

Scotland Australis

By Nico Earhart

It's only an hour-and-a-half's drive from the city of Melbourne in Victoria to the tip of the Mornington Peninsula, the road cutting through uniform rows of wine grapes and ancient, reptilian trees. For the same price, you might as well have boarded a plane and flown to Ireland or Scotland with the available number and quality of links courses at your disposal here. Scattered around the towns of Rye, Fingal and St. Andrew's Beach (the names even sounding European) are The Dunes Golf Links, St. Andrew's Beach Golf Club, The Resort at Moonah Links with its two stunners and a host of other superb tracks both public and private. After having spent a few rainy days in Melbourne rehabilitating my legs, which had been worn ragged during a week of golf and sightseeing in Sydney, I was chomping at the bit to make my way out to this Australian golf-mecca, holding a few of Australia's top 100 to give it a try for myself. And I'll be the first to tell you that it did not disappoint. But let's try and keep this place secret for at least a little while longer, before tourist buses start showing up in swarms.

First, however, I'd like to clarify a few key points here. In the true hold-my-feet-to-the-fire definition of 'linksland' golf, the courses of the Mornington Peninsula differ substantially from their cousins on the Emerald Isle and in the Land of Scotts: For one thing, these courses all have an abundance of altitudinal variations; acclivities and declivities throughout each course. None of them are flat in the true links style. If you walk out here, which I highly recommend, your legs will burn at times and even in gloomy, ocean-blown grey mists, you'll be beading up a sweat as

you slog your way up and down the hills. Second, not many of the courses are afforded ocean views, as is the case in the U.K. Most of them sit behind a rolling, planted seamount that blocks the views. The sound of the rolling breakers is as close as you'll get to a seascape, but the mound also helps with the wind, so no points off in my opinion. Lastly, not all of the greens here are 10,000 sq. ft. flat-pan expanses that will only break two feet on a hundred-foot long putt. Some of the greens are squirrely little things with two or three tiers that will break a number of times before they reach the hole. But other than these slight definitional variants that some people might not have even been aware of, from the gorse bushes and the fescue, grass cut the length of a billiard table, pot bunkers and beautifully undulating fairways across the course, this place is the real McCoy. Plus, with year-round play, access to the peninsula's hot springs and wineries as well as waterfronts in towns like Rosebud and Rye, and having Melbourne only a couple hours up the road, who knows? It could be even better.

For the first of my four-round holiday-weekend assault on the peninsula, I would be heading over to The Dunes Golf Course (\$65AUS/walking), a seven-minute drive from where I was staying in Rye. I pulled in before seven, but even so, the lot was awash in hustle and bustle on this Friday before the long Easter weekend. People greeted each other and laughed in the dim dawn light, pre-round preparations being made. There would be a large social golf outing/tournament being held this morning but luckily enough for me I would be in the last group to tee off before they were all sent out. This time I finally broke down and got a pull-cart for the first time on the trip, which in

hindsight I should have been doing since the first round I played in Australia. They don't look very stylish and are a pain in the rear to wheel up and down the hills (they also call them 'pull-trolleys' in Australia, so that doesn't make you feel very *macho*), but the relief from the added pressure of hefting a whole bag's worth of extra weight on my feet and back was a night-and-day change. After one round I would have rented one even if they had called them 'little nancy-boy trolleys' to be honest, that's how much better it was. But everybody uses them here, and I still didn't hire a golf cart, so I consider that a win.

Today I'd be paired with three serious looking gentlemen from Melbourne, down for the long weekend, who turned out to be both extremely helpful and skilled golfers. They knew the course well and shared the lines to take on blind shots, adding in some more insider's tips throughout the day. Also, the fact that they were proficient golfers made me want to keep up with them; I paid closer attention to my shots and put more thought into them and as a result was able to hold my own – a bonus for everyone involved. An intermittent rain fell for the first hour or so, giving the course an even more distinctly Scottish feel but decidedly less miserable than playing in a frigid, gale-driven Scotch rain.



The Dunes Golf Course

In keeping with links style, the fairways at The Dunes were shaved to about the length of an Army crewcut. Unforgiving for some, but allowing for insanely precise shots for others; like hitting off the mats at a driving range. The greens weren't 'links-flat' per se, but rolled at a good clip and held a fixed line really well, even with the morning moisture and rain. I managed to roll in a few long ones throughout the day that didn't bump or take a skip until they trundled into the cup. The bunkers were a mix of traditional U.K. pot bunkers and the Aussie Sand Belt traps that I was finally starting to get the hang of having hit my fair share of shots from them during the trip. Steep walls, some past the point of inversion, with roots and stalks sticking out of them and loose impediments the size of Ping-Pong balls, were another feature. A few of the sand 'black holes' around the course were big enough to fit a school bus into pretty comfortably. Since I was playing with some regulars, they were usually able to

give me good lines on the blind ones, but had I been alone the architects have laid out stone markers around the hills you hit over to guide clueless golfers along without being too dilatory.

Towards the end of the first half, the inclement weather lifted and by the time we reached the turn (which comes back to the clubhouse) blue sky began to poke through the eggshell of gray. Sunbeams streaked across the property and the day was made that much more enjoyable. The highlight hole of the day for me was the Par 3 16th: A long one with a fun tee shot where golfers try to land the ball on top of a hill sloping down towards the green. It was 200 yds. to the flag, but lay up to about 150 and enjoy watching your ball take a roller-coaster ride down the hill towards the green. Maybe you'll even get a scare of your own. The inward half had another collection of nuggets that didn't disappoint. The Par 5 11th was a long one, but divided into three distinct shots, that is unless you wanted to be brave and try and fly the massive right-hand bunker on your drive. Hitting into it would relieve you of any eagle ambitions and you'd be praying for a par from there. As we wrapped the round up, the sun now in full-bore across the property, I thought about trying to fit in another nine but relented, realizing I still had three more days of walking up and down these coastal mounds ahead of me still.

Just down the road is St. Andrew's Beach Golf Club (\$65AUS/walking) situated in the town of the same name and home to the Gunnamatta course. This is where I'd be playing for day two. I'd shown up to St. Andrew's only about twenty minutes before my tee time, not leaving myself much time for a warm-up but not really needing much of one either. Once you get into a steady golf groove you don't really need to warm up that much. They didn't have a driving range that I saw either (*a la* the original home of golf in

Scotland) so it was inconsequential and I hit a couple putts and was ready to go. The clubhouse at St. Andrew's Beach could generously be called Spartan, but they have coffee and cold drinks and a few golf essentials for sale so it was fine by me. No foofaraw here. If you're looking for a lavish clubhouse and great locker room facilities, this is not the place for you. However, if you are looking for a brilliantly designed golf course, borrowing heavily from St. Andrew's itself but with a little added Australian flare, then look no further because this is your spot.

I got paired up with another group of guys down from the city for the holiday and I would be rounding out their foursome. Without even a second thought they threw me into the middle of their Stableford game – A very serious Stableford game, mind you. It would be Vin and I in an epic Battle Royal against Mic and Rod-O for bragging rights and some undisclosed financial goings-on that I wouldn't be subject to. Now, I'm not one to be deterred by playing golf all by lonesome, in fact, sometime it's preferable to getting paired up with some unknowns who are going to be frosty the whole day. But after a few weeks on the road in a foreign country, where I knew literally not a single person, it was nice to be welcomed into a group like these guys did and I was grateful for it. On the first hole, Vin ran up the fairway 80 yds. to give me the good line on my approach shot and the hospitality continued the whole day.



St. Andrew's Beach Golf Club

From the raised tee box, Number One looked like another doozy of an Australian Par 4, but for once on the trip I was relieved to find out that I would get an extra stroke. A manageable Par 5. The courses of the Mornington Peninsula don't look too intimidating on paper. Most are under or around 6,000 meters, but they all seem to play much longer and St. Andrew's Beach was no exception to that hypothesis. Even with the raised tee box and a well-hit drive and second shot, I still had to hit a hybrid in on my approach, which was lucky enough to hold the green. The greens had been cut and rolled earlier in the morning so they didn't look particularly great and didn't help with my on-course photography, but as three of us rolled our first putts 10 ft. past the hole, we figured out that they were still rolling fast and true. At first glance, St. Andrew's Beach looks eerily similar to Bandon Dunes' Old Mac course, only without the ocean views, hidden by the seamount. High points around the course provided

panoramas of large sections of the track, blind tee shots and a number of expansive and flat greens reminded me of the Coos Bay, Oregon, gem. Fairways were wide and would have been forgiving had it not been for well-placed bunkers that will confound both scratch players and high-handicappers. There were usually two sets of them, one set short and one set long, for either type of player. Shots were thought-evoking and a proper target line and yardage had to be calculated before you swung or you'd be grabbing your sand wedge for a lay-up from the bunker – No going for the greens from these cavernous sinkholes. The Par 3s were a smidgen shorter at St. Andrew's Beach, maybe more manageable in yardage than other courses on the peninsula, but they were too tight, well-guarded greens. Shots needed to stop on a dime or risk rolling into bunkers behind or off of false fronts and sides and down into vast and inescapable collection areas.

Just like its Scottish namesake, St. Andrew's Beach shares fairways in a crisscross pattern: Both the 7th and 8th and then the 9th and 10th had tee shots to one massive fairway that served both holes with double-edged bunkers. A good way to meet a stranger should you both be sharing a monstrous bunker at the same time, playing different holes. And in true links fashion, the course didn't return to the clubhouse until after the 18th. So, load up on snacks and drinks as walking up and down these hills will drain you, or just grab a meat pie and a Victoria Bitter from the cart guy who patrols the course. If I had to level one complaint to the St. Andrew's Beach management (and all three of my playing partners agreed) the Par 4 13th should absolutely be a Par 5, if not even a Par 6 or 7. The winner of the hole walked away with a triple-bogey 7. And they've got an extra stroke to give on the Par 71 track anyway.

It all came down to the wire on the 18th, another deep Par 4 with bunkers right and center and waist-high grass to the left. Rod-O had the match on his flatstick, but missed a squirrely sidewinder that, admittedly, took a couple unfortunate hops before it reached the hole, edging past on the left side. It rolled by a few inches and we finished the match all square. It seemed a fitting end to the day. But as we made our way up Heartbreak Hill as it's called, the long, winding path that leads back up to the clubhouse, I realized that I was the secret winner of the day: I was +3 on new Australian golfing buddies.

If glitz, glamor and pampering are more of your thing, or if you've got the family in-tow when you get yourself to the Mornington Peninsula, then a short drive down the road from St. Andrew's Beach, you'll find Moonah Links Golf Club and Resort. There are various degrees of accommodations available at Moonah, from the hotel, whose rooms are set off the fairway on the first hole of the Open course, to luxurious rental properties that can comfortably fit a family or two. This is where I would be playing my last two rounds of golf out on Mornington, day three at the Open course and day four over on the Legends. The Open course (\$85AUS /walking) was designed with the intended purpose of holding the Australian Open of Golf, which it has done twice, in 2003 and 2005, and has hosted a number of other notable tournaments as well. I showed up to a pretty empty course around 8 am, the result of it being Easter Sunday, and was told by the starter that I would 'pretty much have the whole thing to myself.' Always a spot of good news for The Wind-blown Golfer.



Moonah Links Golf Club – Open Course

The Open course at Moonah Links (6,783 meters from the professional tees, though it'll play closer to 6,000 for the non-gifted) is an absolute beast, so be prepared to spend some time in the bunkers out here. What at first looks like a random scattering of traps all over the course (almost like the designers took a schematic and threw a few hundred darts at it to decide where they would go) are actually a well-designed placement to keep players of all levels, even the pros, on their feet at all times. Pipe your drive right down the middle? Well done, but you might just get too much roll-out and have it land in that fairway bunker 300 yds. out. So, naturally there is a big emphasis on shot placement out here and staying out of trouble to avoid big numbers i.e. laying up on the tee shot of a Par 5, hitting a long iron on your second to a good lay-up yardage and then having a manageable distance for your third into the green. And these bunkers are deep with steep-sided walls and turgid lips that can be real troublesome to get out

of, but take your time and think about your shots and you won't have to resort to the hand wedge too often. For example, I only had three bunker shots the whole day, pretty standard for your run-of-the-mill round, but what I consider the crowning achievement of my day, because it certainly was not what was written down on my scorecard.

Should you manage to steer clear of the bunkers, you will be rewarded with fairways that are immaculate and a rough that isn't quite as intimidating and grabby as its European counterparts. Wayward shots, while not advised of course, can usually be mended by clubbing up and going for the green from there. Watch out though as most of the greens, perfectly groomed numbers that won't bounce but were slightly slowed by the grab of the morning dew when I played, are guarded by deep, greenside traps. If you end up in one of these suckers, especially after getting onto some trouble before you've reached the green, you could be looking at a snowman or worse as they can take a few shots to get out of. The holes that aren't too cautiously guarded by sand (there is only one hole that is bunker-free, the 6th, but a few others ease up on the sand trap peddle as well) have length added to them to add just that bit of bite that you need, or don't need. It's not all doom-and-gloom at the Open course though, so don't let me dissuade you from taking a crack at it. The views afforded out on the course are spectacular, the low-slung clubhouse omnipresent in the background and on a calm day the faint sounds of the breakers off in the distance. There is also access to the hot springs trail, adjacent to the 3rd green, so bring the Misses along with you to walk a couple and then say goodbye as she heads off to the springs while you press on. There are copses of tall pines around the course, which don't come into play (or, aren't supposed to come into play) that add some texture and scenery to the course.

They've taken inspiration from some stalwart European courses to shape the design on the Open from places like Ballybunion and Lahinch, but with a healthy sun bathing the course, you'll know you're in this Australian golf paradise.

If you didn't come to the Mornington Peninsula for a molly-whopping out on a pro-level course, then situated across from the palatial Moonah Links clubhouse is the Legends course (\$85AUS/walking). This track is markedly easier than the Open, it has about 20% of the sand traps and though long, is a much more manageable course. This was my last golf stop out on Mornington and I would be heading back up to the city after I wrapped up the round. This was one instance where luxurious locker rooms were a real lifesaver as a sweaty two-hour drive after the round was avoided by a quick stop into the shower before I hit the road.



Moonah Links Golf Course – Legends Course

There would be a few more folks out on the course today given that it was a bank holiday and many Australians were headed out after spending the previous day cooped up with their families. I would be playing with two blokes about my age, a welcome comfort after spending most of my rounds with the older crowd. Not that I dislike that but it's always fun to have somebody you can relate to out there. The Legends starts with a long, first-down-then-uphill Par 5 that can be managed in three shots or two if you really get ahold of the drive, to a green that is the highest point on the course. You'll be sucking wind once you get to the top of the incline but it's basically all downhill from there until heading up one last hill on the way back to the clubhouse on 16, 17 and 18. The first five holes were real gems, especially the 4th, a scenic tee shot to a wide fairway in the valley below that you can try and cut off to the green, or just go for your standard drive for a mid-range iron approach. These first few holes are more parkland than links with tree-lined fairways that can be a headache if you're not hitting it straight, but they give the Legends a nice contrast in style from the latter holes. By the time you get to the 6th green, a double that shares space with the 8th, it switches to the full on links layout. Seven through fifteen are all essentially flat with just a slight undulation on their wide fairways, festooned with a few bunkers but nothing close to the Open. Just enough to keep your head on a swivel. And in true links fashion, you won't see that fancy clubhouse again until you wrap up the round; the 9th green is about a mile-and-a-half from it. Holes at the Legends course are all named after famous golfers from different countries around the world: Jack Nicklaus is the namesake of 7th, Gene Sarazen the 16th – our American representation. I especially liked Sarazen's, a fairly long Par 3 with a fun, two-tiered green. With the flag up front,

the three of us clubbed up and tried to roll the shots backwards for a little closest-to-the-pin contest. Harry and I tied at about 15 feet. Finishing up, the 18th descends back towards the clubhouse after the second big hill climb of the day. Six bunkers strewn about on this one, so it might give you a little glimpse of how the Open will play if you haven't yet made it out there. My suggestion would be that if you're going to play each of the courses only once, start with the Open and challenge yourself with a round, before heading out to the Legends day two for a little respite.

There are few places around the world where a significant number of high-caliber golf courses can be found in such a relatively minute area: parts of Ireland, England and Scotland come to mind, Bandon Dunes (although that's just one resort with many excellent courses) and a few spots in Florida or the Carolinas. But for the price, the beauty of the courses and the number of them located here, the myriad other options available to non-golfing companions and the weather, the Mornington Peninsula is, in my opinion, one of the tops that I've even been too. If you come out here for a golf trip though, like I said, just tell people you're going to the Sand Belt or something so we can keep a wrap on this place for just a little while longer.