OPEN FOR BUSINESS

TUCKED AWAY IN FORMIDABLE AND SOMETIMES VOLATILE BASS STRAIT, KING ISLAND HAS JUST BECOME THE HOTTEST NEW DESTINATION IN GOLF.

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The closing hole at Cape Woolamai, with the lighthouse of the same name in the distance.
The wait is over. The long-anticipated opening of two world-class links on Tasmania’s King Island has now officially been conducted with the curtain pulled back on two courses that promise great theatre and a lot of fun.

Enthusiastic and inspired by the quality of the seaside golf land the island possesses, course developers turned their focus towards the small island, located off the north-western tip of Tasmania in the middle of Bass Strait, a handful of years ago.

Once approval was granted for the two courses – Cape Wickham and Ocean Dunes – the anticipation of how great these layouts could be has been growing. This buzz has been fuelled with photos of construction and completed holes appearing on social media during the past 18 months.

With the world so small these days, golfers across the globe have been following the progress of both layouts and have ultimately added King Island to their ‘bucket lists’. Even before the official opening of its 18 holes on October 30, Cape Wickham received nearly 3,000 advanced tee-time bookings for this summer from as far afield as the United States, New Zealand, Germany and Sweden. Most, if not all, of these players will also tee it up at Ocean Dunes, which opened its first nine holes on the same day and is expected to have the back nine in play in February.

Ocean Dunes director and course architect Graeme Grant has compared King Island’s new courses to the famous layouts of California’s Monterey Peninsula.

“I think we’ve got the opportunity to produce something like Cypress Point and Pebble Beach in the two courses down here,” Grant said. “With such spectacular links land and the opportunity to play so close to the coast, we have something reminiscent of what I’ve seen and played on over there.”

Golf Australia chief executive Stephen Pitt said the flow-on effect from King Island’s emergence as a golf hotspot will be felt nationally.

“They will be absolutely must-play destinations and I think that’s important in terms of golf tourism,” Pitt said. “I think it offers benefits for the whole of the country. Often those top-end courses are the hook that gets people over but they play a whole range of courses while they’re here.”

Grant has been living on King Island for two-and-a-half years and echoed Pitt’s sentiments about the island’s golf potential.

“Maybe it won’t happen in my lifetime, but this has got to open up and become some sort of a Mecca for links golf in this country,” Grant said. “As people come down here and see the dunes, they’ve got to be encouraged to do something with them.”

“I’ve been involved in golf for more than 30 years and came down here about four-and-a-half years ago. When I got off the plane, all I could see was Scottish and Irish links land and it just kept going, and it goes from the..."
north-west tip to the south-west tip of the island. It really is incredible to think that people in Australia know so little about the potential of it for golf.”

The emergence of Ocean Dunes and Cape Wickham has some in the golf industry predicting Tasmania will surpass Melbourne is famed Sandbelt as Australia’s premier golf destination.

Golf Australia editor Brendan James and deputy editor Steve Keipert recently travelled to King Island to play the courses and see if they lived up to the hype. In short … they did.

CAPE WICKHAM LINKS

If you keep your head down while playing golf at Cape Wickham Links, you’re missing the best part of playing golf on King Island.

The site is remote, exposed, windswept and stunningly beautiful — or, in other words, everything a truly great golf location should be. Nearly five years after the land was first envisaged as a golf course, the Cape Wickham layout is now a reality, rewarding golfers who make the trip across Bass Strait with an unforgettable golf experience. The two Barnbougle courses now have company at the top echelon of Australian public-access golf.

Cape Wickham’s back story is intriguing. Originally cattle farming land, credit for discovering the site as viable golf course land goes to Andrew Purchase, the founder and former chief of golf course construction company Programmed Turnpoint, during a trip he made to King Island in 2011. So struck by what he’d discovered, Purchase bought a parcel of land south of the Cape Wickham Lighthouse. This land was freehold, however, and it quickly became evident that the really perfect golf-course land along the coastline was crown land and would require some high-up persuasion in order to become a reality.

Melbourne-based author and course critic Darius Oliver along with Duncan Andrews, the owner and developer of The Dunes and Thirteenth Beach, brought American course designer Mike DeVries into the mix as each began to see the site’s phenomenal potential. Andrews financed the project under the proviso that the necessary Tasmanian authorities grant a long-term lease for the most desirable land.

Multiple course architects saw the jaw-dropping location over time and numerous routings were penned before the home-and-away pairing of DeVries and Oliver gelled to come up with the final layout. Work began on June 2013 and the course opened last autumn for some preview rounds before closing through the winter ahead of an official opening on October 30.

A pleasant 40-minute drive north of King Island’s largest town of Currie, Cape Wickham Links lies across the northernmost part of the island and in view of the heritage-listed lighthouse of the same name. The tallest in Australia at 48 metres, Cape Wickham Lighthouse was built in 1881 in response to the sinking of the Cataract 16 years earlier, when 400 people lost their lives.

Aside from its maritime significance, the land has more unique environmental attributes. It is home to a healthy population of short-tailed shearwaters, also known as mutton-birds, which spend their days out to sea before returning home on cue at dusk. They scurry down holes scattered in the dunes and rough within the golf course, leading to an
TRY THE FOOD

A day out on the course is one sure way to work up an appetite.

Food is king here, and the island’s annual Long Table Festival (April 1 to 3, 2016) puts the island’s fresh produce front and centre.

The preparation and consumption of this degustation-type feast takes place over several days and features local beef, lamb, vegetables, rock lobster, oysters, octopus and even mutton-birds, all of which are dressed, adorned and flavoured with local honey, herbs, cream and garlic.

If you can’t make it for this gourmet weekend, don’t worry, much of this produce is available locally and you can pick up hints and tips on preparation from some of the friendly locals. And, of course, there is the famous cheese and dairy products of the King Island dairy to sample.

Currie, Grassly and Naracoopa all offer a choice of dining opportunities with menus full of the best local produce. In Currie we suggest you definitely need to take some time out to pull up a seat at the King Island Bakehouse, have a coffee and try one of their legendary pies, which are made fresh on-site daily.

advisory warning from the management to tread carefully off the fairways.

Small sandstone caves dot the coastline and while most are difficult to spot, one takes prominence beside and below the 12th green, which sits on a small promontory and lures big hitters into attempting to drive the 236-metre par-4.

The playing surfaces are fescue throughout, an ideal grass for not just the area but also the types of shots you’ll both need to and want to strike around the greens. As for manmade structures, a temporary – and for now more than adequate – clubhouse sits on high land overlooking the 18th hole and Victoria Cove, while 20 rooms will be built in the near future on equally enticing land near the 1st tee to cater for overnight and extended stays. That option will surely prove popular, as experiencing the Cape Wickham layout multiple times in a variety of conditions will be half the fun.

And for those curious about playability in King Island’s capricious weather, microclimates exist all over the island. There’s a reason why locals refer to the northern region as “the desert”. Such is the disparity in rainfall, the area surrounding Cape Wickham often receives half the precipitation of other parts of the island. Keen eyes on-course will spot the more arid vegetation and desert-like pockets King Islanders speak of.

The Bass Strait location does serve up ferocious weather on occasions but Grant, Oliver and those who have done their homework and spent time on the island during construction figure golf will be playable 300 days per year, with the bulk of the other 65 falling in July and August.

It’s the trade-off with picturesque, coastal locations – Mother Nature isn’t always in the mood for golf. Yet both layouts are designed to cater for the changeable conditions, Cape Wickham in particular.

TAKE A TRAIL

The King Island Grazing Trails are a network of recreation and food trails covering five distinct areas around King Island.

The Grazing Trails are designed to allow visitors to combine the best of King Island’s walks and sights with the most delicious food available. The isolation to be found on King Island means food is not available on many of the trails but local restaurants and supermarkets can provide packed lunches or picnic hampers with local produce.

King Island also features several maritime trails where walkers can discover sites of shipwrecks, the old lighthouses along the coast and the lighthouses in Currie Harbour and Cape Wickham.
DeVries and Oliver offer golfers broad playing corridors and holes that provide fair strategies regardless of the wind strength and direction. A pod of fairway bunkers that is scarcely in play one day will move squarely into the frame the next. Lost balls will happen but in sleeves not boxes. Instead, the focus is on playability and variety through multiple playing lines and numerous shot options. Oliver in particular is in favour of fun golf over penal golf, a fact not lost on the project’s financier.

“My primary ambition was for DeVries and Oliver to create a course where the focus was on joy or pleasure for all levels of golfer,” says Andrews. “On land like that my personal desire was for everyone to walk off the course just bubbling with pleasure from the experience. This was essential to justify the inherent risk in building a course in such a remote location.

“Every golf architect says that is what they do, but very few get there. It is easy to say but extremely difficult to achieve in practice. The balance between a good test for the good golfer and avoiding a torture test for the bad golfer is very fine line indeed. Too frequently, new courses in my opinion err towards the latter (a torture test) as the architect tries to impress the elite and forgets the rest of us. It is always about some compromise or balance.”

Likewise, there’s a distinct pace and a flow to the 6,150-metre Cape Wickham routing. Just as a magician reveals his best tricks slowly and methodically, the layout hits you with a couple of spectacular holes then quells the rhythm with a hole or two where the features are more subtle before ramping up the action again. Cape Wickham shows off its best natural assets immediately with the cliffside first three holes but play moves nearer to Bass Strait later in the round in more dramatic fashion. A string of fine inland holes displays the site’s versatility before the water comes firstly back into view and then into play. It’s the same with the closing four holes that occupy the land north of the clubhouse. The 14th and 15th holes offer challenges without using the sea or boats before a closing run of holes that does.

The bunkering is selective rather than excessive and most bunkers are small but not so small that they don’t catch the eye while assessing a shot. Occasionally, the sand will be the better place to miss a shot as some bunkers prevent balls from slipping into the ocean or from scurrying into a patch of snarly marram grass or up a sand dune.

The dunes are a feature of the inland holes. It’s a credit to the design duo that, for such an extraordinarily eye-catching piece of golf land, the best holes might just be those away from the sea. The run begins with the 4th and 5th holes but really gains momentum from the 8th and onto the 9th, two par-5s with different but complementary qualities.

The ‘show’ begins with two shortish par-4s along a rocky shelf of Cape Farewell with the ocean hugging the right side of the spacious fairways. The 3rd turns with the coastline for a par-3 that is more open than is apparent at first glance – providing you favour the left side. Superficially, the par-4 4th seems unspectacular and it is visually
compared to the opening trio, but holes like this demonstrate Cape Wickham’s subtleties. A blind drive over a rise with the lighthouse in the distance, there is no indicator where to aim yet golfer’s intuition almost compels you to aim at the shiny white tower. Take that line and you will be rewarded with the preferred path into the green from the left half of the fairway, although once again there is ample space up the right but the approach from there becomes a little more complicated.

The 5th runs parallel with a fairway pinched in the driving zone by bunkers and dunes before a wonderfully nuanced green complex with the ocean behind. The 6th is a reachable dogleg-right par-5 for almost anyone but the rippled green is a menace if your ball finishes in the wrong portion relative to the cup.

The seaside par-3s at the 3rd, 11th and 17th will catch photographers’ lenses, although arguably the best of all to play is the 7th. The hole climbs slightly during its 137 metres to a green angled from front left to back right with a giant swale capturing any shot coming up short or right. A hump short and left and a dune hugging the left edge provide the key contours and will allow carry shots to feed close to certain pin positions. It’s a genius short hole where the correct strategy might only become clear in hindsight.

The 8th offers another blind drive over a saddle formed by two dunes from a location that was screaming out to be a tee. The rest of the hole reveals itself after the dunes have been traversed and once again the cut grass is far wider than the surrounding terrain indicates. The 9th is a rolling downhill par-5 to one of the best green sites at Cape Wickham. Whether it’s your second shot, third shot or more, entry to the green is over or around a deep sandy gorge on the left from where escapes will be limited and to the left of a pimple-like mound with a bunker set into it. The ocean again forms the distant backdrop to a green that appears to slide into oblivion over the back edge. A chipping depression right of the green is disguised from view for much of the journey and offers the best bail-out option, but that’s a relative term.

The 327-metre par-4 10th tumbles downhill through a natural valley towards the ocean to one of the coolest greens on the course. A raised back-right shelf houses a pin position that changes the hole markedly, while other hole locations allow for rolling approach shots to use the contours to find their target. The short 11th features two tees – one high atop a dune, one low and hard beside the sea – before the aforementioned 12th, with its green-on-a-ledge, caps a remarkable run of holes.

The par-5 13th is one of the course’s ‘quieter’ holes as play returns to the clubhouse precinct. The final five holes utilise the northernmost reaches of the site, beginning with a par-4 at 14 with numerous angles
of attack available to a green set in a natural bowl at the base of a huge dune. Vigilant golfers will spot the pin position while driving along the course’s entrance road as that, combined with the wind direction, will often dictate the best way to access the flag. The long 16th takes play towards the lighthouse and an understated green before golfers turn for home with a par-4, par-3, par-4 finish with the coastline omnipresent to the right. The 16th rightfully carries the No.1 index, a 377-metre par-4 with a terraced fairway that kicks everything towards the rocks and shore on the right and a hard-to-hit green with trouble all around. The short 17th is no picnic with a bump in the centre of the green to repel shots lacking the required shape.

The 18th is the ultimate crescendo. A crescent-shaped dogleg-right, it curls around Victoria Cove from a variety of tee blocks. The beach and lapping waves are very much in play (so much so, the owners added two staircases in order for golfers to safely walk down and attempt recoveries from the shoreline) and the high dune flanking the left side often shields balls from the wind, which can add to the intricacy of the finish. A lone bunker short and left of the green asks golfers to hug the dangerous right edge from the tee in order to set up the ideal angle in, but taking that line requires considerable bravery. Not every course can build to such a demanding and exciting closer, yet Cape Wickham does it admirably.

**OCEAN DUNES**

Ocean Dunes covers idyllic golf terrain with fairways that weave over and between sand dunes, and feature several holes on its two-kilometre stretch of ocean frontage.

Located just north of Currie and less than five minutes’ drive from the airport, Ocean Dunes is the brainchild and passion of Graeme Grant, who has been around golf all his life – starting as a caddie, then as a greenkeeper, course superintendent and an acclaimed course designer.

More than 40 years of experience working on and seeing golf courses around the world, Grant probably thought he had seen it all. Then, four-and-a-half years ago, he arrived on King Island.

He originally looked at the Cape Wickham site but figured it was going to be beyond his budget to make a world-class course work on the site. When he was outbid for that site, he looked for another high-quality location along the west coast of the island.

“When I was shown this site I couldn’t believe how good it was,” Grant said. “There were golf holes to be found everywhere, not just along the shoreline but through the wide natural valleys created by the dunes. There are some very spectacular ocean holes and then you go inland to the dunes and then there’s a creek that flows through the course, so there’s a plenty of variety. The quality of the land away from the ocean is such that we haven’t had to move a lot of earth to create some memorable holes.”

Despite his four decades of experience, building Ocean Dunes from scratch has been a steep learning curve for Grant, who owns the course with three other investors, including golf-course builder Bernie McMahon.