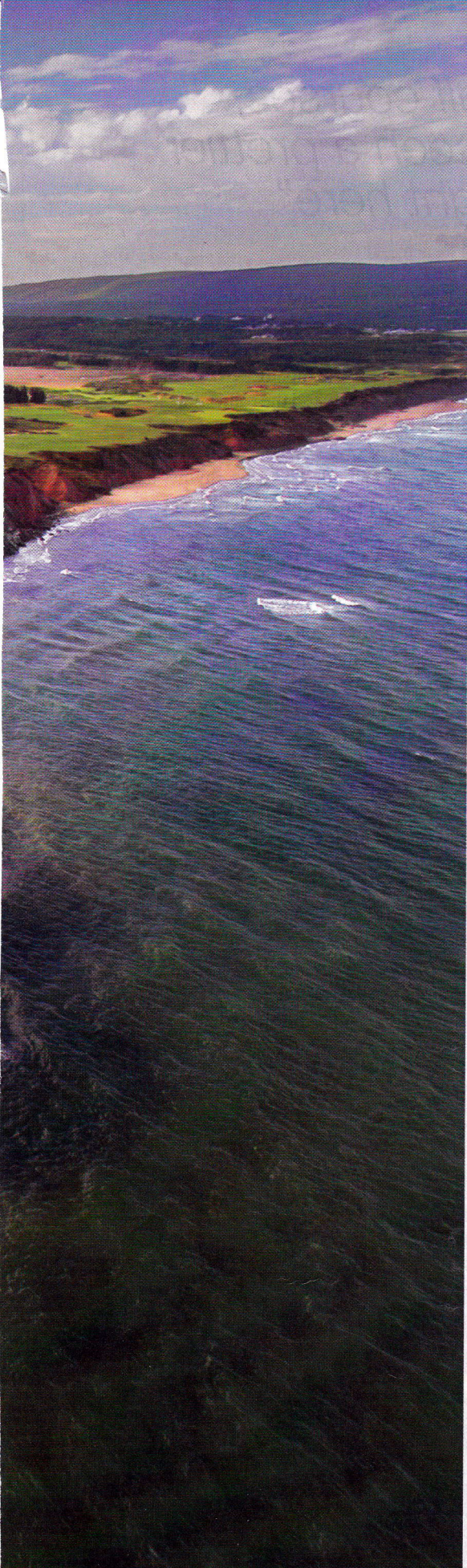
An aerial photograph of the Cabot Cliffs golf course. The course is built on a dramatic cliffside that drops down to a rocky beach and the ocean. The green fairways and sand traps are visible, winding along the edge of the cliff. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall scene is one of natural beauty and challenge.

# Thrills on Cabot Cliffs

Cape Breton's new true links course doesn't open until June but it's already considered one of the world's best

*BY Anita Draycott*





Golfers might have to play Cabot Cliffs' 16<sup>th</sup> hole a few times before the intimidation of the tee shot subsides.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CABOT LINKS UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

**A**fter playing a sneak preview round at Cabot Cliffs last summer, I vowed that if

Cape Breton's newest seaside links sensation wasn't ranked the number one golf course in Canada, if not North America, I'd eat my putter. Lucky for me, I was right.

*Golf Digest* named Cabot Cliffs the "Best New Course in America" for 2015, third in its list of "America's 100 Greatest" and number 93 on its list of "World's Greatest Courses." What's more, the magazine described it as "The second coming of Cypress Point," located on California's Monterey Peninsula in Pebble Beach.

This is remarkable considering that Cabot Cliffs is only six months old and doesn't officially open to the public until this June.

When its older sister course, Cabot Links, opened in 2012, it too caused a buzz as Canada's first and only true links course. Although there seems to be no definitive definition of what a true links course is, there are some common characteristics.

This is the original type of golf course design, dating to the origins of the game, found in such venerable tracts as St. Andrews and Turnberry. Scotland, Wales, England and Ireland boast most of the planet's links. Formed more by Mother Nature than man, the original links along the coast of Scotland were the game's crucibles, where golf as we know it was born.

Traditionally, they were built on sandy, unarable oceanfront land exposed to the salt and wind. Some links have minimal views of the sea and are as flat as pancakes; others run alongside the ocean with towering dunes. In the hearts and minds of golf purists, they are the only real and true courses — all others are imitations.

The vast majority of those that call themselves links are not. Authentic links make up less than one percent of all the courses on earth, yet this small collection includes nearly half of the best courses in existence.

Whatever your definition of links golf, there's little doubt that both Cabot Links and Cliffs are the real McCoy. They occupy a sandy coastal site that drains exceptionally well, resulting in firm, fast fairways. Trees are few and far between allowing them to be scoured by wind. There are plenty of deep pot bunkers and, in almost all cases, approaches to greens are unobstructed, promoting bump-and-run shots. Greens are firm and hard to hold with lofted shots.





*“We’ve seen a lot of golf courses, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a prettier sight than this one right here”*

How fitting that the game that was born in Scotland traversed the ocean and took root in Inverness, Cape Breton, which was first settled by Highland Scots in the 1800s and is still a place with strong Celtic traditions.

The folks who own Cabot Links, Toronto-born Ben Cowan-Dewar and Mike Keiser of the highly ranked Bandon Dunes in Oregon, hired the acclaimed team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw to design their second course. *Global GolfPost* described Cabot Cliffs as “Pebble Beach on steroids.” The maximum green fee for Cabot Cliffs, however, is \$185 for resort guests and \$215 for non-resort players from June to October 2016 — Pebble Beach’s rates hover around US\$500.

Commenting on his design of Cabot Cliffs, Coore remarked “the greatest curse in life is extreme potential.” His partner added, “We’ve seen a lot of golf courses, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a prettier sight than this one right here. Right on the Gulf of St. Lawrence, it’s got gorgeous undulations and the movement of the ground is graceful.”

Indeed, the fairways tumble and twist down from a forested glade high above the sea. They meander up and over dunes, cross meadows and ravines, and skirt ragged cliffs. There’s an empathetic harmony between the golf course design and the rollicking terrain, an ebb and flow with endless sea views. And although there’s no lack of “wow” factor, a romp over Cabot Cliffs feels natural. There’s a rhyme, a reason and a natural rhythm to this masterpiece.

I played with Cabot’s Golf Professional Emeritus, Joe Robinson, one fine afternoon last July. The temporary clubhouse was a yurt and the practice facility was still in the works, but the course was in remarkably good condition considering it had been open for just one week. Standing on the first tee at Cabot Cliffs, inhaling the briny air, watching the russet fescue swaying in the breeze, I wondered if maybe I’d been transported to Scotland. A round island that I spotted out in the Gulf looked like Ailsa Craig at Turnberry on Scotland’s west coast. It was uncanny.



The resort has three restaurants: Panorama (pictured), the Cabot Bar and the new Cabot Public House.





“Is Mike Keiser so rich that he can afford to tow the Ailsa Craig across the Atlantic Ocean?” quipped another golf writer. No, the locals call this Ailsa clone Margaree Island (its real name is Sea Wolf).

There isn't a weak hole at Cabot Cliffs and there are many you'll never forget. Number six, a par-three, 186-yard gem resembles something you'd play in the British Isles. The green is positioned in the bowl of a cluster of dunes that brought memories of the Dell at Lahinch in County Clare, Ireland.

But what differentiates Cabot Cliffs from typical Old World links courses is that along with the ocean, fescue, craggy bunkers and dunes, you'll encounter a forest starting on the spectacular seventh hole, plus the most intimidating tee shot on the course with a forced carry that looks longer than it really is.

On the par-three 14<sup>th</sup>, a huge rock outcropping surrounded by bunkers to the right of the green stands ready to deflect any errant shots. The designers could have bulldozed this rocky attraction out, but wisely opted to make it an integral part of the design.

The most photographed parts of Cabot Cliffs are the green at 16 and the tees at 17, both located on the

jagged, windswept promontory. Number 17 is a cliff-hanging driveable par-four. Once you tee off over the chasm, the roll of the fairway propels your Titleist towards the green. Birdie this one and you'll be on cloud nine.

I think the first course, Cabot Links, is now even better due to new routing. The first four holes were previously numbers six to nine. Actually, the present routing was in the original plan. Now the first hole offers a gentler handshake to your round and if you only want to play nine holes, you finish back at the clubhouse.

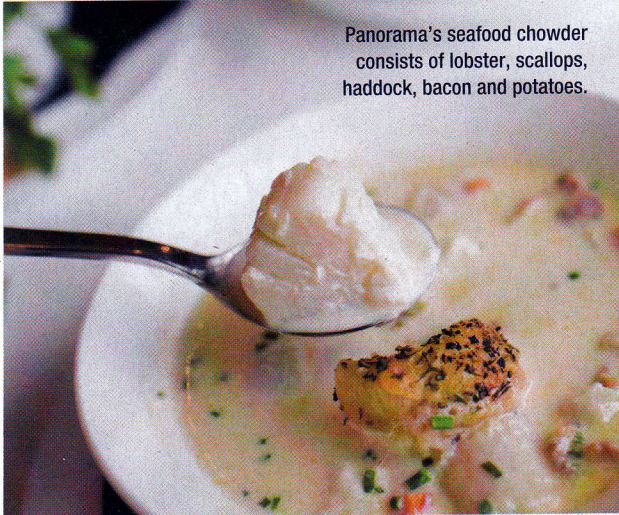
In keeping with true links traditions, Cabot Links is planted from tees-to-greens with 100 percent fescue. Drop your first putt and you'll be rewarded with the sound of it clinking into a tin cup. You don't have to hire a caddy, but I highly recommend doing so the first time you play both tracks. Our caddies, Steve and Keith, locals from Inverness, gave us lots of valuable tips, especially about how to negotiate the cleverly contoured greens. They also provided local colour. Commenting on one of my badly struck shots, Keith remarked, “That's what we call a



There are 48 rooms at the Cabot Links Lodge, each with sweeping ocean views and golf course vistas.



Panorama's seafood chowder consists of lobster, scallops, haddock, bacon and potatoes.



mother-in-law. It looked good leaving, but didn't go far enough!"

Unless you have a medical condition, you do have to walk both courses. And what a joy that is, especially numbers five and six that play around MacIsaac's Pond where lobster and crab boats bob in the harbour. Numbers 14 to 16 play right along the beach. With luck, you'll spot dolphins or whales while you practice your bumps and runs, plus every other shot in the book. Number 14, a nod to the famed seventh at Pebble Beach, is a short, 100-yard, par-three with a downhill pitch to a peninsula green jutting into the water.

The philosophy at Cabot is similar to that at Bandon Dunes. Nothing supersedes the fantastic golf experience. That said, guests enjoy well-designed rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Cabot Links and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Stenciled on every door are clever quotes by famous golfers. Mine, by Harry Vardon, read, "Don't play too much golf. Two rounds a day are plenty." The heavenly Beltrami bed linens are custom-made for the resort in Italy. Amenities such as walk-in rain showers, l'Occitane toiletries and Nespresso coffee machines all add up to a top-notch resort experience.

## LINKS TO THE LINKS

From Halifax Airport, it's a three-hour drive to **Cabot Cliffs** ([cabotlinks.com/golf/cabot-cliffs](http://cabotlinks.com/golf/cabot-cliffs)). From Sydney Airport, it's a two-hour drive. The resort can arrange for transportation to and from the airports in its eleven-passenger Mercedes Sprinters.

Fifteen minutes away, the **Glenora Distillery** ([glenoradistillery.com](http://glenoradistillery.com)) produces North America's single malt whisky (only whisky distilled in Scotland can be called scotch). They have a good dining room and a lively pub where you can sample drams from their various vintages and enjoy fiddle music most nights.

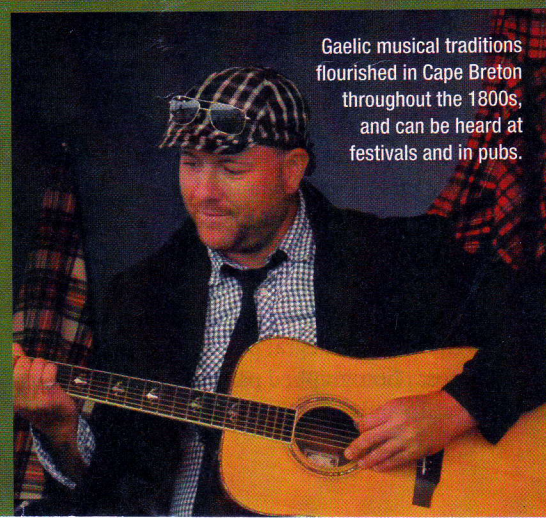
The new **Downstreet Coffee Company** (15844 Central Avenue) on the main street of Inverness, serves baked goods, soups, sandwiches and some specialty items like truffle and olive oils. It's a great spot to mingle with the locals over an espresso and scone. You can also buy a fresh baguette and fixings to take a picnic to the beach.

For golf deals and packages, try **Golf Cape Breton** ([golfcapebreton.com](http://golfcapebreton.com)). For more on travel to the region, visit **Destination Cape Breton** ([cbisland.com](http://cbisland.com)).



PAUL MCKINNON / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Gaelic musical traditions flourished in Cape Breton throughout the 1800s, and can be heard at festivals and in pubs.



AMITA DRAYCOTT





The coastline of the Gulf of St. Lawrence hugs the left of Cabot Link's medium length, par four, 15<sup>th</sup> hole.

## *There's an empathetic harmony between the golf course and the rollicking terrain, an ebb and flow with endless sea views.*

In addition to the 48 rooms, 14 new two- and four-bedroom villas are for sale. These units will also be available for rent. Each is equipped with state-of-the-art kitchens and bathrooms.

The management team intends to make Cabot Links a world-class golf destination where everything, including the cuisine, scores a "ten out of ten." They're obviously doing things right; at the 2014 Canadian Tourism Awards, Cabot Links took the "VISA Canada Traveller Experience of the Year" prize.

John Haines and Tracy Wallace, Cabot's husband/wife chef team, both born in nearby Antigonish, are committed to the owners' lofty mandate. John was trained in the classical French style. Tracy is self-taught and brings a more modern dynamic to her dishes. She also loves foraging for local ingredients, something she learned from her grandmother. They make everything from scratch and butcher every piece of fish caught daily in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Meat

and poultry are sourced locally and most produce comes from their spring-fed garden.

Everything is good, but some dishes are outstanding. The award-winning chowder will never go off the menu. Some guests, including yours truly, request it for breakfast. The lobster ravioli is so rich and decadent, it should be illegal. Go for it.

Panorama is the main restaurant, but you can enjoy casual fare until the wee hours at the recently opened Cabot Public House. They bought a Moretti Forni, the Italian "Lamborghini" of pizza ovens. Specialties include thin crust Italian-style pizzas and local craft beers.

At the end of a memorable day on the links, tucking into some fabulous seafood in the Panorama restaurant, watching the sun slide into the St. Lawrence while the last golfers sink their putts on number 18, is about as good as it gets. The folks at Cabot Links deliver golf as it was meant to be played and life as it was meant to be lived. **■**