

VIGNETTE

Dunes

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM ZELTNER

The *funniest* thing about photo books on Irish links golf courses is that they invariably depict radiant weather with *brilliant* sunshine, china blue skies and tiny tufts of cotton cloud in serene environments of astonishing *tranquility and beauty*. Nothing, any local or visiting golfer would tell you, could be further from the truth.

As evidence we offer the simple Irish saying, heard frequently in this mercurial land, "There's four seasons in an hour here."

Oh, yes, the sun does gleam occasionally, and everyone is grateful for it. And there are rare sequences that bring those photographs to life, when you might be tempted to play in a short-sleeved shirt or even shorts. Don't.

Irish "links" golf courses—that is, those by the sea—are stunningly challenging. (The same goes for their cousins, if one may suggest the kinship, in the United Kingdom.) Few are long by any American yardstick. But upon finishing any of the greatest, one may be tempted to say, as Samuel Johnson said of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "None ever wished it longer than it is."

They are stunningly challenging for reasons that any television observer of various Opens will know: fairways that are anything but level, bunkers as profuse as nuisance taxes, greens that ripple like the breakers heard and seen just offshore. But there's something else that television can do no justice to, that you must simply walk to experience: the dunes.

Say "dunes" to most people and they'll think gentle undulations of sand, perhaps with a thin stubble of grass. In Ireland the dunes can be the size of small buildings, rising as high as a half-dozen stories, towering over golfers and the bumpy fairways they ply. You can easily feel lost in the dunes, as you would in a maze—but not any of those tidy topiary mazes straight out of "Masterpiece Theatre," where a butler or gardener can be easily shouted to for help or directions. When you enter the dunes at Carne, for example, on the west coast of Ireland, you've walked into another biosphere. Or, on a day when the clouds are steel and the wind is raw and spatters of rain start and stop and start and stop, another world.

It's a coin toss whether you'll find golf balls driven deeply into the densely matted dune grass. That's why the low-flying, ultra-accurate game that you never see at American tournaments works here. Don't leave the fairway, mate! Because it seems at times as if those not-exactly-benevolent-looking dunes have been waiting for a human sacrifice—which just might be you.

Fairy tales in these parts have been concocted from less.—*Duncan Christy*

