

Luxury Golf

Homes & Resorts



SAILING THE CÔTE DU GOLF

A tall ship, the romance of the French Riviera, and some surprisingly good golf.

BY JAMES Y. BARTLETT

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People actually stopped on the street and stared—in chic and sophisticated France, no less. This is a country where even a two-headed woman strolling down the street couldn't elicit a sideways glance unless, of course, she were poorly dressed. So that kind of unabashed reaction was remarkable.

They were staring at the *Sea Cloud*, the four-masted barque built in 1931 by financier E.F. Hutton for his bride, the heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post. The ship sat majestically in the dock beside the busy quay in Villefranche-sur-Mer, just around the corner from Nice. Her elegant lines and her web of complicated rigging attracted the attention and admiration of the jaded passersby.

As we joined our fellow passengers on the monkey deck, we couldn't help thinking how much fun it was to be at the center of all that attention. We held glasses of Champagne and watched the crew respond to the animated calls of the harbormaster, who engineered the deliberate and careful pushback from the pier. Once he guided the vessel away from the pier, he let the breeze catch the elegant old lady and pivot her slowly in the harbor. We began to motor past the breakwater toward the sun, which was dipping gradually in the direction of Gibraltar.



A century ago, we might have been sailing toward a new life in America, or hauling a load of French-made goods to a colony in Africa or the Caribbean, or perhaps making a run up to Amsterdam. But on this trip, in this day and age, the *Sea Cloud* carried a cargo of dreams and 60 passengers on a golf expedition by ship along the Côte d'Azur.

The adventure had been arranged by Kalos Golf, a tour company that got its start running academic trips to archaeological and historic sites. Now it offers luxury golf cruises on European rivers as well as this one on the Mediterranean. The sheer novelty of cruising

the French Riviera in this attention-getting vessel has proven to be quite marketable—Kalos Golf's trips are sold out at least a year in advance. Yet company owner Jim Lamont has upped the ante by bringing along a guest celebrity (on this cruise, noted course architect Rees Jones) and by otherwise ensuring that the quality of the golf courses, the service, and the overall experience are nothing less than top-drawer.

After a transatlantic flight, we spent two nights at St.-Jean-Cap-Ferrat's elegant Hôtel Riviera Royal, just above the beach and only a short stroll from the casino. That first evening, we relaxed

TONY ROBERTS (BOTTOM LEFT, OPPOSITE)



The majestic *Sea Cloud* (top left) draws stares wherever she ties up. The modern clubhouse and American-style course at St. Donat are influenced by the hilly countryside near the town of Grasse.

The road to the Monte Carlo Golf Club is as scary as the views from the fairways are sublime. No wonder Monaco's Prince Rainier is a frequent player.



level. From the fifth green, the tiny principality of Monaco can be seen sparkling like a jewel beside the blue Mediterranean below. Prince Rainier often comes out to play, and that closes down the course, something the members don't seem to mind. Perhaps they use the downtime to listen carefully for the sound of their money compounding.

Monte Carlo is a hilly course that doesn't have motorized golf carts. Well, actually, it has one that belongs to a retired American admiral who has been known to take pity on his weary countrymen, give them a lift over the last few fairways, and then have the temerity to charge them a cart fee for the privilege!

Apart from the energy required to play the course, it's a lovely old classic. We found its plush fairways and fairly small greens in fine condition. The holes on the front side offered inspirational views of the sea while those on the back side provided equally compelling vistas to the north that took in rocky massifs and broad valleys dotted with whitewashed villas.

Off to Sea

Still, everyone seemed pleased to finally board the *Sea Cloud* and sail away from the traffic-choked corniches of Monte Carlo and Nice. That night, the *Sea Cloud* slipped quietly across the cool, calm sea, and from the open-air Lido deck we watched the lights of the villages winking back at the numerous stars overhead. Belowdecks, the dark



walnut-paneled library was turned into a formal dining room every evening. From a woefully cramped galley the chef managed, night after night, to send out wonderfully inventive dishes made that much more enjoyable by the *Sea Cloud's* white-glove service and its strict policy against empty wineglasses.

Once the tables were cleared, cruise director Tom "Not Captain" Hook would sit down at the piano and begin an energetic songfest, which often degenerated into bacchanalian caterwauling. One finds it hard to imagine either E.F. Hutton or Marjorie Merriweather Post belting out Broadway

show tunes in such a setting, but it must be noted that another previous owner of the *Sea Cloud*, the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, was renowned for his wild shipboard parties. Perhaps his spirit infected us.

At dawn every morning, we found the *Sea Cloud* riding at anchor while tenders waited to bring us golfers ashore. (Nongolfers had a busy schedule of sightseeing and shopping, credit cards gleaming in the bright Riviera sun.) In the Bay of St.-Tropez, we anchored off the village of Sainte-Maxime, where in the rolling foothills above town one finds the Golf Club



Modern villas cling to the rocky hillsides overlooking the fairways at the Golf Club Frégate above the town of Bandol.

Bandol's farmers are growing ancient varietals such as mourvèdre and cinsaut, and the region is again producing classic wines.

Sainte-Maxime. Its course overlooks both the sea and the Esterel Mountains, which Renoir captured so beautifully. This new course, designed by British architect Donald Harradine and his son, Peter, is surrounded by modern villas and a hotel. It is marked by dramatic elevation changes, narrow tree-lined fairways, and banks of wildflowers and fragrant wild sage.

The next morning, we anchored roughly halfway between Marseilles and Toulon, just off the village of Bandol. The town is home to the Golf Club Frégate, another modern development, this one combining a hillside of bougainvillea-draped villas, a modern-looking resort hotel, and a sporty golf course designed by American architect Ronald Fream. The wind howled in off the Mediterranean and had a profound effect while we played the cliff-top holes that overlooked the sea, although we found some protection on a section of the course carved out of beautiful sandstone ridges. Particularly pleasing were the holes we played that ran alongside



The jet set comes to play on Sardinia's Costa Smeralda, both at the Pevero Golf Club (above) and in the busy yacht harbor (bottom left). New world meets old below the ancient city of Bonifacio (above left) on neighboring Corsica.

The serrated edges of the mountains
that rose from Napoleon's native isle
looked foreboding and dangerous.

fields of grapes, growing plump in the bright sun. The Bandol region was once renowned for its wine, but an infestation of phylloxera virtually wiped out the area's vineyards. Now Bandol's farmers are growing ancient varietals such as mourvèdre and cinsaut, and the region is once again producing classic wines.

A day at sea gave the captain the opportunity to send the *Sea Cloud's* fresh-faced international crew aloft to unfurl the sails. Draped in her canvas finery and with a friendly quartering wind at her back, she rode comfortably to the southwest, toward the island of Sardinia.

To stand firmly rooted to the shore and watch a tall ship sail past is to sense the awakening of a long-lost affinity for the sea. To actually sail on such a vessel . . . to feel one force of nature, the wind, confront another, the sea . . . to watch with admiration as the captain and crew utilize the ancient tools of rope, spar, and sail with a skill and dexterity that landlubbers entirely lack . . . is to partake of a rare and exciting privilege.

On Napoleon's Isle

We arrived at dawn outside of Porto Cervo, Sardinia, where in 1961 the Aga Khan decided to build a superluxurious playground for the ultrarich of Europe.



The gorgeous colors of the Mediterranean provide the backdrop at Corsica's Sperone Golf Club.

The Costa Smeralda—the Emerald Coast—is indeed a swanky development, but all we had time to see were the marina, the golf course, and a shopping center. Other nooks and crannies of the Costa offer a quintet of five-star hotels where one can spend huge amounts of money doing lots of different things or nothing at all.

Our job was golf, and we headed for the Pevero course, which had been literally blasted from the rock-strewn, scrub-covered terrain by the senior Robert Trent Jones, who then used the crushed granite as a topsoil base. Jones strung the holes up and down the hills, creating panoramas of the rocky bays and emerald waters of the Sardinian coast.

In terms of views, Pevero was top-notch; in terms of playability, the golf course rated a bit lower. Simply put, it was quite severe. A shot that went just slightly astray vanished into the maquis, never to be seen again. Perhaps a few more rounds on the course would have made it easier to negotiate, but I felt it was the least golfer-friendly layout on the itinerary.

That evening, we enjoyed a barbecue dinner on the Lido deck as the *Sea Cloud* made her way through the Bonifacio Strait and cruised along the Corsican coast. As the sun sank slowly in a blaze of red, the serrated edges of the mountains that rose from Napoleon's native isle looked foreboding and dangerous.

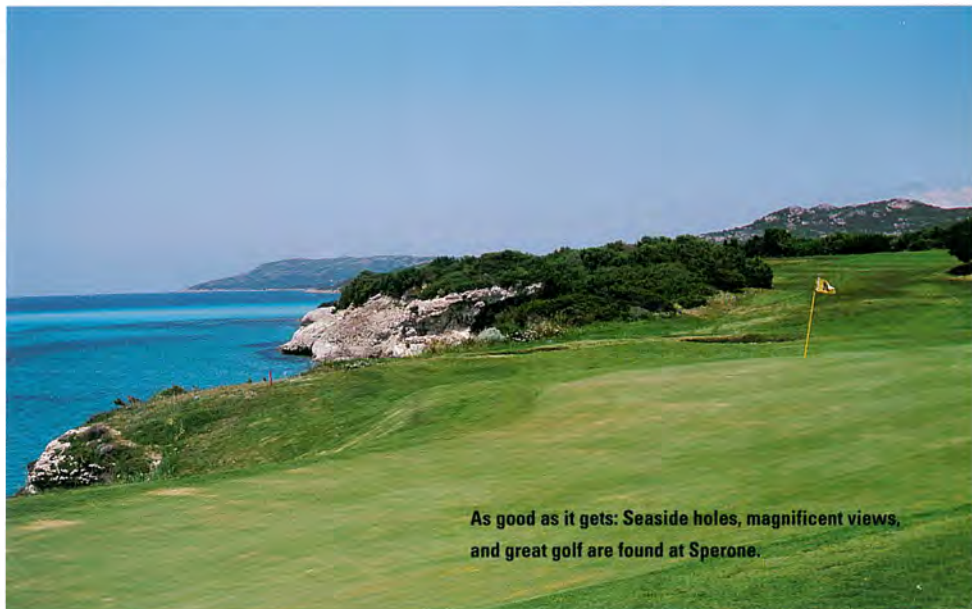
But Corsica turned out to be anything but scary. Early in the morning,

we watched as the *Sea Cloud* glided carefully into the port at Bonifacio, the passage between the high sandstone cliffs guarding the entrance that appeared impossible to negotiate. It is said that these are the same cliffs from which the Laestrygonians hurled stones down upon Odysseus' fleet in Book X of Homer's epic. As we rounded the last point, the medieval city high atop the hill came into view. Its steep, turreted fortress walls, narrow streets, and occasional church steeple offered an impressive welcome. Down at the waterfront, a modern marina awaited, complete with elegant outdoor cafés, restaurants, and swank shops.

Kalos had scheduled two days in Bonifacio, and that meant two cracks at another Robert Trent Jones course. However, even two rounds aren't enough at the Sperone Golf Club, which is about a five-minute drive from town. Sperone is a course one could play every day and not grow bored. The terrain is all undulating hills and outcroppings of stone—a rock garden protects the run-up to the first green—with the occasional small pond thrown in for good measure.

And then there is the sea. The back nine is especially imposing, with several holes clinging to craggy cliffs high above the crystal-clear sea. The par-5 16th hole is as dramatic a seaside challenge as any in the world, and that includes Pebble Beach's scepterlike 18th. Its string of tee boxes is perched out near a lighthouse on a narrow, 40-foot-high cliff, and the hole bends around to the left, with the sea in play on almost every shot.

It is a stunning hole on a magnificent golf course. Even Rees Jones, who had never seen his father's work here, was suitably impressed. The president of the club, a retired French air force general, loaded Rees up with mementos and best wishes to bring back to the old man, who died just a few weeks later.



As good as it gets: Seaside holes, magnificent views, and great golf are found at Sperone.



The bell tower in St. Tropez beckons the glamorous to the town's shops and beaches, while golf holes like the 17th at Sainte-Maxime attract the sporty set.

When the time came, we were sorry to see the ghostly white citadel of Bonifacio disappear off our stern. The old town had been a delightful warren of shops, patisseries, tiny groceries, and cafés. The restaurants both there and down by the waterfront were excellent—Corsica is, after all, French. It was a town made for the wanderer, for one bereft of deadlines and schedules.

Fin de Voyage

Our special voyage was nearly at an end. We docked the next morning at Civitavecchia and rode by motor coach into Rome. Normally, the Kalos Golf trip includes a final round at a Roman course, but during our week a tournament was being held, so we busied ourselves that last day with a tour of the Forum and a shopping foray on the Via Condotti.

Some of the group jetted up to Lake Como and a few days of golf at Villa d'Este, while the rest of us, regretfully, headed for home. But we took with us

a satchel of memories, a group of new friends made, and a new cargo of dreams: the sparkling ocean at Sperone, the bougainvillea in bloom at Frégate, the fragrance of fresh sage at Sainte-

Maxime, the taste of the cold beer after the trek at Monte Carlo.

James Y. Bartlett is the editor of Luxury Golf.

LUXURY DETAILS

Kalos Golf's voyages on the *Sea Cloud* are so popular that spaces are typically sold out at least a year in advance. The company will be adding new trips on the *Sea Cloud II*, a new sailing vessel currently under construction in Spain. Kalos also offers luxury golf trips on exquisite barges that sail the Danube and the Rhine rivers (see "The Green Danube Waltz" in *Luxury Golf's* Fall 2000 issue).

The per-person tariff runs from \$5,970 up to \$10,360 based on cabin size and amenities. Newer cabins average around \$7,000 per person while the original cabins, which have been restored to their former elegance, range from \$8,000 up. These tariffs include all meals, golf fees, transportation to and from the courses, and alternative sightseeing programs for nongolfers. Transatlantic flights are not included.

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