

REGIONAL GUIDE: DEVON

Open standard

Devon is the only county to boast separate coastlines; and it takes advantage with some fine links fayre that at times smacks of Open rota calibre, says Chris Bertram.

One of the many entertaining but ultimately futile discussions on golf courses is when everyone around your table in the clubhouse has their say on which course they would like to see added to the rota for the Open Championship. Someone will likely argue vehemently for Royal Portrush. Another for Royal Porthcawl. Western Gailes may be thrown into the mix. Perhaps Royal Aberdeen too. Or is Trump International the one which warrants entry when it fully matures?

If your group is especially well travelled, they will also suggest Saunton's East course. For anyone who has made it to the South West of England will know that there lies one of the outstanding links courses in the land.

It is the main attraction in a county which is blessed with a handful of bright lights complemented by a very strong support cast. It makes Devon a very attractive option for those of us who like to sneak off for a round or two during the course of a family holiday...

Saunton (East & West)

GB&I ranking 2012 – 27th & Top 200

Saunton's East course is not alone in having to deal with high expectations, in its case by talk of it being good enough to host an Open Championship.

Saunton's premier course is, however, better than most at meeting them... and wastes no time in doing so.

After a short stroll around the side of the low-lying clubhouse which serves to heighten anticipation just a little further, you step onto the elevated 1st tee and realise instantly this is a special course.

The quality is relentless early on; this is no slow burner.

You leave one green and dart briskly to the next tee, interested to see what awaits next. So, after the seriously robust 1st, 'Gullpit' – a 478-yard par 4 off the tips with an intimidating drive over tall dunes and a ditch lurking short of the green – you scurry off the back right corner in search of the 2nd, which turns out to be an inviting par 5.

In such a scenario, it is very easy for a round to become a blur. Yet these holes are simple to recall.

The 2nd is less than 500 yards off the whites but in fact two draw shots with a lofted wood to leave your favourite wedge

LEFT: The 17th is a strong par 3 on the East course at Saunton – part of a quality closing stretch at this world-class links near Braunton.

distance into the elevated green – which dismissively rejects anything short – is the clever play.

The 3rd, 'Valley', might be even better, a two-shotter which zig zags its way up a fairway lined by dunes and punctuated by prominent humps and hollows.

Then comes 'The Gap', where you must find the left side off the tee – but without dropping into one of the three bunkers on that side – in order to get a view of a green obscured by the mound that sits in the right-centre of the fairway.

A cute par 3 of just 122 yards breaks up the hitting, as does the relatively short dog-legging 6th, before we get back to serious stuff with the 7th, whose name – 'Anstead's Humps' – gives a hint as to the fun which follows.

The next may well be your favourite or least favourite hole on the East, including as it does a blind drive and, if you push your approach right, a blind chip.

We loved it.

The comparatively modest 9th completes a terrific front nine which has few peers in Britain and Ireland.

The second half begins with a super short two-shotter played to an elevated green set on a shelf.

There is then a slight dip in quality for a moment or two but soon it is high-octane fare again, with the last three forming a superlative closing stretch.

Walking up to the final green, one has



The par-4 14th on Saunton's East – a course which meets all of the high expectations.

long since decided that although Saunton is relatively short by modern standards, The Open could be held here successfully if the R&A gave it the nod.

Critics suggest the infrastructure can not cope with “all that comes with a modern-day Open”.

It is a depressing, if realistic, comment; one yearns for the championship committee to make a romantic move and take The Open to somewhere less fashionable such as Saunton.

The fact it is unlikely to stage The Open should not stop you moving the East several notches up your wish list.

And while you are there you should certainly also play the West.

Some suggest it virtually the equal of its vaunted sister. But while that seems a little fanciful, BBC golf correspondent Iain Carter, who was in Devon this autumn, is a confirmed fan.

“Having already played and thoroughly enjoyed the East, I found the West to be a similarly fulfilling experience,” he told Golf World.

“Slightly narrower, particularly over the opening holes, it is a fine test of accuracy. Sitting amid giant dunes you don’t see the sea, but the waves can easily be heard and there is no mistaking you are playing fabulous links golf. I played with my wife and son, so can vouch for it being rewarding for all ages and abilities.”

Royal North Devon

GB&I ranking 2012 – Top 200

A mile due south of Saunton – across the River Taw estuary – lies Royal North Devon. This historic course is, of course, to be found in the village of Westward Ho! and is tight to a beautiful sandy beach – so you will be sharing your day out with many happy holidaymakers if you play here on a warm summer’s day.

If you’ve played Saunton the day before RND might initially seem a little low key. The 1st is a par 4 played towards the beach on flat land and it is not alone at RND in being laid out on terrain lacking the natural charisma of Saunton.

But it has its own charm, just as, say, Leven is lovely in its own way in comparison to the thrilling topography of Kingbarns further up the Fife coast.

It also has its highlights, most famously on the 4th, ‘Cape’, with its eponymous bunker – a gargantuan trap whose sleeper-lined face smiles at you back on the tee like teeth in a giant’s mouth. The 6th is even better, a tremendous hole played along the beach with a fairway resembling moguls on a well-carved ski piste. It is one of the most exhilarating tee shots in England.

Good putting surfaces and tight fairway turf exist here all year – but RND is more than just a nice venue for

links golf. Founded in 1864, it is the oldest course in the country and often described as the St Andrews of England. Certainly, within the notably welcoming clubhouse, the golf museum, the trophies and the honours boards chart the development of the game, including the club’s own significant part in it.

John Henry Taylor was born in the village of Northam, overlooking the course, and was a caddie boy at RND before becoming one of golf’s iconic players as part of the ‘Great Triumvirate’.

Carter also played here on his Devon trip, and its history impressed him.

“Royal North Devon is the nearest thing in England to golf as it was

intended,” he enthused. “Its rough and ready nature makes it possible to imagine how the sport was for the game’s founding fathers.

“Negotiating the par-4 4th and the Cape Bunker is a delight while the overall design is wonderful with much of the front nine clinging to the coastline before moving inland. It constantly asks strategic questions and has a terrific array of par 3s as well as a challenging finish.”

Bovey Castle

GB&I ranking 2012 – Top 200

Now we move inland, to Bovey Castle near Moretonhampstead within



The very well protected 4th green at Royal North Devon.



The par-5 2nd on the East at Saunton – in many people’s eyes a worthy Open venue.

10 HIDDEN GEMS

Golf of a great variety is on offer in Devon away from the star-studded venues

1 Thurlestone

Perfect holiday golf here, its 6,230 yards plotted on the cliffs running along the coastline of Bigbury Bay near Kingsbridge.



2 Woodbury Park

The club which former F1 world champion Nigel Mansell built has 27 holes with the Oaks Championship course a well-manicured parkland with rolling tree-lined fairways, stunning lakes and views towards Dartmoor.

3 Teignmouth

Laid out by Dr Alister MacKenzie in 1924, this moorland course sits 800ft above sea level and thus enjoys glorious views of the sea and moors. At allotted times, twoballs start on one nine and three and fourballs on the other.



4 Dartmouth (Championship)

Two fine courses here, with this West Region PGA host spanning 7,200 yards with streams and as many as 12 water features.

5 Yelverton

Herbert Fowler designed this delightful moorland course and used the old mine works as natural hazards. Lovely views across the moors while Dartmoor ponies and cattle share the undulating fairways.

6 Ilfracombe

There are stirring views of the sea from every tee of this spectacular course, which is perched on top of rugged cliffs in north Devon. It’s a robust walk, but worth expending your energy for.

7 Bigbury

Another cliff-top course with exhilarating views and stiff sea breezes. A holiday cottage (sleeping four) on site is popular.



8 Warren

A links on the south Devon coast which is routed on a spit of land in the mouth of the Exe estuary. Located within the Dawlish Warren National Nature Reserve, it is noted for its true greens, and terrific climax.

9 Tavistock

Situated on the western slopes of the Dartmoor National Park, this expansive course was laid out in 1890. The fairways might be wide, but thick gorse and bracken, and clump of trees await to penalise.

10 Ashbury Hotel (Kigbeare)

We just had to include Europe’s biggest golf resort; there are a staggering SEVEN 18-hole courses here, all set in rolling countryside among wooded parkland. Society heaven.



Majestic views from the elevated 5th green at East Devon.



Bovey Castle is a striking example of inland golf.

Dartmoor National Park. It is a destination for those who relish 'old money' opulence.

From the tailored tweed plus-four trousers worn by the hotel concierge to the baby owl, Archimedes, that sits on the reception desk, this is a destination with a difference.

The hotel and course sit within the Hambleton's estate which opened in the 1930s and is an exquisite retreat in the manner of Gleneagles – or even a less exclusive Skibo Castle (Peter de Savary being the common link).

The JF Abercromby design was always pretty but was refreshed to 'Top 100' standard in the late 1990s by Tom Mackenzie. "Bovey Castle is a lovely place to play golf – free from any

interference from the outside world," Mackenzie told Golf World. "Its card length makes it look like a pushover for many players, but its narrowness and the almost constant presence of the river on the front nine makes it quite a challenge.

"It is a course where players of all abilities are tested thoroughly. More important, it is great fun golf in a beautiful place."

Accessible to green fee payers as well as residents, it impresses all who have played the remodelled course; a beautiful, tranquil experience among bursts of woodland colour, it is a very fine course which almost achieves the very difficult task of living up to the elegant environment in which it sits. Expect a lovingly-manicured parkland course

which pleases the eye with its mature trees, water features, sharply-defined bunkering and backdrops of the stately castle. But do not mistake it for merely entertaining holiday golf; it has bite.

East Devon

GB&I ranking 2012 – Top 200

Finally to the south coast of Devon and to this lovely seaside course near Exmouth, south of Exeter.

Laid out by several men – including Herbert Fowler and Harry Colt – on clifftops above Budleigh Salterton, many fairways weave between heather and gorse while there are also plenty of trees around tees and greens.

All the while, you are walking on and

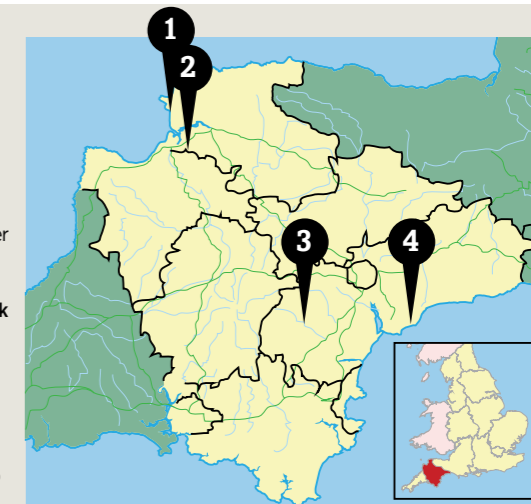
playing off first-class linksy turf – as well as enjoying the kind of breathtaking views common to the large majority of the stellar golf in this blessed part of England.

The locals will insist to you that East Devon is better than vaunted names such as Broadstone or Parkstone and certainly this is a classy hybrid between links and heathland; and if that heady mix doesn't get your pulse racing, you must have a heart as cold as stone.

The proximity of the M5 – the gateway to the South West – makes East Devon an astute first or last stop on your itinerary to Devon, which can provide an enchanting golf break with the minimum of fuss. **GW**

AT A GLANCE

- 1. Saunton**
All week £79. Winter rate: £48.
T: 01271 812436
W: sauntongolf.co.uk
- 2. Royal North Devon**
Sun-Thu £55, Fri-Sat £60. Winter rate: £35 (£55 on Saturday)
T: 01237 473817
W: royalthnorthdevongolfclub.co.uk
- 3. Bovey Castle**
All week £70. Winter rate £49.
T: 0844 474 0078
W: boveycastle.com
- 4. East Devon**
All week: £45. T: 01395 443370
W: eastdevongolfclub.co.uk



THE GW ESSENTIALS

Where to stay

As one of the UK's most popular holiday destinations, you are not short of accommodation to choose from. The difficulty is knowing where to locate yourself, because there is a fair

bit of ground to cover. We opted to hire a cottage for the week through holidaycottages.co.uk. They've got properties all over Devon (and Cornwall, where we also stayed with them) so you can take your pick wherever you fancy being located. Hiring a cottage also turned out to be incredibly good value; £400 for



a week split among four of us. For the well-heeled, Bovey Castle is an exquisite option with a selection of stylish rooms as well as lodges.

Nice touch: Loads of room for bags and gear, plus breakfast is a very quick (if less spectacular) affair than in an hotel, so you're off out efficiently in the morning.

We liked the cottage experience so much we repeated it in Kent. Visit holidaycottages.co.uk for further details and to book.

When to go

It's worth thinking of a trip here as early as April; you'll get a shoulder rate at many clubs and the courses will not be busy – yet

the weather can be very pleasant and very unlikely to be cold in this comparatively mild part of the UK. Worth noting, though, that while the links drain well, the inland courses (Bovey as well as some of the gems) are located on typical rural land and might not be in quite as good nick as the seaside tracks.

What to do

There is possibly nowhere in the UK better placed to combine a golf trip with a family holiday. While you take on Saunton or RND, you can do so safe in the knowledge the rest are entertained by a theme park, a visitor farm, a zoo, wildlife park or the national marine aquarium.

There are historic houses and gardens plus endless natural attractions. And if the weather plays ball and the sun is shining, you genuinely won't find any better beaches on the Algarve or the Costas than you do at Saunton Sands or Westward Ho!