

Alexander Maksik follows the road from the beaches of Biarritz—reveling in the improbable coexistence of great surfing, sophisticated food, and elegant hotels—inland to the spa town of Eugénie-les-Bains, where the pace is slow, the days are long, and attention to detail is everything.

Basque, in the Glow

Photographs by Felix Odell





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COUPLE ARE kissing on the platform in Bayonne, France, while the train hisses and sighs. I've watched variations of this scene for many years—the station farewell, the last embrace. It is the stuff of a thousand photographs, part of the iconography of this country. In a

certain imagination, it is a steam train, the whistle blows, it is winter, there are cigarettes and high-colored coats. But here in Bayonne, next to the lovers are three young blond women wearing shorts and bikini tops, each with a surfboard under her arm.

It is this contrast that drew me, many years ago, to this part of southwestern France. I had just moved to Paris from L.A. and believed I was giving up a surfer's life for a café life in black-and-white, that I had chosen Robert Doisneau over David Hockney, Albert Camus over Tom Curren. During those first years, I came to the Côte Basque, where I discovered a France I'd never imagined. After my first surf here, I sat at a pretty corner café in St-Jean-de-Luz, drinking *cafés crèmes* and eating croissants with raspberry jam. Watching the town's elegant denizens stroll past,

I had the sense that I'd discovered a perfect fusion of two things I loved equally.

I am hardly the first to fall in love with these beaches and mountains. I am pleased to say that I have this in common with Empress Eugénie. She too fell for the landscape and brought her new husband, Napoleon III, to see it. In 1854, he built them a Belle Époque summer palace, named it the Villa Eugénie, and just like that, Biarritz, a pretty whaling and fishing backwater some five miles from Bayonne, was suddenly chic. In 1883, the palace became the Hôtel du Palais. Royalty followed royalty: Queen Isabelle, Otto von Bismarck, and Leopold II all came to visit (as, in later years, did Ernest Hemingway, Frank Sinatra, and Ava Gardner)—a list that reveals the fundamental tension here between the regal and the common. It is the same tension that exists in every beautiful beach town that's become stylish. After all, even St-Tropez was once a humble fishing village, as was every other stop along the French Riviera. It is kings or artists who often turn a good place toward ruin.

But it is not ruin I am thinking of as I'm shown to my massive room at the Hôtel du Palais. The furniture is opulent, the carpets rich and soft. I draw back the heavy velvet drapes as far as they'll go and open the windows: There is the ocean shifting

Previous page, from left: The bridge to Biarritz's Rocher du Basta connects the iconic outcropping to the mainland; splashing around the cliffs by the town's Port Vieux beach. **Below, from left:** The Rocher du Basta is a favorite spot to look out at the Atlantic; taking the plunge nearby; the grand facade of the Hôtel du Palais, which still plays host to royalty of both the literal and the Hollywood variety; details in one of the hotel's restaurants.



from deep blue to turquoise and back again, and the sound of waves breaking on the beach below. I can see children running through the water, a couple spreading out their towels on the sand. Beneath my window is a long-haired surfer singing the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Under the Bridge" in a thick French accent. I wonder if Empress Eugénie would have taken as much pleasure in this scene as I do. I imagine so—even if she was a staunch Catholic and notoriously conservative, I'm certain there was a sensual, restless side to her character. How else to explain the photograph of a handsome young man, discovered among her possessions, inscribed with the words, "One must learn to love in secret." I like to think that she came to Biarritz for love—perhaps of that young man, and the wildness of this ocean.

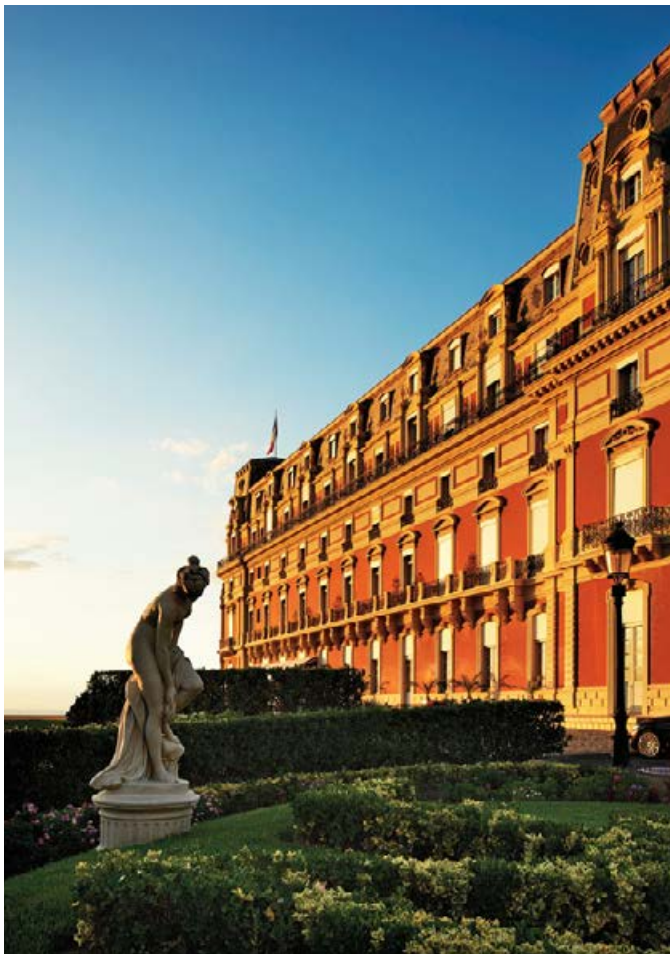
I descend the wide carpeted staircase to the lobby with its crystal chandeliers, and leave my key on its heavy gold chain with one of the concierges. I walk past the Villa Eugénie, the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant (jacket required), past the lovely swimming pool, and out through the tall wrought iron gates that surround the property. After swimming out into the water, I look back at the hotel, at my room with its open windows, the blowing curtains.

That evening, I walk the promenade curving along the wide main beach. It's a few hours before

sunset, and that exceptional September light has turned everything amber—the cliffs, the villas perched along their edges, the simple restaurants lining the Port Vieux. At Casa Juan Pedro, I sit outside above the water and eat wonderful grilled sardines with a carafe of rough rosé while the sun sets. Later, after wandering the paths that run along the seawall, I walk back toward the hotel, which floats at the far northern end of the beach, beautifully lit in the night.

When I return to my room, the drapes are drawn, the windows and shutters are closed, the air-conditioning is on. None of this makes sense to me. I want to fall asleep to the sound of the waves breaking, to feel the wind moving. And once I've undone the maid's good work, I do.

The next morning, I roam the beaches of Bidart and Guéthary, where I used to love to surf. I find the Chemin de Cenitz, a little road I remember from years ago that ends at a tiny cove with waves breaking over rock reef. There is a stylish restaurant here now, with views over the water. Then out to Ilbarritz, one of my favorite beaches on this stretch of coast: perfect yellow sand protected and contained by a low hill of grass. It reminds me so much of places I grew up surfing in California—not so much for the way it looks as for the feeling



of secrecy, of being hidden from nearby cities. But what those places do not have is La Plancha, the quintessential beach restaurant. To eat so well—fresh hake with *piment d'espelette* and razor-thin slices of garlic sizzling in olive oil—barefoot on a simple terrace full of sunstruck people, while the sun sets over the ocean, is a pleasure second only to being in the ocean.

When I return to the Hôtel du Palais, I'm confronted by an enormous gray dog stalking down the lobby corridor, its nails clicking on the inlaid marble floor. As far as I can tell, it is an Irish wolfhound, its head about level with my stomach. Before it can reach me, a tall Russian man shouts, "Rudi!" Everyone turns to watch as the dog trots back to its owner, who waits impatiently in the open elevator. I take the stairs, thinking that neither man nor beast would have been out of place here a century and a half ago, when the hotel was still a palace, and kings with all their eccentricities were common. I enter my room to find chocolates on the bedside table, the lights dimmed, and all the windows wide open.

IN THE morning, I drive inland to Eugénie-les-Bains, a spa town about two hours northeast of Biarritz. It saddens me to leave, but I can't help thinking that for all its careful opulence, the Hôtel du Palais lacks something of the spirit, the honest simplicity, of the empress whose palace it once was. Along with the coast, Eugénie loved the region's thermal baths, particularly Las Aygos de Saint Loubouer, which was renamed for her in 1861 when she granted the town her patronage. After an hour of driving through farmland, I cross the slow-flowing Adour River, and the landscape turns greener, lusher; by the time I reach Michel Guérard's Les Prés d'Eugénie, I'm certain I've made the right decision.

In 1965, Guérard was a young chef who transformed a once simple North African restaurant in the northern suburbs of Paris into Pot-au-Feu and made it world famous. By 1971, he'd been granted two Michelin stars and had fallen in love with his wife, Christine (who had turned a family estate into a Relais & Châteaux property). A few years later, Guérard left his restaurant and moved south to Eugénie-les-Bains, and ever since, he and Christine have been amiably ruling over this exquisite kingdom composed of 40 acres of parkland, gardens, restaurants, hotels, spas, and a cooking school.

One of the founders of *nouvelle cuisine*, Michel Guérard is—at least in France—more famous for *cuisine minceur*, an unfortunate term for food that manages to both be healthful and not taste like an old paperback. His eponymous restaurant, which serves his "slimming cuisine" as well as a full-blown, nothing-restricted *cuisine gourmande* menu, has maintained three Michelin stars since 1977. Now 82, Guérard remains an icon in France, but having

spent the last few nights at a hotel best known for its icons, I am cautious in my enthusiasm.

However, walking through these gardens, past fountains and palms, citrus and plane trees, I feel myself giving in. And then there is the room, which smells faintly of wood smoke and lavender. It is impeccable, down to the polished brass light switches and the bottle of Guérard Armagnac on the dresser. All of it is undoubtedly luxurious, but none of it feels at odds with or in opposition to its environment the way the Hôtel du Palais occasionally did.

Eventually I find my way to La Ferme Thermale, the property's rustic spa. After exchanging my clothes for a cotton robe, I sit on a couch drinking a tea made of leaves harvested from the garden. The floors are seventeenth-century terra-cotta; a fire burns in the massive fireplace. A young woman ushers me into an elegant room with a smaller fireplace and a long bathtub. It has been drawn with warm thermal water infused with rosemary, thyme, and sage. These herbs have also been bound into a fat bouquet that she encourages me to use as a scrub brush. Once I'm alone, I follow my attendant's advice while Eugénie and Napoleon III gaze down on me from their gilt frames.

THAT EVENING I sit in the garden, looking out at the late sun shining through the leaves of a plane tree. I'm served a glass of Guérard champagne and handed a menu with both categories—*cuisine minceur* and *cuisine gourmande*. It seems madness to live with any kind of restriction here, so I choose accordingly. In my experience, a restaurant's three Michelin stars often mean that both the food and I will be treated with the grave seriousness of an operating room. But for all the refined elegance of the place, there is a lack of pretension that makes dining here an unmitigated joy. I will not go on about every dish that night, but I should mention several. One of Guérard's most famous creations is a single egg slowly scrambled with cream, butter, chives, and shallots, returned to its shell, and topped with caviar. It is served in an eggcup balanced atop a ceramic chicken's foot. The egg dish, with its wit and unexpectedness, sets an unusual and welcoming tone. So do the smiles of the servers, their enthusiasm for the food and wine, and the pleasure they take in watching me eat half a lobster cooked in a wood oven and accompanied by onions and peach cream. There is also the duck with minced pigeon and clementines, and the large *oreiller*, a kind of dumpling, stuffed with local cèpes. Drunk and sated after dessert, I return to the garden for coffee and *mignardises*. It's a cool night, and the air smells of jasmine and orange flowers, lavender and rosemary. The fountains mute the dining room noise, and the plane trees are lit from below.

In the morning, after breakfast is delivered to my room (there is no choice here—it is breakfast in

Right: The verdant approach to Les Prés d'Eugénie.

HOTELS ON THE ROAD

Below, a cheat sheet on the most beautiful rest stops our writer checked into.

Hôtel du Palais

Victor Hugo, Queen Victoria, and Bing Crosby have all stayed at this oceanfront stunner that's so close to the Atlantic, it practically floats. 1 AVE. DE L'IMPÉRATRICE, BIARRITZ; from \$385.

Hôtel La Villa l'Arche

If you're a surfer, be sure to seek out this second-home-of-your-dreams just off the coastal road. It has seamless access to Les Embruns Beach, on the Bay of Biscay. CHEMIN CAMBOËNÉA, BIDART; from \$155.

Les Prés d'Eugénie

Owned by chef Michel Guérard and his hotelier wife, Christine, this famous inland hotel is characterized by its familial spirit: The chef, now in his 80s, can still be found around the kitchen, and today his daughters, Adeline and Éléonore, run the place. You can also rent the Guérards' Huchet Beach House, but only if you stay at least three nights. 334 RUE RENÉ VIELLE, EUGÉNIE-LES-BAINS; from \$270.









Previous page: The beach in Biarritz as seen from the Allée Winston Churchill. **Left:** A suite at Les Prés d'Eugénie with a view of the garden beyond; one of the many vineyards between the coast and the mountains. **Right:** The terrace of the Pavillon Anglais, the main house at Huchet Beach House, a tiny inn north of Biarritz.

bed or no breakfast at all), I drive toward Huchet Beach House, an outpost of the Guérards' empire about an hour north of Biarritz. I think of the conversation I had with Madame Guérard, a strikingly beautiful woman dressed in a starched white gown. She spoke about the property with evident pride. "It's all a bit crazy, I know," she said, her gesture including the entire complex. "But so is everything else, and to be happy you must commit to one madness or another. This has been ours."

I pass signs for a nudist campground, some skateboarding kids. A guy in dreadlocks cruises by in a beat-up van, a stack of surfboards strapped to the roof. It could be California, and when I arrive at Huchet, it's somehow a shock to hear the staff speaking French. There is a shy, quiet chef, along with Claudine, a kind of majordomo who serves as housekeeper, concierge, server, sommelier.

The main house, built as a hunting lodge in 1858 by Baron Charles-Eucher Boulart, looks like no other I've seen in the region. The roof is made of red tile; the outer walls are yellow and trimmed in a deep Moab red. Now called the Pavillon Anglais, it's where guests are served their meals. There are only two guest cottages, beautifully restored buildings of weathered gray wood—one a former boathouse, the other a former carpenter's quarters. Each is reminiscent of my room in Eugénie, though simpler, more in tune with the ocean—the ocean, which I've not seen since Biarritz. I follow a wooden walkway that rises through the dunes and high grass until I come to a low gate, and there before me is water.

The beach is wide and stretches on and on in both directions. I have the sense that I've stumbled upon some wild, pristine, undiscovered country. It

is the same feeling I imagine Eugénie might have had the first time she saw it. I keep expecting a wave of tourists to pour over the dunes. But there is only a fisherman, a woman walking her dog, two boys chasing a soccer ball. It feels impossible that I should be in France, one of the most visited nations in the world.

After a long swim and a bath in the beautiful stone tub in my room, I dress and walk to the worn wooden deck that wraps around the Pavillon Anglais. Claudine shows me to a table facing west and places a plate of spoons in front of me. On each is a piece of endive stuffed with minced veal. She opens a bottle of Billecart-Salmon rosé and pours me a glass, leaving the bottle in ice. Later, after the sun is replaced by a sky the color of champagne, I go to the small dining room, where a fire burns. I'm served a salad of local greens, vegetables, and blanched walnuts, a fillet of turbot with parsnips, and a dessert of three small strawberry tarts. It is an excellent, unpretentious meal that perfectly matches this place: the art of balance that the Guérards have mastered.

After a glass of the house Armagnac, I walk to the top of the dune, not to look at the water but to look back at this little haven. The sky has gone a deep blue. I can see the Pavillon Anglais, the barbecue where the fish was cooked, the coals glowing orange, and beyond that my little house, where I will sleep as deeply as I've slept in months. And when I return, the windows have been left open, and the bedroom smells of thyme and ocean. ♦

DRINK LIKE A LOCAL

Because it's always cocktail hour when you're on vacation—especially in the south of France.

Guérard Armagnac

In the guest rooms at the Guérards' Les Prés d'Eugénie, you'll find a bottle of the housemade brandy on the dresser. Have it as a nightcap, after a meal of fire-roasted suckling pig or Landes chicken at the hotel's La Ferme aux Grives restaurant.

Izarra Jaune

An herbal liqueur with a slight almond flavor, it is usually served as a digestif.

Txakoli

This crisp, clean, sparkling white wine (pronounced *chok-oh-LEE*), which pairs nicely with seafood or charcuterie, is made from the hondarrabi zuri, a grape native to the neighboring Spanish Basque region.

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