

COUNTRY LIFE

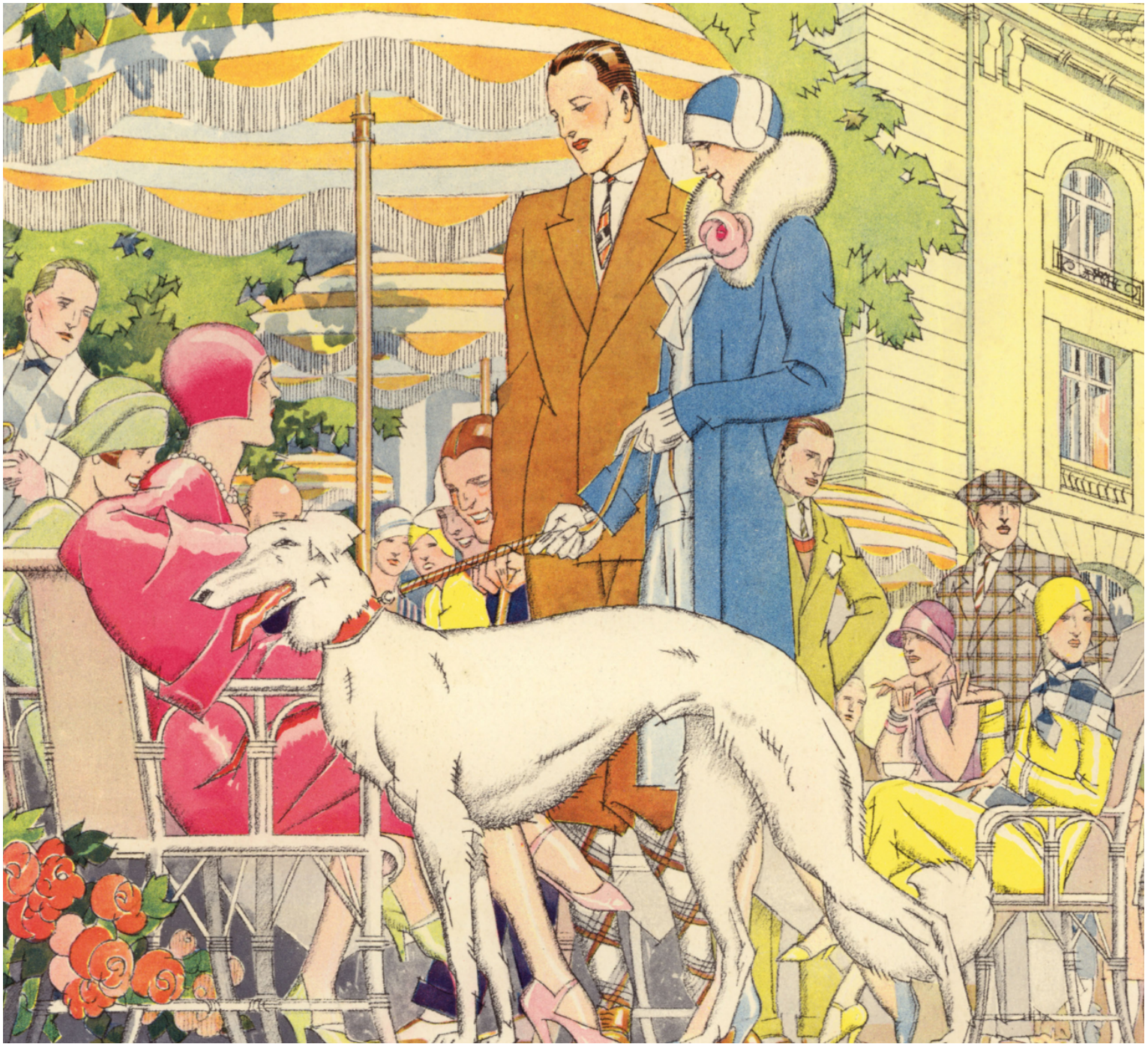
EVERY WEEK

JUNE 26, 2024

Love me do Let's hear it for the Beetles



Rewilding: hands-off Nature?
Cutting a dash: how to scythe like Poldark
France's most fashionable town and padel fun



Take the *plage*

Royalty, writers and world leaders have long made the ‘most British of French resorts’ their preferred home away from home, finds **Russell Higham**

SITUATED midway between London and Paris—in both miles and mentality—Le Touquet has drawn the smart set of both Britain and France to its elegant shores for more than a century.

Nicknamed ‘Paris *Plage*’ for its proximity to, and popularity with, residents of the

French capital, in the 1920s it also became the favoured destination of England’s cultural and social elite. Noël Coward, Somerset Maugham and P. G. Wodehouse bought Art Deco homes in Le Touquet’s broad, leafy boulevards. Later, its beaches, villas and hotels were frequented by the late Elizabeth II and her uncle Edward VIII, as well as Winston

Churchill, H. G. Wells and Ian Fleming. The latter is said to have conceived the idea of James Bond when staying at the town’s Le Westminster hotel and based his first book, *Casino Royale*, on the Belle Époque gaming palace across the road from it. Today, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, and his wife, Brigitte, maintain a holiday



Left: Tea-time at the Hermitage Hotel, Le Touquet, 1928. Above: P. G. Wodehouse in town with his wife and daughter in 1924

Gothic, Modernist, neo-medieval, Picard and Tudor. A good example of the amalgam of architectural influences at play in Le Touquet is the striking-looking Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall) on the Boulevard Daloz—named for the Parisienne notary and agriculturalist Alphonse Daloz, whose planting of maritime pines helped turned Le Touquet’s 3,954 acres of sand dunes into a hunting forest to be enjoyed by Daloz and his friends (including Hippolyte de Villemessant, founder of *Le Figaro*, the newspaper that coined Le Touquet’s nickname, ‘Paris Plage’). Built in 1931, the Town Hall’s entire construction cost was financed by one year’s profits from the town’s casino. Nearby, the Tata Ice, in Le Touquet’s ‘golden triangle’, close to the Ypres Garden, is a favourite of Anne-Frederique Lemesre,

‘Where landed gentry led, the fashionable and wealthy followed’

home in the town, having married there in 2007. Located above a French estate agency that, until recently, sold 80% of its properties to British buyers (changes in French tax legislation and Brexit have reduced that percentage of late), it is perhaps the perfect embodiment of an *entente cordiale*—reached between two countries that haven’t, historically, always seen eye to eye.

Le Touquet owes its Britishness to Leeds-born entrepreneur, philanthropist and founder of the Earl’s Court Exhibition Centre, John Robinson Whitley. In 1894, he—together with Allen Stoneham, a British businessman and founding member of England’s Rugby Football Union—purchased a strip of land between the forest and the sea with the aim

of turning it into the sporting paradise that it still remains today. Golf (Le Touquet boasts three courses, totalling 45 holes, including La Mer, France’s number one links course and host of six French Opens), tennis (40 courts), polo, sand yachting, riding and horse-racing; these sports and more enticed the British aristocracy to this playground on the *côte d’opale* (named for the opalescent sky and sea captured by Le Touquet painter Édouard Lévêque in 1911)—not to mention the promise of wins at the baccarat tables.

Where the landed gentry led, the fashionable and wealthy followed, building and buying up villas around Le Touquet in a variety of styles that reflect the town’s make-up: Anglo-Norman, Art Deco, Cubist, Flemish,

proprietor of estate agents AFT Immobilier (www.aftim.fr), the offices of which sit beneath President Macron’s home.

‘It’s like a child’s drawing,’ she says, referring to the human face-like features of the 1926-built villa designed by Horace Pouillet. Of her famous landlord above, to whom she has paid rent for 20 years, Mme Lemesre, a self-confessed Anglophile, reveals: ‘I’m proud to finally have a French president who can speak English well.’

President Macron is said to keep a table (number nine) at Perard permanently on reserve when he’s in town. The restaurant, to which the fish soup and flamboyant service draw crowds, is located just off the main shopping thoroughfare of rue Saint-Jean, →

Country Life International



Sun, sea and sand: Le Touquet remains a draw for British visitors, with its seven-mile beach lined by rainbow-coloured 1960s cabins

which is, mercifully, devoid of international designer chains. Rumour has it that the mayor has forbidden certain ubiquitous luxury brands from opening their branches here, so as to discourage the town from becoming another Monaco or St Tropez.

Kate Landry-Madden, who originally hails from West Kirby in the Wirral, has made Le Touquet her home for more than 35 years. She used to run a hotel with her French husband, but now volunteers as a Chargé de Mission, helping to administrate the town's twinning schemes, such as with Witney in Oxfordshire. She lives on the edge of the forest close to Le Touquet airport—recently renamed after Elizabeth II—into which Ian Fleming used to have his Aston Martin flown by aeroplane. Mrs Landry-Madden enjoys the diversity of architecture on display in Le Touquet, which she often admires on walks with her border terrier, Ripley. 'We love to walk past the villa La Belle au Bois Dormant (Sleeping

Beauty) in the Avenue des Ombrages—it's so majestic,' she says. 'And also the villa Madcap in the Avenue de l'Hippodrome close to the racecourse, which is where the Duchess of Westminster used to stay during the First World War.' The Duchess (Constance Edwina 'Shelagh' Cornwallis-West) established a military hospital at Le Touquet casino that carried out pioneering work in the treatment of shell shock.

'What makes it English is how like a big garden it is'

'What I love about Le Touquet and what makes it English, to my mind, is how like a big garden it is. When you move away from the town centre and the beachfront into the forest areas, everything is open plan. One

of the philosophies of the town, right from when it was first built, was to not have high hedges. If you go to the South of France, everything is locked away behind walls and hedges, you can't see anybody's houses, but here everything is very open and you can look in and admire people's gardens, which are all very English. They're landscaped, rambling, Constable-esque gardens, rather than typically French formal gardens, which tend to be based on Versailles.'

Le Touquet's popularity has endured through the decades. In the 1950s, its airport was the third busiest in France for passenger numbers, behind Orly and Nice. Successful crime author Ernest Elmore, writing as John Bude, saw his 1956 novel published under the title *A Telegram from Le Touquet* (now back in print by the British Library) to cash in on the resort's glamorous allure, although most of the action takes place elsewhere.

Today, the resort's population of 4,000 swells to more than a quarter of a million in August, although its pinkish sandy beach, flanked by brightly coloured 1960s beach huts, stretches so deep and wide (seven miles) that it is seldom unbearably crowded. Behind it, the town's famous octagonal lighthouse, Phare de la Canche (open to the public if you're energetic enough to climb the 274 steps to the top), is, rather unusually, set back nearly a mile from the sea.

At night, its bright beam shines right across the town, over the Canche estuary and far into the Channel, calling Britons to make their home in Le Touquet as they have done for more than a century. You can still fly here, of course; it's one of the most popular European destinations for British General Aviation pilots—although you may have a job finding one who will transport your Aston Martin in the hold. Far easier, and more relaxing, to come by ferry or use the Eurotunnel, which, like Le Touquet itself, is where Britain and France, after what some might call a tumultuous past, finally met halfway. 🍷

Where to buy



▲ Le Touquet-Paris-Plage, Pas-de-Calais, €2.9 million (about £2.47m)

Recently renovated, this four-bedroom, one-bathroom villa enjoys a light and airy cathedral-roofed living room that opens on to a north-facing terrace, a large office, two shower rooms and a heated swimming pool. *Touquet Sotheby's International Realty* (00 33 321 050 304; www.sothebysrealty.com)



▲ Le Touquet-Paris-Plage, Pas-de-Calais, €4.635 million (about £3.9m)

A contemporary six-bedroom, five-bathroom villa set over three floors surrounded by woodland, the property has a wine cellar, a large mezzanine, a bar opening onto a terrace overlooking the garden and pool, a relaxation room with hammam spa and sauna and a two-car garage. *Touquet Sotheby's International Realty* (as before)