

FOR THE GOLFER WHOSE HEART IS IN THE HIGHLANDS

A GREAT COURSE MAKES ITS BOW

Winding through the heart of Perthshire, the drive north on the ruggedly beautiful A9 from St. Andrews to Dornoch has long had just one outstanding golf stop along the way, at Nairn. But very recent years have seen the creation of the testing Spey Valley Golf Course, at Aviemore, and, in a matter of just four months, we'll witness the unveiling of the sublime Castle Stuart eighteen, no more than 15 minutes from Inverness and 10 minutes from Nairn. We'll go out on a limb now and proclaim Castle Stuart the most important course opening in Great Britain and Ireland—and arguably the world—during 2009.



Castle Stuart Links (Rating: A), named for the 17th-century castle that is a 10-minute walk from the 1st tee, is the work of two Americans, Mark Parsinen and Gil Hanse. Parsinen's wizardry is best showcased outside St. Andrews at Kingsbarns, where he converted 190 treeless acres of pasture and croplands into a links of inarguable greatness. Hanse, inspired by Muirfield, has given golfers Craighead, at Crail, with its native fescues waving like wheat in the wind and framing the fairways high above the sea.

Now on the south shore of the Moray Firth, just off the A9, the two have teamed up to fashion another man-made links.

Both architects were determined to provide the singular appeal of links golf: vigorous run of ball. Parsinen and Hanse planted 100 percent pure fescue in pure sand, which enabled them to control both the look and the playability of fairways, greens, and even the rough. This sand-based turf makes the ideal surface for striking golf shots.

Castle Stuart sports an overall elevation change of 130 feet. Though the 10th and 18th greens are enormous, most greens average 6,000 square feet and are wide enough to present fair targets in windy conditions. What's more, they will receive running shots under the wind, particularly if you are coming from the preferred approach angle.

Most golfers will play this par-72 course at about 6,400 yards, though it can be stretched to 7,400. Thanks to an interesting seaside shelf effect, 12 holes, tucked 75 to 200 yards inland, are routed over higher ground, while the remaining six literally skirt the Moray Firth, down at the foot of an embankment on a long, narrow ledge. On holes 1, 2, and 3, a robust slice is likely to find the water; the same can be said of a hook on 10, 11, and 12.

Though by no means a penal layout, Castle Stuart is consistently challenging. No hole is less than good, and seven or eight are great. Virtually every hole—but not every shot—puts pressure on the swing. Asymmetry is the order of the day—the play twists, turns, climbs, and dives around and over a rich assortment of landforms (mesas, dunes, knobs, undulations)—but wonderful sight lines permit the Castle Stuart player to clearly observe the net of a sound swing. Prominent landmarks such as Kessock Bridge, Alturlie Point, Chanonry Lighthouse, Ben Wyvis, and Fort George capture the eye again and again during the round. And the Moray Firth itself is directly in the golfer's gaze on 15 holes.

All six of the seaside holes are beauties, but a couple are unforgettable. The thrilling par-four 3rd, 269 yards for regular play,

Photo Courtesy of Castle Stuart Golf Links



Castle Stuart Links may be the most significant new course opening anywhere in the world in 2009

boasts a driveable green perched on the point precariously above the sea. And the short 11th, the lone one-shotter beside the water, has a saddle-shaped green in the dunes that is slightly angled to the line of play, the shimmering sea its backdrop.

Castle Stuart's formal opening is in July. We expect the links will be spoken of in the same breath as such iconic Scottish layouts as North Berwick, Royal Dornoch, Ailsa, Kingsbarns, Prestwick, Cruden Bay, and Machrihanish—all of them bastions of true links golf, where run of ball over the rumpled terrain enriches the round—and our memory of it—enormously.

At venerable **Nairn Golf Club (Rating: B+)**, the Moray Firth is again the principal hazard, the beach lurking tight along the right on six of the first seven holes. Nairn was founded in 1887 when Archie Simpson, the professional at Royal Aberdeen, laid out the links. Nairn hosted the British Amateur for the first time in 1994, and the Walker Cup in 1999, the year Great Britain and Ireland, led by Luke Donald and Paul Casey, humbled the United States 15-9.

Par is 71 on this wholly natural links that is likely to measure about 6,350 yards. The waters of the Moray Firth are always in view, and the dappling effect of sunlight and shadow on the Black Isle produces a marvelous aesthetic treat. Although firm fairways bring even the longest par fours within reach in two shots, Nairn is a serious examination in driving. The narrow fairways—undulating, hummocky, capricious—are strait jacketed by heather and gorse. As for the greens, though silken and readable, they are sometimes intriguingly angled to the line of play, hidden behind dunes (as on the teasing 4th, a wonderful 145-yarder played out to sea), or set on troubling plateaus or ostensibly innocent little crests.

Perhaps no hole better exemplifies Nairn's challenge than the 337-yard 5th. Here the drive must be lined over the edge of the beach on our right. A pesky Braid bunker awaits in the left side of the fairway, precisely where we would choose to land the ball in order to play safely away from the water. The green sits mockingly atop a modest plateau.

You will want to have lunch or at least a drink in the impressive clubhouse, its broad windows framing glorious views over the Firth to the distant peaks above Strathconan.

Spey Valley Golf Course (Rating: B), in the village of Aviemore, is a 35-minute drive south on the A9 from Castle Stuart. Irresistibly set amidst stands of Caledonian pines and the River Spey, with the magnificent, often-snowcapped Cairngorm Mountains a backdrop, this 5-year-old eighteen has the ideal trappings of inland golf.

Englishman Dave Thomas, an accomplished player who lost the 1958 British Open in a playoff (to Peter Thomson) and the 1966 Open by a stroke (to Jack Nicklaus), laid out the course. Among Thomas's best-known designs are The Belfry, the English venue for four Ryder Cup Matches; and the picturesque Roxburghe, in Kelso, Scotland, near the English border. Spey Valley, a par 72, ranges in length from 5,924 to 7,118 yards. This gently rolling, attractively varied course provides nary a flat test. Although silver birch trees line the majority of holes, nothing is claustrophobic about them. The fairways breathe in and out. Water and sand are present, but only in small doses. Bunkering is light, yet most of the 63 pits are skillfully spotted to offer maximum greenside intimidation.

While the par-five 5th, which tops out at 641 yards, is one of the longest holes in Scotland, two par fours early on in the second nine stand out as Spey Valley's most memorable tests. The 428-

yard 11th features a devilish false front, and the striking 453-yard 12th plays down from an elevated tee before ascending sternly on the long second shot. Heather flanks the fairway from tee to green on both holes. This carefully conditioned course is full of character and a pleasure to play.

Castle Stuart Golf Links, Balnaglack Farmhouse, Inverness IV2 7JL, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1463-795440. **castlestuartgolf.com.** Green fee: £130 (\$188). Two carts are available, but only for those whose health necessitates riding: Cart fee is £29 (\$36). A caddie is required with a cart. Caddies cost £35 (\$51), plus tip. Closed December through March. Aerification: early October (small tynes).

Nairn Golf Club, Seabank Road, Nairn, Nairnshire IV12 4HB, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1667-453208. **nairngolfclub.co.uk.** Green fee: £82 (\$119). Caddies, to be booked in advance, cost £35 (\$51), plus tip. Carts must be booked in advance, and there must be medical reason for using them. Carts cost £20 (\$29). Aerification: November through March, when the greens are closed.

Spey Valley Golf Course, Dalfaber Village, Aviemore, Inverness-Shire PH22 1PN, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1479-811725. **speyvalleygolf.com.** Green fee: weekdays, £69 (\$100); weekends, £79 (\$114). No caddies. Carts cost £20 (\$29). Aerification: mid-October through March. When necessary in summer, the Hydrojet technique is used.



Castle Stuart (Rating: A-) itself is a sturdy twin-tower fortress/residence with four bedrooms in each tower. A total of 16 people can be accommodated. Guests instinctively make themselves at home when they arrive, whether in front of the log fire in the drawing room or in their own quarters, which, spacious and welcoming, have their own remote-controlled gas fires.

The castle was built in 1625 by the 3rd Earl of Moray, a descendant of Mary Queen of Scots. The present proprietor, Caroline Stuart, can also point to the Stuart line.

The cooking is as noteworthy as the history and the comfort, with a menu that changes daily. Dishes include wild boar and malt whisky pâté, with apple chutney and baked sea bass in a herb vine tomato sauce. Dinner is regular followed by coffee, truffles, and fudge in the drawing room.

Culloden House (Rating: A+), one of the two or three finest country-house hotels in Scotland, is less than 10 minutes from the Castle Stuart Links. Four hundred years old and the centerpiece of a 40-acre tract, Culloden House is a perfectly symmetrical red brick and ivy-clad Georgian manor of surpassing elegance. Furnishings include many one-of-a-kind period pieces as well as an impressive collection of crystal chandeliers, rich fabrics at the long windows of the high-ceilinged rooms, rare and fine Adam fireplaces, and ornately carved plasterwork. The guest rooms, which are unusually generous, are appointed to a high standard, some of them with both a four-poster bed and fireplace.

The cooking does not disappoint. We love the marinated scallops wrapped in smoked salmon and a phyllo pastry, and the cutlets of Highland lamb topped with black pudding and peaches

and served in a Rosemary jus. The wine list is extensive.

Two four-star hotels that cater to golfers are within a five-minute walk of Nairn's 1st tee. At the **Golf View (Rating: B)**, more than half of the rooms command the Moray Firth. This comfortable family hotel sports an up-to-date leisure club and spa. Like so many of the guest rooms, the swimming pool also has beguiling views of the Firth.

The cooking is first-rate. Guests can eat in either the dining room or the conservatory. Among the choices on a recent menu were: an appetizer of chilled galia melon with honey-spiced plums surrounded by fresh berries; for an entrée, Isle of Skye seafood bound with macaroni in a crab and prawn bisque. Three-course dinners cost £27 (\$39).

Across Seabank Road and not five minutes from the Golf View Hotel is the **Newton Hotel (Rating: B)**, a 19th-century castle-like structure in 21 acres of parkland and gardens. Some rooms have views that encompass the golf links and the sea. The public rooms and guest accommodations, though no more comfortable than those at the Golf View, are a bit smarter and more luxurious. The long lawn runs down to the beach.

Chaplain's, the Newton Hotel's bistro-style restaurant, is named for the "Little Tramp" himself, who used to bring his family to Nairn for summer holidays. This sunny room is Manhattan chic in both ambience and choices. The menu is attractively ambitious: pan-fried venison collops drizzled with a juniper and redcurrant essence; and apricot and almond tart served with a mandarin compote and a touch of strawberry syrup. There is a nice selection of wines by the glass.

Castle Stuart, Petty Parish, Inverness IV2 7JH, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1463-790745. castlestuart.com. 8 rooms. Doubles cost £300 (\$435), full breakfast included.

Culloden House, Culloden, Inverness-Shire IV273Z, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1463-790461. cullodenhouse.co.uk. 28 accommodations, including five suites. Doubles with a view over the front lawn start at £250 (\$367), full breakfast included.

Golf View Hotel & Leisure Club, The Seafront, 63 Seabank Road, Nairn, IV12 4HD, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1667-452301. crerarhotels.com. 42 rooms. Doubles with sea views start at £155 (\$225), full breakfast included.

Newton Hotel, Inverness Road, Nairn, IV12 4RX, Scotland. Tel: 011-44-1667-453144. oxfordhotelsandinns.com. 56 rooms, including four suites. Doubles cost £160 (\$232), full breakfast included.

NON-GOLF ACTIVITIES

The Highlands provide plenty to see and do. Nairn itself has two beaches, a seafront promenade (boardwalk without boards), and a pretty little harbor. Inverness, often called the "Capital of the Highlands" and divided into two parts by the River Ness (the legendary loch is about 20 miles south of the city), makes for a pleasant half-day's outing. Cawdor Castle, the scene of Duncan's murder in Macbeth, is a medieval fortress with beautiful gardens. Fort George is the ranking example in Britain of Hanoverian military architecture. A polygon fort once home to 2,500 soldiers, it now serves as the regimental museum of the Queen's Own Highlanders. And finally, the principal sightseeing attraction in this area is Culloden battlefield, site of the last land battle fought in Britain (1746), marking the end of Bonnie Prince Charlie's doomed cause.

Photo Courtesy of Castle Stuart Golf Links



Castle Stuart Links, designed by Americans Mark Parsinen and Gil Hanse, features six seaside holes