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# Doonbeg resort: The epitome of luxury links in Ireland

By [Jason Scott Deegan](#), Senior Contributor

DOONBEG, COUNTY CLARE, Ireland - Charles Pinckney Darby III can't quite explain what makes the **Doonbeg resort** special.



The stone work on Doonbeg Golf Club's clubhouse and other buildings make the resort look generations old.



The man everybody knows as "Buddy," the CEO of Kiawah Development Partners in Kiawah Island, S.C., says he came to southwest Ireland "for a couple of pints" when researching an offer to potentially build a golf course among the towering dunes of Doughmore Bay. From that first visit, to the hundred or so since, Darby continues to be haunted by the enchanted natural surroundings where the land and sea collide. It's that way for a lot of the guests who visit the Doonbeg resort.

"I don't know what lures people to Ireland -- the people, the sea, the landscape," he says. "But if you step outside and breathe the air here (at Doonbeg) -- it's salty and fresh -- there's nothing like it in America." Yes, Doonbeg can leave you breathless.

The resort, named the 2010 European Golf Resort of the Year by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators and one of Europe's Top 25 Golf Resorts by Golf Digest, might be the best combination of links golf and luxury on-site accommodations in the world. Perhaps only playing the Old Course at St. Andrews and staying at the Old Course Hotel owned by Herb Kohler, or staying and playing at Turnberry in Scotland can compare. Turnberry is currently undergoing a massive multimillion-dollar renovation by Leisurecorp to raise its stature.

Small bed-and-breakfasts and smaller hotels that exude their own charms service most traditional Irish links, places such as Lahinch, Waterville and Ballybunion. But cramped showers, tiny rooms and hardpan beds aren't for everybody.

When you're talking about creature comforts off the course, few European golf destinations can stand with the Doonbeg resort. Since when does a golf resort have a clientele where golfers makes up a mere 20 percent of its business?

Many guests come to Doonbeg to be spoiled rotten, that's why.

Doonbeg's location is ideal for those starting or finishing a vacation in the southwest of Ireland. It's less than an hour's drive from Shannon Airport. It's a simple half-hour's drive to Lahinch or the Cliffs of Moher, a series of 700-foot seaside cliffs.

The Doonbeg village provides a perfect snapshot of Irish life. Stop by Comerford pub for a performance of traditional Irish music. Or eat fresh seafood, the local catch from the bay, in the fine restaurant at Morrisey's.

## The Lodge at Doonbeg

Just don't stray from the resort itself too long. The stone-laden Lodge at Doonbeg, completed in 2007, looks 200 years old, yet is stocked with modern conveniences such as wireless Internet, elevators and a concierge. Brick-lined streets lead to the main lodge, where you half expect to see a horse and buggy, not convertibles and sports cars, arriving with weary travelers in tow. A fireplace burning peat logs warms their arrival the old-fashioned way.

Two- and three-story guest suites in the main lodge and surrounding courtyard are designed to be spacious, so guests can feel at home for a weekend or a month, all while enjoying privacy from their housemates. Room furnishings, paintings and decor are exquisite. Staffers tell stories of people buying their Tempur-Pedic mattresses they sleep on to be shipped home. Or if a guest wants to make Doonbeg a more permanent home, there are eight Links Cottages -- four-bedroom units lining the 17th fairway that are part of the Timbers Resorts Residence Club -- available for fractional ownership.

The food, always a sore spot with well-heeled travelers when visiting Ireland, lives up to its surroundings. The fine dining Long Room delivers creative international delights. The informal Darby's Pub serves local seafood. Try the seafood pie or seafood chowder. While eating and enjoying a pint, showcase your inner Johnny Miller by critiquing golf swings of players hitting off the first tee just outside the window. On the lower level of the lodge, the White Horses Spa pampers guests with treatments such as caviar facials and the moor mud wrap.

"Doonbeg is a special place," says Keith Wood, the legendary Irish rugby player who visited the resort this summer. "They treat you right."

## Doonbeg Golf Club

All the coddling off the course is necessary to relieve the ego-thumping many golfers receive on it. Over the years, [Doonbeg Golf Club](#)'s original Greg Norman design has been softened but not defanged. For example, fierce fescue haunting the entire right side of the par-5 fourth hole has been removed, allowing for more wiggle room.

The 6,911-yard, wind-swept layout tends to play firm and fast, so approach shots should run up onto the greens. Unfortunately, severe elevated greens at the par-4 third and par-5 eighth don't allow such shots. The opening par 5 introduces the mountainous dunes that frame most holes. Take a caddy to decipher the best lines through the grassy maze. Blind tee shots await at the par-4 second, par-5 13th and par-4 finishing hole. Caddies also steer clear of the hidden pot bunker in the middle of the 12th green. Doonbeg Golf Club's strengths are its risk-reward holes: the drivable sixth hole (it plays 285 yards from the white tees, where most players tee off) and the 451-yard par-5 13th hole. Both feature elevated greens that are difficult to hold with treacherous bunkers and falloffs near the putting surface.

The do-or-die, 111-yard 14th hole befuddles even the best of players, where a wedge shot either finds the tiny shelf of a green or suffers a cruel fate among the dunes. Whatever your score, just don't forget to look around. Staring down the beach toward the majestic lodge is just another picturesque moment at a resort brimming with them.

"I can count on two hands the places (and golf courses) that give you an experience like this," Darby says. Doonbeg has matured into one of the world's great links courses since opening in 2002. Like the lodge, it looks natural, like it's been there forever. It suffers a bit only when compared to its nearest links neighbors, Lahinch to the north and Ballybunion to the south.

It's hard to fathom that such a swanky resort can give off such a relaxed vibe. That's where Doonbeg shines brightest: The ability to make you feel at home, even when you're an ocean away.

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