

Ireland Forever : A hundred thousand welcomes and the best links golf in the world

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On this strip of land between the often ferocious Atlantic and the calm waters of Blacksod Bay lies Carne Golf Club, built specifically to bring golf business to this remote spot. It features tall dunes, broad dunes, steep dunes--all of them deadly dunes--and it is a very good idea to stay in the fairways that meander between them.

The back nine is wondrous, and the short 14th possesses one of those tees made for a movie set: Away in the distance is the Nephin Beg mountain range, behind you, Atlantic rollers that are pure white on deep blue. There's a golden sand beach, crazily paved by shoreline rocks and sky that seamlessly meets the sea. Breathe in and take a good look, for there is stern work at hand.

Over its finishing stretch Carne has a series of what Alister Mackenzie used to call "heroic carries," and it will help to hit the ball more than 220 yards on the fly three times in the last four holes. It is, in addition to being a beautiful place, a great test. The player who gets close to his or her handicap will be proud--and probably richer, too.

Carne is in a Gaeltacht, an area of Ireland where the first language is likely to be Gaelic, and the signs around the course reflect that. Upon arrival, for instance, the men go to the "Seornra Nabh Fear" (the Gents' Locker Room), while on the course there are posted exhortations to "Deisign an scraithin," erratically translated as "Replace divots."

Ceann Sibeal is also in a Gaeltacht, at the end of the Dingle Peninsula, and, like Carne, not easily reached. But how well it repays persistence. They've been gifted by the Almighty with some of the finest turf you'll find even in Ireland--fine-bladed, sturdy fescue grass, typical of links golf, which always seems to bounce the ball forward whether you wish it to or not. It provides the best-possible playing surface, especially at Ceann Sibeal. One president of the Golfing Union of Ireland once described it as "the best sod you'll ever tread."

Sibeal is only 6,696 yards long, but that is more than enough golf course when the wind is anything more than a whisper. This is because of a stream, wonderfully utilized, that comes into play on 12 holes and renders decision-making harder than, well, speaking Gaelic. The course is surrounded on three sides by soaring hills. The sea, when not in sight, is within earshot. Should you be on the course when the sun begins to set, be prepared to have your breath taken away, as colors you never knew existed fill up the sky.

Finally, mighty little Dooks. Little, because it's just more than 6,000 yards, mighty because few places in the world are surrounded by as much sensational scenery. On one side the backdrop is Macgillcuddy's Reeks and Carrantuohill, the highest point in the country; on the other is the estuary that eventually forms Dingle Bay. The light is fantastic, lending complete clarity to the panorama spread before you.

The golf is essentially as it always has been, and harder than it seems. The third, for instance, is a 300-yard par 4 down the prevailing wind, and a good drive will get close to the green. But it's unlikely to get on it, for the putting surface is elevated, the green like something on the top of a bowler hat, and even a well-struck pitch could return to your feet. A gimme par 4 it is not.