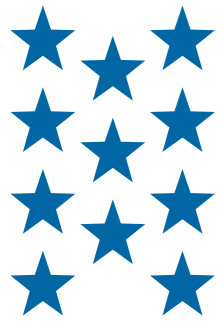


# SCOTTISH FIELD

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— THE —  
LUXURY  
ISSUE





# LURE OF THE LINKS



*American investment into Scottish golf is at an all-time high, leading to a rash of swanky new links courses while our top clubs are becoming increasingly luxurious and expensive, finds **Richard Bath***

**T**he Saudis may have staged an audacious putsch of professional golf, but on Scotland's links it's the Americans who are taking over.

Fuelled by a strong dollar and the fact that the US market is used to paying handsomely for golfing excellence and luxury, American golfers and entrepreneurs are revolutionising the Scottish off-course golf experience.

The opportunity to play the best and most storied courses in the world – iconic places like St Andrews' Old Course, Muirfield, Royal Dornoch and North Berwick – has always attracted large numbers of golfers from across the pond, and that remains the case. But there's now a drive to build the sort of luxury facilities and accommodation that is standard issue at the top American courses, and to repackage venerable old Scottish courses so that they appeal to golf tourists demanding a luxury experience.

'The new American golfing tourist is more wealthy, and more selective in their quest for links golf,' says Todd

Warnock, the American owner of Links House in Dornoch, arguably Scotland's most luxurious boutique golf hotel. 'They still want to experience the history of golf in Scotland but they seek more full experiences beyond golf such as castle and whisky distillery tours. They want a higher level of comfort and luxury, and they are prepared to pay for excellence.'

A good example of the market's response to an influx of high-end golf tourists is the partnership between Dundonald and the expensively remodelled The Machrie on Islay. The two courses are offering the chance to play three historic Ayrshire links courses (Dundonald, Western Gailes and Prestwick, where the first Open Championship was held in 1860) before being flown to Islay by private jet to play The Machrie and visit Lagavulin Distillery, and then finally flown back to Ayrshire. The cost for four for the week starts from £24,540.

If they have especially deep pockets, they could take the



ABOVE: XXXXX



*'The opportunity to play the best courses in the world has always attracted golfers from across the pond'*

ABOVE: Getting into the swing of things at Trump Turnberry. LEFT: Private jet is the transport of choice for rich American golfers.

*'Ardfin's cachet verges on cult status with high-flying Americans'*

fifteen-minute ferry north from Islay to Jura or cover the short crossing by helicopter. Once on Jura, they could play Ardfin, a beautiful private golf course on a pristine 12,000-acre estate that epitomises the direction of travel for luxury golf tourism in Scotland.

Billionaire Greg Coffey is rumoured to have spent £50m building this flight of fancy which was completed in 2015. It's a project where no expense was spared, to the point where sand was flown onto the island for its bunkers.

Playing there is not for the faint-hearted. Those lucky enough to have played Ardfin have either hired the estate's ten-bedroomed Jura House at a cost of £24,000 per night (for a minimum of three nights) or stayed at Jura Hotel for £1,540 per night (breakfast and dinner are extra, and there's a two-night minimum), plus £500 per round for the golf. Nevertheless, its inaccessibility and limited tee times produce an exclusivity which has ensured its cachet verges on cult status with high-flying Americans.

'We have to be careful though,' says Drumgolf's Gordon Adam, one of Scottish golf tourism's longest-established operators. 'Over the past five years there has been unprecedented inflation in green fees for visitors at the top courses in the belief that the Americans will always pay, but my experience is that there's a limit, and I think we've reached it.'

There have, of course, been Scottish golf courses which have been aimed squarely at rich American visitors for years. The first and the most prominent was Tom Weiskopf's Loch Lomond, which was built around the beautiful palladian mansion of Rossdhu House in 1993. It was the first course built in Scotland for two decades and in

2008 had membership fees of £75,000 and an annual sub of £3,250, which is staggeringly high by Scottish standards but on the cheap side for a top-quality course in America (when sold in 2019 its joining fee was £125,000 plus membership of up to £25,000 a year).

Since then the number of courses built in Scotland by Americans has gathered pace relentlessly. Designed by American Tom Doak and owned by his compatriot Jerry Savardi, the exclusive Renaissance Club next to Muirfield has a country club feel, a large number of American members, a membership bond (joining fee) of £75,000 and annual fees of £6,000.

There are also a growing number of American-financed and owned links courses which have eschewed the traditional membership model and operate on a pay-per-play basis, with locals getting preferential rates but Americans stumping up full fat green fees. The pioneer of this model was Kingsbarns in Fife (£418 per round



TOP: KONRAD BORKOWSKI. LEFT: XXXXXXXX. RIGHT: XXXXXXXX.



*Luxury golf*

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Sand for the bunkers at Ardfin, which cost £50m to build, was flown onto the island of Jura; Dundonald in Ayrshire is consciously chasing the luxury golf market; on tour and dressed to impress.



in 2024), Cabot Highlands (formerly Castle Stuart) near Inverness (£295 per round in 2024), and Dumbarrie Links in Fife (currently £286).

None of those courses have members or accommodation, but a different approach was taken by Donald Trump when he built the stunning but controversial Trump International outside Aberdeen, with an on-site hotel called Macleod House & Lodge named after his mother. Again, the price is high by domestic standards (currently £305 per round, which

is dwarfed by £475 for the Ailsa course at Trump Turnberry), but again those green fees are unexceptional Stateside.

Another American company dipping its toe into Scottish golf is Southworth Development from Massachusetts, who built Machrihanish Dunes near Campbeltown and bought the Ugdale Hotel next to the legendary Machrihanish course. They are also building a hotel and new course, which will provide a concentration of four courses in Machrihanish. The nearby airstrip is big enough to accommodate transatlantic flights and is a 20-minute helicopter ride from Royal Portrush in Ulster, The Machrie, Ardfin and Ayrshire courses like the three Open Championship venues of Royal Troon, Turnberry and Prestwick. It's yet another golfing honeypot.

The American money coursing into the top end of Scottish golf shows no sign of abating. A key ambition of the Arizona-based Discovery Land Company's £300m renovation of Taymouth Castle is to bring its once famous James Braid-designed course



**FROM TOP:** The remodelled Machrie on Islay; The Machrie hotel; dine in luxury at Dundonald with spectacular views of the course.

back to its full pomp. Further north, Warnock and his partner Mike Keiser remain hopeful the local group Communities4Coul will gain planning permission for Coul Links north of Royal Dornoch (interestingly, the local community sees the benefits of American golf tourism, with 70% of local residents voting in favour of the project in a referendum).

Warnock, who owns Links House, is not the only American to have invested in high-end golf-related hotel accommodation. American sanitaryware magnate Herb Kohler, who already owns the Old Course Hotel, has turned what was once a St Andrews University student halls next to the Old Course 18th green into Hamilton Hall, a development of luxury condos (at the time of writing a two-bedroomed flat is for sale at offers-over £2.3m). Indeed, many of the most famous golf hotels in the country have recently been bought by American venture capital companies. Rusacks by the 18th at St Andrews, the Marine in North Berwick and the Marine in Troon are famous golf hotels recently bought and upgraded by Americans, while other golf hotels (such as the Royal Golf Hotel in Dornoch and the Royal Marine Hotel in Brora) have been upgraded to appeal to Transatlantic visitors.

American money, it seems, is slowly but surely changing the face of Scottish golf. ☎