

# MELBOURNE SHUFFLE

**A** CENTURY AGO, golf-obsessed businessmen in Melbourne, Australia, sometimes kept a second set of clubs at the office. That way, if someone came looking for them while they were out playing, their secretary could say, "Well, his clubs are here, so I know he's not at the course." In those days, Victoria Golf Club (which had founding members named Green and Fairway) was downtown, on the north bank of the Yarra River. In the 1920s, as the city expanded, the club moved a dozen miles southeast, to the village of Cheltenham. ➤➤

The 175-yard sixth hole at Royal Melbourne's East Course.



edited by **MATT GINELLA**



I visited this past June and stayed in the clubhouse, which has 15 bedrooms for overnight guests. (During the Australian summer, which runs December through February, the daily room rate, including golf and all meals, is roughly \$300—a steal. The club also offers packages that include rounds on other courses.) My room had just been vacated by one of Victoria's longtime regulars, a woman from Vermont who comes for 10 weeks every year and for an additional three weeks at the time of the Australian Masters (played every November, this year at Victoria). I shared the guest wing that night with 19 women, most of them in their 60s, who were midway through a weeklong clinic. When I turned in, after a dinner of steak and warm kangaroo salad, I could hear them in the dining room, still whooping it up.

Victoria is one of many excellent courses in Australia's Sandbelt, a 25-square-mile region of undulating terrain that once was at the bottom of the sea. The sandy soil and gently sculpted topography are ideally suited to golf. Peter Thomson (who won the British Open five times and is a longtime Victoria member) described the Sandbelt to me as "a cross between linksland and parkland"—a little like Ireland with trees. Victoria's first hole is the first of many pleasant surprises: a 254-yard par 4 that produces more bogeys than birdies. I played with three members and learned that the conveyances known as pullcarts in the United States and as trolleys in the United Kingdom are



## COURSE GUIDE



1 **Royal Melbourne G.C.** (\$363)  
rmgc@royalmelbourne.com.au,  
011-61-3-9598-6755

2 **Victoria G.C.** (\$240)  
golfshop@victoriagolf.com.au,  
011-61-3-9583-1170

3 **Kingston Heath G.C.** (\$317)  
golf@kingstonheath.com.au,  
011-61-3-8558-2700

called buggies in Australia.

Literally across the street from Victoria is Royal Melbourne, which is listed above the fold in almost all rankings of the world's greatest courses. There are two 18s, one of which, the West Course, was substantially designed in 1926 by Alister Mackenzie, whom the club had imported on the recommendation of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews. During that trip, Mackenzie tinkered with other Sandbelt courses—Victoria among them—and made a lasting impression on Australian golf. (American architect Tom Doak has described Mackenzie's trip as "two months that changed a continent.") Mackenzie's most recognizable contribution to Royal Melbourne might be the bunkers, many of which have wildly ragged margins, like the tangled eyebrows of angry old men.

I played Royal Melbourne with Richard Allen, who owns a public-relations business in the city and looks a little like a younger Tom Watson. Because hardly anybody else was around, we played the Composite Course, which consists of the best 12 holes from Mackenzie's layout and the best six from the second 18, the East Course, which was added in the 1930s. The Composite is officially used only for special events, such as the Presidents Cup, which returns to Royal Melbourne in 2011.

In the Sandbelt pecking order, a membership at Royal Melbourne (a bargain, at less than \$3,000 a year) packs the most social gunpowder, but the best course is probably Kingston Heath, three or four miles to the east. In 2009, Golf Digest picked Kingston Heath as the second-best course in Australia—after





Kingston Heath has a 160-yard 19th hole (above) that sometimes gets used in place of the 10th. At Victoria Golf Club (below), you can see why they call this the Sandbelt.

New South Wales Golf Club, in Sydney—and the 11th-best outside the United States. I played with a group of mostly retired men, who call themselves FLAG (Friday Lunch and Golf) to distinguish themselves from WAG (Wednesday Afternoon Golf). We started with wine and sandwiches in the clubhouse, and, as we ate, a member named Maurice made teams by drawing numbered ivory tiles from a box.

Melbourne has distinct seasons, but there's never snow, and you don't have to be a nut to play year-round. The weather can be fickle, though. I took my rain jacket to Kingston Heath and was glad I'd brought it. Then I wished I'd left it in my car, then kicked myself for forgetting my sunglasses and sunscreen, then searched my bag for rain gloves, then cursed my sweater, then wished I'd worn long johns—all within a couple of hours. But the course is wonderful, under all conditions. The Sandbelt has been very dry in recent years, and all three courses

I played were taking urgent, expensive steps to improve their access to water. But the greens were magnificent, and the Melbourne area has one of the highest concentrations of accessible high-quality courses outside the British Isles.

The only downside to golf in the Sandbelt, for an overseas visitor, is that Australia is almost as far away as the moon. Mackenzie had to stay for a couple of months just to get over ship lag. Flying from New York to Melbourne usually takes about 24 hours, including layovers, and costs upward of \$1,400 round trip even when you're sardined in the back of the plane. (Round trip business-class tickets go for about \$6,000, and first class can top \$20,000.) But if you're a Mackenzie junkie, or if you're planning to hang around for a while, like that woman from Vermont, or if you happen to be going to Australia anyway, as I was, then you don't need to worry about running out of excellent golf courses or friendly, interesting people to play them with.

#### LOCAL KNOWLEDGE



#### ▶▶ HIT THE ROAD, MATE

If you suddenly feel over-golfed—or if you like to surf—take a couple of days to explore the Great Ocean Road, which runs for 151 miles along the southern coast of Victoria (above) a little more than an hour southwest of Melbourne. The road was built by returning veterans of World War I, and the views are spectacular. The entire stretch is known as the Surf Coast because of the equally spectacular waves.

#### ▶▶ THE GREAT EIGHT

The top Sandbelt courses are often referred to as the Seven Sisters: Commonwealth, Huntingdale, Kingston Heath, Metropolitan, Royal Melbourne, Victoria and Yarra Yarra. You could play all seven while staying at any hotel in downtown Melbourne, then take the short flight to Tasmania to play Tom Doak's Barnbougle Dunes, which is No. 20 on Golf Digest's list of the 100 Best Courses Outside the United States.



#### ▶▶ TROLLEY GOOD

Melbourne's Central Business District (above) is charming, lively and often compared to the most agreeable parts of Boston and San Francisco. It's easy to explore on foot, but if you feel like riding, it's also served by one of the world's oldest and most user-friendly trolley systems. The trolley is the reason for the Melbourne "hook turn"—a local automobile maneuver that's (somewhat) easier to execute than describe.



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