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## BRITISH LINKS - IN BAYONNE

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AS the boat cuts through the choppy waters below and heads toward its destination, the land up ahead looks positively bucolic.

There's dramatic mounding in the hills with elevated points overlooking the water from all angles.

There's green grass between the hills and three-foot-high brown fescue blowing rhythmically in the breeze off the water.

At the peak of the property is an epic clubhouse overlooking the club's 18 golf holes and, right next to it, is a 150-foot-high flagpole with a flag so large it weighs more than 100 pounds.

As much as you think you're happening upon some magical British Isles links course, alas, you're not.

That boat is headed for Bayonne, N.J.

The flag is red, white and true blue American.

And the destination is the Bayonne Golf Club.

The British Open is this week, with Carnoustie poised to beat up the best players in the world with its treacherous links set-up.

Who knew there was links land a mere five miles across the New York Harbor in Bayonne?

Days away from heading over to Scotland to cover the British Open for The Post, I decided to take the club-owned boat over from Battery Park and meet up with a few members of the private club to take in the experience.

The place is dramatic, as unique a find as you'll uncover in American golf given the dune-like mounding, the huge undulating greens, the views of lower Manhattan, both the Verrazano and George Washington bridges, the Statue of Liberty, cruise ships slowly milling in and out of the harbor and Staten Island.

Yes, Staten Island.

In fact, while standing on the 10th tee, which faces south, there's a part of Staten Island that actually looks like the village of St. Andrews. Staten Island never looked so quaint.

Bayonne Golf Club is the brainchild of New York golf course developer Eric Bergstol, who for years jumped through more red tape hoops than a trained veteran circus animal dealing with environmental issues, etc.

Jim Coady, the club secretary, said prior to the seven million cubic yards of dirt and fill being maneuvered around to form the course, which was on a flood plain about 10 feet above sea level, "the place looked like Jurassic Park."

The final product is astonishing. The golf is world class. The views are startling. The experience is like few you can find anywhere.

Who could have imagined fescue grass in Bayonne?

How about plucking fresh berries from blueberry bushes along some of the holes and snacking on them between shots? Could you have ever imagined picking a berry off of a bush in Bayonne and eating it?

If you're fortunate enough to be able to afford the \$200,000 initiation fee or be invited as a guest, bring your most comfortable golf shoes, because in the tradition of the links courses in the British Isles, there are no carts. While the walk can be daunting, it's worth every step as you stand atop the elevated tee boxes that offer views you'd otherwise need a helicopter to see.

A number of the members are regular players of the British links courses. For example, one of my playing partners, Blair Fensterstock, is a member of Skibo Castle in Scotland and the Eden Club at St. Andrews and makes frequent trips abroad to play.

He said it took a mere walk out to the 18th green to sell him on becoming a member. He calls Bayonne "the most unusual, unique course I've seen in the U.S. other than Whistling Straits.

"I have yet to bring a guest here who didn't think the place is spectacular," said Fensterstock, who lives in Battery Park, a mere 200-yard walk to the pier where the club's private boat picks up members and guests. "The course is special. I never imagined I'd have summer camp in my backyard when I moved down here."

The boat, a 54-foot converted water taxi, is fully air-conditioned with a stocked bar, big, cushy leather chairs and an outdoor deck on top.

The ride back to Manhattan is as unique as the ride to the course. You look behind you and you see British links disappearing in the distance. You look ahead and you see the building of Manhattan growing larger as you pass the Statue of Liberty.

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