



The 18th green at Victoria Golf Club, with the heritage-listed clubhouse beyond offering stay-and-play packages.

VICTORIA GOLF CLUB
**RESTORING A
GOLDEN-AGE CLASSIC**

RECENT RENOVATIONS TO THE SANDBELT'S VENERABLE VICTORIA GOLF CLUB HAVE EARNED IT A PLACE AMONG THE WORLD'S TOP 100.

WORDS Paul Prendergast PHOTOS Golfplus Media

Tiger Woods' performance at Royal Melbourne during the Presidents Cup epitomised the skill sets required to play this style of Sandbelt golf and he has long been excited and inspired by golf in these parts.

Asked what he thought of course conditions for the event, Woods answered, "Hard, fast, difficult, but extremely fair. And that's what the Aussie Sandbelt golf courses have historically done... We wish there were more events on venues like this."

High praise indeed. And those fortunate enough to have combined a visit to the Cup with a round or two at any of these famed Sandbelt layouts would certainly have agreed with Woods' assessment.

At the Victoria Golf Club, more than 400 visitors across the week of the Presidents Cup – including former PGA Tour Commissioner Deane Beman, Hall of Famer Karrie Webb, World No. 1 tennis star Ash Barty and Australian Rugby League star James Tedesco – were captivated by what in essence was the first high-profile public unveiling of the acclaimed course renovation work completed over the previous six months.

Consulting architects Ogilvy, Cocking and Mead (OCM) were tasked primarily with replacing turf on all 18 greens – the last remaining set of original greens built in the early 20th century 'golden age' on the Sandbelt.

OCM's Michael Cocking explained that the club also agreed to a high-level analysis of the pitch of the greens, as green speeds and technology have changed so dramatically since their construction.

"There were a few steep greens that have caused problems when they're running at 12 or 13 feet in a northerly wind," Cocking explained. "We highlighted three that we probably needed to modify, those being number six, 11 and 13, which had been problematic over time. There were another half-a-dozen greens we wanted to make minor tweaks to and maybe expand the greens to create an extra pin location.

"We started running the idea of running the bent grass right to the edge of the bunkers, which has become a bit of a Sandbelt thing. The club were very open to it and that instantly adds a few more pin positions, because you get those really tight pins behind bunkers."

Putting on the finished product – Pure Distinction bentgrass

VICTORIA HAS LONG BEEN HIGHLY REGARDED FOR ITS ROUTING OVER GENTLY UNDULATING TERRAIN FRAMED BY INDIGENOUS FLORA AND HEATHLAND ROUGHS.

– was worth the trip to the southern capital alone. You couldn't help but admire the wonderful shaved edges of the greens spilling into the bunkers; and the surfaces themselves were nothing short of flawless in every way.

A number of months bedding down over summer had them firm underfoot and demanding of your complete attention to ensure you didn't look foolish by over- or under-compensating for the speed when chipping and putting. On the flipside, however, pick the correct weight and the quality of the surfaces will provide you with the pure delight of seeing your ball find its way unerringly to the cup.

"The last time I played the course, I thought they really had the combination of firmness and speed absolutely perfect," Cocking said. "Gee, it was good."

"It wasn't ridiculously hard but it was just on the right side of fair. You actually have to execute good shots, get a good flight and get the ball spinning. It exposes poor technique when the greens are playing like that."

Although the club was rightfully careful not to compromise the integrity of the original design, OCM was able to make other adjustments here and there, some subtle, some more significant. Collectively, these have added polish and elevated the overall golf-course presentation and playing experience to another level.

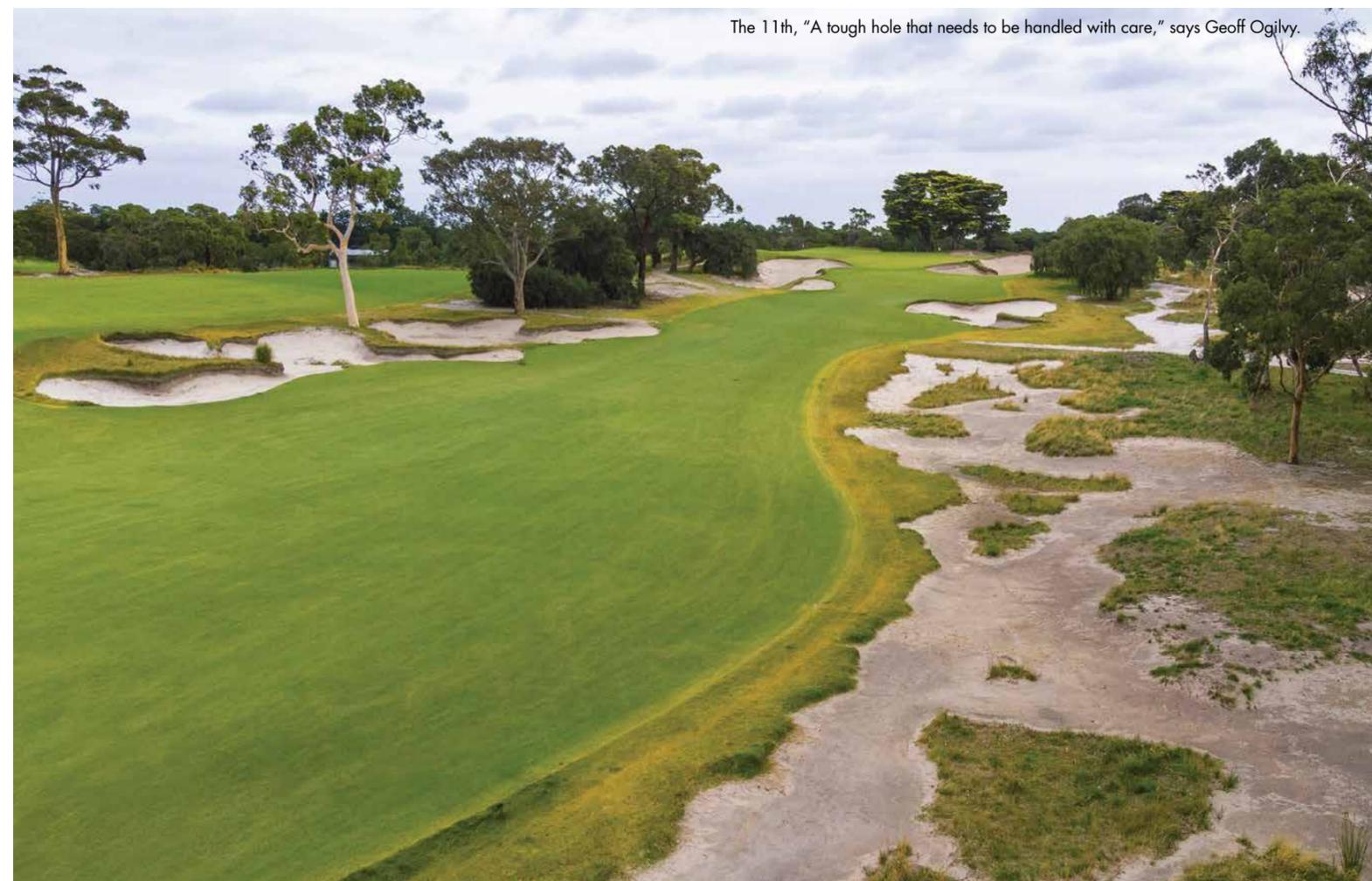
Not that the host course for the 2022 Australian Open hasn't always been an architectural gem and a fantastic experience to play. Victoria has long been highly regarded for its routing over gently undulating terrain framed by indigenous flora and heathland roughs. It boasts a collection of wonderfully artistic yet stout par-3s and at least two iconic short par-4s that are a prominent feature of many courses on the Sandbelt and surrounding area.

The first of those short fours comes at the very first hole – a downhill, 233-metre oddity in the modern era and a tantalising opportunity to flex muscles and kick-start your round with a birdie – possibly an eagle. On the flipside, the greenside bunkering and shaved slopes around the green can be a momentum killer right off the bat if you happen to stray.

"Time's proven that it's a terrific short four and it works quite well that it's not too long as the first hole of the day. It's



A tricky elevated green awaits players at the end of the par-4 10th.



The 11th, "A tough hole that needs to be handled with care," says Geoff Ogilvy.

amazing how many people start off there with a bogey," Cocking said.

Along with No. 10 on the West Course at Royal Melbourne and the third at Kingston Heath, the wonderful 15th, across a hog's back ridge, is a study in architectural genius that never fails to beguile and confuse.

Rated among the top few of the many world-class short holes in Melbourne, if not the world, there are multiple options to consider from the tee when determining your course of action on any given day. Many automatically lick their lips at the prospect of overpowering the 15th's 289 metres to set up a strong finish ahead of the rare combination of back-to-back par-5s that complete the round at Victoria.

From the tee, you're invited to advance the ball as far as you wish towards the green. But with bunkers hemming in from the left and to the right of the green, the target becomes narrower the closer you get. An exposed putting surface that slopes from front to back adds another subtle complexity to the challenge.

"Fifteen could make a legitimate claim to be the most interesting short four in Melbourne," Cocking said.

"It has that 'wide-to-narrow, bottle hole' effect; it gets increasingly narrow the closer you get to the green. And then there's that cool little speed slot down the left side close to the bunkers. If you can get the ball running into that, it feeds down on to the green.

"From a design point of view, we often talk about 15 at Vic because it absolutely comes at the perfect time in the round. If a short par-4 comes too early on, people aren't always prepared to play the aggressive shot, whereas 15 couldn't come at a more perfect time. If you're two down in your match or you're not going well in your round, you're going to hit the driver and hope for the birdie or eagle.

"The whole Victoria back nine, for a lot of people, is their favourite back nine in Melbourne. It's such a dramatic bit of ground, it moves around so much and has such an interesting finish."

Victoria's renovation adds to those recently completed or in train elsewhere on the Sandbelt



The 11th hole at Victoria Golf Club. Course adjustments, some subtle, some more significant, have added polish and elevated the overall presentation and playing experience to another level.

– Peninsula Kingswood and Yarra Yarra being the most significant – while others continue to tinker and refine their products just as winemakers do in any good wine region.

A recent ranking in the top 100 international golf courses would suggest Victoria's leap of faith in refining its own patch of precious Sandbelt 'terroir' has certainly paid substantial dividends.

The final word goes to Geoff Olgilvy, who has been a member of Victoria for almost 30 years and has witnessed the course's transition into the "very elite tier" of Sandbelt courses.

"The course now has a remarkable set of greens with pure surfaces," he said. "The club's international top 100 ranking is absolutely earned and staying in the accommodation at the club is a great base for a golfing experience on par with the world's best." □

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