

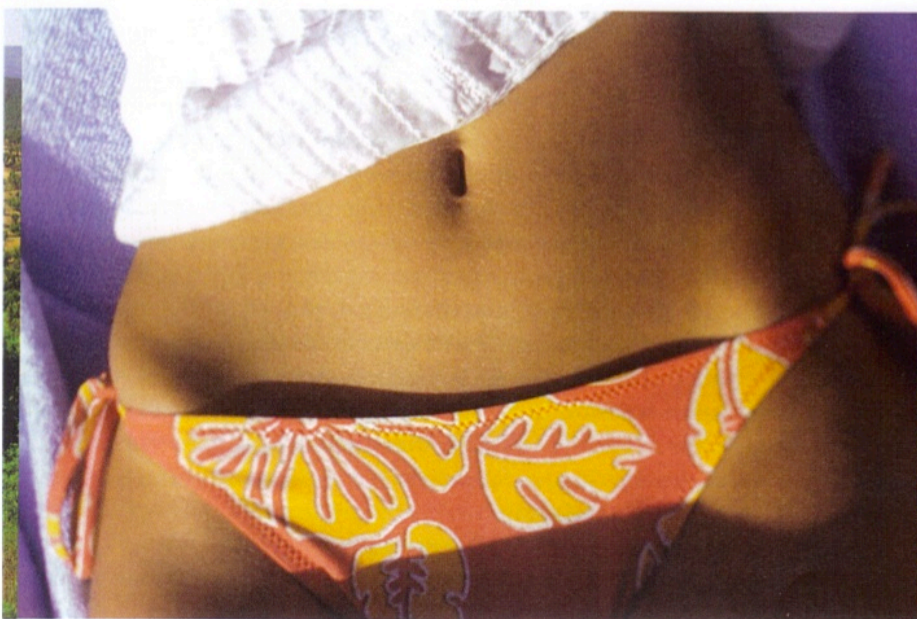
Think French Riviera and what comes to mind? La vie en rose. Bronzed topless babes at Saint-Tropez. High rollers in flashy Ferraris racing down the vertiginous corniches to Monte Carlo's roulette wheels. Stars born and scorned by the movie moguls at the Cannes Film Festival. Glamour and glitz.

But golf? You bet. I am happy to report that there are more than thirty courses tucked between the Côte d'Azur and the hills of Provence. You need not speak French. A green is a green, a slice is a slice, a birdie is a birdie. And if ever a nation has mastered the art of fine living, it's the French, so your get-away comes with sun-drenched Mediterranean cuisine, spectacular scenery and a tour of some of the world's most glamorous towns.

My husband and I decided that Cannes was as good a place as any to acclimatize ourselves to the hedonistic pleasures of "Club Med." Once a sleepy fishing village, it was discovered by accident in 1834 when Lord Brougham, former lord chancellor of England, spent the night here en route to Italy. He never left. Thanks to him, London's upper crust arrived, and as the British are wont to do, they introduced golf to the Riviera.

After a languorous lunch and some sensational people-watching at the private beach restaurant of the chic Martinez Hotel on the palm-studded La Croisette oceanside promenade, we ventured less than half an hour north to the hilltop town of Mougins. The luxurious Relais & Châteaux, Le Mas Candille, made an ideal base for our first two rounds, not to mention some divine creature comforts. Each room is furnished with original objets d'art,

LEFT: Gary Player designed the golf course at the Château de Taulane. BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: The vista and cuisine at the Amarante Golf Plaza are sensational. Ste. Maxime is a Riviera roller coaster. Perfecting one's tan at Cannes. Seillans, one of the most beautiful villages in France.





LEFT TO RIGHT: The patio of the Domaine de Châteauneuf is a pleasant spot for an *aperitif* after a round on the neighbouring St. Baume golf course. Participants in the cologne-making workshop in Grasse receive a diploma and a bottle of their signature scent.

opulent fabrics and fine antiques. Soak in a huge tub in your marble bathroom while watching a flat screen television that has been cleverly mounted onto the mirror and you'll find that Le Mas allows guests to enjoy period trappings, without being trapped in the past.

Le Mas also boasts the only Shiseido Spa in Europe. The Zen-like sanctuary offers a variety of holistic treatments based on a balance of Oriental and Western philosophies. The four-hands Qi massage, a sort of *ménage à trois à la spa*, is my definition of nirvana.

Fortified with some buttery croissants, freshly squeezed orange juice and espresso, we were ready to take our first swing at St. Donat Golf & Country Club. Up until 1993, fields of jasmine cultivated for the perfume industry in nearby Grasse grew where fairways now lie. Designed by Robert Trent Jones Junior, this par-seventy-one meanders around an ancient estate granted by Napoleon III to the original aristocratic owners as hunting grounds. On the eighth hole, golfers pass a Roman bridge and a Provençal farmhouse surrounded by stately cypress trees. Number ten features a waterfall and private chapel.

NOSING AROUND GRASSE

About ten minutes away, nestled in the Provence hills, lies the charming and somewhat sleepy town of Grasse. Thanks to its mild microclimate and ideal growing conditions, you can literally follow your nose to Grasse. In winter, golden mimosa brightens the hillsides. Summer brings the heady scent of lavender, roses and orange blossoms, followed by jasmine in the fall.

Grasse didn't always smell this sweet. Back in the sixteenth century it was a town of tanners who discovered that aromatic herbs such as myrtle helped overcome the stench of the skins and also improved the quality of the leather. Back in those days, the most important status symbol an aristocratic Italian could flaunt was a pair of perfumed

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gloves. Grasse, at the encouragement of Catherine de Medici, became the main supplier. As the demand for gloves decreased, the tanners turned to perfume making. By the eighteenth century, Grasse was the world leader of scent and remains so today.

In parfumeries all around town, they've perfected the art of putting a seductive scent into a bottle. But we were not about to uncover the secret recipes of the famous "noses," who create fragrances for such prestigious houses as Chanel, Guerlain and Dior. Those laboratories are off limits to tourists. However, at the Molinard, we attended a ninety-minute workshop and concocted our very own colognes. My creation made me sneeze, but it certainly gave me an appreciation for the talents of the makers of fine perfumes.

We also took a swing at the Royal Mougins Golf Club, ten minutes



LEFT TO RIGHT: Robert Trent Jones Junior designed the St. Donat Golf Course that meanders around an ancient hunting estate near the hilltop town of Mougins. Mega-yachts line the pretty pastel port of Saint-Tropez made famous by sex kitten, Brigit Bardot back in 1956.

away. Built on a valley estate that belonged to a countess, this championship track by Robert von Hagge defines target golf, especially on the signature par-three (Angel's Jump), requiring a shot from cliffside hugging tees over a waterfall and pond to a postage-stamp green. It's a preview of the narrow and watery adventure to come.

Lunch at most North American golf courses is about as exciting as a burger stop at Wendy's. In France, expect gourmet fare and fine wines served on china, crystal and crisp linen—perhaps a terrine of foie gras, roasted monkfish and a selection of cheeses.

We walked off lunch with a stroll around the village of Mougins, a magnet for celebrities and great chefs. Pablo Picasso spent the latter part of his life here. Christian Dior, Paul Anka and Winston Churchill also visited. In the Museum of Photography there's a collection of photos of Picasso and his entourage taken by André Villers. The twisting, narrow streets are full of antique stores, galleries and shaded squares. For a splurge, consider dinner at Le Moulin de Mougins, where chef Alain Llorca orchestrates his thirteen-course tapas menu.

Even if you're not a gambler, you must head over to the Principality of Monaco to catch the action at the Monte Carlo casino, a Belle Époque wedding cake of a building. You might not spot James Bond but there will be no lack of glamour girls and tanned playboys.

Back on the "Riv," the lofty perch of Ste. Maxime golf course maximizes its commanding views of the Bay of Saint-Tropez far below. You'll want to pack your camera in your bag for this roller coaster, designed by British architect Donald Harradine, especially for the panoramic views on the elevated tees at numbers eleven and fifteen.

At the adjoining Amarante Golf Plaza Hotel, our suite's huge balcony afforded marvelous views of the course, sea and topless sunbathers by the pool below. At the Relais Provence gastronomic restaurant we feasted on a foie gras and artichoke salad and rack of lamb.

SAINT TOO MUCH

The Amarante offers free shuttle service down the cliff to the town of Ste. Maxime, a sweet little port crammed with cafés and shops selling typical Provençal fabrics, lavender sachets and olive wood dishes. Its notorious neighbour is Saint-Tropez. When the voluptuous teenager Bridget Bardot, sporting capris and Ray-Bans, arrived to make *When God Created Woman* back in 1956, she put it on the jetsetters' map.

St. Trop (Saint Too Much), as it's called, defines the expression "nothing exceeds like excess." If you want to avoid the snub of certain waiters, you'll need a buff body, designer shades, at least two cell phones, a poodle with a Prada collar and a mega-yacht that's about the size of QE2, complete with handsome deckhands who fluff pillows, pop champagne corks and polish brass.

However, wandering into the back streets of St. Trop we discovered a quieter ambience with pastel houses, outdoor markets and elderly Maurice Chevalier types smoking stinky Gitanes cigarettes and playing pétanque beneath the plane trees. You can't help but notice the intensity of the light here that attracted such painters as Matisse and Signac.

To reach Saint-Tropez, take my advice and board a boat from Ste. Maxime instead of driving. In peak season there's a perpetual traffic jam on the narrow road linking the two towns. Besides, the cruise is far more pleasant and the crew will point out such highlights as Bardot's favourite beach and some zillionaires' villas.

The next day, as we drove about an hour west to the Dolce Frégate golf resort, we were entertained by the classified ads on the English-speaking radio station looking for chefs, sommeliers and engineers for yachts with names like Pink Panther, Serenity and Blue Princess. Frégate is probably the most dramatic golf course on the Riviera. California designer Ronald Fream has squeezed a masterpiece into the quintessential Provençal countryside, traversing vineyards of Bandol



LEFT TO RIGHT: Wisteria drapes the loggia at Provence at Terre Blanche, the Four Seasons' first resort in Europe. Breakfast with a view. Typical Provençal tablecloths make fine souvenirs. The scenic seventh hole at Terre Blanche's championship course.

grapes, olive groves and pine forests and offering cliff-top vistas of the azure Mediterranean beyond. The eighteenth is a tough uphill battle with hidden water features on the left. An errant hook might send your Titleist into the hotel swimming pool. Frégate was so good we decided to tackle it twice. Besides, we needed an excuse to spend the night and enjoy the exquisite cuisine of chef Hervé Robert at the resort's Le Mas des Vignes, where we indulged on sea urchins and scrambled eggs drizzled with truffle oil, a hot pot of prawns, mussels and winkles in a saffron sauce and a Clementine crème brûlée served with honey ice cream.

The next day we decided to get a final whiff of salt air at the nearby fishing village of Cassis, where towering white cliffs guard the ruins of a medieval castle. We took a glass-bottomed boat through the fjord-like finger bays called calanques, then stopped at Chez Nino, one of the cafés lining the port, for a glass of delicate Cassis white wine and a steaming bowl of bouillabaisse, a seafood stew spiked with garlicky mayonnaise. From Marseilles east along the coast, each village and town claims to make the best bouillabaisse, but my vote goes to Nino.

We bade *au revoir* to the Mediterranean Sea and turned our car north into the hills of the Var region of Provence. History tells us that the relics of Mary Magdalene were discovered in a crypt in the town of St. Maximin. Since 1280, folks have been making pilgrimages to the splendid but unfinished Basilica of Saint Mary Magdalene. But for we golf pilgrims the destination was the nearby Domaine de Châteauneuf, a Relais & Châteaux eighteenth-century *bastide* (country mansion).

The St. Baume golf course beside the hotel was a relaxing walk in the park compared to the challenges of nearby Barbaroux, the only European design by Pete and P.B. Dye. Barbaroux took us on a giddy 6,614-yard ride through the indomitable Provence countryside, complete with ravines, vineyards, six lakes with signature Dye retaining

beams and the largest greens in Europe. I must admit that the demonic Dyes' extreme extravaganza, with its slope rating of 138, managed to both dazzle and defeat us. We consoled ourselves by stopping in at the Triennes winery across from the hotel to sample some rosés, a dip in the pool and a four-course dinner on the terrace of the Châteauneuf.

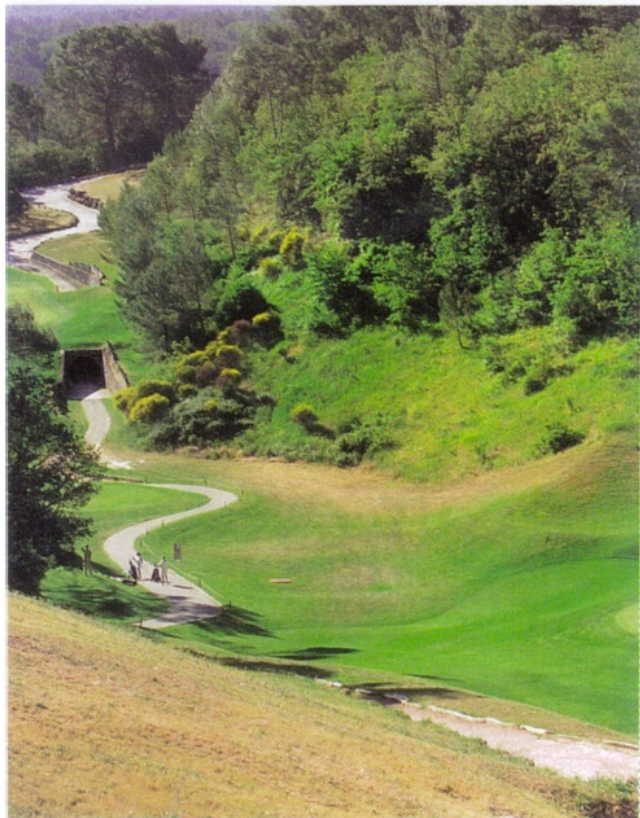
INTO THE HAUT VAR

Now we were ready to venture further northeast into a untamed, windswept region known as the Haut Var, where wild thyme and lavender flourish on rocky hillsides. To say the Domaine du Château de Taulane is isolated would be an understatement, but trust me, it's worth the spectacular and somewhat unnerving drive into the foothills of the French Alps to an altitude of 1,000 metres above sea level.

The long driveway to Taulane is lined with mature pine trees, giving the alpine air an invigorating scent. When Mario Contini, a keen golfer himself, bought Taulane in 1985, the eighteenth-century château was a crumbling ruin surrounded by fields of wild flowers. Contini hired Gary Player to design a magnificent 6,850-yard course to radiate around his restored château. Both opened in 1992.

The likes of Michael Douglas and Sean Connery have played in Pro-Ams at Taulane. With its wide fairways, many elevated tees and seven lakes, the scenery is constantly changing. Each fairway is like a private theatre culminating in the grand finale eighteenth, a par-five dogleg left that shares a pond and double green with number nine. The red-roofed château makes a stately backdrop.

Taulane is a tranquil haven unto itself, offering nary a reason to leave the property. After our round we sipped some Kir Royals on the terrace and watched the sun go down. More active types can take a hike, play tennis or use the pool, hamman (Turkish sauna) and fitness facilities. Eventually, everyone will end up at the Marquise de Lisle



Barbaroux golf course, the brilliant and demonic brainchild of architects Pete and P.B. Dye is a giddy ride throughout the indomitable Provence countryside.

Contacts

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



Le Mas Candille
www.lesmascandille.com

Domaine de Châteauneuf
www.domaine-de-chateauneuf.com

Saint Donat Golf & Country Club
www.golfsaintdonat.com

Château de Taulane
www.chateau-taulane.com

Royal Mougins
www.royalmougins.fr

Barbaroux Golf Club
www.barbaroux.com

Air France flies daily from Toronto and thrice daily from Montreal to Paris in summer with convenient connections to Nice and Cannes where you rent a car. 1-800-667-2747; www.airfrance.ca

Amarante Golf Plaza /Golf de Sainte Maxime
www.jjhotels.com

Four Seasons Resort Provence at Terre Blanche
www.fourseasons.com

Dolce Frégate Hotel Resort
www.fregate.dolce.com

Maison de la France
www.franceguide.com

dining room where chef Benjamin Pensec and sommelier Jean Michel Bracco perform a brilliant *pas de deux* each night.

For our grand finale, we headed further east to Provence at Terre Blanche, the Four Seasons' first resort in Europe, only an hour from Nice's airport. The staff here have perfected the art of spoiling guests—from the seamless check-in to the golf-cart transfer along the lavender-lined Allée de Provence to our suite. Opened in 2004, the resort, built of local stone with terracotta tile roofs, blends seamlessly with the architecture of the perched villages in the surrounding countryside, as do the two eighteen-hole golf courses: Le Château and Le Riou.

Welsh architect Dave Thomas designed the thirty-six holes in four loops of nine, all starting and finishing close to the clubhouse. Both courses enjoy sweeping views of the Southern Alps, winding through spectacular pine- and oak-lined fairways, punctuated by a series of valleys, lakes and cascading ravines. At 7,235 yards from the tips, Le Château is wider and longer with dramatic waterfalls and a castle ruin presiding over the sixth green. The shorter, tighter Le Riou (6,567 yards), occupying higher terrain, is the perfect complement.

If you find your game needs a tune-up, there's a David Leadbetter Academy at the resort. And if you're really serious, the Biomecaswing Performance Center, the first in Europe, provides training similar to what the pros undergo.

"You over-rotate on your backswing and under-rotate on your forward swing," pronounced Biomecaswing's director Jean-Jacques Rivet,

who spent fifteen years on the PGA European Tour. Bingo! I hadn't even picked up a club and Monsieur Rivet's X-Ray eyes had succinctly sized up my swing, based on my posture and gait.

First, the Biomecaswing program takes a scan of your body to define your physiological pros and cons, then, using advanced technical equipment, you are trained to swing to the best of your ability. A series of flexibility, strength conditioning and coordination programs follow, plus a custom-made orthotic shoe insert for balance.

As intrigued as we were by this state-of-the-art swing doctoring, we decided to put the Biomecaswing program on our "must do" list for the future and spend our final days exploring the surrounding hilltop towns. Our favourite was the fortified medieval village of Seillans, where the townsfolk were out en masse decorating every available inch of the labyrinth of the cobbled streets, fountains and portals with floral arrangements for the annual June flower festival. Classified as one of the most beautiful villages in France, Seillans, on this visit, had outdone itself. No wonder artist Max Ernst chose to retire here.

On our last evening, we succumbed to Chef Philippe Jourdin's *dégustation* menu at Terre Blanche's Faventia restaurant. From the vintage bubbles poured from the champagne trolley to a final spoonful of praline and molten chocolate cake topped with pistachio ice cream, I was reminded of a musing by the nineteenth century French poet and *bon vivant*, Charles Baudelaire: "Decadence must be considered the high point of civilization." *Touché.* **CS**