

## The Hacker Magazine Course Review July 2011

Often when I write course reviews for the magazine, I find myself cringing when I read back some of the superlatives that I have written. What can I say? I love golf courses! I might be visiting a bush track that hasn't got a great layout or the conditioning of a sand belt course, but for a hit it's a nice place to play – I tend to look at the positives not the negatives, so I can even give an average track a wrap. But this isn't an average track – so I'll cut to the chase. Not only is St Andrews Beach golf course one of the best courses I have played, I'd be stretched to think of one I've seen in better condition in the past five years. Yes (I promise) it is that good!

So superlatives aside what will you find at this track on the Mornington Peninsula? Well in case you don't know the story of its creation, a little background first. St Andrew's was built and opened with much fanfare back in 2004–05. Designer Tom Doak's international reputation as one of the great modern day golf architects was gathering momentum, so the very active Golf Club Properties Group sought him to build their Mornington Peninsula dream.

You don't need to be a critic to realise that the canvas handed to Doak was a pretty good one. An old scribe once wrote that it's hard to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but this land wasn't any porky's appendage. The earth here is gold for golf (Dunes, Moonah Links, National – the list goes on), and so Doak had a handy strip of turf to start.



In 2006 it opened to rapturous fanfare. It was an instant top 10 public access course and a top 100 Australian course to boot. With a temporary clubhouse and an expensive membership model, it was to be just the beginning. The Gunnamatta course (named after the famed and treacherous surf beach nearby) was just the start. Soon after a clubhouse, resort, accommodation and a second course (to be named the Fingal) was planned. Once built, the Gunnamatta course would be totally private, so the

public was encouraged to play this new jewel of the peninsula before it was accessible to the well-healed only.

Best laid plans! Golf Club Properties controversially went belly up, owing a fair swag to shareholders and St Andrews closed its doors.

In October 1, 2009 Golf Services Management (GSM) reopened the course and took over its management and day to day running. Naturally the place looked a shadow of its former self – but in came the mowers in an attempt to restore the course to its former glory.

In Oct 2010, GSM appointed Turnpoint to maintain the course, coinciding with new ownership with four key stake holders putting their hands in their pockets to acquire this diamond in the making. In quick time, Turnpoint have returned the layout to better nick than it ever was and that must please the owners.

Plans are grand now that the wheels are oiled and rolling again. A new clubhouse is the first task at hand; it will replace the modest but extremely functional makeshift building that is working just fine at this point in time. In early 2012 it will open – not far from the first tee – followed by development including 100 condos, a day spa, a hotel and a second championship course. Big plans, but let's look at what you find there today.

From Boneo Rd (at end of the Mornington Peninsula Freeway turn left), you turn right into Limestone Road and weave your way to Sandy Rd before reaching the course (it's only 7 mins from the end of the Freeway). After making your way along the entrance driveway you can drop your clubs at the Clubhouse door and park in a newly sealed car park.

The Clubhouse is only small with a lovely decking area that can be sealed with drop down awnings during inclement weather. Inside is a small pro shop. In all I think you'd be struggling to seat fifty people, but it works; it seems to blend in with the rugged surrounds. A new addition is a BBQ area that is free for groups to use.

After a decent stroll to the first tee, you get the WOW factor from the start. An elevated tee on one of the higher parts of the course gets you in the mood for links style golf. A wide fairway waits, framed by native seaside vegetation and straw like grasses. It's all laid out before you – it makes you want to play and builds the anticipation.



And you're not disappointed. The first thing that I noticed once I launched my first three hundred metre drive right in the Mayor's office (a little editorial license taken here – about 80 metres worth in fact) is the superb natural couch carpet that your agate is sitting on. The fairways are magnificent and mostly they're wide and very generous. Great growing conditions have meant the rough has gone a little crazy, so if you cut or hook a shot by a big margin, you can say goodnight to Dr. Spalding.

Bunkers can be punishing. A-lines (or the best route) will often involve taking on the rugged, gouged sandy graves. I suggest you avoid them and only admire the aesthetic appeal that they add to this golfing paradise. And come winter, the cold, wet and wind might put you off, but you'll never find this course wet and soggy. Its sand base acts like a sieve. I can almost guarantee great surfaces year round.

There are a number of blind holes and hidden targets at St Andrews Beach and the first is no different. First timers would swear the opener is gun barrel straight off the tee then bends to the right. The fairway is cut in a way that this looks the obvious route to a hidden flag and green. But cavernous bunkers on the left of the fairway obscure the view to the flag that is actually cut to the left. You are pre-warned of the illusion, but even on subsequent visits I have had to remind myself that the green is tucked away on the left, not the right, so convincing in the scene.

The greens and surrounds are first class, conditioning that is present from beginning to end and your imagination and flair is called for around the greens. The only sections of the course that aren't in perfect condition are the natural catchments for errant golf balls. There are several examples – shots left a fraction short of a green feed downwards into a depression – here you'll find plenty of divots and pitch marks from golfers that made the same mistake as you. But I guess by the volume of visitors, these areas are expected to be well worn.



From the first tee the journey is one enjoyable hole after another, with the first few holes some of the best. The second is a terrific short par four. From the tee you're asked if you want to take the conservative approach to the left, or the aggressive line to the right, with bunkers blocking a direct route up the centre of the fairway.

The third hole is a long par four and a really tough hole. The fairway sweeps around to the right and you need to hug the bend as close as you dare to leave the shortest possible shot into a narrow green. The shot in is daunting – probably a long iron at best – and it's requires surgeon like precision to make the trip successfully.

I could rave about every hole from here on. The two par threes on the front nine are tough – especially the exposed and long fourth, while the remaining outward par fours provide a great mix of shot making challenges over beautiful undulating ground.

Being geographically challenged I had no idea where the clubhouse was once I reached the tenth hole, suffice to say there's no return to the refuge of the pro shop if it's blowing a gale.

The tenth is a cracker from an elevated tee. If you can land your ball centre left you'll have a good approach to a small target and challenging target. A natural run off area to the green's right will capture many stray shots and an up and down from this side is a true test.

Two more fun par threes and two reachable par fives (if the conditions are right) are punctuated with an array of differing length par fours on the inward nine. This variation is the beauty – the finishing hole a ball tearing 400m plus challenge, the fourteenth a ripping little par four of 276m.

You'll never be bored at St Andrews Beach but the weather will play a big part on your final score. If it's blowing a gale you'll need to nail yourself to the cut stuff and hang on, but it's a worthy challenge and a natural defense for the open course. If the weather is fine and the infield semaphore of flags are flaccid, you have every chance to record a good score and beat your handicap. Either way, the rolling

landscape, the manicured fairways, the dramatic bunkering, greenside bumps and hollows, terrific putting surfaces and a beautiful outlook will make every visit one to remember