

BY JOHN McALLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY ANDERSON

# Into the Rough

At Bandon Dunes, the terrain is gnarly.

The wind, relentless.

And the golf, incredible.



**J**UST BEYOND the soundproof windows of Bandon Dunes Golf Resort's ordinarily sedate clubhouse lounge a silent movie is unspooling to the roaring delight of the couple dozen low-handicappers inside. A golfer on the other side of the glass has just lost his billfold in the 30-mph winds coming in off the Pacific, and as his cash skitters across the ground, he and a posse of caddies run after it with the comic frenzy of Keystone Kops.

It's a rare eruption of pandemonium at a place that prides itself on being blissfully removed from such disruptions. There are a lot of things that draw the avid golfer to Bandon Dunes. For starters, four of the most spectacular courses ever built in this country—Pacific Dunes, Bandon Dunes (the resort's namesake and first course), Old Macdonald, and Bandon Trails, ranked No. 3, 6, 12, and 16 on *Golf Digest's* current list of the 100 greatest public golf courses in America—are arrayed like magnificent puzzle pieces on the resort's 2,500 acres of barely tamed oceanfront. A fifth links—the breathtaking, 13-hole Bandon Preserve—is the pitch-and-putt course of your dreams.

But the resort's subtler allure is in the very thing that makes its success so unfathomable: its incredible remoteness. Globetrotting instructor Hank Haney, whose six years with Tiger Woods yielded a delectably readable best seller, *The Big Miss*, would love to tee it up at Bandon Dunes—one of these days. "It's a really hard place to get to," he says a few days before I make the journey to the coastal, southern tip of Oregon, a four-and-a-half-hour drive from Portland. "You gotta be committed!"

Life's craziness has never been more difficult to escape, it seems, and traditionally it's what we've turned to golf to shed. But that's not why Mike Keiser, the owner of Bandon Dunes, dropped his pin on a spot so removed from the churn of the big city, from hyperactive smartphones, Saturday-morning soccer games, lawn chores, and email tsunamis.

Keiser, a lifelong golfer, made his fortune in greeting cards. You almost certainly bought one of them if, like millions of us, you couldn't resist the ingenious charm of celebrated illustrator and children's book author Sandra Boynton's birthday classic, "Hippo Birdie Two Ewes," which she drew for Keiser in 1975, when she was 22. The riches earned at Recycled Paper Greetings—it's estimated that the cards Boynton created for the company sold more than 200 million copies alone—allowed Keiser to indulge his passion for golf architecture and, particularly, for links golf. That wild, wooly, windblown, and often wet form of the game dates back six centuries and is played in the British Isles on legendary seaside tracks like Scotland's St. Andrews and—Keiser's greatest inspiration—Royal Dornoch, an exquisitely weather-



## Taking the Long Way

From Portland, cut to the coast and ride the Pacific Coast Scenic Byway (U.S. Highway 101), skirting craggy cliffs and the churning Pacific. Here are four worthwhile stops along the way.

**1 Yaquina Head Lighthouse** This stoic, white beacon a few miles north of Newport has guided mariners since 1873. Nearby tide pools should not be missed, with their hordes of starfish and spiny purple sea urchins.

**2 Devils Churn** All of Oregon's coast is grand evidence of the relentless power of the ocean, but nowhere is the display more impressive than at this wave-carved inlet near Cape Perpetua that explodes with every incoming swell.

**3 The Hobbit Trail** Six miles north of Florence, enter the unmarked parking lot just south of Carl G. Washburne Memorial State Park. Here you'll find the trailhead for this mystical half-mile walk. An arching tree canopy, or hobbit tunnel, leads to a pristine beach.

**4 Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area** North America's longest stretch of coastal sand dunes extends south from Florence, ending just north of Bandon. Hop on a dune buggy or ATV for a thrilling ride through the sand. Enjoy it—soon you'll be pitching out of the bunker.

battered 18 holes tucked into a distant nook of the ferocious North Sea's coast. Keiser wondered what would happen if that brand of golf—available in the States on only a precious few courses and, for the most part, only to members of such untouchably tony private clubs as Eastern Long Island's Shinnecock Hills—were made possible for the guy with a deep love of the game but not the Hamptons ZIP code.

A "speculative folly" is what Keiser calls it now, 15 years after he built Bandon's first course on the only patch of land he could find and afford that met the essential standards of true links golf: situated near the sea; minimally carved from natural, gnarly terrain; set on fast, firm, sandy soil. "It's the reason this place is so remote," he says over a 7 a.m. breakfast in late May in the main lodge at Bandon Dunes. "On the East Coast, there's nothing. You can find sand places in Long Island, but you can't buy the land. You can find them in North Carolina, but they're state parks and hurricane-prone. I was beginning to despair on the West Coast, too, until we found this."

"This" is the 50-mile stretch of sand dunes due north of tiny Bandon, Oregon. It's what Keiser calls "America's true linksland." Sitting next to the lithe, salt-and-pepper-haired, 69-year-old entrepreneur, you wouldn't possibly glean that he has, in the brief period of time since opening that first course in May 1999, created a golf destination that many close watchers of the game think outranks century-old Pinehurst and Pebble Beach. The man whom one longtime golf writer admiringly calls "the anti-Trump" is humble, rigorously undemonstrative, and exceptionally generous in the credit he gives to almost everyone but himself.

"I'm proud of the place, yes, but I'm also astonished that it worked," Keiser says, moving steadily through a plate of strawberries and watermelon. "That first year, I thought 10,000 rounds was doable—a bit optimistic, but doable. It turned out to be 24,000." Today, on the four full-length courses combined, that number has grown to 140,000. Ample lodging for extended stays (visitors often play all four courses) became necessary. Four on-site restaurants have blossomed. An elaborate shuttle system makes getting around the sprawling property effortless.

It's in Keiser's nature to downplay the success of his creation, but the Golf Channel's Matt Ginella—one of a dozen or so journalists Keiser is hosting at the resort to mark the opening of the Punchbowl, a dizzily undulating, 2.3-acre putting green—has no qualms about noting its

wonders. "When people use the term 'an embarrassment of riches,' that's Bandon Dunes," Ginella says. "Again and again, it just clubs you over the head with pure golf."

That is to say, golf both exhilaratingly raw and strikingly pristine. During a typical round at Bandon Dunes, you might get hammered with 50-mph winds and horizontal sheets of rain. Or you could be blessed with abundant sunshine and a menagerie of unexpected playing partners—deer freely roam all of the courses, and the inland Bandon Trails, with its indiscreetly chummy turkeys, bullfrogs, and woodpeckers, outdoes even Old Macdonald for wildlife. Unlike many of the courses erected in golf's boom years that are littered with condos and luxury homes, the tracks at Bandon Dunes are untouched by real estate. Signage is minimal, and there's not a ball cleaner in sight, nothing to detract from the isolated beauty of the place. In my handful of days here, the words "Oh my god" leave my lips at least a dozen times, not because of the need to hit a ball out over the gusty ocean in order to have it blow anywhere near a green (although you *will* be sending up such prayers) but because the vistas and the greatness of the rough-hewn holes are that overwhelming.

"Livin' the dream" is how Ron Blair describes it one glorious afternoon on Pacific Dunes, beaming as he approaches the 11th-hole tee box, where a few missteps might send you tumbling to the sea. The 54-year-old



**A LINE IN THE SAND**  
The lower greenside bunker on Pacific Dunes No. 9.

pediatrician from Dallas has made the trek to Bandon five times and is planning his sixth visit. He, too, is blown away by the pure golf—particularly the image of players on foot. Although exceptions are made for medical reasons, carts aren't allowed on the courses. Each one has to be walked—with or without a caddie. "You're out here for one purpose: to play golf, enjoy the surroundings, and enjoy the people you're with," says Blair, who often brings along his 17-year-old son. "I love the fact that there are no carts, that you can carry your own bag. It just seems to me to be restoring the natural history of the game—having the time to contemplate your shots, battling the weather and terrain. It's how the game was meant to be played."

Blair's experience precisely echoes Keiser's intuition about what would set Bandon Dunes apart. Not that it's all a guessing game. Two days before my chat with Keiser, during the wind-blasted opening of the Punch-bowl, he breezily mingled with resort guests. "I guarantee you that what he was doing was soliciting feedback and listening," Ginella says. "He wants people to have fun. It sounds simple, but it's true. It's the memorable moments, the fun, that make people come back. Mike understands that."

Keiser was probably less at ease the following day, when a Golf Channel producer asked him to scale a peak near the circular drive that fronts the resort's clubhouse. The producer and his cameraman wanted a hero shot of the constitutionally low-key businessman. As images go, it was canned. But with Keiser's humming resort and the Pacific as a backdrop, it captured the glory of the game and one man's remarkable accomplishment.

**E**ACH WEEK, SiriusXM's PGA Tour Radio is crowded with worried voices about the future of golf. "How 'bout a Bring Your Dog to the Course Day?" one caller seriously proposed as a means of lifting sagging attendance at many of the country's 15,500 golf courses, a count that shrinks by more than 100 each year.

Hank Haney, who moonlights as a fantastically candid morning-show host on Hank Haney Golf Radio, attributes the slippage in golf to all kinds of factors. "The economy and the price of the game are the most obvious," he says. "A lot of people now consider it unaffordable." Add to that the overall diminishment of adult leisure time, and the message is simple: Even if our discretionary income wasn't under siege, who has the time to play golf anymore? "Clearly, if the game had been invented today it would be much, much different," Haney says. "First off, it wouldn't be 18 holes; it would be 12. You'd use a third less water, a third less land, a third less time, and operators would have a third less maintenance costs."

Haney thinks it's time to crank up music on golf courses and to ditch stuffy rules that inhibit casual attire and

cellphone use—anything that might help make the sport more appealing to younger people, whose passion for it isn't on par with baby boomers. Mark King, former CEO of the club-manufacturing giant TaylorMade, is advocating for a different kind of stretching of golf's boundaries: His research shows that a change in the size of the cup, from the standard 4.25 inches to a more forgiving 15, would reduce the typical four-hour round of golf by more than an hour.

Some adventurous course operators have opened their fairways to disc golf, a game played with Frisbees. An even more concerted push is being made for foot golf, in which a soccer ball and your best leg replace your Pro V1 and driver. Course owners, especially in California, are jumping onboard with the encouragement of the surpris-



**BRUSH STROKE**  
Off the beaten path at Bandon Dunes No. 4.

ingly well-organized American FootGolf League. It's not lost on golf-industry leaders that soccer is a massively popular and growing sport—particularly among Latinos, who, it's estimated, will make up 30 percent of the U.S. population by 2050.

Ted Bishop, the president of the PGA of America, appears in a YouTube video raving about the pleasures and potential of the soccer/golf hybrid. But Bishop's most urgent challenge is the need to address core concerns about time and money. His intention is to tinker with the method of payment for golf: Rather than plunking down \$50 for an 18-hole round you no longer have time to finish, what if you played only seven or 12 holes and paid by the minute? This summer, the PGA of America is testing the concept at five courses in the Midwest.

"Going forward, I think there might be four or five or six different variations on the game," says Steve Mona, CEO of the World Golf Foundation, a Florida-based nonprofit whose initiatives for ensuring golf's future include the First Tee program for kids. "Hopefully, they'll help move the needle with our two most underrepresented groups: women, who are 50 percent of the U.S. population but only 20 percent of the golf population, and minorities, which we define as African-American, Latino, and Asian. They're 37 percent of the U.S. population, and growing, but just 21 percent of the golfing population."

Can the game be made more accessible and inclusive? "Income is the most direct indicator of participation in golf," Mona says. "If we can create greater economic diversity in our country, you'll see greater diversity in golf."

**O**N THE FIRST HOLE of Bandon Preserve, Josh Lesnik draws his tee shot high into the air and watches it land, with butterfly wings, on the green. As the president of KemperSports, the Chicago-based management company that operates Bandon Dunes and a hundred other golf courses in North America, you'd expect him to have a sweet swing. And he does.

Tucked into the V-shaped acreage that separates the original Bandon Dunes course and its inland resort-mate, Bandon Trails, the Preserve delivers stunning ocean views from almost every one of its diabolically designed but deeply pleasurable 13 holes. It also provides a perfect vantage point from which to watch the flow of golfers

moving in every direction across the beautiful landscape.

It's a sight that, no doubt, pleases Lesnik. When he was 29, he was the resort's first general manager, and in recent years he, too, has seen changes in the game—ones that excite him. "If you think about it, there's never been a better time to be a golfer," he says. "Because the industry is reacting to an oversupply of courses, rates are dropping. Instruction has never been more affordable; the equipment has never been better."

"I'm not blind to the fact that the game takes a lot of time and can be an expensive pursuit," he continues. "But if you look at the number of USGA members, it has gone up over the past five years. Look at the junior golf associations in the States—their registrations have never been higher."

Looking around the course, it's hard to argue with Lesnik's assessment. The place is alive with the thrill of the game. Hank Hickox, the resort's general manager, proposes a theory about why a venue like Bandon Dunes has been largely immune to an economy that has the industry on its heels. "People will take a vacation in a recession," Hickox says, "even as they're resisting spending elsewhere or making long-term investments like cars and homes."

The truth is that Bandon Dunes, on Keiser's insistence, is a golf dream affordably attained. Greens fees top out at \$295 and drop to \$100 in southern Oregon's surprisingly warm winter months. (By contrast, the fee to play Pebble Beach is \$495 year-round, and it'll cost you \$410 to tackle

Pinehurst No. 2 in peak season.) The resort does not charge for Wi-Fi. It ponies up for the bank fees collected at the clubhouse ATM. And all proceeds from the par-3 Bandon Preserve—more than half a million bucks last year—go to charity.

Keiser's innate largesse extends to the residents of Bandon, too, many of whom are among the 800 people the resort employs in the peak season of May through October. If Keiser can get through the red tape, he'll soon break ground on Bandon Muni, a 27-hole course that is expressly intended to serve—and thank—the community. The cost to play? Twenty bucks. And if you think he's going to skimp, you're not grasping the essence of the man. Gil Hanse, the renowned architect hired to build the course in Rio for the 2016 Olympics, is set to design it.

Mike Keiser can't say what the future holds for the game of golf or Bandon Dunes. But he knows what would be lost if they aren't standing a hundred years from now. Maybe there's something presciently purposeful about how relentless a journey it is to get here. To experience the solitude and joy of golf in an ever-frenetic world, we might need or want to travel farther for it.

Or maybe Bandon Dunes just belongs in that group of other iconic, faraway tests of our fortitude and dreams. Sandra Boynton, the "Hippo Birdie Two Ewes" illustrator, admits she's not much of a golfer, but a few years ago she made a hole-in-one at Bandon Dunes. "How's that for synchronicity?" she says, gently nodding to her contribution to the place. Her witness was Grant Rogers, the resort's Yoda-like head of instruction, who eerily said, "That's in," the moment she struck the ball. "Grant's a quirky, funny, sort of, oh, subversive guru," Boynton says, laughing. That sounds about right for a guy who claims his clubs speak to him and who's been known to play big chunks of a round with just his putter.

I first met Rogers while he was whale watching, with his bag strapped to his back, from an elevated tee overlooking the Pacific. The next morning, over oatmeal and tea, he talked about the pursuits—and those hard-to-get-to places—that are the ultimate test of our being. "Golf is a good way to find out about people, but it's a great way to find out about yourself," he said that day. "If you're a serious skier, at some point in your life you need to go to Chamonix, in France. If you're a surfer, you have to go to Mavericks, in California. If you're a mountain climber, pretty much you need to go to the Himalayas. But if it's about golf, if it's about testing your skill, you have to come to Bandon Dunes. There's something magical about this place. It's where you go to find out about yourself—to find out who you are."

*John McAlley's work has appeared in Rolling Stone, GQ, and Entertainment Weekly. Let him know how your golf game is going at [mcalley.john@gmail.com](mailto:mcalley.john@gmail.com).*

**ON THE EDGE**  
The putting  
green of  
Pacific Dunes  
No. 11.

