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BY TOM DOAK



No, it's not hurricane season; it's just the 15th hole at Portmarnock.

Scotland's five Open Championship venues have an irresistible appeal for most Americans, but if you want simply to play the five best courses you can find in one destination, Ireland should be your first choice.

Some would have you believe there are more than five such courses—that Waterville or the European Club or the Old Head of Kinsale belongs among the elite. Those are all great courses, and there are more on the way. But they're not why you're going. This is your itinerary:

1 **PORTMARNOCK** is just north of the city of Dublin and not more than 15 minutes from the airport, but you'll need a good night's sleep to tackle Ireland's most revered championship golf course. For those who have never played a true links, Portmarnock is a perfect introduction to the two most difficult hazards in golf: firm ground and wind. On the par-5 13th, you might reach the green downwind with two swings, but that second shot will bound and roll a good 50 yards, putting you through the green into a gorse bush if you're not careful. Then, at the 385-yard 14th, you'll hit your best drive maybe 190 yards back into the wind, your second into a nasty bunker well short of the green, and your third sideways to avoid the steep three-foot face—if you're smart. Think that was hard? At the par-3 15th, you'll have to aim your tee shot out over the beach to deal with the crosswind. Now you can forget about your scorecard for the rest of the trip and get ready to enjoy some of the most spectacular terrain in golf.

2 **ROYAL COUNTY DOWN**, as the name implies, is not of the Republic but in the North, a pastoral and beautiful land that could not be a more ironic setting for the terrorism that makes headlines. Royal County Down is the embodiment of this dichotomy. On the one hand, it is the most beautiful golf course you will ever play. The first three holes head straight away from the clubhouse, with the Irish Sea to the right, until the dunes loom so large, they prevent the course from going any farther in that direction. Then, at the par-3 fourth tee, you turn around and look all the way back across the course to the town of Newcastle at the foot of the looming Mountains of Mourne. Some days the mountains are sunny and you can see the farmhouses well up the slopes; on others, they are shadowy and foreboding, looming over the town like a curse.

As you catch this breathtaking view, you are most likely turning back into the wind and about to realize that Royal County Down is the hardest course you will ever play. The most dramatic moment on the course comes at the ninth hole, when after another drive over a post, you reach the crest of the hill to look down at a fairway at least 60 feet below, then up the long fairway to a green pinched between two small dunes near the clubhouse. At this point, you will believe you're playing the best golf course in the world. Then the back nine starts away again to the north, and while there are a lot of testing holes still to come, with each you're getting a bit farther from the sea, and you realize that maybe it's not such a good idea to use up all the dramatic terrain early in the round.



3 **ROYAL PORTRUSH**, through the city of Belfast and an hour farther to the north, isn't quite as difficult or spectacular as County Down, but the more I play it, the more I become convinced it might be better. How could that be? Well, it's the only one of the fab five that was planned from the start by a master golf architect—the Englishman Harry Colt—who also assisted in routing Pine Valley. Here Colt kept some of the drama in reserve. The first four holes are along high ground looking over the sea, with some big elevation changes, and then you're at the tee of the bunkerless dogleg fifth, which plays downhill to a two-tiered green set right on the cliff's edge. Try to bite off too much of the dogleg and you'll find impossible rough; overclub the second shot and you won't find the ball at all. From there, the course tacks back and forth in the middle of the dunes, with enough rugged country outside the fairways that the holes require only one or two bunkers each to keep you honest. In due time, you reach what PR people would identify as the signature hole—the 211-yard 14th, named Calamity, with its tee and green on the edge of a precipitous drop, which must go about 75 or 100 feet down to the valley below. A couple of holes like this, properly spaced out, are all a golf course really needs.

4 Your next stop is **LAHINCH**, in the southwest, and though the drive through the west country is beautiful, if you're in a hurry, you're better off going back to Dublin and starting over from there. Then again, if you're a type-A personality, you're probably not going to like Lahinch anyway. Some of its greens sit atop small knolls, where even the straightest of shots may not be able to hold the green; others sit in bowls where your buddy's wide iron shot may ricochet back to gimme range. Its signature hole is a blind par-3, the Dell, where you aim your tee shot over a white rock and trust that the greenskeeper remembered to move the rock to align you with the day's hole location. Like life, Lahinch is a test of your patience, your good nature, and your faith, but unlike some of the other courses on this trip, you don't have to be good at the game to have fun playing it.

5 Last but certainly not least is **BALLYBUNION**, which Tom Watson made famous in the early eighties when he stopped there on his way to the Open Championship. It doesn't have the dramatic backdrop of Royal County Down, but the terrain is unrivaled, with four holes at the brink of Pebble Beach–style cliffs and sand dunes so steep that a mountain goat would walk around them. It's not surprising that it became Watson's favorite course, for he was the master of the short game, and any time you miss a green at Ballybunion, it's a daunting test to get the ball back on the putting surface without skidding across and down the bank on the other side. The back nine is like great sex: The tenth green is right at the cliff's edge, and every hole afterward flirts with another climax. More than one friend has mused that if you combined it with the front nine of Royal County Down, you would have the best golf course in the world, though I've yet to meet the man who'd be able to play it.

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All of these courses are busy enough to require advance arrangements, but guests are truly welcome at all of them. Perry Golf in Atlanta specializes in creating itineraries for golf tours of Ireland. Call 800-344-5257.

MAP BY JOHN GRIMWADE