

Racing's ultimate world trips

A calendar of eight top racing events across the world to get the jet-setting punter's blood up.

By GRANT DOYLE



White Turf Club, St Moritz, Switzerland. Picture: Andy Mettler

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1 White Turf Club, St Moritz, Switzerland

Probably not on every punter's radar, but for uniqueness, coolness, high fashion and champagne there's nothing quite like being trackside on a frozen Swiss lake in subzero temperatures. Top-tier sponsors such as Longines and BMW ensure the amenities (albeit temporary), catering and attendees are all first class.

The race days are a mix of traditional flat and harness racing plus the dangerous Skikjoring, whereby a “jockey” dons a pair of skis and steers using extra-long reins, sliding along behind. It looks as precarious as it sounds.

Betting is primitive, however; a tote accepts your bets but there is no indication of prices until seconds before the race starts. In conjunction with the racing carnival are art exhibitions, live music and plenty of people-watching opportunities.



After all, where else can you tackle some of Europe’s finest slopes in the morning, watch horseracing in the afternoon and return to the slopes that same night on Switzerland’s longest illuminated ski run?

Stay: Badrutt’s Palace Hotel is worth the splurge.

badruttpalace.com

2 Dubai World Cup Carnival, United Arab Emirates



Oisin Murphy riding Benbatl wins the Dubai Turf during the Dubai World Cup Day at Meydan Racecourse in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

The 1996 Dubai World Cup carnival put the United Arab Emirates on the horseracing map, which represents an ironic homecoming, given the modern thoroughbred racing breed began when stallions from Arabia were imported into England and were bred with local mares in the early 18th century.

The carnival, held at the Meydan Racetrack, now runs for almost three months. The main event, the Dubai World Cup, is worth an eye-watering \$US10 million (\$13.5m).

Despite laws concerning alcohol consumption in public, licensed venues at select on-course enclosures means punters don't go thirsty.

If you want to wager, a betting account in your home country and a VPN app installed on your smartphone will circumvent the local restrictions.

When: Late March (Dubai World Cup is on March 30 next year).

Stay: Unique among international racecourses, the Meydan Hotel is right by the track, so you could watch all the action from your suite. There's even a floodlit nine-hole golf course and a tennis academy on site.

themeydanhotel.com

3 The Grand National, Aintree, Liverpool, England



Milansbar ridden by Bryony Frost jumps Canal Turn ahead of eventual race winner Tiger Roll ridden by Davy Russell during the 2018 Randox Health Grand National at Aintree Racecourse in Liverpool, England. Picture: Getty Images

Jumps, or steeplechase racing, has its critics. Dangerous and inhumane, they say, given the attrition rate of runners in these marathon obstacle courses. And while it's a dwindling style of racing in Australia, it's a different story in Japan, Europe and, particularly, England, where Liverpool's Grand National has been staged since 1839.

In that first year, a solid brick wall was one of the obstacles but it was removed five years later. Today, jumps are made of plastic uprights topped with spruce extensions.

Originally designed as a cross-country steeplechase event, today's 7km circuit across 30 obstacles tests the endurance of runners, jockeys and the viewing public alike. It's the rare race that might compare to our own Melbourne Cup because so many non-racing people tune in to watch the drama unfold.

When: Early April (April 7 next year).

Stay: The course is easily accessible from Liverpool proper by regular trains on race days; try Aloft Liverpool (Starwood Hotels) or Titanic Hotel for maritime nostalgia.

aloftliverpool.com , titanichotelliverpool.com

4 Kentucky Derby, Louisville, Kentucky, US



Promises Fulfilled and Justify lead the field to the first turn during the 144th running of the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky. Picture: Getty Images

The mint julep, that quintessential southern cocktail of bourbon, ice, sugar and a few sprigs of mint, is available as soon as the gates open at Churchill Downs, home to “the most exciting two minutes in (American) sport”.

That opening time is 8am, but beware, as the Kentucky Derby doesn’t start until almost 7pm.

Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson must have been an early arrival during his visit in 1970. The essay he wrote in its aftermath referred to events surrounding the Derby extravaganza as “decadent and depraved”.

These days, the first leg of the US Triple Crown, while still a raucous affair, continues to exude a party atmosphere. It’s now a month-long festival with fireworks, fun runs, hot-air balloon events and paddlewheel steamboat races on the Ohio River.

There’s even a Fillies and Lilies gala concert party, complete with a private bourbon lounge (this is Kentucky, after all).

The Saturday Derby crowd tops out at about 150,000 patrons, many of whom back up from the Kentucky Oaks held the day before. Seating and hospitality packages range from Premium, Clubhouse and Grandstand along with many exclusive lounge and in-field

options. General admission is \$US80. A ticket to Millionaire's Row will set you back about \$US2500.

When: First Saturday in May (May 4 next year).

Stay: The iconic Galt House in downtown Louisville is the official hotel of Churchill Downs.

galthouse.com.

5 Royal Ascot, England

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Prince Harry and Meghan talk with the Queen's bloodstock and racing advisor, John Warren on day one of the Royal Ascot horse racing meet, in Ascot, west of London.

Picture: AFP

The Royal Ascot, a week-long racing series with 16 feature Group races, has been a part of British tradition since 1711. These days, the Queen and her royal retinue typically attend most of the five main race days in June; after all, Windsor Castle is just 10km down the road.

Try for the Diamond Jubilee Stakes, towards the end of the carnival, which has a rich and successful association with Australian thoroughbreds: Black Caviar won in 2012 and Merchant Navy, bred in the NSW Hunter Valley, collected the winner's cheque this year.

Ticket prices cater for any budget, from the informal Windsor Enclosure to the posh Royal Enclosure, and just about everything between. There are DJs, all-day entertainment, pop-up restaurants and a traditional singalong to round out the day for punters in the Queen Anne enclosure.

If you snare a ticket to the Royal Enclosure, a strict dress code applies. But irrespective of your seat, most punters don their best ensemble, with chaps in top hats and morning suits.

There's so much pomp and pageantry too, including the royal procession in horse-drawn carriages down the main straight, military bands and more celebrity spotting ops than the Oscars.

When: Mid to late June (June 18 to 22 next year).

Stay: It's 45 minutes by train from London's Waterloo to Ascot. Corinthia Hotel London is about 1km from Waterloo Station.

corinthia.com

6 Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, Longchamp, Paris

Known simply as the Arc, one of Europe's biggest horseracing series culminates in the final event, Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. Set in the sublime parkland surrounds of the Bois de Boulogne on the western fringe of Paris and beside the River Seine, Longchamp racecourse oozes class and sophistication like few other tracks, especially after its recent reopening following two years of redevelopment.

The race's slogan, *Ce n'est pas une course, c'est un monument*, seems to epitomise the event's status as not only a financial windfall for the owners and breeding prospects for the winning horse but also a sought-after gathering on the Parisian social calendar. Artists such as Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas painted horseracing scenes from Longchamp.

New this year is an augmented reality experience (app download required) where each horse is fitted with a tracking device to its bridle enabling punters to follow the race in real time 3-D, just as the jockey sees it.

When: First Sunday in October (October 7 this year).

Stay: Splurge those winnings at La Reserve, just off the Champs-Elysees.

lareserve-paris.com

7 The Everest, Sydney



Everest Race Day at Royal Randwick Race Course. Picture: David Swift.

It's about time the Melbourne Cup had some homegrown competition. And it arguably arrived last year with the first running of The Everest at Randwick, the world's richest race on turf. Projected prize money for this year is \$13m.

It's the centrepiece of Sydney's revamped spring racing carnival, when traditionally, all racing interest and prize money is focused on Melbourne. Almost 35,000 people attended the inaugural last year, which was the largest crowd to descend on Randwick in decades.

The air is festive, with bands, DJs, fashion parades, pop-up bars, and enough ornate hats and fascinators to keep local milliners in work for months. Ticket prices are very reasonable but, for something special, try to nab a guest pass to the Members and take in the action from the Stables or exclusive Grandview Lounge.

The Australian Turf Club certainly needs congratulating on the race's unique format and global promotion.

Combined with the newish grandstand and aggressive marketing to a younger clientele, a day at The Everest soon may be regarded as the pinnacle of Australian horseracing.

When: Second Saturday in October (October 13 this year).

Stay: Randwick racecourse is a short drive from the CBD. For a neighbourhood hotel with serviced apartments, try Veriu Randwick; or go hip at the new Paramount House in Surry Hills.

veriu.com.au , paramounthousehotel.com

8 Japan Cup, Tokyo

An invitation-only race, the Japan Cup attracts top-class entries from around the world, including winners of other races listed here, which lends an international air. A huge prizemoney pool adds to its allure, as does the convenient location of Fuchu racecourse, a 25-minute subway ride from downtown Tokyo. On a clear day you can see Mount Fuji from high in the impressive grandstand.

It is by far the biggest and one of the most well-appointed racecourse precincts in the world. A crowd of 100,000 feels spacious. The record cup day attendance, set in 1990, was more than 196,000. And unusually for major race days, families (attracted by all sorts of fun rides and child-friendly facilities) plus 30-something professional types seem to make up much of the punting mix.

Australian horses have figured prominently in the cup through the years and so have our jockeys. Sydney's Hugh Bowman, who rides Winx, won last year and the victory secured Bowman top place in Longines world's best jockey rankings.

When: Last Sunday in November (November 25 this year).

Stay: The designer-chic (and all non-smoking) Andaz Tokyo or the historic Tokyo Station Hotel.

tokyo.andaz.hyatt.com , tokyostationhotel.com