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Play It While You Can

Tee It Up at One of New Zealand's Newest, Most Exclusive Golf Clubs

BY TOM MACKIN



BEAUTY SHOTS:
With head-turning holes such as the par-3 second (top) and challenging par-4 sixth (bottom), Tara Iti Golf Club takes full advantage of its coastal location.

THE GAME'S COGNOSCENTI all agree that New Zealand's **Tara Iti Golf Club** will likely rank among the world's Top 100 courses when *Golf* magazine unveils the 2017-2018 version of its prestigious biennial list this fall. Ever since it opened in late 2015, the Tom Doak-designed links course has been generating much buzz, particularly among architecture buffs who admire Doak's minimalist artistry. But from Day One, the private club has closely guarded its exclusivity, meaning it has been almost impossible for anyone but members to play its 18 holes — until recently.

Yes, you now stand a chance of scoring a coveted tee time at Tara Iti, which sits alongside the Pacific Ocean in Mangawhai about 60 miles north of Auckland on the North Island. You'll have to first jump through a few hoops (see sidebar below), but you'll be glad you did. It's that good.

Doak made a noteworthy design mark in New Zealand in 2004 at Cape Kidnappers, a stunning clifftop course in Hawkes Bay on the North Island. But the setting at Tara Iti, named after one of New Zealand's rarest birds, differs greatly: generally level enough to the sea that waves hitting the adjacent beach provide a soundtrack on some holes.

Initial studies of the site revealed enough undulations beneath a dense pine tree forest to convince Doak he could create a stellar layout. "An aerial photo also showed all the raw sand dunes just to the north, and I figured if it was all sandy like that, we ought to be able to find some great holes," he says. A large ridge that moves northward on the property (which totals 7 miles of pristine

oceanfront land) ended up touching seven holes and provided an elevated site for the one-story clubhouse.

"We had the bones of our routing put together in three or four days, and I knew the holes had the potential to be really good, but there's no way we could have visualized how beautiful the place would look from walking around the forest," says Doak. "We knew we had a beautiful ocean backdrop, but the rest was just a leap of faith."

After removing tens of thousands of those pine trees, he crafted a superb collection of 18 holes that even inspired a poem by talented caddie Alan McCulloch, which he recited as we walked off the opening tee on a cloudy day this past March. Look for his words framed on a clubhouse wall, along with an excerpt from *An American Caddie in St. Andrews* by Oliver Horovitz that pithily sums up the club's policy — essentially, don't be a jerk.

More fun than fearsome sums up the tale Doak and his team penned at Tara Iti; a place where, like all great links courses, wind factors into club selection and tight fescue turf (kudos to superintendent C.J. Kreuscher) provides plenty of roll. Play shots along the ground on this rough-free layout whenever possible. You'll encounter the rare punch-bowl green, hidden from the fairway and nestled between two large dunes, on the par-4 third hole. Your toughest challenge? More than likely, the par-4 sixth.

"It's not the longest par-4 on the course, unless you play the crazy back tee up above the fifth green, where the carry is beyond



"We knew we had a beautiful ocean backdrop, but the rest was just a leap of faith."
— Tom Doak

Here's How You Can Get on the Course

To get started, you'll need to email **a letter of introduction** from your home club to info@legacypartners.co.nz. A member of Tara Iti's management team will then follow up with a phone call to confirm the information in the letter and find out a little more about you and why you want to visit the club. Emerge from that vetting process successfully, and you can start planning your New Zealand golf getaway.

No need to shop around for hotel accommodations; **you must stay on site**. Since Tara Iti opened, it has completed eight two-bedroom, ultramodern cottages and two one-bedroom ocean suites. By year's end, it will unveil two three-bedroom cottages. The club doesn't disclose its lodging rates or green fees publicly; rather, it simply says they're comparable in price to the accommodations and fees at Cape Kidnappers and Kauri Cliffs, two of the country's highest-end resort golf experiences. You can stay as many nights as you like, assuming space availability, and play the course daily while a guest.

Originally set to expire at the end of the year, the visitor policy now has no end date. Still you may not want to wait too long; management notes it will re-evaluate the policy "if it becomes burdensome to members." You'll want to make every minute at Tara Iti count because you're allowed to visit only once.



Two-bedroom Tara Iti cottage

JOANN DOST (COURSE-2), BRIAN WALTERS (DOAK)

the ability of most mortals,” says Doak. “But it usually plays into the wind, and the fairway is so undulating that it’s pretty much impossible to play for a level lie. So you’ve got to play your second shot uphill to a tightly guarded green, into the wind, and usually from an awkward stance. It’s the toughest approach shot out there, on a course that has a few of them.”

Another one comes on the very next hole, the par-4 seventh. It features the smallest green Doak has ever built on an 18-hole course. At 292 yards from the championship tee, he says, “It’s also one of the shortest par-4 holes we’ve ever built, and I wanted what looked like a pushover on the scorecard to actually be quite challenging, so we made the green tiny, and the recovery shots around the green are tough, as well. It’s certainly one of the most talked-about holes on the course, and we saw scores from two to X when we held our 2016 Renaissance Cup [a tournament named after Doak’s design company] event there.”

Elevation changes come into play more on the back nine, where the sand dunes

rise much taller and broader. The dogleg-right par-5 11th, with an expansive fairway that eventually leads downhill to a green framed by sea views and islands in the distance, was my favorite par 5 (despite two double bogeys). Doak entices you to go for the green off the tee on the par-4 13th, but it’s all uphill with a steep fall off on the green’s front left side, where an imperfect drive leaves you with a perfectly blind pitch shot. Trust me, I know.

The sea provides yet another memorable backdrop on the 17th, the final par 3 with a green almost completely surrounded by sand, and the first hole site identified by Doak. The par-5 18th caps it all off, a hole where the sharply angled and heavily rumpled fairway got the best of me during both rounds.

Like every great links course, and Tom Doak course for that matter, Tara Iti will linger long in my memory. A stanza from the poet caddie McCulloch best sums up the experience: “Born of one man’s vision, and built by many hands toil, Tara Iti is the perfect collision, of sand and sea and soil.” 011-64-9-4314600; taraiti.com

Another Golf Option

Want to do your shot-making at a more affordable, more accessible, and even newer course than Tara Iti? At **Windross Farm Golf Course**, which opened last September in Ardmore, just 20 miles south of Auckland’s city center, you’ll only pay about \$115 to play 18 holes. Close proximity to the Auckland airport — only 13 miles to the west — makes it a perfect first or final round on a New Zealand golf trip.

Brett Thomson, with Kiwi native and former PGA Tour veteran Phil Tataurangi, transformed a former potato farm into a virtually flat links-style layout. No fancy amenities here, just a solid course well worth playing. It’s an easy walk with personality injected by artfully designed bunkers and well-crafted green complexes.

You can see it soon without getting on a plane: This September, it will host the internationally televised McKayson New Zealand Women’s Open, the first LPGA or PGA-sanctioned tournament ever held in the country. 011-64-9-2815414; windrossfarm.co.nz

Bedding Down

Tourism surpassed dairy last year as New Zealand’s leading industry, and many new lodging options, especially in the luxury market, have come online to meet a rising demand. Put these on your radar.



North Island

→ The **Kinloch Club** debuted both the castlelike Lodge at Kinloch, made largely from local schist stone with decor by noted designer Virginia Fisher, and 10 villas in January 2016. All the rooms overlook a challenging — think 170 bunkers and heavily contoured fairways — Jack Nicklaus-designed course, with views of nearby Lake Taupo. From \$633, including breakfast and dinner. 011-64-7-3778482; thekinlochclub.com

South Island

→ Last December, Eichardt’s Private Hotel, a fixture on the Queenstown waterfront since the mid-19th century, opened the **Penthouse**, a two-bedroom suite with a kitchen and private sauna. One of the country’s most expensive lodging choices at \$7,025 per night, it offers you private elevator access, a chef, butler, and driver. All that, plus a sprawling outdoor deck with a hot tub that overlooks Lake Wakatipu. 011-64-3-4410450; eichardts.com/penthouse



→ You’ll get a less expensive but elevated view of Lake Wakatipu at **Hulbert House**, an elegant boutique hotel originally built in 1887 that’s a short but uphill walk from Queenstown’s center. New owners reopened the six-room inn about a year ago after meticulously restoring it. Decor, colors, patterns, and designs faithful to the Victorian era create a vivid step back in time, albeit with modern amenities, such as Wi-Fi and warm duvets made with Hungarian goose down. From \$750; 011-64-3-4428767; hulberthouse.co.nz

→ Soak in the jaw-dropping vastness of New Zealand’s natural beauty at **Mahu Whenua** (“Healing the Land” in Maori). Built by record producer Mutt Lange, who purchased four adjoining sheep stations totaling 135,908 acres, this lodge charms with two homestead suites and two cottages nestled among native New Zealand beech trees just 11.5 miles from Wanaka and 53 miles from Queenstown. Expect informality, but with access to a lodge host, chef, and concierge services. From \$1,300, including meals and drinks; 011-64-3-4412200; mahuwhenua.co.nz

