

The Kiwi Challenge

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Golf at New Zealand's Cape Kidnappers offers sweeping ocean views, unpredictable turf and lots of sheep

By Michael Hiller

It should have been an easy chip shot, five yards to a big putting green with the Pacific Ocean at my back and the sun casting a golden glow over my left shoulder. It would have been easy except for one pesky detail: My golf ball fell off the side of the earth. Almost literally.



"There are a lot of places your golf ball can go on this course, and many of them are not good," cautioned Ryan Brandenburg, formerly the director of golf at a thrill ride of a course called Cape Kidnappers, on the eastern edge of New Zealand's north island.

"Especially on the cliff-side holes, where a ball can get swallowed by the ocean."

Five hundred feet below.

"He's right," added a local player. "When the wind is up, like it is today, the holes by the ocean are some of the toughest shots on the course. On some days, the wind pushes through at 50 miles an hour."

I should have listened.

By the time I arrived at the 12th hole, the wind howled past me, grabbing airborne balls and tossing them into silly places. I hooked one ball into a chasm, airmailed the next one into the ocean and sliced a third into overgrown rough. Then I reached the 13th hole—and my ball was lost forever.

PEBBLE BEACH ON STEROIDS

Golf fanatic and Wall Street tycoon Julian Robertson owns Cape Kidnappers and the rest of the 6,000 acres here. It's mostly a working sheep ranch with a large chunk carved out for the golf course and an upscale lodge called the Farm at Cape Kidnappers. Robertson purchased the land more than a decade ago, then hired noted golf course architect Tom Doak to construct 18 holes of some of the world's most visually stunning golf, perched precipitously hundreds of feet above the Pacific on Hawke's Bay.

The course tilts toward the sea, tumbling along serrated ridges and over folds of wrinkled turf as unpredictable and exhilarating as anything in Wales, Ireland or Scotland. It's Pebble Beach on steroids.



Doak routed the golf course through rolling pastures, then across jagged thumbs of land. His design is neither fussy nor over-intellectualized; it unspools like lyrics over music.

Most of the holes face the ocean or jut into the bay, unwinding naturally as they follow the contours of the land. Three of the holes in particular—Nos. 14, 15 and 16—seem to have been plucked out of a Peter Jackson movie. They're epic, with sweeping views of sea and sky, and carry monikers such as "Widows Walk" and "Pirates Plank." Most golfers reach for their cameras. I searched for my Dramamine.

Then there's the matter of the sheep, which outnumber the humans in New Zealand by a wide margin. Cape Kidnappers' greens keeper told me they used to allow sheep to roam the fairways freely, saving thousands of dollars in mowing costs, but too many sheep were struck by golf balls. Now the sheep are cordoned.

BEYOND THE FAIRWAYS

Of course, this being New Zealand, lamb finds its way onto the dinner menu at the lodge. The restaurant's seasonally inspired offering features fish, venison and pork, but it's the grass-fed lamb that steals the show. The chefs grow much of their own produce, and the sommelier draws upon a cellar stocked with regional wines, including Kidnappers' own prize-winning Bordeaux blend, Kidnapper Cliffs, from nearby Gimblett Gravels.



"The soil here is like magic," a chef told me. "You can grow nearly anything."

Aspen-based designer Linda Bedell created the look and feel of the lodge and its guest suites, which are arrayed in a series of cozy cottages.

Exposed wood beams, rough-hewn plank floors and high ceilings lend a farmhouse comfort to the rooms. Tall French doors and big windows invite the outside in. Comfy armchairs, antler chandeliers and cowhide rugs all seem to have stories to tell, given the right chill in the air and crackle in the fireplace.

Slip on a fluffy cotton robe, open the jar of freshly baked chocolate cookies delivered to your room each day, pour a glass of cold milk (you'll find it in the mini-fridge just below the cookie jar) from the nearby dairy and snuggle in for the evening.

If golf isn't your passion, the resort also offers a full-service spa, farm tours, walking trails, a gannet seabird colony, quad biking, mountain biking and trout fishing.

"This place is very special," Brandeburg added. "It's like Napa Valley and Scotland, all rolled into one."

NEED-TO-KNOW INFO

Cape Kidnappers and the Farm at Cape Kidnappers, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand

Green Fees: Approximately \$300

Getting there: Qantas and Air New Zealand offer regular flights to Auckland, New Zealand, from Los Angeles, then connecting to Napier (Hawke's Bay) Airport, about 20 minutes from Cape Kidnappers.

Info: capekidnappers.com



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