

Into the MYSTIC

By Blaine Newnham

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BANDON DUNES

BANDON DUNES, WITH FOUR HIGHLY RANKED COURSES, CASTS A MAGICAL SPELL OVER GOLFERS. AND THE MEATLOAF IS PRETTY GOOD, TOO.



PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): BANDON DUNES; BANDON TRAILS; PACIFIC DUNES

For me, it is the quiet. So quiet, in fact, that all you can hear is the muffled roar of the waves hitting the beach or the rattling clubs of a foursome passing in the distance.

“You have a sense there is nothing else happening in the world,” said Jim Taylor, a retired Navy admiral who has played golf all over the world.

“The place is spellbinding.”

The place is Bandon Dunes, now four courses strong after the summer opening of the highly crafted Old Macdonald, a reflection of golf’s past and one of its earliest architects.

“I think (Old Macdonald) will be the best of the four,” said Mark, our caddie, pulling a stocking cap from his head as we finished a round. “It is so much fun. You want to go out and play another 18 right now.”

In the lodge, over salmon hash in the morning and meatloaf in the evening, the debate carries on at Bandon Dunes on Oregon’s southern coast. Which course is best? Given one final round, which one would you play?

Pacific Dunes rivals Pebble Beach as the best

public-access course in the U.S. It’s arguably the best golf course built in the past 50 years.

And yet it might not be the course you choose to play. There are options. The reality is that at Bandon, the sum is greater than the parts – all of which are, on their own, world-class.



Tom Doak, the throw-back architect who brought us Pacific Dunes and shared in the design of Old Macdonald, brought his wife out to Oregon during one of his visits.

“She said, ‘I’ve never seen as many happy men in one place,’” said Doak.

She’s right, but why? How did this still-young resort develop a mystique that rivals that of the much more established marquee destinations not just in the United States – think Pebble or Pinehurst – but even in Scotland. It has to be more than the meatloaf.

First, the hardware. No place on the planet has four courses of this quality and all within five minutes of each other. And nowhere in the U.S. will you find seaside links courses with fescue playing

surfaces. The complex also has a 22-acre practice facility to wear your hands bloody, and on tap is a 12-hole Bill Coore-designed par-3 course in the wild dunes west of the first tee at Bandon Trails.

The reality is you could play Royal County Down one day, Royal Portrush the next and any of the Bandon courses the next and never miss a beat. These courses aren’t *like* links courses, they *are* links courses. The British Isles in Oregon.

But the software may be just as important – the ambiance, the changing nature of the courses with the fickle weather, the I-lived-to-tell-about-it joy of surviving the winds, the oneness with the ocean, the metal mirrors in the showers to shave by and the total commitment to golf, not real estate development or spa treatments.

Where else will you find a par 5 that’s reachable on the second shot with putter, where you hit 5-iron to a 120-yard hole and wedge to a 200-yard hole? Where else are there no carts and no cart paths, nor any cart girls hawking beer and chips? Where else are rangefinders sublimely useless? And the winters better suited for golf than the summers?

The place challenges our sensibilities. Why would we like it? It can be raw – the lies so tight they are skinny, the first hole at Pacific into a three-club Northerly so scary you feel as if you’re about to enter combat.

“You seldom hear people talking about the score they shoot, but rather about the experiences they’ve enjoyed,” said Grant Rogers, the resort’s director of instruction.

Bandon is an adventure. No matter your point of arrival – whether it be Portland, Eugene, North Bend or even San Francisco – it demands commitment and sacrifice. Reaching Bandon has, for me, the sense of visiting a hunting lodge in Canada, minimalist but elegant, boys getting away, adventure from the moment you leave home until you find the place in the remoteness of southern Oregon.

“I take it as a compliment when people criticize it for not being fancy enough,” owner Mike Keiser said of the accommodations. “I wanted it spartan without being barren. We put a limit on pillows.”

And luxury.

“When I first see the lodge and the holes beyond it, it feels like Christmas morning,” said Neal White, a former Washington state senior amateur champion who has played more than 50 rounds at Bandon. “It is my favorite place in the world. Who else would do the things they’ve done? I mean, they’ve made one gutsy decision after another.”

Keiser, the visionary owner, admits he thought

his idea so radical and Euro that the place might break even at best. With one course, not four.

“Everyone told us we were too remote, that the American golfer wouldn’t give up his cart, that we had no chance to be successful,” Keiser said. “I thought they were right, but the American golfer proved us all wrong.”



Old Macdonald may be a caddie’s favorite – although many of them will tell you that they favor Bandon Trails – but the jewel of the resort will always be the wildly creative Pacific Dunes, while the most enjoyable and important is the first course, Bandon Dunes. Without the beauty and playability of Bandon, there wouldn’t have been a Pacific or a Trails or an Old Mac.

Old Mac is a wonderful change of pace at

Bandon, a great afternoon of golf after the wilds of Pacific Dunes, a 500-acre windswept playfield lacking the seaside drama of Bandon Dunes and Pacific Dunes, but an enjoyable carnival of ruffled fairways and banked shots. It’s

old-fashioned links golf, easier for average players because it is wide open, but more difficult for the better players because of the immense greens and beguiling pin placements. If that sounds strange, then try to make birdie on a green that measures nearly 100 yards from front to back.

“Fun is the word I hear most about Old

“You seldom hear people talking about the score they shoot, but rather about the experiences they’ve enjoyed.”



Macdonald,” said Keiser. “I like that.”

The cost – \$220 during the high season for those staying at the resort – is the same for all four courses. A second round on any of the courses is offered at \$110, while a third round – if you started early enough and can still stand up – is on the house.

“What I didn’t want,” said Keiser, “was to have a best course and a worst course. That is the case at Pebble, Whistling Straits and Pinehurst. The courses are priced accordingly. I wanted them all to be different, and all appealing.”

Rogers has made 24 trips to the U.K. to play golf, but only one in the past 10 years while he has been at Bandon. No need, no more.

“The place is like Chamonix for skiers or the North Shore of Oahu for surfers,” Rogers said. “It is where those who really care end up.”

–Blaine Newnham is a freelance writer from Seattle and a former columnist for the Seattle Times.



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