

Castle Stuart Golf Links Inverness, Scotland

Architect: Gil Hanse and Mark Parsinen (2009)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
White	72	6553	71.6	133
Green	72	6153	70.2	126

Overview:

Gil Hanse and Mark Parsinen had the intention of designing a golf course with great visual impression that afforded a playability factor an average golfer would enjoy. Standing on most of the tees a player sees an expansive and receptive landing area for their drives-not a whole lot of fuss to clog the mind-yet obvious tactical choices are available and it is easy to process them at first glance. The result is a championship course to challenge the best players in the world that is playable by mere mortals full of memorable vistas that create pulse racing shot opportunities without the imminent doom awaiting every good intention gone awry.

For me the design has much of the look and feel of David Kidd's creation at Bandon Dunes. Expansive landscapes stretching along the Moray Firth with accents of gorse and heather covered dunes and rugged natural bunkering that looks like it was blown out by the seaside winds. The bunkering is a blend of the raw appearance accented by selective landscaping, some sleepers, and hand revetting to give them a wild but finished look. The style of bunkering belies the recent vintage of the course-it looks like it has been there for a hundred years.

The generosity of the driving areas are not harrowed with disaster, they provide opportunities to find your ball and figure out what to do next. The next is full of challenge because rumpled fairways, roll offs, and punitive bunkering can put you in a spot of bother. But Parsinen says it was not their intention to terminally punish you for a mistake, rather your fate is still in your hands if you have the imagination and courage to play the recovery available to you. Not many "in your pocket" experiences. Instead there are going to be some very gratifying recovery memories when you are done, true postcards for the mind of the thrill of the little challenges that add up during your round here.

The opening holes on both the outward and inward nines are literally on the sea and share an intimacy with the beach and water. The first three holes have a tall gorse dune wall on the left and open exposure to the Firth on the right so wind behind or off your right shoulder will present an opportunity to challenge the short length of the holes. Your position off each tee will help determine how aggressive you should be on your approach shots. Take the bait if the reward outweighs the risk because the second part of the outward nine will not afford many scoring chances. The key to doing well on this course is to get to the fifth tee close to par. This may happen because of a birdie or two or simply resisting adrenaline decisions and protecting par.

From five to nine the holes sit atop an 'old sea cliff' and meander high above the coast like the middle holes at Pebble Beach with panoramic views of the Firth and the Kessock Bridge in the distance. Being on the high ground the wind is more influential because you have no tall dune wall to protect one of your flanks. Five, six, and seven are long holes with plenty of fairway contour to deflect your approach lines so navigate carefully, using the ground as your friend, to avoid roll offs into arduous bunkers or gorges of heather and seagrass. The last two holes before the halfway house don't scare you with length but you have to carefully manage your misses to protect par.

The halfway house is tucked in a bunker building with the starter's station just above the first and tenth tee. Dry, wind protected, and not a bad cup of soup will provide a welcome sanctuary. If you are going to indulge in the chocolate bars make sure to ask for the frozen ones they are a real treat. Eventually they will throw you out to face the elements again on the inward nine.

The first three holes are scoring opportunities of similar ilk to the opening holes just headed in the direction of the Chanonry Lighthouse to the North. Between all the photo opps you will have to hit some shots with clear intention but if you pull them off there can be good numbers to add to your scorecard. Be aware that the left side is not as buffered from the Firth as it was on the opening segment. Three pars will do fine to get this side off to a successful start.

After a cardio climb up the face of the dune (do not ignore the water oasis station half way up if for no other reason than to rest your aching quads) the finishing six are the balcony seating in this theater where you will enjoy exhilarating views of the Moray Firth. The next three par fours are very demanding as they traverse the high ground and provide little opportunity to make up ground. A par and a couple of bogies would set you up for one last dash down the final three holes.

If you are hopelessly down in the match don't despair because lots of things can happen on these closing holes. A driveable par four, very difficult par three, and a five par with lots of options could make a 3-4-4 finish to steal the bacon a real possibility. The key is to get through the seventeenth without serious harm-as a par three with the sixth handicap hole designation you have to blend some courage with sanity to get to the eighteenth with a chance. From the last tee you see the entire links set against the sea below and it will take your breath away. Cue the camera there will be a full handful of Kodak moments over this last 500-yard walk.

The clubhouse is an art deco design which looks like the stacked deck on a cruise ship. Full featured with a nice golf shop, casual grill room, and locker rooms from a first class private club make sure to take the time to wander about and enjoy the amenities. The view of the sea from the deck is just astonishing-take a moment to take in this moment from the balcony off the locker room. The layered windows from each area provide sitting opportunities within for watching the golf below.

A rarity in Scotland this place has a first class practice ground-driving range, short game area, and practice putting greens. One should take advantage of this before or after a round. The yardage book for course is supreme as it has topographical detail that helps on the shot planning and very nice color photos of each hole for some fond remembrances months later.

All in all they have provided a creative, challenging, and forgiving design for you to enjoy. If you have spent the week getting thrashed by one course after another on your Scottish Tour this will be welcome relief if you can put together some solid shot making.

Hole-By-Hole Analysis (White/Green):

#1 Par 4 360/330 yards

The course opens up with three seaside holes, the first of which has what appears to be an intimidating tee shot with gorse on the left and the Moray Firth on the right. The landing area is very generous and a three wood to left center should be contained by the upslope on that side. A series of mounds in the right rough should keep a ball wandering right on the ground from serious rebuke. What is left is a low punch shot at the left edge of a bunkerless green that leans toward the sea. There is even a side board banked area left that will feed beside the putting surface.

#2 Par 5 530/486

This playable par five is a typical example of the choices you will have throughout the round. The driving area is ledged so if you are playing for the green in two, a tee shot to the upper left plateau will leave the best angle of play to the green. If playing three shots to the green, the lower right fairway hollow is the choice for an easy lay up into sideboard that contours the left. The pin position of the day should be a big factor in this go-for-it decision. The green has a ridge across the front 20 feet that makes the front pin nearly impossible to get at with a long club. On the other side of the ridge the green ramps to the peninsula back section with a cut out back left so a pin there is probably approachable.

I like a three wood off the tee at the left furry mound that will feed it into the low area on the right followed by a lay up to the left landing area. From there the green appears to be hanging precariously over the sea but it actually is not. But as mentioned before the pin position will dictate how aggressively you can go at the flag with a low releasing shot. The front right waste bunker is fierce and no place to end up-it looks like the wind gnawed it from dunes last night. You can miss long and left and have recovery opportunities.

#3 Par 4 290/266

Cool hole early in the round that you must attack. The green is probably drivable in most conditions and that play is a strong fade between the bunkers down the right feeding it onto the long and narrow green leaning left against the sea. Missing left will leave an adventuresome recovery shot up the heaving slopes on that side of the green. The putter would seem like the best choice for this recovery but the guys put in some cute revetted speed bumps buried in the side hill to preclude this opportunity from some angles.

If the pin is back it is probably better to lay up just right of the bunker at 65 off the tee and use the straight look up the length of the green to control your approach. This has a false front and serious humps and hollows within the putting surface. As pointed out pitching is a very creative endeavor on this hole.

#4 Par 3 176/161

As you turn 180 degrees and back from the sea, you get a look up a chute between the mounds at a framed green complex beneath the doorstep of Castle Stuart that spawned the spire logo for the course. The oddest thing is that in all the photos the castle seems right on top of the hole when it is in fact at least a mile away.

The sea is over your left shoulder beyond a high wall of gorse so the wind effect may not seem obvious on the tee. The segmented green has no bunkers and is wedged into an alcove below the gorse. The daily wind condition and pin location will determine which of three ways you should play this mid-length tee ball. You can use the high left plateau fairway to land it short and release it down onto the front left portion of the green. Alternatively, you can just try a high spinning one into the middle of the green and hope it holds. Or you can hit a low punching approach up the 30 yard long invisible fairway in front of the green and let it release up onto the putting surface. The green falls off sharply short right if your approach is timid or moving too much left to right. The back pin location is a small shelf with a serious fall off on all sides and you should not be pin seeking under any condition to this section of the green.

#5 Par 4 430/401

You are now on the inner cliff and the next five will play atop this high ground overlooking the sea from afar. The fairway has a hidden valley to the right which is actually the best place from which to approach the green. There are no bunkers in this fairway reasonably within reach or fronting the green so it is about picking and holding your preferred line. The steeply contoured green sits above you, influenced by dune on the right, and once again favors something working right against the contour coming in. Beware of going long because of the hidden deep revetted bunker through the right side of the green. A pitch and a putt from in front of this green may be the best hedge for a par.

#6 Par 5 522/505

Much like the second this is a hole that is baiting you into bad choices so resist the siren calls for heroics. As this five par works back toward the sea and likely into the wind it is a true three-shot play. The characteristic you must respect is the extreme narrowness of this green stretched across a raised spine vice gripped between harrowing Mackenzie-esque sand features. The key parameter is the lay up position on the second relative to the bunker in the center of the fairway about 75 yards from the green. Drive it to right center and lay up just right of that bunker trying to avoid the slight fall off to the right. Now you have a short club up the length the narrow 42 yard green. The green side bunkering must be avoided at all costs because it is a three story pitch up to a shallow target from that angle. The sea seems right behind this green but this is a slight of eye on the part of the designers, there is actually a good chunk of the third hole between you and the water.

#7 Par 4 451/429

As you switch back directions again this bear of a par four could well call for some restraint to play it as three shots especially if the wind is in your face. The drive is at the sleepers on the hill which will lean you back to the left for the best angle of approach into a green tightly hemmed by a hollow and bunkers below the green to the left and a gorsed dune on the right. There are huge feeding humps on the right side approach that will feed on to the green. If you are in doubt on it being reachable lay up right center short of the hollow for a look down the green. This green gives you that infinity feel that it falls off into the Moray Firth but the bunkering on the left actually will contain overly aggressive shots on that line. As the number one index hole it is just a brute of a par four/five.

#8 Par 3 208/192

Fairly long par three with a reverse L-shaped punchbowl green that looks like the Red Sox logo wrapping around the foot of a dune. First task is to get your tee ball in the right leg of the L so you have a putt that does not have to travel through three fabrications. It is a good option to play a runner feeding up the front but beware that the mound front right can deflect balls the wrong way. The back right pin is a phone booth pinched between grandstand dunes. Standing on this green you feel the amphitheater effect but please resist the temptation to break into an embarrassing aria.

#9 Par 4 350/330

This is a very technical short one that plays even shorter if the wind is at your back. If you are playing at the green from the tee you have to play up the extended fairway right of the green and try to let the ground and your curve nip a piece of the putting surface. A more reasonable approach is about 210 off the tee short of the finger of waste that intrudes from the left. From the high plateau on that side you have a short iron across a furry dip and deep face bunker complex to a green that is almost on level and is receptive from that angle. Long hitters will hate this choice but there are more birdies in a lay up than going for it. As you walk to the green note the artistic detail in the bunker embedded below the green that you so dutifully avoided.

#10 Par 4 360/341

Well for the next three we are back on the Firth with the imposing dune wall on your right. These holes all have the raw, natural look of Kidd's creation at Bandon Dunes. Your best drive line is slightly left center at the bunker in the center of the fairway with the gorse square top dunettes just above it. Take a good look at the yardage book to make sure that with the wind direction today the bunker is not reachable. From this angle you have a manageable shot into a long green that is canted front to back and with a lower shelf on the sea side the full length of the green. Tee balls played from the side hills on the right are very difficult to control into this green setting.

#11 Par 3 130/115

For me this may be the most picturesque hole of the day with a short pitch to a stunning green setting against the sea nestled between two low dunes with nothingness beyond. The waterfall cascade tee box arrangement is awesome, it makes the challenge similar for all strengths of players. Take a second to walk up the stairs to the back tee box and take a picture for your desk at home. The no-no here is long on either side so it is best to plan for a shot to end up in the front third of the eggplant shaped green no matter the pin position. Short right leaves a creative ground recovery up the contour of the face of the hill.

#12 Par 5 518/504

The last true seaside hole is a sucker punch for the long hitters. Drive it down the center into the uphill landing area and then consider your options. Going for this green requires a carefully shaped shot right to left without too much enthusiasm. The green is set on the edge of the water and the left side and back of the green drops straight into the oblivion so overcooking your draw is not a good idea. The foot of the dune wall right of the green will feed a ball to the edge but be aware that there is a heel print in the back right of the green that can

collect shots away from the center of the putting surface. The lay up short of the intruding bunker on the right at about 90 yards seems the place from which to play an approach.

#13 Par 4 416/363

The next six play along the inland balcony overlooking the sea and lower portions of the course. Once you have your sea legs under you after that climb from the 12th green you note that this dogear right seems to beg for you to cut the corner. Fact is that the left side is a much preferable place from which to approach this green. Drive it strong to left center with a draw at the edge of the gorse on the left to reach the top of the hill. From here you can trundle a low approach onto the green through the tempest of low waves in front of you. From the right the shots bouncing in have a nasty habit of deflecting left and missing the green. There is a serious heel print that segments the front left of the green so for a right pin aim all the way at the edge of the green to stay on that segment. For a left pin aim at the left edge of the green.

As you approach the green take a look at the view of this horizon the designers have composed, it is sheer artistry. The dunes on either side frame the green beautifully with the horizon behind. This mimics the same look of the hills in the distance framing the Kessock Bridge crossing the Moray Firth. You won't get a view like this on a tennis court.

#14 Par 4 360/347

From this tee you are looking down between the dunes to a landing area that is very generous but fraught with seriously rumpled ground on the right and collaring waste on the left. From the right the lies are uneven and it is a bad angle to a diagonal set green that is very shallow from that line. From left of the fairway bunker you get a much better look up the 7 to 1 axis of the plateau putting surface and the ground will reliably feed shots to the target. This is one of the coolest green complexes you have seen all day and it can handle either a left to right running shot or an aerial dart depending on where the flag is cut. There are no bunkers here but the green has shoulder pads and balls will fall off the left side into a collection reservoir where the flat stick may be your best recovery weapon. Missing on the right will be a billy goat elevator recovery pitch that only guys with the initials P.M. could pull off.

#15 Par 4 409/388

The fraternal sister of number seven just about 10% shorter. Like you did on seven aim your drive right center at the sleepers in the dune to end up between the bunker on the left and the sandy area through the fairway on the right. If your ball makes it back to the left edge of the fairway you will have a clear view of the green but the more likely approach is semi-blind across the foot of a dune that juts in from the right. The putting surface is big enough to air one all the way in as long as the wind is not howling over your shoulder. Like many links greens this is long enough to allow run out downwind. The only serious penalty is missing into the nasty steep faced bunker left of the green.

#16 Par 4 325/310

A driveable par four that works it's way down toward the sea begins the final stanza. A three and a life rope for your match is a real possibility here. Hit the driver because it is hard to make really disastrous things happen here. This green has that endless edge look and plenty of options on how to access it on a short second shot. A bump and run from the right will feed up this long 40 yard green. When you stand on the green Fort George seen across the Firth to the right is the home of the elite Scottish Black Watch combat troops so try to be on your best behavior.

#17 Par 3 210/195

Turning back to the house you have the rarity of a par three as the sixth handicap index hole should tell you all you need to know. This hole sets awkward to the eye as the green juts out to the right hanging off the balcony and the danger is on the right here so use the contours out to the left and short of the green to release a shot down and onto the putting surface. Being long on the left brings in the furry do-do beyond the green. As inviting as a high shot into the middle of the green might look it is has control issues because of the wind influence which is big time from the Firth. Either way the club selection here can be anything from driver to a mid-iron depending on the wind. Once you get on this green the contours are subtle so you need to concentrate to avoid a three-jack that will upset the momentum you are building.

#18 Par 5 508/490

And now the finale, a spectacular tumbling five par that brings you down the balcony overlooking the sea on the right. Take a moment from the high tee box to appreciate the view of the entire course beneath your feet. Once you get over the view this is a partially blind tee shot that requires trust-if you pull it off it will lead to a bundle of options and an exciting finish. The blue Scottish flag left of the clubhouse is the line, take dead aim and trust it. From there, depending on the wind conditions, you have a number of choices. A lay up is down the left to a plateau is the smartest choice in that it gives you a line for an aggressive pitch looking down line to the green. Going for it is an option because this is the largest green at Castle Stuart and a the piece of fairway you cannot see in the hollow beyond the scraggly abyss on the right can feed a ball on the left down slope onto the green. Standing in the lay up area the look down to the green set against the majesty of the sea is pure exhilaration. This is another green with many contours so don't let your focus wane until you walk off this green.

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