

# A NEW GEM ALONG THE BELT

A new shining star on the Melbourne Sandbelt adds greater flair to an inspirational collection of golf courses.

BY PAUL PRENDERGAST

PICTURES OF PENINSULA KINGSWOOD BY MARK WILSON - GOLFPUS MEDIA

When an avalanche of praise follows the re-opening of a golf course after major restoration work, golfers of all description generally take heed of the hype and make a mental note for future reference.

When the project involves two golf courses located on the southern perimeter of the hallowed Melbourne Sandbelt, it is inevitable the broader golfing world will sit bolt upright and start making their travel plans.

As the finishing touches are applied to a multi-year project at Melbourne's Peninsula Kingswood Country Golf Club, or PK for short, there is already a groundswell among members, prominent professional golfers, commentators, even Major champions, suggesting that a meteoric rise to the top handful of golf courses in the country is an absolute given.

In fact, it's already there in the eyes of many. It is that good.

Highly regarded design firm Ogilvy Clayton Cocking Mead - and principally, former 'PK' member Michael Cocking - were entrusted with the latest and most significant chapter in the evolution of the existing North and South courses that have their origins in the early 20th century, at least in the South's case.

The current day 'PK' has been born out of the merger of the Peninsula and Kingswood Golf Clubs in 2013, the latter of whom forfeited their course with the subsequent land sale providing considerable funds to transform two existing courses and facilities into what could be considered a '21st century Sandbelt' offering, located at the gateway to the Mornington Peninsula.

Actually, the earliest thinking about further restorative work at the current property occurred before the merger took shape. The Peninsula club wanted to take affirmative action on some lingering course conditioning issues, most notably the declining standard of putting surfaces that had become soft and infested with poa.



Merger deliberations then started to accelerate quite rapidly, ultimately leading to a project of quite epic proportions.

"The club have been brilliant really and have had a great mindset throughout the process," Cocking said, "They were always looking at the potential to make things better, rather than being concerned about what they might lose."

"The Kingswood members wanted to see something for their money and courses that were better than what they were giving up, however some of the people who needed most convincing might have been the older Peninsula members.

"One of the big things was they'd always been promised firm, fast, bent grass greens which had never eventuated, so they'd sort of heard it all before."

"However, once we opened the first five or six holes on the South, it pretty much all changed. They couldn't believe how



**RIGHT PAGE FROM TOP:** The Metropolitan is one of the eight sandbelt beauties on display; Kingston Health Golf Club is a private facility that welcomes international visitors.



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**With around a hundred courses, many of the courses feature designs by world-renowned golf players-become-architects such as Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, and also the likes of famous golf architect, Robert Trent Jones, Jr.**  
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**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Mike Cocking, course designer of Peninsula Kingswood, playing the 13th at the North course; Huntington Golf Club at Melbourne's sandbelt; Commonwealth's 18 hole golf course is a joy to behold.

good they were. They were saying, “These are the best greens we’ve ever seen” and that just gave us even more licence to do what we felt would make the golf courses better.”

The large scale of the property and undulation available on the land housing the North course in particular, is unlike any other available on the sandbelt outside of Royal Melbourne.

OCCM’s work on both layouts showcases all that is great about Sandbelt golf - superbly conditioned and contoured greens, artistically designed ‘flash’ bunkering and short grass surrounds. Natural sandy heathland areas and some of the best vegetation on the Sandbelt have been embellished by the removal of many hectares of introduced species and other ‘weed’ varieties, as Cocking put it.

What Royal Melbourne offers by way of fairway width, strategic options and preferred angles into greens is largely mirrored at Peninsula North, save for a number of more exacting tee shots that force you to aim up and execute with courage.

At around 6,000m on the day we visited, pure length was not at the forefront of the course’s defences. Apart from the

myriad of challenges posed by the design itself, green speeds - running at around 12 on the Stimpmeter - and the proximity to Port Phillip Bay and therefore a prevalence of wind, are routine factors that combine to thoroughly test players’ skills throughout the bag.

With more than a hint of glint in his eyes, Cocking invited us to play from some of the new back tee locations that could stretch the course to 6,500 metres to cater for the prospect of championship play in the future.

“One of the great things about the Sandbelt courses is that they’re so playable day to day for the average member and yet they can still host a tournament. They really don’t do anything other than firm the greens up a little and use some of the back tees.” he explained.

“The idea of hosting tournaments didn’t really affect our design philosophy but we really worked the angles, we wanted some pin locations tucked tight behind bunkers that force you to play to a certain side of the fairway.”

“Where it did influence our mindset was that we tried to build a few extra black tees. Sometimes you don’t even know they’re there, it just looks like short fairway grass.”

The South course may not boast the more undulating tract of land but is an excellent layout with its own charm and character nonetheless. Cocking noted the South was always the ‘main’ course of the two going back to his junior days and beyond, although the recent work at the North may have switched the public perception of the two.

Cocking recalled a story told by the granddaughter of Sloan Morpeth, who designed the North course when the Peninsula club expanded to 36-holes back in the ‘60s. Morpeth was told: ‘Don’t spend any time on the North as it’s only going to be a ‘ladies’ course.’

“He apparently lamented that it was on such good land but it was interesting when we went to work because it was really well preserved. Nobody had touched it because people hadn’t paid it as much attention over the years, despite it having the potential to be the better course,” Cocking said.

Today, many of the members retain a soft spot for the South and part of the overarching brief for OCCM and Cocking was to not only unearth the sandbelt features of the property housing the North, but to make adjustments to the South that removes something of a ‘parkland’ status it had earned over time.

“Other than the creeks you see on the South, there’s not much difference now between the two courses in terms of a sandbelt feel,” Cocking said.

“In relation to the creeks, we really hadn’t planned on building any but I found an old photo of some of the creeks at Augusta National. They had a stone wall in the bank of Rae’s Creek on the 13th that made things look attractive and solved some of the maintenance issues that they were having.”

“We introduced a stone wall in a small section and the Board loved it so much that we’ve introduced more and reinstated some of the creeks that we found in old plans that had once existed on the South.”

Peninsula Kingswood’s pursuit of excellence extends well

beyond the golf courses and the creation of a world-class short game facility.

The recently opened state-of-the-art clubhouse, complete with indoor pool, gymnasium, tennis courts and bowling green, includes eight hotel style rooms with an additional 10 luxury cabins that establish a new mark for on-course accommodations in Australia and a rival to those anywhere else one cares to visit.

There's nothing at all austere or cramped about these lodgings, in fact, they would be likened to 'show home' standards in terms of the quality of features and fixtures. Spacious bathrooms include walk-in showers and baths, king-size beds that can be reconfigured into two singles if required, smart TVs, and balconies with course views.

House guests will be wowed by the first class cuisine and beverage options in a variety of well-appointed dining, verandah or lounge areas and in the cooler months, the lure of a comfy chair in front of one of the many fireplaces dotted throughout the clubhouse will be hard to pass up.

The club's aspirations also extend to the prospect of hosting championships of significant proportion into the future and just like Royal Melbourne, they have ample space at their disposal to comfortably cater for spectator movement, corporate hospitality and television needs.

The routing of each course, some of the amphitheatre settings and with many holes in close proximity to the clubhouse also suggests a 'Composite' layout, or layouts, are a real option for an event staged at PK.

"We've talked about a Composite course and it's quite complicated to get your head around because there are so many options between the North and South," Cocking explained,

"We have a number of holes that finish around the clubhouse and can push tees back into fairway on other holes if we want, convert some holes to Par 4s, there are a few opportunities like that."

"Tournaments are not the 'be all and end all' for members but it would be validation I think, for the whole project, for the ground staff. I think it would create a great buzz and show the members just how good the course is too."

1991 Open Champion Ian Baker-Finch applauded Cocking and the OCCM team following a recent visit for 'a fantastic transformation of the North' into a demanding but also enjoyable golf course.

"I love the views they have created with some wider corridors, along with many spectacular greens, great fun." Baker-Finch said. "I prefer the South course as a tournament test, a thoroughly enjoyable walk and Sandbelt experience with many truly great holes, green complexes and bunkering."

High praise indeed and time will tell how good the golf courses will become with further maturity over the coming years. However, what's not in question is that Peninsula Kingswood has now well and truly been thrust into the mix of any conversation about the best golf courses on the Melbourne Sandbelt and therefore, in Australia.

That alone is an honour in itself.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Cabin sited at the new Peninsula Kingswood Golf Club; The 14th at Peninsula Kingswood's North Course.



# CITY OF MYRIAD FUN

Melbourne calls to the golf traveller in more ways than one, and with more courses to entice and entangle too.



St Kilda Festival lights up the harbour area.

**W**hen not on the golf course in Melbourne, you'll be spoilt for choice when it comes to food, wine, entertainment and sightseeing around the city that is the second most populous in Australia.

As a result, 'Melbournites' love to proclaim their city as the beating heart of food, culture, entertainment and sport in the country. From a golf perspective, there is no argument but Sydneysiders in particular like to beg to differ on the others.

However, the city's eclectic vibe is hard to top. The inner city is famed for a 'laneway' culture brimming with restaurants, wine bars, live music venues, historic public houses – even walking ghost tours – a few days strolling the city's shopping precincts, cafes, parks and admiring the impressive colonial architectural

heritage are 'must do's.

A day trip out of the city in almost every direction will also find you in a region boasting a tangible difference from the others, begging to be explored.

For a start, wine and food lovers will salivate at the prospect of not one, but several world-class regions within a short hop from the CBD – the Yarra Valley to the north, Mornington Peninsula to the south and Geelong slightly further afield to the southwest.

All are generally regarded as cool climate regions and boast many dozens of historic and more contemporary wineries, most of which are open for daily tastings and with restaurants that take full advantage of excellent local produce.

From the Sandbelt courses to the south of the city, the

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Melbourne cityscape at night; Peninsula Kingswood showcases its 14th hole at the South Course; The grand Crown Towers in the city.



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Mornington Peninsula is the most accessible with a regional focus primarily on chardonnay and pinot noir varieties.

Some tastings followed by a long lunch taking in the sweeping views from the decks at Foxeys Hangout; or Montalto and neighbouring Tuck’s Ridge at Red Hill have been personal favourites, among many.

**‘WHERE TO STAY?’**

Apart from Peninsula Kingswood, other on-course accommodation can be found further south on the coastal strip of magnificent ‘links-like’ courses on the Mornington Peninsula (The National, St Andrews Beach, Moonah Links) and over at Portsea and Sorrento.

I’ve stayed, played, wine and dined on numerous occasions at the Victoria Golf Club which never fails to be a delight. Exceptional food and well-stocked wine cellar, great fireplace with leather lounges and an impressive collection of golfing artefacts on display – especially in the Thomson Bachli Room dedicated to the great Peter Thomson and amateur Doug Bachli who as ‘Vic’ members, won the British Open and Amateur Championships in the same year.

As you would expect, hotel and other accommodation options abound in a city the size of Melbourne. The gigantic Crown Melbourne complex will again be the host hotel for the visiting Presidents Cup teams this December although it’s highly doubtful the players will be encouraged to explore all Crown has to offer by way of its casinos, bars and restaurants, which are of Michelin standards by the way.

Staying at Crown will be at the top end of budgets but its location on the South Bank of the Yarra River provides easy walking access to a litany of waterfront restaurants and across into the Central Business District.

Other options along Collins and Little Collins streets will place you in the heart of the city, close to the Flinders St Station train, tram and bus hub and entertainment precincts.

**‘WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK?’**

A visit to Melbourne would not be complete without sampling a few local laneway haunts and food trails.

I often make a beeline for the Block Arcade or bustling Centre Place for coffee or breakfast and for dinner, a walk down Hardware Lane, Lygon St in Carlton for its Italian fare



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Ernie Els chilling out at Brighton Beach with the President's Cup trophy; The strategic bunkering at Yarra Yarra Golf Club; Possibly the continent's most famous golf course and site of the President's Cup, Royal Melbourne Golf Club.



or any of the other specialist eating destinations – Richmond for Vietnamese, Fitzroy for Spanish and Brunswick for Lebanese – are all excellent options.

Brunetti's is renowned for its delicate Italian pastries and if I ever return from Melbourne without a few samples of Haigh's chocolates for my family, my life is generally not worth living to them.

Of the many fine establishments, pubs, wine bars and bistros, high up on my list is the historic Mitre Tavern in Bank Place, hidden between Collins and Little Collins. One of the oldest continually licenced premises in Melbourne, it is a popular CBD haunt for an ale or good quality bistro meal for executives after a long day at work. Out of the city, the bayside St Kilda district is a longstanding entertainment mecca and other bayside villages such as Brighton, Sandringham and all along the coast down to Mt Eliza and Sorrento have some excellent suburban eateries and locales.

Black Rock village, home to the Royal Melbourne and Victoria Golf Clubs, is a great example and has been a base on several occasions when attending golf tournaments on the Sandbelt. The local craft brewery and restaurant, 'True South', has been a particular late evening sanctuary after many a long day on the golf course.

### THE INCOMPARABLE SANDBELT

Melbourne's collection of eight golf courses to the south of the city that comprise 'The Sandbelt' have been pencilled in as a bucket list destination and a source of golf course architectural inspiration for generations of players.

And the most famous club on the Sandbelt, Royal Melbourne, comprises of two world class layouts, the East and West courses, both of whom are rated in the Top 100 courses in the world.

Courtesy of the greater number of holes used in 'Composite' layouts derived from both courses for tournament play, the Alister MacKenzie-designed West is generally regarded more highly.

However, to not take time to play and study both courses would be foolhardy. If you could transplant it with ease, the East quite frankly would be the best golf course in any number of countries the world over.

The 2019 Presidents Cup will be played over a Composite layout at Royal Melbourne for the third time this December. 🏆

### OTHER COURSES OF THE SANDBELT

#### KINGSTON HEATH

A classic layout that is an example of how to extract the most out of a relatively small tract of land, Kingston Heath is famed for its magnificent bunkering and astoundingly beautiful putting surfaces, as well as short par threes and fours.

The club and its membership are committed to excellence in all things at Kingston Heath. As a long-time member once told me, 'they get all the small things right' regarding course presentation, playing surfaces, practice areas.

In the eyes of many prominent judges, Kingston Heath is their personal favourite sandbelt layout.

#### METROPOLITAN

Host of the 2018 World Cup of Golf and dozens of other major events over a long history, 'Metro' is another with sublime bunkering and green complexes in a layout that winds between tall stands of eucalypts and heathland vegetation.

It is often regarded as the best conditioned course all year round on the Melbourne Sandbelt, although the standard is exceptionally high at every club.

#### VICTORIA GOLF CLUB

Sitting adjacent to Royal Melbourne, Victoria has hosted many national championships and events over time.

Some of the short holes in particular are absorbing challenges, examples of which are highlighted by the opening hole, a driveable Par 4 ringed with deep bunkers, as well as a number of medium length Par 3s and one of the more exceptional short fours (No.15) in all of golf.

The club has recently renovated their bent grass putting surfaces under the guidance of course architects Ogilvy Clayton Cocking Mead and by all accounts, are in magnificent order.

#### WOODLANDS

An unsung but thoroughly deserving member of the upper echelon of courses, Woodlands is a delightful walk - as the name implies - with any number of outstanding holes.

The short Par 4 third and fourth holes are classic examples of strategic design and no lesser judge that international architect Tom Doak regards the par-5 fifteenth as one of the best par-5s in golf.

#### COMMONWEALTH

Another that has recently undergone course restoration work at the hands of Ogilvy Clayton Cocking Mead, Commonwealth is good enough to have hosted both the Australian Men's and Women's Opens and other state championships.

The course boasts an array of par 3s and 4s that would not be out of place on any of the sandbelt layouts.

#### HUNTINGDALE

The long-time host course to the Australian Masters tournament that has seen the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Arnold Palmer, Tiger Woods and Greg Norman (a six-time Masters winner) grace its fairways over 30 years of the event.

In the heyday of the tournament, Huntingdale was known for being a test of power and accuracy, given the heavily tree-lined layout however, progressive course renovations have restored some width to a course that again, boasts many fine examples of sandbelt styled holes, bunkering and slick putting surfaces.

#### YARRA YARRA

Some of the best Par 3s in Melbourne exist at Yarra Yarra which has recently engaged Tom Doak to undergo a full course renovation to restore elements of its original design and open up playing corridors that had been compromised by tree growth.

Gary Player's £5,000 winner's cheque in the 1956 Ampol Tournament at Yarra provided a financial boost to not only kick start his young career but to go home and propose to his wife Vivienne.

All of the Sandbelt clubs are private but accessible to international guests. Advance bookings are essential.