

## At a Glance

Undulating, raw, sparsely treed seaside land is most sought after by modern golf architects. Such terrain gives a golf course designer the ability to use the natural earth in which to plot a course and give the illusion that it has been there for a millennium.

Lying just one hour south of Melbourne is the Mornington Peninsula, arguably one of the world's great pieces of golfing real estate.

Over the past 15 years much of this hallowed golfing turf has been claimed by designers. It is a rare canvas indeed – dramatic rolling pastoral land with a sandy base. Dig a hole and you have a bunker.

There's rugged and raw vegetation very much in the tradition of the famous Scottish and Irish Links. A seaside locale ensures stiff, prevailing winds, arguably needed to protect a links style course (depending on one's ability).

The Mornington Peninsula has over a dozen courses dotting this thin wedge of land. It's flanked by the calm waters of Port Phillip Bay on one side, Western Port Bay on another, while the wild waters of Bass Strait lash the coast beyond the heads.

The golf offering down this way is varied. There's the exclusive National Golf Club with its three courses for members only, while virtually next door there's the public RACV Cape Schanck resort. Near the very tip of the Peninsula is the private Portsea and Sorrento Golf Clubs – once exclusively a playground for the rich and famous – while not far away Rosebud Park and Eagle Ridge courses cater for social players.

There's even the Moonah Links complex – the Open course used as the venue to test our best golfers during the Australian Open in 2003 and 2005.

Pound for pound though, one of the best courses is the fully public access Dunes Golf Links.

Opened in 1997, this sensational piece of golfing terrain was redesigned by renowned architect Tony Cashmore.

From the moment you enter the complex you tingle with anticipation. You pass a number of holes and admire the fairways – only to learn that you were looking at the Cups course, an alternative nine holes at the Dunes (and a good one too!)

The clubhouse is a wonderful retreat for golfers. It's a welcoming, grand abode that blends in beautifully with the surrounds.

Magnificent course views are available from almost every part – from the pro shop to the classy restaurant. Whether it's a cooling summer drink or a hot chocolate to warm the inners in front of a crackling fire, it's a fitting clubhouse for the almost flawless, 6464m (black tees) Par 72 course. Magnificent Santa Ana couch fairways cover the undulating links landscape. Superb, slick and true Cobra Bent grass greens provide the perfect putting surface. Many holes offer multiple tee positions making it user friendly for all standards of golfer.

The Dunes is one of those uncommon courses that make for a challenging round without beating you into submission. Fairways are generous but there's always an A-line to tempt the accomplished golfer. Playing safe and smart golf from the blue tees (in calm conditions) and you can play to your par or better. Take the back marks and add a little weather and you have a test of golf for the very best.

The fairway definition is further enhanced by the long wispy grasses that line the rough. In summer the fairway is a rich green and the rough is highlighted with white, straw like grasses – the contrast is amazing.

The bunkers are another feature. Many look like a huge hand has gouged a sandy crater in one violent tear.

The tee box of the fourth hole gives one of the best views of the entire course – the elevated vantage gives you a great view and feel for the special land on which the course lies.

The Golf Course Guide, Australia's golfing directory to public access courses, has rated the Dunes as the number one public access course in the country in past years and it is unrivalled in Victoria, assuming the number one slot for the past five years.

The first hole typifies the challenge of the course. A right dog leg, the fairway is generous and easy to find from the tee. The best line to the green is to hug the right side of the fairway but in

doing so you flirt with hidden bunkers. If you are successful you greatly reduce the distance of your second shot on this very long (416m) par 4. If you find a bunker you'll drop a shot and par will be unattainable. Play too far left off the tee and you can't make the green in regulation. The green is elevated with some wonderful and testing undulations, while three punishing bunkers will make you pay if you can't find the putting surface.

That's the Dunes in a nutshell – fair but testing, hidden surprises, more than meets the eye at every turn. Play conservatively and you'll go ok, take it on successfully and you'll be rewarded, but miss the mark and it will punish severely.

It is classic risk for reward golf – like all good courses should offer.

The mix of holes on the course demands the use of every club in the bag. The par fours range from the short 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> – at just over 300m from the black tees – to the very tough 1<sup>st</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> that all measure over 400m.

During your test on the par fours you'll pass an historic kiln on the second, you'll admire a 300 year old Moonah tree smack bang in the middle of the ninth and you'll curse the pot bunker in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> fairway if you're unlucky enough to find it with your drive.

The par threes are highlighted by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> – both absolutely fantastic holes. Nick Faldo raved about the 13<sup>th</sup> saying it was one of the best he'd played – it's about the toughest tee shot you're likely to face!

Seventeen is a classical par three, real danger if you go left, a putting green that's slightly elevated so distance is hard to gauge and many other nuances to tackle. Eight time Major winner Tom Watson summed it all up in six simple words, "This is an exquisite golf hole".

But personally I love the par fives at the Dunes. Each one has something special and you just want to go back and try to conquer them again and again.

The fifth starts with a blind tee shot and you are guided by a white stone that indicates the direction to take. If you get one away you enter a vast valley and then you plot a route to the flag.

Hole seven is a little more of the same – another stone shows the way. About 250m from the tee (on the right) is a wicked pot bunker that draws balls to it like a magnet. During a Tom Watson visit he drove to the spot where it now lays and said "this would be a great place for a bunker".

Thanks Tom, there's one there now!

The twelfth is highlighted by a sandy wasteland on the right and is my personal favourite hole on the course, while the 15<sup>th</sup> is protected from the tee on the left side of the fairway by a six pack of raw, deeply cut bunkers waiting to punish you.

Quite simply the Dunes Golf Links is a great course – open for all to enjoy. In calm conditions there's no better place to enjoy a round – when the wind is up there's no greater place to challenge your game.

Ten years since opening, the course looks and feels like it has been there forever. The Dunes initial advertising slogan sums up the feel of the course perfectly – "God built it, we just mow the grass".

If I had to choose only one course to play for the rest of my days, the Dunes would be up near the top of my list.

The Dunes Golf Links

By Garry Kennedy