

The Links at Bandon Dunes: An Unforgettable Experience

Forget all the typical descriptions. This is a “hidden gem”. Located four hours south of Portland, nine hours north of San Francisco and an hour or so off I-5, sits one of the best new courses in years. Located just north of the tiny hamlet of Bandon Oregon, Bandon Dunes is a course you won't believe until you're there. How good is it? Golfweek rated it #10 in it's ranking of the best Modern courses -- before it opened! That's right, of all the ranked tenth! How could it be? Is would build a course in such a



courses built since 1960, this one is any new course that good? Who remote area anyway?

Bandon Dunes is the love child of conceived of it when he first laid spent years traveling the southeast searching for that special parcel, all he saw was a variety of swampland at very expensive prices. What he wanted was sand. He ultimately bought the 1,200 acres (later he acquired two additional parcels, of 380 and 360 acres) and began to set his plan in motion. Four years later, after dealing with the seemingly endless Oregon environmental issues, he finally convinced all parties that Bandon Dunes would be a cooperative partner. Disdaining the “name architects” Keiser hired little known Scottish architect David McLay Kidd, a 30-year-old with only one course to his credit, who went about sculpting the links course on this isolated terrain. Is Bandon Dunes a links course? “It's on the ocean and it's on dunes that were ocean-created”, notes Keiser.

Chicagoan Mike Keiser, who eyes on the land in 1993. Having

Figure 1: The Par-4, 407 yard 16th. You can alternately lay-up short of the waste area or drive over them. But accuracy is key here.

Like many, I was skeptical at first. I visited their web site and while the views looked spectacular, so are the views at Kiawah, and Pebble Beach, Half Moon Bay and dozens of other courses. What is it then? As noted above, one thing Bandon Dunes has is sand. Lots of sand. It's what many of the great courses have as their foundations; Pinehurst, Cypress Point, Pine Valley, National Golf Links, St. Andrews, Royal Portrush to name just a few. The course wasn't so much built as it was uncovered.

Bandon Dunes has several different faces. Many of the greens are elevated, demanding accurate shot control to the hidden green surfaces. Others allow you to use a bump-and-run strategy to thread your shot between the strategically placed bunkers and mounds. And you should practice this shot with great care for when the wind blows, as it frequently does, (it has been measured as high as 75 mph), keeping your ball low is of prime concern.

A hole-by-hole description just can't do it justice, but here are the basics. There are six sets of tees, ranging from 5,100 yards to 7,326. Most play either the green or blue at 6,400 and 6,800 yards. Six of the holes sit atop the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Throughout the course are the natural pockets of gorse, Scotch broom and shore pines, having been there for decades. From the practice range, you can hear the pounding surf as it crashes on the beach. The smell of saltwater is everywhere. Seagulls and Puffins, the courses' logo bird, cruise overhead.

Figure 2: Par-4, 409 yard 17th. With the Ocean to your back, a huge, 180-foot long green awaits your approach.

From the first tee, a slight dogleg uphill, the fairway looks more like a mini-ski slope. With bumps and mounds and knobs awaiting to deflect your shot you had better be prepared to hit a variety of shots, from a variety of positions – few of which will be level. But what the heck, who said fairways had be level in the first place. But apart from finding one of the deep pot bunkers, which might demand a shot sideways or even backwards, there is nothing unfair about the course. The greens are quite large, some could be considered huge -- the 17th green could leave you with a putt of 180 feet – yet the 16th, a gorgeous par 4 reminiscent of the 8th at Pebble Beach, is probably only about 3,000 sq. feet, sitting on the tip of the bluff. Miss it to the right and you have got a 100-foot uphill shot from the beach, if you can find it.

However, Bandon Dunes is also reminiscent of a turn-of-the-century layout. Cross bunkers set at varying distances on some holes offer you the option of carrying them, laying-up, or finding the gap between them. Grass-covered waste areas surround the fairways, with a few strategically positioned at points in the fairway, to further create more challenge and diversity.

Figure 3: The 5th hole, a 470 yard Par-4. Staying out of the waste areas is a must to reach this long, narrow green.

The par-5's are very fair, almost a little easy if the winds not howling. The 520-yard par-5 third played downwind during my first round and I reached it in two with a 3-iron. The second round, I was approaching with a 9-iron for my third – after a 3-wood second. Or consider the par-3 12th at 165 yards; One round it was an 8-iron while the next it was a 5-iron.

Managed by Kemper Sports Management of Chicago, Josh Litwin, the General Manager, is a Chicago native who loves the small-town feel of this Oregon coastline. Matt Allen, the Director of Golf, is a native Oregonian who is thrilled to be at Bandon Dunes.

But mostly Bandon Dunes is about terrific golf. This is a walking course, offering a caddy or trolley for those not wanting to carry their own. There are no cart paths, only railroad ties laid over the dunes, making walking easier, and providing a path for the maintenance vehicles ferrying the staff about the course, a course they diligently maintain at a high level. The poa-anna free greens, something not easy to maintain in this area, are true, fast and firm. There are closely mowed areas surrounding the greens -- reminiscent of Pinehurst -- some of them leaving you 15-20 feet below the level of the green. You can still putt it, and from the tight-bent grass lies, it might be preferable to chipping!

The fairways appear small from the tees, though this is deceptive. The knobs and mounds hide their true width, while directing you to open areas – though usually leaving you with a longer approach.

Figure 4: Par-4 4th hole. At 415 yards, your approach here is downhill with a swirling wind. Landing short and letting the ball roll-on is a preferred shot here.

If I were to select some of my favorite holes, I would probably start with the 5th -- a 445 yard par 4 -- a slight dogleg left with waste areas surrounding the fairways and three grass-covered knobs in the middle of the fairway. Even a good drive leaves you with a middle to long iron to a narrow green. Then there is the 359 yard par-4 8th -- with four cross-bunkers at 200 yards out – leaving you about a 100-yard shot over two deep bunkers to a sloping green. The 10th is a fairly short 347-yard par-4 with bunkers directing you to the left side of the fairway, with the option of attempting to carry-them, leading to a shallow, sloping green with collection areas just off the green. A great short hole to challenge your short game. Finally the par-4 16th. In the summer, playing downwind from the north, players have been known to drive the green, yet in the fall, with a southerly wind, you must strategically place your tee shot for a clean approach.

But you must also dig deep into your bag of tricks; the 7-iron run-up; the putt from 40 feet off the green; the 3-wood chip; all will come in handy as the swales and knobs and bumps direct an off-line shot into the creative zone.

Keiser has visions for more courses at Bandon Dunes. The second layout, under construction by Tom Doak, will play just to the north of the Dunes course. A third course, a private club for Keiser and his closest friends, is also in the plans. A unique feature of that layout, still undergoing some consideration, would be to have sheep perform their legendary maintenance tasks on the fairways and greens! A fourth course, more inland, is also in the planning stages. If Keiser's vision plays out, watch for Bandon Dunes to become the next ultimate destination for serious golfers.

Figure 5: Par-4 14th hole. At 369 yards, avoiding the pot-bunkers with your drive leaves a short approach to a possible birdie-hole.

Bandon Dunes is not the only “links” course in the country. The Ocean Course at Kiawah and Pebble Beach come immediately to mind, along with Cypress Point, Spyglass and the Links at Spanish Bay. Their one common denominator is the ever-present dunes, carved by the constant ebb and flow of the winds and tides working their magic as no architect could. And so as you stand atop the ancient dunes nestled high above the Ocean, you glance upward at the seagulls floating on the ever-present breeze, then to the deep green carpeted fairways, envisioning the demanding shot awaiting you, it is at that moment you understand what captivates us about this game. You understand why this course is something very special indeed. It is reliving that moment that will bring you back.