

CHAPTER 1

Do's, Don'ts and Local Knowledge

Since the first edition of *Golfing in Ireland* came out, Ireland has evolved into one of the world's most popular golf destinations. The boom actually began in the late 1980s, with golfers—particularly American golfers—lured by magnificent, uncrowded golf courses at bargain-basement prices. Word spread among the golfing cognoscenti that visitors could pay next to nothing, walk onto often empty links golf courses, golf that is almost impossible to find in the United States, and experience the kind of game previously associated with such legendary, crowded and prohibitively expensive Scottish links as St. Andrews and Royal Troon.

In the mid-1980s, when I first encountered golf in Ireland, it was seldom necessary to book a tee time at all. Occasionally in the summer at the most famous courses you'd need to call a day or two in advance to reserve your spot. But that was rare. Golf was beyond a bargain. For a few Irish punts, a currency that no longer exists, you could play any course in the land. In a majority of cases, you'd go to the bar, pay your green fee and head out onto the links. All of that is now the stuff of lore and memory.

Thanks to aggressive international marketing by a variety of organizations, led by The Irish Tourist Board, the Irish golf boom of the late 1990s saw new golf courses built, many old courses redesigned and an accompanying glut of golf-related hotels, resorts, restaurants and tour companies. Ireland now boasts nearly 400 golf courses. The marketing proved hugely successful and combined with significant word-of-mouth promotion, Ireland had cemented its place among the world's premier golf destinations by 2000. That

has led to a major increase in prices and, in many cases, sharp competition among individuals and tour operators to acquire tee times on the big-name courses. It is now necessary to book such popular courses as Ballybunion's Old Course or Royal Portrush a year or more in advance.

In the mid-1980s, Ireland was a nation in transition. It was emerging from near-third world status, little more than a poor and sometimes backward country beset with sectarian strife. The transition saw Ireland emerge as a prosperous modern nation, due in large measure to the European Union's involvement in shoring up the Irish economy. The E.U. actively promoted Ireland as a venue for business development. It encouraged industrial and high-tech expansion and relocation. Perhaps most importantly, it poured money into the country's infrastructure, which included several golf-course projects. In the summer of 2006, E.U. data showed Ireland to be one of the wealthiest and most expensive countries in Europe.

In addition to the economic encouragement of the E.U., the diminishing pall cast by decades of sectarian violence has contributed to the tourist boom. What was euphemistically called "the troubles"—bombings, demonstrations, knee-cappings, confrontations and the like between Protestants and Catholics, republicans and British loyalists—had a chilling effect on tourism, especially in Northern Ireland and in the Republic's border counties. While visiting golfers could, for the most part, avoid the political fray, many were discouraged from venturing into what they viewed as a war zone to play a round or two of golf.

As an old Ireland hand, I can report that I seldom experienced an injection of local politics into golf—either in the Republic or in Northern Ireland. The news and current events were, naturally, discussed, but as I recall, I was usually the person to start the discussion. Such is the nature of being a journalist. As a golfer and a tourist, I never felt anything other than safe while playing such courses of Northern Ireland as Royal Portrush, Royal County Down or Portstewart, or while traveling to them.

Ireland's transition to a prosperous and influential member of the European Union has had a downside beyond price that affects American golfers. In earlier times, Americans uniformly experienced a quaint Irish charm and a national penchant for warmth

and friendliness to strangers. Immigration reform, new pan-European labor laws and open borders among E.U. members have changed that. A more educated Irish population has also contributed to the change. No longer are young Irish content to work in service and tourism industries. As a result, many of those jobs that support tourism have been taken over by non-Irish and the by-product is a change in the faces and accents that greet American visitors. An example: so many Poles have moved to Killarney that a Polish grocery is booming on Chapel Place and, anecdotally, Polish is the most common language, other than English, on the streets.

One hotelier, who did not want to be named, said that it was not uncommon for American visitors to complain about being checked in to their hotels and being served in restaurants and pubs without “finding anyone who doesn’t speak with a foreign accent, if they speak English at all.” My experience is that’s a bit extreme, but it is not a condition that is improving.

In addition, the Irish press has loudly decried a tendency away from what they call “value for money.” Some of my Irish friends and colleagues speak openly about a decline in the quality of products and services while prices skyrocket. There is no doubt that Irish prices are high, but the value and quality seem pretty consistent, at least in the realm of golf, if not in other segments of the tourism industry. Americans can no longer expect cheap food, cheap drinks, cheap accommodations and, most of all, cheap golf.

That said, Ireland remains welcoming to Americans. It is also home to some of the best golf courses in the world. It is a wonderful a place to visit and play golf.

Every golfer knows that “local knowledge” can shave strokes off one’s score. What follows is some general information and tidbits of local knowledge, culled from experience, which you likely won’t learn from the Internet, tourism offices, your tour operator or anywhere else.

Passports

I probably don’t need to include this, but you’ll need a valid passport. They won’t let you on the plane without one. You won’t need a visa unless you plan to stay for more than three months.

Planning

It is essential to plan your trip well in advance, especially if you want to go sometime during the peak summer tourist season. May is a big month for golfers from both the United States and Europe. The summer months—July, August and September—are the busiest for tourism in general. Booking your airline, hotels, rental car and, of paramount importance, your tee times several months ahead of your departure date will save you countless headaches and disappointments when you arrive. The month of August can be especially busy as that is when entire businesses in France, Italy, Germany and elsewhere in Europe close for summer vacation.

If you are planning to book a golfing tour, it is not a bad idea to start doing your research and comparisons of packages, prices and durations a good six months in advance. That too cannot be left to the last minute, although some tour operators offer deep discounts for late bookings if they have cancellations or haven't filled available seats. Sometimes they do not advertise that fact up front, as they want you to pay the higher price, so before you fork over full fare, ask about discounts.

The best approach is to pick dates and make airline reservations. Booking in January or February is not too early for a trip in May or June. Then look at a map and determine a rough itinerary, reserve your tee times, adjusting for availability and follow with booking hotels. You can usually find a B&B without advance booking. Weekend tee times can be challenging as more and more golf clubs reserve large blocks of time, or even entire days, for their own members on Saturday and Sunday. For example, my home course, Killorglin Golf Club, holds Sunday mornings for members. The majority of Irish golf courses have adopted the American practice of charging more to play on Saturday, Sunday and holidays than during the week.

It's generally easier to cancel a reservation than to try to get one when the booking ledger is jammed. Be advised, however, that a growing number of the most popular Irish golf courses—including Tralee, Old Head, Waterville, Portmarnock and Royal County Down—have taken to requiring a deposit, at the time you book, to hold your tee time. If, for some reason, you should cancel, many of those courses will not refund your money.

Old Ireland regulars will tell you wistfully about the days when you could get off the plane and walk onto any golf course in the land without advance planning. You can still do that occasionally in April, October and the winter months. But from May to September, those days are long gone.

Airlines

Aer Lingus, the Irish national airline, offers the most non-stop flights between the U.S. and Ireland and often has some of the best fares. Aer Lingus is a no-frills carrier. Delta, American, Continental and US Airways also provide regular service. To avoid nasty airport surprises, make sure you know the rules when you make your reservations. Most airlines have weight restrictions on luggage and will charge sometimes hefty fees for overweight bags. Most airlines restrict passengers to one carry-on bag and two pieces of checked luggage, which includes golf clubs. International flights require counter check-in—no curbside check-in for luggage and no electronic ticket kiosks. This is mostly done for security reasons, so allow enough time at the airport.

As a golfer, my preferred route is from the U.S. to Shannon Airport on Ireland's west coast. The overnight flights take about six and a half hours from New York's JFK, Newark or Boston—just enough time to have a cocktail and a little dinner, take a nap or watch the movie and freshen up before landing.

Flying directly to Dublin is an effective route if you plan to concentrate on Ireland's east-coast golf courses or those in Northern Ireland. Be aware when making your reservations that some flights stop first at Shannon, before going on to Dublin. What they don't tell you is that often the plane is boarded by security and customs officials in Shannon, and Dublin passengers are kept on the plane the whole time it is on the ground, which can be an hour or more. Same cautionary note in booking your return. Make sure it is direct and does not stop in either Shannon or Dublin before the transatlantic crossing.

Shannon Airport remains relatively user-friendly. Passport control and customs—which pose varying degrees of discomfort and inconvenience virtually everywhere—are about as easy and pleasant as they can be. As airports go, it is small, clean, easy to get around and efficient. It also boasts a fine tax-free shop. In fact, travelers are well advised to

budget a little extra time before the flight home to do some last-minute shopping at the airport. (While there's ample duty-free shopping in Dublin, the airport looks and acts like every big, impersonal airport worldwide.) Shannon airport is one of very few that permit travelers to go through U.S. Immigration (passport control) before departure, which saves significant time on the arrival end of the journey.

Some people opt to fly to London on British Airways or Virgin Atlantic and then connect to Dublin, Shannon, Belfast or Cork. Going through London is a colossal waste of time. Not only do you fly all night to get there, but once you get to London's Heathrow Airport it takes hours to get through passport control and customs, take a shuttle bus from the international arrivals terminal to one of the domestic departure terminals and catch the short-hop flight across the Irish Sea. And, of course, there's always the unspeakable joy of being processed through Heathrow along with at least a quarter of the population of the known world. If you feel you must go through London, avoid the flights from the U.S. to Gatwick Airport, because most connections to Ireland (including Aer Lingus, British Airways and Ryan Air) depart from Heathrow. That means a long bus trip from Gatwick to Heathrow.

Budget enough time to get through check-in and airport security everywhere. It is generally less time-consuming at Shannon than in Dublin or Heathrow. Shannon simply processes fewer passengers. At the height of the summer season I have stood in the line to go through security for up to an hour in Dublin. The same advice holds true at various U.S. airports.

Air fares can vary widely, and the number of flights changes seasonally. Use as many of the resources available on the Internet that you can to compare flight schedules and prices. Sidestep.com is particularly valuable for this. You can occasionally find significant savings if your departure, and return dates are at all flexible.

Tours

An offshoot of the Irish golf boom has been a proliferation of companies that purport to provide tours for visiting golfers. Like dandelions sprouting in spring, entrepreneurs smelling money to be made have popped up to cash in. You can hardly open a golf magazine in North America or Europe without finding a glut of

tour operators. When I Googled “Ireland golf tours,” the search engine coughed up 12,800,000 sites, a few more than are needed.

They come in all shapes and sizes. Some specialize regionally. Others will prepare customized itineraries. Some work only with groups. Some have been in business a long time and others weren't there last year and may not be there next year. I have talked to players who say they have had very satisfactory experiences with Irish golf tours. I have also encountered players who report less enjoyable results, ranging from mild disappointment to outrage.

Personally, I have never been partial to entrusting my care and feeding to a stranger, but many golfers find it less time-consuming, less complicated and less of a hassle to engage in one-stop shopping for their golfing trip to Ireland. One of the best methods of picking a tour operator is by talking to your golfing buddies who may have been on a tour. If they were satisfied, that's a good place to start. If they weren't, you've eliminated one of the multitude.

I have other objections to golf tours. Most try to cram too much into a short period. That sentiment was echoed by Brian Shaw, the head pro at Greg Norman's brilliant Doonbeg links in county Clare. “Guys come over here and they go on that ridiculous tour, playing two golf courses in a day and traveling around. They all get so confused. They play Portrush and Royal County Down and Baltray [county Louth] and then they jump down here. At that stage they don't know what country they're in.”

If a tour is what you want, here's some basic advice: Don't take what they tell you on the phone or in their Web site at face value. Ask for references and follow up on them. Make sure you get details in writing about what golf courses you will play, what level of accommodation and food you can expect and what is and is not included in the price of the package. Be skeptical if you see such phrases as: “You'll play courses like . . .” You don't want to play a course *like* Waterville, you want to play that exact course and you want it in writing. One of the most common complaints I've heard about golfing tours, in general, is that the tour operators make verbal promises they do not keep. You have very little recourse unless you have something written with which to seek recompense. Consumer protection laws are different in the U.S. and Ireland.

Partially in response to complaints from travelers and partially as

a marketing entity, the Ireland Golf Tour Operators Association was founded in 1996. The association has attempted to offer consumers a measure of quality control and a central location through which to funnel complaints. Unfortunately, any self-policing organization with voluntary rules is effective only when members adhere to the rules. Nonetheless, it has proven to be a respectable place to start your search, if a tour seems like the right option for you.

Money

As a member of the European Union, the Republic of Ireland uses the euro. In Northern Ireland, it's the British pound. The latest exchange rates can easily be checked on the Internet. The best place to change money is at a local bank after you arrive. Most post current rates in their windows, so look around. The banks, however, are not open on weekends, so if you arriving on a Saturday or Sunday, it's advisable to get some euros or British pounds from your American bank before you depart. There are foreign currency exchanges at Shannon and Dublin airports which are open most of the time and can tide you over, but their exchange rates and commissions are usually several cents per dollar higher than banks and, unless you like throwing money away, avoid them.

In a pinch, there are also commercial, non-bank related, foreign currency exchanges all over the place. The commercial establishments bear the sign Bureau de Change. Hotels, some stores, tourist offices and restaurants will often change money for you, but they'll charge you such outrageous rates that they would have been expelled from the Temple in biblical times.

Most hotels, restaurants, shops and major golf courses take credit cards. Many pubs and some smaller golf courses do not.

Bills and Tips

Let's start with an inescapable fact of Irish life. The price of virtually everything includes a Value Added Tax or VAT. In the Republic, it's a staggering 21 percent; in Northern Ireland it's 17.5 percent. On many gift purchases you can obtain forms to be filed at the airport on leaving the country to get the tax money back. You get nothing

back on anything purchased and used in the country, such as hotels, rental cars and restaurant meals.

Most of the bigger hotels and some restaurants add on a service charge to your bill. Most restaurants will tell you how much the service charge is right on the menu; 12 to 15 percent is pretty standard. In restaurants, if there is no service charge, tip as you would in the U.S. If there is a service charge, I usually leave a little extra if the service has been outstanding—something on the order of 3 to 5 percent, depending on how satisfied I was with the service. In hotels I virtually always leave a little tip for the housekeeping staff, about one euro or one British pound per night. Hotel bellmen get one euro or pound per bag, about the same as in American hotels.

In most pubs, you order your drinks at the bar, pay for them and take your own drinks to your table, unless you're seated at the bar. All expect to be paid when the drinks are presented. The bartenders do not usually expect a tip. The Irish certainly do not tip in pubs. If you are seated at a table and a server brings your drinks, tip as you would at home.

Caddies make their living from tips. Most pro shops or caddymasters will offer you a list of the going rates, which you should confirm with your caddie before you tee off. After the round, the rate plus 15 to 20 percent is pretty standard. (I'm always a little more generous if I've had a particularly good round.) If for some reason you take a taxi ride, get a haircut or go to a beauty shop, tip about the same as you would at home.

Smoking

Ireland was one of the first European nations to ban smoking in most buildings. The ban includes pubs, restaurants, nightclubs and theaters. If you feel like a smoke with your cocktail, you'll have to step outside for it. In summer a few pubs put tables outside—if it's not raining—where smoking is permitted.

Getting Around

Unquestionably, the best way for golfers to get around Ireland is by car, unless they can afford a limo and driver. Plan to rent one. Then hold on to your wallet and get ready for sticker shock!

It's expensive. It may, in fact, be the most expensive single item on your itinerary, aside from your air fare. Insurance can nearly double the rates quoted for renting the car, alone. It may not rival a complete set of Waterford crystal stemware, but it's in that neighborhood. Be sure to check on what the deductible is. Nine hundred or more euros is not uncommon, and virtually no insurance covers tires or keys. Base rates are substantially reduced in the "off season."

I have used most of the major rental companies, all of which are represented at Shannon and Dublin airports. There is a wide variation in prices, depending on the size of the car you want, the season and the duration of the rental. Do some price comparisons, including the Irish and European companies, online.

Smaller cars cost less. Unless you specify when you make your reservation, cars come with a standard transmission. That means you shift with your left hand. It's a very awkward feeling at first. The clutch, brakes and accelerator have the same configuration as in the U.S. If you want a bigger car, air conditioning or an automatic transmission, brace yourself for how much it will cost.

Once you get over the initial jolt of the cost of renting your automobile, steel yourself for the price of petrol (that's gasoline). You can probably fill up your car at home three or four times—or make a mortgage payment—for what one fill-up will cost you in Ireland. In addition, they sell it in liters (which is akin to a quart) and watching the numbers change on the gas pump is like watching an electronic game tote up the score.

It should also be noted that some Irish rental car companies either restrict or prohibit people older than 70 or younger than 25 from renting a vehicle. Many charge extra to have a second driver named on the contract.

Insurance

Before you rent your car, check with your own American insurance company about whether you should also purchase the rental company's collision and damage policies. Coverage varies, and while some U.S. policies will cover you in Europe, many won't. It adds to the cost, but the peace-of-mind factor makes it worth it. Some credit-card companies also provide car-rental insurance, and

it's a good idea to check before you leave the U.S. about whether the coverage extends to cars rented in Europe and if so, how much coverage there is and what is and is not covered. There are also time restrictions on some credit-card insurance (e.g., there's a ten-day or two-week maximum).

Rules of the Road

The Irish drive on the left and pass on the right. The best rule is to drive carefully, especially until you get the hang of it. The traffic approaches you from a different side than you're used to, so you look to the right first, then to the left. It will feel very awkward at first. At roundabouts (traffic circles, which are more common than stop lights) traffic in the circle approaching from the right has the right of way. It is considered polite driving practice to make a left turn signal before your exit from the roundabout to tell drivers entering what your intention is.

When you're in a populated area and see two lighted gold balls on posts at either side of a yellow crosswalk, pedestrians have the right of way, and vehicular stopping is mandatory in both directions. Handicapped parking spaces are marked on the pavement, and the rules are the same as in the U.S. Tractors and other farm machinery are still commonplace, especially on rural roads. Wait until there is no on-coming traffic, signal right, and get around as soon as possible. The usual practice is for the vehicle closest to the farm machine to get around next.

The Irish have a passion for horses. In some places you are likely to encounter horses and their riders, even on major roadways. Drivers are expected to give them a wide swath. The same is true for walkers and bicycles. The same passing rules as for farm machinery apply.

The police—the Garda in the Republic—have little sense of humor about driving mishaps. Under Irish law, in almost every accident the rule is “hitter pays.”

Seatbelt use is mandatory.

Speed laws are actively enforced.

Cellular phone use—they call them “mobile phones”—is prohibited by drivers.

I am obliged to tell you that the laws against drinking and driving

are very strict in both the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. The Garda frequently set up checkpoints to inspect for everything from drinking to seatbelt use. In some cases you are required to submit to a breathalyzer test on the street, before you even get into your car. If you're involved in any kind of an accident after drinking they can fine you heavily, take your license, impound your car, put you in the slammer or carry out any combination of the four.

Livestock

The narrow, winding back roads of Ireland, and even some fairly major roadways, are more rural than almost anything you'll ever encounter in the United States. Even the main highways are mostly two-lane and feel constricted to Americans used to interstates and freeways. Divided highways ("dual carriageways," they call them) exist mostly around major population centers, such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway.

Be cautious when driving the serpentine back roads! Cattle and sheep are still herded regularly across them, from farmyards or barns to pastures, or from one field to another. They have the right of way. Don't honk! Don't be impatient! They'll let you pass just as soon as they've gotten where they're going, and not before. An old timer in county Sligo warned me many years ago to budget an extra fifteen minutes "for sheep" on any journey. Like much in Ireland, that's changing, but it's still valid advice.

Distances

Most of the maps you receive when you rent your car will have some rough estimate of mileage on them. Ignore it. Every skill you have developed over the years in the U.S. for figuring out how long it's going to take you to get from one point to another based on distance is out the window in Ireland.

If, for example, you determine that it's about 70 miles from Limerick to Killarney, forget how long it would take you to drive 70 miles at home. In the U.S. you'd probably estimate it will take you a little over an hour. In Ireland it will take you two hours and longer if you happen to hit the regular sheep sale in Abbyfeale or market day in

Castleisland or get stopped for roadwork anywhere along the route. On the narrow two-lane roads, you slow down to a crawl at every little town on the way. (You'll find the roads are better and wider in Northern Ireland, but you won't make appreciably better time.)

Road Signs

Distance signs (green rectangles) and the posted speed limit (small round white signs bordered in red with a number in them) in the Republic are in kilometers; in Northern Ireland they are in miles. The signs are uniformly smaller than those we are used to in North America. You know you are in Northern Ireland when the Gaelic names for towns disappear from the signposts.

Parking

Most towns have restrictions about where you can park. If there is a solid, double yellow line by the curb, don't park there. Parking meters are non-existent. Most places use a system of parking vouchers or tickets which you purchase from machines and place on the driver-side dashboard. Machines that sell the vouchers are usually located every 25 or 30 yards and are well marked on streets and in public parking lots. A notice on the front will tell you how much money it will cost you for an hour, etc. Insert the appropriate coins, press a button and collect the voucher. Some, but not all, give change. None take paper notes.

Telephones

To call the Republic of Ireland from the United States, use the international code followed by the country code (011-353). Then you need the city code. If the city code is preceded by a zero, you ignore the zero. The local phone number can be five, six or seven digits long. Let's say you want to call Doonbeg Golf Club and you see the number listed as 065-905-5600. To dial from the U.S., dial 011-353-65-905-5600.

Calls inside Ireland require only the city code (including the zero) and the number. For example, if you were calling from Doonbeg to Ballybunion, you'd dial 061-396204.

Calling Northern Ireland from the U.S. is the same as calling Britain. The country code is 44. To call any number in Northern Ireland from the United States, you dial 011-44-28- and the eight-digit local number.

Emergencies

Nobody goes on a golfing vacation with the anticipation of something awful happening. In the event you need emergency help, the telephone number in most of the Republic and Northern Ireland is 999. Most hotels will also summon medical or other emergency help for their guests.

Climate

The Irish climate is cooler than most of the U.S. in summer, and be advised that it can rain—and often does—every day. In fact, Ireland has about 240 days of rain a year. That doesn't mean that it's like Burma in monsoon season. The rain often comes and goes in a matter of hours, if not minutes. "It's a fine, soft day" is a common phrase. That means it's raining, but not very hard, usually a little harder than mist but certainly not hard enough to cause you to cancel your golf game. In fact, rain is rarely, if ever, an excuse for canceling a golf game.

Sitting in our local pub in Killarney one rainy May evening, an unhappy American woman asked seriously, "When is the dry season?"

When the laughter subsided, our friend Maurice Switzer quipped, "It's on Good Friday. The pubs are closed."

Daytime highs in the summer are usually in the 60s, occasionally into the 70s, and the temperature drops into the mid- to low-50s at night. But there are rare exceptions. In 1995, Ireland experienced its hottest, driest summer in decades. "It's the worst heat wave I can remember," said Lindy O'Hara when I called to book a room at Coopershill House in county Sligo after a week of record-setting 80-plus degree days. Nobody knew what to pack that summer, but the assumption was that it wouldn't happen again for several more decades. It did in July 2006.

The locals will tell you that you can golf all year in most of Ireland, but take that with a grain of salt. It can—and does—snow regularly during the winter months in the northern, interior and

eastern parts of the country. More often than not it is rainy, blustery and downright nasty from late November until March all over the place. In winter, daylight lasts roughly from 9 to 3:30 or 4. In addition, many Irish hotels, especially outside the major cities, simply close from about mid-November until mid-March because the trickle of tourists is so slight that it's more cost-effective to shut the doors than to pay the staff for that period. Check before you leave home.

What to Pack

For the most part Ireland is an informal land, although, until recently, it was more European and formal in its attitude toward clothing than American. The cities—Dublin, Cork and Galway—are still a bit more formal than the more rural towns. A few city restaurants, especially in Dublin, will refuse to seat you if you're wearing blue jeans, tee shirts or halter tops. For the most part, what you'd wear to eat in your golf club's grill will suffice almost everywhere.

For golf, packing can be a bit tricky. The weather conditions can vary from short-sleeve warm to heavy-sweater cold in a matter of hours. While laboring through a bit of icy rain, verging on sleet, one August day at the Wicklow Golf Club, the local chap I was playing with quipped, "You can have all four seasons in a single round." We did.

Logic will tell you that it's cooler in the north than in the south, and the golf courses on the Atlantic side of Ireland are subject to more severe winds and weather than the courses on the Irish Sea.

You'll wear a sweater most days, so take several in case they get wet. Pack plenty of socks for the same reason. I also usually take an extra golf towel, as things tend to dry very slowly in the Irish climate. It's never a bad idea to tuck a small umbrella into your suitcase so you don't have to haul out your big golf umbrella in the evenings.

While the temperatures are seldom hot, even in summer, the sun can be intense, and I learned early, after coming off the golf course looking as red as a well-broiled prawn, that sunscreen is never a bad idea.

Golf Equipment

A few essentials for the golfer include waterproof shoes, several

all-weather golf gloves, a tight-fitting rain hat (when it rains it is often windy too) and a full rain suit (jacket and pants). A golf umbrella is less valuable than good rain clothes. In some of the gale-force winds you can encounter, you can imagine putting up your umbrella and taking off like Mary Poppins.

A little bug spray can be valuable as some courses have nasty little gnat-like flying critters called “midges” that come out on calm, warm days.

Take lots of golf balls! On the treacherous links courses along the Irish coast, you will be hitting to tight and hidden landing areas and—unless you’re Tiger Woods, in which case you wouldn’t be reading this anyway—you will lose balls. Even after hitting a good shot you can lose a ball. You’ll probably lose more balls than you ever imagined. Of course, you can buy them in Ireland, but they are extraordinarily expensive and are subject to that 21 percent VAT.

Pack lots of tees. Only the big-name, expensive golf courses routinely provide tees. You can buy them too, but you’ll discover that most of the time they are made of plastic. I simply hate plastic tees. While they don’t break, they make a disconcerting “thwock!” when you hit the ball from them.

Take your own pencil, pen, crayon or charred stick. While it’s changing, many courses do not routinely provide pencils with their scorecards. (Some Irish courses still have two scorecards, one for men and the other for women, so be sure to get the right one.)

Buggies, Trolleys and Caddies

The golf buggy (what we call a cart) has made inroads at many of the bigger, newer golf courses, but buggies remain the exception rather than the rule. Some golf industry insiders predict that will change completely by 2010, or so. If you feel that you can’t play without riding, inquire when you book your tee time, and reserve one at that time. Battery-powered trolleys (pull carts) are popular. They can be rented at many of the bigger courses. Most players opt to carry their clubs, rent a trolley or hire a caddy. Before you get there and suddenly discover you’re a pack mule, consider the weight of your golf bag. A light bag makes it easier, especially given the hilly topography of most Irish golf courses. If your bag is not

equipped with a cover for the clubs, buy one before you leave home, as it will help keep your clubs and grips dry in the rain.

Caddies can be arranged at many, but certainly not at all, courses. Only a very few actually have caddies standing around waiting for bags to carry. As the demand for caddies has increased, you'll find they are often teenagers trying to make a little extra money during the summer. They often have little knowledge of the game and will not help you much, except with such basics as where the next tee is. Check when you book your tee time about availability and cost of a caddy.

The fact is that many golf courses are cutting back on the availability of caddies in favor of buggies, which generate additional revenue for the course. Some anticipate eliminating caddies completely over the next several years.

Tee Times

It is absolutely critical to book your tee times as soon as you can, especially during the summer months and especially on weekends. Some courses, such as Royal Portrush, Ballybunion's Old Course, Lahinch and Royal County Down, fill up six months in advance.

Plan your itinerary around your tee times. One successful approach: Once you've decided on your travel dates and gotten your plane ticket, make a list of the golf courses you want to play and group them geographically. Then phone or e-mail for tee times. Do this several months in advance for such popular courses as Waterville, Tralee, Lahinch, County Louth and The European Club. Even some of the less famous courses book up early. Over the years an increasing number have taken to restricting or prohibiting visitors on weekends, reserving much or all of the time for members. In addition, many courses have a specific weekday—Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday—restricted, at least in part, to women members.

Some top courses demand a deposit to confirm your tee times. For example, the last time I played Portmarnock, they had billed my credit card for full green fees and pocketed the money before I left my house for the airport. When I inquired about their refund policy, the young woman in the office informed me that when advance payment is made and the tee time is subsequently canceled, they

generally do not give a refund. The story was similar at Old Head. The young man who took my reservation said a 50 percent deposit was required, and the cancellation policy was that they would give me another tee time on another day—no refund. Several other courses don't even go that far. They require the entire green fee up front, and rain, wind or infestation of locusts, you either play or you forfeit your deposit. Consider this a grim warning about Ireland's consumer protection laws!

Once tee times have been reserved, it's relatively easy to pick accommodations in reasonable proximity.

Courses, Shots, Etiquette, Etc.

LINKS VS. PARKLAND

Irish golf courses are divided into two general categories: parkland courses (which are mostly, but not exclusively, inland) and seaside links courses. Not every seaside course is a links course, but every links is seaside, and virtually every inland course is a parkland course. A few new courses are amalgamating the qualities of both, but this hybrid has not been given a moniker yet nor has it enjoyed wide popularity.

Parkland courses cover a broad spectrum, but most are very much like golf courses all over the United States. Few, except some of the ultra-expensive American-style courses such as The K Club, are as well manicured and maintained as the average American country club, golf resort or even the lion's share of public and daily-fee golf courses. The biggest visible difference between parkland and links courses is that parkland courses have trees and shrubs with more clearly defined fairways and roughs than the links layouts. Links have a wilder look.

For visiting Americans, links golf is the heart and soul of the game, and it is showcased at its finest in Ireland. I submit that links golf is the reason for Americans to go to Ireland. It is something we cannot get at home. We make American-style golf courses better than the Irish or anybody else. I have never found a compelling reason to go to a land where the links courses are world class to play what I play every day in the U.S.A.

There are many definitions of what a "links" golf course is. A links is coastal and built on wind-hardened sand, which generally allows

extraordinary drainage. Traditionalists will tell you that linksland has never been used for any agricultural purpose. Linksland is the buffer between the sea and habitable, arable land. (By that definition, several famous Irish links would not technically qualify, so for practical purposes the definition has been modified.) Links golf puts the emphasis on natural hazards, such as dunes and hollows, rocks, gullies and palisades. The topography is usually rolling and hilly, sometimes craggy, with huge variances between fairway and rough. Some links play right alongside a sandy beach; others are constructed high atop coastal cliffs.

The hardy coastal grasses often provide extremely tight lies in the fairway and can produce monstrous difficulties in the knee-high rough. In between, there is usually a short cut of rough—a few yards of grass that's longer than in the fairway. On links courses, deep rough means uncut, unkempt and often unplayable. When it is not a sea of grass and weeds up to the tummy of a tall sheep, it is given over to such nasty and unfriendly plants as gorse, buckthorn and heather, not to mention rocks, scrub-brush, moss, ferns and sand.

On links, the wind is almost always a factor, from gentle zephyrs to gales. There tend to be very few, if any, trees. At first glance, the landscape can appear stark, but there is enormous beauty on virtually every links golf course in Ireland. For players who have only seen links on TV, the reality is startling. Unfortunately, the television camera does not do justice to the landscapes. TV flattens the terrain, conceals the contours and often makes even the likes of St. Andrews look mundane. The visiting American golfer must exercise caution not to let the glorious landscapes and breathtaking panoramas interfere with what is surely one of the greatest golfing experiences in the world.

I have profiled a few parkland golf courses—mostly those that are uniquely Irish in character or those that have garnered a substantial measure of fame or acclaim for one reason or another. The simple fact is that if you are taking the golfing trip of a lifetime to Ireland and don't know when you'll get back and do it again, you should stick to links. You'll not be disappointed.

SPECIAL SHOTS

The almost constant wind and the extremely tight lies you will encounter in most links fairways require some techniques far different

from those commonly used in the U.S. Players who regularly compete on links courses have an arsenal of low, running shots. American golfers traveling to Ireland would be well advised to learn a pitch-and-run or bump-and-run and a knock-down shot before leaving home. If you don't know these shots before you arrive, you will probably invent them before you leave.

Given the nature of links courses and the fact that the wind is in play on most holes most of the time, you'll save yourself countless strokes if you learn to approach the pin low and rolling. A high lob-wedge or sand-wedge lofted toward the pin on a calm day on an American green that holds is a thing of beauty. On wind-blasted, weather-hardened links courses in Ireland, such a shot can be blown to the Aran Islands or worse. Likewise, a high and floating tee shot is seldom rewarded, and your slice or hook will be exaggerated beyond recognition by the wind.

The deep rough will probably cost you a stroke. If you don't exercise proper care, it can cost you more than that. If you can find your ball in the deep rough on links courses—which is always problematic—your best option, usually, is to take a short iron and get it back into the fairway as expeditiously as possible. This is especially true for women. But even the strongest men will find it difficult to get any distance out of the long rough. Those who try it, often regret it.

Gorse, buckthorn and heather are nasty, ball-eating flora. For the most part if you hit into some, don't try to hit out. Take an unplayable lie, accept the penalty stroke and move on.

In addition, with very few exceptions, the greens are hard and do not hold. A shot played to the pin can easily squirt out of bounds, into pot bunkers or deep rough or even the ocean. Many links veterans putt from as much as twenty-five feet off the green.

Even the pros will tell you that on links, course management and game management are paramount to insure the best possible score. Links golf, frankly, is a far more cerebral game than parkland golf.

WINTER RULES

If you are playing with the locals, it's summer rules all the time, even in winter. Don't even think about moving your ball, regardless of your lie. If you're playing with other Americans or by yourself you can do anything you want.

PACE OF PLAY

One of the biggest complaints about Americans is that they stand around too long on the putting greens. Unless you're qualifying for the Irish Open, putt the damned ball and move along! The same thing goes on the fairway. Hit the shot and walk on.

LOST BALLS

Keep your eye on the ball. If your ball is lost, Rule 27 applies. If you haven't memorized Rule 27, here it is: "A ball is 'lost' if it is not found or identified as his by the player within *five* minutes after the player's side or his or their caddies have begun to search for it."

If there's a group right behind you, it's usually the polite thing to do to ask them to play through while you look for your ball. The British and the Irish are much better than the Americans about letting people through. We could learn something. So could a large number of Europeans and Asians who seem not to understand the concept.

METRIC MEASURES

Some Irish golf courses are measured in yards and others are measured in meters, so be prepared to do the conversion. There seems to be no particular pattern or reason that determines how a course is measured. For example, Tralee and County Sligo have meters on their scorecards; Waterville and Doonbeg have yards. Most courses in Northern Ireland are measured in yards.

For American golfers, the metric system can be perplexing. I came upon it unexpectedly the first time I played in Ireland. While it's the standard in much of Europe, I'd never thought of golf in meters. What does it mean when there's a 150-meter marker? What does that do to my club selection? What does a 163-meter par 3 really mean? I think it's overkill, but some golfers even carry small pocket calculators for precise conversion. (One meter equals 1.094 yards or 39.37 inches.) If you're computing in your head, add 10 percent to the number of meters to come up with yards.

I find this conversion table satisfactory:

10 meters = 11 yards
50 meters = 55 yards
100 meters = 110 yards
150 meters = 165 yards
200 meters = 220 yards
250 meters = 275 yards

FAIRWAY MARKERS

There is no standardized approach to distances indicated by stakes or other fairway markers. On some courses it is from the marker to the *front* of the green; on others it's to the center. Most will have a sign or a notation on the scorecard. Only a handful of courses, mostly the newer and more American-style ones, have anything other than 150- and 100-yard or -meter stakes. A rare few have distances marked on sprinkler heads. Many courses, however, now have “stroke savers”—little booklets that will delineate distances from various hazards or landmarks. They will generally cost you a handful of euros.

RESTROOM

Without getting too personal, go to the bathroom before you tee off. Many Irish golf courses are laid out in the traditional Scottish manner: the front nine plays *out* and the back nine plays *in*. In other words, unlike most American courses, there is no point at which the golfer returns to the clubhouse between the first and eighteenth holes. Only a few of the newest courses have built restrooms on the field of play. It's not something most people think about until it's too late.

CELLULAR PHONES

Some people seem to have had their cellular phone (what the Europeans call a mobile phone) surgically connected. In Ireland, cell phones on golf courses are considered bad form. Many Irish golf clubs have simply banned them from the courses and clubhouses. Bottom line: hang up, turn it off and hit the ball.

BETTING

Most golf clubs in Ireland have local competitions almost every weekend. The rules vary widely regarding whether visitors may compete. Some restrict competition play to club members and invited guests only. Almost all clubs have an “open” week, or weeks, at some point during the summer, which means that anybody with an established handicap can pay the entry fee and play. Most of these open competitions are scored using the Stableford system. American visitors should make sure they understand the scoring rules, as the pure Stableford system used in Europe is different from some of the variations that crop up at American clubs.

When they are not playing in an organized event, many Irish golfers, like many Americans, like to make a little wager on the game from time to time. The games are similar to those played on almost every golf course in the United States, although sometimes the local names for the bets are highly colloquial. It is not considered rude to inquire about the rules and terms before you enter into any wager, and frankly, it's foolish not to.

It is also a good rule of thumb never to bet with or underestimate a youngster wearing blue jeans, a tattered sweater and sneakers and using a set of totally unmatched, out-of-date clubs. This young person will pound you until you bleed.

I once met up with such a young man on the eighth green at the Mallow Golf Club in county Cork. I'd followed him for several holes before we joined up and was smirking to my arrogant, self-satisfied American self about his odd and awkward swing. He'd been a champion hurler, he told me. That didn't mean a thing to me, except that he'd once played a brutal, incomprehensible, field-hockey-like, Celtic sport. When we got to the par-4 ninth hole, which in those days measured only 323 yards, he made me a true believer.

We stood on the tee and waited and waited until the threesome (they call it a “three-ball”) ahead of us cleared the green. I thought it was absurd to wait, until this young man teed up his ball and with his odd and awkward swing launched it into the bunker to the right of the green. “I pushed it,” he said.