

LA BELLE VIE

Jeremy Ellwood enjoys the best of all worlds on a visit to Terre Blanche, one of France's very best golf resorts just a short drive from Nice's Cote d'Azur airport...

Words Jeremy Ellwood | Photography Phil Inglis, Getty Images



Trying to save par on Le Chateau's 18th hole

Golfing trips to France have been like the proverbial buses for me – wait 30 years for one to come along, then another appears over the horizon before the first plane has even touched down. When I visited Royal Mougins last November for my first ever round on French soil, I had no idea I would be returning to Nice Cote d'Azur airport just weeks later to savour another of southern France's top resorts, the highly regarded Terre Blanche in Tourrettes. This magnificent five-star hotel, spa and golf resort is a key part of the *European Tour Destination* portfolio, about which I have to confess I knew relatively little other than that the London Golf Club had become the inaugural one around the time it was hosting consecutive European Opens a few years ago.

There are now 13 such destinations (more of which on p72) spread throughout Europe and beyond in the case of Jumeirah Golf Estates →

Water and mountain backdrops feature strongly on Terre Blanche's two courses

in Dubai where the tour's flagship finale is played. Of those 13, seven currently host tour events, and many are regarded as the premier golf resorts in either their regions or countries, with the line-up including PGA Catalunya in Spain, Le Golf National in France and Kungsängen in Sweden. The concept is a network of world-class golfing facilities whose alliance with the European Tour tells the visiting golfer all he or she needs to know about the quality of the destination.

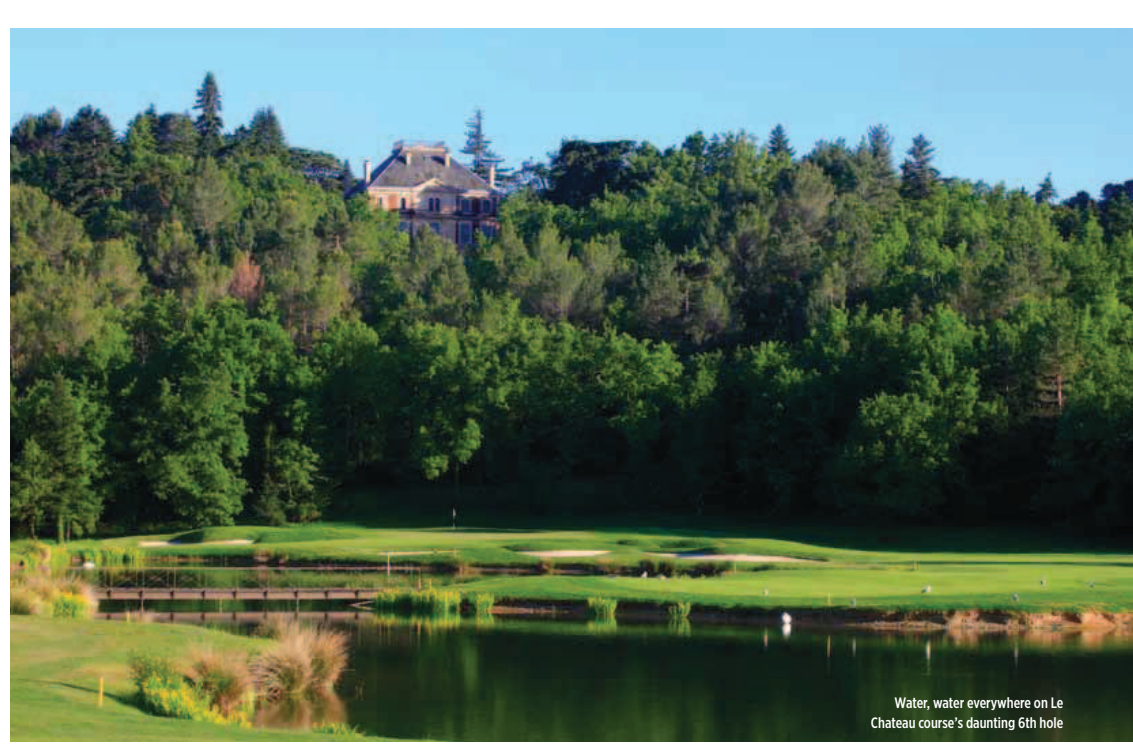
That quality was all too apparent as our transfer pulled up outside Terre Blanche's impressive main gates after a pleasant 40-minute drive from Nice. I've been fortunate enough to visit many excellent golf resorts over the years, but as we were waved through by security, it immediately became obvious that this was going to rank among the very best. My itinerary indicated a "quick lunch" in Les Caroubiers restaurant, after which we were to enjoy a grand tour of the resort. All I can say is that 'quick' should never be used in the same sentence as 'lunch' in France – especially on a Sunday – with the duration of our repast far exceeding my understanding of the adjective. Suffice to say, after the calibre of midday meal to which I am rarely accustomed, I was glad we weren't sampling Terre Blanche's two highly acclaimed Dave Thomas-designed courses – Le Riou and Le Chateau – until days two and three!

Suitably replete, we set out to explore the expansive estate, making our way slowly past elegant residential areas, imposing villas, an extremely appealing spa, a spacious golf clubhouse and on along a road serving up tantalising glimpses of wonderful golf holes through the trees. Eventually, we reached the Leadbetter Golf Academy, which is also home to the first ever European Tour Performance Institute, though a second is now open at Jumeirah. We would be finding out more about the institute's impressive facilities next day along with former European Tour pro Fredrik Lindgren, and European Senior Tour pro DJ Russell, who won

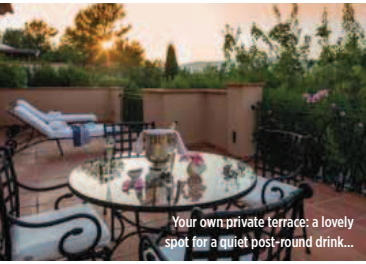
his team. There was some mind-boggling technology on display, and it was no surprise to learn that the French Golf Federation uses the facility as its winter training base, while Victor Dubuisson, Alex Levy and the resort's touring pro, Raphael Jacquelin, are among the top home players to pass through the doors. I studied a bit of biomechanics at college half a lifetime ago, but things have clearly progressed a little since the 'Class of '88'. I was familiar with the use of force platforms to tell you how well or badly you distributed and transferred your weight (badly, in my case, before one of my kindly office colleagues chips in). But the force platforms of the 21st century bear no resemblance to the one I trialled in the college gym 25 years ago, highlighting in the minutest of detail which specific part of your foot the weight is on at any given point and where and how it moves during your swing.

State-of-the-art technology

Our experimental guinea pig was Swede Fredrik Lindgren who played on tour for 10 years in the 1990s, with a best finish of tied 2nd in the 1992 Murphys English Open. I impressed both him and myself by somehow remembering it was Vicente Fernandez' ridiculous putt up all three tiers at The Belfry that denied him. The high-speed cameras Jean-Jacques uses can shoot at up to 33,000 frames per second, and these showed that Fredrik was striking the ball a little out of the heel causing the clubface to close noticeably at impact. The system can also clearly show where the centre of gravity is at all stages – in Fredrik's case a little too far towards the front of the feet – which again can be used in diagnosis and cure. The volume of data generated is vast, but it is the practitioner's duty to pinpoint the one or two key things that could make the most difference, and then suggest exercises, drills or treatments to address things rather than bamboozling the pupil with information overload.



Water, water everywhere on Le Chateau course's daunting 6th hole

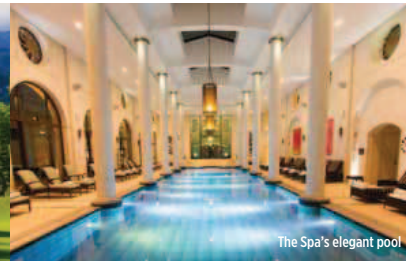


Your own private terrace: a lovely spot for a quiet post-round drink...

All I can say is that 'quick' should never be used in the same sentence as 'lunch' in France...



Terre Blanche's two parkland courses enjoy majestic backdrops



The Spa's elegant pool

The system showed Fredrik was striking the ball out of the heel causing the face to close at impact...



Ex-tour pro Fredrik Lindgren discovers a few home truths...

the 2012 French Riviera Masters over Le Chateau course. Let me just say that if all driving ranges and practice areas were like Terre Blanche's, I would be a considerably more dedicated practiser than I am. It was one of the most impressive I'd ever seen, with two storeys of well-spaced bays playing out into a hitting area cleverly sculpted to replicate the visuals of the golf course. This was complemented by the calibre of short game areas and putting greens that would finally seduce you in to paying as much attention to these elements of your game as you know you should.

All too soon it was time to for another sumptuous feast in Le Gaudina restaurant before retiring for the night ahead of a busy, golf-filled Monday. The suites and villas are well worth retiring to, with all 115 featuring separate living rooms and bedrooms, as well as private terraces that make a great spot for a quiet drink as the sun gradually descends to meet the earth once more. The Prestige Villas even have their own pools and Jacuzzis, while for me it was just a short walk up to the heated outdoor 'infinity' pool with wonderful views over the resort and beyond.

In the morning it was down to the Performance Institute for a fascinating session looking at the incredible diagnostic and coaching facilities at the disposal of osteopath and athlete, Jean-Jacques Rivet, and

With my brain impressed and slightly frazzled in equal measure, it was time to put theory into practice on Terre Blanche's Le Riou layout which starts with a short, sharp dogleg left where the bold, or in my case unintentionally pulled drive, may be rewarded. The senior tour event may be played on the longer Le Chateau layout, but what Le Riou lacks in length by comparison (not that it's short at nearly 6,600 yards off the backs), it more than makes up for in character and variety, with a lovely flow of holes to keep you entertained from start to finish. Fredrik and I hit tit-for-tat 4-irons close on the tough par-3 3rd where you can't see the foot of the flag, with the short 8th across a valley then requiring confident clubbing to a right-hand pin position. The front nine closes with a strong par 4 where water right is a threat all the way up to the green. I then fell foul of the 11th, a fantastic uphill par 3, again across a valley, with bunkers front and left. I spent some time acquainting myself a little too closely with the greenery left of the green here. The 16th may tempt you into having a crack towards the end, with everything seemingly feeding in from the right, but beware – this short par 4 has a sting in the tail with several front bunkers and a small top shelf that's likely to prove wickedly elusive should the pin happen to be there, as it was for us. →



Terre Blanche's infinity pool looks out over the resort and beyond

I walked off the 18th up to the terrace for a post-round beer to find everyone in raptures, wondering how Le Chateau could possibly be better. We would find out the following day, but first there was the small matter of a much-needed massage in the Spa, then a trip to Le Moulin de la Camandoule's Restaurant L'Escourtin a short drive away to enjoy the finest Provencale cuisine in a setting that couldn't be more quintessentially French and rustic. I was beginning to sense that I should be availing myself more of The Spa's fitness centre as my calorie intake was comfortably exceeding my energy expenditure, but it would have been rude to spurn the splendid desserts on offer... or indeed a cheeseboard of truly epic proportions, with its astonishing selection of the finest French fromage.

The star attraction

Next morning, after an admirably restrained breakfast, there were brief one-to-one sessions in the Performance Institute, with Jean-Jacques evaluating everyone's weight distribution and transfer. Not surprisingly, there were some instantly detectable issues with mine; more surprisingly, Jean-Jacques felt they could be fairly easily remedied, but sadly there wasn't really time for him to fully expound his theories as we had a pressing date with Le Chateau course.

DJ Russell had said that if we could get through a tough opening stretch, things would settle down, and he wasn't wrong, with the 1st demanding a long enough drive to make the corner of a dogleg stoutly defended by large trees on the corner. The next is then a glorious par 3 playing uphill along a rocky creek, with anything left a distinctly bad miss. The drive from the elevated 4th tee has you playing straight towards the mountains, but two holes later it's water that forms a rather more close-at-hand distraction on the daunting par-5 6th playing towards the chateau after which the course is named. After a decent drive, I chunked my lay-up horribly, leaving me a full hybrid in over a final expanse of unforgiving water.

simple but wise words: "Manger est un besoin; savoir manger est un art." To eat is a need; to know how to eat is an art.

It had been a hugely enjoyable trip – great golf and great food in great surroundings. I just need to somehow engineer a return visit to tap into Jean-Jacques' expertise a little more in the Performance Institute, so that next time I can make a slightly better fist of Le Chateau course. In the meantime, I will be watching this year's French Riviera Masters with renewed interest, keen to see how Le Chateau's holes should really be played by those who know how to transfer their weight properly. ■



So, was Le Chateau a better course than Le Riou? Not necessarily better, but definitely more demanding



It would be one of the last decent shots I hit, but as my game went south, the course went from strength to strength with excellent hole following excellent hole... the clever dogleg 10th where the right-hand water, tree and sand seem blessed with magnetic properties; another elevated tee with a mountain view on 11; and then the pretty par-3 16th, with a walled stream to the front and an amphitheatre of trees providing a stirring backdrop. By the time I was chipping and putting to save par on 18, with glorious views out over the surrounding villages, I'd run the 'good shot' bank dry, but this had in no way detracted from the experience. So, was it better than Le Riou? Not necessarily better, but definitely more demanding.

With energy levels now dangerously low, I headed back to the villa to recharge the batteries for the trip's final activity – a farewell dinner in Le Faventia Restaurant where each course was accompanied by both an introductory talk explaining the combination of flavours about to assault our tastebuds, and a wine selection from the sommelier to complement those taste sensations. It was pure Mediterranean gastronomic heaven, and without doubt one of the finest meals I have ever had the good fortune to enjoy. It is certainly the only one in which the chef has been summoned at the end to receive heartfelt, well-deserved applause, and from which I have a signed souvenir menu with his

EUROPEAN TOUR DESTINATIONS

Here's a snapshot of the other 12 venues affiliated to the European Tour Destination programme

Jumeirah Golf Estates, Dubai

The home of the DP World Tour Championship boasts Greg Norman's Earth and Fire courses, plus a European Tour Performance Institute.

PGA Catalunya, Spain

This year's Spanish Open venue has long hosted Q School Final Stages over its Tour and Stadium courses.

Golf Club St Leon-Rot, Germany

The 2015 Solheim Cup venue has two excellent courses, Rot and St Leon.

The Dutch, Netherlands

The Dutch is home to a Colin Montgomerie championship signature layout created in conjunction with European Golf Design.

Le Golf National, France

The long-time venue of the Alstom Open de France is hosting France's first Ryder Cup in 2018.

London Golf Club, England

There are two Jack Nicklaus Design courses here – The Heritage and The

International, which welcomes the Volvo World Matchplay this autumn.

Diamond Country Club, Austria

The Lyonesse Open host near Vienna has two courses, Diamond and Country.

Golf & Country Club, Germany

There are five courses and four hotels at Northern Europe's largest golf resort.

Estonian Golf & Country Club

This 27-hole complex near the coast is 20 minutes from capital city, Tallinn.

Linna Golf, Finland

Linna's testing course plays through beautiful pine and birch forests.

Quinta do Lago, Portugal

There are three championship courses at this famous Algarve resort – South, North and Laranjal.

Kunsangen, Sweden

This leading Swedish venue features two contrasting courses – the Kings playing through pine forests and the tighter Queens with its small greens.