

BONNIE GREEN GIANT

Prospective members of the sublime Loch Lomond Golf Club should move fast and have the £75,000 joining fee at the ready. There are just 100 places left before the list closes, says an envious John Gibb.

There are times when the game of golf slips gently into “theatre” and the play becomes comedy, sometimes tragedy or, occasionally, in my case, farce. It all depends on the company you’re in, the significance of the match and the grandeur of the landscape. I’m talking about the obsession it generates among addicts who are prepared to traverse the world to get a game on a course where someone has committed heroics of significance only to aficionados. For instance, I flew up to Loch Lomond in October and found myself treading the boards at one of the world’s most beautiful golfing theatres.

The curtain rises to reveal an elevated platform of perfect turf set in front of Rossdhu House, a Palladian mansion that glows gold in the late afternoon sunshine. The background is of purple heather and pine forest fringing a wide loch in which are reflected distant, snowcapped mountains. The scenery creates the effect of a Landseer



Main picture: England lock Simon Shaw tees off from the first after the World Cup Rugby Final. Above: club drawing room with peat fire and bottle of malt.

landscape, minus the wildlife. Enter stage left an elderly golfer in a pink shirt and co-respondent shoes. He is followed by two unusually tall men, one athletically built, who carries a bagful of clubs as if they are a bundle of twigs. He has a face which appears to have been trampled on and then hastily patched up. The first man stretches, bends down and carefully balances a ball on a high tee.

He rises slowly, flexes his knees and takes a couple of stiffish swishes with his driver before standing back and staring myopically into the stalls. A cadaverous caddie in a hat and army surplus boots appears stage right, painfully unshoulders his bag of clubs and remarks, “Ye’ll kip to the reet and aim for yon boonker; ye’ll never reech it.” Having delivered his professional advice, he spits and shuffles a few steps backward. In the silence the pink shirt steps forward to address the ball.

Melodrama aside, playing golf at Loch Lomond is a treat and while it is nearly always a memorable and exciting experience, it also manages to remain essentially Scottish. I was there when the trees were turning glorious shades of brown and copper and the sinking afternoon sun was catching the snow on the crest of Ben Lomond across the loch. My opponent was General James Shaw who acts as a roving ambassador and secretary for the club. His nephew Simon, the England second-row forward, had arrived





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hotfoot from the Rugby World Cup Final in Paris and was still fired up, striking his first drive so far we never saw it again. The course looked sublime, turf dry and firm and the greens trim and fast and slippery as an ice rink.

We set off down the first, a gentle 425-yard par four which bends to the left on to a long, thin green with a rash of tricky little bunkers waiting to catch a pulled second. The inescapable Caledonian nature of the course is brought about by the landscape. It is predominantly parkland, although there are hints of links golf in some of the long, rolling holes beside the loch. The sixth, for instance – a monstrous 625-yard par five with a 30-yard-long fairway bunker waiting to catch the well-hit second, and a long, narrow, well-defended green – is one of the most beautiful holes I have ever played and it would be at home amongst dunes by the Fife shore.

The designers have made good use of trees. The two old oaks on the right and left, 290 yards up the fourth fairway, for example, are an indication as to how you must play the hole, but, if you manage to steer your

Top: a seaplane delivers players to the club in front of Rossdhu.

Above: sun shines on the turn.

Below: Gibb on the 13th tee.

second shot between them, you must deal with one of those narrow, domed greens which can be cranked up from difficult to impossible depending on the mood of the greenkeeper.

The course was co-designed by the American Tom Weiskopf who won The Open at Royal Troon in 1973. He rightly considered himself a lucky man to be given such a spectacular canvas to work on. The course, always planned as a challenge to the world's best golfers, was laid out on marshy land on the loch's west shore. It was once a park of trout streams, wetlands, marsh and peat bog with carefully sited avenues of trees. There is an elevation change of 35ft and the sandy soil is stabilised and enriched with ancient oak, Scots pine and Douglas fir.

The major problems for Weiskopf and his co-designer Jay Morrish were how to drain the land and keep the course open for at least 10 months a year. Money and space seem not to have been a problem; investment has exceeded £100m and there were 700 acres to play with. Weiskopf's skill as a designer was established with his instinctive feel for the land and his knowledge of competitive golf.

He also had the luxury of an historic, protected landscape uncluttered with buildings and without the prospect of development. This would never be an amenity course, it had to be a monument to golf, prepared and kept to the highest standard. The course is well drained and in perfect condition.

The idea was to create an international club to which members would be happy to travel from all over the world; not easy when first-class courses are opening regularly wherever you look and your club is 25 miles north of Glasgow. The members would happily travel because of the quality of the golf. The luxury of the accommodation would be taken for granted and cost would be irrelevant. The estate had for centuries been the HQ of the Clan Colquhoun. Rossdhu House, adjacent to the ninth and 18th holes, is where the lairds would sit, drinking their privately distilled *uisge beatha* and plotting bloody vengeance on the McGregors and MacFarlanes. It remains one of Scotland's loveliest historic buildings and has been converted into the clubhouse.

Weiskopf finished Loch Lomond in 1993 and it was an important milestone because it was the first course built in Scotland for 19 years. He has been tinkering with it on and off ever since and turns up every year to fiddle about with the position of a bunker or the subtleties of an approach shot. Today, it

remains home to the Scottish Open, is a 7,100 yard, par 71 and it is not by any means a simple challenge. The turf is constantly tended and pampered by a greenkeeper/agronomist who has the benefit of 36 staff and an extensive grass nursery. When I arrived, there were teams of uniformed men with air blowers clearing the leaves from the greens and fairways so that the course looked as if it had been unwrapped fresh from its packaging.

The luxury comes with the clubhouse and the lodges built on the loch shore. There are steps up to the beds, bottles of malt on the bedside table, three dining rooms and a large bar, venison and wild salmon on the menu and a spa where a Scottish girl called Paula massaged my aching back with hot golf balls.

James Shaw spends much of his time travelling the world to vet prospective members. There are currently 900 and when they reach 1,000 the list will close for a few years. About half the membership is from the UK and Ireland and the remainder from the rest of the world. They pay a joining fee of £75,000 and the annual sub for 2008 is £3,250. You can't play the course unless you're a member or a member's guest. A caddy costs £45 a round, plus tip, and you can take one of the lodges on the estate. There is a second course, at Dundonald on the links near Troon, and plans for a third on the south of the estate, designed by Jack Nicklaus.

The perfect day would be to reach Scotland and end your journey by chartering a Loch Lomond Seaplane to take you to the Loch. Step aboard the club launch. Take a bite of lunch and play 18 holes on a spring afternoon. When it happens, the course will get to you and when you come to the end, a saucy 205 yard, par three 17th, followed by a b*****d of a narrow, curving, 435-yard final hole, both beside the water, you will appreciate Weiskopf's unique ability to mix beauty with danger. Irresistible. Pull all the strings you can to play it. ♦

John Gibb was a guest of Loch Lomond Golf Club, Rossdhu House, Luss by Alexandria, Dunbartonshire, G83 8NT (01436-655 555; www.lochlomond.com). The 43 suites cost from £320 to £465 per night.

JOHN GIBB (2)



how to spend it