

New Zealand »

Clubbing at its best

Cameron McMillan joins the post-Covid boom of golfers who are discovering just how good we have it when it comes to world-class resorts

As a newcomer to golf, my long drives down country have taken a different perspective. Trips with my family from Auckland to visit my parents in Napier have forever changed, as I quickly scout glimpses of every golf course we pass along the way. Previously they were ignored like any other patch of grass along State Highway 1. As many others taking up the game or returning to it post-Covid have quickly discovered, we have so many brilliant options — from cheaper clubs on the outskirts of towns to the top-end courses dotted from Kauri Cliffs in the north to Jack's Point in Queenstown.

The Kinloch turnoff sign coming into Taupō is one I'll never ignore, pointing towards one of the great golfing experiences around.

Twenty minutes down the road, you head through the entrance and drive up towards the Kinloch clubhouse, where you begin to get a glimpse of the more than 170 bunkers you're hoping to avoid at the only Jack Nicklaus-designed course in New Zealand.

The greatest golfer of all time made the game look very easy but he hasn't made it an easy game at Kinloch. With undulating greens protected by bunkers, Kinloch Club's director of golf and head PGA professional Tom Long calls it the most challenging course in the country.

"I don't think there's a tougher course in New Zealand. A lot of the top pros have said it definitely is. Every time you play it, you learn something, you get served up a different game of golf," Long says.

It's links golf with a twist. The traditional Scottish links will be uneven but mostly open

with a channel from tee to an accessible green — but Nicklaus' design means the greens are forever surrounded by trouble. And once you safely land on the green, that's when the fun begins. The number of undulations leaves you in four minds on the longer putts and only two minds from short range.

On the first tee you arrive with a view of the opening fairway to your left, which dips and dives and includes 14 bunkers to start, which is visually impressive, with farmland in the nearby hills and uninviting long grass as the rough looms nearer.

This may sound daunting and it's certainly a challenge. But if you embrace that, it's so fun to play. My opening tee shot goes so wide right that it hits The Fairways road, not the fairway grass. Lost ball number one. But that doesn't deter me from what is one of the most enjoyable and memorable rounds of golf I've played. Birdies don't come naturally to me but I bag a couple, which seems even more of an accomplishment.

Despite the challenge and a few more lost balls it is still fun to play and as two golfers with handicaps in the low 20s, we weren't intimidated by its difficulty or beauty.

There are so many great holes to choose from but the final three stand out. The tricky par-five 16th is followed by probably the pick of the five par threes, with Lake Taupō in the



background, while the par-five 18th, with water in play left of the green, is a fitting way to finish.

"I don't think anybody has come off the golf course without saying I left a few shots out there," Long says. "And they come back for that reason. The challenge is always there." If time permits, he recommends playing the Kinloch Club a number of times. The challenge changes with every round but what you have learned will stick with you.

Whether you're mentally exhausted or still on a high from playing a stunning course, one of the most glamorous 19th holes in the country awaits, looming over the 18th green. Entrepreneur John Sax bought the Kinloch Club in 2011 and added the amazing manor and villas that overlook the course. Described as a modern-day Scottish baronial castle, the inside matches the exterior for impact. There's a corner window that might just be the best spot in the world to watch golf.

The West Lounge Bar is the perfect spot to relax with drinks and canapes before dinner. Guests can mingle and marvel at the building's elegance, and the 18 holes and 254 hectares of grounds and farm outside.

The villas that line the manor are equal in class. They're so inviting you'd struggle to leave if you didn't have a tee time awaiting you.

Take Long's advice. It's worth a first and second look.

Checklist

KINLOCH

DETAILS

For more information, see kinlochgolf.co.nz and kinlochmanor.co.nz



The main lodge, overlooking the famous Kinloch golf course; above, the West Lounge Bar. Photos / Supplied