

Bandon Dunes: Golf The Way It Was Meant To Be

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Written For: The Globe & Mail

It was 8:00 a.m. on a sunny, nippy, Oregon morning in July and the Pacific wind was already starting to blow. Gathering speed as it raced across the ocean, it crashed into the sandy, craggy shores of the Northwest Coast and flowed forcefully through the fairways at Bandon Dunes and Pacific Dunes.

This wind was steady, solid, unremitting... an invisible wall you could lean into, and already it was wreaking a special kind of havoc on golfers. First-time visitors to these Pacific coast courses—heralded as the new Pebble Beach—were sent scurrying into the pro shop in search of balls with low spin. Caddies, wise to the powers of Bandon wind, were consulted on strategy. And an extra club, or two, or three, were called for to counter the constant flow and get the ball somehow—anyhow—to the green.

Golfers at Bandon pay homage to this wind. It's the wind that dictates the way you play, and it's the wind that contoured the dunes these courses are built on: 36 holes of wrinkled, rippled fairway, bordered by native fescue, gorse, wind-bent cypress and sandy bluffs that tumble softly into the Pacific Ocean.

Bandon Dunes and Pacific Dunes are twin courses located mid-way down the Oregon coast off coastal Highway 101 near the town of Bandon, about two hours from Eugene and four hours from Portland. It's a leisurely, two- or three-day scenic drive down the coastal route from Vancouver through Washington and Oregon, or a quick-and-dirty, one-day blast down I-5 through the middle of the two states.

These courses were a dream of Chicago tycoon Mike Keiser. He made a fortune producing greeting cards and he'd searched the world for ideal terrain for a links course he and his buddies could play golf on. In 1993 he found that land near Bandon, miles of undeveloped coastline: beach, 80- to 100-foot bluffs, dunes edged with European beach grass and mounds of unruly gorse—the kind you find on the links fairways in Scotland.

Here Keiser could build a true links course, routed through dunes and snuggled up close to the sea, as links are meant to be. He hired Scottish rookie architect David McLay Kidd, and in 1999 their first course, Bandon Dunes, debuted. Pacific Dunes followed in 2001, designed by Tom Doak. The job for Kidd and Doak was fairly simple: work with nature. They designed it as it lies, clearing brush, planting grasses, and creating tees and greens. The rest was courtesy of the forces of wind, wave and native vegetation. Very little land was moved. Kidd and Doak gently massaged the sandy soil to reveal the fairways within, and they benefited from spectacular raw materials.

Their commitment to preserving nature has permeated all aspects of the entire Bandon Dunes Golf Resort. The clubhouse and accommodations are unobtrusive, sided with cedar shakes to blend in, not stand out. There are no rows of condos, no swimming pools, no tennis courts, no multi-storied hotels or bright lights and neon. Deer wander the fairways, bears have been seen on the beach, and seabirds soar on drafts blowing up off the cliffs. Though frequently compared to California's Pebble Beach Golf Links, this Oregon experience is wilder and much more natural.

On this July morning, the course was quiet and unpretentious. The starter was a middle-aged woman swathed in Gore-tex. The pros were friendly and accommodating, and the caddies in white coveralls looked more like naturalists from the National Forest Service. Indeed, our caddie, Chuck, is an ex-forest service worker who's spent days isolated in the thick Oregon forest. He's quick with nature facts and wind estimates, and he knows these courses.

Both Bandon and Pacific are walking courses. There are no carts for hire unless you've got a doctor's note and a permanent disability. Cartpaths are made of rail ties instead of asphalt and blend into the natural environment. Because they're wood they're in play—at Bandon, there is no relief from a cartpath.

There's also no relief from beverage carts so common at other courses. At Bandon you tote your own water or sip from the water fountains. Also at Bandon, you hire a caddie. For \$35 US plus tip they're an invaluable source of course advice and info. There are 300 caddies at the resort—owner Mike Keiser is a supporter of junior golf and a caddie program that creates employment for the locals.

The first hole at Bandon Dunes is a par-4, dogleg right, with fairway undulations that golfers learn quickly are Bandon's trademark. Already Chuck's defined this as a two-club breeze blowing headlong into the tee. At 8 a.m. Chuck is also already predicting a steady increase in wind. He says it's like a dial that gets turned up gradually as the day progresses. By the 18th we were battling a solid four-club wind.

To the west, from the first green you can see the ocean, hear the surf's crush, and smell the salt and seaweed. These elements are never far. Bandon follows the coast for most holes and you can nearly always see the sea. Many of Bandon's fairways play across the wind, so the fairways are generous. Plus the greens are massive. "Three putts are common," Chuck warned, "unless you practice 150-foot putts!"

Chuck said the course had been "friendlied up considerably" since its opening in 1999. Waist-high grasses have been thinned, fairways widened, and chipping aprons added to the greens. "Now," Chuck said, "it's a whole new game."

Still, he added, thanks to the wind "the wheels come off most hot shots' games about half way through the first round. Players get frustrated. Clubs start flying." Golfers most affected are mid-handicappers with high expectations. Modern golf technology can work against you at these two courses. The required play is often a low, running shot not often used by today's golfers. Chuck gave us good advice. He said: "Modify your expectations, enjoy the experience."

Bandon's fourth hole is ranked among the world's top-500 in US golf magazines. It's a gentle dogleg right, and when you reach your approach shot you're faced with a green looking as if it's perched over the edge of the ocean. The surf is deafening, the cross-winds are howling. When putting it's tough to concentrate. The fourth is followed by a legion of memorable fairways, including the par-4 fifth which is Bandon's No.1 handicap hole. Cliffs fall away from the left edge to the beach below. Islands of gorse and sand split the fairway and dunes create a narrow opening that leads to a green harboured by bunkers and native grasses. Since it plays into the prevailing wind, Chuck said five is the real par for this hole.

Other memorable holes include the ninth, which plays straight downwind—this may be your only opportunity to a 550-yard par-5 in two! Bandon's signature hole is the par-4 16th, with a drive over a ravine, a split fairway, and a green hanging over the Pacific Ocean.

Next door, Pacific Dunes is shorter, tighter, and plays more directly into and with the prevailing wind. Designer Tom Doak made the fairways smaller, presenting different kinds of challenges. Our caddie Chuck said on a calm day it's easier to score on Pacific, but with a full-force wind high-ball hitters are doomed.

If you're strapped for time, it's hard to say which you should play. Many golfers book an early time at one course, then play the second in the afternoon. Guaranteed, it'll be 36 of the best holes of golf you'll ever play. After playing Bandon Dunes Golf Resort all holes will stay with you. There's not a weak one in the bunch.

Bandon's bold slogan is "Golf As It Was Meant To Be." Driving the long entrance—past the gate house, the ponds, and the subtle cedar-shake cottages that blend into the background—preps you for a retro, unpretentious, old-country experience. But it's not 'til you walk among the dunes, duel with the winds and listen to the thunder ocean that you get what the slogan means. This is 1880s Scottish fare brought to 2002 America—fescue grasses, push-up greens, gorse, sand and unrelenting wind, all sized for the modern-day golf game. It really is golf as it was meant to be.

Lori Knowles is a Toronto-based sports and travel writer.

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SIDEBAR:

IF YOU GO:

Bandon Dunes Golf Resort
Round Lake Drive, Bandon, Oregon, off Highway 101.
Phone: 1-888-345-6008
Website: www.brandondunesgolf.com

Bandon Dunes
Par: 72
Holes: 18
Yardage: 7,212 to 5,125

Pacific Dunes
Par: 71
Holes: 18
Yardage: 6,557 to 5,107

Peak season: May 1 to October 31, but open year-round, weather depending.

Green fees for lodge guests: \$140 US

Green fees for non-lodge guests: \$175 US

Caddie fee: \$35 US per bag plus gratuity

Lodging:

Cottage and lodge accommodation is available at Bandon Dunes Golf Resort. 1-888-345-6008
Motel accommodations are also available in the town of Bandon. Try the new beachside Best Western Inn At Face Rock, 1-541-347-9441 or 1-800-638-3092

Dining:

On course: Bandon Dunes restaurants. Post-round, feast at Bandon Dunes' Gallery Restaurant.

Off course: La Fiesta, Mexican fare in the old section of the town of Bandon.