th and 13th are both standouts, as are the par-3 6th with its high tee, the excellent short par-4 8th, the long two-shot 9th with its contoured approach, and the strong par-4 12th over some low dunes contours.
6 – 7 - [2017]

Royal GC du Sart-Tilman, Liege. Tom Simpson,

Simpson was a true minimalist designer, and this rambunctious piece of ground must have given him great excitement. The stretch of holes from the 3rd through the 8th is a wild ride, with some strong topography cut up by several sharp drainage swales, and greens full of natural tilt that make it very difficult to get a short approach shot close. The parallel two-shotters at the start of the back nine are also gorgeous: the 11th has a rolling fairway and a strongly tilted green, while on the 12th the tilt is in the fairway and the putting surface is terraced from back to front. The last five holes are not up to the prelude, and the club really needs to work on tree management if these contours are going to shine, but any golfer with a spirit of adventure will love this course. 6 – 6 - [2017]