

# 112 Miles to the Pin

Extreme Golf  
Around the World



**Duncan Lennard**

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A large, dark silhouette of a golfer in mid-swing, positioned on the left side of the page. The golfer's club is extended diagonally across the page, passing behind the table of contents.

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# Introduction

On his first ever round on an eighteen-hole golf course, North Korea's "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il shot a rather tidy 34. His total, which included five holes-in-one, put him in a commanding position at the top of the Dear Leaderboard at 38 under par. If you have any problems believing this, you can take it up with the seventeen armed bodyguards who witnessed the feat on that fresh October morning in 1994.

Your own introduction to the game may have lacked this burst of spectacular scoring – personally, I managed a mere 20 under par – but I suspect you can remember it vividly all the same. Because, for so many players, golf is a case of love at first smite. I can readily recall the feeling my first properly struck shot gave me; a sensation of fireworks ripping through my soul followed by a warm, spiritual glow that told me I'd stumbled across something special. A glittering tree-lined setting, the sun filtering through the branches, added to the enchantment.

It's the same the world over. For 60 million golfers, the sweetest music they ever heard was the sound of a small white ball ripping through the air for the first time, packed with pace



and purpose. That's it; you're hooked. And you are destined to spend the rest of your life trying to rediscover the wondrous feeling that shot gave you.

Sadly, many golfers never do. That first, chance success came at a price; it raised a devil named Expectation. You did it before, so you should be able to do it again. If not, why not?

It gets worse. Once you have established a level of competence with club and ball, golf culture throws you into a world of handicaps and yardage charts, swing techniques and scorecards. The pure joy of that first contact is replaced by an embittered mission to score. If you are not careful, your enjoyment of the game starts to revolve around how well you play.

In a game as difficult as golf, that is not a good thing. The scientists tell us that if your clubface is just one degree off square at impact, the ball will miss its target by seven yards on a 200-yard shot – an astonishingly dispiriting statistic. A three-degree error is enough to send your ball spiralling into the trees.

With the score as the governing criterion, no wonder golf is so often described in terms of pain and suffering. "A five-mile walk punctuated by disappointments" is a common definition of the game. When writer and commentator Jim Bishop claimed, "Golf is played by twenty million mature American men whose wives think they are out having fun," he was not joking. Even golf's patron saint, the celebrated amateur Bobby Jones, darkened the gloomy theme when he famously mused, "On the golf course, a man may be the dogged victim of inexorable fate." How can this be the same game that began with all those early, golden emotions?



This book is about golfers who have realized that golf doesn't have to be this way. The players you will meet do not base their golfing lives on its most frustrating and elusive feature – playing well. Instead, their unorthodox journeys into the game have allowed them to take full advantage of golf's many other qualities – qualities that put them in touch with the reasons we all fell in love with the game.

Take, for example, one of golf's greatest attributes – its setting in the great outdoors. Here we have a terrific opportunity truly to connect with the world around us. But for the score-obsessed wretch, the opportunity is squandered; he's more interested in yardage charts and the navel-gazing that is, apparently, a key part of maintaining concentration.

Thankfully, there are exceptions. A Scot named David Ewen woke up one morning and decided he did not know enough about his home country; he resolved to put that right by hitting a golf ball from the east coast to the west and discovering what lay in between. An American, Andre Tolme, did the same in a country that fascinated him – Mongolia. Their incredible stories, recounted here, reveal golf at last as an outward-looking game, so much at odds with the introspection of the scorecard player.

And what of the field of play? If your mission is to score, you are drawn back to the same track every time. After all, you know it; it gives you your best chance of beating your handicap. Logical, yes: but so dull.

But if your score doesn't matter, you open yourself up to a host of fresh, new experiences. Playing new courses is one thing, but why stop there? Wouldn't you just love to smack a shot over a city from the top of a skyscraper? Or across the field at your local football stadium? Or to the distant shore from a riverboat? This is all in a day's golf for a bunch of Europeans known as Natural Born Golfers, whose aim is to take golf to every place you'd think it wasn't.

In scorecard golf the challenges are stale – a carry off the tee, a high lip in a sand trap, a steep, sloping green. But in taking the game in new directions, the stars of this book have created fresh new problems that sidestep the crushing weight of expectation.

Scientists at Scott Base, Antarctica, must calculate a strategy to stop their precious supply of golf balls being spirited away in the beaks of the aggressive skuas that patrol the skies above. Golfers playing in Greenland's Mount Dundas Open must somehow scale a 75-foot vertical cliff face just to get to the first tee. And after holing out, the nude golfers of New Zealand's Mackenzie Muster golf tournament must develop a way of plucking their golf ball from the hole without giving offence.

And what about the exercise element? Golf is great for keeping you active but it is only the scorecard that limits you to walking. Throw it away and suddenly you have the chance to use the game for your daily aerobic workout. Today, keep-fit golf fans combine running and golfing to form speed golf, a round where you don't so much smell the flowers as hurdle them. Forget Ready Golf – this is ready-steady-go golf.

As for that pure, innocent joy that comes from smashing a ball as hard as you can with complete and utter freedom, welcome to the feisty but uncomplicated world of professional long driving, where the ball flies 400 yards and competitors wear out the grooves in their drivers after just ten shots.

These challenges are fresh and attractive – just like that first shot – and that is why a theme of pleasure and enjoyment flows through these pages. But the journeys in this book are not just about putting the fun back into golf.

USAF Captain George Hall was shot down over Vietnam in 1965. Locked in solitary confinement for eighteen months, Hall kept himself sane by playing a round of golf every day, in his cell, in his head.

A Canadian named Bob MacDermott lost an arm and a leg in a freak accident – but used golf to spur his recovery. Amazingly, he now plays off a scratch handicap. These are stories of courage and survival, a less common journey for golfers to make, but one that reveals the game's true worth.

They are two of the many incredible people in this book. All have forged deep and rewarding relationships with golf through the unconventional paths they have chosen. They have shown me that to look at the game solely in connection with your scoring and ability is to view a vividly colored sport in black and white. No one would dispute the pleasure gleaned from playing a fantastic back nine or watching your handicap tumble; and yet, if we base our enjoyment of the game solely on the numbers we're scribbling on the scorecard, we could find ourselves in for a depressing old time.

These golfers have made me realize just how little I take from a game that has so much to offer, and inspired me to ask for more. I hope they will do the same for you.



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# Scorpions in the Cup

As Apollo 14 shuddered away from the Kennedy Space Center in February 1971 astronaut Alan Shepard – a makeshift 6-iron concealed in his spacesuit – embarked on a secret mission to boldly golf where no man had golfed before. Shepard's lunar course, later nicknamed the Fra Mauro Country Club after the crater Apollo 14 landed by, was approximately 240,000 miles from the nearest pro shop, so it was as well he remembered to bring a supply of balls. Shepard was the same distance away from the nearest pro, so in terms of the technique needed to play a delicate lob over a crater out of moon dust, in one-sixth gravity, he was on his own.

Shepard has no real rivals in his claim for the title of world's most remote golfer. Even the second man to golf in the stars – Russian cosmonaut Mikhail Tyurin hit a shot from the International Space Station in November 2006 – was only around 220 miles from civilization. Tyurin apparently hit something of a shank, which just missed the part of the space station he was supposed to working on. It's golf, Jim, but not as we know it.

Certainly back on earth, most of us do not have to go far to



find a track to play. Happily for golfers, the Western world is awash with tees, fairways and greens. In England alone, a slender country that stretches just 400 miles from north to south, there are 2,000 layouts. I can be on the first tee of no fewer than nine of them within half an hour of leaving my front door.

It sounds like a golfer's dream, but maybe this saturation is not all good. Pleasant though these courses are, the experience of playing one is very much like that of playing another. Sure, I can see the sea from one while another has several lakes . . . but the similarities outweigh the differences. I obey the same rules and fall foul of the same hazards; I often play with the same people, indulging in familiar banter and codes of conduct. The experience becomes, shall we say, routine; the courses meld into one.

Of course, a global game like golf is quite capable of offering a much broader range of experiences. But to find them, it's best to get off the beaten track. For it's here, in hidden areas of extreme remoteness, that conformity dies and singularity flies. Convention might be a great colonizer but it is a lousy navigator.

But there is more to the remote golf experience than fresh and unusual sights and sounds. Each club in this chapter is peopled by a singular and sparky membership, golfers whose pure and unbridled passion for the game could teach us a thing or two about our own attitudes to playing. These folks do not care how they play – they are just glad to be playing at all. You simply do not set up a golf course on the ice shelves of Antarctica, or the arid expanses of the Atacama Desert, unless you really, really want to play a game of golf.

