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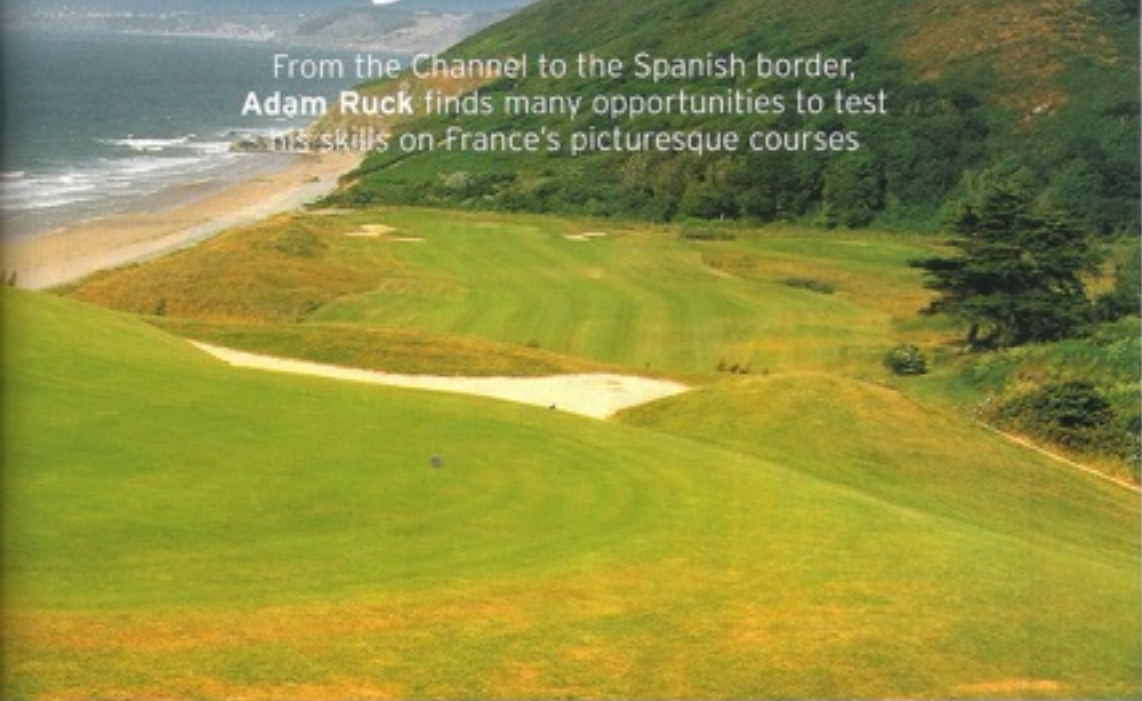
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Long drive on the golf coast

From the Channel to the Spanish border, **Adam Ruck** finds many opportunities to test his skills on France's picturesque courses



Next stop, Bordeaux wine country, where Saint-Émilion has been the talk of French golf for almost a decade, although Le Golf Club Grand Saint-Émilionnais, to give the talking point its full title, was a long time coming and did not fully open until 2015.

The venture is a family affair, conceived and managed by the Mourgue d'Algue clan, pillars one and all of the nation's sporting *noblesse d'épée*. Their patriarch Gaëtan has devoted his life to promoting French golf via new courses, prestigious championships and the much-lamented Peugeot Golf Guide, which did for travelling golfers what Michelin does for gourmets and sightseers.

The new club is a former hunting estate below the village of Gardégan-et-Tourtirac: centennial oak woods surrounded by Cotes de Castillon vineyards. "The site appealed to us because it's undulating enough for a varied and interesting round, but not mountain golf," says Gaëtan's daughter Kristel, a past winner on the LPGA tour. The ground drains well, and suits fast-rolling fescue grass.

These attributes were enough to persuade the homiest name in golf course design, Tom Doak, to cross the Atlantic and make this patch his first course in continental Europe.

Doak's style is summarised as

minimalist, based on the idea that golf should sit comfortably in the landscape without distorting it. Subtle adjustments to the river that runs through the property have created a network of streams to complicate our game and feed two lakes for sustainable irrigation, and a couple of good short holes. There are only 35 bunkers and Doak has left gaps for a 'bump and run' approach to the green.

Despite the forest setting, there is no sense of confinement. "Tom believes golf should be fun for everyone," says Kristel. For a friendly finish, the 18th is wide open with a punchbowl green that helps the ball toward the hole. Which is not to say the course is easy: some parts of ➤

the fairway and green are more advantageous than others. "It's about strategy, and thinking two shots ahead," she adds.

Gaps in the screen of trees give us views of surrounding features – a glimpse of the philosopher Montaigne's tower from one hole, Gardejan's church from another. Do these touches add anything to our game? Arguably not, but they are the artist's signature and a reminder to look beyond the course, and beyond golf. Montaigne's tower might be worth a visit. Saint-Émilion – a 20-minute drive to the west – definitely is, for the wine-tasting and the village itself, one of Nouvelle-Aquitaine's finest.

Project Saint-Émilion is a work in progress – the shell of an old manor beside the first tee will be a stylish clubhouse one day – but the things that matter are in place. The course is rolling well and wonderfully empty, if my experience is typical.

The family has also found a good chef, who plays an early round, cooks lunch in his spikes and mans the pans for the evening service at his Michelin-rated bistro on the River Dordogne at Branne.

Although no longer in the best of health, Gaëtan Mourgue d'Algue still enjoys his golf and speaks through his daughter. "My father has always said that France needs more golf resorts," Kristel tells me.

As it happens, an excellent one lies on the other side of Bordeaux, an hour away unless you try it in rush hour. Golf du Médoc is a 36-hole spa hotel complex between the immense Landes pine forest and the Grand Cru Médoc vineyards of Margaux, Mouton Rothschild and Latour.

The landscape is flat, the hotel

low-rise, and there are no views beyond the course. Nothing intrudes to prick the golf bubble. Les Châteaux, Médoc's trophy course, is a heathland masterpiece by Bill Coore, another leading light of new-school American design whose works are collectables as sought-after as Tom Doak's. Les Vignes, the supporting

act, is a bit more forgiving, which is not a bad thing.

Médoc and Grand Saint-Émilionnais have teamed up to offer a "Signature Golf Pass" valid for golf on all three courses during a week, with or without accommodation. I can't think of a more tempting formula for a short break combining golf and wine tourism.

And so to Biarritz, queen of Basque coastal resorts. Ninety years have passed since the legendary Tom Simpson received a brief to make the finest golf course in the world for the future Edward VIII and friends, and laid out Chiberta beside the sea at Anglet, between Biarritz and Bayonne.

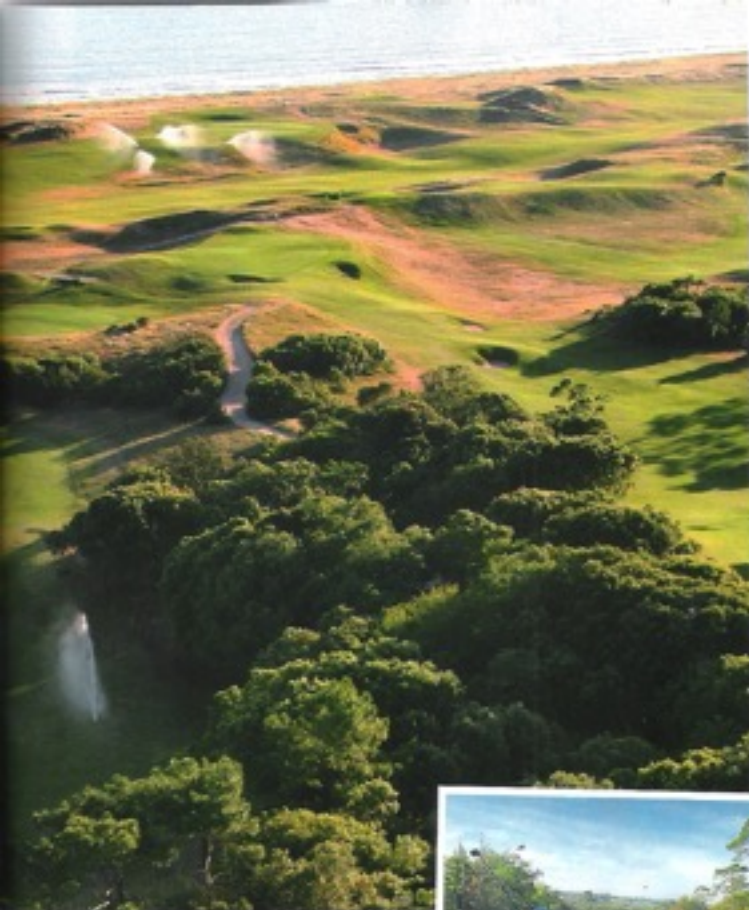
The bucket-list option would be to stay in the sumptuous Hôtel du Palais overlooking the Grande Plage and its surfers; hone the short game on its practice green and do the rounds of Biarritz's eight courses.

For more affordable comfort, I put up



ABOVE: The clubhouse and first hole at Saint-Jean-de-Monts; BELOW: The 18th green at Grand Saint-Émilionnais; RIGHT: Driving off at the sixth hole at Saint-Émilion



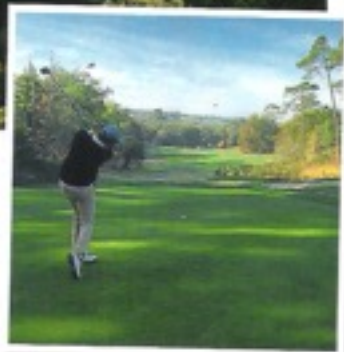


at the Hôtel de Chiberta and from the breakfast terrace watched members make their first swings of the morning at the short tenth, as they are entitled to do. After a second croissant, I headed for the practice ground, a lake. Hitting balls into the water is a questionable practice routine, but strangely liberating.

"There was no practice ground in the early days," explains club manager Estelle Nocera Raguno-Sirot. "When we needed one, the only space available was the lake."

Chiberta is another course that divides its setting equally between pine forest and treeless links holes, with only the promenade between golf and the ocean.

On a calm day it is in a benign mood. "You have to imagine the wind in your face here," says Estelle at the 11th, which she describes as "pure Simpson, at his simplest": a long straight par four toward the sea, with a gun-barrel fairway and a raised green. On an exposed sea course such as this, in Europe's surfing capital, wind is everything. If it doesn't carry your drive into someone's garden,



it will do its best to blow your putt off the green and back down the fairway, or into a bunker.

Simpson's creation has had its troubles, to say the least. During World War II, the Germans requisitioned the hotel, and their coastal defences wrecked the course. Chiberta's golfers unearthed Simpson's original drawings after the war, rebuilt the greens and planted new trees on top of Nazi blockhouses.

The restoration work goes on, removing trees that don't belong and clearing the rough to allow indigenous marine vegetation to flourish, instead of long grass. "It's colourful, it's natural, and you don't lose the ball," says Estelle.

"If Pinehurst can do it, so can we."

Chiberta measures itself against the best.

Coastal erosion is another threat: the sea has advanced 60 metres in 40 years, devouring a hotel, a railway and half the fifth fairway. All the more reason to play this beautiful course soon.

My last stop before the Spanish border is the old port of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, on its sheltered bay, where Harry Colt designed Chantaco while his arch-rival Simpson was shaping Chiberta, 20 kilometres up the coast. Did the two master builders bounce ideas off each other over a glass of Irouléguy in one of the tapas bars outside the Biarritz fish market? Were there furtive missions of industrial espionage?

The two locations are quite different, with Chantaco being set back from the sea in leafy seclusion between town and mountains. The club enjoyed fashionable success from the off, numbering Charlie Chaplin and the future Edward VIII among its patrons. The owner's daughter, many times French amateur champion, married the inter-war tennis ace René Lacoste to found the sporting and business dynasty that still holds the reins at Chantaco, and maintains its reputation as a tournament venue and academy for young talent.

The course and its art-deco clubhouse have great charm and the aura of an institution at peace with itself. "We're in nature here, that's what our members appreciate most," says the club's manager Stéphanie Kerjean, inviting me to admire the view of La Rhune. The Basque Country's signature peak is the last buttress of the Pyrénées before they plunge into the ocean at Irun. Its summit is the line for your drive at the long 17th.

"Why don't you play, since you've come all this way?" asks Stéphanie. With regret, I have a boat to catch, but it is good to have something to look forward to, for the next pilgrimage.

● See page 40 for travel information. ➤

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