

how to spend it

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THE HOLE DEAL

The French are brilliant sportspeople in a variety of fields, but they haven't won a major golf championship since the 1907 Open. To date, their most famous player is Jean Van de Velde, the pocket legend who lost the British Open at the final hole at Carnoustie in 1999. The viewing millions have an enduring image of a small, dark charmer, shoes and socks off, trousers rolled up above his ankles, failing to hit the ball out of the burn onto the 72nd green. He could – should – have taken the penalty and won. Instead, he lost, heroically and graciously, a peculiarly British combination for which we love him still.

The problem is the French don't much care for golf. At Pau in south-western France, where the Brits built the oldest course in mainland Europe in 1856, the citizens were unimpressed by an activity they've always seen as strictly bourgeois.

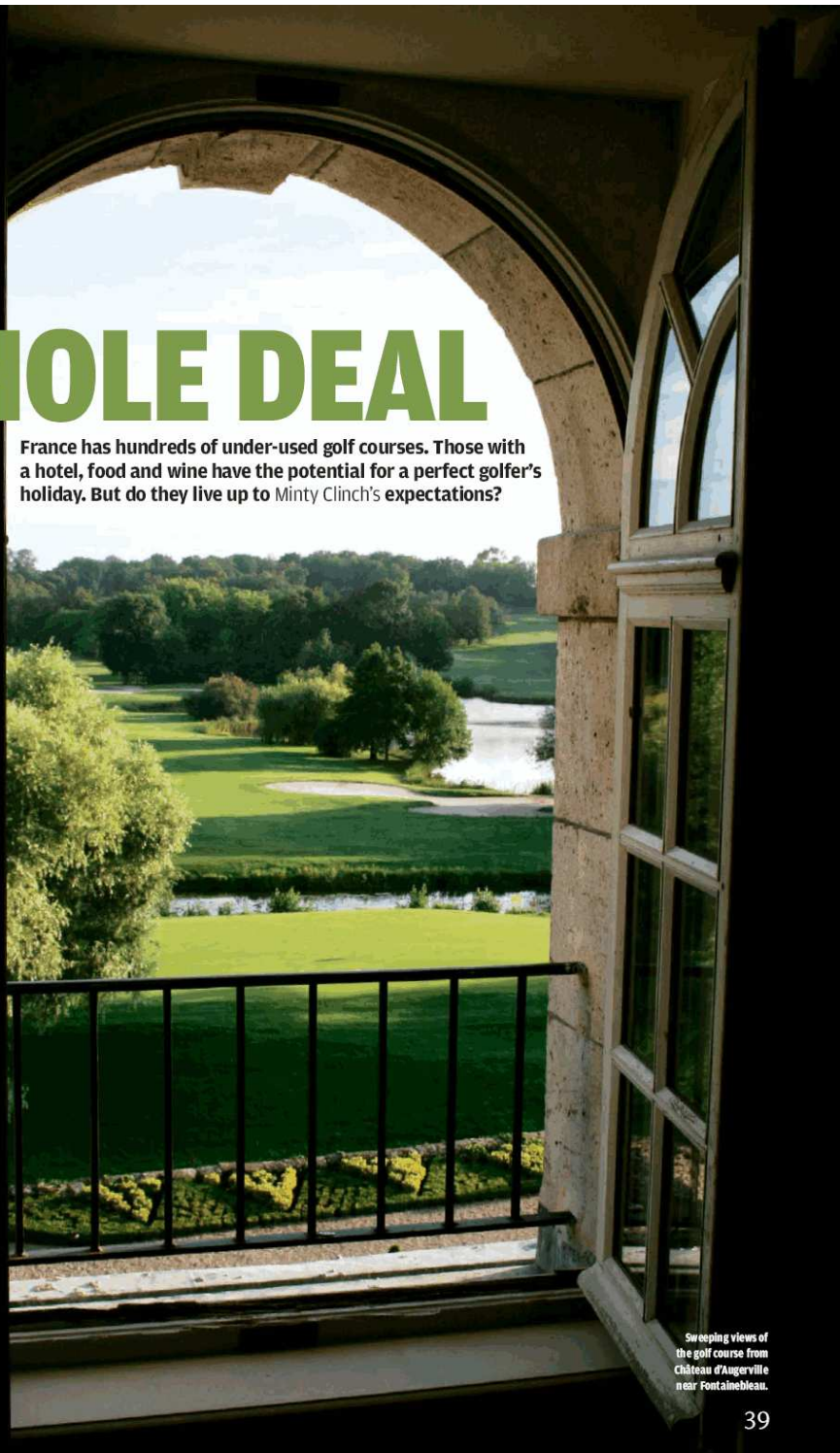
In the 1980s, however, developers targeted France as a future golfing nation with courses in every corner of the land. They built about 200 in one decade. Some French toes dipped cautiously in the water, but the majority stayed dry. As a result, France is arguably the best holiday golf destination in Europe. Forget overwatered Spain and overpriced Portugal. In France, coastal and pedigree courses are crowded in high summer, but they are sparsely populated throughout the rest of the year. Most of the others you have to yourself.

For a golf addict, heaven would be the four greats in one place: course, hotel, food and wine. If it were to exist on earth, it would surely be in France. But does it?

I set out on my voyage of discovery in high summer, starting with the obvious – a flight to Bordeaux. At the Golf du Médoc, the general manager of the hotel and spa, Henry Martinet, greeted me with some embarrassment. He regretted the lashing rain, and suggested I devote the afternoon to his lovely new spa. I looked out of my bedroom window at a flat landscape, gorse, purple heather, spartan trees and cloud low enough to count as fog. I could have been in Scotland in October. That probably meant this was perfect terrain for golf.

One who certainly thinks so is the former Ryder Cup captain Bernard Gallacher, a regular since the first course, appropriately named Les Châteaux, opened in 1989. It was joined two years later by Les Vignes, making by far the best 36 holes in the area. When the on-site hotel opened

France has hundreds of under-used golf courses. Those with a hotel, food and wine have the potential for a perfect golfer's holiday. But do they live up to Minty Clinch's expectations?



Sweeping views of the golf course from Château d'Angerville near Fontainebleau.

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mind you. What you see is what you get, as long as you don't allow it to get inside your head and destroy your round. The centrepiece is a country house built in 1865 in an unusual mix of stone covered with wood. Claude Bieth, a Strasbourg local, bought it to live in, then turned it into a hotel which opened in 1996 with 13 rooms in the main house. In 2003, it expanded with 16 new mini-suites.

As Bieth is a movie man, the original rooms have cinematic themes: Metropolis, Casablanca and Zorba rate highly, but he reserves the most exotic décor for the spacious von Stroheim, the turquoise-panelled Barry Lyndon, and La Luna, a two-level suite with great views of the fairway from hole 8. Hotel custom puts a golf ball instead of a chocolate on your pillow, but most are recycled the next day when the staff fish them out of the lakes. Kempferhof's restaurant and bar are relaxed, with honest rather than exceptional food supplemented by an Alsatian wine list of biblical proportions. But, as Strasbourg and its environs have some of France's best restaurants, there's a case to be made for eating out after the day's golf.

In the interests of leaving no top wine area unexplored, I tacked back to Burgundy and Château de Chailly, the site of a stronghold since the 12th century and now in Japanese ownership. My quarters may have had lovely views over the fairly modest golf course but, although they were the size of a mid-range London flat, they had a single small window in the living area and a couple of glassed-over arrow slits in the claustrophobic turret sleep zone. Surely this is taking the fortress factor too far?

Seen from the outside, the château is impressively large, though rather stark in contrast to the lush countryside that surrounds it. The helpid is the clue: this is corporate territory and Château de Chailly is a popular Sunday lunch spot for wealthy Parisian families. A snack and a glass of wine before afternoon golf? "Certainly, Madame, but it is forbidden to eat a sandwich on the restaurant terrace." Even if you are a resident? Oh yes – and there is nowhere else to eat it other than your room. The food in the evening is superb and the wine list, predictably burgundian, is awesome, but pretension on this scale is not relaxing.

Inadvertently, I had kept the best for last. Driving into Provence, the Château de Taulane is located 45km north-west of Grasse at a refreshing 1,000m, overlooking rolling wooded hills. In deepest winter the landscape is covered in snow, but from April to November this is an

exceptional hideaway from the rough and tumble of the Riviera.

The main château was built in the 18th century by the Marquis de Lisle de Taulane, while the former stables were converted into the manor house. Its current owner, Mario Contini, turned the château and manor house into a hotel in the early 1990s and employed Gary Player to design the golf course, which opened in 1992.

In converted châteaux the best bedrooms are generally in the main house, with lesser ones in dependant farms and coachhouses. This is true at Taulane, although the standalone stone tower suite is a popular honeymoon choice. Stéphane Collomb presides over a fine kitchen for La Marquise de Lisle restaurant, and Jean Michel Bracco's wine list is extensive, with a bias towards the best bordeaux, including Pétrus, Cheval Blanc, Margaux and Latour at prices upwards of £800.

The golf course is very natural, with sightings of deer and opportunities to collect ceps and morilles in season when searching for your ball, but a buggy is recommended. As always with Player layouts, there are tee positions for all skill levels, but you'll need to bring your A game to reach the huge double green shared by the ninth and 18th without a blemish on your card. Golf rage is, thankfully, effectively soothed on a sunlit terrace. Mine's a large glass of chilled provençal rosé. ♦

ON A PAR WITH THE BEST

Minty Clinch was a guest of **Your Golf Holidays** (01277-824 100; www.yourgolfholidays.com), which tailor-makes programmes with pre-booked tee times to all the above and many other destinations. A typical midseason B&B package (usually four nights, either fly/drive or Eurostar) for a group of four costs from about £550 to £900 per person, including green fees. Prices below are for a double room per night with breakfast: **Château d'Augerville**, Place du Château, 45330 Augerville-La-Rivière (00332-3832 1207; www.chateau-augerville.com), from €210 (about £168). **Château de Chailly**, 21320 Pouilly-en-Auxois, Bourgogne (hotel00333-8090 3030; golf club 00333-8090 3040; www.chailly.com), from €295 (about £235). **Château de Taulane**, D6085, Route Napoléon, Le Logis du Pin, 83840 La Martre (hotel 00334-9340 6080; golf club 00334-9360 3130; www.chateau-taulane.com), from €299 (about £239). **Golf du Médoc Hotel and Spa**, Chemin de Courmateau, 33290 Le Plan Médoc (00335-5670 3131; www.hotelgolfmedoc.com), from €150 (about £120). **Le Kempferhof**, 351 Route du Moulin F, 67115 Plobsheim (00333-8898 7272; www.golf-kempferhof.com), from €256 (about £204).

last year, Gallacher and nine of his best golfing mates checked in, playing both courses every day, plundering the buffet in Le Club house at lunchtime and eating in La Table du Médoc – which specialises in regional dishes – in the evening.

You can see their point. The hotel is low and red and far from beautiful, but it's the most golf-friendly I've stayed in. With 73 rooms and six suites, it was the largest on my list, but distances to the facilities are minimal and rooms are designed by golfers for golfers – a corner for clubs, a rack for shoes and, in the suites, a TV console that moves between bed and sitting room.

Walking off the food on the golf courses makes good sense, though calorie-burning is not easy on land as flat as this. Les Châteaux, which staged the French Open in 1999, is a links-style classic, not excessively long but well defended by savage undergrowth, intelligently placed bunkers and huge greens. Les Vignes is wooded and the two courses complement each other as an intriguing challenge.

As all the holes are sponsored by local châteaux, only an obsessive golfer with an inexcusable indifference to great wine could resist a visit to one of the Grand Cru houses nearby. Pauillac,

Saint-Estèphe, Saint-Julien, Margaux – the names make the mouth water. I chose Pichon-Longueville in Pauillac. Delicious.

Reluctantly, I turned north to Fontainebleau, but my first sight of Château d'Augerville dispelled any doubts. For a romantic break lightly spiced with golf, it is hard to imagine a more magical setting than this pale gold mansion, partly dating from the 15th century, with its steep silver roof, circular tower and reflection gleaming in the lake. Reinvented as a hotel in 2006, the conversion is immaculate, with 12 bedrooms in the main house and 28 in the stone courtyard, all individually designed. Mine was spacious, blue and cool. The panelled bar and dining room are elegant but comfortably informal.

The golf course, laid out over forested hills to the south of Paris, is more tourist than championship, but the holes are varied and the hazards – ranging through water, camber and blind shots – add up to a reasonably stern test. In the absence of other guests in the hotel or on the course, it was easy for me to make believe I owned the place, and it is wonderfully peaceful.

Three years after opening Les Bordes (the best course in France, now a private club), the American Robert von Hagge designed another classic at Le Kempferhof, south of Strasbourg. As at Les Bordes, the terrain is flat, but again the American teases with his trademark contouring and island greens. Nothing sneaky,

