



# You Beauty

Australia may be a few airmiles away when considering your next golfing escape, but just outside Melbourne you'll find one of the best regions on the planet – the Sand Belt...

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Victoria's testing 18th hole

**T**he Sand Belt. Not an auspicious title many would agree, but mentioned in golfing circles, it is as hallowed as St Andrews, Pebble Beach and Ballybunion. Any conversation about the game in Australia generally centres around 'The Magnificent Eight' courses south east of Melbourne's famous MCG. All are five-star, and within six square miles of each other. As a group of clubs this is a golfing nirvana.

All these courses were built in the early 1900s in an area that was considered the 'boonies' – Melbourne was considerably smaller then and most clubs existed nearer town. However, the demand for bigger and better layouts fostered a collective migration to this sandy loamed area where the terrain was similar to Scottish and Lancastrian links land, and is now one of the most recognisable golfing regions on Earth.

Much is made of Alister MacKenzie's involvement in the layout of the Sand Belt, but truth be told, he was more 'influential' than hands on. Overseeing the construction of Royal Melbourne's West course in 1926 also saw him invited to advise other clubs. All listened and acted. Today, his 'Camouflage' army techniques are still apparent. The history of Australian golf is right here in the Sand Belt.



Yarra Yarra's unforgettable 11th hole

## YARRA YARRA

Located in the middle of all its sister clubs and surrounded over the years by expansion of suburbs and light industry. Designed by Alex Russell (in partnership with MacKenzie), the course is substantially the same. Sitting on undulating ground, surrounded by eucalyptus trees. The 11th is renowned as the best par 3 in Australia. Karrie Webb describes it as the best in the country and Peter Thomson a "National Treasure". At 180 yards it's not overly long, but finding the putting surface is another matter. It has three levels and is protected both front and right by huge tongue-style bunkers to confuse the eyeline from the tee. Exposed to the winds it plays almost like a links hole. You can rely on Yarra Yarra to always be in pristine condition.

The 2nd on the Peninsula North course



Commonwealth is in a fantastic setting



Commonwealth's 2nd and 17th greens

### COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth Golf Club was constituted in 1920, after moving from inner Melbourne. Eighty-nine acres of scrubby country land was honed and perfected by the pro, directors and the secretary over the years until by 1938, the course was established as we see it today. The LPGA played the Australian Open here twice recently. From the 1st tee you can see two greens – the 18th is nicely placed for a 1st tee hook, but only 330-odd yards away. The hole you should be on is a birdie opportunity. Length too is an issue with the 6th at nearly 600 yards taking some effort. Indeed, LPGA pros asked officials to push the tee forward. The short par-3 9th near the clubhouse is close to being as good as the 14th at Wentworth – albeit shorter. Post round, the club's Kookaburras may just share your sirloin steak if you venture onto the terrace for a bit of a barbecue – so be warned.

### PENINSULA

Take care when driving south to the Peninsula Club to stick to the speed limit religiously as there are plenty of hidden speed cameras. Shame on this writer for managing to pick up a ticket just two hours after taking delivery of his hire car! Peninsula has two courses, although the South is considered by many to be superior to the North. Recent tweaking by

Michael Clayton (of recent European Tour status) might have reversed these roles. The terrain over which the courses are sculpted is pure sand belt, although geographically the club is some 14 miles south of the others.

As early as the 2nd – a par 3 – Clayton has drawn inspiration from the famous 5th at Royal Melbourne. A tricky green across a gentle valley was engineered onto the hillside opposite. Only the reckless would take on the pin when it's set on the right side, close to a large bunker. Next up and a heavily bunkered downhill par 5 is where the course gives you a chance to open the shoulders and witness a glistening vista of Port Philip Bay. The tranquillity of a venue free of 21st-century noise – abundant with flora and fauna, and enough bird life to even get David Attenborough excited – contributes to another portion of Aussie excellence. After a glass or three of the local tippie, Peninsula's comfortable dormy rooms made for diminished concern regarding Victoria's over-zealous traffic cops!

## HUNTINGDALE

Huntingdale is a club synonymous with the Australian Masters and Greg Norman. The latter has 'owned' the former at this classic-but-tight venue. All the world's top players have walked these fairways – from Jack Nicklaus and Peter Thomson to Seve Ballesteros and Tiger Woods. But it is Norman – with six titles and a classic win against Faldo in 1990 – who catches the eye on the clubhouse honours board.

A small parcel of land has a routing playing mostly north to south, with fairways adjacent to each other. Almost 'Wentworth-esque' in feel, the turf and drainage, however, are superior to our national treasure. On the day we played a huge cyclone hit hard and within minutes the course looked in danger of floating away. Yet, by the time we returned 18 hours later, you could not tell a drop had fallen. Bunkers that traditionally take the brunt of rain, held up – a real testament to English architect C.H. Alison.

The 'meat' of the course perhaps lies around the 8th and 10th greens. Playing in opposite directions you'd be forgiven for thinking you were playing a desert track with the amount of sand to contend with. To get onto these slick surfaces, your approach shots need both accuracy and bite to hold on. Also be very wary of the excellent fairway bunkering along with the swales and hollows at the back of the 18th green – it makes for a serious par-4 home hole and one that will have ruined many a round. Making par over its 460 yards is no easy task.



Huntingdale's superb closing hole



Huntingdale's Hall of Fame

**Greg Norman with six titles and a classic win against Faldo in 1990 catches the eye on the clubhouse honours board**



Huntingdale's 10th has plenty of hazards



Victoria's holes are protected by tall trees

## METROPOLITAN

The Metropolitan Club is quite literally across the road from Huntingdale and when The Aussie Masters was played here the pros used Metro's 5th and 6th holes as their practice ground. Our appetite for the course was whetted hearing references from Adam Scott, who believes it to be on a par with Royal Melbourne and Kingston Heath, Greg Norman reckoning it to be "second to none" and wishing courses in the USA would "take note" while Tim Finchem believes he has never been to a course where every player in the field was ecstatic about it.

Out on the course the wide open spaces of the practice area and the 1st contrast nicely with the 9th and 18th to the right with their robust, strategically placed eucalyptus and paperbark trees – common encounters in all the Sand Belt courses. It was greens in regulation on the first four holes, but three-putting made us pay attention to slope and speed for the rest of the round. These were perfect greens and lightning quick. If golf is 'a good walk spoiled' then even the most earnest hacker will love Metro. Although regarded as having the best fairways in the world, not one stance could be relied upon to offer up a flat lie. Without a weak hole, our favourite was the 16th, a 340-yard dogleg right monster. Voluminous bunkers on the right side of the fairway cover

about 100 yards and all you can see from the tee is sand. Up ahead and 11 bunkers surround a tiny green on a very small acreage.

## VICTORIA

Returning to defend his Aussie Masters crown at the century-old Victoria Golf Club – immediately next door to Royal Melbourne – Tiger Woods was asked about golf in Australia. His reply was pure magic for the Victorians: "Sand Belt golf is phenomenal and you Aussies know your golf." Continuing his errant form for three days, he blitzed it on Sunday with a 65, finishing fourth behind home favourite Stuart Appleby.

From the short 250-yard par-4 opening to the 18th, a birdieable par 5, all the holes are protected by high trees which block out sight and sound of the local traffic. No consecutive holes are played in the same direction, and the wind – a regular factor here – has a major influence on club selection. The most splendid set of par 3s adorn Victoria, all are uphill either severely – like the 14th and the 16th – or gently at the 4th and the superbly bunkered 7th. Unusually, you finish with two par 5s (the 17th is a monstrous 600 yards with a reservoir on the right). Camilo Villegas tamed this beast with a driver and 8-iron just for the record. This is 18 holes of sheer bliss.



Metropolitan's 16th is a 'monster'

**Tiger Woods was asked about golf in Australia. "Sand Belt golf is phenomenal, and you Aussies know your golf"**





Kingston Heath's tough par-5 7th

## KINGSTON HEATH

With 50 hectares of fairly flat virgin land to work on, Dan Souter (a Scot from Carnoustie) started construction on Kingston Heath when word had it that Dr MacKenzie was working down in Black Rock. An invitation for him to visit and make some observations was offered and to the delight of all, accepted. After his visits, he wrote a remarkable letter to the Board, part of which went: "I have never advised on a golf course where owing to excellence of its design and construction, the problems have been simpler."

He tweaked the fairways, some lengths, and rendered the greens a little less severe. Bunkering had already gained his 'stamp' after the club gained the services of Mick Morcom from Royal Melbourne – someone MacKenzie thought of in almost 'Godlike' reverence when it came to interpreting his wishes – to oversee the construction work. They now have the best bunker system on earth.

"Welcome to the best golf club in the Southern Hemisphere" was a greeting made all the more meaningful when we looked under an Aussie cork hat at an Open Champion. Having a game with his wife after the rigours of the TV microphone, Ian Baker-Finch was his usual charming self and effusive in his praise for the course.

Walking out onto the course is so reminiscent of the same experience at Augusta National – a wide open putting green, a gentle, hardly discernible 1st tee, a large tree and an expansive view of six holes. Golfing heaven must be having a few holes on a summer evening with a mate – little wonder the members wanted a reciprocal arrangement with Walton Heath. The similarities are profound, with big skies and wide open vistas, the lack of claustrophobia is palpable.

**Walking out onto the course is so reminiscent of the same experience at Augusta National**

Singling out any particular hole as a signature one would be insulting to the other 17. The opening six are splendid, the 460-yard 1st – often spoken of as the toughest opening hole in Australia – can be made tougher by bringing a tee almost inside the members' lounge. It was in 2009 for Tiger Woods' last victory!

A good mix of long and short par 4s follow, with the 5th a blissful par 3. Average club golfers should regard all long holes as par 5s. At the 7th the course begins to bite hard with such a hole. It's not 'overly' long, but finding both the fairway off the tee and the green with two blows are supreme feats of skill. The par-4 8th is well over 400 yards and rated the hardest. It's best played long from the left side of the fairway where you're rewarded by a good view of the huge double green.

Tucked away plumb in the middle of the heath lies the magical 10th. For those of you who like your short par 3s, this is a gem. Bunkers are everywhere, the green having 'koala' undulations rather than elephantine. Ten paces wide, but stretching 40 front to rear, all this potential trouble lies only 140 yards from the tee. In practice for the Aussie Masters back in 2009 Tiger was seen to be studiously scouting the green complexities on the 15th. It's only a tickle with a mid iron, but its toughness is exaggerated by a two-tier green and lots of sandy trouble above your eyeline.

Let Tiger sum up Kingston Heath in a quote overheard to Adam Scott across the fairways: "Hey Scottie, why can't we play courses like this every week?"



The 'magical' 10th hole

## ROYAL MELBOURNE

Royal Melbourne will always be a Top 20 world-class club. Thirty six holes on a site dominated by the biggest undulations in the Sand Belt – this is a club worthy of being acclaimed by all who visit as right up there with Augusta and Cypress Point.

The common denominator is Alister MacKenzie, the Yorkshire born of Scottish parents and a Boer War Army camouflage specialist. Whilst Augusta has generally all its trouble in front of you, Royal Melbourne certainly doesn't and as a result is a much more interesting test. Whilst he gets all the plaudits for his design of The West course, much work was done with the assistance of Alex Russell, the fabled Aussie golfer of the time, and the equally legendary Mick Morcom, Royal's Head Greenkeeper. Their work (completed with very rudimentary mechanical equipment in five years) readied the course for opening in 1931. Today, when the 'Big Boys' come to play, the green staff lay out a composite course made up of primarily the West, but incorporating several holes from the East, the latter designed by the aforementioned Russell.

The 6th hole portrays very simply the philosophy of MacKenzie and his camouflage techniques. A 90 degree dogleg requires supremely accurate drives from an elevated tee across dense rough and unsighted traps. An accurate and long drive yields the correct position to play a second shot to a forward sloping, elevated green. Three-putting is the norm here – but this hole is all about MacKenzie's unsighted bunkers.

The 10th is another example of the Sand Belt courses' teasing – and beautiful – short par 4s: simple to look at, but hellish to play. Only 300 yards long and with an acre of fairway to aim at, the drive should be straightforward. That said, the cavernous, high sahara bunker to the left just over 200 yards out rises about 10 yards and continues for another 30 or so. The direct line for the drive is right over it. Even with a simple fairway second, don't think your work is all done. Two 'MacKenzie specials' guard the right side and a severe swale at the back makes for some fiendish chipping. This will surely be a fun spot to watch varying strategies come November's Presidents Cup. If you like your short holes to be 'classically' short, then the 7th is one such gem. At 150 yards it plays longer as it sits atop a mean hillock with only sky as your backdrop.



Royal Melbourne's 5th hole

## TRIP PLANNER

### WHERE TO PLAY

#### Yarra Yarra

**W:** [yarrayarra.com.au](http://yarrayarra.com.au)

#### Commonwealth

**W:** [commonwealthgolf.com.au](http://commonwealthgolf.com.au)

#### Peninsula

**W:** [peninsulagolf.com.au](http://peninsulagolf.com.au)

#### Huntingdale

**W:** [huntingdalegolf.com.au](http://huntingdalegolf.com.au)

#### Metropolitan

**W:** [metropolitangolf.com.au](http://metropolitangolf.com.au)

#### Victoria

**W:** [victoriagolf.com.au](http://victoriagolf.com.au)

#### Royal Melbourne

**W:** [royalmelbourne.com.au](http://royalmelbourne.com.au)

#### Kingston Heath

**W:** [kingstonheath.com.au](http://kingstonheath.com.au)

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Victoria

**W:** [victoriagolf.com.au](http://victoriagolf.com.au)

#### Peninsula

**W:** [peninsulagolf.com.au](http://peninsulagolf.com.au)

#### Beaumaris Bay Motel

**W:** [beaubay.com.au](http://beaubay.com.au)

#### Brighton Savoy Hotel

**W:** [brightonsavoy.com.au](http://brightonsavoy.com.au)



Royal Melbourne's bewitching landscape