



Tura Beach has a terrific collection of short holes and reachable par 5s.

True colours

A few days spent on the Sapphire Coast provides an insight into the area's natural assets, including its high quality, top-value golf courses.

In the days leading up to my second-ever visit to the region known as the Sapphire Coast, I mentioned to several people I spoke to – family, colleagues, fellow golfers, even my hairdresser – that I would be spending a week on the Sapphire Coast. Their reactions ranged from perplexed looks and crinkled lips to quizzical smirks and furrowed brows. Few could tell me where it is.

I was not surprised. My first visit to the area in 2002 was a discovery mission. I recall walking away from the region and its golf courses wondering why I hadn't heard more about them. So, here's a quick geography lesson: the Sapphire Coast stretches from Bermagui, 380 kilometres south of Sydney, to the New South Wales/Victorian border – essentially the south-eastern corner of NSW.

And it's not just residents of the harbour city that are attracted to the Sapphire Coast. Figures show that more Melburnians visit than Sydneysiders, but the region is accessible from three capital cities (Canberra by far the closest). Few if any other golf destinations in Australia can boast the same.

Sapphire Coast Golf's Nigel Ayling, who moved to the Merimbula area from Sydney four years ago, reveals another often-overlooked reason to like this coastal getaway: its proximity to the ski fields, which are just a few hours away by car. Talk about the best of both worlds.

Ayling's company gives golfers good cause to spend an extended weekend on the Sapphire Coast. A \$150 golf pass grants you 18 holes at five courses: Bega, Bermagui, Eden Gardens, Pambula-Merimbula and Tura Beach. In tough economic times – and given the calibre of courses on offer – this might just be the best-value golf destination around.

Coasting along

★★★★½ Tura Beach Country Club

The Fairway, Tura Beach, (02) 6495 9068, turaclub.com.au, \$30 for 18 holes or \$85/week

The Sapphire Coast gets its name from the brilliant blue water lapping its white, sandy beaches – a marriage of colour most evident from many holes on the Tura Beach layout.

It's a close contest, but this is the pick of the Sapphire Coast's golf courses. The mix of holes and constructive use of the undulating terrain in the design are excellent. New course superintendent Aaron Miller has raised the standard of conditioning, particularly the bunkers and greens, which are pure and fast. Members quiver in fear over the surface at the signature par-3 13th, which tilts backwards towards the rear-left corner. It is the scene of many a three (and four) putt.



A reachable par 5 at 426 metres, Bega's third hole is a definite birdie chance.

After playing in the club's Tuesday competition, I watched on from the expansive clubhouse as canny member after member bounced tee shot after tee shot within a few feet of the cup at the par-3 ninth. The hole slopes hard left-to-right and the deep front bunkers can be avoided by hugging the hillside on the left. One wily member won the hole's nearest-the-pin prize by twice bouncing his ball off the cartpath. Ingenious!

★★★ **Bermagui Country Club**

Tuross Street, Bermagui, (02) 6493 4657, bermaguicountryclub.com.au, \$30

This coastal fishing town was made famous by the 2001 movie starring Billy Connolly called "The Man Who Sued God", which was partially filmed on Bermagui's harbour, and for being the retreat where former prime ministerial aspirant Mark Latham decided one Christmas that he'd resign from politics.

Heavy topics, indeed, but the fabulously conditioned golf course in the heart of town is a far more relaxing environment. The club is putting its hand up to host the New South Wales Senior Amateur Championship in 2011, which would bring due recognition for one of country Australia's 'sleeper' courses.

The 6,085-metre layout requires plenty of craftiness to conquer. For instance, several tee shots play uphill or over rises that hide distance in a fashion that first-timers mightn't notice.

The seventh is one that club professional Chris Hearn regards as among the best holes you'll find on the Sapphire Coast. It's a 387m par 4 that banks towards a water hazard that flanks the entire right side, rising to a putting surface known for its speed. For the big hitters, try your best on the par-5 18th to emulate the feat of local Brad King, who won the pro-am one year by launching a rocket off the tee around the lake on the left, puring a 7-iron to five feet and stroking home the eagle putt to win by a shot.

Hearn, however, has a more difficult act to match on the second hole. The lone albatross of his career came on the par-5 in a club competition some years back. His joy was short-lived, though, as the event of the day was a two-ball worst-ball, so his pair's score was a rather ho-hum 5/2.

★★★ **Pambula-Merimbula Golf Club**

Arthur Kaine Drive, Pambula, (02) 6495 6280, merimbulagolf.com.au, \$35/day or \$110/week

I played in Pambula-Merimbula's midweek Stableford competition with Robert, a Melburnian who has been holidaying here for the past 30 years. He and his wife saddle up their caravan and drive north-east to see out the final part of summer on the Sapphire Coast. He was in the final few days of a 5½-week stay, during which he was taking full advantage of being a member of Pambula-Merimbula as well as his home club in Melbourne.

Holes 10-27 comprise the championship layout that hosted the NSW PGA Championship from 2003-'06. However, I still like the first nine as much as the other two. It's shorter, but offers plenty of strategic decisions for the grey matter.

On the middle nine, the par-4 13th is a terrific downhill, dogleg-left that is a simple fairway wood then short iron for most, but a high draw with a driver might almost scare the green if you're brave enough. The double-dogleg par-5 15th is another eye-catcher that tempts long hitters. It's a short par 5, as many of the Sapphire Coast's three-shotters are (most falling in the 440m-480m range), and offers an easily navigable 5 for the cautious but an eagle beckons for the more daring.

Kangaroos lounge about all over the course. It's an iconic aspect of the Pambula-Merimbula layout that the members are blasé about. The novelty has clearly worn off on them but first-timers – overseas visitors in particular – love them. The big males, though, are not easily budged no matter how close your ball finishes to their chosen place of rest. Robert tells me that opening and closing an umbrella quickly usually does the trick, but one time he needed his cart-riding playing partners to use motorised motivation to clear the way of resident fauna. Who says carts are a blight on modern golf?

★★½ **Eden Gardens Country Club**

Princes Highway, Eden, (02) 6496 1054, edengardenscountryclub.com.au, \$26

Eden Gardens is a long-established layout that utilises its rolling topography through clever design. Holes like the uphill par-4 13th, with its nest of fairway traps that are difficult to ignore standing on the tee, as well as the par 5s at 15 and 17 that both sweep downhill to the left are heaven for those blessed with the ability to hit a long, running draw with the 'big stick'.

The closing hole is a 151m par 3 with a thick, towering gum fronting the left side of the putting surface. Plenty of promising rounds have unravelled to the crack of ball striking timber, as those who hit left-to-right shots must lie awake at night trying to work out a way to find the left side of the 18th green (without a chainsaw).

Eden is also home to the Sapphire Coast Golf School, which is run by ALPG professionals Loraine Lambert and Lisa Newling. They opened their school a couple of years ago at the Mandeni Resort, moving it to Eden late last year. It's a great way to dovetail a golf holiday with the means of getting better in the process. Newling has a client in Sydney who recently travelled south for a 2½-day tutorial.



Pambula-Merimbula offers 27 holes, and a feast of fauna.

She boarded the first flight to Merimbula Airport on the Friday morning and was home by Sunday night.

★★½ **Bega Country Club**

Tarraganda Lane, Bega, (02) 6492 3465, begarsl.com.au, \$27

This solid, quintessential country course sits on the edge of the town known the land over for its cheese factory.

Bega's small greens are raised just enough in most instances to catch your attention. Courses like Bega are suited to golfers who can hit accurate iron shots and those who've mastered the art of 'the miss' on approach shots to leave a straightforward up and down.

Of note is the twin fairway shared by holes 10 and 17, while many holes on the front nine run parallel up and down the same steep hillside.

Also worth a look...

Tathra Beach Country Club, Tathra, (02) 6494 1220, tathrabeachcountryclub.com. Alternate tees and 12 greens give this nine-hole course a playable 18. One story goes that the club once claimed to be the best nine-hole course in Australia, a difficult claim to accurately validate. Give it this, though: I find it hard to imagine a country nine-holer in better condition. Terrific lush-but-fast greens complement full, healthy kikuyu coverage on the fairways. Well worth a visit if you have time.

Mandeni Golf Resort, Merimbula, (02) 6495 9644, mandeni.com.au. Mid-length nine-holer with a pitch 'n putt layout, aquatic driving range and putt-putt course that may not appeal to the serious player but is ideal for families or occasional golfers. □



VISIT HERE: This truly is a destination for everyone.

Outside the golf options are attractions for lovers of art, wine, the beach, bushwalks, amusement parks, coastal walking/driving and more. On your must-see list should be two icons of the Sapphire Coast: the **Bega Cheese Heritage Centre** (02 6491 7777), where entry is free, and **Eden Killer Whale Museum** (02 6496 2094), where admission costs a mere \$7.50 (or \$2 for kids).

EAT HERE: For great food and views to match, don't

bypass **Cliff Place** café at Tathra (02 6494 1995). Use it as a lunch destination and there's every chance you'll think about cancelling that afternoon's nine holes in favour of gazing out over the Pacific. I also couldn't fault the broad menu options at **Santa Fe** Mexican restaurant at Merimbula (02 6495 4073).

STAY HERE: Merimbula is a central place to cover

the whole Sapphire Coast region and **Coast Resort** (02 6495 4930) offers stylish apartments from which to base your visit. At the northern end of the Sapphire Coast, try **Anchorage Holiday Units** at Bermagui (02 6493 3308), just a couple of minutes away from the golf club. (See page 118 for more accommodation options.)

TRAVEL ADVISORY: The Sapphire Coast is a five to

six-hour drive from Sydney, 6-7 hours from Melbourne and 2-3 from Canberra. Regional Express flies daily to Merimbula Airport from Sydney and Melbourne.

KEY: Course ratings are derived from *GOLF Digest's* exclusive 5-star scale. A single star represents "basic golf"; five stars indicate "golf at its absolute best".

