

Bonville

A MUST FOR YOUR GOLFING 'BUCKET LIST'

It is probably the biggest 'Wow Factor' most Australian golfers can access. And with a range of upgrades now in place, and even bigger plans for the future, Brian Johnson reports that Bonville is something you just have to experience ...

The very fact that you have this publication in your hand and are reading this article, means that we have something in common. In fact, we share common traits with hundreds-of-thousands of like-minded Australians. It's our golfing DNA.

We want great experiences. We aspire to great golf and great courses. And we want to share those experiences with our fellow golfers. And let's face it, quite often we're envious of the player who's managed to enjoy a great course we've yet to 'get to'.

For many of us, it's akin to having a golfing 'bucket list'. The dream courses we've already got to play, and those we still aspire to.

Sadly, for many of us, some of those great courses are simply out of reach. The gates are closed to outsiders. But thankfully, one of Australia's true golfing gems welcomes visitors. It's Bonville – tucked away in a lush setting, close to Coffs Harbour on the NSW North Coast. If you have yet to experience its magic, this is one course you need at the top of your golfing bucket list. Be that on your own, as a couple, or with your mates.

"It's probably better than it's ever been, in terms of conditioning and refurbishments to the whole property," notes general manager, Brad Daymond. And he should know, having been here from day one running the pro shop to start with, and now running the whole complex. "It's a very exciting place to be around. You're seeing it reach its full potential."

Don't hate me because I'm beautiful

Mention Bonville and the word that comes up is beauty. But beauty seems such a small word for something so big. This is grand scale, jaw-dropping, gobsmacking beauty.

It's been voted Australia's most beautiful mainland golf course 10 years in a row.

And while it certainly deserves the accolade, being branded beautiful runs the risk of suggesting it's simply a 'postcard experience' that runs only skin deep. A place to enjoy the view and then move on. Not so. No, this is a superb championship layout and one for the golfing purist.

It just happens to be that the setting elevates the golfing experience even further. And it's very much your own experience. Each fairway delivers privacy, shielded from the next by massive curtains of timber, hills and greenery.

In fact, Bonville has been described by some as Australia's answer to Augusta. And it's not hard to imagine why.

Accentuated, almost Hollywood-proportion landscapes. The scale and grandeur of the place make it feel like you've been reduced in size, and dropped into a huge 3D landscape. It's as if you've landed the lead role in Honey, I Shrank The Hacker.

But you're not sure whether it will turn out to be an action-adventure, a comedy, something with a happy ending, or a tragedy demanding a sequel.

New legend on the block – The Rise and Rise of Bonville

Decades ago it was a dairy farm, then the timber men moved in, filling the steep hills with flooded gums.

Monstrously big trees.

But the business didn't take and then someone else had an idea. A preposterous idea. An entrepreneurial, late 1980s-sized idea. One that may not have seen the light of day at any other time.

A golf course – in there.

“Enjoying a delicious breakfast from the Flooded Gums restaurant, anticipating the day ahead, we watch a koala wander across the picturesque 18th fairway as the green staff blow some leaves out of the bunkers, making sure everything is perfect. Across to the right, down the first fairway, a lone cart heads out early to meet the challenge. Full of hope and destined for greatness”



The story goes that the growth was so thick, and the topography so severe, that they sometimes didn't know what they were really dealing with until they were right there, on the spot, building the holes. (You can almost picture them in pith helmets and working their way through with machetes.)

But they got it right, and melded the course perfectly into the stunning natural world around it.

There were many involved in the process. It was a collaboration. But particular credit should go to the designer Terry Watson and architect Ted Sterling. Watson would pass away not long after and Bonville remains a majestic legacy. We can only wonder what his reputation might have become, had he built more as good as this.

And this, in a way, raises an interesting point: Bonville is, quite rightly, a top 100 golf course. But without a broadly-recognised designer name – such as Alister MacKenzie or the more modern stamp of Nicklaus, Norman and the like - there is an almost unwritten understanding that a course cannot be 'fully delivered' up the rankings. Thankfully that's (slowly) changing. But the people who run Bonville don't dwell on these things.

They have resisted the temptation to host a big event, to fast-track their way up the pecking order.

Their priority is opening the gates and delivering the ultimate premium experience to amateur golfers. It's good policy and it's working.

They are, after all, a relative newcomer to the scene. Not yet 30 years old and they're already rated in the top 50.

And with a raft of upgrades now complete, and big plans for the near future, Bonville's stocks seem set to keep rising.

Improvements and big plans ahead

Like many big resort-style courses, Bonville had some teething problems early on.

But that's very much history, and the overseas money men have long gone. Across the past decade, a new management approach has delivered energy, teamwork and an ongoing commitment to excellence.

A major re-bunkering program has recently been completed and every bunker on the course has been given the treatment. More than 50 of them all up. Geo-fabric matting, new drainage where needed, a nip here and a tuck there. To the average golfer it might look like another hazard, but bunkers take a lot of making and maintaining – and these are now state-of-the-art and geared to handle what nature might throw at the course. You can Stay and Play at Bonville. There are 30 villas stretching alongside the first fairway - and they have recently enjoyed a makeover too. Spa baths, flat screen TVs, Foxtel, big beds, and a very comfortable place to relax.

Even the humble golf lesson has been upgraded to take in 3D technology.

As part of Bonville's Academy of Golf, teaching professional Craig Chandler places sensors on your shoulder, hand and hip.

Then, using ultrasound and computer technology, the mechanics and flaws in your swing (or your putting) are quickly identified.

“It works within one degree of what you're doing with your swing,” Craig notes.

“I also find out what a person's learning strengths or traits are – visual, kinesthetic or audio. It's all to be more precise what you're coaching with.”

Weddings, Parties, Anything

Indeed, Bonville is very much a package deal. It doesn't just do golf.

As a regional operator, it needs to have a broader business model. But it does them all well. A look at its long list of awards and you realise that this is a top-shelf version of 'weddings, parties, anything'.

It hosts everything from in-house conferences to massive presentation dinners laid out on its fairways.

There's the Country Club 'extras' of tennis courts and a pool. And the restaurant is one for the serious foodie. The management structure means that Bonville's partner property is the highly-respected Jonah's restaurant at Sydney's Whale Beach.

And it shows, as you try to make a choice from the stunning menu offerings.

For marketing manager Damien Tarbox, selling Bonville

and its many facets is best delivered with the cut-through power of its striking images.

“Let the picture do the talking, rather than bombard people with too much”, says Tarbox. But he also notes that the Bonville experience is something else again.

“The golf course leaves people wanting more. They might miss a birdie putt and they think, right, next year I'm going to make that. Or they walk away with the story about actually making that birdie.”

The website www.bonvillegolf.com.au also plays its part, and you can get a special DVD presentation sent to you, to really whet the appetite.

It's the vibe And what brings it all together, like any good venture, are the people. It's the staff.

It's the vibe. The brochure talks about them being “genuinely friendly”, and that's true. They're professional, but not distant. You're at ease to have a chat.

“In the selection process, when we're hiring, it's a huge thing,” GM Daymond offers. You've got to ensure you enjoy your time in the interview with the person, otherwise the customers aren't going to enjoy their time with that person.

“It's the whole experience we're about. People can't smile for the sake of smiling.”

There are 75 to 90 people working at Bonville, depending on the time of year.

There's a weekly planning meeting, involving all areas, to make sure all visitors will be properly catered for in the days ahead.

The staff also have their own mix-and-match golf challenges during the year and from the restaurant to reception, and from the office to the green staff, you'll hear them talking to each other on a first-name basis.

Australia's Most Desirable Postcode

In terms of upgrades, and awards, the biggest news is yet to come. It's still in the pipeline, and a case of 'Watch This Space'. But Bonville may very well become the most sought-after postcode in Australian golf.

With parcels of land secured near the boundary of the course, plans are underway for a community of two and three-bedroom townhouses. There are 480 lots on the plan.

But don't worry - there'll be no clotheslines along the fairway (like some other golf estates).

This will be done very much Bonville-style, ensuring golfers continue to enjoy that feeling of privacy on the course.

But tucked away nearby, if all goes to plan, there will be a new community, just a short cart ride from the course. Golfing memberships likely to be included as an option.

Bonville and your Bucket List

It can be quite awe-inspiring just to tee it up at Bonville. Hit a great shot, and life is special. Get a par, and you're walking tall.

For this is a true golfing challenge.

At times, it's a brute of a thing.

A beautiful brute that will test your game to its limit.

And it will give you plenty to 'replay' with your playing partners, most likely for years to come.

"And that's our goal," says Daymond.

"This has got to be the most desirable place to want and come and play golf.

"To provide a fantastic service, a very memorable experience, generate good word of mouth. And for so many people, this is their favourite place to come."

The only problem with playing Bonville is that you won't want to cross it off your bucket list.

You'll just have to come back again, and challenge those cruel beauties that got the better of you.

And, rest assured, there'll be enough of those luring you back.



Bonville – The Fact File

Want to Know More?

Go straight to the website www.bonvillegolf.com.au (or you can phone 1300 722 444).

It all sounds amazing, but is it expensive, and is it worth it?

Well, that depends on your perspective. For a bit more than the cost of a tank of petrol you can have a round of golf at Bonville. You fill the tank every week, but how much joy do you get out of that? A round of golf is \$110 Mon-Thurs and \$125 Fri-Sun. This includes your cart (you can't walk Bonville, and wouldn't want to try).

What About Play and Stay Packages?

There are packages to suit individuals, couples and groups. These start at a bit over \$200pp (twin share) during the week and include breakfast and a round of golf. Give the resort a call and discuss your particular needs and they'll let you know what's on offer.

What else is there to do in the area?

Plenty. Everything from relaxing on the beach, to deep-sea fishing, shopping, and plenty of family-oriented activities. Just visit www.coffscoast.com.au and you'll get the picture.

Finally, any tips for a fellow-hacker?

- 1) Read the course notes provided. They're excellent.
- 2) Don't let the scale of the place affect your swing by over-hitting. Take an extra club if you feel the need, but do your best to hit a smooth, clean shot.
- 3) And remember, make sure you take a look back down the fairway after you've putted out on each hole. It's another take on something quite stunning.