

THE 10 HOTTEST NEW DESTINATIONS

Long gone are the days when a golf break meant simply choosing between the Algarve or the Costa del Sol. Now you're spoiled for choice. From Poland to Atlanta to Estonia, here are our favourite emerging courses and areas we've uncovered during the many trips we've taken in the past 18 months. By Chris Bertram.

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SHORT HAUL NEW COURSE

Parnu Bay, Estonia

We've not long returned from this new course on the edge of the Baltic Sea and can confidently state that spectacular images like the one adorning this page are not misleading. However, it's not just Parnu Bay's coastal location that makes it so special. Invigorating as it is, that might not even be the course's main attraction. As enjoyable are the firm, tightly-cropped fescue fairways that make striking an iron so pleasing, and the width off the tee that gets everyone in play but offers so much choice and strategy to better players. So, too, are the funky greens that mean the entertainment doesn't stop until the ball is in the hole.

If you're thinking 'it's a long way to go to play just one course, even if it is great', we'd counter by revealing Parnu is a famous Baltic holiday destination on account of its pristine white sand beach. So it is very easy to create a terrific long weekend for couples or groups. There's a second Top 100-class round at Estonian GCC near Tallinn if you wish.



TRAVEL TIPS

Getting there: Fly (only around two hours) to Riga in Latvia or Estonia's capital Tallinn and hire a car.
When to go: Late May to late September.



LONG HAUL NEW COURSE

Cabot Cliffs, Canada

Cabot Cliffs already had an all-world course in the Rod Whitman-designed Links (which is very close in nature to a GB&I links). Then along came Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw to build the Cliffs. It is a mind-blower that makes the Links seem very ordinary (although it's not). It is one of the famed Coore-Crenshaw firm's biggest and boldest creations. Every hole is epic, and even the ones that work away from the ocean and into trees and valleys are amazing.

In fact, it has a chance to become Canada's best course ahead of Banff Springs, a Stanley Thompson classic set in the Rocky Mountains. Add it to the Links – set amid sandy dunes and along the Atlantic Ocean, where it empties into the Gulf of St Lawrence – and high-end accommodation and it makes it a resort that could be mentioned in the same sentences as Bandon Dunes, Pinehurst or Streamsong.



TRAVEL TIPS

How to get there: Fly direct to Halifax Stanfield from Heathrow and Glasgow or do a stopover in Montreal, Ottawa, St John's and even JFK en route. Once at Halifax Stanfield, it is a three-hour drive to Cape Breton Island. When to go: Their seasons mimic ours.

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TRAVEL TIPS

When to go: It is searingly hot during the peak summer months so head there in April and May (when the courses will be quiet) or in October and November. Getting there: Fly to Marrakesh, Agadir and Essaouira. Flights to Marrakesh are especially cheap and you can even use this inland city as an inexpensive route to the coastal courses.

MEDIUM HAUL DESTINATION

Morocco

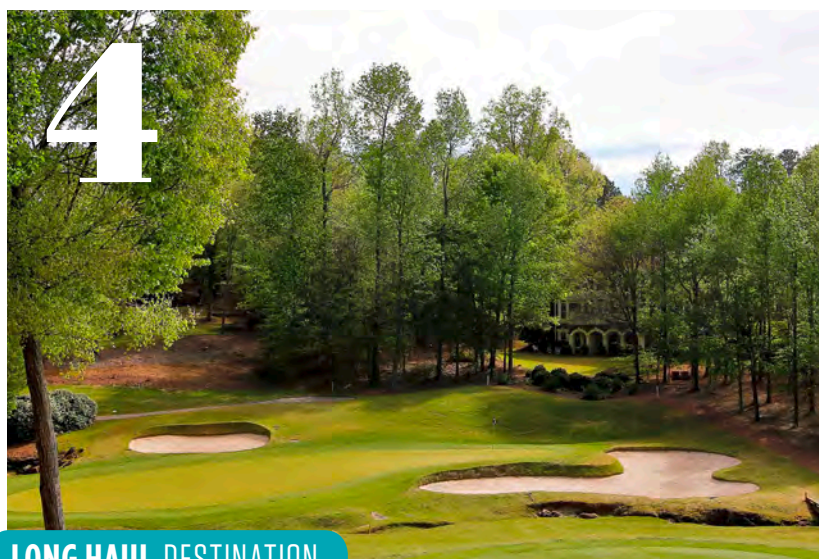
There are two options here: the hustle and bustle of Marrakesh or the newer developments on the Atlantic Coast. Both are tremendous winter sun options... yet are just over three hours from the UK.

Within Marrakesh's 15 courses there is something for everyone: In the south-west outskirts, Assoufid (the best in the city), Palm Ourika and Samanah are expensive but have real quality. Royal Palm is part of a fantastic Beachcomber resort and is full of character while Noria is distinctive yet won't break the bank. On the eastern side Palmeraie is a great family option, Royal Marrakesh a pedigree track, and Al Maaden a strong modern venue.

If tranquil, high-class Atlantic coast resorts appeal more, look west to the Gary Player-designed Mazagan Beach and pair it with El Jadida by Cabell Robinson. Moving down the coast, Player also designed the North course at Mogador in what was once a dense pine forest. Agadir is home to some good golf resorts, with the best just north of the city within Taghazout's complex. The Tazegzout course is a typically thoughtful Phillips design that hugs the coast.



Tazegzout (main image) is a Kyle Phillips maturing classic while (above) Mazagan Beach is a fine all-round resort.



LONG HAUL DESTINATION

Atlanta

With the Masters becoming increasingly accessible, Atlanta is emerging as a high-quality golf destination. The city is blessed with a collection of expensive but largely accessible private courses – think Peachtree, Piedmont Driving Club and Atlanta Athletic Club – but also has a hefty collection of resorts and semi-private courses. Make sure you check out the Bobby Jones memorabilia at East Lake (home of the PGA Tour's season-ending Tour Championship), The Frog, a spectacular Tom Fazio design to the west of the city, and Bear's Best, a collection Jack Nicklaus' favourite holes in one course.

TRAVEL TIPS

Fly direct into Atlanta from most cities. It gets hot and sweaty from June to August. April/May and Sept/Oct are perfect.



MEDIUM HAUL DESTINATION

Sicily

Sicily has four courses ranked in our Continental Top 200. For an island of its size and modest golf pedigree, it's a huge achievement. They are led by Verdura's East and West courses – plus a seriously deluxe hotel – but Donnafugata, with its own prime accommodation and two fine courses, is no poor relation. They are close enough to play at both on the same trip. Elsewhere, Il Picciolo was the island's first course, Siracusa Golf is part of the four-star I Monasteri Resort, and Le Saie Golf is south of Catania. Sicily's balmy climate (located further south than Tunisia) make it an attractive year-round option.

TRAVEL TIPS

June and September are perfect and there are amazing deals from October to March. Fly into Comiso, Palermo and Catania.



TRAVEL TIPS

When to go: The weather is way better than you think. Their summers are hot and consistent (swimming pool weather) with spring and autumn lovely if you aren't eager to sunbathe. How to get there: Lots of flights (under two hours) into Gdansk.

SHORT HAUL DESTINATION

Poland

Few countries illustrate the expansion of golf tourism better than Poland. It's not just that they have some golf courses, it's that they are really good. Sand Valley is as alluring as its name suggests, a clever design that mixes some strong holes with lots of fun ones (and some seriously sporty greens). It has chic on-site accommodation too.

On the other side of Gdansk, the Sierra resort (pictured) has similar appeal; a solid parkland with a strong back nine punctuated by water plus luxury accommodation in the form of villas and apartments.

Gdansk's new airport offers cheap, regular access from the UK, which reminds us of the outstanding aspect of a golf break in Poland: its incredible value. You will scarcely believe the low cost of green fees, accommodation, beer and burgers given the quality you enjoy. We can only think of Slovakia's Penati resort that has anywhere near the same quality-to-cost ratio. Another super option lies to the west, near Szczecin. Modry Las, ranked by us among the Top 100 in Continental Europe, has 27 holes as well as beautiful on-site accommodation.



DOMESTIC DESTINATION

Western Isles of Scotland

Given this region contains two courses that began life in the 1800s this might seem an odd choice as an 'emerging' destination. However, not only has one of them been so thoroughly revamped it is virtually a new course, the Western Isles have never been thought of as an actual destination before. Oh, and there is a very exciting brand-new course set to open this year to augment these existing attractions.

This is a fly-drive, or a purely driving trip. Fly to Glasgow or, even better, Prestwick and hire a car. If you're driving, head straight to Ardrossan for the ferry to Arran. You could spend a week playing cute golf on Arran but this trip only has time for the beguiling 12 holes on Shiskine – full of intrigue, majestic views and tremendous fun.

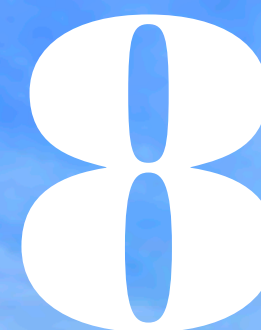
Next, the ferry to Claonaig, and down to Machrihanish to stay in the Ugadale Hotel and play at Machrihanish and Machrihanish Dunes. Old and new mix beautifully here. From here we take the ferry to Islay (from Kennacraig) to play the revamped Machrie (next year it'll have a new on-site hotel). From there, take the 10-minute ferry to Jura and play soon-to-open Ardfin, assuming it offers the limited tee times we expect.

Then it's a long ferry back from Islay and a chance to reflect on the most soulful, feel-good golf trip you'll ever have the fortune to make.



TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

When to go: It's Britain, so take your chances! We'd lean towards early autumn rather than early spring as even these links courses take a little while to get growth in March.
How to get there: Fly to Glasgow/Prestwick and hire a car. Or drive straight to Ardrossan and the first of your many experiences with a Caledonian Macbrayne ferry.



LONG HAUL DESTINATION

Ras al Khaimah, UAE

The same weather, the same service and the same course conditioning as Dubai, without the extreme hustle and bustle... and the cost. This neighbouring emirate (big city) to Dubai has two good courses and plenty of hotels, restaurants and bars. Tower Links is a proper test – very tight in places with plenty of sandy waste areas. Its mix of robust par 4s with more playable holes concludes with a super climax over water.

Al Hamra, with its on-site Waldorf Astoria hotel, is just 10 minutes away. This pristine course starts gently before asking stringent questions. It also has a water-dominated grandstand finish. If you want a third round, Al Zorah is found in Ajman, a neighbouring emirate 20 minutes from Dubai's main airport. It was built among mangroves by Nicklaus Design in 2015.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Dubai (DXB) is convenient, with flights going from many UK cities.
When to go: May to September is blisteringly hot. October to April inclusive is terrific for golf. February is our choice; no clouds, but not yet scorching.



SHORT HAUL DESTINATION

Southern Sweden

On a spit of land in the extreme south-west of Sweden are three fabulous courses so close together you could cycle from one to the next! The star is Falsterbo, as close to a GB&I links as you'll find in mainland Europe. The back nine is full of strong holes but the best is the 4th, a strategic two-shotter of rare calibre. Then there are 27 holes at Ljunghusen – a 1932 seaside heathland that oozes quality – and Flommens, set on flat wetlands. The area is a popular holiday retreat, which means there are many charming restaurants and bars to enjoy in the evening. For a longer stay, the Kyle Phillips-designed duo at PGA National (which has rooms) is just 20 minutes from Falsterbo and if you keep travelling there are three more Top 100 courses within an hour: modern Vasatorps plus two Solheim Cup venues; woodland-seaside hybrid Barseback and Halmstad.

TRAVEL TIPS Fly direct into Malmo, or into Copenhagen and cross the bridge into Sweden. May to October are the best months.



MEDIUM HAUL NEW COURSE

West Cliffs, Portugal

This has been the grandest course opening in Europe in 2017 by some distance. Sitting on prime coastal land an hour north of Lisbon, on Portugal's Silver Coast, West Cliffs Golf Links offers sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean from each hole.

Situated just 10 minutes from already-vaunted Top 100 venue Praia D'El Rey, which manages West Cliffs, it was designed by American Cynthia Dye, of Dye Designs Group.

Sprawling over 200 hectares of natural rolling sand dunes and coastal vegetation, it will be a magnet for tourists – also nearby are Royal Obidos and Bom Sucesso – but is a tough enough design to challenge even the strongest player. It's not presumptuous to state it will be a strong contender for our Top 100 Continental Europe, to be published in our November issue (on sale mid September).

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS Fly to Lisbon and drive an hour north. It's a touch cooler than the Algarve but still a year-round option.

