

## GOLF

# Deluge fails to derail my Ryder Cup recce



The last green on the Twenty Ten course at Celtic Manor is guarded by an enormous lake

The eyes of the golfing world will turn to Celtic Manor in Wales next year when Europe and America wrestle for the Ryder Cup. The Gazette's **Nick Beer** braved the rain to find out what kind of test Tiger Woods and his cohorts can expect to find

IT'S unlikely that anyone's bothered to tell him, but Tiger Woods will be following in my footsteps when he rolls up at Celtic Manor for next year's Ryder Cup.

The greatest golfer the game has ever seen will also be checking into the sumptuous five-star on-course hotel, possibly having a peek in the mini-bar, standing for a moment out on the balcony and flicking through the channels — before shouting at Phil to turn the music down next door.

He'll no doubt avail himself of Celtic Manor's cuisine, which hits heights that might even tingle the tastebuds of the biggest name in world sport, although the grub's more likely to use the lift than Eldrick Tont Woods.

It's here, though, that his preparations for the 38th Ryder Cup and mine for the inaugural Writers' Cup veer off at a little bit of a tangent. We have a lot in common, me and Tiger — we're the same height, both have a couple of young kids, his wife is Swedish, mine half-German and, of course, we're both fairly committed to the art of steering a ball measuring 1.68 inches across from one patch of grass to another into a hole measuring 4.25 inches in diameter.

What we don't have in common, I strongly suspect, is a weakness for booze. It was 1.30am before myself and the (fool) harder of my Writers' Cup colleagues managed to stumble off to bed ready for an 8am breakfast on the opposite side of this vast site on the edge of Newport. By roughly the same hour that we'd cleared our heads enough to pull on our

spikes, Tiger would already have got half an hour at the gym and 200 balls under his belt.

There are two abiding memories that all of us took away from our trip to Celtic Manor.

Firstly, the standard and scale of the facilities is truly world-class. There is space for 50,000 spectators on high banks with views of virtually every hole on the Ryder Cup 'Twenty Ten' course, which was built especially for the biannual battle between good (Europe) and evil (the Americans) at an eye-watering cost of £16m in a beautiful corner of the stunning Usk Valley.

Secondly, it didn't stop bloody raining from the moment we stepped onto the course to the moment we were airlifted off the last green by a Sea King Helicopter crewed by volunteers committed to the lives and safety of high-handicap golfers. The Writers' Cup was effectively declared null and void when half the competitors trooped off in a line, heads bowed and each clinging onto the waterproof jacket of the player in front in case they got washed into River Usk, somewhere near the 10th green. This left the rest of us to soldier on towards a contrived result in conditions that would have sent Tiger scuttling back to Florida. Still, my playing partner was a lady of letters of a certain age who goes by the name of Minty Clinch — and if she was determined to see this baby through, then so was I.

It almost goes without saying that the course, with its profusion of water, slick greens and crafty layout, is a thrilling

rollercoaster ride for the plucky amateur. Embarrassment and frustration stalk every shot if you're not at the top of your game, especially when each grip feels like a broom handle dipped in Vaseline, and fear can very soon turn to anger, anger to hate and hate to suffering.

But by the time we got going on the back nine, which includes most of the newer section of the course, my game had clicked into place somewhat, the rain could only be described as incessant and the six inches between my ears had found a much happier place.

Although the 14th is billed as the course's signature hole, with its switchback fairway curving around two lakes, the next seems more likely to decide whether European captain Colin 'Monty' Montgomerie crowns a glittering career by capturing the biggest prize in team golf. And not even Tiger will be counting his chickens standing on the tee at a 575-yard final hole that boasts a couple of punishing fairway bunkers and an enormous greenside lake.

Now a word from our sponsors: Celtic Manor has just launched a 'Twenty Ten Club' limited membership scheme that makes a virtue out of living more than 75 miles away from the course. The centre of Exeter's around 90 miles away, a journey of not much more than an hour for the experienced driver, which puts it in the same bracket as, say, Royal North Devon up in Bideford, Saunton or Dartmouth.

Despite the downpour, I got to play next year's Ryder Cup course with Minty, if not Monty, putted where Poulter's going to putt, hacked out where Harrington's going to hack out and drove where Donald's going to drive.

And that's another thing me and Tiger will have in common in 14 months' time.

Details: 01633 410 300 or [www.celtic-manor.com](http://www.celtic-manor.com).