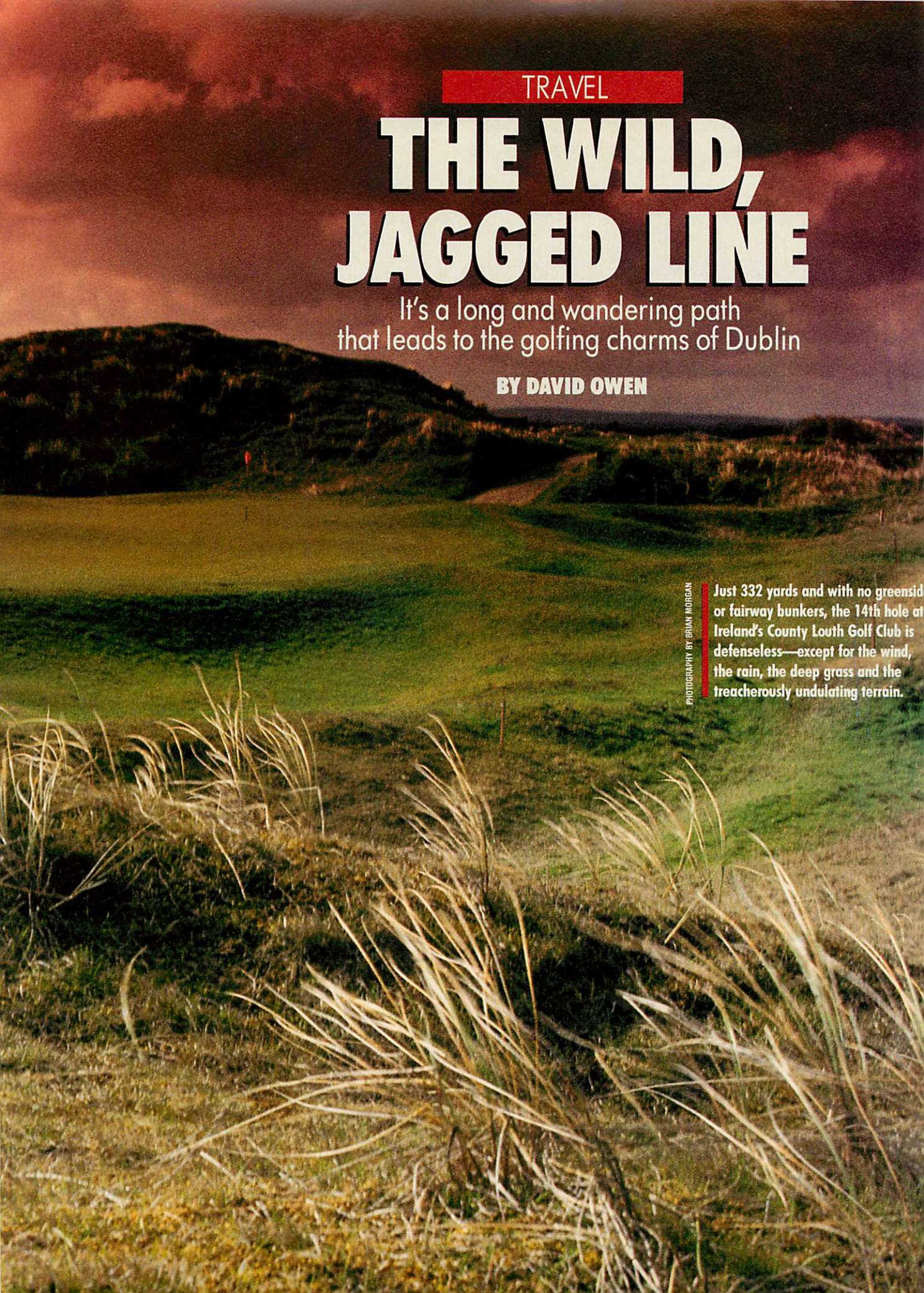
TRAVEL

THE WILD, JAGGED LINE

It's a long and wandering path that leads to the golfing charms of Dublin

BY DAVID OWEN



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN MORGAN

Just 332 yards and with no greenside or fairway bunkers, the 14th hole at Ireland's County Louth Golf Club is defenseless—except for the wind, the rain, the deep grass and the treacherously undulating terrain.

"Cold and very windy," said the forecast in The Irish Times, "strong to gale-force west to northwest winds, squally rain and hail showers, but sunny intervals also."

Just like the Irish to find a silver lining.

Actually, the weather was pretty nice. Only once during my dozen rounds of golf did it rain really hard, and on that occasion the wind was blowing so fiercely the rain fell horizontally, leaving the fairways relatively dry. I grew up in Kansas City, in the middle of Tornado Alley, so I know how to get around while leaning forward at a 45-degree angle. Besides, the storm blew out to sea toward the end of the morning, and I played a second 18 holes in sunshine after lunch.

I went to Ireland last November to play half a dozen courses in the Dublin area, and despite some ragged weather, had a terrific time. I learned: (1) There are a number of memorable courses within easy striking distance of Ireland's capital, (2) winter isn't necessarily the worst time to play them and (3) Ireland is a worthy destination for Americans who feel a deep chromosomal yearning to play golf on terrain so similar to that which the game began on. Although Ireland lies as far north as parts of Saskatchewan in Canada, the Gulf Stream keeps the seaside courses playable year round.

My first stop was the **Royal Dublin Golf Club,** a few miles northeast of the city's center. Royal Dublin is sometimes compared with the Old Course at St. Andrews, primarily because both are links, both run all the way out and all the way back and both are flat and quirky.

The comparison surely originated in Ireland. Royal Dublin has little of the primordial spookiness permeating the Old Course. There are fewer notable holes and the smokestacks of Dublin make for a less stirring backdrop than the spires of St. Andrews. Nor is the course particularly ancient. It was laid out shortly before the turn of our century on a narrow peninsula of sand that did not exist before the turn of the 19th century. The peninsula materialized following the construction of the Bull Wall, an enormous breakwater built to prevent tide-swept sediment from clogging Dublin's harbor. (Among the Bull Wall's designers was an out-of-work sea captain named William Bligh, whose résumé included the loss of His Majesty's Ship Bounty.)

The Island's original members traveled by boat from the town of Malahide, visible across the water.

Although Royal Dublin is no Old Course, it is nonetheless a very good place to play and not too pricy at IRL£45 on weekends, IRL£35 during the week. (One Irish pound equals approximately $1.40.) Royal Dublin has been the site of the Irish Open and is the home course of Christy O'Connor Sr. Its best-known hole is the 18th, a sprawling par 4 that used to be a par 5. To reach the green with your second shot, you must flirt with out-of-bounds on the right by cutting off a massive, creek-bordered, 90-degree dogleg. Errant balls disappear, often forever, into a scrubby field called, oddly enough, the Garden.

On the way back to my hotel, I gave a ride to an elderly man who had approached me in the parking lot. As we set out, I asked him how long he had been a member. "I am a caddie," he said. "I have worked on 157 golf courses—83 in Ireland, 71 in England, and three in Scotland. As I lie in bed at night, I recite their names. I used to carry between 12 and 14 bags a week in season; I now carry two, because I won't work for less than I'm worth. I preferred caddieing in England because the pay is better there, but my wife missed her family in Dublin and wanted to return. I couldn't cook, so I had to come along.

"I have caddied for 10 Ryder Cup players, some before, some after, none during. I caddied for Paddy McGuirk when he won the Carrolls International in 1973. He insisted on carrying a ridiculous selection of clubs. He carried a 1-wood, a 2-wood and a 5-wood. He couldn't hit the 2-wood, and he didn't need the 5-wood because he also carried a 2-iron. He had to hit his driver from the fairway 16 times in that tournament. He would grip down, cut the hell out of it, and pray."

Dropping my passenger at a busy corner, on the north side of the city, I plunged into the driving nightmare of central Dublin. As in many cities laid out before the invention of the oxcart, the shortest path between two points in Dublin is likely to be a wildly jagged line.

Early the next morning, I headed north again, to **Portmarnock,** a course that not only has a place on nearly every list of the world's great courses but is a certifiable bargain at IRL£40. The 1991 Walker Cup was held there, and

To reach the green on the K Club's seventh hole players must walk across a 150-year-old suspension bridge.

the members of the PGA European Tour once voted it their favorite course. I arrived in gale-force winds and driving rain, but of course played anyway. There was virtually no one around. The bored caddiemaster, wearing storm gear and standing near the door of the golf shop, watched without comment as my first tee shot rose almost vertically against the wind then seemed to bend back gracefully toward the tee.

Despite the conditions, I loved the course, which meanders through shallow valleys defined by ragged dunes. My favorite spot was a bench beside the 13th tee. It faces the Irish Sea, which comes dramatically into view as you climb the dune to the tee box. While waves crashed on the beach below my feet, I looked out over the dark water at Ireland's Eye, a desolate island with the remains of a seventh-century convent at one end. The same view appeared at the 15th, a notoriously difficult 185-yard hole Ben Crenshaw once called the best par 3 in the world and Gary Player called the best par 5. Its crowned elevated green is guarded by bunkers, tall grass, scrubby dunes, and the howling wind. I aimed a 4-iron virtually toward England and watched the gale push my ball back into a bowl-shaped depression on the opposite side of the green.

Portmarnock wouldn't be a good place to spend a golfing honeymoon unless, of course, you were counting upon a very short marriage. Like Royal Dublin, it has no women members, and female guests and visitors are only allowed at certain times. The women's tee markers are placed seemingly at random, often in the footpaths leading from the men's tees to the fairways. The club has a nice locker room for members, a pretty nice locker room for visitors and then a teensy changing room for women, across the hall from the manager's office.

The smartest thing I did before leaving for Ireland was to pack two rainsuits. After my round, I spread my wet one on the back seat of my car and went to lunch at a pub in town. After lunch, I put on my dry suit. The rain had stopped and the sun had come out by then. But the wind was still blowing hard and my rainsuit kept it from cutting through me as I played a second 18. I was also glad that I had brought two pairs of neoprene-and-vinyl gloves, since they kept my hands warm when the wind was blowing and prevented my grips from slipping in the rain.

On the recommendation of the Irish Tourist Board, I'd been staying at a hotel called Jurys on the southeast side of Dublin. Jurys was described as "luxury" accommodations, but I was reminded of a down-at-the-heels Holiday Inn, imbued with the sort of grim characterlessness that apparently seems quintessentially American to people who don't think much of Americans. Worse, Jurys is a long way from the lively parts of Dublin, and an even longer way from the best golf courses, most of which are to the north. I decided to move my base of

operations to a small hotel in Howth, a picturesque fishing village and resort situated on a bulb-shaped promontory overhanging the northern part of Dublin Bay.

In Howth that evening, I visited a pub called the Pier House near the water's edge. The comfortable old bar was filled with workingmen—or, as is nearly as likely to be the case in Ireland, nonworkingmen. (During the American Presidential campaign, Irish newspapers had to explain why a single-digit unemployment rate was considered a political issue.) Astonishingly, the television in the pub was tuned to the PGA Grand Slam, an event one would never find on TV in a comparable American bar. I marveled at the contrast and found myself wishing that golf in America could somehow shed its country club taint and truly become a sport for everyone as it clearly was here. Just then the bartender asked me whether I would mind if he switched the channel to a football match, since no one except me seemed to be interested in the golf.

Just around the corner from the Pier House is the King Sitric, a seafood restaurant reputed to be one of the few good restaurants in all Ireland. (Though there seems to be a revival of Irish cuisine, I believe the island's culinary history has less to do with pushing forward the frontiers of fine dining than with averting mass starvation. Many of the national dishes tend to be mushy and white, or else made from parts of questionable origin.) The King Sitric looked too formal and empty, so I ate instead at The Abbey Tavern, just around the corner and up the hill. The Abbey has a wonderfully dark and medieval-looking bar downstairs, a semi-horrendous restaurant upstairs and a cramped annex in which a lively troupe of Irish-folk musicians performs in the evenings.

Irish golf has known two great periods of growth. The first was roughly 100 years, when Royal Dublin, Portmarnock, and quite a few other courses were constructed in response to the sudden popularity of the Scottish game. The second is now. Speculators all over the country are bulldozing old farms, partly in the hope of tapping a recent upsurge in domestic demand for golf and partly in attracting international travelers. **St. Margaret's** is one of the best known of the new courses. It opened last year, and its owners hope it will one day be chosen as a site for a European tour event.

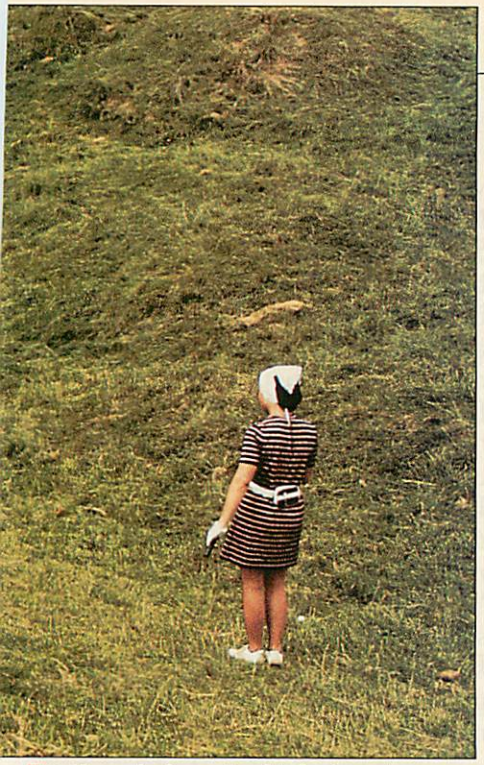
The sky was perfectly clear when I arrived at St. Margaret's, but the wind was cold and blowing hard. On a downhill, downwind, 150-yard par 3, where I would have hit an 8-iron in calm weather, I hit a pitching wedge and watched my ball sail into a creek on the far side of the green. Originally, St. Margaret's was a cow pasture and it still looks like one. Hundreds of trees have been planted, but it will take years before any are big enough to affect course strategy. On several holes golfers are on their honor to stick to the fairway and not save yardage by cutting through a grove of microscopic saplings.

I played with a man named George, a sales representative for a big British chemical company whose clients include the superintendents of golf courses. His critique of St. Margaret's was not pretty. It had been opened too quickly, he said. In just two months the greens had to be resodded, even rebuilt. We watched some workers fussing around the edges of a ruined green that was as lumpy as a quilt. On many holes, putting was pointless. On several greens careless contouring had created ridges and bumps scalped by the mowers. In addition, he said, the course designers had paid insufficient attention to soil compacting during construction. Indeed, we had to step carefully to avoid the many boggy areas. Such problems, George said, were common on a number of new courses, because of pressure by the

owners to begin earning revenue as quickly as possible. It will be several years before St. Margaret's is worthy of a return visit.

The next day I drove north to Baltray, a small village on the outskirts of the ancient port city of Drogheda. Baltray is the home of **County Louth Golf Club,** a wonderful links situated near the intersection of the Boyne River and the Irish Sea. Usually referred to simply as Baltray, the course is reminiscent of Portmarnock, but eerier. The seaside holes look like moonscape covered with grass. The dunes beside the fairways are jagged, stark, and weirdly sculpted; the greens seem like smoother continuations of the undulating ground around them. The course was overhauled in the 1930s by Tom Simpson, who also did work at Ballybunion, Muirfield, and Sunningdale. Simpson liked to build tough, interesting greens that were not overly dependent on bunkering. Baltray's greens are considered to be among his finest.

In the morning, playing with Kevin Beirth, who had been an assistant pro at Baltray the year before, I asked him what he did now. "Play golf," he said simply. The wind was blowing so hard the divots flipped out of divot



Golf may be becoming big business in Ireland, but at its roots it remains very much a game of the people.

holes, the sand blew out of bunkers and my pullcart tipped over twice. On the 476-yard, par-5 11th, which played straight downwind, I hit a 3-wood off the tee, then hit an 8-iron 10 yards past the pin.

The pro at Baltray turned out to be Paddy McGuirk, the golfer whose club selection in the 1973 Carrolls International had so annoyed the caddie hitching a ride into Dublin with me. McGuirk gave me a copy of a book called *The Baltray Century,* which the club had published earlier in the year for its centennial. Facing the title page is a portrait of Baltray's most distinguished member, Philomena Garvey, who won the Women's Irish Open 15 times and the women's British Amateur in 1957. (Baltray has no ban against women members, and it has been the home of many notable Irish women golfers.)

After lunch, I played a second round by myself. A storm threatened but never arrived. At one point, half the sky was dead black, half was flawless blue, and an enormous rainbow stretched from one horizon to the other. I was stuck behind four local priests who treated every ball the way they would a soul, never giving one up for lost. They also never gave a thought to letting me play through. I saw them later, in their black robes, in the club's dining room, where they were drinking tea and taking turns studying their check.

For IRL£15 I spent the night in one of 13 bedrooms that Beltray maintains for visitors. My room was small, spare and not very comfortable. The bathroom was down the hall. But I loved spending the night in the clubhouse. At 7:30 the next morning, as I was packing my suitcase, the cook knocked at my door to tell me my breakfast was ready.

After the standard Irish eye-opener of cornflakes, toast, eggs, tomato, bacon and sausage, I drove on to Straffan, a village to the west of Dublin and home to the **Kildare Hotel & Country Club**—known familiarly as the K Club. On a map the distance between Baltray and Straffan is unintimidating. In a car it is measured in light years. To drive from the north of Dublin to the west of Dublin, you have little choice but to drive through Dublin itself. The route winds through side streets and over tiny bridges, repeatedly doubling back on itself, and is marked with ambiguous miniature signs.

The K Club is the dream project of an Irish mega-mogul named Dr. Michael Smurfit, who in 1988 bought an ancient 330-acre estate and spared no expense in turning it into an almost absurdly luxurious resort. Among a great many other attractions, it has a golf course designed by Arnold Palmer and a clubhouse on a level with those of the snootiest American country clubs. The hotel—the only one in Ireland ever to be awarded five stars by the Automobile Association of Ireland—occupies the magnificently renovated and expanded Straffan House, parts of which date to the sixth century. Rooms in the hotel begin at IRL£145 a night, and go up to IRL£800 (for the Viceroy Suite). I could have lived comfortably for several weeks in just the bathroom of my single. It had a bathtub the size of a small swimming pool, and a shower in which the water pressure was so ferocious that when I turned it on I feared for the safety of ships in Dublin Harbor.

I had been warned about the golf course at the K Club by George, my St. Margaret's playing partner. He had told me that the club had wildly underestimated the amount of drainage they would need to keep the course dry. The river Liffey winds through the estate, and parts of the course are below flood level.

As I played, teams of workers were top-dressing muddy fairways with enormous loads of sand. Others were installing gravel-and-sand-filled slit drains on the mounds and tee boxes, which were especially mucky. I wore my rainpants just to keep the mud from soaking through to my skin. The greens here were in better condition than those on the St. Margaret's course, but they still showed signs of immaturity, and they were annoyingly untrue. All things considered, the IRL£77 green fee seemed downright audacious.

Despite drainage problems, the K Club is a beautiful course, and it may be worth a visit even in its current raw state. Elements of the old estate—such as ancient walls, huge oaks and tangled windrows—are skillfully incorporated into the course. My favorite hole was the seventh, a long double-dogleg par 5 with a green situated at one end of a wooden island in the Liffey. You cross to the green on a 150-year-old iron suspension bridge while Straffan House and its gardens loom majestically behind you.

Only three of the hotel's 45 rooms were occupied the night I stayed there, so the staff-to-guest ratio in the dining room was uncomfortably high. I ordered venison, and it wasn't bad but it didn't alter my opinion of Irish cooking. The only other diners were an elderly couple from Mississippi.

The woman had spent the day watching birds, and the man had spent it shooting birds, so at least they had a common interest.

Early the next morning, I set off for a golf club called the **Island,** situated on a sandy peninsula just up the coast from Portmarnock. The Island was founded in 1890 by 10 men—known in club lore as The Syndicate—who objected to what was then a ban on Sunday golf at Royal Dublin. The Island is not, in fact, an island, but it looks like one from Malahide, the village across the inlet to the south. At first, the course was accessible only by boat from Malahide; now it's just a short car trip from Dublin.

The Island is not a better course than Portmarnock or Baltray, but it has powerful charms. The dunes flanking the fairways are enormous—one of the holes is called, appropriately, the Andes—and they create a supernatural sense of enclosure as you make your way from tee to green. Throughout the course you can see evidence of earlier routings. (Both the course and the peninsula have changed dramatically over the last century.) There are blind shots, sheltered greens and stirring views.

The course also has several outstanding short par 4s, the most unusual being the 347-yard 14th. Its fairway is the narrowest I have ever seen—just a few paces wide—guarded on the left by tall grass and a ridge of dunes, and on the right by tall grass and a water hazard. The green is no wider than the fairway. From the air, the hole would look like the back of your index finger. A member once made a hole-in-one there, but you could as easily get a 10. Standing on the tee box (which sits on the foundation of the original clubhouse), you can see the landing where the original members used to arrive by boat.

For my last night in Ireland, I returned to Dublin to stay at the Shelbourne Hotel. At IRL£125 a night, the Shelbourne is to Dublin what the Waldorf or the Plaza is to New York. It's across the street from St. Stephen's Green and a couple of blocks away from Grafton Street, a lively shopping district that is mercifully off limits to cars. On Friday evenings, the Shelbourne's lobby transforms into a tasteful pickup joint, overflowing with what must be every young professional in Greater Dublin. I shouldered my way through this hormone-rich crush and made my way to Oisin's (pronounced like "ocean's"), a small restaurant that serves scrupulously authentic Irish fare and is recommended by several guidebooks. The food was—oh, well, never mind.■

David Owen is a staff writer for The New Yorker currently at work on a book about golf. This is his first piece for GOLF DIGEST.