

FIRST in CLASS

With three golf courses covering the timeline from Old Tom Morris to Tom Doak, Ireland's **Rosapenna** isn't just the "world's first true golf resort," it's one of its finest

by **RICHARD PENNELL**

L.C. LAMBERT

"It is difficult to write with restraint about Rosapenna. The exceptional beauty of the surroundings is liable to interfere with unbiased criticism."

Harry Colt, 1927



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he intervening century has done little to dampen the "exceptional beauty" that Harry Colt perceived in this wild and wonderful corner of northwest Ireland, but one element that has developed beyond all expectation is the breadth and depth of golf on offer at Rosapenna Golf Resort, in County Donegal.

The original course was laid out by Old Tom Morris shortly after his initial visit via paddle steamer in 1891, and the original, timber-clad hotel opened in 1893, advertised as the world's "first true golf resort." By the time Colt and his business partner Charles Alison arrived to further develop the original links in the early 1910s, it already had a cult following among golf travelers, based not only on the wonderful, rugged landscape but also on the reputation for fine hospitality that the hotel earned and enjoyed, helped later by high-profile guests such as Errol Flynn and John Wayne.

The imported, Norwegian pine timbers of the original structure burnt down in the early 1960s, but the replace-

L.C. LAMBERT

Sandy Hills 13th;
INSET: The original hotel

ment—Rosapenna Hotel—was promptly rebuilt and the whole property bought by Frank and Hilary Casey in 1981. As a boy, Frank had worked at the old hotel on his school holidays, returning for a spell as Assistant Manager in the mid-'60s before pursuing other business interests in the area.

Like his parents before him, Frank met his wife Hilary while they were working at the hotel, so when it came up for sale there was an emotional attachment that proved too strong to resist, and the Casey family set about putting their stamp on the resort. Before long, the next generation was getting involved, with son John taking over the bulk of the hotel and catering, and his brother Frank, himself a scratch golfer, looking after the golf course and operations. In yet another twist, John and his wife Claire also met under the stars of the Wild Atlantic Way, and you wouldn't put it past their baby boy, Jack Charlie, to inherit the gift for hospitality that surrounds him.

The family's background and combined experience as hoteliers, enhanced by a passion for this special place, has proven pivotal to its ongoing appeal, and today's hotel, with 70 luxurious bedrooms plus a spa, heated pool, and snooker table, is almost as much a draw as the waving fescues on view through most windows. It is a delightful, stylish place to retreat to, but only when the darkness falls across the links.

The Caseys commissioned Irish architect Pat Ruddy to add a second 18, Sandy Hills Links. Where the original golf was itself restrained, using the flatter portions of this crumpled blanket of Irish coastline, the vast dunes were this time deployed in spectacular fashion, a rollercoaster ride that opened in June of 2003, sitting on the higher ground between the two halves of the Old Tom Morris Links. Ruddy invites golfers to prove themselves, with greens perched above fairways and thrilling tee shots; it is golf on an heroic scale to match the land through (and

sometimes over) which it plays, and the view of Muckish Mountain and Ards Forest Park as one comes over the brow of the spectacular 6th hole is simply unforgettable.

In 2005, Ruddy returned to craft a new front nine for Old Tom, his Strand holes (opened in 2009) replacing the Coastguard holes that remain open on the north side of the road that leads to Downings, the charming fishing town just a few hundred yards farther north. The Valley holes that were largely Colt's work, reminiscent in places of his first masterpiece at Rye in England, became the back nine, and further detail work on the Strand greens was carried out by Renaissance Golf's Eric Iverson in 2007. The latest routing builds as the round goes on, and Colt's stretch after turning the corner to come home at the treacherous short 14th is quintessential links golf, the final hole climbing the hill to finish under the bright lights of the Golf Pavilion, beside which a statue of Old Tom himself gazes out over Sheephaven Bay toward the distant mountains.

So Rosapenna was already on many a bucket list when, in late 2012, the Casey family bought a piece of land to the south upon which a 36-hole Nicklaus Design project had started and promptly failed. They kept the original name, hired Tom Doak's Renaissance Golf, and when St. Patrick's Links opened in June 2021, it sent ripples through the golf community that are still gaining momentum. Within two years of opening, Doak's masterpiece—which swirls through the dunes with enough design flair to somehow complement the breathtaking location—was ranked in *GOLF Magazine's* Top 50 in the world. Such is the quality of this new chapter of Rosapenna's illustrious golfing history that it seems inevitable it will rise further.

The routing is masterful, weaving through the property with a sense of mischief and adventure. Here a little camouflage on the tee shot to make you think; there a



St. Patrick's 3rd



Rosapenna Hotel today

dramatic reveal as you stroll round a dune to find the delights of Sheephaven Bay stretched out before you, the same "exceptional beauty" that stopped Colt in his tracks all those years ago, and more or less everyone else since.

It is hard to pick out individual holes, but the stretch from the sublime 9th through the 10th's brilliant, wick-ed green site and surrounds, and on to the iconic 11th green, with a devilish perch along the right edge, is worth the journey alone. And the delightfully dangerous, short par-four closing hole is just brilliant, concluding one of golf's great sensual journeys with a gentle, teasing finale.

St. Patrick's Links is getting all the headlines, and it deserves every plaudit and more. But Rosapenna, and this pocket of Donegal, have so much more to offer that—in the same way as it feels unfair to single out specific holes in the latest edition—focusing only on the new course is to miss a good part of the charm of this neck of the woods.

The Coastguard holes offer a respite from the demands of the three main links, and alongside them sits a charming pitch-and-putt loop and a fully stocked range, in case the Atlantic breeze plays havoc with your rhythm (note: it will!). And when you are spent with golf for the day, the hotel will cater to your every

need with the sort of effortless hospitality that only the Irish seem able to master.

Between the excellent fare in the Golf Pavilion and the many charming eateries in both Downings and Carrigart, there is no shortage of choices for post-golf refreshments. But it is in the open areas of the Coach House Bar and the gorgeous Vardon Restaurant that the welcoming spirit of the original resort still burns brightest. Here you will bump into golf pilgrims from all over the world, windswept from their own exploration of these glorious

courses. It is a vibrant place to be, and you can see in those packing up to leave a distinct reluctance to do so.

There are days when you will get battered here by wind and rain, but you will survive, and the next day when the golden sun breaks through and bleaches the sand upon Tramore Beach, all is forgotten and you might be in heaven itself. What once seemed impossibly remote is today conveniently accessible from various airports, but the feeling of delightful isolation remains intact. Perhaps Colt found it hard to write with restraint about Rosapenna because the place itself, the landscape, has little restraint. The land here has always been epic, and so have the skies and the horizon, and the fresh, salty air. It is a place to come to feel better, to recharge one's batteries. As Dominic O'Kelly's delightful poem "Rosapenna" puts it, plucked from a bookmark in the hotel lobby:

*"Deep 'mid the dunes of Downings
Haven of health and glee"*

But these days the golf is also epic, and I like to imagine that if Colt were here today, he would not change a single word of his proclamation, but would also not bother going home. He'd love what those who followed him here have done.



Old Tom Morris 18th

L.C. LAMBECHT (3)