

Playground of the

Biarritz has become famed over the years as a favourite haunt of the rich and famous and as **Mary Johnston** discovers the French coastal resort still has that certain je ne sais quoi

MORE than 50 years ago my parents visited Biarritz, St Jean de Luz and San Sebastian. Back in the fifties they were the chicest resorts in Europe. 'A millionaire's paradise' is how my mum described this beautiful part of the world where I knew I would be walking in the footsteps of my beloved parents. After a short flight from Dublin we arrived at the tiny Biarritz International Airport. Because it's small, you're in and out rather swiftly.

We stayed in the former summer home of Napoleon and his Empress Eugenie. I turned chocolatier for the day. And at last understood the hype about French cuisine. The five star Hotel du Palais sits majestically overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and not for nothing is it listed among 'The Leading Hotels of the World'. Its €12 million Imperial spa was deemed 'Best Hotel Spa in Europe' by the European press and the Rotonde restaurant is Michelin starred, so it has plenty to commend it. Needless to say, it doesn't come cheap but they have a reputation to retain and its exclusivity is part of the appeal to its well-heeled guests. My magnificent bedroom had a full ocean view, interactive TV, adjoining dressing room and Carrera marble en suite. Of course, I meant to try out the fitness centre with its resident instructor, the power plate and the enormous indoor swimming pool and Jacuzzi, but with so much gourmet eating to be experienced and so many fine wines to check, I only had time left for spa treatments – I can highly recommend them and the very professional team. The only slight set-back was that the therapist was so beautiful, it was intimidating.

Among the culinary delights I tried were oysters in cauliflower gelee, Dorado Meuniere, roast breast of duck with pommes Gaufrettes and macaroons to rival my previous best from Laduree in Paris. The ultimate seal of approval must be that celebrated chef Alain Ducasse, with a choice from every top venue in France, opted to hold his wedding reception here. The Hotel du Palais combines the opulent charm of a bygone era with all the requirements of the contemporary traveller. Victor Hugo prayed that Biarritz would never become fashionable but the Palais guestbook shows his prayers weren't answered. Almost every crowned head of Europe has been captivated by its magic and the world's aristocracy followed. The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1903, but was soon rebuilt, bigger and better. Among previous guests are names like Charlie Chaplin, Ernest Hemingway, Bing Crosby, Gary Cooper, Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Aristotle Onassis and Jayne Mansfield. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor were regulars. Michelle Pfeiffer adored every minute of her stay while filming Colette's *Cherie* and Jude Law lapped up the luxury during a shoot for Christian Dior's Pour L'homme. The discerning traveller's desire for that unique sense of class should ensure a future as legendary as its past. On his signed photo in one of the hotel salons, Henry Fonda wrote 'Excellent as always'. If they'd asked me, I'd have agreed.

There are lots of affordable eateries all around Biarritz to cater for every palate, long beaches and great walks. Go for a coffee or tea and pastries to Miramont on the Place George Clemenceau. Established in 1872, kings and queens have enjoyed infusions in its rather stately premises. The two most popular sports in Biarritz are golf and surfing, not forgetting le rugby. In fact Peter Viertel (hus-



band of movie star Deborah Kerr) introduced surfing to Europe in Biarritz in 1957. We enjoyed a lovely lunch at La Socket Biarritz Golf Training Centre overlooking the ocean. One of the best meals I've ever eaten anywhere, was at a little restaurant called L'Atelier, 18 Rue de la Bergerie, a five minutes walk from the Hotel du Palais. I'd suggest you make a reservation beforehand and guarantee it will be a gastro highlight of your visit. One highlight of mine was being trained by Master Chocolatier M. Serge Couzigou to make my very own bars of chocolate and being allowed to take them home. The heavenly Planete Musee du Chocolat, Biarritz is open for visits all year round. You can taste and buy. Another worthwhile place to check out is the vast market where the variety of fresh vegetables, fish, cheese and foie gras makes you want to organise a party. You should also take the 15 minute drive into St Jean de Luz, an extremely pretty little fishing town with some lovely shops and cafes and the church where Louis XIV married Marie-Therese from neighbouring Spain in 1660. It was there I realised the relevance of the lovely little sailor suits mum had brought back for my brother and me in the fifties. The entire Basque region is accessible in a matter of days and the scenery resembles parts of Ireland. I loved the little village of Sare where we were treated with enormous warmth to a delicious lunch by the owners of Lastiry a fine bar/restaurant with six bedrooms overlooking the surrounding mountains. I even got Monsieur Echeverria to speak some Basque, which is like no other language on earth. The Pays Basque has first class camping facilities for thousands of families, hundreds of hotels to suit every budget, lively night life and is a place that takes time to offer itself to the visitor. The people are friendly and proud to tell you about their history, art, culture and tradition.

■ Hotel du Palais Biarritz Tel: 0033 (0) 559 41 6400 www.hotel-du-palais.com
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