



Imagine a place surrounded by golf courses where the beer flows like water, and where the stressful ways of city life pale into insignificance. Simon Hill found one such place, and as it turns out, it's not as far away as you might imagine...

ESHOWEET!

The call from my editor came on a Monday. A Monday afternoon at the beginning of May to be exact. I remember, because the Stormers had lost 14-20 to the Crusaders in the Super 15 on the Saturday and I was still in a bad mood. Yes, golf isn't the only thing I take seriously.

The other reason why I remember is because my editor hardly ever phones me. And when he does it's usually to enquire about an article (just like this one) that is delaying the entire magazine from going to print (just like this one). And just like all his calls, I answered this one with a certain degree of guilty trepidation.

'Howzit?'

'Howzit.'

'Cool.'

'Good.'

'Simon?'

'Brendan?'

'I need you to get seven friends together...'

'OK'. (I don't have seven friends)

'I need you to get seven friends together, and head down to Eshowe for a weekend of beer and golf...'

'Right.'

'...but mainly beer.'

'Where is Eshowe, Brendan?'

'It's in northern KZN, Simon.'



'Is this weekend free?'

'Yes. But you'll have to write an article about it.'

'I don't care. Free beer.'

'Cool. Get hold of a guy named Richard Chennells and confirm dates, OK?'

'Nom, nom, nom. Free beer...'

And sommer like that, my Monday had just got a whole lot better. I immediately set about

getting hold of Chennells – a former Michaelhouse boy who I heard decided to skip matric rave in order to stay in Eshowe and build a backpackers' lodge behind The George Hotel that he now owns.

The sum total of our correspondence in terms of getting the whole weekend set up comprised just three emails. One to tell





Richard our flight time and the date. One back from Richard to tell me that was cool, and that we should arrive thirsty, and another from Richard just reminding me how important it was that we arrived thirsty.

The stage was set. With arrangements made, golf bags packed and golf clubs cleaned, I, along with my four friends and three of their friends, caught the red-eye out of Lanseria to Durban.

Those of you who fly regularly between Joburg and Durbs will know that you barely have time to ignore the in-flight safety demonstration before you're back on the ground again, and an hour after taking off from a cold Jozi we were standing in shorts and golf shirts at the drop-and-go section at King Shaka International waiting for Richard, who arrived precisely at the agreed time of 9am.

"Howzit lads!" was the friendly greeting from inside the van. "Dump your bags in the trailer and climb in. I've got beers for you in the cooler box."

We jumped in, safe in the knowledge it was 12 o'clock somewhere in the world. For the record (and any law-enforcement official reading this): Richard only drank Coke.

Our first stop was Simbithi. A short ride from the airport be-

"RICHARD'S PUB APPEARED ALMOST LIKE A MIRAGE IN FRONT OF US, TEASING OUR BEER-STARVED TONGUES."



tween Ballito and Salt Rock, Simbithi is a par-60 Peter Matkovich design comprising 13 par threes, four par fours and one par five. At first, I must admit, I was slightly sceptical. I am sure most people would be if they saw 13 par threes on their scorecard. Visuals of the mashie course at San Lameer began to play on my mind.

My fears, though, were completely unfounded. The course, which was in fantastic nick when we played it, is completely charming. You'd expect nothing less

from a Matkovich design. Carts, mercifully, are compulsory as there are some serious undulations. You'd end up with calf muscles the size of a Ukrainian powerlifter's if you had to walk it. However, given the short distances you're covering, you can expect to be done with your round in well under four hours.

And don't for a minute think it's easy. The sea breeze that gets up in the early afternoon has the potential to change the entire dynamic of the course. All of a

sudden the 155-metre par three you would normally hit a routine 7-iron into now becomes a little demon. There's plenty of bush as well as the odd water hazard, so don't rock up like most of our guys did thinking you can bomb it willy-nilly off the tee. You will lose lots of golf balls. Just like most of our guys did.

With golf tour barely four hours old and Simbithi now ticked off, we jumped back into the van and headed north up the N2, bound for Eshowe.

The 45-minute drive from

Simbithi to Eshowe certainly tested all of us: the thought of tasting of Richard's world-renowned Zulu Blonde brew, which won best beer at the JDW Real Ale Fest in the UK last year, was almost too much to bear.

The structure of the Golf and Beer weekend is simple: you decide how many rounds of golf you would like to play – and Richard takes care of the rest. In our case we went for the full house, which included the round at Simbithi, a round at the Bob Grimsell-designed Eshowe Country Club – redesigned by Jeff Hawkes – and a round at another Matko gem, Prince's Grant. However, given the plethora of courses in that part of the world, you can tailor-make your tour to suit your specific playing requirements. Regardless of which golf package you choose, all beer and meals are included.

Not even bothering to unpack the trailer upon arrival, we hot-footed it straight into Richard's pub, which appeared almost like a mirage in front of us, teasing our beer-starved tongues. The Zulu Blonde that kissed our lips, however, was certainly no hallucination, as we made ourselves comfortable, determined to put the all-you-can-drink side of things to the test. Not all can be winners on the course but everyone is a winner in the bar.

As mentioned, Richard is the owner of The George Hotel, which he bought from his father in 2005 after returning from playing the London stock market (the banking crisis of '08 now explained). Lovingly restored, the hotel and bar both possess an undeniable charm, especially the bar. The rooms are very comfortable, while the Zululand backpackers behind the hotel gives you the option of a more 'rustic' experience. Just a point of interest: the backpackers happens to be right next to the Zulu Blonde brewery, which some individuals might find comforting.

After a heavy session on the Friday night, we woke up slightly worse for wear on Saturday morning ready to head to the famous Prawn Shack in Gingindlovu. This

is an absolute must for anyone going on the weekend. The R150 fee will see you eat until you practically burst. Add to this an awesome sea view, the sounds of Van Halen interspersed with the odd Bob Marley track, beer in buckets, all complemented with great company, and life really doesn't get much better.

After our Prawn Shack escapade it was time for the second round of golf at Eshowe Country Club. Built in 1907 and at 5 733 metres, Eshowe is one of the older but certainly not one of the longest courses ever built. Don't be fooled though, the course is surrounded by the Dhlinda forest, meaning that great emphasis is placed on tee shots – something the majority of our tour party had difficulty coming to terms with. Apart from all that, the course was a pleasant surprise. And I don't mean that in a derogatory way, but it's often the case with small towns that the money and memberships just aren't there to maintain tracks to the standards we are generally becoming more and more accustomed to in this country. Eshowe, though, is an actual estate where I think a couple of under-the-radar millionaires have now sought sanctuary.

Back to the hotel after the round, we went to settle not only outstanding fines, but also a massive outstanding tab from the night before. The beer is included, but it seems the Jagerbombs are not. Vowing to stick only to Richard's ale for the remainder of the weekend, we settled down in front of the big plasma TV to watch the Boks play the All Blacks in PE.

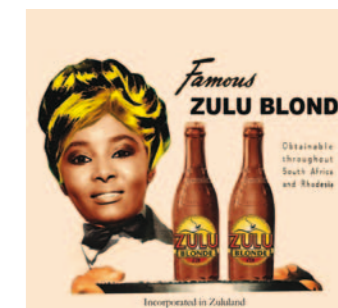
The victory that followed left us with little choice but to pick up where we left off the night before, while the live music, more Jagerbombs (yes, it was me), and a French touring group ensured none of us would be going to bed early.

So with heavy hearts and pounding heads, we took leave of The George Hotel on the Sunday morning. The tour was not yet over though; we still had a round to play at Prince's Grant – a course that must surely offer some of the

most breathtaking scenery of any in the country. However, many of the tour party were now very worse for wear after two extremely large nights, and at one point I actually overheard one of them say he needed to see a doctor. Don't worry, we fined him for that.

Tired but happy we packed our golf bags into Richard's red trailer one last time and made our way to the airport to go our separate ways. The weekend was over but what a legendary, epic weekend it was. If going on golf tour is all about having a good time with your mates, then Golf and Beer will tick every single box every single time. Speaking of mates, I now have seven of them. And you know what? We often chat about the time we all went away together to a small town in KZN called Eshowe for a weekend of beer and golf...

... but mainly beer. **CG**



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Contact Richard Chennells
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Photographs by Jon Ivins.