

Golf and L'art de Vivre in France

FIVE-STAR LUXURY AT A THREE-STAR PRICE TAG

By Anita Draycott

If ever a nation has mastered the art of living well, it's France. Think champagne, foie gras, pampering spas, fairy-tale chateaux and you think France, right? But did you know that France also has 600 golf courses? That's more than the rest of continental Europe put together. And except for the Riviera in summer, they're practically empty. Unlike the North American "conveyor belt" mentality, golf in France is an unrushed affair. On most courses your green fee, averaging about 40 Euros, entitles you to unlimited play



The 17th-Century chateau at Bélesbat (left) and oceanside at Biarritz.

for the day. You don't have to speak French; a green is a green, a slice is a slice, and a birdie is a birdie. Best of all, you'll enjoy a five-star vacation for a three-star price tag.

Last fall, my husband Bill and I treated ourselves to two weeks of golf, gastronomy and chateaux in three different regions.

CHÂTEAU HOPPING AT BÉLESBAT

We began our swing through France at the Domain de Bélesbat, a 17th-century chateau just 55 kilometres south of Paris. From our window we had a grand view of the formal French garden and the 18th green of the estate's golf course.

Ranked in the top 25 by the French golf press, this modern style course was built into an 18th century walled park. Head professional Daniel Mercier refers to the front nine with 28 bunkers, as the beach; the back nine that meanders around the Essonne River, he has nicknamed Vietnam. Only the birds and us were out on the course on our first morning there. By the 15th hole, we encountered

one other player, a distinguished gentleman who could pass for Maurice Chevalier. On the 18th tee, we met Mademoiselle Belle, the estate's pet deer who is so tame, she'll follow you down the fairway, maybe even help you find your ball. With the chiming bells from the church in the nearby village of Boutigny, the views of the turreted castle gates, the majestic swans swimming around the moat and the enchanting forest, it was like playing golf in a fairytale come true.

We could have played unlimited golf at Bélesbat but on the recommendation of general manager Guy Maranzana, we set out in the afternoon to explore this glorious countryside. First stop was the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, a 17th-century palace built for M. Fouquet, minister of finance for Louis XIV. The Sun King's money man was obviously no pauper. After touring the sumptuous apartments, we took a golf cart tour of the gardens complete with grand canals, fountains, pools and statuary, designed by Le Notre, who later created the gardens at Versailles.

Next on the château tour was Fontainebleau, proving that nothing succeeds like excess. It's hard to think of this gilded palace as a hunting camp but it was apparently a favourite retreat for Napoleon I and French royals.

Back at our very own château there was time for a dip in the pool and a sauna before dinner at the Domaine's Pavillon gourmet restaurant — escargots and artichokes in a tomato garlic cream sauce, sea bass poached in red wine and sublime crème brûlée.

BASQUING IN BIARRITZ

I love the name of this town. It sounds like the town feels. Biarritz combines French flare with Spanish gusto. By the 19th century this once-quiet whaling port became the seaside resort rage with the who's who of Europe. Napoleon III built Villa Eugénie as a summer residence for his wife. More royals and stars followed, including English lords and ladies. And they brought golf to Biarritz. No less than 10 courses lie within a 15-mile radius.

Built in 1888, the second oldest course in Europe, Le Phare, named for the lighthouse that dominates over a sea-side cliff, is in the heart of town. At first glance the beautifully manicured tract surrounded by half-timbered villas seems straightforward. But don't let this deceptive par 69 fool you. Seve Ballesteros scored an 11 on the par-3 12th thanks to a radically sloping green and hungry bunkers. For sexy golf duds, pay a visit to the chic boutique at the entrance to the course.

Biarritz also boasts one of the best golf practice facilities in Europe with a driving range and stations for putting, pitching and chipping at the International Training Centre. On the adjoining nine-hole Ilbarritz course that teeters over the Atlantic Ocean, you can put your practice to the test. It's tight and tough.

My favourite course is Arcangues. Nestled into the foothills of the Pyrenees, the course is laid out on the estate of the flamboyant Marquis d'Arcangues. In fact, you'll be teeing off and putting in the backyard of his vine-covered chateau on holes 13 through 16. Then it's past the doghouse and clay tennis courts, and up a hill to an ancient chapel and cemetery. I was hoping that the Marquis might invite us in for a cup of tea.

Golf carts aren't nearly as popular in Europe as in North America but you'll want to hire one at Arcangues, unless you're a mountain goat. In any case it's time to treat your aching golf muscles to another Biarritz specialty, thalassotherapy.

I recommend the ultra modern Hotel Sofitel Miramar. After some under-



water exercises with hydrojets, an algae wrap and a massage, you'll be ready for a night on the town. Start with cocktails and a dazzling sunset at the ever-so-luxurious Hotel du Palais. If you've got a craving for seafood, walk down to Chez Albert in the Old Port where I highly recommend the zesty gazpacho and grilled langoustines. Another find is the cozy Le Bistrot des Halles beside the food market. Try the slow braised lamb shank or fish soup under a pastry dome. If you're a gambling girl, you might want to try your luck at the beachside casino.

In between those 10 golf courses you'll want to explore this colourful Basque region of France. Saint Jean de Luz and Saint Jean Pied de Port are two of the prettiest villages you'll find. Try the famous Basque cakes filled with almond custard and cherry jam or Basque chicken smothered with Espelette red peppers. Sangria on the menu and stores selling espadrilles are reminders that the Spanish border is around the corner.

WINE IMMERSION AT CHÂTEAU DES VIGIERS

Tucked into the famous vineyards between Bordeaux and Bergerac, Château des Vigiers will wow you from the first





The Arcangues course is tucked in to the Pyrenees' foothills, and winds through several vineyards.

glimpse. A white swan swims on a lake beside the 18th green. Behind is the grand 16th-century château, nicknamed "le Petit Versailles." You know you're in the heart of the Dordogne, famous for its foie gras, wine and truffles, when you see cases of goose liver and bottles of Chateau des Vigiers wine on sale at the pro shop.

Des Vigiers is a family affair. Lars and Elisabeth Petersson bought the decrepit property in 1989. An avid golfer, Lars supervised the golf course construction and château restoration while Elisabeth became the interior decorator. Their son, Philip, is head of sales. Inside, the château is furnished exactly the way you'd hope. A sweeping staircase leads to romantic bedrooms decorated with rich tapestries, Oriental carpets and canopy beds. Bathrooms are wall-to-wall marble. A fire burning in one of the salons tempts you to curl up with a book on the generous velvet sofa.

But we came to play golf. Donald Steel, considered one of Europe's best "natural" golf course architects, designed the layout to radiate among the plum orchards, vineyards and forests, using the dramatic red-roofed château and lake as the centrepiece. Also tastefully landscaped into the tract

is a driving range on which the distance flags are appropriately anchored into wine barrels. Here, as on all of the other courses we played in France, the course was blissfully uncrowded and arranging a tee time was no problem.

We could happily have played 36 holes a day but François Bras, owner of France Golf Tours, who organized our trip, suggested some tempting outings. In the walled medieval town of Saint-Emilion, he arranged a tour of the cellars and a wine tasting at the prestigious Angelus winery whose vintages are found on some of the world's poshest wine lists.

Another day, we drove toward Bordeaux to the Les Sources de Caudalie, a unique "vinothérapie" spa where you literally steep in barrels of mineral water and wine extracts. The daughter of vintners, Mathilde Thomas has created a unique series of rejuvenating and slimming treatments using grapes and the estate's hot spring water. Where but in France would you indulge in a Merlot wrap or a crushed Cabernet scrub?

In Bergerac we took a picture of a statue of Cyrano de Bergerac whose famous nose had been chopped off by some vandals. Then we visited some other famous noses — the



truffle-sniffing dogs of M. Martin who gave us a tour of his truffle farm. Naturally, we bought some tins of the coveted black fungi as souvenirs.

Back at the Château des Vigiers the staff treated us as long-time friends and houseguests. The chef gave us his recipes for truffles and foie gras. The spa director convinced Bill that he might like a massage. She was right. The chap in the pro shop had our clubs ready on trolleys each morning. We almost had the golf course to ourselves. Often we'd play in the morning, go sightseeing in the afternoon and shoot a couple of holes before aperitifs. The cuisine was decadent and delicious and the wine plentiful and cheap. It was a lifestyle to which we could enthusiastically become accustomed. Fortunately, there are plenty of French châteaux, chefs and golf courses waiting to be explored.

When you go

François Bras runs France Golf Tours. He will make all your golf, château and transportation arrangements, as well as suggesting spas, excursions, wine-tastings and shopping sprees. 011 33 1 34 75 20 49; info@francegolftours.com; www.francegolftours.com.

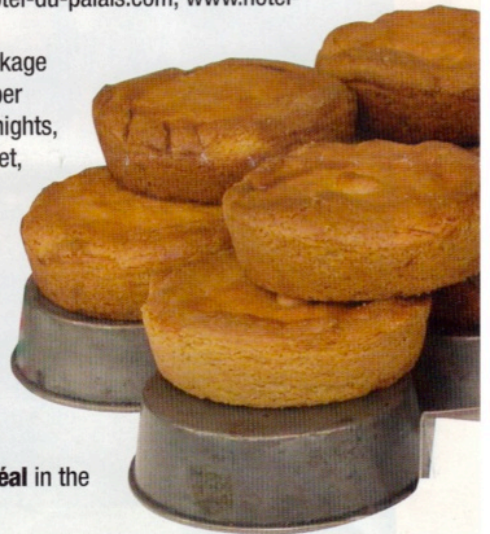
- **Domain de Bélesbat**, 91820 Boutigny-sur-Essonne. 011 33 1 69 23 19 00; belesbatreception@wanadoo.fr; www.belesbat.com.

Rates, starting at 159 Euros per person, include room, dinner, breakfast and golf.

- **Hotel du Palais**, 1 Avenue de L'Imperatrice, Biarritz. 1 800 223 6800; reception@hotel-du-palais.com; www.hotel-du-palais.com.

The Grand Golfer package starting at 1,334 Euros per person, includes seven nights, American breakfast buffet, use of sea-water pool, sauna, fitness centre and private putting green, six greens fees at six nearby courses and practice time at the Ilbarritz Training Centre.

- A less expensive alternative is to stay at the charming **Villa Vauréal** in the



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