



Aberdovey

Wales Golf

By Jack Berry

When I say “Wales”, what do you think of?

Catherine Zeta-Jones? Tom Jones? Robert Trent Jones? Charlotte Church? Richard Burton? Coal? How Green Was My Valley? The Prince of?

Whiskey-makers Jack Daniels and Evan Williams trace Welsh roots as does zillionaire J.P. Morgan. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright? He named his Wisconsin home and Arizona winter headquarters Taliesin, after the Welsh poet.

Now say “Ian Woosnam” and you might think golf but Wales doesn’t resonate like Scotland and Ireland when you think golf. The Welsh would like to change that. They’ve been playing the game about as long as anyone. They just haven’t boasted about it despite having the third oldest golf union in the world and Dr. Frank

Stableford first used his unique scoring system at Glamorganshire Golf Club in Penarth in 1898.

Matter of fact, the Welsh just don't seem to boast at all despite having some of the most beautiful land in the British Isles, great green mountains, picturesque valleys and villages, bordered by the Irish Sea, twisty roads, small, stick-shift cars (no SUVs or F-150s at \$8 a gallon), fast-running streams, wonderful small hotels like the Penhelig Arms in Aberdovey and Maes-y-Neuadd

Country Hotel in Harlech, and 12 million sheep to three million people. Excellent food with emphasis on lamb, seafood and Welsh Angus beef. But they don't fly their gold on black Cross of St. David flag the way the white on blue Cross of St. Andrew flies everywhere in Scotland.

Coal was king in Massachusetts -size Wales until the mid-1980s, during Margaret Thatcher's reign as premier. Long strikes closed the mines and while there still is plenty of the mineral beneath those

green mountains, it's become cheaper to import it so Wales had to begin looking for new business and to promote its natural features.

Led by Sir Terry Matthews, the first Welsh billionaire, Wales has its eye on golf and golf tourism. Matthews was born on the property where the 2010 Ryder Cup will be contested, was educated in Britain and then, after making his fortune in Canada in telecommunications, returned to Wales and built five-star 400-room Celtic Manor, the largest hotel and golf resort com-



Photo courtesy of The Wales Tourist Board

Celtic Manor



Photo courtesy of The Wales Tourist Board

Royal Porthcawl

plex in Europe, just two hours west of London's Heathrow Airport.

Matthews turned the former maternity hospital

property into part of the complex, and while in Florida happened to meet an American golf course architect with Welsh family roots – Robert Trent Jones. He hired Jones to design a championship

course and it opened in 1999. It has been home since 2000 to the Wales Open on the European PGA Tour.

Until Matthews lit the fire, about the only course traveling American golfers had heard of was Royal Porthcawl overlooking the Bristol Channel, a short drive from Cardiff, Wales' capital and largest city. Porthcawl has hosted six British Amateurs plus the Walker and Curtis Cups between America and Great Britain and Ireland, the best male and female ama-

teurs. The losing American Walker Cup team in 1995 included Tiger Woods. Padraig Harrington was on the winning side. Reminiscent of last year's Ryder Cup?

Porthcawl, founded in 1891 and at its present location since 1895, was described by Bernard Darwin, acknowledged as the finest golf writer of all time, as "very excellent links...the genuine thing – the sea in sight all the time, and the most noble bunkers."



Photo courtesy of The Wales Tourist Board

Royal St. David



Nefyn

Michael Williams, of more recent vintage, said Porthcawl “epitomizes that which is best about the game even down to a creaking clubhouse that is as

unchanging as the magnificent links.”

As good as Porthcawl is, there are nearly 200 courses in Wales, many of them seaside, and two of

the best, most memorable links are Aberdovey and Royal St. David’s, each dating to the 1890s and never victim of a bulldozer’s blade. Along with Porthcawl, *Golf Digest* this year ranked them among the

best 100 courses outside of the United States.

The Cambrian Line railroad borders each, and when the two clubs had matches, their members could board a train next to their own course, ride to the other, step off and walk to the first tee.

It always seemed to me that the great British courses were bordered by rail lines and Aberdovey and Royal St. David's qualify. Aberdovey was Darwin's favorite. His mother's family lived there – the Welsh spelling of the village is Aberdyfi. Darwin was the club's first captain, a post he held many years, and of Aberdovey he wrote "It is the course that my soul loves best of all the courses in the world."

Neither is long by today's standard, 6,571 yards and par 69 for Royal St. David's and 6,454 yards, par 71, for Aberdovey. There are only two par 5s at St. David's and they're back-to-back. But there are five par 3s and they're good ones. The shortest is 144 yards and the

others are 173, 188, 202 and 218. None are over great stretches of water, like so many American par 3s. Instead there are humps, bumps, mounds, bracken, golden gorse (in the spring), rabbit holes and, of course, bunkers.

Aberdovey has three par 5s and the par 3s and par 4s offer wonderful challenges with the big green of the 173-yard third at Aberdovey hidden from the tee, sunk among the humps and bumps with just the top of the flag visible. To the left, over medium-high dunes, is a broad, sandy beach and the sea.

Neither the Welsh nor the Scottish seaside courses I've played have the towering dunes that mark the northwest and west links of Ireland like Carne, Rosapenna, Enniscrone and Portstewart.

Standing high above Royal St. David's and looking west out to the sea and north to 3,560-foot Mt. Snowdon, Wales' highest peak, is a great stone castle built by Edward I in the late 13th Century. Edward (nicknamed Long Shanks

because of his 6-2 height, uncommonly tall in the Middle Ages), had a knack for castles. He built an "Iron Ring" of five of them in Wales to quell Welsh nationalism. And today, among many Welsh, there's still a certain animosity toward England, one reason they've held onto their language, one that uses vowels but not where you'd expect them. They share their little distaste of England with the Scots – Edward thrashed Mel Gibson's William (Braveheart) Wallace, killed him and had him drawn and quartered.

I did learn one Welsh word: ARAF. Painted on the road, it means SLOW.

That's the way to go, too, around Nefyn & District Golf Club in North Wales, atop a slender peninsula jutting into the Irish Sea. Slow, hold your hat and take your camera. It rivals Ireland's Old Head for Most Spectacular – you see the sea from every tee — and it is open 365 days a year. It's windy at another Welsh cliff-top course, Cardigan Golf Club above Cardigan Bay, but it can't hold a



Photo courtesy of The Wales Tourist Board

Nefyn

wind sock to Nefyn where you need the lowest shots you can hit.

And all that on a beautifully maintained 26 hole course. Right, 26 holes, Old Course dates to nine holes in 1907 and nine more in 1912. An additional nine, the New Course, was added in 1933 and in the rearranging, one hole had to be dropped.

Every hole is, well, spectacular thanks to the surroundings, but the par 3 14th can stand with Cypress Point's famed 16th. It's 165 yards, all carry, clifftop to clifftop.

Tucked at the bottom of the leeward side is a very small fishing village reached by a very narrow

one-lane road.

Pennard, on the Gower Peninsula near Swansea, Wales' second largest city, is another cliff-top course – 200 feet up from the sea but with typical links holes with humps, bumps, gorse and bluebells. Dating to 1896, it's known as the "Links in the Sky." While it's a modest 6,225 yards, par 71, as with all the seaside courses, length is deceiving and much depends on the weather which can change several times during a round.

Golfers today might like to draw and quarter a few course designers but when they walk (a key word), feel the turf beneath their feet and play those links, so

unlike our expensively manicured courses traversed in golf cars, there is a feeling that this truly is golf the way it was meant to be played. And, like Ireland and Scotland, you walk. Some courses have a few "buggies," used primarily by physically handicapped people. Unlike American resorts and real estate-driven courses, the next tee isn't a quarter mile from the previous green. They're close.

In a tongue-in-cheek effort to distinguish themselves from their English cousins and Celtic clans to the north, the Wales Tourist Board adopted a campaign stating that Wales "Is Golf As It Should Be" and "There's Stuffly Golf and There's Golf in Wales." Stuffly is



Photo courtesy of The Wales Tourist Board

Cardigan



Cardigan

represented by a mutton-chopped, bearded gent in tweed suit, bow tie and plus fours with a likewise garbed manservant behind him, while the Welsh are represented by a couple strolling, he carrying his bag, she pulling a trolley (golf cart). Strangely, they're on a rolling green course with four horses grazing, a stone castle ruin and the sea in the distance.

They're also trying to appeal to women with a picture of golf-spiked high heel pumps and the line "For Women Who Take Their Golf Seriously."

Unfortunately, not all course managers have caught up. Forward tees seemed an afterthought at Aberdovey and Royal St. David's,

just places where two tee markers were set down on rough, uneven ground. And don't expect yardage markers on sprinkler heads or ball washers at the tee. If it's windy, and, after all, you are by the sea, yardage markers don't mean much anyway. And don't expect drinking water on the course or a cute cart girl with snacks and beverages. As at most courses in Ireland and Scotland, clubhouses are unpretentious and simple. Changing rooms have benches to sit on while you change shoes and hooks to hang your clothes. Nor are the pro shops stocked like department stores.

But there's always a comfortable bar and sandwiches and friendly bartenders.

Greens fees generally compare to northwest courses in Ireland – about \$80 at Aberdovey and Nefyn, \$117 at Royal St. David's, \$50 at Cardigan, \$75 at Pennard and the two priciest are Celtic Manor, host of the 2010 Ryder Cup, at \$180 and Royal Porthcawl are \$189. The best bet is to book with a specialist:

<http://www.walesgolfvacations.com> is one, led by a personable PGA professional Dylan Williams.

Another is

<http://www.welshrarebits.co.uk>.

The Wales Tourist Board website is <http://www.visitwales.com> and it also publishes an excellent large brochure which contains websites for all of the Welsh courses. **MG**