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THE EUROPEAN BRAND



GAME OF THRONES

Six annual tournaments determine the official and unofficial rulers in the “Sport of Kings.”

by PAUL RUBIO



Photo: Gabriel Rossi/LainContent/Getty Images.

What began as a war game in Central Asia during 600 BC, polo grew into an exclusive society sport during the first century, popular among royalty and privileged classes. By the late 19th century, membership-based polo clubs were established across the United Kingdom, the United States, and Argentina to formally organize competitions, subsequently fostering polo associations to preside over the clubs.

More than a riveting sport, polo has evolved into an experience, with a high-energy social scene that often trumps the action on the field. Championships are as much about the players as the attendees, their outfits, and the glittering tournament parties and galas. Here, the best of the high-goal polo circuit across the globe as well as some newer incarnations of polo, the tournaments crowning new kings of the sport and new queens of the scene. ▶



LAND ROVER INTERNATIONAL POLO TOURNAMENT
Cádiz, Spain

WHEN 31 days from late July to late August.
Next date: July 26–August 28, 2016.

WHERE The 22-goal tournament is held at the Santa Maria Polo Club in the residential enclave Sotogrande, located in the Costa del Sol region of Spain. With nine polo fields and expansive facilities, Santa Maria is heralded as the ultimate polo club in continental Europe and organizes more than 30 tournaments a year in high, medium, and low handicap.

ALLURE More than 88,000 visitors came in 2015. The most coveted polo tournament in continental Europe comprises 120 matches over 31 days, climaxing with the competition for the high-goal trophies, the Silver in the middle of August and the Gold Cup on the final day. And since the Spanish know how to throw a party like no other, the entire month becomes one big polo fiesta as the club is transformed into a shopping, dining, and nightlife arcade with pop-up restaurants, seven bars, a dozen food trucks, 40 high-end shops, and art installations temporarily inhabiting the grounds to complement the sporting events.



WHO'S GOING Spanish aristocracy like Luis Alfonso de Borbón, Cayetano Martínez de Irujo, and Álvaro de Marichalar, Spanish celebrities, European runway models, and global polo enthusiasts. Pepper that with local day-trippers and tourists, enjoying a bit of shopping and dining in the Polo Village and perhaps dabbling in the sport (the Polo Village remains open on nongame days to cater to this demographic). On Friday nights, catch the pro polo players off-duty partying at the Grey Goose After Polo Lounge.

FASHION With temperatures nearing 90°F during the Andalucía summer, expect clothing to be white and light by day (but design-driven and textured). Come evening and nightfall at the club's prolific watering holes, the look is St. Barths or St. Tropez.

santamariapoloclub.com



US OPEN POLO CHAMPIONSHIP
Palm Beach, Florida

WHEN Four weeks between late March and late April.
Next date: April 3–24, 2016.

WHERE The tournament is held over four consecutive Sundays at the International Polo Club (IPC) in Wellington, Florida, west of Palm Beach. The expansive polo facility, which features a private club, nine polo fields, and a contemporary stadium, has hosted the championship since opening in 2004.

ALLURE Dating back to 1904, the US Open Polo Championship is the pinnacle of the North American polo circuit. It's the most prestigious high-goal polo (26-goal) tournament played in the United States, outshining tournaments at other stalwart clubs like Bridgehampton Polo Club in the Hamptons, New York, Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club in California, and the Greenwich Polo Club in Connecticut. The final match of the four-week championship is a battle between the most elite players in the sport. Event tickets are usually purchased as brunch packages, many of which come with a prematch reception, preferred seating, a gourmet meal, and Champagne.

WHO'S GOING Given the prestige of the competition, the tournament attracts the Who's Who of the polo world, as well as local CEOs of blue-chip companies, old-money heirs, sports and entertainment celebrities, and polo enthusiasts and fans. The halftime divot stomp is the time to see and be seen.



FASHION In the early weeks of the championship, high fashion competes with casual daywear. However, for the more exclusive final event, expect the latest from Worth Avenue. Women in Etro summer dresses, Céline sunglasses, and Gladys Tamez hats snicker at those still trying to uphold the 1990 Julia Roberts polo look. Younger guys in form-fitting Tom Ford blazers and city pants mingle with the old guard in blue multibutton Brooks Brothers blazers, pleated tan pants, and white patent leather Ferragamo loafers.

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THE CARTIER QUEEN'S CUP
Surrey, United Kingdom

WHEN Three weeks in early summer.
Next date: Tuesday, May 17–Sunday, June 12, 2016.

WHERE The championship takes place at Guards Polo Club, in the center of Windsor Great Park, south of London, UK. The 130-acre club, founded by Prince Philip in 1955, has the most members and largest number of playing fields of any polo club in Europe.

ALLURE The UK's premier polo tournament is a 22-goal competition, with about 12 teams composed of the world's greatest players facing off over three weeks in hopes of taking home the grand prize—the Cartier Queen's Cup. The "Sport of Kings" takes on its true meaning as HM the Queen herself, who first presented the trophy to the club in 1960, historically attends on the finals day.

WHO'S GOING Her Majesty is often joined in the Royal Box with other members of the Royal Family, notable American and British actors, as well as sports celebrities. Last year this entourage included Prince Philip, Dame Joan Collins, tennis player Boris Becker, and British actress Donna Air, while previous attendees have included the likes of Angelina Jolie and Keira Knightley.

FASHION The global trend toward a more casual polo scene has yet to reach the Queen's Cup. And that's a good thing. Dressed to the nines, the threads of the



general crowd easily rival the celebrity fashions (though the twill suit is often reserved for HM the Queen). Expect pastel hues, floral prints, and frilly dresses complemented by statement headgear and hats, with some definite hits and misses.

guardspoloclub.com



ARGENTINE OPEN POLO CHAMPIONSHIP
Buenos Aires, Argentina

WHEN Three weeks from mid-November to December.
Next date: November 19–December 12, 2016.

WHERE Celebrating its 123rd anniversary in 2016, the tournament is held at Campo Argentino de Polo in the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires, 10 minutes from downtown. Because of its history and storied matches, Campo Argentino de Polo is often referred to as the "Cathedral of Polo." The championship is organized by the Asociación Argentina de Polo or Argentine Polo Association, which presides nationally over the country's polo clubs.

ALLURE This Argentine Polo Open is the be all and end all of events in the polo world. The highest-ranked players from across the globe compete among eight teams over three weeks, climaxing with a final match that sees a winning team take home the world's most coveted polo trophy. This is the highest of high-goal matches. Participating teams must have a combined handicap between 28 and 40 goals. Put in perspective, the other famous high-goal matches like the Surrey and Sotogrande Cup are 22-goal tournaments.



WHO'S GOING For those in the polo circuit, the question is more like who's not? Expect international polo, social, and political royalty. And since the "Cathedral" seats 40,000 and since polo is deeply embedded into Argentinian culture, it's a very vocal and lively crowd of nationals.

FASHION It's more about the sport than the fashion at the world's most coveted tournament. General spectators tend to dress casual—men in polos and shorts, ladies in designer jeans and blouses or dresses. The polo crowd glams it up at invitation-only pre- and post-parties, taking place in Buenos Aires' most exclusive bars and clubs and private homes.

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THE SNOW POLO WORLD CUP ST. MORITZ
St. Moritz, Switzerland

WHEN Last weekend in January.
 Next date: January 27-29, 2017.

WHERE The three-day event takes place in Switzerland's most picturesque ski town, with polo matches unfolding over a frozen expanse of Lake St. Moritz that has been transformed into a polo field. This championship event is not associated with a particular club but is organized by Evviva Polo St. Moritz Limited, a group specifically dedicated to the event and managed by eminent figures in Swiss polo.

ALLURE Back in 1985, polo circles in St. Moritz threw a curve ball into the history-steeped game by introducing a more challenging winter incarnation: snow polo. More than 30 years since its inception, snow polo is now played across the world, but the Snow Polo



World Cup St. Moritz stands as the world's only high-goal snow polo event and culminates in the Cartier Trophy. In addition, the championship has grown into a three-day annual event with a hefty roster of social events buffering the games.

WHO'S GOING Entrance to the games and access to the stands are free of charge, so among the some 15,000 spectators, expect a mix of devotees as well as novices coming to see what the fuss is all about. To instantly find your polo tribe, purchase VIP tickets for field-side tent access where Swiss Master Chefs prepare lunches and light bites, and chilled Champagne is constantly flowing. Don't miss your chance to hob-nob with the European polo elite at Saturday night's cocktail reception and Snow Polo Night Gala Dinner at Badrutt's Palace Hotel (tickets available to the public if reserved far enough in advance).

FASHION With subzero temperatures, the daytime fashion is more focused on keeping warm than looking fabulous. Of course, there are over-the-top fur ensembles made from rare foxes and bushy fur hats, but the true fashion comes out during the evening events, namely the Saturday black-tie gala, where gents impress in designer tuxes and ladies dazzle in couture and heirloom jewels.

snowpolo-stmoritz.com



THE KING'S CUP ELEPHANT POLO TOURNAMENT
Bangkok, Thailand

WHEN Four days in early spring. Dates vary by year.
 Next date: March 10-13, 2016.

WHERE From 2001 to 2013, the event was held in the seaside town of Hua Hin or the northern town of Chiang Rai. In 2014, the event moved to Bangkok to accommodate its growing popularity and a greater breadth of activities. It is now played on a private polo field along the banks of the Chao Praya River, 10 minutes from the host hotel, Anantara Riverside Bangkok Hotel.

ALLURE Elephant polo is the South Asian counterpart to horse polo, governed by the World Elephant Polo Association. A much-hyped event on the elephant polo circuit, this annual tournament is one of Thailand's largest charitable events, with proceeds benefiting a variety of elephant-related projects across the country. Sixteen teams compete over four days, culminating in two teams duking it out in the King's Cup Elephant Polo Grand Final.

WHO'S GOING The King of Thailand's royal representative, Privy Councilor Real Admiral Mom Luang Usni Pramoj, presides over the event, which attracts members of the royal family as well as international members of the media, pro sports players, the donor community, Thailand's expat community, national bourgeoisie, and the occasional visiting maharajah or two. The world's most beautiful transsexuals and transvestites are often in attendance as well.



FASHION To have a chance at beating Thailand's ladyboys in the tournament's official best-dressed competition, women feel the extra need to dress to impress and accessorize. The result is a bizarre daytime display of evening-style cocktail attire, occasionally bordering on outright costumes. Guys get away with polos and khakis. The more extravagant gowns and suits come out during the Saturday night gala and silent auction.

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Photos: (top) St. Moritz; (bottom) Andy Mettler/Swiss-Image.ch; Christof Sonderegger/Swiss-Image.ch.