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AROUND THE WORLD IN 90 HOLES

New Zealand is an incredibly beautiful country that is home to a wealth of breathtaking golf. Rob Smith makes the trip of a lifetime...



Attracted by the double draw of working at one of the most important amateur tournaments in the world and a chance to play some of the courses that had only ever been a twinkle in my golfing eye, I leapt at the chance to visit New Zealand at the back end of 2017.

Just as the first frosts were glistening on the fairways at home, my escape to this picturesque land where Spring was just arriving could not have been better timed.

While I am lucky to have played golf in many countries, never before had I travelled quite so far, this time to the other side of the world. Any further and I would have been coming back home again. And while the journey involves in the region of 24 hours in the air, as well as a body blow to the body clock, this was a tiny price to pay for visiting a country that had long been on my must-play list.

The primary reason for my trip was that, in its efforts to grow the game further and wider, The R&A

was keen to spread the word about the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship, which was taking place at the lovely Royal Wellington Golf Club on the North Island (you can read about this on the GM website).

Happily, Tourism New Zealand was also keen to show off some of its world-class courses, which meant I would spend a further week with writers from Australia, China and the US playing some premier-league courses at the same time as getting to see a little more of this glorious country. ➤



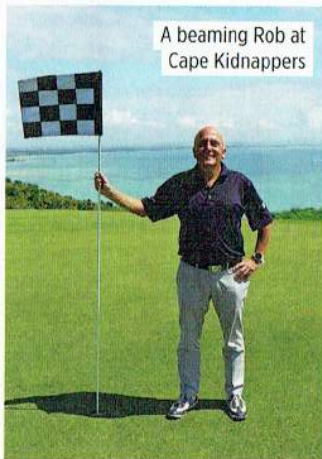
Staggering beauty
at Cape Kidnappers

The quest begins

My odyssey teed off with the best part of a week in the delightful harbour city of Wellington. Despite being the nation's capital, it is just the size of Aberdeen, and from here it was a scenic 25-minute drive up to the historic club at Royal Wellington. Every day I became more and more impressed by the mature demeanour and skilful play of the young golfers. I also walked the course and learned more about the club's bold move for an almost complete redesign just a few years ago. The architects were former tour player Greg Turner and Scott McPherson, a Wellingtonian now based in Edinburgh who designed the Lee Westwood Colt at Close House.

On the Monday morning following the championship, I played the course. I can happily say that it was an immediate new entry into my personal hit parade. There is a terrific mix of the old and the new, with many holes running through mature trees and striking bunkering. The newer holes closer to the River Hutt offer a wealth of risk and reward, and I very much liked the excellent short holes. Some of the most significant features now are the characterful, undulating greens. This is particularly so on the 8th, where there is a valley of extreme sin between the front and back, which obviously I found! Overall, the course is packed with variety and interest and offers a round you simply don't want to end.

To save time in our full and exciting itinerary, we then flew the 200 miles up to Hawke's Bay in a



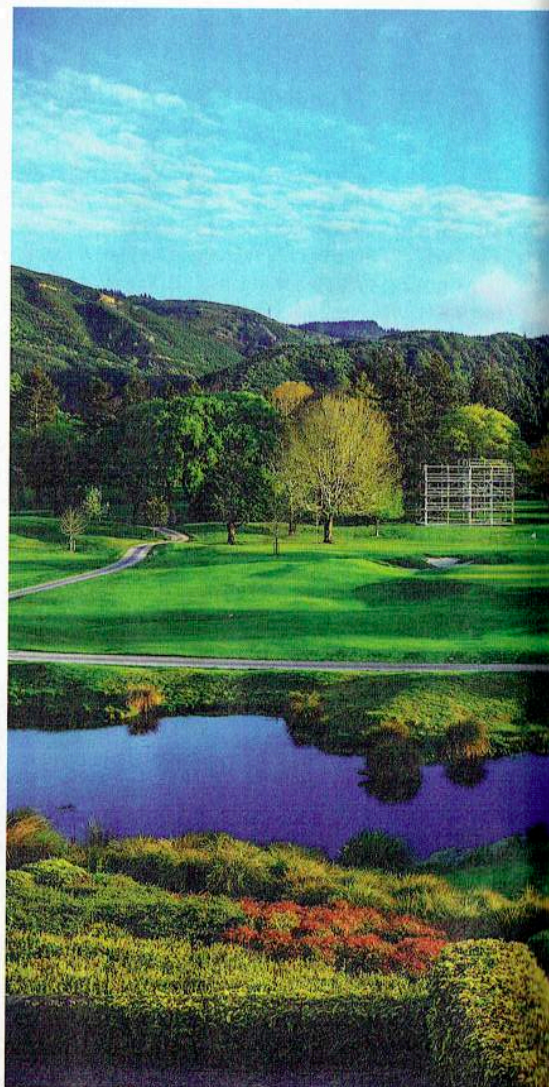
A beaming Rob at Cape Kidnappers

40-seater that offered excellent views over the unspoilt landscape below, at the same time as raising the adrenaline levels even more for our visit to Cape Kidnappers.

Truly world renowned

This sensational estate has been on my golfing radar since its opening in 2004, and even when you leave the public road, it's still another 15 minutes or so in the car to this idyllic golfing haven. We were lucky enough to be spending two nights at The Farm – the on-site accommodation and unquestionably one of the finest hotels I have ever visited. Everything about the place makes you smile: the classy and subtly stylish accommodation; the friendly, informal and yet totally efficient service; the mouth-watering food; and, of course, the setting and views. I was in one of eight Ridge Suites, and if it were up to me, I'd still be there now!

With regard to the golf at Cape Kidnappers, words will always struggle to do justice to the



The beautiful closing hole at Royal Wellington

photos, while the pictures themselves will never match actually being there. This Tom Doak design is what bucket-list golf is all about: a seriously good course that would be high up in the rankings even without its unique surroundings. Add in the jaw-dropping views and you can see why people travel from all over the world to play here.

The whole set-up is on such a grand scale that, in the flesh, it is actually quite different from the heart-stopping aerial views that make you wonder how some of

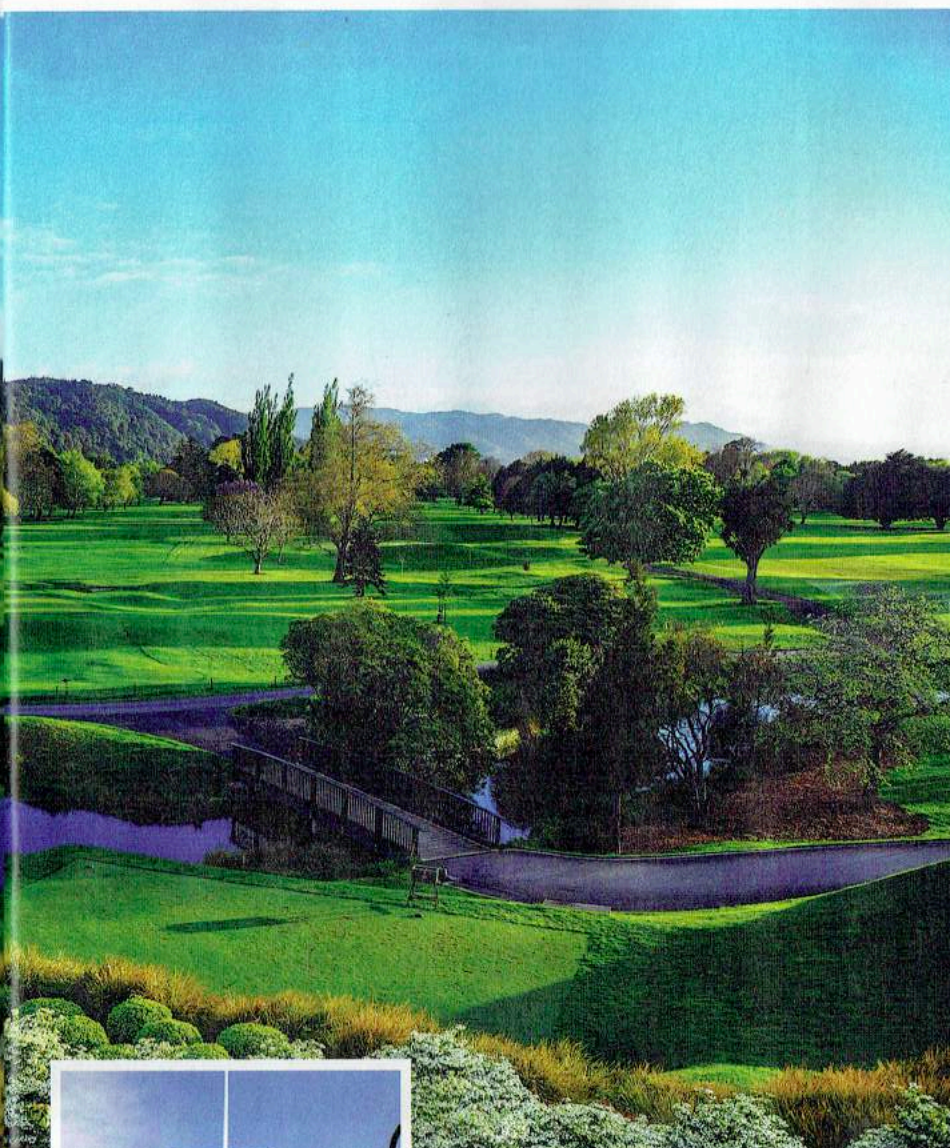
The par-4 5th at Cape Kidnappers



Photography: Getty Images



Rob stayed in one of eight Ridge Suites



Rob was escorted around Napier in a vintage Packard

the holes are even possible. Providing the wind behaves and you choose the right tees, this course is indeed very playable, as well as walkable. Yes, there are some demanding shots, but every hole is memorable and each has its own distinct features. While the bunkering is superb, it is understandably the natural topography that makes this place so very special. I managed to lose four balls in one or other abyss, but still managed 29 points and quite simply loved every minute.

Value for money

Following our round at Kidnappers, we headed back down to civilisation for an al-fresco lunch at the excellent Terroir restaurant, which is attached to the Craggy Range winery, before enjoying a tour of the charming town of Napier in a vintage 1930's Packard. This seaside resort is surrounded by some of the country's many award-winning vineyards and is a popular destination for holidaymakers.

Although my journey focused on some of the North Island's marquee courses, there are plenty of accessible and hugely enjoyable 'country clubs' that are run by their members and offer wonderful value for money. On the drive from Hawke's Bay the following morning we visited the nine-hole at Te Pohue, which looked great fun and where the green fee for a full 18 is about the same as two premium golf balls. ➤

ASIA-PACIFIC AMATEUR CHAMPIONSHIP

The Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship was inaugurated almost a decade ago, since when it has become one of the most prestigious such tournaments in the world. Run by The R&A in conjunction with The Masters and the Asia-Pacific Golf Confederation, its status is underlined by the fact that Hideki Matsuyama won it in both 2010 and 2011.

The field comprised 120 of the world's best amateur golfers from the 41 member organisations of the Asia-Pacific Golf Confederation.



Televised in 160 countries, the tournament is run in the most professional way, with The R&A's Martin Slumbers and new Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley in attendance.

The opening ceremony included a fly-past by the Royal New Zealand Air Force and performances of traditional Maori song and dance (below). Golfers from the host nation, Australia and China were among the favourites, but it was encouraging to see representatives from the Cook Islands, Bangladesh, Guam and elsewhere make the cut. In the end, it was two of China's rising stars who fought it out, with 17-year-old Yuxin Lin making a decisive eagle on the closing hole to take the title from compatriot Andy Zhang. Lin receives invitations to the 2018 Masters and Open.





The 14th hole at Wairakei

Taupo bound

A three-hour drive from Napier through photogenic, wooded hills led us to Lake Taupo, which sits in the crater of an old volcano. It is the largest lake in New Zealand and the size of Singapore. A mile or so from its northern shore, the upmarket Kinloch Club was our next port of call. This Jack Nicklaus signature course is described as an inland links, but if so, it's unlike any I have played.

Opened in 2007, it covers a vast acreage and has 18 individual and intriguing holes. Yes, one or two are a bit attention-seeking – the severe dogleg at 6 and the allegedly softened 14th spring to mind – but it's a feast for the eyes and has some absolutely cracking holes, including a closing quartet that's as exciting and attractive as just about anywhere. I'm not sure I have ever enjoyed a Nicklaus course as much.

As you'd expect from such a development, it is kept in tip-top

condition and there are some dreamy views. With the recent addition of some seriously smart on-site accommodation, this is a wonderful place to stay. There is also excellent catering in the clubhouse, from which there are far-reaching vistas.

The Kinloch Club is a visual treat

A contrast of styles

Just a short drive away, Wairakei could hardly be more different. While it has elements of traditional parkland, it is still somehow quite different. Opened in 1970, it runs through what would have been dense woodland from which has been carved a par-72 course of great appeal and diversity. The mix of flora and fauna here is as good



Windross Farm opened in 2016

A LAND OF PLENTY

Away from the golf, New Zealand is all about the great outdoors. I really liked Wellington. Hugging the magnificent natural harbour, it has a more intimate feel than any other capital I have visited. There are countless bars and restaurants, ample museums and a regenerated docklands area.

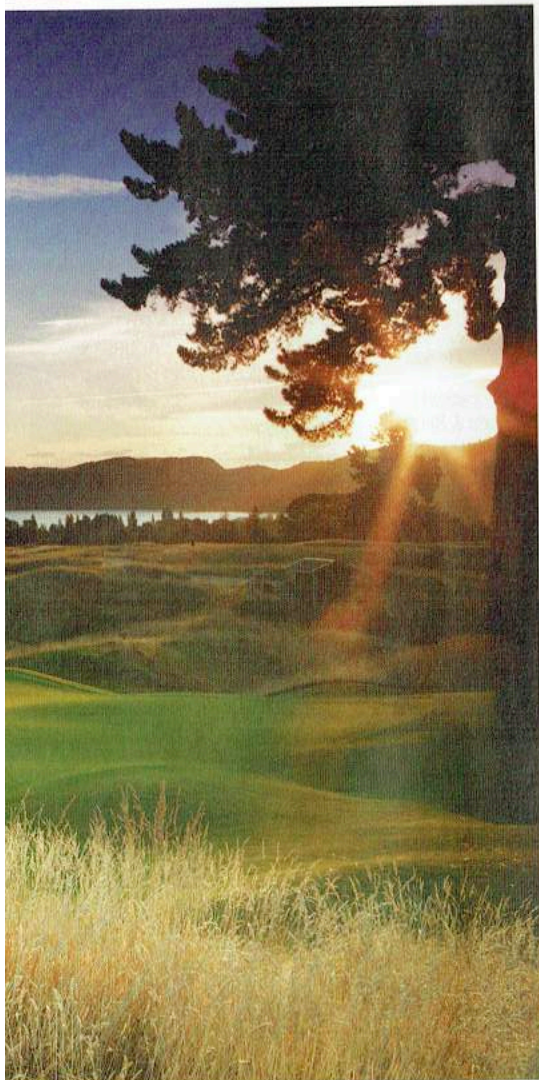
Napier is an appealing coastal town that was largely destroyed by earthquake in 1931, before



'A real highlight': Taupo jet boating

resurrection as a mecca of art deco. Taupo is another lively resort with some great restaurants where the emphasis is on entertainment. Our jet boat ride up to the Huka Falls was a real trip highlight.

I would also recommend a day trip from Auckland over to Waiheke Island, where there is yet more fabulous scenery as well as several boutique vineyards. Talking of which, I really enjoyed all of the wineries we visited, particularly Craggy Range, Stonyridge and Mudbrick. Anyone who knows me will also not be surprised to learn that I was very impressed by the wide array of craft beers that seem to be blossoming in New Zealand.



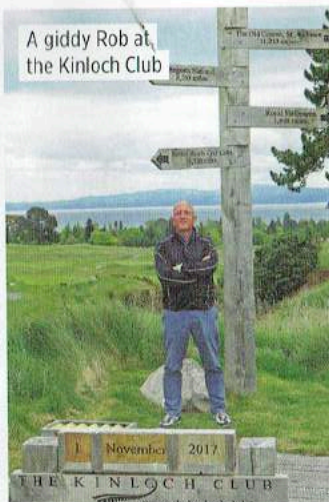
as anywhere we visited, and the gently undulating terrain offers some elevated tee shots and very scenic views.

The sleepered bunkering is a real feature, and my favourite holes were the very pretty par-3 5th, the landscaped dogleg 8th

Wairakei's 5th



A giddy Rob at the Kinloch Club



and the par-5 14th, which is played up to a massive, boomerang-shaped green. A huge Scots pine splits both the fairway and opinion, but I loved it!

If you fancy another golf-related pursuit, there is a very entertaining hole-in-one challenge on the shore of the lake, where you hit to a floating green that is anchored a pitching wedge away.

An impressive newcomer

Our last two nights were spent at the perfectly located Mercure Grand Hotel up in Auckland. This is a large, sprawling, modern city that is home to about a third of the nation's 4.5m population. There are also endless activities to enjoy away from the golf. We were here to play the fledgling but fast-maturing Windross Farm.

The course has only been open a year, but has already hosted the New Zealand Women's Open on the LPGA Tour. To my eye, this was much more the inland links: exposed; difficult to gauge

ESSENTIALS

Where to Play

Cape Kidnappers

W: robertsonlodges.com/the-lodges/cape-kidnappers

Kinloch Club

W: thekinlochclub.com

Royal Wellington

W: royalwellington.com

Wairakei

W: wairakeigolfcourse.co.nz

Windross Farm

W: windrossfarm.co.nz

General Golf Club Information

W: newzealand.com/int/golf

Where to Stay

Cape Kidnappers, Napier, Hawke's Bay

W: robertsonlodges.com/the-lodges/cape-kidnappers

Kinloch Club, Taupo

W: thekinlochclub.com

Mercure Grand Hotel, Auckland

W: accorhotels.com/gb/hotel-1721-grand-mercure-auckland/index.shtml

Rydges, Wellington

W: rydges.com/accommodation/new-zealand/wellington

distance; very strategic; lots of bump and runs. Unlike any of the previous courses, it would not have looked out of place in Europe or the States, and I very much liked the four par 5s, especially the 5th. As at Kinloch, there is a particularly strong closing loop of four, and I would recommend sneaking out from the 17th tee to the adjacent strawberry farm which serves the most delicious ice cream! This is a strong course that will only improve and was yet again something different.

Granted, it's a long journey and some of the best courses and hotels are not cheap. But the sheer, timeless beauty, the pace of life, the exquisite golf, the supporting cast of activities and the fantastic food and world-class wines are all a draw in their own right. If there is a golfing destination in the world that is more worthy of a visit to mark a special occasion, I have yet to experience it. And if any further recommendation is needed, let me say that I have every intention of returning – off-duty and under my own steam. New Zealand is simply an exhilarating country.