

THE CUT

GOLF

Discover the spirit of
TE ARAI LINKS



HSBC
Premier

118

GOLF
TRAVELLER

WHO NEEDS BANDON DUNES?

TWO WORLD-CLASS GOLF LINKS ARE UNDER
CONSTRUCTION IN NORTHLAND.

WORDS Tom Hyde PHOTOS Ricky Robinson

The South Course at Te Arai Links is due to open in the last quarter of this year.



BELOW: Bandon Dunes developer Mike Keiser (left) and Jim Rohrstaff the managing partner of Te Arai Links.

A friend once asked me to name my dream golf destination, one where I had not already played. Australia, Ireland, a dozen US states, including Hawaii (my American golf destination of choice) were out.

Scotland is an eternal dream, of course, but the resort I'd love to spend a week playing to my heart's content would be Bandon Dunes, that Mecca of links golf on the coast of Oregon.

Bandon Dunes is one of the world's unquestioned destinations for mad-dog golfers who will go anywhere for that once-in-a-lifetime experience. You can read more about it on its website.

But after visiting Te Arai Links and its two courses under construction on the Pacific coast north of Auckland, I'm beginning to think: who needs Bandon Dunes? I could save an airfare and car rental, not to mention an unfavourable exchange rate.

It's not too far-fetched to think of the two new courses at Te Arai Links, together with the private Tara Iiti, as the Bandon Dunes of New Zealand.

That's not a coincidence.

Mike Keiser, the developer of Bandon Dunes – who has taken links golf into the stratosphere with the likes of Sand Valley in Wisconsin and Barnbougle Dunes in Tasmania – is a friend of, and inspiration for, Ric



Kayne, the majority owner of Kayne Anderson Capital Advisers, in Los Angeles, the force behind Tara Iiti and Te Arai Links.

As Jim Rohrstaff, the managing partner of Te Arai Links, told *THE CUT*: “Bandon Dunes was a model for what we are creating here. We both know Mike Keiser and Bandon Dunes is a place we love and admire. It was Mike who once said that one course is a curiosity, two is a destination and, for resorts, one plus one equals three.”

According to *Golf Course Architecture*, the cost of construction of the two links at Te Arai is estimated to be \$50 million. Designed by the partnership of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw, the South Course at Te Arai Links, due to open in the last quarter of this year, is certain to be ranked among the best new golf courses in the world.

By phone from the latest Coore Crenshaw project in South Carolina, Bill Coore said: “Ric [Kayne] rang me and asked me to come down to New Zealand to look at the property. I did that and though it was forested, it took me no more than a moment to see that it was truly a special site. I came back several times and even three times in quarantine made it worth being allowed to walk the site.”

Bill Coore grew up in North Carolina, where he was introduced to the work of legendary course architect Donald Ross. A graduate of Wake Forest University, Coore began his career in course design and construction working for the late, great, Pete Dye.

Coore eventually formed his own company, building courses in Texas, mainly, but elsewhere, too. Golf du Medoc, in France, is ranked among the best courses on the Continent and is the only course outside of Paris to host the French Open.

Ben Crenshaw is, of course, a name well known to

anyone who has followed professional golf since the 1970s, when he turned pro. Considered one of the best putters in the game, his Hall of Fame career includes two Masters, 17 other PGA Tour wins and four Ryder Cups.

The Coore Crenshaw partnership was formed in 1984. As Coore recalled, “Ben had just won the Masters. We were introduced by a project manager who thought we’d make a good team. I knew that Ben talked a lot about course architecture and had read the same classics as me, like Robert Hunter’s *The Links* and George Thomas’ *Golf Architecture in America*.”

Coore Crenshaw has since created a portfolio of some of the best and most eye-popping golf courses in the world, including the Plantation Course at Kapalua, Hawaii, Cabot Cliffs in Nova Scotia, Bandon Trails at Bandon Dunes, Sand Hills in Nebraska, Streamsong in Florida and, closer to home, Lost Farm at Barnbougle Dunes in Tasmania.

“The goal at Te Arai Links,” Coore said, “was to build a golf course that complements the great potential of the site. Ric has an interesting sense of humour. We were walking the site and he said he wanted something better than Tara Iiti.”

“I mean, Tara Iiti is one of the best in the world; how could we do something better? But we could build a course that complements it and I believe that’s what we’ve done with the South Course.”

Jim Rohrstaff notes that Bill Coore and Tom Doak, the designer of the North Course that will open for play in 2023, are similar in that they take an old-school approach to golf course architecture.

“They are not like a lot of modern architects who rely on computer-generated drawings,” Rohrstaff said. “They go out and find green sites and link them with their own intuitive awareness of space based on their extensive



The 18th hole at Te Arai Links.





experience. They are as skilled as any architect in the business at creating a great rhythm and flow with their routing.

"Here, they walked with a topography map over dunes and through a pine forest covered in gorse to find the rhythm of the routing that is so important to the flow of a course. They are artists, with a site as their canvas, doing it by look and feel and they are as good as it gets."

The South Course clearly expresses the Coore Crenshaw design philosophy. "We like courses that are natural in appearance and the way they play," Coore said. "They have features that are alive, ever-evolving; nothing is stagnant. I like natural hazards and contours formed by wind. Sometimes those are big and sometimes tiny, but always an infinite variety of landforms put together by nature. I do not like artificial."

Tara Iiti, meanwhile, will remain private, but not so exclusive that only members or guests of members can play there. As Rohrstaff clarified, "People can play Tara Iiti when it has the ability to host someone who is not a member or the guest of a member. But they can stay and play only once..."

Once, as in, once in a lifetime?

"Yes. And we require a letter from their home club vouching for their character and they must stay at least one night. But they can play as many rounds as their stay allows."

Stay three nights and play 36 holes a day, perhaps set a personal record of 108 holes in three days?

"That's possible."

Possible if you've got comfortable shoes: like Tara Iiti, the 36-hole layout at Te Arai Links is walking only,

preferably with a caddie, another feature of this resort unique to New Zealand.

Both golf courses at Te Arai Links will be open to the public whether they stay or not. But then, to get the most out of a visit, it makes sense to book at least one night's stay; better still two or three nights to enjoy the golf as well as the accommodation and services.

The South Course will be the accommodation hub, with 48 one-bedroom suites, plus eight two-bedroom cottages. The clubhouse will have a pro shop and once you've checked in and confirmed your tee time you'll have the opportunity to practice your putting on what might be the largest green in the world: a whole hectare that includes an 18-hole putting course.

Add Ric's Pizza Barn, a second restaurant and a menu of activities for non-golfers like horseback riding on the beach with views to the Hen and Chicken Islands. For, as intimidating as the entire setup might feel at first, the modus operandi is Fun.

"Most of all, we want to see people enjoying themselves," Rohrstaff said. "Too many golf courses take themselves too seriously. We want people to have a great time and as long as your idea of fun does not burden someone else, that's fine."

He continues: "Guests may feel a bit intimidated at first, but as we've learned from Tara Iiti they very quickly learn to relax and enjoy the place, without feeling as if they have to walk around on eggshells."

Eggshells aside, our escorted tour of the South Course revealed a links that, like Tara Iiti, has no two holes alike. The diversity ranges from the 4th hole, a dogleg par-4 sweeping down and around to the sea, to the 13th, a short par-5 reachable in two but featuring a smaller green, to the 17th, a short-short par-3 that, with its

Formed by nature: architects Coore Crenshaw don't believe in artificial course features.



ocean backdrop, may remind some of the famed 7th hole at Pebble Beach – although here the hole plays out, not down, from an elevated tee to an elevated green. It may be short but, like a character in a Stephen King novel, it's scary.

"Apart from dunes and fescue and seaside conditions," Rohrstaff added, "the feature that defines a truly great golf course, in my view, is that no two holes are alike, yet you'll remember all of them. Coore Crenshaw have created a true links course with a figure-eight routing that takes you away and brings you back with different conditions on every hole."

And, it almost goes without saying, there are no bunkers – only waste bunkers that allow you to ground your club. With fairways and greens running between high dunes, a regular bunker would look artificial and, as we've heard, artificial is not what Coore Crenshaw does.

On that note, Alex Flavell-Johnson is Te Aria Links' full-time conservation manager, an environmental scientist who works alongside the Department of Conservation. He explained that, "The property was planted in *pinus radiata* many years ago, but it's not natural.

"To make way for the golf courses, we removed much of the pine and that allowed us to plant native dune grasses like *spinifex* and *pingao*. We've planted millions and there's a lot more planting to do. They help create an ecological sanctuary above and beyond the requirements of the resource consent. Eliminating the pine forest monoculture helps eradicate predators and that's why we're also seeing an increase in the population of dotterels." □