

PEAK PRACTICE

The Chivas Regal Snow Golf Series: one-part serious sport, two-parts whisky-laced bash at a chilly 19th hole on an Andean mountainside. *Nick Scott* mingles with the revellers.



A FREEZING PLATEAU on the Andes, about 50km from Santiago, 2,700m above sea level. Standing in the midst of a complete whiteout, I pluck a nuclear-orange golf ball from the pocket of my heavily branded ski-jacket, toss it onto the floor, then thwack it into the milky ether ahead. Accepting it is gone forever — I lost sight of it a mere split second into its trajectory — I take a large slug of upmarket whisky and giggle like a helium-filled hyena. And repeat. This is the game golf could have been.

The last time I attempted to play 'ordinary' golf, the shop attendant had to run out to the first hole and give me an impromptu, agitated lesson to stop me hacking myself home to London via the Earth's core. So it's no surprise that my attempt to play ball, so to speak, at the 2007 Chivas Regal Snow Golf Championship eventually degenerates into this cycle of half-

arsed slice-and-swag. Myself and three other equally inept Chivas guests have been bumbling, squinty-eyed and scarlet-lunged, around the 9-hole course for... I'm really not sure how long, but with a prevailing visibility of about two metres, we've been playing something more like croquette on ice without the hoops. Scorecards, along with dignity, have long since been abandoned.

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ALL IN ALL, the amateurs on the course today agree, snow golf a tad harder than the grassy endeavour that spawned it. First there's the elements to contend with: it's not so much shivery, bone-chilling cold on the Andes as "Fuck me if I haven't had a retinal haemorrhage" cold. It also requires a more delicate touch — not easy when whisky, testosterone and mild altitude

sickness are thrown into the mix. (Some of the more macho gamers on the course today are attempting to play with drivers: the equivalent of playing ping-pong with a tennis racket).

So indelicate is my own touch, the wayward ball trajectory ensured by the rugged ice on the greens — or 'whites', as they're called, naturally — proves my only advantage. Fourteen shots on a par three (mostly penalties for pitching my ball from the craterous bunker to the thigh deep snow either side of the packed down fairway) is my low point; the highlight of the round, for all three of us, comes between holes four and five, when a rectangular silhouette emerges from the mist. It turns out to be a bar, topped with rows of scotch-and-dries and staffed by local stunners with flecks of ice in their hair and a thing about raw-cheeked, rubber-legged magjournos that they've been keeping hidden, even from themselves.

The Scottish believe golf to be their own invention. Now, that particular nation's attitude to claiming the origins of popular pastimes can be summarised with the phrase, "Well, if it inni tied doon..." But we should give them the benefit of the doubt in this instance, if only for the aptness it lends to a luxury whisky company sponsoring this wintry offshoot of a sport that has become the most played in Australia. (Trivia buffs, incidentally, may be interested to know that Rudyard Kipling is thought to have played a part in spawning snow golf; when he lived in Vermont, the *Jungle Book* author would practice knocking specially painted red balls into tin cups.)

Part of the Chivas Life Series — which also includes Chivas Elephant Polo in Nepal and The Chivas Ocean Series in Uruguay — this tournament has been played in St Moritz every year since 1979, and is in its second year here in >



Sporting altitude: ice is no banned substance at when it comes to Snow Golf. Heavily-branded ski-wear, so, by Chivas. Regal.



White spirit: clockwise, a cheating amateur smooths his path to the green; a pro's tee-off sparks a mini-blizzard; snow golf's sexier answer to a golf buggy.



“WITH A VISIBILITY OF ABOUT TWO METRES, WE’VE BEEN PLAYING CROQUETTE ON ICE WITHOUT THE HOOPS.”

La Parva. Of course, first and foremost it’s a brand-focussed jolly-up, and in this respect it’s a sign of things to come — in an age where even the added time in the A-League is brought to you by Snickers, effective corporate sponsorship now requires a little more derring-do: why just put your name to an event when you can have your own?

But participants aren’t, like me, just here for the revelry and the sheer outlandish dinner-party factor. “The series is a big party, and everybody wants to be have a good time,” says eventual winner Cristian Leon, Chile’s number-one ranking pro-golfer. “But once you are on the golf course, the only thing is to try to play the best you can. Everybody loves to win so people take it very seriously. Keeping the ball in play and avoiding penalty shots is the most difficult thing — luckily I’m a pretty straight player, and haven’t lost a ball yet.”

The fact that Leon is one of 100-plus professionals taking part is a sign that the competition has accumulated some credibility. Organisers have clearly worked hard to make this happen: this particular course was designed by Henrik Bergqvist, a Danish ex-pro and specialist snow golf course builder. Meanwhile, the rules are taken directly from the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews in Scotland (with a few exceptions: it’s played over nine holes, which are between 120 and 180 metres long — 33 per cent shorter than normal

grass ones; the holes are about three times as wide; you can re-tee every shot unless it’s on the ‘white’; the flags are left in at all times).

Whatever type of ‘rounds’ attendees have been drawn here by, it’s a relief for all at the start of day two, the day of the pro tournament, and time for the serious drinking to begin, when the transfer choppers soar off into a clear Santiago sky and touch down minutes later in an idyllic mountainscape of brilliant white, abruptly juxtaposed by a stunning azure backdrop. In and around the VIP tent, throngs of competitors, guests and celebrities — including Argentinean supermodel Dolores Barreiro and her husband, model-musician Matias Camisani — clink glasses and visibly drool at the smell of the vast sides of lamb barbecuing to one side. It’s like the base camp on Tattooine would have been, had the Rebel Alliance been spirit-quaffing Groove Armada fans (“The Restored Galactic Republic is brought to you by Chivas Regal”).

Around the sporting action, a crowd ‘oohs’, ‘ahhs’ and does that mysteriously gentle applause which is the golf spectator’s prerogative. For others, it seems that golf is, to adapt Mark Twain’s famous ‘good walk’ quote, a hearty piss up spoiled. Whichever camp you’d be in, a good time is par for the course. **GG The Chivas Snow Golf Championship, St Moritz, takes place from 11-12 January 2008. Enquiries: info@chivas.com**

* HOLD THE BACK PAGE.

EVEN MORE MADCAP SPORTING EVENTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

WORLD PILLOW FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIPS, CALIFORNIA

This 4th July ritual is actually a serious business, with a list of rules as long as your arm — not that any of them count once the bouts start. Two contestants straddle a slippery pole over a pit of mud and try to topple each other with a wet feather pillow. Your salivary glands may have piqued at the thought of young UCLA co-eds engaging in such a battle, but in reality most competitors more closely resemble Bruce Willis’s inbred nephews.

CHEESE CHASING, GLOUCESTER, ENGLAND

On the last Monday of each May, a bizarrely clad Master of Ceremonies throws a double Gloucester cheese down a West Country English hillside and competitors race to grab it. The cheese reaches speeds of up to 113kmph (enough to knock spectators over like skittles). Ambulances wait at the bottom of the hill to patch up the casualties of this high-calcium carnage, and sobriety up those drunk on neck-snapping adrenalin, international news coverage and the local brew. Allegedly a pagan fertility ritual.

GRASS SKIING, ALSACE, FRANCE

With feet strapped into wheeled devices, grass-skiers hurtle down snowless ski runs navigating hazards and taking falls that would normally be cushioned with soft powder. More upmarket adherents use caterpillar treads — something like having high-speed military tanks attached to your lower extremities. Not for the feint of knee.

BIRDMAN RALLY, MOOMBA WATERFEST, MELBOURNE

Budding Icarus-types from all over Victoria converge on a four-metre platform to launch themselves into the brown abyss of the Yarra. Only 20 flying machines (chosen by official Boeing delegates, presumably) are allowed to compete, and prizes are awarded for Longest Distance Travelled and Most Inventive Aircraft. There is speculation that x [number of entrants] is directly proportional to y [number of grog-addled engineering students at Monash].

BEHEADED GOAT POLO, AFGHANISTAN/CENTRAL ASIA

Bozkashi — which translates as ‘goat grabbing’ — is an ancient Afghani game played on horseback. The goal is to gain possession of a beheaded goat (or calf — though apparently bovines disintegrate more easily) and throw it into your scoring area, which is known as the Circle of Justice. Competition is fierce and teamwork is minimal, with players using whips, boots and barging techniques to ‘discourage’ other contenders. Not suitable for vegetarians.

THE GREAT FRUITCAKE TOSS, COLORADO

How do you release the pent-up rage from a family holiday? What to do with the dust-filled marzipan turd that is your bearded great aunt’s Christmas cake? Hurl, hack, mock and destroy it at the Great Fruitcake Toss in Colorado. Competition categories include tossing (by hand), launching (with a non-fuel powered mechanical device) and hurling (using a committee designed catapult).

LOG RIDING, NAGANO, JAPAN

Almost every Onbashira Festival — which is every six years — a few riders (or spectators) perish in the sake-saturated mayhem of the Onbashira Festival, a Shinto tradition in which scores of men in ceremonial dress ride felled fir trees downhill. Due to the high risk of being crushed by 100-year-old vegetation at high velocity, veteran riders coach up-and-comers on the finer points of leaning and holding on (presumably using a 3D log-slide simulator, this being Japan). — Rebecca Whish

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