



Below: a fairway on the Bandon Trails course.
Right: an overview map of Pacific Dunes.



Westward holes!

In golfing terms, deepest Oregon might be regarded as somewhat in the rough. But the coastal courses at Bandon Dunes offer some of the finest fairways in the world, writes James Spence.

Bandon Dunes, a 1,011-hectare pristine stretch of coastal property in the northwest of the United States, is the world's best golf destination – or at least that's what is suggested by its fast-growing number of visiting players. And its popularity comes despite the fact it lies in one of the most remote locations in the golfing world (it is probably easier for east-coast golfers to play Turnberry in Scotland than Bandon Dunes in their own country). Yet, like pilgrims they go – more than 80,000 rounds were played at the three-course site last year.

Most fly in via Portland to the local airport, North Bend. By car it takes nine hours from San Francisco, a trip best spread over a couple of days to ensure enjoyment of the redwood-and-Douglas-fir-flanked Highway 101 as it meanders north. Three hours north of San Francisco you are in cowboy country and every second vehicle is a pick-up truck. An overnight break in peaceful Eureka, close to the California-Oregon border, is a reasonable target and the best lodgings here are at Carter House, a group of four renovated Victorian buildings.

The ethos of Bandon Dunes was established early on. The philosophy that it's all about the golf suffused every decision relating to the construction of the courses, their infrastructure and how they are run. If you hire a caddy from the 300-strong force, he or she will be with you for all of your rounds, which generates camaraderie. Most golfers stay on site in spacious rooms in the main two-storey clubhouse or in nearby cottages, and play twice daily. The food is hearty rather than fancy and there is a good selection of Oregonian micro-brewery beers and wines on the menu.

Only 15 years ago, the land was an impenetrable, wind-lashed, overgrown series of dunes. Further back, before it was settled by Europeans, it was the preserve of two Indian tribes. The Coos and Coquille tribes still exist in the area, although their numbers are much depleted.

George Bennett, an Irish settler who arrived in 1873,

introduced *Ulex europaeus*, a resilient gorse that quickly covered the dunes and masked the contours of the land. A gorse fire in 1936 was so fierce the town of Bandon was incinerated, but the plant soon reasserted itself. Until golf-course development arrived, the only break in the dense, spiky growth was a track used by four-wheel-drive enthusiasts to reach the beach. Prospecting the site required sharp instruments, bush craft and sturdy clothing.

Greeting-card tycoon and golf aficionado Mike Keiser bought 491 hectares in 1991 and has been improving the site ever since. He was warned against building Bandon Dunes at all on the grounds of remoteness and bad weather. He went ahead and built. He was advised to incorporate cart paths, otherwise people would not come. He ignored the advice, re-instituting walking golf and developing a caddy programme that has become the largest in the world. People urged him to hire a "name" architect – preferably Jack Nicklaus. He hired a then-unknown 27-year-old Scotsman, David McLay Kidd, son of the greenkeeper at Gleneagles. From 1994, when he was hired, until the course's completion in 1998, Kidd struggled with the terrain, the owner and his legion of advisers and friends. When he wasn't in Oregon, he was in Nepal, developing a course for the royal family. Back home, his marriage disintegrated.

Kidd and his crew shaved the Bandon Dunes site of its pervasive gorse and laid out a magnificent 7,200-yard course that begins in front of the clubhouse and traces two anticlockwise loops. The opening couple of

holes are good without being great (Kidd jocularly refers to this portion of the course as foreplay – "You don't take your knickers down straight away"). But the stretch of holes that follows is sublime – as good as any coastal course anywhere.

Sixteen thousand rounds were played in Bandon Dunes' first year. Then Keiser contracted modern architect Tom Doak to build the second course on the site, Pacific Dunes. In characteristic minimalist style, Doak scraped less earth than Kidd, retained gorse and natural bunkering, and built a shorter, even more entertaining course than Bandon Dunes. In its studied ruggedness it is more Irish than Kidd's recognisably Scottish offering.

Last year saw the completion of Bandon Trails, a course that begins in the dunes, slips into the neighbouring meadows and circles around the pine forests. This too has a pedigree, having been created by double US Masters winner Ben Crenshaw, a soft-spoken Texan, and his design partner, Bill Coore.

Individually, each of these courses is establishing itself among the best in the US. Collectively, they add up to one of the most lauded golfing destinations in the world. And the story isn't over – Keiser's private cliff-top course, Sheep Range, which comprises 12 greens and no specified tees (you make the course up as you go) may be developed into an 18-hole layout.

Also, Keiser is reportedly planning courses on other parts of the Oregon shoreline. Rest assured, they will all be dedicated to golf as it should be played.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) flies from Hong Kong to San Francisco. Air Alaska (www.alaskaair.com) flies from San Francisco to North Bend via Portland. Rooms at Carter House, Eureka, cost from US\$175 a night; see www.carterhouse.com. High-season green fees at Bandon Dunes are US\$195 a round and accommodation costs US\$140 a person, twin share. Caddies cost US\$50 a round before tips – and expect tips of at least US\$25 a round. See www.bandondunesgolf.com.