



Darren Clarke: A Golf Odyssey Conversation

Beach bar meditations on Northern Ireland, the Open's return to Portrush, and his love affair with The Abaco Club in the Bahamas

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Darren Clarke enjoys the good life as he divides his time between Northern Ireland and The Abaco Club on Winding Bay in the Bahamas

On our recent trip to the beautiful Abaco Club on Winding Bay in the Bahamas, we sat down at Flipper's Beach Bar with Darren Clarke. Clarke is from Northern Ireland and best known for winning

the 2011 Open Champion at [Royal St. George's](#). He has a home at The Abaco Club and he's the club's official ambassador on the PGA Tour Champions. Flipper's Bar is one of his favorite spots to hold court, so it seemed like the perfect place to ask him about the upcoming Open Championship at [Royal Portrush Golf Club's Dunluce Links](#) as well as life at The Abaco Club.

GOLF ODYSSEY: You must be tremendously excited about the Open Championship coming to Northern Ireland. It was last played at Royal Portrush in 1951. Could you have ever imagined this happening in your country?



Royal Portrush and Northern Ireland returns to The Open rota in 2019. David Cannon/Getty Images

Darren Clarke: Yeah, we're tremendously excited. But, no, back in the day, when I was growing up and playing at home, having the Open Championship there wasn't feasible at all because of the Troubles and everything that was going on. To have reached the point where the biggest and best tournament in our sport is coming to our little country is certainly something I don't think anybody would have envisioned a few years ago.

GO: The Troubles hit your immediate circle hard, and you felt tragedies and loss during your childhood. Why do you think things changed?

DC: I think the people basically just had enough of it. We have a beautiful little country. With everything that was going on, from both sides of the divide, people just had enough. Eventually, with the hard work of a lot of people behind the scenes -- politicians, etc. -- we came to the *Good Friday Agreement*, and the place has been fantastic ever since.

GO: For anyone who may venture over to Northern Ireland to see the Open Championship or for a golf holiday, what do you think they'll find most remarkable about your home country?

DC: I think the welcome that you would get, especially Americans traveling anywhere in Ireland. Ireland and America are very, very close. There's so many Irish people who emigrated to America. But when go into any bar in the evening or anyplace, people are very welcoming. They are very appreciative of people coming to visit.

Royal County Down is a perennial contender for best course on the planet. Golf Odyssey

And we've got a lot to offer. We've got two sensational golf courses in **Royal Portrush** and **Royal County Down** for people to play. Just up from Royal Portrush, we've got Giant's Causeway, which is a World Heritage site. For those *Game of Thrones* fans, we have the Dark Hedges and all that sort of stuff -- a lot of it is all filmed in that area, as well.

Belfast is a hustling, bustling city with new bars and new restaurants. There's something new opening all the time, including hotels. We've got some wonderful hotels, such as **The Merchant Hotel** in Belfast. It's housed in one of the old Ulster Banks from years ago that has been converted to what is probably the best hotel in Northern Ireland.

There's other places, not just Portrush and Belfast. All of Northern Ireland has a lot to offer to people when they do come over.

GO: How do you think Royal Portrush will fare as the Open championship venue? The last time it was there was in 1951.

DC: Royal Portrush is fantastic. It's been brought a little bit up to date. Martin Ebert has done a wonderful job with that. There are two new holes -- replacing the old 17th and 18th -- along with new greens and new bunkers. But essentially, he hasn't changed an awful lot. It's as good and fair a links test as you'll play anywhere in the world.

GO: What's your best tip for anyone playing the Dunluce course?

No. 14 on the Dunluce Links at Royal Portrush Golf Club is one of the most famous par 3s in the world. Getty Images

DC: Portrush is all about keeping the ball in the fairway. Keeping the ball pretty straight. It's not overly narrow, Royal Portrush, but if you miss the fairway by 10 yards, you're in trouble. There's no big area where you can afford to miss the fairway. A lot of the holes are cut into little natural valleys, so off the fairway your lies are going to be brutal because they'll be sidehill, uphill, and all that. It's not flat outside the fairway. Lost balls are frequent. If you miss the fairway, you'll just be reaching for another ball. So hit it straight at Portrush, and if your driver isn't working, leave it in the bag.

GO: Can you tell us a little about the town of Portrush and what you recommend for getting a feel for it?

DC: Portrush is a holiday village, town. That's what it is. Whilst in Portrush, there's a little area down in the harbor. It's where I go all the time for a pint of Guinness on a Friday afternoon with my friends. A place called the Harbour Bar. It's a little small, tiny bar. Ask for Willy—he's the main bar man. The Guinness is as good as you'll get anywhere.

This area of the harbor is wonderful with its restaurants and bars. In behind the Harbour Bar there's the Harbour Bistro, and out the door, just to the left you come to The Tourist and the Wine Bar. Neptune is across the road, and Mermaid is up on top. All are owned by the same family, the McAlpins. George and Kay McAlpin have been running the family business for a long, long time and they do a wonderful job. The two sons Matt and Fionn. Fionn is a highly qualified chef, and Matt runs the whole thing. All the restaurants give different options and the food is fantastic and very reasonably priced. It's a great little area.

GO: Is Northern Ireland known for any particular food or dish?

DC: I think maybe we're more famous for the drinks that go with it.

GO: Northern Ireland is a hot golf destination now. Tee times are going to be extremely hard to come by at Royal Portrush and Royal County Down the rest of this year. What other courses would you recommend that are lesser known or off the beaten path.

The Strand at Portstewart Golf Club hosted the 2017 Irish Open, won by John Rahm

DC: Portstewart. We had the Irish Open at [The Strand](#) there a couple of years ago. It's very good. [Castlerock](#) which is maybe 20 minutes away from Portrush, is also very, very good. And then heading towards Donegal, you've got **Ballyliffin**, which has the [Old Links](#) and the [Glashedy](#), both of which are very good and have hosted important championships. Murvagh Golf Club ([Donegal Golf Club](#)), which is where I grew up and played an awful lot of golf, is also good as well. There are so many really good golf courses in and around Donegal when you go up in that direction. You have numerous opportunities to play golf.

GO: Any course recommendations around Belfast?

DC: [Ardglass](#) is not too far away, and you then you have [Malone](#). [Royal Belfast](#) is good. There's a lot of them. [Hollywood](#) -- Rory's home course. There's golf courses all over the place in Northern Ireland.

GO: How about a tourist site or any attraction that might not immediately come to mind, but that anyone visiting shouldn't miss?

DC: The Titanic center in Belfast ([Titanic Belfast](#)) is a huge tourist attraction. It was built in Belfast years ago. It documents everything about the Titanic and what happened afterward. It's a very, very busy, fantastic modern exhibition of everything about the Titanic and the expedition to recover it.

GO: Let's shift gears now to your life here in the Bahamas at [The Abaco Club on Winding Bay](#). It's a private sport club and residential resort development, but anyone can make one holiday visit before becoming a member. What makes this place so appealing?

The Abaco Club on Winding Bay is an island paradise in the Bahamas

DC: I've been coming here almost from the beginning. It opened in late 2004 and I been here since 2005. We're the no. 1 [golf course](#) in the Bahamas and no. 4 in the Caribbean, so that speaks for itself. For me, the golf course is as good a test as you'll get anywhere. It is not a resort course, as people would think. It's a tournament, championship golf course. The practice facilities are second to none.

My other big passion of is fly fishing, and we have one of the best fly fishing lodges in the world, just 30 minutes away, called Black Fly, run by June and Clint Kemp, and I spend a lot of time there.

The beach, as you can see, doesn't get much better than this, It's 2.5 miles of tranquil waters on a tranquil horseshoe bay. My wife really enjoys that, and my kids grew up on this beach. The staff here, the wonderful staff members that have been here a long time, they've known my kids since they were "this" high. Every holiday weekend we would always come here. Now they're 18 and 20. One is in Boca Raton in school and my other one is in school in Northern Ireland. Even in their teenage years, which can be very difficult for people –it wasn't for mine, fortunately,- they were very good—my kids always wanted to come here. There's not an awful lot to do here, but if you have teenagers and they can't wait to get back here, that sums up an awful lot.

For me, whenever I'm here, I have everything I could possibly want. If I want to get tournament-ready, they have the golf course. If I want to go hang out at the beach, they've got the beach. If I want to go fishing, I'll go over there [to Black Fly Lodge], and if I want to sit and drink too much, they've got this place where we're sitting, which is just 10 paces up that way and then 10 more paces that way right to my place. It doesn't get any better

GO: You spend quite a bit of time at Abaco Bay.

DC: I do. I basically play a couple of weeks on Tour, then come back here for a couple of weeks. A couple of weeks away, then a couple of weeks here again. It works out well that way.

Darren Clarke hones his game on the Donald Steel/Tom Mackenzie-designed Abaco Club layout

GO: What's your daily routine here when you're at The Abaco Club?

DC: It depends. If I'm fishing, I'm away and out of the house at 6:45 in the morning. If not, I'll probably get up early and go practice for four hours and then go and join my wife on the beach and relax. I'm not a beachy sort of guy--that's a little too non-active for me. So I'll only go and join her for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and then we'll come here and probably have a few drinks in the afternoon. And then we'll see what we're going to have for dinner.

GO: We're sitting at the bar at Flipper's looking out at the turquoise water. This is the real hub of The Abaco Club. It must be hard sometimes to work on your game at a place where it's so easy to relax?

DC: Oh yeah. It's a very chilled atmosphere here, as you've probably picked up that vibe already. It's very relaxed. It's island life. I'm convinced that at 4 o'clock in the afternoon they put some sticky

substance on the seats, which means that you can't get up out of them for at least a couple of hours. Which I'm not complaining about.

GO: We know you like Guinness. Do you have a favorite cocktail you enjoy in the Bahamas?

DC: I do. Here we have the *DC Sea Breeze*, which is a Sea Breeze with coconut water. They named it after me. My house is named *Sea Breeze*. That would be one of my favorite libations.

GO: Can you tell us a fish story?

Darren Clarke has pulled in some of the largest bone fish ever caught

DC: I've caught some big ones. I'm just a salt-water fly guy. And we have some of the best bone fishing here you'll find anywhere in the world.

GO: Of all the golfers who fish, we've heard you're the best.

DC: I don't know about that. I might say Mister Nicklaus. He's smart. He mostly goes deep sea fishing, and he catches fish all day long. Many days I'm out all day and might not even get a nibble. It is really difficult -- salt-water fly fishing.

So I don't know what I'm doing. I've chosen golf for a career, which is very difficult. And I go salt-water fly fishing, which is very difficult. Maybe that's why I get stuck here at the bar so often.

it's a good bet Darren Clarke will make it to Flipper's Beach Bar at some point every day he's at The Abaco Club

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