

The Haj, Part I

Seven Men's Journey to the Birthplace of Golf



Hajis Don Cross, Jeff Brinegar, Mike Mumper, John Gurke, Dan Marco, Dave Radaj and Dave Blomquist outside the birthplace of Donald Ross in Dornoch.

Editor's Note: "The Haj, Part II" will appear in the April issue of On Course.

According to most dictionaries, a "haj" is "a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam." In October of 2003, seven MAGCS members set off on their own haj to the place regarded as the holiest in golf—the place where golf began; where golf is not only a game but an integral thread in the fabric of life; the place where Mel Gibson painted his face blue and hacked up scores of extras while screaming, "Free Scotland!"

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The trip began on October 16th, when after numerous planning and re-planning sessions and some very intensive networking by self-proclaimed "travel guide to golf's Mecca" Mike Mumper, the seven of us converged upon O'Hare International Airport (more specifically, the American Airlines Club bar). Fresh off the grave disappointment of the Cubs' loss in game seven of the NLCS, the mood was at first somber; but as spirits were served and downed, so too were spirits raised. The long flight departed at 5:10 p.m. and touched down at London's Heathrow Airport the next morning at 8:00, where the phrase "airport security" takes on a whole new meaning: camouflage-clad soldiers armed to the hilt and snotty baggage scanners were the norm. (Q: "Will the film in my camera be damaged?" A: "You silly Yanks know nothing about terrorism—we've had it since before you were a wee glint in your dada's eye. Now put the camera on the belt and hush.") All that aside, I give the WCs (water-closets) my highest rating—clean, comfortable and not a single one blockaded by the devil mop bucket.

The next leg of our trip found us on a short "puddle-jump" to Glasgow—much akin to going from Illinois to Wisconsin, and with much the same acrimony between the peoples (I do believe "Cheesehead" to a Chicagoan has the same connotation as "Highlander" to an Englishman). Upon our arrival, we were greeted by our new best friend for the week—Murdo Morrison, our tour guide and bus driver. The accommodations aboard the coach (the Ark) were exactly what the doctor ordered: comfortable seats, climate-controlled atmosphere, room to move around, a refrigerator AND cooler filled with Scottish beer and shortbread, and the all-important bathroom. The whirlwind first day continued with a three-hour drive into the Highlands to our first golf destination (yes, after 10 hours of flight time and three hours of driving, sightseeing and imbibing, we still had to play golf).

All along the way, the numerous points of interest (castles, walls, ruins—

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nearly anything as long as it was 800 years old) were described to us by Murdo, giving us our first taste of the Scottish tongue and its at-times-difficult translation. The ride also affirmed our heady decision to entrust our arrangements to a company experienced in this type of trip—driving through Scotland, with the roundabouts (their version of on- and off-ramps), the left-hand lanes and the right-hand steering wheels, would have been quite a challenge. Add the beer into the mix and it would have been disastrous.

We arrived in Nairn, a small town located on the Moray Firth (firths are bays, and there are many!), a trifle late for our 2:30 tee times at Nairn Golf Club and now feeling the full effect of the dreaded jet lag/beer lag/sleep deprivation syndrome. None of this, however, could keep us from our mission to golf 'til we drop regardless of the circumstances. Nairn, like most of the courses on our itinerary, is a links course named after the town in which it lies. This is an oft-misunderstood description, as

links courses are so-described not because they are laid out like links in a chain, but because of the land they occupy—the “links” between the sea and the more fertile agricultural ground behind the dunes. Because this area—found up and down the east coast of Scotland—was formed and continuously reshaped by receding seas and blowing winds, and because wild grasses and plants gradually took hold of the sand and somewhat stabilized it, and because grazing animals then kept the grasses “mowed” and “fertilized,” the links were a perfect place for golf, or “the gowf,” to be played. The romantic version of the first game of golf played describes a shepherd boy tending to his flock on the windswept shores of the Firth of Forth, easing the boredom of his day by swatting at stones on the ground with his shepherd’s crook. He propels a round pebble carefully between the sandscapes worn away by his sheep searching for shelter from the cold off the sea. One stone takes a final bound into a rabbit hole, and the royal and ancient game of golf

is invented. Nobody really knows if this is in fact how golf began, but it is probably close to reality; and it is relatively well-known that golf has been played in Scotland (on the links of St. Andrews) since the 12th or 13th centuries in some form. The earliest factual account of golf in Scotland comes from the attempted banning of the game by an Act of Parliament under King James II in 1457. His thinking, albeit ignored by his subjects, was that more time should be spent on archery practice in defense of the realm, and not on the gowf.

Arriving at the first tee at Nairn and meeting our caddies—club members Ian and Allister, to name those I remember—we embarked on our first round of golf in its birthplace. With great expectations of playing above our capabilities, off we went. Alas, those expectations were quickly dashed when, in my own instance after only one shot, I had to ask my caddie (before deciding to climb over the rock wall) whether the ocean was in play or O.B. My fears confirmed, out I waded into the rocky surf to put



The 13th at Nairn, where the course turns inland and upland.

my ball back in play, or at the least back onto grass. This was the story of the day for all seven of us, with amusing variations throughout. Nairn was no pussycat—it played host to the 1999 Walker Cup matches, and its Old Tom Morris layout has been vexing golfers since 1887. The difficulty (and this applies to all the links courses we experienced) is not derived from “tricked up” design nor from ultra-fast greens, but from the ever-changing winds, the on-again/off-again sudden cloudbursts, the persistent light rain that can turn into a sideways sleet in the blink of an eye, the natural hazards including the lethal gorse bushes and sheep-formed bunkers, and of course the man-made, perilously deep-revetted or sod-stacked bunkers. All these contribute to a completely different game than we are accustomed to playing here, where lush fairways and perfectly-manicured bunkers, precisely-mown rough and shot-accepting greens, allow good golfers to shoot the ball at the pin as if shooting darts at a bull’s-eye.

Not the case at Nairn, nor at any of the courses we played. Golf in Scotland is about imagination—the ability to envision a shot and execute it while abandoning the conventional “wisdom” of American golf. This might include an 80-yard putt across a fairway, a 140-yard 2-iron runner, or a bunker shot in the opposite direction of the green. Anything goes, and any lie is to be played from—not complained about. Finally, the first round came to an end with the obligatory drinks in the clubhouse with our caddies, and we departed at sunset for the town of Dornoch, about an hour up the road, where the Burghfield (pronounced Buddafield) House Hotel would serve as our base camp for the next two days.

The Burghfield is a 100-year-old building staffed by some of the nicest people you could hope to meet. From the minute our loud, travel-weary and beer-sodden group of ugly Americans checked in, our hostess Leslie had committed all our names to memory, and cheerily

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greeted us each time we passed the desk en route to Euan Currie’s magical bar. Euan once owned the hotel, and when he sold it he remained as its bartender, its resident poet and

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The approach to no. 2 at Nairn with the clubhouse in the background.

moreover its identity. A Highlander to the core, Euan mans his station nightly in full Highlands garb—kilt and all. A night spent with Euan is a crash course in deciphering the Highland tongue, aiding in the avoidance of any future conversational faux pas with the locals. (For example, it turns out that “buggery” does not mean entomology, nor does it imply anything even remotely related to insects—oh, no, not by a long shot.) If you’re game, he’ll take you on a distillery tour without even leaving your stool (mine didn’t last very long, but included “stops” at Bruish Laddaish, Clynelish and Glenmorangie, to name a few). Early the next morning, after a fine breakfast and discussion on the rules of the week (as they pertained to the gambling aspect of golf), we boarded Murdo’s Ark for the short drive up the coast through Embo and Golspie to our next destination: Brora Golf Club in (go figure) Brora.

The scenery along the way was exactly how you would picture the



Scottish Highlands, with rolling terrain broken up by centuries-old stone walls, ancient cottages with thatched roofs and sporadic herds of sheep and cattle roaming the countryside. As it turned out, this description of the scenery applied to the golf course itself, for Brora is not only a wonderful links course originally designed by Old Tom Morris and renovated in 1923 by James Braid, but is perhaps the truest mingling of golf and the environment that exists. This was “roughing it,” as no caddies could be

found, nor yardage markers—just hit the ball, get your bag and chase it and hit it again. The outward nine featured eight holes hard against the pounding surf of Kintradwell Bay, and the inward nine returned you through steep, undulating terrain, long grass and poop. And I mean POOP—you see, sheep and cattle use the golf course for grazing, and can be found lazing on nearly every hole, leaving everything from the spread-out “milk duds” to the more concentrated “lose-your-shoe-in-it” piles of dung. In several instances, our shot strategy was based upon the location (and demeanor) of these animals. To keep them off the greens, knee-high electric wires circle every green, and they do pack a punch. In fact, two local rules regarding this phenomenon are spelled out on the scorecard: “#2—All Fenced Greens and Tees: Electric fences surrounding all greens must not be moved and should be treated as immovable obstructions. A ball striking any part of the fence may be replayed.” And “#4—Animal Droppings: Animal



The ninth green at Brora, surrounded by electric fencing and “mowers.”

droppings on the course may be treated as casual water.” The finishing hole is a memorable par 3 over a deep valley—201 yards, all carry, wind howling and directly under the clubhouse window, where many townspeople gather to watch the mere 200-yard shots roll halfway back to the tee into the abyss. Our reward for our exertions was the chance to sit above the 18th with a cool pint in hand and watch other golfers suffer as we did.

With ample daylight left, we made a stop for a tour at Dunrobin Castle, the former home of the Duke of Sutherland, before heading back to Dornoch. (No trip to Scotland can be considered complete without a castle tour.) After a walk about the town, with several stops at historical points of interest (800-year-old pub, Donald Ross’ house, another 800-year-old pub, and then yet another), it was back to the Burghfield for our final night’s stay.

As luck would have it, the Burghfield was hosting a grand party for the area’s sheep ranchers (I think that’s what they were), allowing us



The Dunrobin castle, once the Highland home of the Duke of Sutherland.

the opportunity to meet and chat with the real Highlanders who reside in this harsh environment. Euan’s bar was bustling with activity, and the locals could not have been more receptive of our group. The people we met were much like the landscape they inhabit: weathered, windswept and tough, and similar in description to the countless pubs we experienced, with exteriors cold and stone-faced, but warm and friendly on the inside. And the lasses in particular could be described like a links course—bumpy, prickly, undulating and tough, with any shot contemplated requiring a

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The other Brora mowing crew.

vivid imagination . . . though also endowed with an endearing charm and beauty that says, “To play me is to love me.” We were entertained by a table of locals who regaled us with the spontaneous singing of traditional folk songs, and encouraged us to do the same for them. (Unable to think of any traditional folk songs to which we knew the lyrics, a rousing rendition of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” had to suffice.) I believe this was the point at which we started to talk like Scotsmen and reply to every question with “Aye, laddie.” Early the next morning—foggy in several ways—we packed our bags and embarked on our next destination: the much-anticipated Royal Dornoch Golf Club, after which we would travel down to St. Andrews in the ancient Kingdom of Fife.

Royal Dornoch, according to written records, was the third known golf links in Scotland, established in 1616 (following St. Andrews in 1552 and Leith in 1593). It wasn’t until 1877 that the Dornoch Golf Club was founded as the successor to the

Sutherland Golfing Society, and the great Tom Morris came to Dornoch to oversee the laying out of nine proper holes. Three years later saw the addition of nine more holes, and not much has changed since. Although it is gaining in worldwide popularity recently, its remote location and the difficulty in traveling there (rail service from London came only in 1903, and the more-recent construction of a network of bridges spanning the firths has made it more accessible) kept it a well-guarded secret for many years.

Our experience on Dornoch was nothing short of awe—no finer links course can possibly exist. Upon completing our round, the common feeling was the wish to stay, get a good night’s sleep and have another shot at giving this fine lady our best game. I would have been satisfied just to walk the course—clubs or no—to take in the majesty of the links and the significance of the surroundings. From the seventh tee, up on a ridge high above the North Sea, a 360-degree view awaits where you can see

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the monument to the first Duke of Sutherland, which commemorates the man who was responsible for the infamous Highland Clearances in the early 19th century. This event involved the forcible removal of 15,000 people—mainly tenant farmers, or crofters—from their land and relocation to coastal areas, as the duke felt that sheep would prove far more profitable than people. Turn a little, and the entire course rolls and meanders around you, reminding you

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The panoramic view from the third tee at Royal Dornoch.

of those devilish holes that ate your Titleists without remorse—holes with names like Whinny Brae, Foxy, High Hole and simply Home. Another slight turn brings into view the Tarbat Ness lighthouse, the second tallest in the United Kingdom. Finally, turn some more and you see the center of town, dominated by the spire of a 13th-century cathedral. If the trip had ended here, we all would have been satisfied. Ah, but it was only Sunday afternoon as we enjoyed a parting pint in the clubhouse and then boarded the Ark for St. Andrews, the ice boxes replenished and our anticipation high—we had four more days of golf!

Our auspicious arrival in the ancient city of St. Andrews began with a drive right across the first and 18th fairways of the Old Course—perfectly legal, but it still felt surreptitious and somehow wrong to drive a busload of overindulgent slob on such hallowed ground. The Dunvegan was our next base of operations, and proved more than capable. A quaint “pub with rooms” owned by Jack and Sheena

Willoughby, the Dunvegan lies a block from the Old Course, and is the evening watering hole for its caddies and players alike. Photos of the notables who have called it home—mainly golfers who have stayed there during the Open—cover the walls of its barroom. I believe we stayed in there long enough to memorize all of them. The merriment that lasted well into the night, with Steve the barman keeping glasses full, led to a less-than-sharp constitution for the coming day, which featured a round of golf on the Old Course with greenkeeper Eddie Adams along for the fun.

To be continued . . .



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About the Photos

The author wishes to thank Glyn Satterley, a renowned professional photographer of Scottish golf courses and landscapes, for allowing the use of the stunning golf course images in this article. For information on these and all of Glyn’s golf and sporting photography, visit www.glynsatterley.com.



The sixth green at Royal Dornoch with the 11th hole in the background.