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There are three driving ranges and a large putting green at the Bandon Dunes course in the Bandon Dunes Golf Resort.

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## Bandon Dunes considered best U.S. golf course

Oregon's Bandon Dunes is a top 'bucket list' destination for golfers. The coastal course challenges amateurs and pros alike.

By **LARRY WELBORN**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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There is a place, my friend Lazarus says, where the native tongue is golf.

It's a place where they have three of the top golf courses in America, and soon a fourth.

A place where fairways sit on rolling bluffs overlooking wild surf pounding on brown sand beaches.

A place where you must walk, either with a caddie or while toting your own clubs.

And it's a place where everything else – restaurants, hotels and bars – revolves around the golfer.

It's called Bandon. Bandon Dunes Golf Resort, Oregon. In just 10 years Bandon has found its way to the top of the bucket list of golf destinations for the serious golfer.

It's right up there with St. Andrews and the Old Course in Scotland, or Pebble Beach in Northern California.

If you're a golfer, sometime before you kick the bucket, you must make it up to the south-central coast of Oregon to tee it up at Bandon.

So when Lazarus, a Bandon golf devotee and my regular buddy on great golf road trips, invited me to make my pilgrimage, he didn't need to beg. I had heard the buzz, and I was good to go.

We made our journey in early February, which to some may be the most brutal time of the year for golf in Oregon because of the weather.

It can be windy, rainy and numbingly cold.

But to others, it is prime time to go, also because of the weather.

That means cheaper rates, fewer people and a chance to play golf in conditions as close to playing in Scotland as possible – without being in Scotland.

## Bucket list buzz

Chicago businessman and golf resort developer Mike Keiser took a gamble in the late 1990s.

He knew he had a stunning, untouched piece of links land near the small town of Bandon, ideal for building a world-class Scottish-style golf resort.

But would golfers come?

After all, reaching Bandon, about 90 miles from the California border, is not exactly easy.

It's next to nothing, except the Pacific Ocean. It's hundreds of miles from any large airport. It's not near any freeways.

And then there is the often harsh weather.

But Keiser believed that if he built his resort, golfers would come.

The first course, Bandon Dunes, opened in 1999. It was designed by native Scotsman David McLay Kidd, who aimed to filter his holes using the natural lay of land through sand dunes and grassy knolls on a large mesa.

It is a true links golf experience. Nearly every fairway has a view of the Pacific, which is often revealed in angry turbulence, with sets of frothy waves crashing onto the shore.

Keiser was right. Bandon Dunes became a sensation on the golf conscience. Golf Digest lists it as the seventh-best public golf course in America.

Pacific Dunes came on line in 2001. Because Bandon Dunes sneaked up on golfers' radar, Pacific Dunes was the expected sensation. Pacific Dunes is a par 71 track designed by architect Tom Doak that meanders naturally along stunning oceanfront cliff tops with amazing views. It ranks second on the list of top public courses in America.

Then came Bandon Trails in 2005. Architects Ben Crenshaw – yes, the former Masters champion and longtime PGA golfer– and Bill Coore had perhaps the toughest task of all: design and build a course without oceanfront holes that could compare to Bandon Dunes and Pacific Dunes.

Their course trickles from sand dunes to pine forests with a lot of elevation change. A herd of deer crisscrossed the fairways when we were there, and the sunset from the Bandon Trails bar was incredible. Golf Digest ranks Bandon Trails the 21st-best public course in America.

And next year comes Old MacDonald, a throwback to the olden days of links golf designed by Doak and Jim Urbina as a tribute to Charles Blair Macdonald, the father of American golf course architecture. It will be even more a links-style course than the others at Bandon, with some of the bunkers mimicking those on the Old Course, the venerable home of golf.

The quality of the courses at Bandon ignited the bucket list buzz about Bandon, but the infrastructure of the resort sustains it. The Bandon Lodge, the Inn and other accommodations at the resort are all designed and located with the golfer in mind.

Restaurants range from elegant to casual. Cocktail lounges are established at each course. Clubhouses are ideally situated. Shuttles haul golfers and the gear from lodging to the world-class driving range to the course to the restaurant and back to lodging.

For a golfer, it's nirvana. And that's why Lazarus didn't have to beg. I was booking my flights – which can be complicated – that night.

## Getting there

Bandon seems as far away from anywhere as any place. Portland is 250 miles north. San Francisco is 465 miles south. With that said, we still wanted to get there early enough on our first day to get in a round of golf in the afternoon – this was, after all, a golfing vacation.

And this can be accomplished, with a 6 a.m. flight out of Southern California.

I flew Horizon Air into Portland out of Ontario International and had a two-hour layover before a 45-minute commuter hop into Eugene, where Laz met me with a rental car. (He took an earlier United Airlines flight through

San Francisco.) Ninety minutes later we were teeing it up at Sea Pines Golf Course, a nifty track in Florence, Ore. – about 75 miles north of Bandon.

We had a tasty seafood meal at the Captain's Choice in downtown Coos Bay before we arrived at the Bandon Lodge, and within a few minutes we were sitting in the Bunker Bar downstairs enjoying a fine cigar, sipping on Mirror Pond Ale and watching a boisterous eight-ball game on the pool table.

Let's see now. On Day One, we traveled 1,000 miles, played a great round of golf and enjoyed a nice dinner, a cigar and some local brew. Not bad.

### **We came to play**

Perhaps the coolest thing about playing golf at Bandon is this: You walk. They do not allow golf carts. It's the way golf was meant to be.

You can rent a pull cart, quaintly called a rickshaw in Bandon parlance, but our recommendation is – even though it adds considerably to the expense – hire a caddie.

That's the second-coolest thing about golf at Bandon: It has an active caddie program.

We drew Scott, a veteran looper who had a nonstop library of advice, legend and lore about golfers, courses and life. He was on Lazarus' bag when we teed it up at Pacific Dunes under ominous clouds.

The third-coolest thing is the weather. Expect it, prepare for it, embrace it – because if you're at Bandon for more than a day, you're going to get it.

We got hit hard on our first day. This course, Pacific Dunes, is one of the prettiest courses anywhere in the world, with multiple oceanfront holes. It's not ranked by Golf Digest as the 14th-best course in America for nothing.

But admiring the views was hard when slashing horizontal rain and a three-club wind were making the golf as challenging as it gets. Still, seeing the Pacific Ocean at its angriest on the 11th and 13th holes was impressive, with multiple sets of waves howling onto shore.

By the 17th hole, we were getting hail. We played the 18th into the teeth of the storm and walked off drenched but happy we had finished.

An hour later, we're warming up in this indoor chrome spa in the basement of the Lodge, near the Bunker Bar, sipping on a cold beer and talking about golf. We played 18 in as tough a condition as it gets, and we were still enthralled.

That was Day Two. A round of golf on one of America's greatest public golf courses, relaxing in a whirlpool. It just keeps getting better, eh?

### **36 holes**

Bandon Dunes, the course that started the bucket list buzz, beckoned on the morning of our third day. We had an early tee time, but we woke up before dawn to take advantage of one of the finest golf practice facilities I have ever seen: three driving ranges and a putting green the size of Rhode Island. We recommend you build time into your schedule to hit a few balls here before your rounds.

Scott was back on Lazarus' bag for Bandon Dunes, back for more despite another gloomy weather outlook. We got in four holes of dry golf before the skies opened up – again. The rest of the round was played in soggy conditions, but the course never became unplayable.

They were very much aware they were going to get weather in Bandon, so they took proper steps to allow for drainage. This much rain in So Cal and they won't allow you on the course. At Bandon they encourage you to man up.

The highlight was the 16th, a shortish brute along the coastline with one of the best views among many great views. If you're ahead of the pace of play, take a moment and enjoy the scenery.

But if you're lagging, get up and hit. Otherwise, one of the many course marshals will be politely at your side, asking your group to keep up. Since this is a golfing place, appreciate this service: It is designed for the

enjoyment of all.

After a bowl of warm beef barley soup after the round, we headed for Bandon Trails for our second 18 of the day. The storm of the morning blew out, and we had our first taste of blissful weather on the trip. It was glorious.

The Trails is less than a mile inland from Bandon Dunes, but it had the feel of being on a different continent. Holes were protected from the wind by pine forests. A few water hazards dotted the landscape.

We were the last group off the course. After the round, we lollygagged behind for a bit at the ocean-facing Bandon Trails cocktail lounge, enjoyed our Mirror Pond and one magnificent orange-hued sunset.

After walking 36 holes in sometimes damp and cold weather, the whirlpool at the lodge felt even toastier.

Recap, Day Three: an amazing driving range session, two rounds of incredible golf and a cold-brewed beer for sunset viewing. For a golfer, it doesn't get any better than this.

### Getaway day

Good news, bad news. A finger-numbing frost closed the driving range, but they were letting golfers out – a bit behind schedule – at Pacific Dunes. How many chances can you get to play the second-best public course in America? And this time, on a rain-free day.

We're out a bit after 8 a.m. with another pair of avid golfers, who leave tiny wheel tracks through the dew with their hand-pulled rickshaws. This time, without horizontal rain, we see just how stunning this course is.

The 11th, a heavily bunkered, short par 3 hard against the oceanfront cliffs that we played with wedges, and the 13th, a par 4 along the waterfront that required a driver and a long iron, were the most memorable.

We had just enough time to grab a shower back at the lodge after the round, jump in our rental car and drive back to Eugene to catch a 5 p.m. flight.

By midnight, we're back home.

Is this place – Bandon Dunes Golf Resort – worthy of a bucket list golf destination?

Let me answer that question with my final recount: three nights in comfortable accommodations, four days of golf that included five rounds on courses all listed in the Top 25 of public-access courses in America, some comfy whirlpool time, a few fine cigars, several cold microbrewed beers and some good meals.

Not bad. Not bad at all.

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