

# Paris-by-the-sea: a big hit with the British



## Russell Higham heads to Le Touquet, that 'most British of French towns', loved by Edward VIII and Winston Churchill – and was an inspiration for Ian Fleming

Midway between London and Paris, the French coastal resort of Le Touquet has been attracting visitors for more than a century. Back in the 1920s, it became the favourite destination of England's cultural and social elite, amongst them Noël Coward, Somerset Maugham and P. G. Wodehouse, all of whom bought Art Deco homes in the town's leafy avenues.

Later, its villas and hotels were frequented by the likes of King Edward VIII, Winston Churchill, H.G. Wells and Ian Fleming. The latter came up with the idea of James Bond whilst staying at the town's Le Westminster hotel in 1953. He based

his first book (*Casino Royale*) on the Casino Barrière across the road, an extravagant Belle Époque palace that remains one of the town's most popular attractions.

Ian Fleming had his Aston Martin flown over to Le Touquet airport, which was recently renamed 'Elizabeth II International' in honour of the town's royal patronage and long-standing British connections. I brought my own, more modest

vehicle across via Eurotunnel and, 35 minutes after leaving Folkestone, was cruising down the Côte d'Opale.

### Appeal

Situated amidst a landscape of pine trees and long, wide sandy beaches, Le Touquet retains its natural appeal, attracting visitors with its extensive sporting opportunities. Think riding, sand yachting by the dunes, walking or cycling through the forest, or >>

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>> playing tennis on one of the town’s 40 courts. Golfers are well looked after, with three courses to try, including La Mer, France’s number one links course and host of six French Opens. My hotel, Le Manoir, offered a 40% discount on the green fees for all of them.

Le Manoir started life in 1911 as the family home of Allen Stoneham, the British businessman and politician who helped develop Le Touquet into the thriving resort it is today. Located on the edge of town, Le Manoir is a good base for a weekend break.

### Favoured

Le Touquet’s nickname of ‘Paris Plage’ comes from its seven miles of coastline being the closest to the French capital, making it much favoured by fresh-air starved Parisians. I walked along the pinkish sand, past the brightly-coloured 1960s beach huts and out to the ‘thalassotherapy’ spa. It’s a relief to find the beach here so long and wide that it never seems to get too crowded, even in August when the population of 4,000 swells to more than a quarter of a million.

Leaving the beach at the scaled-down ‘sandcastle’ version of the Eiffel Tower, I walked up Rue Saint-Jean into Le Touquet’s shopping centre. Rumour has it that the mayor has forbidden ultra-expensive designer brands from opening their branches

here, to discourage the town from becoming another Monaco or Saint-Tropez. You’ll still find the smart boutiques and upmarket restaurants if you want them, but the town has a more relaxed, less showy feel than some French resorts.

### Traders

Every Thursday and Saturday (and on Mondays during the summer), traders set out their stalls under the high arcades of the town’s historic covered market. It’s the ideal place to pick up some home-made jam, regional cheeses such as the strong smelling Maroilles, or a bottle of La Touquettoise beer whose labels feature the omnipresent ‘petite golfleur’ logo.

There’s a summer festival on the



### FACT FILE

Russell Higham travelled via Eurotunnel.com (return crossing from £60). He was a guest of Le Manoir hotel (double room from €180/night including breakfast). Visit [letouquetgolfresort.com](http://letouquetgolfresort.com) for more details and booking information.

Also check out [en.letouquet.com](http://en.letouquet.com) If you fancy flying to Le Touquet (it takes 15 minutes from Lydd on the Kent coast), take a look at [lyddair.com](http://lyddair.com) who offer day return charter flights in a seven-seater Piper Navajo from around £240 per person (based on seven people sharing).

beach as well as a winter jazz event in the Palais de Congrès each year; the town is also the setting for many vintage and modern car rallies. I spotted a number of Ferraris and Lamborghinis parked outside Le Westminster when I called in for a prix fixe lunch at their La Table du West restaurant. It’s worth dropping by for afternoon tea or just to wander along the corridor and see the signed photographs of many well-known hotel guests. My favourite was Sean Connery, who came here to sign the contract for playing 007 in his first James Bond film, Dr. No.

Exploring the streets is a joy in Le Touquet, admiring the quaint coloured fishermen’s cottages and

**Above:** boutiques on Le Touquet’s main shopping street.

**Below:** there’s plenty of space on the beach for everyone, and riders are guaranteed an exciting time.



Above (clockwise): Phare de la Canche; boardwalks for exploring the vast extent of natural sand dunes; golf at La Mer; mixed seafood starter in a Le Touquet restaurant.

grand, turreted villas; occasionally stopping for coffee or a verre de vin in a simple tabac. Le Quento on Rue de Calais is a good example, offering a friendly welcome and staying open late into the night during the summer months. A short walk away is the town's famous octagonal lighthouse, Phare de la Canche, which is, unusually, set back around half a mile from the sea. It is open to the public for guided tours (advance booking required) where you can climb the 274 steps to the top for stunning panoramic views, or just visit the exhibition to learn the building's history.

### Lighthouses

There were two lighthouses in the 19th century, both closer to the shore, but they were blown up during World War 2 and replaced with the current version in 1951. At night, its bright beam still shines across the town, over the Canche estuary and far out into the Channel.

The striking looking Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall) is also worth a

visit for its mix of Anglo-Norman, Flemish, Gothic and Tudor-style architecture. It was built in 1931, its entire construction cost financed by one year's profits from the casino. The result, resembling a haunted castle, wouldn't look out of place in a modern fantasy movie.

Food lovers are spoiled for choice in Le Touquet. Perard, for example, is a traditional seafood restaurant in the Rue de Metz that's been here for half a century. I'm not the only fan: President Macron has his own table (number nine) on permanent reservation when he's in town. Perard will serve you free refills of its legendary fish soup, which is also available to take home. If you order the Crêpes Suzette, be ready for a spectacle as staff flambé pancakes by your table, sending flames leaping up towards the ceiling.

### Drive

For a pleasant afternoon's drive, head out 20 minutes from Le Touquet, past the historic market

town of Étaples, to Montreuil-sur-Mer. After walking around the ancient ramparts and shopping for cheese at Fromagerie Caseus, eat lunch at one of the many first-class eateries that make Montreuil a famous 'Destination Gastronomique'. Alexandre Gauthier, the local two-Michelin starred chef, owns several restaurants here. His flagship, La Grenouillère, was recently placed in The World's 50 Best Restaurants list. If it's booked up, however, try one of his others: Anecdote serves a reasonably priced table d'hôte menu, offering excellent food with Gallic charm and style.

Back in Le Touquet itself, a visit to the town's museum, housed within the sandstone villa Way Side, is an essential stop on your drive through the forest, before heading home. Built in 1925, the villa's architecture and interior, as well as the artworks and historic artefacts on display inside, illustrate the development of this elegant resort, where Britain and France meet half way. ■