



Above the Four Seasons vast spa
Left: the hotel pool
Far left: the 6th hole at Le Château

GOLF COURSE: FOUR SEASONS RESORT PROVENCE, FRANCE

A course in Provence

With France in the midst of a golfing boom, Timothy O'Grady visits the Côte d'Azur to experience one of the country's finest courses

French golf is concentrated around three focal points – Paris, the southeast and Biarritz, where its first two stars, Jean Gassiat and Arnaud Massy, were born.

Massy, who worked on a sardine boat before becoming a caddy, had a peculiar loop at the top of his backswing, which became known as Massy's Pigtail. He won the first French Open in 1906 and the following year became the first Continental player to win the British Open. Jean van de Velde would have been the second Frenchman to do so 92 years later had he not suffered the most spectacular breakdown of the television era in the burn and high grass of the 18th hole at Carnoustie.

It was thought for a time that the French had built too many courses, but golf is now the country's number one sport in terms of participants and they have several talented players on both the main European

Tour and the Challenge Tour. Their current pre-eminent player, Raphael Jacquelin, won early this year in Asia.

Golf began on the Côte d'Azur when the exiled Grand Duke Michael of Russia had a course built at Cannes in 1890. Some of the best golf in Europe is now to be found in this area, with a Gary Player course at Taulane and two

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excellent courses in Mougins.

These have perhaps been surpassed by the development at the Four Seasons Resort Provence at Terre Blanche, a 114-suite hotel of small ochre buildings connected by pathways lined with lavender, wild thyme and rosemary and made to resemble a Provençal village. It boasts a spa the size

of a country mansion, a Michelin-starred restaurant and two Dave Thomas-designed golf courses: the relatively short, complex and steeply pitched Riou and the grander, championship Château. There's a David Leadbetter academy and it's the European base of the brilliant Dr Jean Jacques Rivet, inventor and biomechanic, who works with Justin Rose, Ian Poulter, Nick Price and Charles Howell as well as numerous racing drivers, rugby players and cyclists.

In two hours, with a new insole in my left shoe and some liberating of my hamstring with one of his machines, Rivet cured a constricted leftward hip rotation, giving me increased extension and more freedom and power. I could have spent two years with a pro on this trying to learn a new swing and gotten nowhere.

The Château course rolls through pine and oaks and around lakes, streams and boulder-strewn ditches, with each hole being given its own

arena in which to establish its identity. It attacks you early with the nerve-wracking par three second, followed by two long par fours, and finishes with two tough par fours that play right into the mistral on the day I was there.

There are many intriguing, complex holes along the way. Anyone who plays it is likely to best remember the par five 11th first for the view of the distant hills from the tee and second for how it seduces you into going for a big drive downhill and downwind into an increasingly narrow landing area guarded by rough on the right and a ditch that slashes across the fairway like a knife wound. If you keep it in the fairway you can get to the green in two; if not, you could be lost among the boulders of the ditch, towards which the fairway pitches.

The course has the feel of a private world: grand and beautiful in its open upper reaches, mysterious in its valleys, with views of the outside world as if through huge windows but with the course's intricate details drawing you back. It invites extended study.

DETAILS

COURSE FEE From €150 **ADDRESS** Domaine de Terre Blanche, Tourrettes, Var **CONTACT** +33 4 9439 9000, www.fourseasons.com/provence/golf.html