



Vive le Golf!

With the
Ryder Cup
coming, France
is putting
its best golfing
foot forward.

BY RAY TENNENBAUM

Whether you've given par a beating or your ego has sustained a few bruises, when you walk off the sixteenth green of the Vineuil course at Golf de Chantilly an hour north of Paris, you are greeted by an uncanny and inspiring par-3 set in a quiet tree-lined hollow, its putting surface 210 yards downhill from the tips. Coming as it does near the end of the round, the 17th is not so much Vineuil's signature hole as its complimentary closing, architect Tom Simpson's "Affectionately yours."

If it's a measure of great golf courses that they spur you with difficulty and console you with scenery, the Vineuil course ranks with the best. Built in 1909, it hosted the French Open 11 times (the last two held

here were won by Nick Faldo in 1989 and 1990). A par 71 at nearly 7000 yards with fast greens and plenty of rough, it is a well-maintained monument to the genius of Tom Simpson, a brilliant, eccentric architect who

was often chauffeured in his silver Rolls Royce to golf construction sites and wrote his own obituary.

Your visit to Chantilly offers plenty more to take in, from the drive past the world-famous racetrack with its massive, ornate stables—built by an 18th-century Bourbon prince who believed he would be reincarnated as a horse, and directed his architect to build stables befitting his rank—and a magnificent Château that houses a large and renowned collection of fine art second only to the Louvre's.

As France rolls out the carpet for the 2018 Ryder Cup next fall, it is also seeking to welcome golfers, and so the question for

the golf traveler is, how much game has France got?

Quite a lot, and it's very, very good. This beautiful, civilized country offers the traveler the opportunity to enjoy an unrivaled food and wine culture, interspersed with some superb and highly diverting links. In France, proud of its supremacy in all manner of pleasure-finding, the golf club is yet another pathway of *la bonne vie*.

Forty years ago, French golf was strictly old-money—aristocrats whose families played on courses laid out by the great British architects of the 19th and early 20th century. Starting in the early 1980s, the game became popular among the prosperous

Left to right: Surfing in view of the Biarritz lighthouse; the Eiffel Tower looms over the Green Course at Golf de Saint-Cloud; culinary beauty at Chateau la Cheneviere; Chateau Monbadon in Aquitaine; the Louvre lighting up the night.

middle class, and what we think of as upscale, semi-private clubs sprung up all over France. Big-name designers were hired to make the most of the country's fertile, varied landscape. The results are on abundant display in three of the most popular regions for travelers.

Centered around Paris, the **Île-de-France**—literally "island of France"—is home to more golf courses than anywhere else, including a handful of distinguished, historic tracts. Some, like the ultra-private Morfontaine (another great Simpson course

a few miles from Chantilly), are inaccessible unless a member is willing to take you, while many others offer a courteous welcome to visitors at a reasonable green fee as long as you give them enough notice. Exclusive as many of them are, the culture at these finer clubs is simple and unpretentious—in the words of David Lawday, a longtime Paris resident and former correspondent for *The Economist*, "What makes some of these more exclusive clubs different—Chantilly and Fontainebleau among them—is they have a sort of utter disdain for ostentation and

show. Their class is in their disdain for all that frippery. There are no jackets and ties required; the dining rooms are very simple, but with excellent food.... It gives them a sort of dignity.”

On weekends, Parisians head to Fontainebleau, an hour’s drive southeast of the city, to enjoy the expansive pine and oak forest and visit the fabulous Château de Fontainebleau, famously enjoyed by a long line of rulers including Napoleon. A stone’s throw from the palace is Golf de Fontainebleau, the favorite of many: evoking British heathland courses, with rock outcroppings providing décor and hazards, it’s another Simpson gem. Golf de Saint-Germain, 40 minutes northwest of the city, is a superbly-maintained Harry Colt design reminiscent of the architect’s great British parkland courses Sunningdale and Swinley Forest.

An International Feast

The Ryder Cup, which will be held at Le Golf National on September 25-30, 2018, isn’t the only international competition heading to France next year. The French American Challenge for Fred’s Cup, contested since 1990, pits teams of men and women amateurs from the MGA/WMGA and the Ligue de Paris. It will take place at around the same time, and intrepid golf travelers will be able to enjoy both the drama of the Ryder Cup and the intimacy of the French American Challenge in a single trip.

The Albatros course at Le Golf National was built in the late 1980s and was engineered to host big-time tournaments, with stadium seating throughout and water coming into play on many holes. This is only the second time the Ryder Cup has taken place on European soil, and the crowds will be large and boisterous as the home team tries to take back the Cup. Registration for tickets has begun at www.rydercup.com, and it’s advisable to plan well ahead if you’re going to attend.

The French American Challenge presents a much more intimate atmosphere for spirited if quieter competition; there are no gallery ropes, and spectators can walk close enough to the players to hear their conversations. The Ligue de Paris has dominated the event, though the 2016 edition came down to the final hole of the final match. The MGA has never won in France, but a strong Met Area cheering contingent could turn the tide. Watch the MGA website, www.mgagolf.org, for information on the scheduling and venue, and make plans to be there for great golf in glorious surroundings.



On a summer weekday, you can get onto Golf de Saint-Cloud, not far from the Bois de Boulogne, which boasts some of the most remarkable urban views of any golf course. Lawday – whose first marriage was to Anne Turnesa, daughter of amateur golf great Willie Turnesa (two-time U.S. Amateur winner, British Amateur champ, Walker Cup standout, and onetime president of the MGA) – remembers that his father-in-law “used to rave about Saint-Cloud. It’s on a wooded slope, and it has this terraced look over Paris: from several holes, you have an almost birds-eye view of the Eiffel Tower, you feel as though you can almost touch it.”

And then there’s the Ryder Cup venue, Le Golf National’s Albatros Course, 20 miles west of the city center. Designed by the American architect Robert van Hage, it has been nudged and tweaked into championship shape through its hosting of all but two French Opens since 1990, and had improved drainage and irrigation systems installed once it was awarded the Cup. There’s an audacious peculiarity to some of the holes, which should lend themselves nicely to match play. The crescent-shaped par-5 ninth, nearly 600 yards, plays into the wind and culminates in a sunken green complex with a tiny, bean-shaped raised putting surface: under the right conditions it will be difficult to hold even with a wedge. Several greens feature dramatic breaks, which may well come into play should the Euros decide to cut them quick; while the most recent touch-up shaved some of the incline off the large green of the par-3 16th, it has the potential to push approaches towards a watery exit, stage left.

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The administrative district of **Normandy**, to the northwest of Ile-de-France along the Atlantic coast, is another escape for city dwellers. Forty-five miles outside the city,

The house and gardens of Claude Monet are preserved and maintained and open to visitors in Giverny.

the flower garden and arboretum that Claude Monet created in Giverny have been painstakingly replanted and restored – you’ll recognize many views of his carefully-planned garden from his paintings, and the colorful décor inside his house is also remarkable.

Proceeding northwest, the countryside starts getting hillier and greener, bringing into view the legacy of an enterprising agricultural past carefully preserved and perfected: terraced apple orchards, half-timbered barns and farmhouses, hand-painted bottle-shaped signs. If you’re curious about what’s brewing, stop to fortify yourself at the Boulard distillery for a sampling of the delicate, robust apple brandy known as Calvados, the traditional Norman spirit. Cool coastal conditions are ideally suited for cultivating dozens of varieties of apples, and since antiquity farmers have fermented *cidre* for imbibing – and for distilling Calvados.

Americans will always associate Normandy with the D-Day invasion that turned the tide of World War II. Odd as it may seem, it is not difficult to combine a visit to the landing site with a round of golf – once you get used to the notion of a golf course planted atop this consecrated battleground.

There is a certain makeshift quality to the Golf Omaha Beach clubhouse, which features a photograph of Dwight Eisenhower’s son John at the course’s opening. The general who commanded the bold and perilous assault on the Normandy coast became a president whose name was practically synonymous with golf; and there, beyond the cliffs past the 6th green, is the goosebump-inducing sight of the artillery bunkers and the remains of the artificial port through

Golf a la Française

Cost: French golf is remarkably affordable. Green fees around the country are seldom over €120 (~\$128); an annual membership at Golf de Moliets is €1750, regarded as high.

Handicapping: Evidently the prevailing golf sin in France is the vanity handicap: you won't find many sandbaggers, at least among the double digits. The golfer is not required to input every score, and may not enter the score of any round played solo. Thus Jacques might report the single round he played under 90, even if he never broke 97 in his other five or six rounds. (Clearly, wagering doesn't play much of a role in matches here.) The unfortunate consequence

is that once in a rare while you may encounter a player who has no business playing from the back tees vainly hitting wayward drives from them, but such is the exception and hardly the rule.

Tee to green: Caddies are hard to find except at the fancier clubs; golf carts are almost impossible to rent, except at the very hilliest courses. Pull-carts are the rule here. While last summer's drought in France took its toll on a few tracks, generally speaking you will find good lies in the fairway and healthy greens – in part, no doubt, because green speeds are kept well under 10 at most courses.



Golf de Chantilly

which massive amounts of materiel poured in the victory over the Axis. The holes are named for Allied generals, and a pro-am is held every year on the anniversary of D-Day.

Ronald Reagan's 1984 speech at the U.S. Ranger Monument on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of D-Day here kicked off tourism development, and now a steady stream of visitors comes to see and pay tribute. The terrain still bears the marks of the epic battle: bullet-scarred German fortifications and pillboxes constructed so durably that many are still largely intact, and bomb craters left from aerial attacks and Naval artillery shells. A mile or two down the coast is the Normandy American Cemetery, where the somber pattern of thousands of seaside grave markers weaves a noble tapestry. The memorial to the fallen in battle has been fashioned with a monumental economy of decoration and faultless taste – elegant chapels and a reflecting pool decorate this landscape of liberation with somber grace.

The chic beachfront city of Deauville – a sort of Gallic Sag Harbor – draws an affluent crowd for its annual thoroughbred yearling auctions and summertime races – and in September, the prestigious American Film Festival. Scattered among the traditional half-timbered Norman houses are elegant boutiques and cafes, and in the middle of town the grand old Casino made famous by

the French caper film "Bob the Gambler." The Hôtel du Golf Barrière Deauville sits in the hills above the city: rooms offer views of the golf courses surrounding the hotel, framed by the blue Channel beyond. Its three nines are designated by the French tricolor: the Red and White nines were originally laid out by Simpson in the late 1920s, then touched up by Henry Cotton when he added the Blue nine forty years later. It's a genteel and tactful challenge, with just enough difficulty to engage your imagination and skill.

Château La Chenevière makes for a very convenient stay: less than a mile from Omaha Beach, luxurious, elegant, comprehensive (tennis court, heated pool, stately grounds, whirlpool en suite). This 18th-century mansion was completely renovated in 1988; it served as German officers' headquarters during the war until the night before D-Day, when local Resistance fighters destroyed its communications lines. Now La Chenevière does a brisk trade hosting well-to-do tourists, particularly Americans.

Be prepared to enjoy a gastronomic dinner, that uniquely French dining ritual so intrinsic to the national identity that it is recognized by Unesco as an "Intangible Cultural Heritage." Come as you are, because the formality belongs alone to the servers: dinner is a performance conducted by the chef, with your waiter and the battery

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of servants acting as stagehands. Their brisk, cheerful efficiency allows guests to enjoy not only the food but one another's company. Thanks to the lasting influence of the nouvelle cuisine movement, serving sizes have shrunk, and the rich, heavy sauces and dressings have been largely set aside in favor of intense tastes and textures delivered by the spoonful. On a cool October evening we savored a fillet of monkfish steamed amid several different preparations of fennel, dripped with a wine sauce and permeated with the mellow spice of local chorizo sprinkled throughout – a taste of early autumn.

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The region of **Aquitaine** extends along the Atlantic down the southwest corner of France, bordering Spain to the south. The city of Bordeaux, center of the country's most famous wine-producing region, was long regarded as a dull industry town; starting in the early 2000s, mayor Alain Juppé

started a makeover: building a tram, washing buildings of centuries of black soot, and razing the old warehouses and rusting cranes along the Garonne River to clear the views. The rediscovered vitality of Aquitaine's capital, now a bustling hub for tourism, is embodied in its brand-new multimedia museum of wine, *La Cité du Vin* ("Wine City"), an informative and engaging shrine to oenology and viticulture, with genuinely innovative interactive presentations – a bank of scents for you to nose, clever 3-D video depictions of the history of wine in religion and politics, even a playful tribute to the hangover.

Several magnificent 18th- and 19th-century residences have been converted to luxury hotels: smack in the middle of town across a busy plaza from the Opera House is the grand InterContinental Bordeaux, a palatial hostelry with two floors of a spa, a rooftop bar and sun deck, a Gordon Ramsay

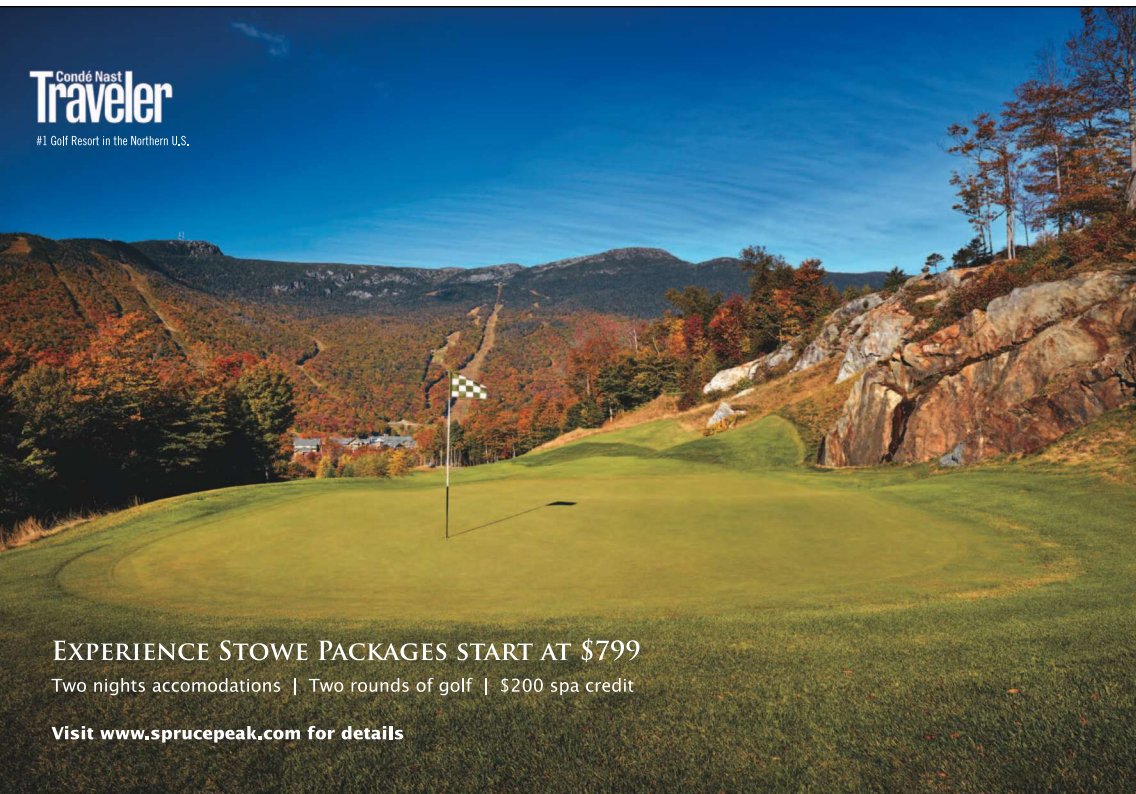
restaurant on the main floor. Wander a few blocks off the touristy avenues and you will find clusters of cheery bistros and taverns offering excellent local cuisine at reasonable prices.

To the north of Bordeaux is Saint-Émilion, with a winemaking tradition dating back to Roman times – and a brand-new Tom Doak-designed course at Grand Saint-Emilion-nais Golf Club. This idyllic, engaging walk in the woods combines forgiving fairways and approaches demanding careful strategic decisions. Don't expect fast greens here; these small putting surfaces are slow, but pitched as steeply as the Pyrenees.

Golf du Médoc, 90 minutes away, has two 18s: the Châteaux course, built in 1989, one of Bill Coore's early efforts, and the 1991 Vignes, designed by Rod Whitman of Cabot Links fame. Laid out over a scrubby, relatively flat heathland, Médoc provides an amiable resort course experience, with

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Its beaches have made the swank resort city of Biarritz, lying on the Atlantic coast in Basque country, a popular resort destination – “the surfing capital of Europe,” thanks to big swells and mild temperatures – and the sandy soil helped germinate a handful of remarkable golf courses. Willie Park would probably not recognize what’s left of the course he built at Golf de Biarritz-Le Phare in 1888; Park’s original par-3 “Chasm” hole, featuring a green scored with a deep, traversing channel that lent the name “Biarritz” to its many descendants, was rerouted out of existence in the early 20th century. (Architecture fans will be glad to hear plans are underway to restore it.) Compact but not cramped, superbly conditioned, with fluffy bunkers and postcard views of the Pyrenees, the club has a

The 17th hole at Golf de Chantilly’s Vineuil course; an aerial view of Chateau La Cheneviere in Normandy; the course at Omaha Beach overlooks Port en Bessin’s fishing village; Place de la Concorde, the most famous square in Paris; a seaside setting at Golf de Moliets in Aquitaine.

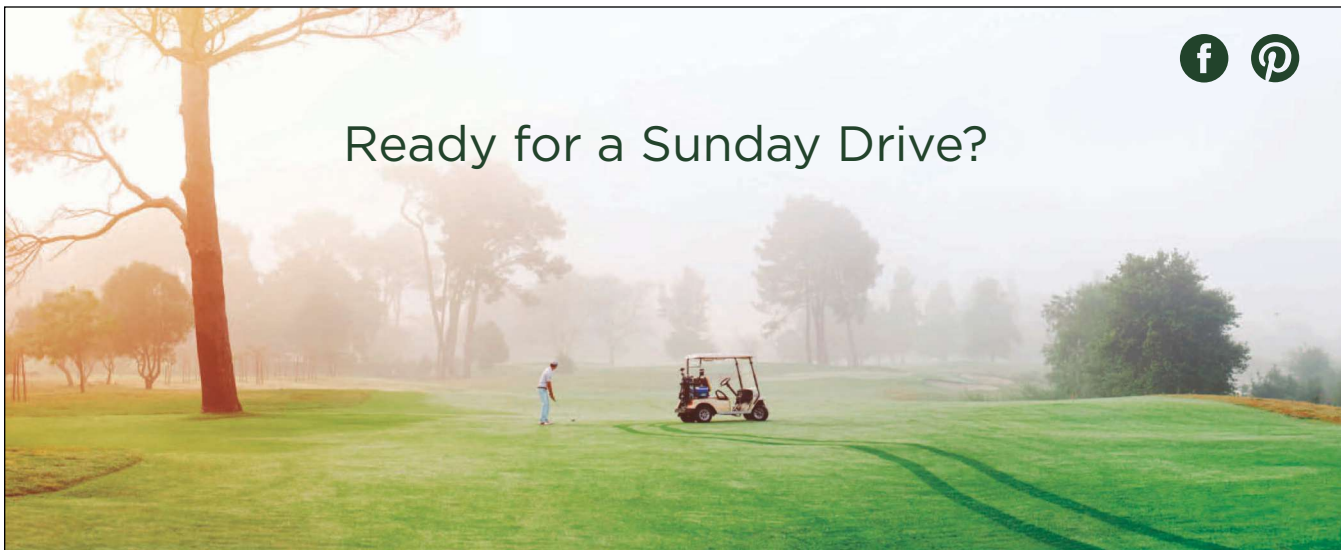
friendly, easygoing membership –Biarritz is an old-fashioned club in the best sense. The recently-renovated Maria Regina hotel nearby has one of the greatest lobbies you’ll ever find, resembling the interior of a grand opera house.

That evening, I made my way to Magescq for a gastronomic dinner at the Relais de la Poste, a two-star Michelin restaurant in this small town northwest of Biarritz. Afterward I got to enjoy a drink of local armagnac with Chef Jean Coussau and his wife Annick, who runs the business end of the restaurant along with the chef’s brother, Jacques. Chef Jean is an ardent golfer – his wary expression turns warm at the mention of the game. With Annick kindly translating, he chatted about the annual late-autumn golf vacation they take a few hours down the road in

Bilbao, Spain.

Chef Jean is a member of the unpretentious Golf de Moliets, an excellent modern golf course that can stand with all but a few American semi-private courses of the last thirty years. Built by Robert Trent Jones in the mid-1980s, Moliets offers a pleasing rhythm and scenic variety, highlighted by a glorious linksy stretch along the beach, where the smooth inviting undulations go well with the surf – which wasn’t up on the day of my visit, maybe why board legend Kelly Slater showed up to play 18 late in the afternoon. I missed seeing him, since I had to drive back to Bordeaux to make the train to Paris the next morning.

I wasn’t too disappointed about departing, though; I know I’ll return to France. So will you. ■



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