

A tumbling fairway shrinks to a green sided by water at the par-four 13th; (below) right on the beach, the clubhouse oozes low-country charm

TO DYE FOR

Peter Swain looks at the challenges facing the 2012 PGA field, and the Southern delights of what many believe to be America's number one golfing resort

If one-time Charleston resident Rhett Butler were alive today, he would undoubtedly play his golf at Kiawah Island, near the famous old South Carolina seaport where the first shots of the Civil War, at Fort Sumpter, were fired.

Pete Dye's Ocean Course, the venue of the 2012 US PGA Championship, is by common consent the most difficult set-up in North America. But Rhett always liked a challenge. Along with the other four resort courses at Kiawah, he would at least be allowed to play it.

In contrast, it's unlikely a man of his 'reputation' would be accepted into the exclusive Kiawah Island Club, the elite part of the enterprise with its own two private 18-holers, the stunning Tom Watson-designed Cassique and

Tom Fazio's River Course.

So, one island, seven courses, beautiful natural scenery and wildlife, private beaches, soigné spas, several great clubhouses exuding Southern charm, palatial homes, brilliant tennis facilities and, in The Sanctuary, probably the best golf resort hotel in the US - it's easy to see why Kiawah is a legend.

Of course, to most of us, the Ocean course brings back memories of the 6-foot putt Bernard Langer missed to lose the 1991 Ryder Cup. And if the players found it tough back then, Dye has made the set-up way more challenging for what will be a fascinating fourth leg of this season's major championships.

At 7,676 yards for the PGA, it will be longest course in the history of golf's majors. It will also be the first time Paspalum greens have been used. The fairways have another variant

of the same grass, and with the first cut at 2 1/2 inches, the strangely tangly turf is likely to play havoc with scoring.

The serious rough is wiregrass or marshland, so balls will be lost. The Ocean also features waste areas of compacted sand running alongside - and, on average, about seven feet below - the majority of fairways and around several greens.

Then there's the water. Even if you see a Pro V1 trickle in, it'll probably be left there. Almost every pond of any size on Kiawah has at least one alligator...

In comparison with most US country club layouts, the Ocean Course has a far wilder, less manicured feel to it. Out on the 14th tee, I even found myself reminded of Royal St George's. It isn't a true links - too much earth has been moved and there's too much water - but it has



the bouncy uneven fairways and deadly pot bunkers beloved of links devotees, and truly comes alive when the wind blows. Darren Clarke should love it.

So the challenges facing the pros are exceptional, as indeed they should be. For the rest of us, even off the forward tees, the challenges are as thrilling as they are intimidating.

The front nine features marshland and trees, with the back playing through the dunes. With forced carries seldom less than 200 yards, most drives are aimed at angled fairways, so the ability to shape the ball both ways is an advantage to get that kick-and-run into a box-seat for the next shot. Many approaches are to table-top greens with no collars to stop the ball plummeting down into severe run-offs. The wind often swirls at 35mph, so trying to overpower the Ocean would be a mistake.



The par-threes are simply awesome. During the last day singles of the '91 Ryder Cup, not one player hit the two-tiered elevated green at the 14th. Close to the Atlantic, so breezy, for the PGA it'll play 243 yards; from the blacks, it's 194. If you miss left, you'll be playing from a waste area 15-feet below the green, so a par here almost counts as birdie.

The iconic 17th plays 197 yards over water, almost all carry. At the 2007 Senior PGA, this was rated the hardest hole, so until players pass this point, no score is certain. A grandstand seating 5,000 will surround the green for the PGA, where Sunday afternoon drama is guaranteed - 34,000 balls were recently fished out of the pond.

The 18th is a great finishing hole requiring a long drive to the top of the hill then an accurate approach to the right half of the green to avoid the wicked sunken tongues of sand licking the left side. The sumptuous clubhouse is perfect for drowning sorrows or toasting victory.

In truth, the other four resort courses are very good but not quite in the same class as Pete Dye's creation. Nicklaus's Turtle Point is often rated the best; Fazio's Osprey Point fea-

tures water and dense maritime forests of live oak and palmettos; Player's Cougar Point runs along the Kiawah River; and Oak Point is good for a first day tune-up. They're all in pristine condition, and with the Ocean, make up a fabulous package.

The second-best course at Kiawah, in my view, is Cassique, a long 'Lowcountry' track meandering through the marshland. Fazio's River course is rated as highly, but both are restricted to lucky well-healed members and their guests. Bump into a member on the range and, hey, you never know.

At the heart of the resort, the 225-room Sanctuary has not one but two magnificent curving staircases for budding Scarlett O'Haras to sashay down, and in the Ocean Room, one of the best steakhouses outside New York. The shrimp and grits for breakfast is mighty fine too. The rooms are exemplary, suites opulent, spa luxurious, and the beach - just a matter of yards away - one of America's Top Ten.

In fact, the whole island is something of a natural sanctuary. Loggerhead turtles, bobcats, deer and alligators abound, as well as

ospreys, bald eagles, and turkey vultures feasting on the lost dreams of broken golfers.

Nearby Charleston was the capital of the 'Old South' and still has a certain languid elegance, with many fascinating Revolution and Civil War sites. The graceful Antebellum mansions around the Battery offer a glimpse of Confederate life now Gone with the Wind.

There are several other very decent courses around the city. The 7,100-yard Rees Jones Charleston National is carved through the natural wetlands, while Wild Dunes Links and Rivertowne are both highly regarded.

If you've promised yourself just one trip to experience golf in the States, make this it.

SUGGESTED PACKAGE

7 Nights, Self-Catered Accommodation
 5 Rounds of Golf
 (Osprey Point, Cougar Point, Turtle Point, Oak Point, Ocean Course)
 Return Flights
 £1335pp
 (Based on four sharing, villa accommodation)
 Valid 14 April - 19 May 2012

