



| Golf at Gleneagles: Pilgrim's Progress on the King's Course

20

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COURSES

Golf Travel story by Ranjan Pal

Gleneagles sits proudly on the list of great golf courses of Scotland. Even the name evokes images of a majestic bird of prey soaring above the Scottish heather.....ideally tracing the flight of a well-struck ball! It is one of the few inland links courses in Scotland set among the scenic backdrop of the Trossachs and Ben Vorlich mountains and just an hour's drive from Edinburgh and Glasgow. Founded in 1919, it boasts three championship courses: the King's Course, the Queen's Course and the PGA Centenary Course with the latter having hosted the Ryder Cup in 2014 and being the venue for the Solheim Cup this year. Gleneagles is not just a golf destination: it has plenty of other sports and outdoor activities like tennis, fishing and horse-riding to offer and is home to a luxury five-star hotel dubbed the "Riviera of the Highlands".



Ranjan hits a blind second shot on the 3rd hole



1st green – King's course

I was touring Scotland on invitation from Visit Scotland to write about the Speyside Malt Whisky Trail experience and asked for a round of golf to be thrown in. When I was told that it was to be Gleneagles itself, I was in Seventh Heaven but not a little nervous to boot. For a very average hacker like me, it was akin to a Go-Kart driver being thrust into the rarefied atmosphere of Formula One at Silverstone! Still, I was reassured by the fact that I was going to be playing with the resident pro-Matthew Reid – with the Lord as my shepherd, I shall not want – are the words that came to mind.

My saviour Matthew turned out to be an amiable young man with blonde hair, a firm handshake and a ready laugh. Like many Scottish lads his age, he was practically born with a golf club in his hand and so the progression to a golf scholarship at Belmont Abbey in North Carolina was just karma. After graduating he turned professional and worked for the Quail Hollow Club for two years. But the call of home was too strong and when Gleneagles came knocking, Matthew had no hesitation in returning to the Tennants lager, steak pies and the wind that he loves so much. As my nominated golf shepherd, he was wonderfully supportive and allowed me ample recourse to mulligans and overlooked penalties for lost balls!

It was a typically blustery day on the King's Course designed by the legendary James Braid, five-time winner of the British Open and we teed off from the 1st hole called the Dun Whinny. The whimsical Scottish names were bewildering to me but that was the least of my problems. One major one manifested itself right away as I hit off the fairway and landed in the fescue which lurked right on its edge. This wretched tall grass is the bane of any Scottish golfer's existence and I was already cursing as I tried to thrash my way out of it. I finally made it to the hilltop green and was relieved to see my putt go in.



Matthew tees off the 10th hole as the Scottish downpour starts

The rest of the day passed in a kind of Pilgrim's Progress, moments of ecstasy followed by long periods of hard struggle. One such Hallelujah moment happened on the 5th hole the Het Girdle, a difficult par 3 with bunkers surrounding the green. By some miracle, I actually drove right onto the green and was closer to the hole than Matthew. We both parred it and he jokingly wagged his finger and said that I was not allowed to outhit the Pro! A wee bit of Scottish rain came down shortly after that, slanting down in waves and soaking me through and through. Losing two balls on the difficult 10th hole Canty Lye, I was happy to stumble into the Halfway House for some well-earned steak pie, vinegar chips and lemonade.



My biggest challenge at Gleneagles – the pesky Powakaddy

Interestingly my biggest challenge at Gleneagles came not from the strange course or the inclement weather, not from playing with unfamiliar clubs or the all-consuming fescue. Rather it came from a pesky little contraption called the Powakaddy which we were using to ferry our clubs around. The damn thing was like a frisky terrier on a leash that alternated between wanting to go charging off in all directions or just refusing to budge. On one critical uphill lie where I was concentrating on the ball, it suddenly took off downhill! On another, it decided to slyly bump into me from behind causing me to duff my shot! I longed for my home course at ITC Classic in Manesar where a real human caddy would take care of everything for me.



King's Course – Par-5 18th

Finally, we were on the par 5 18th hole and headed for home, hence its name King's Home. I hit out of the fescue for the last time and landed on the largest green on the course. My Scottish driver/guide Charles Hunter sauntered onto the green and helpfully held the flagpole for me. The inevitable three-putt followed and then we were done and headed for Auchterarder 70 at the clubhouse which served bespoke craft beer and some excellent tacos and sliders.

About the Author:



Ranjan Pal

Ranjan Pal is an adventurer in both his professional and personal life. Professionally he has had a rich and diverse record of accomplishments at the leadership level in a variety of fields ranging from investment banking to education. Personally he now pursues his twin passions for the outdoors and for travel writing. Having done all the major whitewater trips in India including the iconic Siang and Zaskar rivers, he returned to terra firma with memorable trips to Everest Base Camp in 2012 and Green Lakes Kanchenjunga in 2014. When it comes to travel writing, he is a great believer that in exploring other countries and cultures one gets to know oneself better, an idea best expressed by Rudyard Kipling who famously wrote *"And what should they know of England who only England know?"*