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ST. PATRICK'S LINKS

Above, the 15th hole on the new St. Patrick's Links designed by Tom Doak opened in 2021.

DOAK'S WESTERN SHORE WONDER AN INSTANT HIT

BY BRUCE SELCRAIG

For at least a decade or so, the lords of Irish Tourism have been politely weaning some of the many thousands of international golfers who descend upon Ireland from May to September off the venerable Southwest cathedrals – think Ballybunion and Lahinch – to the remote Northwest and its enthralling but lesser known courses.

Tour operators have diverted some of the Southwest traffic that once accounted for about 75 percent of Ireland's international golf rounds, but what the rugged Northwest always lacked was a world top-100 course, such as Northern Ireland's Royal Portrush or Royal County Down – that would be a stand-alone trophy destination.

Now that's changing as the golf world beats a path to St. Patrick's Links, an inspiring Tom Doak creation at the Rosapenna golf resort in County Donegal that debuted in 2021 to almost unprecedented praise.

Doak's first design in Ireland and third in Europe leaped to No. 55 in Golf Magazine's world rankings almost before they striped the parking lot. No golf course on earth has ever ranked higher in its inaugural year in the magazine's poll of course raters.

With oceanic swales, gnarly blasted bun-

kers and a sense of solitude on nearly every hole, St. Patrick's vaulted in the rankings past new and old pageant queens such as Baltusrol, Royal Troon, Prestwick, Winged Foot and Nova Scotia's Cabot Links.

Doak, whose new course at Pinehurst will be his 44th design (including six in Australia and New Zealand), says his clients care more about course rankings than he does, but he concedes that "I knew how well we had done" when several of his close friends said St. Patrick's might be his finest work.



Tom Doak walking the grounds of St. Patrick's Links.

"The instant recognition the course got has been difficult to comprehend," said John Casey, director of the Rosapenna Hotel Golf Resort, which sits 111 miles west of Belfast. "The sheer number of people within the golf industry who are talking about the course has been overwhelming."

In case you've been overspelunking, Doak is that fellow who attended MIT and Cornell and brought a math and engineering mind, wrapped in simplicity and minimalism, to a golf architecture aesthetic that seemed stuck in a 1960s pro shop.

Pacific Dunes, Doak's 2001 project at Oregon's Bandon Dunes resort, overwhelmed course raters and sent Doak to the head of a small class. It's now ranked 28th in the world by GOLF and joins six other Doak

designs in the Top 100, highlighted by the 23rd-ranked Tara Iti course in New Zealand.

St. Patrick's joins Rosapenna's two existing and superb courses, Sandy Hills Links, designed by Ireland's estimable Pat Ruddy, and the Old Tom Morris Links, where a new nine that opened in 2009 joined the original nine laid out by Morris in the 1890s. Guests at the 70-room Rosapenna hotel can play all three courses for 400 euros (\$427), while St. Patrick's alone will cost you 200.

While you could be happy for a week with only the Rosapenna resort and its trio of links, you'd be remiss in missing Donegal's other marvelous courses – enchanting Ballyliffin (36 holes, hosted the Irish Open in 2018), Donegal Golf Club (known as Murvagh to locals; redesigned by Pat Ruddy), beautiful Portsalon, recently reinvigorated Narin & Portnoo (Gil Hanse and Jim Wagner did wonders) and the underground cult favorite, Cruit Island Golf Club, one of the world's finest and friendliest nine-hole courses. The Rosapenna resort has a splendid dining room (The Vardon, great views and local fish), but within walking distance in the surrounding village of Downings (pop. 450) are two classic favorites of Donegal – Fisk, a 16-seat seafood restaurant that is chef owned, with a beloved bar next door, and The Olde Glen Bar and Restaurant, a Michelin-recommended spot that Chef Ciaran Sweeney has turned into what may be Donegal's finest restaurant.

But back to the golf. Doak's crew had done some shaping on the delightful Old Tom's new nine a few years ago, so the architect was well aware of the 300-acre tract nearby that the Casey family had always envisioned as the perfect setting for a third tourist-grabbing course. At one time, the St. Patrick's property had two modest links that Jack Nicklaus briefly showed some interest in reinvigorating, but when Doak studied the terrain he told the Caseys it should rightfully only contain one sprawling exceptional course.

And the Caseys agreed. "Several architects have walked the land with us," said Casey, who plays off a 5-handicap. "but we always felt Tom was our best opportunity. I think he's the greatest living architect in golf, and would give us instant notoriety. With Tom, there was never a sense of telling him what to do. That would have been a big mistake. We totally let him build anything he wanted."

Doak was so committed to the project, he says (and Casey confirms) that he took a minority ownership interest in the course in lieu of his standard fee, which reportedly runs in the \$1-\$2 million territory.

The only downside for this dream come true is that the Caseys have had to turn



Tom Doak's challenging greens are part of the fun at St. Patrick's Links.

away as many hotel guests as they've accepted. Casey says they're booked well into September, but the three golf courses are certainly available. He expects St. Patrick's will do about 9,000 rounds this year, about the same as last.

As for the golf, I found St. Patrick's on a crisp blue summer morning after a few wrong turns in the curvy countryside. I nearly had the course to myself on a slow Monday but for a TV crew in the parking lot with a loud New Yorker in charge.

Nicole, a college business intern from Illinois, was running the tiny temporary pro

shop, a spartan pine cabin of sorts, by herself. Casey said the minimalist approach – there's little more than some snacks, balls, shirts and bathrooms – has gotten so much approval from visitors that they might not be needing anything more grand.

From the first tee, Doak takes golfers from the intimacy of two lovely restrained par-4s (both at about 360 yards) and the somewhat protected par-3 third to a Bonanza-like landscape that features the aptly-named Sheephaven Bay beside you and an expansive wild canvas of dunes that unfurl beneath you. Good luck with concentrating on

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your shoulder turn.

Doak allows that he has been “one of the pioneers of building wider, more playable courses in modern design,” but he’s pulling in the wide fairways a bit. “I just think the super-wide courses that have been winning all the awards,” he says, “are pandering to bad golfers who just bomb away, instead of encouraging them to learn to hit the ball straighter and swing within themselves.”

As you might expect, the fairways, rough and greens are all native fescue, with tufts of marram grass giving the rough-hewn bunkers the feel that they’ve been borrowed from some Dakota Badlands. A few of those fairway bunkers are so, um, natural and steep that you’ll do well to simply get your errant shot back to civilization.

St. Patrick’s is full of nice little touches. Check out the deep hollows among the dunes on 10, 17 and 18. They were even deeper when Doak first spotted them. He filled them in somewhat just so they could maintain grass and be playable. And he’s



Nearby is the nine-hole and vastly entertaining Cruit Island Golf Club.

tried to hide the mowing lines between fairways and rough, tucking some behind contours or interrupting them with bunkers to make them vanish visually.

You’ll be getting no hole-by-hole testimonials here, but the gigantic 522-yard, par-5 sixth is likely to make you stop, grab your camera and try to do justice to its serenity and challenge. Located inland just a bit, the bay is to your left as you face north and hope to fly a 20-yard wide stretch of sand that begins right about where a 285-yard drive would roll out. Big hitters will love the dare. Mortals will lay up.

Better than offering any one “signa-

ture hole” designed to thrill you, St. Patrick’s does what few courses can. Using a landscape that is, honestly, much like hundreds of miles of gorgeous Irish coastline, Doak has created 18 captivating moments of golf theater that you can actually remember a day later.

I’ve made 22 trips to Ireland since the 1990s and played all its great

links. None is better than St. Patrick’s. Of course, it has none of the mystique and tradition of Portrush, County Down and Ballybunion, and it’s hard to imagine the new TikTok golf culture ever bestowing such reverence on a mere golf course, but for the rest of us this is a pure Irish links you’d be thrilled to play all the days you have left.

A former staff writer at Sports Illustrated, Bruce Selcraig has written for The New York Times Magazine, The Atlantic, Harper’s and others, while playing an erratic game in San Antonio.

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