

Gliding over the greens

Missing the fairway at the Golf Club of Villars means more than a stroll in the woods to find your ball. At this height, you may need to take a train to retrieve it – luckily, one stops 100 metres from the clubhouse

Story and photos by Ava Chisling

Like a canvas that an artist sits in front of, working away at for decades, the golf course at Villars is a labour of love and a work in progress. Doubtless one of man's most extraordinary sporting constructions, it was carved out of the side of a Swiss Alp 82 years ago and has been continually renovated and upgraded ever since. It started with a few holes in the centre of town and grew into a world-class, 18-hole course. Today, it's frequented by celebrities such as F1 drivers Jacques Villeneuve and David Coulthard; European jet-setters like the Piaget and Lancaster families; and plain old locals, happy to spend the day on the links, in the shadow of the mountains. The course has been rebuilt several times, most recently, way up on the side of a very steep slope, off a steep road, in a seemingly impossible location above the cloud line.

The club is situated about 20 kilometres up from the valley, where you will find famous resort towns like Montreux. The course is surrounded by the massive Diablerets, Muveran, Dents de Morcles and Dents du Midi mountain peaks, with the famous Mont-Blanc silhouette to the south. To give some idea of how tough it was to build a golf course in this location, at this height, the course is steep enough to double as a ski slope for almost half the year. And I don't mean for cross-country skiers. Come winter, Club Villars turns into Ski Villars whereupon thousands of downhill skiers and snowboarders glide right over the greens every day for months. And then there are the cows. Before the farmers bring their livestock back up the mountain to graze each spring, the staff has to rush out to put up barriers so the cows don't roam the course – or graze on it. Talk about a golf hazard!

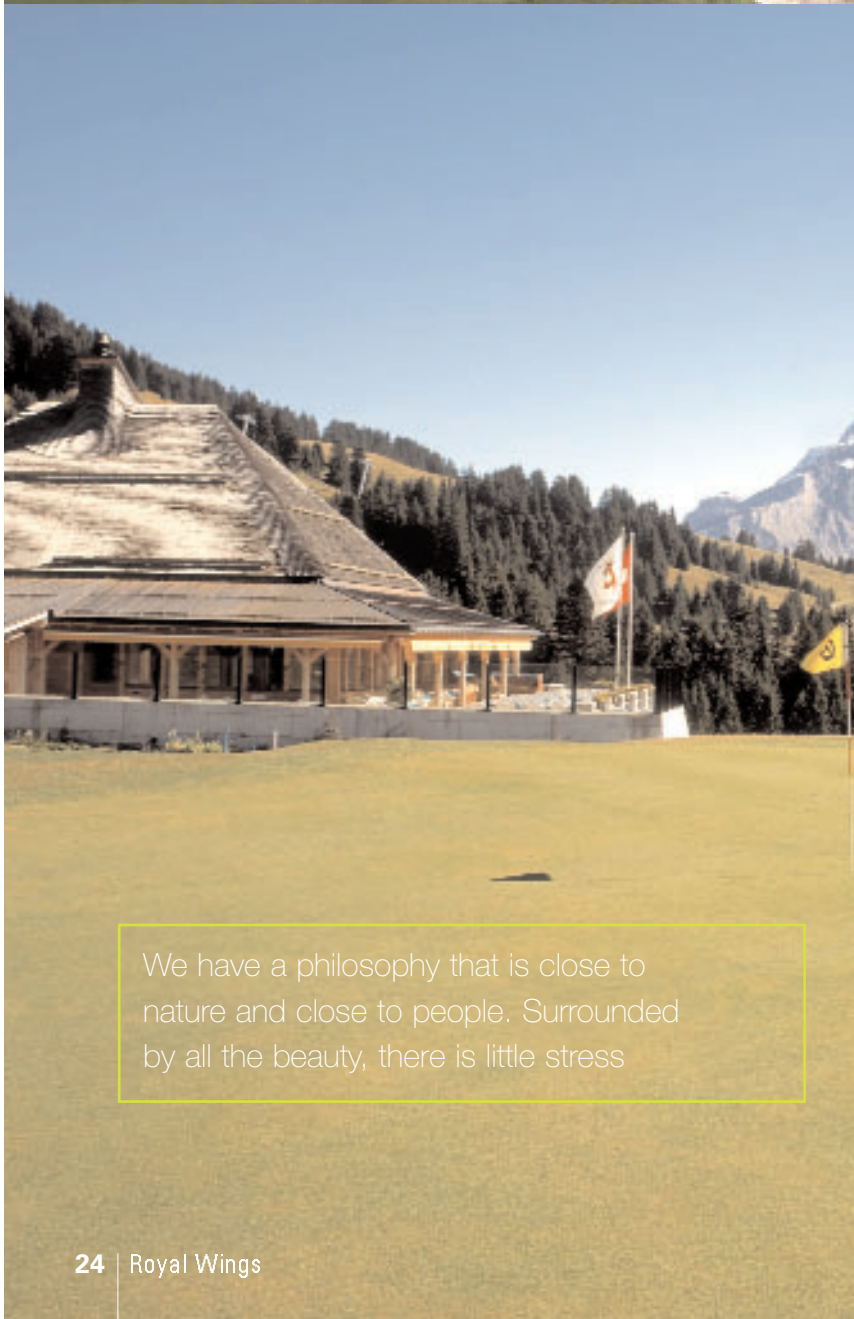
'Building anything at this height is hard,' says Eric Krol, Director of the Club. Krol, who came to Villars three years ago after a successful career as a TV sports journalist in Belgium, continues, 'We needed specially built machines and just bringing them





STRUCTURES

THE GOLF CLUB AT VILLARS OFFERS UNRIVALLED VIEWS FROM ITS PUTTING GREENS



We have a philosophy that is close to nature and close to people. Surrounded by all the beauty, there is little stress

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up here was a serious problem. We also had to find competent people to run them.' Much of the material had to be flown in by helicopter, which brings up logistical problems and, of course, there are weather considerations. Even in spring and summer, the weather at that height can change quickly. There is heavy fog, extreme heat, driving rain, snowstorms and – even more frightening for the workers – landslides. There were two of those during construction. The dangers of working heavy machinery on a slope are enormous. Every single move had to be considered and reconsidered in designing and building 18 holes. 'The key word for us was "adaptation". We believed it was possible and then we made it so.'

Over the course of five years, Club Villars went from a par 70 over 3,000 metres to 18 holes over 5,288 metres. The site occupies an incredible 90 hectares of land, all of it on the slope. A landscaping marvel, this is the only golf club in the world to have a 'prenuptial' agreement with a ski slope. They may not be technically married, but they are linked. 'Before the snow arrives, we put in the maximum of vitamins, which helps the terrain resist the harsh winter. And the snow is a really good insulator that prevents the grass from freezing.'

All of that sounds simple but Villars is an extremely popular ski and snowboard destination. The town has a permanent population of about 1,500 but this grows to 20,000 in the winter and all of them are gliding, with sharp edges, over the golf course. Grooming machines chop up the terrain every day. How is it possible to maintain sensitive greens under these conditions?

'The machines that prepare the ski slopes won't begin until at least 20 centimetres of snow has fallen,' says Krol. 'In principle, this protects the course. We also hold a meeting with the winter workers to explain what has changed on the course and where the critical points are. And finally, the main ski slope that crosses the fairway is made of artificial snow; that way, no machines are criss-crossing the slope. So, skiers can enjoy it to their hearts content and they can come into our clubhouse

STRUCTURES

68,0 127	Jaune CR = 66,5 Slope = 122	Bleu CR = 68,7 Slope = 121	Rouge
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CARVED INTO THE MOUNTAIN, THIS HIGH ALTITUDE GOLF COURSE TURNS INTO A SKI SLOPE EVERY WINTER



restaurant to warm up!’ However, even Krol admits that with thousands upon thousands of people gliding through over four months, there are spots that need time to mend in the spring. ‘Yes, but in 10 days all marks are gone and you wouldn’t know the difference.’

Carving 90 hectares into a mountain could not have been easy to sell to the environmentalists. This is Switzerland, after all, and they take nature very seriously. ‘Of course we had many meetings with them, especially about our building permits, but there was never total opposition. Today we have very good relations with them.’ Krol says the healing properties of nature are amazing. While the staff runs around putting up cow fences and setting up the course infrastructure, the grass grows. ‘As we are at high altitude, the sun’s UV rays help us a lot. We remove as much snow as possible to speed up the process and we do it ourselves, with shovels and our hands. The greens are a little yellow at that point!’

Nature is a big part of Swiss living. They are used to a high quality of life and, for the most part, have the money to enjoy all of their passions. (As Krol says, this is the country with more small aeroplanes per capita than anywhere else in the world.) So when it comes to golf, the Swiss are fit, wealthy and anxious to spend their time outside. There are private courses like Bonmont near Geneva and the championship course in Crans. These places are filled with fancy people eating fancy food – Club Villars is not one of those.

‘We have a philosophy that is close to nature and close to people. We are not “chi-chi”, we are simple and when you come here, surrounded by all the beauty, there is little stress. With a panorama like this, it is a privilege just to be here, in good health, standing at the tee, club in hand.’ ■

For information on the course, contact +41-24-495 4214, visit www.golf-villars.ch or email direction@golf-villars.ch.