



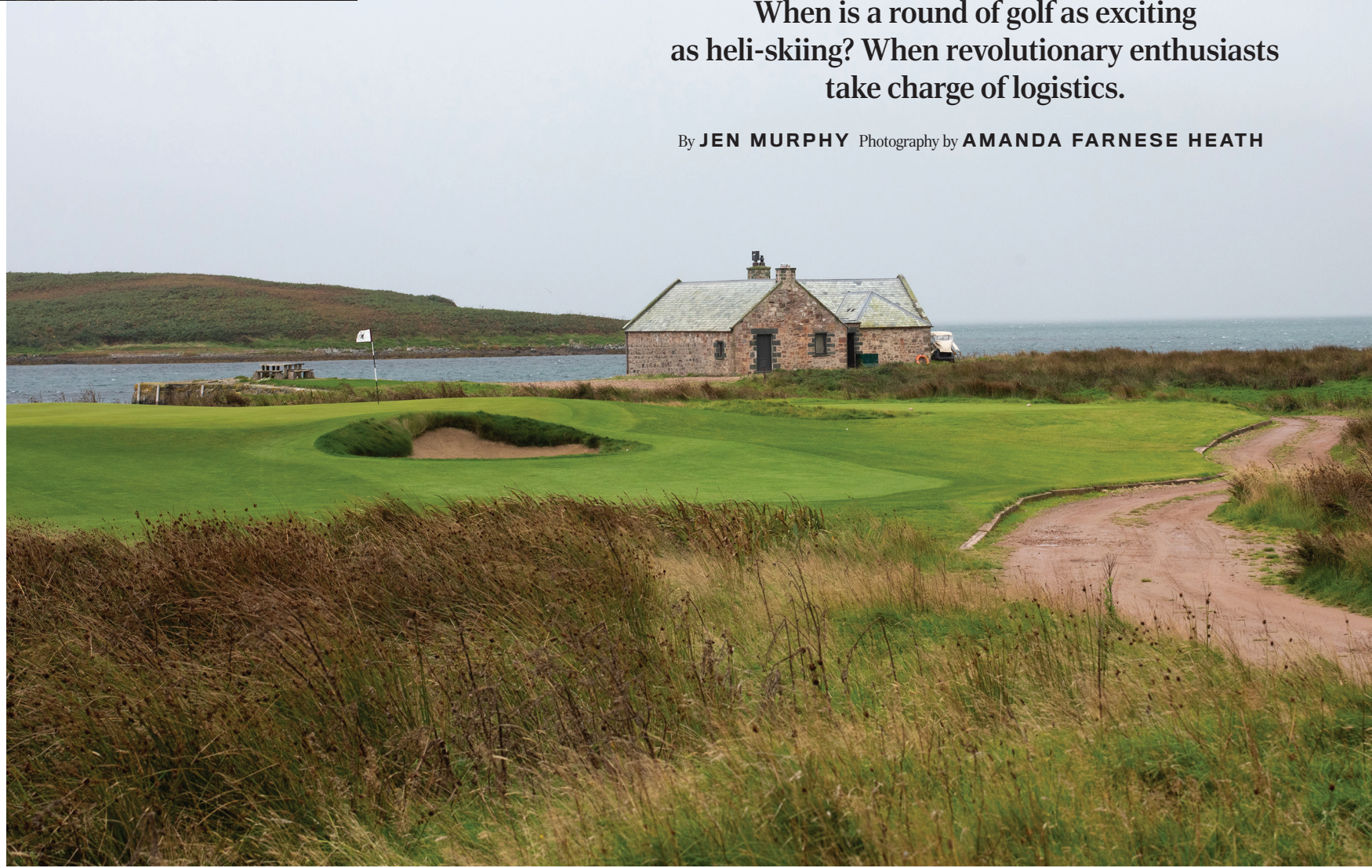
CLARA YOUNG: NORTH BERWICK GOLF CLUB

# High Tee



When is a round of golf as exciting as heli-skiing? When revolutionary enthusiasts take charge of logistics.

By JEN MURPHY Photography by AMANDA FARNESE HEATH





**The dramatic clifftop** golf course at Ardfin Estate sits mostly on rock and clay rather than on sand and dunes, with holes placed on slivers of beach and in towering bluffs. Boldly sculpted into the rugged shoreline of the southern tip of Jura, an island in Scotland's Inner Hebrides, it requires an adventurous soul to play, not to mention to reach.

George Orwell described the secluded isle, population 230 people and 6,000 deer, as “an extremely un-get-atable place.” In the late 1940s, it was the perfect remote retreat to pen his final work, *1984*. Today, it's home to one road, one pub, one whisky distillery and Ardfin, one of the world's most ambitious and lavish golf retreats. It's exactly the type of edge-of-the-world locale Bravo Whisky Golf specializes in discovering and making accessible to guests.

Some of Scotland's most spectacular links are tucked away in the deepest corners of fissured coastline and middle-of-nowhere islands, calling for hours of travel by car, plane and ferry to reach. Accessing Ardfin from Edinburgh, for example, typically demands a full and exhausting day requiring a nearly five-hour drive plus an hour-long ferry ride, or an hour drive to Glasgow to catch a regularly delayed regional flight to Islay, followed by a ferry crossing and short drive, all at the whims of the west coast's unpredictable weather.

But Bravo Whisky Golf founders Neil Scott Johnson and Paul Geddes adamantly believe that a proper golf holiday should never involve more than 30 minutes of driving in one day. Whether zeroed in on their native Scotland or looking farther afield in Scandinavia, the duo aligns hard-to-reach courses with airstrips, boutique hotels and VIP experiences, such as special entry to distilleries or a private dinner with a lord at his grand ancestral estate. Thanks to a relationship with the only commercial seaplane company in the UK, they're able to escort guests like me to Ardfin in under an hour.

The evening before my scheduled departure for Jura, Geddes surprises me with a private whisky tasting at my hotel, Edinburgh's grande dame, the Balmoral. Scotch, the hotel's exclusive whisky room, boasts over 500 varieties of the Scottish spirit, including the sought-after Macallan Red Collec-

tion 40 Years Old. As we taste our way through a flight of the Macallan Sherry Oak 12 Years Old, the distillery's Double Cask 15 Years Old and the 2021 release of its Rare Cask, my whisky-warmed worries about the ominous weather forecast spill out.

Geddes, a baby-faced 49-year-old with a predilection for extreme skiing and fine French wines, seems anything but concerned as he takes another sip of the Rare Cask, which he poetically describes as Christmas in a glass. “We'll be fine,” he says with a sly smile. “Plus, a helicopter and helipad are a backup if we can't make a water landing, and if it's too windy, a private boat is on standby.”

**Geddes and Johnson**, I quickly learn, aren't just golf and whisky fanatics. The NATO alphabet code words that form the company's name are a nod to the duo's military-esque logistical and tactical mastery. “We don't sit around,” Geddes assures me. “There's always a plan A, B, C and even D.” They are also connoisseurs of the finer things in life (classic cars, Champagne, contemporary art, bespoke tweed suits) with the uncanny ability to secure everything from tee times at St. Andrews to a private showing of one-of-a-kind tartans by cult textile designer Araminta Campbell.

The friends met over 20 years ago while studying at Aberdeen University. Their professional paths veered—Johnson went into property management and ran a catering business with his wife, while Geddes traded commodities—then three years ago, they took a ski trip to Chamonix, France. Deep into their second bottle of wine après ski, they hatched the idea for a company that would make playing 18 holes as exciting as heli-skiing.

Being someone who thrives on adrenaline, I was dubious. But Bravo Whisky Golf is not a conventional golf travel company. It's a luxury travel company that specializes in golf. A variety of flight plans serve as jumping-off points to build the trip of your dreams. And if you prefer to mix in some time on the rails, the pair can schedule a break around a charter of the Royal Scotsman, the Belmond luxury train. Given the company's short season—May through September—and diligent flight organizing, which can require weeks to puzzle together followed by six months of fine-tuning, Geddes and Johnson take on only 12 to 16 groups, each ranging from two to eight guests, every year.

For golf obsessives, Bravo Whisky Golf can curate journeys such as a 2022 booking set to hit 17 courses in 19 days across five countries. Another plan, which saves 21.5 hours of travel and hops to four off-the-beaten-path Scottish courses via four private flights in three days, serves as a muse for guests like me, who are short on time and like a round of whisky as much as one on the links. Most groups—nearly 90 percent—are couples looking to complement playing time with insider experiences.

Geddes or Johnson, a fit 53-year-old who keeps his game sharp by waking at dawn to do qigong, personally escorts every trip. Whoever stays behind runs logistics to ensure everything

from the transfer of golf clubs to the backup helicopter flights is executed seamlessly. I was lucky enough to have both gents by my side and got to watch firsthand as they smoothly shifted activities around weather delays and unexpected pandemic restrictions.

Geddes's instincts were correct, and despite the wind and mizzle, a Scottishism for mist and drizzle, we take off, as planned, in a Cessna 208 seaplane over Loch Lomond. The UK's largest lake spans 23 miles, and in the eyes of Bravo Whisky Golf, doubles as its longest runway. We could fly direct to Jura, but Ardfin's team messages to say the weather is wet and blustery—by a Scot's measure, that's akin to a hurricane—so we splash down on the banks of Loch Voil for Champagne and plump, briny oysters shucked by Tom Lewis, the bald, brazen chef-owner of Monachyle Mhor, a restaurant with rooms where Bravo Whisky Golf sometimes hosts guests.

Johnson and Geddes pride themselves on finding unique accommodations. Their portfolio includes classics such as the Balmoral as well as relative newcomers, including the Fife Arms, a Highlands inn reimagined by the owners of juggernaut art gallery Hauser & Wirth. But then there is also a retired lighthouse tender turned floating luxury hotel, a 13th-century castle and Lauderdale Estate, a buy-out property with 10 uniquely designed guest rooms and a toy-filled boathouse located on the shores of the Morvern Peninsula.

Our plan A had been to arrive at Ardfin by late afternoon for 18 holes. I have no complaints with our backup strategy, which, in addition to the mid-morning oyster snack, includes a potential splashdown on Tiree to surf the long peeling waves of Balevullin beach and visit Welan, the men's favorite maker of woolly hats in Scotland. But we decide to linger at Monachyle Mhor instead, and when we depart, the ever-changing light up above feels almost biblical. After the veil of mizzle finally lifts, our flight also serves as an aerial tour of the archipelago's wild beauty.

When our pilot gently eases us down near the shore of Ardfin just before dusk, estate manager Willie Macdonald is already waiting with the rib boat to shuttle us to the hotel. Throughout our trip, a drink seems to be the antidote for Scotland's damp weather, but for once we're greeted not with whisky, but gin.

Macdonald escorts us into the glass-ceilinged Atrium, where Claire Fletcher, one of the three female owners of the island's six-year-old gin distillery, Lussa, is behind the bar. As she mixes G&Ts, she schools us on the 15 botanicals—all foraged on Jura—that give Lussa its distinctive aromatics and velvety finish. Savory house-cured venison salami topped with shaved olives and Parmesan accompany the zesty cocktails almost too well. Luckily, Macdonald gathers us for dinner before a third round is ordered.

All stone and wood, decorated with just the right mix of taxidermy and tweed (spun from looms on neighboring Islay), Ardfin is the quintessential Scottish estate. It's the type of destination that immediately lulls you into a slower pace with

its oversized fireplaces, coddling staff and sprawling grounds. Australian multimillionaire Greg Coffey—nicknamed the Wizard of Oz for his financial brilliance—acquired the 12,000-acre property in 2010 and hired compatriot and renowned golf architect Bob Harrison to craft what some are calling the greatest course on the planet.

**One look at his creation** and its punishing geography, and it's immediately clear that Harrison designed the 18 holes for a unique breed of golfer—more thrill-seeker than perfectionist. Six years in the making, the course was initially invite-only. But Coffey's vision for Ardfin grew beyond golf. Last year he debuted five-star accommodations, including the exclusive-use Jura House, which has nine guest rooms, plus 13 art-filled rooms and two apartments located in the estate's former farm buildings. Guests have access to his much-hyped golf course, but Coffey hopes they will also come, as he does, to soak in the raw wilderness on deer stalks with Jura-born gamekeeper Scott Muir or kayak expeditions in the bay and its surrounding skerries. We, however, have one mission: golf. The drying cupboard in my room is the first hint that I'll be playing in the morning's sideways downpour. Rain gear supplied by Bravo Whisky Golf is the second. “If you want to golf in Scotland, you can't be scared of a little weather,” says a giddy Johnson. He has played the course before—one of the many benefits of having an escort who is also a global panelist for *Golf Digest International*—and I can sense his excitement as we step foot on the first tee box. “This is golf nirvana,” he says with a sigh. We are the sole players out here today. As I take in the wilderness around me—sheep and stags in the distance, crashing waves on the rocks—I know this place is something special.

The distractingly cinematic scenery makes it hard to focus, and this is a course that requires concentration. There is no room for error with the wind and the slope. It's not uncommon for players to lose five balls in the Jurassic-sized bracken and thick carpets of heather or off devilish cliffs. The rain subsides, but the wind doesn't let up as Johnson approaches the back tee of the par-3 10th hole. Precariously perched on a vertigo-inducing cliff jutting out above the ocean, this cliff-to-cliff hero shot spans 178 yards. “This is adventure golf,” Johnson shouts into the howling wind. The extreme environment seems to heighten his competitiveness. He nails the shot and lets loose a simultaneous fist pump-hip shake that Geddes and I later name the Jura jive. As much as we tease, I'd be jiving, too, if I'd made that drive.

The 11th hole is a challenging par-4 that meanders from the cliff tops across wetlands down to a small boathouse on the shoreline. Music buffs might recognize the site where Scottish band KLF set fire to 1 million pounds in the 1990s in the name of art. Now it's a cushy comfort station where players can warm up by the fireplace, regain focus and refuel on seafood platters and venison steaks. We battle the elements, lose way more than five balls each and finish the round with weary legs and ruddy faces. It is hands-down the most exhilarating course I've ever played.

The next day, we hop a five-minute ferry across to Islay. Just 15 miles from

Ardfin, another multimillionaire, former BBC chairman Gavyn Davies, and his wife, Baroness Sue Nye, have recently reinvented the Machrie, one of Scotland's iconic links courses. Originally laid out in 1891 by famed Scottish golfer Willie Campbell, it weaved in and out of what many describe as the wildest dunes in all of Scotland. Unruly tufts of marram grass resembled the furry heads of Highland cattle, hiding both the ocean view and, infuriatingly to golfers, many a pin.

The redesign is equally challenging yet more refined, and even traditionalists will concede the new seascapes are dazzling. While Ardfin's course aims to intimidate, the Machrie encourages progression and fun. The Wee Course, with six par-3s, for example, is the perfect setting for whisky-fueled sunset putt-putt, which we play with antique hickory clubs one evening. Similarly, the renovated Machrie Hotel is the antithesis of Ardfin's masculine wilderness estate. Baroness Nye enlisted her friend hotelier Campbell

PREVIOUS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Bravo Whisky Golf brand ambassador Clara Young takes a swing; a vintage Daimler V8 250 from Edinburgh Classic Cars transports guests; the course and boathouse at Ardfin Estate on the Isle of Jura; cycling on Ez-Riders electric bicycles; Ardfin's reception area; Bruichladdich Distillery on the Isle of Islay.

**From the sea, I'm able to fully appreciate the immensity**

**of Bass Rock, soaring about 350 feet into the sky.**



Paddleboarding past Bass Rock, Scotland's onetime version of Alcatraz

**In true Bravo Whisky Golf fashion, wind-in-my-hair adventure is followed by a formal affair: tea with a lord.**



Gray to create a stylish, 47-room country home that celebrates golf heritage with shelves of historic tournament trophies and framed Hermès and Gucci golfing-themed scarves hung throughout the halls. Whisky is even more acclaimed than golf on this sleepy island, and the hotel's restaurant and bar, 18, aptly overlooking Machrie's final hole and Laggan Bay, stocks bottles from all nine island distilleries, plus many more. But as a guest of Johnson and Geddes, I visit the cellar doors of lauded producers such as Bowmore, where we tour the No. 1 Vaults, said to be the world's oldest scotch maturation warehouse, set on the shore of Loch Indaal, and Bruichladdich, where original Victorian-era equipment, including a seven-ton mash tun and 20-foot narrow-necked stills, is still in use.

**A private plane** delivers us back to the east coast to play our final holes at North Berwick West Links, Geddes and Johnson's seaside home course. Blessed with a sunny, blue-sky day, we cut our game short and detour to Ez-Riders, a new e-bike outfitter in nearby East Lothian. Tina O'Rourke, the sporty co-owner, guides us on a ride along the craggy coast, past the ruins of Tantallon Castle and down along the sandy beach of Sealcliff. Learning that the ocean would be uncharacteristically calm and knowing my deep love of water activities, Geddes and Johnson called ahead: Paddleboards from local operator Ocean Vertical are awaiting us on the shore. I zip into a 5-millimeter wetsuit just in case my balance fails me. From the sea, I'm able to fully appreciate the immensity of Bass Rock. Soaring about 350 feet into the sky, Scotland's Alcatraz sits just 1.2 miles offshore and today shelters the world's largest colony of northern gannets, snowy-white seabirds with black-tipped wings.

In true Bravo Whisky Golf fashion, wind-in-my-hair adventure is followed by a formal affair: tea with a lord. Our car turns down a hidden driveway, delivering us to Broomhall House. The 300-year-old home of the family



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: An aircraft from Loch Lomond Seaplanes; local oysters and scallops served at Monachyle Mhor in Balquhider; Bravo Whisky Golf founders Paul Geddes and Neil Scott Johnson; dining alfresco; the writer heading to Sealcliff Beach in North Berwick; Johnson, Young and Geddes head to the next hole.



of King Robert the Bruce—father of Scottish independence—is straight out of *Downton Abbey* and closed to the public. Lord Charles Bruce, heir to the Earldom of Elgin and Kincardine, ushers us inside the library, where shelves of books, including a first edition of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, contain some of the greatest ideas of the past three centuries. Charles is just as much historian as host and entertains my inner history nerd by sharing letters exchanged between his great-grandfather, the 9th Earl of Elgin, who served as Secretary of State for the Colonies, and Winston Churchill, his undersecretary at the time. A neighboring room has been turned into a museum that currently displays artifacts, such as a compass, musket and handwritten journal, from the travels of explorer James Bruce of Kinnaird, a cousin of the 5th Earl. Charles could indulge me for hours, but Geddes insists we can't be late for our final appointment.

It's my last evening back in Edinburgh, and the gents don their finest tweeds and wow me with a loaner vintage gown. A driver appears in a midnight-blue Daimler V8 250 to whisk us off to dinner. Bravo, indeed. **B**