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Where the greens are white



Winter wonder
The Engadin Snow Golf Cup is a nine-hole tournament played in a snow field in Surlej near Silvaplana Lake.

In Switzerland, snow play attracts golf lovers and also second home buyers

BY ADAM H. GRAHAM

For years, golf has been associated with lush greens, bluebird skies and a Whitman's sampler of riotous plaids and checks. But few know the sport has also quietly embraced winter whites, particularly in ski-crazy Switzerland.

In 2021, the Engadin Snow Golf Cup will enter its 42nd year in Switzerland's Engadine Valley, home to St. Moritz, and its famed diamond dust skies and scenic alpine golf courses dating to 1889. What started as a lark in one of Switzerland's sunniest winter sports destinations, has become a bona fide sport that's not only drawn golf enthusiasts but has begun to lure second home buyers seeking winter recreational activities adjacent to the snowy piste.

Winter golfing might sound odd, but the alps of southern Switzerland are especially sunny and offer a refuge for golfers from northern European countries who may not feel like hauling their nine irons on a plane for a few rounds farther afield. What's more, snow golf offers an active but less-risky alternative to skiing. This has all led to a surge

in popularity in predictable places like Germany, Austria, Canada and the United States (including popular golf destinations like Colorado, California, Wisconsin and North Carolina) but also off-the-golf-radar spots like Argentina, Greenland and Finland.

It has also drawn enthusiasts to buy nearby property. "Winter golf is just one of many offerings that make Switzerland's Engadine Valley attractive for second home buyers, and a few have even bought here solely because of that," said Ramun Ratti, the managing director at Engadine Golf Course, home to two 18-hole courses; it will host the Snow Golf Cup in January. "But snow golf is and will probably always be niche."

While images of winter golf on frozen lakes can be found as far back as 17th-century Dutch paintings, it's believed by some that modern snow golf started with St. Moritz's former resort manager, Peter Kasper, who took up the idea of converting the putting greens to whites in 1904, which turned into reality with the first tournament in 1979, held on a frozen Lake St. Moritz. (The tournament moved in 1996, and today nine holes are played in a snow field in Surlej near Silvaplana Lake.)

There are, of course, significant differ-

ences with regular golf. The "whites" need a lot of manual grooming to make the surface around the hole compact, and the balls are orange and the golf

holes three times bigger than regulation size. But the trade-off is something special, enthusiasts say.

"Winter golf is an amazing experience," said Caroline Rominger, a professional golfer and Engadine native. "It can be quite cold, but when the sun comes out, we often play without jackets."

The Alps play host to another tournament, the Barnes Winter Golf Cup, which is entering its fourth year in 2021. The annual host of the event rotates between four different alpine resorts:

Courchevel, Megève, and Val d'Isère, in France; and Crans-Montana, in Switzerland's Canton Valais, host of the Omega European Masters and one of eight golf courses in the canton.

As the popularity of snow golf tournaments has grown, so has demand for nearby real estate.

Switzerland has had a wave of new golf residences, resorts and courses open in recent years, including Bürgenstock, a resort complex of hotels and residences perched above turquoise Lake Lucerne and once home to Audrey Hepburn and Sophia Loren. In 2017, its



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scenic nine-hole course offering views

“It can be quite cold, but when the sun comes out, we often play without jackets.”

of mountains like Eiger, Jungfrau, Pilatus and Titlis, reopened. Andermatt’s network of high-altitude residences and a 18-hole course just below the Gotthard Pass opened in 2016, while Grand Resort Bad Ragaz, the spa resort, reopened in 2019 with three hotels and seven restaurants, including two with two Michelin stars each.

The next generation of Switzerland’s golf communities includes Golf Resort La Gruyère, scheduled to reopen in 2023 after a major refurbishment. Not all courses offer snow golf, but demand is growing and having fun is the goal.

“Snow golf is not about scores,” said Eveline Fasser Testa, a regular player who lives in St. Moritz. “The chance that you’ll find your ball in the deep snow is unlikely. It’s more about the experience of playing golf in the winter and having a great day.”