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GOLF | JULY 8, 2011

The Fine Courses of France

A Country Known for Its Gastronomic and Cultural Heritage Aims to Become a Bigger Player in Golf

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By WILLIAM LYONS



Cl.Rodriguez

The "Chateaux Course" at the Golf du Medoc in Bordeaux.

Le Golf National is a course that can be as punishing as it is picturesque. Nestled among low, undulating gorse-covered mounds on the outskirts of Paris, a 10-minute drive from Louis XIV's palace of Versailles, it is marked by a series of hazardous impediments from large bunkers, tight fairways, impenetrable rough and water. On the 18th hole, the course reaches its zenith, a par-5 where the player has to avoid a lake on the left-hand side before placing the ball onto an island green. Hit it straight and you have a chance; deviate an inch and it will not forgive.

"If you start missing the fairways on this one, you are in deep, deep trouble, says French golf champion Thomas Levet, who on Sunday won the French Open at Le Golf National. "It is never an easy course to manage, but if you like it, you can score on it."

More than 150 kilometers away, set amid an oak-and-birch forest in the Loire Valley, the course may be different but the story is the same. At Les Bordes, canny golfers should pack extra balls. Designed by celebrated U.S. course designer Robert von Hagge for

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Associated Press

A view of the 18th hole at Le Golf National near Paris.

Baron Marcel Bich, the co-founder of Bic disposable pens, it has been described as one of the most enchanting picturesque and tranquil settings in the whole of France. Since the death of Baron Bich in 1994, the course has been open to members and their guests. It has very narrow fairways and is describes by Mr. Levet as, "probably the toughest course you will play in your life."

Travel further, to the Provençal hills that sit atop the Cote d'Azur and you will find Le Golf de Cannes-Mougins, northwest of Antibes. For many years home to the Cannes Open, it has been described as brutal and narrow, with some of the quickest greens you will see anywhere. But as Mr. Levet says: "Battling against the coastal wind on the first two holes really puts you in the mood."

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Aerial view of Le Golf d'Étretat

France has a golf lineage that traces its origins back to the mid-19th century, when English visitors to the popular spa town of Pau in the mid-Pyrenees created Europe's first golf course. Today, the country boasts a slew of picturesque and historic courses from the dramatic white cliffs of Normandy, home of Etretat golf club, to the foothills of the Pyrenees, where Mount Canigou can be seen from the Golf de Saint Cyprien near Perpignan. Many of these have been laid out and built within the past two decades.

Yet in the league table of golf tourism, there is a feeling that the country still lags behind its European neighbors. England, Scotland, Portugal and Spain enjoy more immediate appeal, having capitalized on the potential of an international market which, according to the International Association of Golfing Tour Operators, is valued at more than €12 billion a year.

France's Top Golf Resorts

Golf National

Versailles, Paris

Home of the 2018 Ryder Cup and the venue for this year's French Open, Golf National lies just 32 kilometers west of Paris near Versailles. The course is testing, with tight fairways and lots of water. The thick gorse on some holes gives it a links feel.

Golf de Saint-Nom-la-Bretèche

La Tuilerie, Paris

Arguably France's best-known course, this was home of the Trophée Lancôme for many years, which was played on both the red and blue courses. Well maintained amid wooded countryside with great fairways and quick greens, Thomas Levét describes the clubhouse, a former manor house, as "absolutely perfect."

Golf de Fontainebleau

Fontainebleau, Paris

Designed and opened for play in 1909, it has been described as France's most beautiful course as it lies 30 kilometers from Paris in the Fontainebleau forest. The course itself is very narrow, sandwiched between thick beech trees.

Les Bordes

Loire

Set in some of France's most breathtaking scenery in the Loire Valley, this course was designed by Texan Robert von Hagge. Thomas Levét says this course offers the player a real challenge.

Golf du Médoc

Bordeaux

Located in the middle of Bordeaux's celebrated wine country, Golf du Médoc offers players a chance to play a challenging course and then relax with a glass from some of the world's most famous châteaux.

The Golf de Seignosse

Seignosse, southwest France

Created in 1989 by Robert von Hagge, two years after he designed Les Bordes, the course sits just a few kilometers from the Bay of Biscay, winding through pine and oak forest. Narrow fairways make it one of France's most challenging courses.

Golf du Touquet

Pas-de-Calais

Le Touquet's two courses, La Mer and La Forêt, are among some of the best links courses in the world, often compared with their counterparts in Scotland. Thomas Levét describes the Atlantic wind that sweeps across the course as some of the "biggest you have experienced in your life."

Golf d'Hardelot

Hardelot, Pas-de-Calais

Les Dunes, which opened in 1990, is situated close to the seaside resort of Hardelot in northern France. Nestled on the sand dunes of Mount Saint Frioux, it is very popular with visitors from neighboring England.

But following an announcement in May that France will host the 2018 Ryder Cup, a country known more for its gastronomic and cultural heritage is attempting to establish itself as a destination of choice for the discerning golfer. Which is good news for those wishing to avoid the golfing crowds, as many of the courses have yet to be discovered by the wider golfing fraternity. Or those wanting to play on some of the most spectacularly located courses in Europe, such as Les Gets, positioned on the Chavannes ridge, where golfers can take in a view of Mont Blanc, or Le Touquet in the Pas-de-Calais with its coastal dunes.

"Le Touquet in the Pas-de-Calais is one of the best links courses in the world," says Mr. Levét. "There are two courses there, La Mer and La Forêt, and both of them are really good to play. It has probably the biggest wind you have experienced in your life. If it blows, you are going to have fun.... And the City of Le Touquet is a nice place to visit."

Spearheading this push to improve golf's popularity at home and with visitors from abroad is Pascal Grizot. As president of the French Ryder Cup committee, he was instrumental in bringing the tournament to France—a move that will see the contest played on continental European soil for only the second time in the Cup's history after Seve Ballesteros captained Europe to victory at Valderrama in Spain in 1997. Among Mr. Grizot's aims is to increase the number of people playing in France from 600,000 to 800,000 by 2020.

"France is one of the most visited countries in the world," he says. "But not for golf. In fact, we have more than 600 golf courses in France and we imagine that hosting the Ryder Cup will help us develop the game faster."

One of the ways Mr. Grizot hopes to drive participation is with the creation of 100 short, urban six- or nine-hole golf courses in areas not normally associated with the game.

It is an initiative backed by Mr. Levét. "Golf in France is a very minor sport," he says. "Now the government realizes that some countries are doing very, very well by pushing sport and golf. Golfers travel, they love their game, they spend money and are very big tourists. That is what countries like Spain and Portugal, Scotland and Ireland realized a long time ago,



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Golf de Cannes-Mougins

Nice

Home of the famous Cannes Open for many years, the course has seen a wealth of stars and celebrities walk its fairways. Thomas Levet says the start of the course, holes number 1 and 2, are an absolutely brutal test of the golfer's skill.

Saint Cyprien Golf Resort

Perpignan

Facing Mount Canigou near the border with Spain, this is a course for the more established player. Thomas Levet describes it as relatively easy to play when the weather is fair. But when the wind picks up, the course can get quite tricky.

difficult Châteaux course and the Vignes, which is easier to navigate. In a nod to its locale, every hole is named after a famous Bordeaux wine. The wine theme doesn't end there. After a hard day on the Châteaux course, players can unwind at the hotel's spa before moving onto La Table du Médoc, a restaurant that, as you would expect, keeps a sensational cellar. If that doesn't quench your thirst, the course can also organize a wine tasting at a local château.



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Golf Country Club de Cannes-Mougins

Golf de Cannes-Mougins in Nice.

but France hasn't exploited it yet."

Some regions, perhaps more widely known for activities other than golf, are looking to add courses as well. An area that has earned an international reputation for the production of fine wine as opposed to fine golf courses is the Medoc in Bordeaux. But here, amid the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot vines planted along the Gironde estuary, lies the Golf du Medoc Hôtel & Spa. The course was designed by U.S. architect Bill Coore with a Scottish Links course in mind.

Characterized by wide fairways, heather and gorse, there are two courses—the more

While not every course offers wine tastings, back at Le Golf National, players who have tired of the courses challenging fairways can enjoy the grandeur of Versailles, which is just a short drive away. Failing that, they can unwind by the swimming pool at the Novotel Saint Quentin Hotel, which lies in putting distance of the last two holes—a finish that in seven years time will experience the climax of the Ryder Cup.

"The finishing holes are just spectacular," says Michael Pask, senior vice president of

IMG, the sports-marketing group. "It is almost a bowl. You could put 30,000 people around the last four holes—it is going to be a spectacular finish to the Ryder Cup."

No doubt, but with the golfing world watching, it also threatens to reveal what only a few have known for years. There's more to France than the seaside, vineyards and castles. Hidden amid the landscape, the country boasts some fine golf courses that might be worth visiting before the rest of the world wakes up to this fact too.

Corrections & Amplifications

U.S. architect Bill Coore designed the golf course at Golf du Medoc Hôtel & Spa. An earlier version of this article misspelled his surname as Corre.

Write to William Lyons at william.lyons@wsj.com

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