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For Golfers, a Covid Winter Brings Unexpected Perks

As Americans tee up in record numbers this winter, resorts and clubs—from Oregon to North Dakota—are offering warmer-than-usual welcomes, with heated golf carts, shorter courses and a lot of whiskey

By Kelsey Ogletree
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WINTER GAMES A blustery swing at Silvies Valley Ranch in Seneca, Ore.

PHOTO: SILVIES VALLEY RANCH

THIS TIME of year, many golfers swap rounds on the course for rounds on the couch, unless they're heading to Florida or Arizona. But 2021 looks different: Thanks to milder temperatures in January and Americans' persistent desire to get outside amid the continuing pandemic, golf courses around the country have been experiencing an unexpected boon. They're also adapting to this harder breed of duffers, offering a warmer-than-usual welcome via heated golf carts, shorter courses and expanded whiskey menus.

"What we're seeing this winter, particularly in colder markets, is an extension of what we've experienced throughout 2020...more new people enjoying the game than we've seen in a long

time,” said PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan, a Boston native who’s always considered golf a year-round sport.

Golf’s inherently socially distanced nature is fueling its surge in popularity. Total rounds played in the U.S. in 2020 were up 37% in December year over year, according to the research firm Golf Datatech.



The Cairn 6-hole short course at McLemore in Rising Fawn, Ga. entices golfers in who prefer to make their winter rounds short and sweet.

PHOTO: AUDRA MELTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Lena Land, 50, and Grace Lapena, 64, are part of the motivated year-round golfing crew. The two friends are committed to playing golf every week at their home course of Brasada Canyons outside Bend, Ore. One dreary mid-January day, it rained for 90 minutes during their round, but they still finished 18 holes. Mrs. Land, who battled breast cancer last year, said she’s excited to feel healthy again and not about to let weather stop her. “They won’t let us on the course in the snow; otherwise we’d get colored balls and give it a try,” she said.

Guests use neon-green tennis balls, easy to spot in snow, to zip around a five-hole course.

Other courses don’t mind a little frost. Elsewhere in Oregon, Silvie Valley Ranch, a golf and spa resort in Seneca opted to stay open through winter for only the second time and is offering a “cool golf” option (\$45 per person). Guests use high-loft clubs, whose higher launch angle makes them easier to hit, and neon-green tennis balls, more readily spotted in the snow, so players can move briskly around a five-hole course. Each green is equipped with extra-large

cups, introducing a new kind of putting challenge. Winter bookings at the Ranch are up more than 200% from last year.



*Georgia's McLemore golf club has put propane heaters in the carts.
PHOTO: AUDRA MELTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Riverwood Golf Course in Bismarck, N.D., initially closed entirely for winter as usual, but in early December, reopened the driving range. Typically, the course and driving range are turned into cross-country ski trails in cold months, said Tim Doppler, golf operations manager for Bismarck Parks and Recreation District. This year, due to unseasonably warm temperatures and high demand, Riverwood decided to place mats on the cart path for the driving range to enable golfers to work on their swings. "We wanted to keep the momentum of the great 2020 golf season going," said Mr. Doppler. "Our avid golfers love to see the golf ball fly into the snow."



*Part of McLemore's newly expanded bourbon and whiskey menu.
PHOTO: AUDRA MELTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Big Cedar Lodge in Missouri's Ozarks recorded the same number of rounds the first week of January this year as it did the entire month in 2020. While its Buffalo Ridge and Top of the Rock courses typically remain open each winter, frost delays bump the first tee time back to around 10 a.m. Walking on the grass when it's frozen can damage the blade and roots, said Matt McQueary, assistant director of golf sales and marketing at Big Cedar Lodge. At Payne's Valley—which opened last September as the first public course designed by Tiger Woods—both the pandemic and early spring fever are also driving winter play, said Mr. McQueary. (You can peek at parts of Payne's from Buffalo Ridge.)

Northwest Georgia's McLemore is also enticing cold-weather golfers. Among the lures: a six-hole short course (for those who want to make their cold-weather game short and sweet),

propane heaters in golf carts and a curated menu of bourbons and single-malt whiskeys for warming up chilled palates. So far, the campaign has been a success. As of Jan. 27, McLemore had seen a nearly 600% increase year over year in January rounds.

As the rest of 2021 unfolds and despite blizzard conditions this month across parts of the U.S., golf's upward trajectory is only expected to continue. "Like they say," said Mrs. Land, "you don't get better by not playing."

FORE-WARNED / Apparel to keep golfers toasty



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

You'll need to layer up when hitting the links in winter, but make sure you don't overly restrict your range of motion. "You want to be able to turn and swing without feeling like you're in a straitjacket," said Matt McQueary, assistant director of golf sales and marketing at Big Cedar Lodge. So leave the puffer jackets at home: Golf can still be a workout, and it's easy to get overheated after a few holes.

Here, a few more practical, just-warm-enough items:

The G-Tech Apparel pouch (above) is a cross between a fanny pack and a muff, embedded with a rechargeable battery, that thaws your digits in between shots (\$115, gtechapparel.com). The three-layer stretch fabric of the Zero Restriction Z2000 Jacket can withstand rain, snow, and wind, and has an anti-chafe chin guard for when you're nuzzling in like a turtle to stay toasty (\$550, zerorestriction.com). Walking to stay warm? Good call. Slip HottMitt heated mittens over the handle of your push cart and stash your phone in the

middle (\$99, stewartgolfusa.com). Regular dry-fit golf pants won't cut it in the cold. [Under Armour](#)'s Links Golf Pant uses infrared technology to absorb and retain body heat while repelling water (\$90, pgatoursuperstore.com).

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