

The Un-St.-Tropez

A revival of their historic inns has quietly ushered in a new era for seaside towns Cap Ferret and Pyla-sur-Mer. *by Michael Gross*

Photographs by Ambroise Tézenas



Above: An oyster degustation tour near L'île aux Oiseaux.
Left: La Co(o)rniche sits next to the Dune du Pilat.

ON MY SECOND DAY on the Bassin d'Arcachon, a vast, triangular body of tidal water an hour west of Bordeaux on France's Atlantic coast, I took the 90-minute drive from Cap Ferret, a resort village, to Pyla-sur-Mer, its analogue on the other side of the ever-changing body of water.

Just outside Cap Ferret, I pulled off the road near a grove of tall trees with a pine-needle-and-sand floor to climb a steep dune, walking past a neon-graffitied relic of World War II—a German *blockhaus* observation post—to Plage Le Truc Vert (the Green Thing). Building is forbidden on the Atlantic side of the Lège-Cap-Ferret peninsula. And the views of the wild, surfer-friendly beaches there are breathtaking, just as Philippe Starck had promised me in a phone call a few days before.

Starck, the French starchitect-designer, said his protean talents spring from that special place: “When I was very, very young, I went to the coast north of Arcachon with my mother. We did not have a lot of money, so she rented a *blockhaus*, just a big staircase with a huge room at the top, all in glass, with a view over the forest and the big waves. It was a piece of art and a very strong inspiration for my creativity.”

Although he now owns homes around the world, Starck has lived near the Bassin d'Arcachon for 40 years. “It’s one of the best places in the world,” he said. The *bassin*, or lagoon, which partly empties with each low tide to mud flats studied with oyster-bed pickets and listing, beached boats, is anchored by the quaint

Victorian-era resort town of Arcachon. The shoreline then swoops south to Pyla-sur-Mer, a quiet, exclusive community nestled beneath the Dune du Pilat, the tallest sand dune in Europe. Across the bay, opposite the dune, the narrow headland where we’d parked ends at Cap Ferret, a former fishing village turned bustling summer resort, where Starck lives. Those two elite towns remain semi-secrets, closely held and revered by the French.

“It’s magical because of the lagoon,” Starck continued, “because the mud is the primordial soup—the same for hundreds of thousands of years. I take my boat and go to the Banc d’Arguin,” a shifting sandbank between the bay and the Atlantic. “Every night, it disappears. Every day, it’s virgin. I love the idea of living at the beginning of everything.”

For decades, Pyla and Cap Ferret were hidden in the glare of Riviera resorts like St.-Jean-Cap-Ferrat (with an *a*), Cannes, and St.-Tropez. Their heat-seeking international habitués couldn’t appreciate the *bassin’s* essential allure. “It’s French quality, French intelligence, French balance,” said Starck. “Mix that with the elements and it makes it pretty wonderful.”



From top: Club Plage Pereire, in Arcachon, at sunset; a man selling hats in the Cap Ferret market; a guest room at La Co(o)rniche.

But while Cap Ferret (with an *e*) and Pyla have always had natural beauty and a bounteous food source in their *bassin*—an ideal environment for producing 60 percent of the oysters consumed in France—their few aging hotels lacked luster until, in 2010, the mimosascented region began to blossom. That's when William Téchouyeres, a locally born rugby star, and his wife, Sophie, leased one of those hotels from its owners, the Gaume family, who founded Pyla. La Corniche, at 80, was tired, its environs “a bit abandoned,” said Sophie, who grew up in Pyla, but the chalet-style former hunting lodge had a priceless location,

with matchless views that encompassed the Dune du Pilat, the Banc d'Arguin, and the intersection of raging ocean and calm, shallow bay. Starck was lured across the *bassin* to renovate it.

He had an instinctual vision for the hotel. “Just do the minimum. Be humble, disappear, and it's done,” he decided. His reaction to the view—oh! oh!—inspired the rebranding of the hotel as **La Co(o)rniche** (from \$300; lacoorniche-pyla.com). The new proprietors expanded it in 2013 and, in 2016, bought Pyla's neo-Basque-style No. 2 hotel, Haïtza, from the Gaumes. They hired Starck's daughter Ara to help with the redesign of what's



now the spa-hotel **Ha(a)itza** (from \$210; haaitza.com) and added boutiques and fine dining to both.

Around the same time the son of the Accor hotel group's chairman was inspired to buy an old wooden house across the water and transform it into the nautical-chic boutique hotel **Maison du Bassin** (from \$140; lamaisondubassin-capferret.com). And a Bordelais TV producer overcame local resistance to open the 15-room **Hôtel Côté Sable** (from \$360; hotel-cote-sable.com) just off the beach in the center of the village. In summer 2017, when the TGV fast train from Paris-Montparnasse



reduced travel time to Bordeaux to just over two hours, the *bassin* was reborn.

The main attraction is what it's always been: Visitors come to the beach and climb the dune. Oysters are never far, either. They are pulled from the *bassin* moments before they're served—along with rosy crevettes, the freshest baguettes, homemade mayonnaise, pâté, and glasses of crisp local white wine and Bordeaux rosé—in the many unpretentious “*dégustation*” cabins clustered along the coast. At La 12Zen in La Teste-de-Buch, near Pyla, we watched the tide come in as we nibbled, sprinkling our oysters with Madagascar pepper.

Cap Ferret and Pyla are complementary opposites that attract different types. Starck had never even spent time in Pyla before that rugby player invited him across the *bassin*. Residents of Pyla consider Cap Ferret flashy. Pyla, on the mainland, with easier access to Bordeaux and the rest of France, as well as the diverse restaurants and shops of Arcachon, is more Parisian; Cap Ferret feels more isolated and has long been a bolt-hole for the Bordelais gentry and, more recently, a paparazzi-free zone for the rich and famous. The actress Marion Cotillard and director Guillaume Canet own a home there.

Often compared, inexactly, to the Hamptons or Nantucket, these French resorts do have some things in common with their American counterparts: weekend traffic; pastel clothes; well-maintained vintage cars. They are also constantly evolving. “Things are going to change,” predicted Fabrice Gili, creative director of the Frédéric Fekkai salon in SoHo, who grew up in the area and is planning to open a bed-and-breakfast. But

the future—more of the same, or more St.-Tropez?—is really anyone's guess.

Arcachon became a winter resort in 1857. Barely populated, it was a haven for victims of pulmonary disorders, attracted by the sea air and temperate climate. Napoleon III encouraged its *ostréiculture*, or oyster farming. Inevitably, it also drew the celebrated and artistic.

In 1910, Louis Gaume, a 23-year-old tinkerer, arrived in Arcachon seeking his fortune. After World War I, he opened an engineering office and partnered with a real estate investor to create Pyla-sur-Mer and, later, Pilat-Plage, both luxurious subdivisions in the pines by the dune.

Less accessible, Cap Ferret was a comparative late bloomer, initially attracting only fishermen and hunters, who built bare-bones cabins. In 1908, France auctioned off land at the peninsula's tip; called Les 44 Hectares, it's now some of the priciest real estate in France. The first Americans—soldiers—arrived in 1918, setting up a base on what's now called the Beach of the Americans. Development and tourism followed in the '60s, making Cap Ferret “very fashionable today with all these wealthy people,” grumbled



Left: Bicycle paths along Boulevard de la Mer in Arcachon. Above: The exterior of La Co(o)rniche.

Benoît Bartherotte to the press in 2016. A character himself, Bartherotte made his wealth from the fashion trade. He has evoked equal parts controversy and irony by building a multimillion-dollar private dike on public sands to stop the natural erosion of his land.

Wealth came to Pyla between the wars, when Gaume sold homes to the likes of fashion's Jeanne Lanvin and the banker Baron Philippe de Rothschild. Gaume developed homes and hotels, beginning in the 1930s, and his grandson and great-grandchildren still build and renovate most of Pyla's villas.

"Our family is deeply in love with the Bay of Arcachon" and its "rare quality of life," great-grandson Nicolas Gaume told me. "What differentiates Cap Ferret from Pyla? Each of them has its distinguished trait, but they are both deeply rooted in an overwhelming natural beauty. The best of the Bassin experience is to enjoy both sides."

And we did. At the morning market in Cap Ferret, we picked up bread, fruit, delectable ham with herbs, and cheese. A few blocks away, the commercial strip has cafés, restaurants, and a few chic boutiques. Across the *bassin*, in an open-air pedestrian mall in the center of the small village of Le Moulleau, Bar de l'Oubli has a congenial terrace for croissants and coffee with the Byzantine Church of Notre-Dame-des-Passes as a backdrop.

In Cap Ferret, we gorged on *moules frites* at L'Escale on the Jetée Bélisaire, a long pier where ferries dock. In Pyla, the minimalist pool terrace at La Co(o)rniche is best for a lunch of shellfish, the cozy Café Ha(a)ïtza is best for heartier dinner fare. And the short drive to Arcachon is well worth it for lunch on the beach at the summer-only Club Plage Pereire and for dinner at an Arcachon institution, Chez Pierre.

But the quintessential *bassin* experience is a ride on a *pinasse*, the flat-

bottomed, shallow-draft pine craft designed for these waters. We boarded *Calistoga*, built by 220-year-old Dubourdieu, France's oldest still-active shipyard, in Arcachon. We cruised to L'Île aux Oiseaux, or Island of the Birds, home of the *bassin*'s visual signatures, Les Cabanes Tchanquées, two cabins on stilts built to guard oyster beds. *Calistoga*'s owner, Muriel Linxe Fort, lives in Cap Ferret. "But not so much in summer," she admitted, "because too many people."

We cruised past the fisherman's village at L'Herbe, "but there are no more fishermen," she said with a sigh. "Cap Ferret was once all Bordelais. Now they can't afford to keep the properties in their families." Still, Linxe Fort says, "It's not like St.-Tropez. It's *style simple*. People stay in their villas. They do barbecues. They don't show themselves."

But neither is it like the tired old days, she added. "This side is smart. Pyla is very, very smart."



A view of the Arcachon Bay from Cap Ferret.