

# 'Ireland can be top destination for US golfers'

by Tony Leen

THIS country enjoys the best links golf courses in the world — it just needs to communicate the message better across the Atlantic.

That's the verdict of Buddy Darby, chief executive of Kiawah Development Partners and the man behind Doonbeg Golf Club in West Clare.

Darby says the combination of links golf, five-star accommodation, superb food and "craic" should make us the top destination for a US golf market that annually spends over \$26bn (€19bn) on golf travel.

In his address to a golf business conference in Dublin, the Doonbeg chief said that Ireland represents real value to the US golfer and particularly those living on the east coast of the US. He said that the west of Ireland was in fact easier and quicker to reach than many of the US courses



**Buddy Darby: Ireland represents real value to the US golfer.**

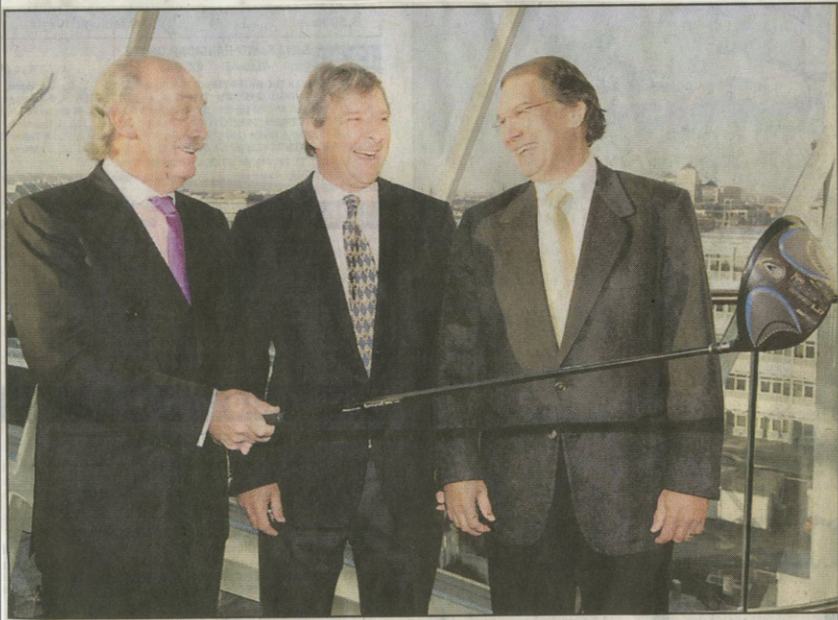
marketing themselves as offering a "links golfing experience".

In that context, he cited Whistling Straits, Bardon Dunes and Pebble Beach. He said such courses, while on US golfers "must play" lists, were in fact far more expensive to play than Irish links courses which are steeped in the history of the sport.

He said that the fact that US golfers were willing to pay premium prices for a links experience was a major opportunity for Ireland.

"Ireland needs to better communicate not alone the value available to the US golfer but also the unique experience awaiting them in Ireland," he said. He cited the marketing efforts of Doonbeg, which he said saw a 10% increase in US visitors this year. He said that Doonbeg had worked hard at creating an ever better value proposition over the past two years and that this had seen room nights increasing by 60% in 2009 and by a further 30% this year.

Darby added that Ireland not alone need to market its links product more aggressively but that it also needed to have the infrastructure to make it easier to access the country. He contrasted Shannon's strong decline in flights available since Doonbeg opened in 2002, to St Kitts where his firm is involved in a project and the government subsidises flights bringing tourists to the island.



**DRIVING FORWARD:** at the golf business conference were Dermot Desmond, chairman IIG; Marty Carr, Carr Golf Group chief; and Buddy Darby, Kiawah Partners/Doonbeg GC chief.

Picture: Mark Stedman