

CITY SPORT

GOLF

Galway's top ten courses

■ Salthill rated sixth best course in Galway after Portumna and Connemara

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BEARNA Golf Club got in touch recently about a 'Top Ten Golf Courses in Galway' that they'd discovered online. They sent over the link and it was enough to make your hair stand on end.

Not only was Bearna not on the list, neither was Connemara Golf Links (aka Ballyconneely). Add in that the renowned Galway Golf Club was listed as a '9 hole executive golf course' and the list is shockingly bad. Actually, it's embarrassing.

Part of the problem is that the list was published in 2008, but type 'best courses in Galway' into Google, and the list still makes the first page of results.

The concern is that anyone looking to play in Galway is going to get inaccurate information. Perhaps that's a bit strong, as some copy is relevant, but then you get this: "Ballinasloe Golf Course is one of Ireland's oldest (over 80 years) and most loved golf clubs."

Neither of those statements is true. Yes, it is one of the oldest, but it's 119 years old - a far cry from 'over 80'. That's like saying the Dead Sea Scrolls are a few centuries old! And most golfers outside Galway and surrounding counties will never have heard of Ballinasloe, let alone love it. It's a good country course but 'most loved' is comparable to 'probably the best lager in the world' in terms of over-selling. The plan, therefore, was to produce a Top Ten Golf Courses in Galway which, would usurp such inaccuracies. Here's the list:

1. Portumna (1913)

A beautiful and under-appreciated parkland coasting over the gently rolling terrain of an old estate. It comes with big solitary oaks, dense woods of pine, tall stone stacks (from where ladies watched horse races) and deer using the course as their personal fiefdom.

It's lazy, sweet golf, with room to play off the tee and attractive approach shots, made all the more striking by the forest backdrops. The par five 17th is the hole of the round, tall pines on the left, lake on the right, the fairway curving between the two.

1. Connemara (1973)

As for Portumna, Connemara (in equal 1st position) is another

course that doesn't get the credit it deserves. This one is tucked away at the far end of one of Ireland's unique landscapes and you should enjoy the journey as much as you relish the round. It's a links that plays over more open ground with spectacular views of the Twelve Bens and ocean.

Fairways are crumpled, dunes pop up sporadically and the greens beg for bump and run. After the flatter holes of the opening nine the back nine changes pace entirely. Greater elevation and greater thrills, with a cracking final stretch. Holes 13 and 14 are a stand out par three, par five combination, and the par five-par five finish will ruin many a scorecard when the wind blows.

3. Galway Bay (1993)

Christy O'Connor Jr designed and redesigned this course which races out to Galway Bay amid flurries of gorse, low bent trees and an ocean of bunkers. Condition is excellent, greens are like velvet and the swans perch on lakes like Hollywood starlets.

Expect wind on a course that demands accuracy between the bunkers and which offers little forgiveness around the greens. From the walk to the 1st tee you'll get a good chance to eye up the course - look left and you'll see the 12th curling around a lake; it's a brute of a par four and possibly the best hole of the round.

4. Bearna (1996)

Perfect Connemara moorland has provided a rich environment for flora at Bearna, creating striking colours, dark turf and water features like chocolate. It also creates the most intriguing rough; there isn't much of it but if you happen to find it you can wave goodbye to your ball.

This is a relaxed kind of place where there is room to open your shoulders and have some fun. Its easy rhythm rises as you move away from the sea and up the slopes for the final holes. Here the views out to the Aran Islands and across to the Burren get even more spectacular with every step.

5. Gort (1924)

Another Christy O'Connor Jr creation and one that tumbles over a peaceful, rolling landscape - the Slieve Aughty Mountains a mere turn of the head away.

As one of his earlier creations, there is a more natural flow and



The approach to the 17th, the signature hole on Portumna Golf Course.

feel to it (his affinity for mounding came later), with plenty of sweeping doglegs, water features and a natural wildness that is enchanting. A set of strong par threes provides a solid backbone for this under-rated and extremely enjoyable course.

6. Galway (1895)

An oldie and a goodie. Galway falls into that 'classic parkland' bracket. It dates back to 1895, although the clubhouse is an entirely more modern affair. Everything works in harmony (even the four holes separated by the road) and its design demonstrates the beauty of a mature course and the skill of the designer.

Set into a gentle hillside, with views over Galway Bay and out to the Aran Islands, gorse abounds - as do bunkers which threaten constantly. The greens have big shapes and are nearly always visible from the tee, showing just what is required of you.

7. Athenry (1902)

Sweet, uncomplicated parkland. There are no climbs so it promises a relaxing rhythm as you play between lines of evergreen trees towards tempting green sites. You have space to play - but not too much - and there's a strong finishing stretch that builds the tempo.

Athenry does everything you want of a strong country parkland with a few extras thrown in.



A view from the tee box at the par four 14th on Connemara golf course.

These include an impressive clubhouse and a wonderful pair of side-by-side par threes (3 and 12).

8. Oughterard (1973)

Oughterard begins with a run of holes curving over the gentlest of crests and between the trees. Greens open up from the crest-top and offer exciting shots in. It's a sweet, uncomplicated start that gets you into the swing of things.

It may not be an A-listener but it does everything so well and so smartly that you'll be having too much fun to notice.

This par 70 course comes with a splash of water (9th-11th) and a dash of brilliance (par five 8th).

9. Ballinasloe (1894)

Ballinasloe is well over 100 years old and is a country parkland that can cause chaos if you're not playing smart golf. Doglegs abound, many on short holes routed around trees.

The top section of the course is on a gentle slope, which can make club selection just that little bit tricky; the bottom part plays over a bog and has a much wilder appeal. If a course is defined by the number of fun shots you have to play, Ballinasloe delivers.

10. Cregmore Park (2007)

One of the newest courses in

the county, you'll find Cregmore Park to be well structured and routed across a flat and mostly bare landscape.

That may not sound thrilling but bunkers and tall, wispy rough give strong structure to holes and the greens are always inviting targets. Arthur Spring, the designer, took simplicity and turned it into something considerably more dynamic.

● Kevin Markham drove around Ireland in a camper van a few years back playing and reviewed every 18 hole golf course for a book entitled 'Hooked'. He has an active blog and contributes to various golf magazines in Ireland and the UK, as well as other blogs worldwide.