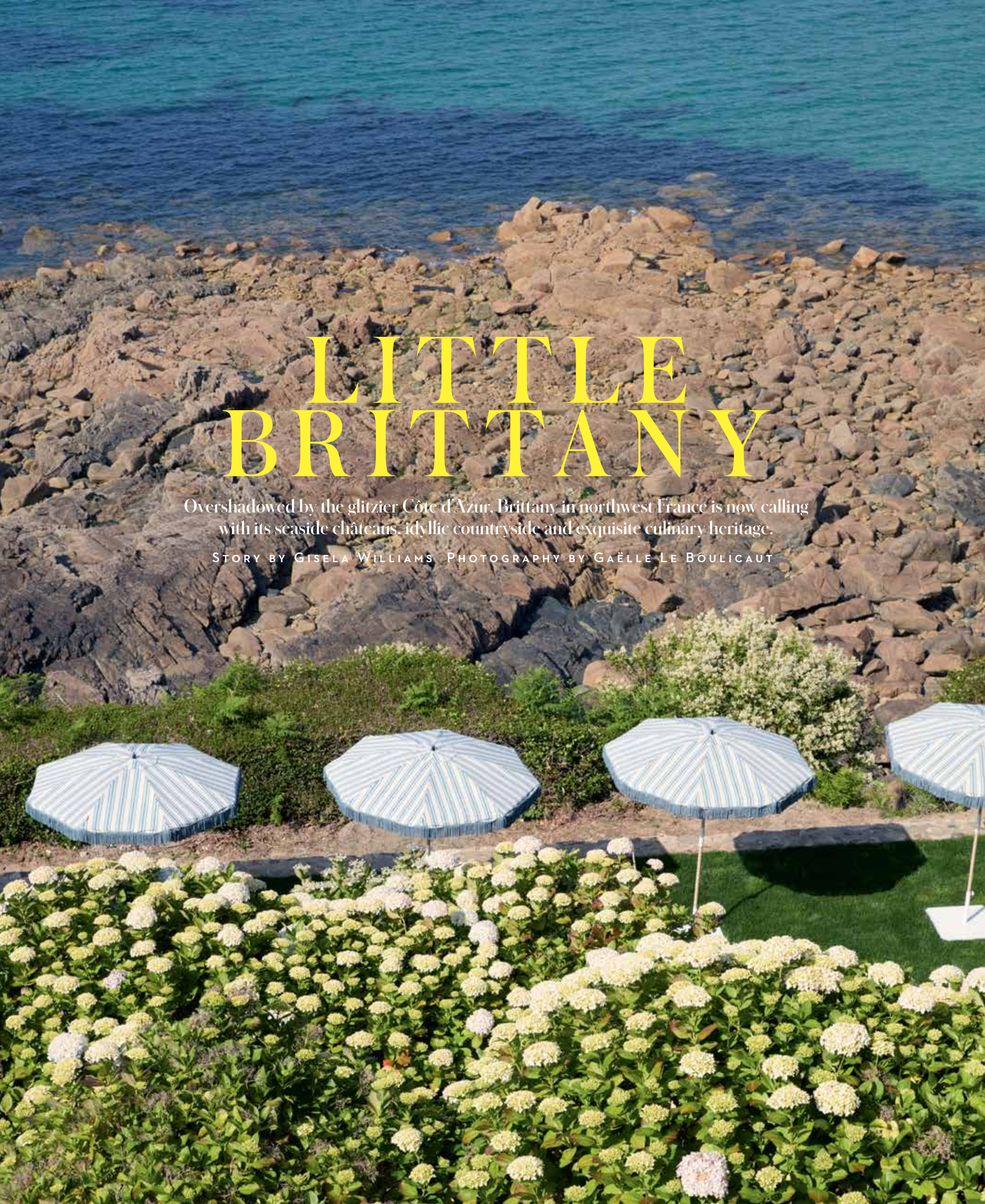




LITTLE BRITTANY

Overshadowed by the glitzier Côte d'Azur, Brittany in northwest France is now calling with its seaside châteaux, idyllic countryside and exquisite culinary heritage.

STORY BY GISELA WILLIAMS PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAËLLE LE BOULICAUT

EXPLORE

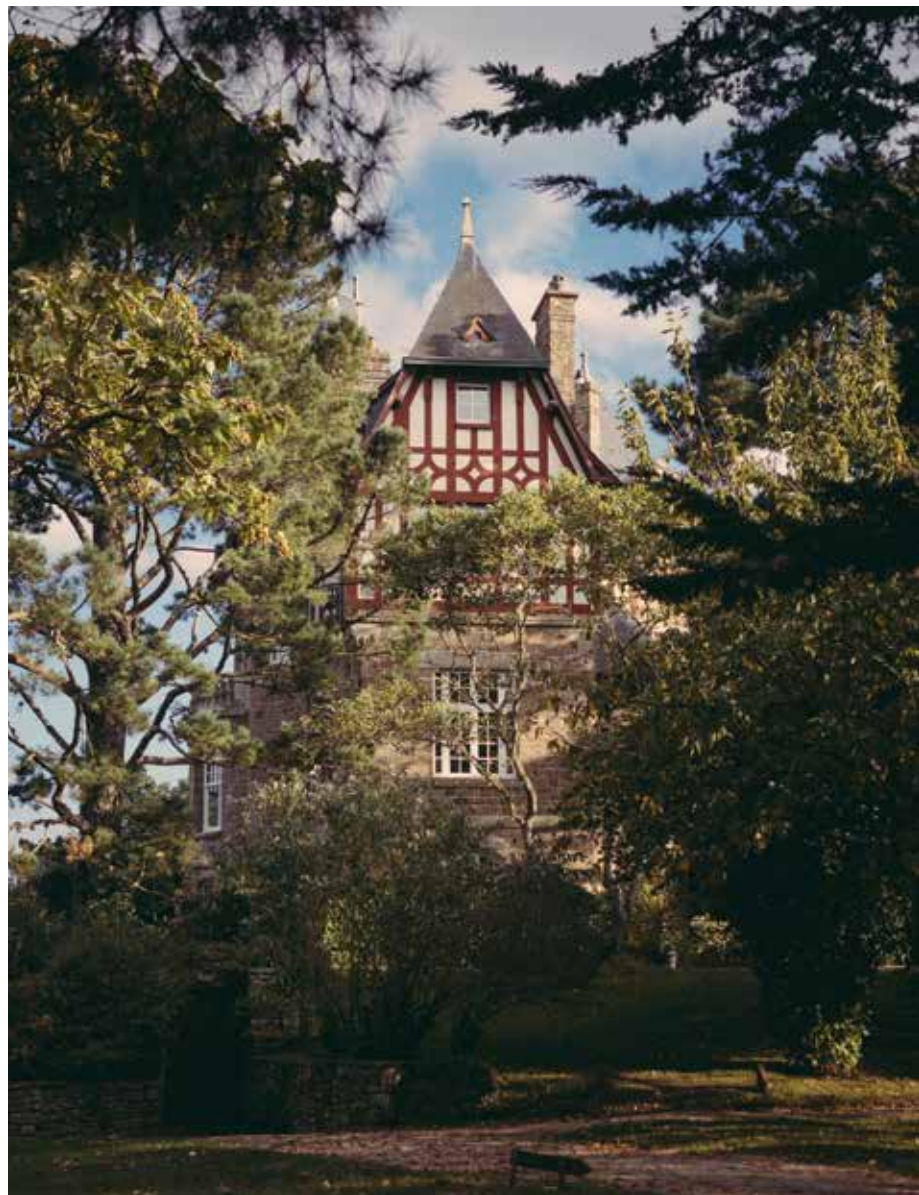
COAST ALONG

La Belle-Iloise sardines originate in Quiberon, a seaside resort town in Brittany. Opposite: Les Bassans is a waterfront hotel near the blush-hued Pink Granite Coast.





BLUE NOTES
Sailing in the Gulf of Morbihan, the aquamarine jewel of southern Brittany. Clockwise from above: local spider crab for lunch; La Cale aux Épices is a spice repository in Vannes; Château Richeux.



Some of the most carefully guarded and unspoilt corners of Europe tend to be regions or islands that think of themselves as completely independent of the countries that claim them. Closer to Africa than Athens, Crete, home to an extraordinary prehistoric Minoan culture, considers itself autonomous, with cultural traits separate from Greece. Many Sardinians insist they are more Sardinian than Italian, and anyone born in the region of Asturias will tell you they are their own nation within Spain.

In France, there are three territories where locals proudly identify themselves with their region before admitting that they are French: the Basque Country, Corsica and Brittany. Owing to their relative isolation and unique heritage, all these places have developed a strongly rooted identity and continue to protect and be proud of their food culture, landscapes and ancient sites. Of those three, it's Brittany – a region about half the size of Ireland in the northwestern corner of France – where the chicest of Parisians are flocking lately, partly due to an impressive crop of new or newly renovated hotels and restored attractions.

Although there are myriad updates in Brittany, its real appeal is that it feels profoundly intertwined with its rich history and windswept terrain. To this day Breton, the local language, is more comparable to Welsh than French. More than 1,500 years ago, the region was occupied by Celtic-speaking populations; legend says they were brought here in the fourth century by the British-Celtic leader Cynan Meiriadog. If you think Stonehenge is fascinating, you'll love Brittany. The department of Morbihan, which embraces a wide, picturesque bay dotted with dozens of small islands, boasts the world's largest concentration of megaliths in one place.

Just as pilgrimage-worthy as these magical stones are the region's celebrated dairy products and baked goods. (Brittany is, after all, home to the kouign-amann, the sweet, salty and irresistible pastry.) Breton butter, made with fresh cream from a special breed of grass-fed cow and flavoured with salt from Guérande, is considered by some to be the best in the world. On a recent tour of Brittany, I ate a lot of butter, but what really filled me with wonder was the raw beauty of its varied landscapes, especially its rocky coastline and tiny islands. It was August, and while everyone in the south of France was complaining about the heat and crowds, I was enjoying a refreshing sea breeze. The best part? I was one of only a few international tourists wherever I went. Brittany is still such an insider secret that most visitors are French. From green fields to pink boulders, here are some noteworthy stops.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROMAIN BASSENNE (CHÂTEAU RICHEUX); NOËMIE LEFÈVRE (CANCALE COAST) & ELENA ELISSEVA (VANNES)



EXPLORE



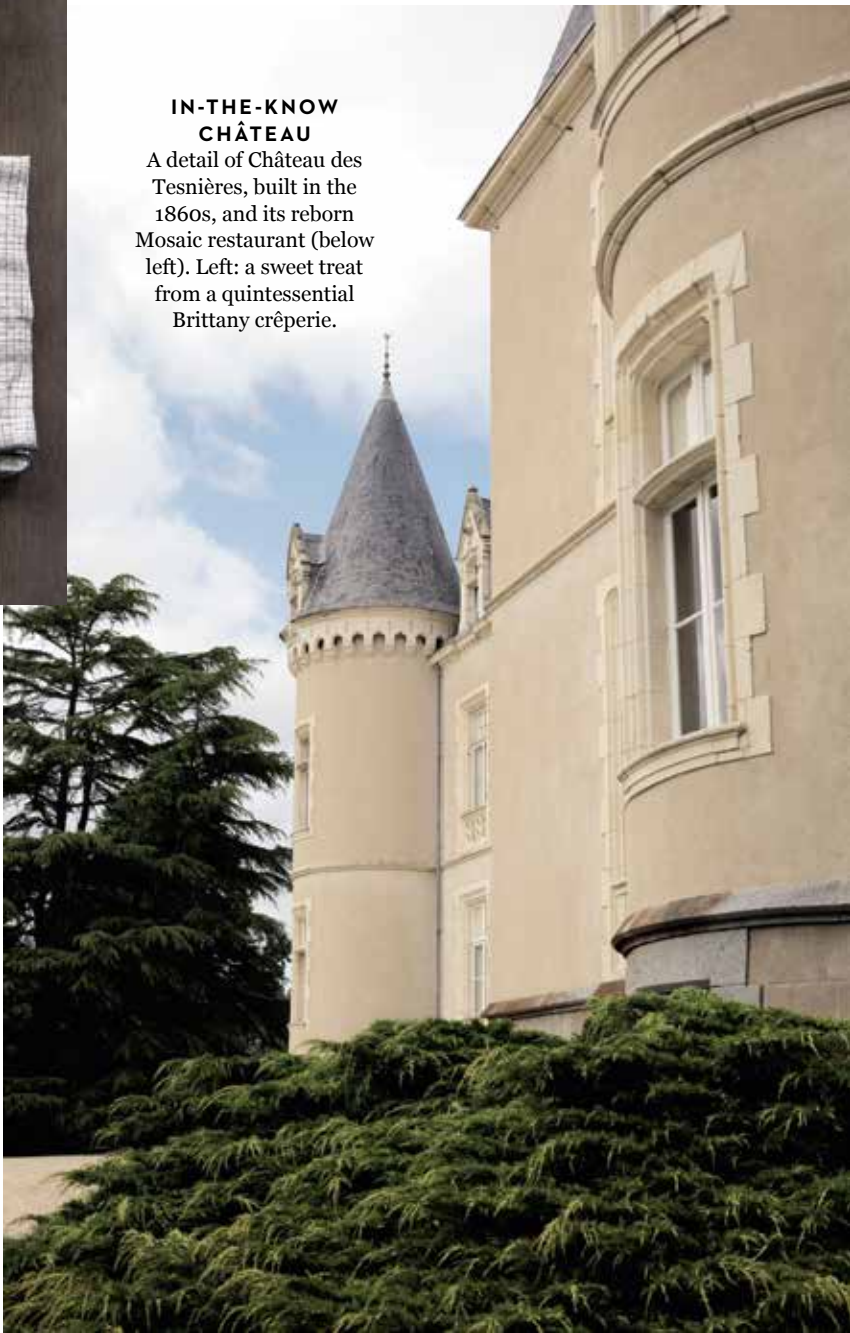
PEARLY OUTLOOK

The scenic coastal town of Cancale is renowned for its oysters. Above from left: Les Jardins de Kerdalo; timber-framed houses in Vannes; Bistrot de Cancale is the latest addition to the Roellinger family empire.

EXPLORE



IN-THE-KNOW CHÂTEAU
A detail of Château des
Tesnières, built in the
1860s, and its reborn
Mosaic restaurant (below
left). Left: a sweet treat
from a quintessential
Brittany crêperie.



BAY OF CANCALE AND MONT SAINT-MICHEL

A stylish, well-travelled French friend of mine, who lives between Paris and Brittany, advised me the ideal way to begin a tour of the region was to take the train from Paris to Rennes and venture directly to Château des Tesnières. Constructed in 1860 and furnished with an extraordinary and eclectic collection of art, the Neo-Renaissance castle is a fantastical sanctuary. “They have the most *incroyable* Champagne menu!” she raved. “And a thousand of the most-precious bottles in their cellar. The kitchen is led by a fantastic South African chef and her all-women team.” Unfortunately for me, the château was still closed for a four-year reinvention after being bought in 2021 by the aforementioned chef (and art collector), Chantel Dartnall, and her family, but it has since reopened to great acclaim. Each of its six sumptuous suites is dedicated to a historical or mythical figure, from the Queen of Sheba to Scheherazade. (I hope to get back if only to try Dartnall’s flower-forward spring menu at Mosaic restaurant, which includes fresh scallops served with the buds of just-picked magnolias.)

I was not disappointed for long. From the moment I arrived at my stone cottage at the Ferme du Vent, a soulful property of standalone buildings and a bathhouse on a farm estate overlooking the Bay of Cancale, I felt like Goldilocks finally finding her perfect bed. Looking around at the serene, whitewashed interiors – so thoughtfully and elegantly conceived with a large clay-clad fireplace, mismatched artisanal chairs and cosy low ceilings – I immediately wanted to know more about the lodge’s owners. Were they artists? A family of designers? In fact, the Ferme du Vent is one of several projects operated by the Roellinger family, a culinary dynasty that started with Olivier Roellinger, that include a boutique hotel, Château Richeux, and a bistro. Olivier grew up nearby in an 18th-century shipowner’s mansion, which he turned into the now-shuttered three-Michelin-starred Le Bricourt restaurant. In 2014, he handed the château’s Le Coquillage restaurant over to his son, Hugo, which won its third Michelin star last year.

I eventually made my way to the château, a bit reluctantly since I was deeply attached to the view from my cottage. Beyond the rose bushes blooming outside, ombre fields of wild grass sloped down to the bay and, in the distance, I could see legendary island Mont Saint-Michel topped by a gravity-defying abbey. En route I stopped to admire the long-haired cows posing against the horizon, then followed a narrow path through a gate into a series of beautiful gardens that included a greenhouse full of herbs and vegetables. Finally, I spotted the turreted roof and mansard windows of Château Richeux, a 1920s villa with an eccentric stone and timber façade. I wandered through a series of small lounges and public spaces decorated with marine-themed art and objects, including shell collections and glassed dioramas of old ships that would have pleased Wes Anderson.

It’s clear the Roellingers have an incredibly cinematic eye. I felt steeped in the joyful, creative scenes of rapturous and quirky originality in the château’s interiors, which communicated both a respect for nature and history, down to the smallest details. That was true of the food as well. That evening, back in my cottage, I was sent the most-decadent and deliciously fresh seafood platter loaded with some of the country’s most-prized oysters. (The Cancale oysters, farmed along the coast, are considered some of the most outstanding in Europe and are listed as part of France’s Intangible Cultural Heritage by Unesco.)

The next morning, after I was delivered a wooden box filled with a beautifully presented Breton breakfast – salted butter, freshly baked bread, handmade jams and just-picked cherries – I headed to the spa. Ferme du Vent’s spa is not like any other I have seen. Inspired by Celtic bathing rituals, the stone and wooden building that houses the wellness centre is home to a wonderful bathhouse with windows overlooking the sea, and guests can book an hour for themselves. In addition to soaking in the therapeutic waters, they can sign up for a reflexology foot massage administered by local “healer” Gwenn Libouban.



BRETON BRIO
Mont Saint-Michel is topped
with an abbey. Clockwise from
left: a room at Château
Richeux; the château’s
Le Coquillage restaurant;
a cottage at Ferme du Vent;
Bistrot de Cancale; a bedroom
at Ferme du Vent



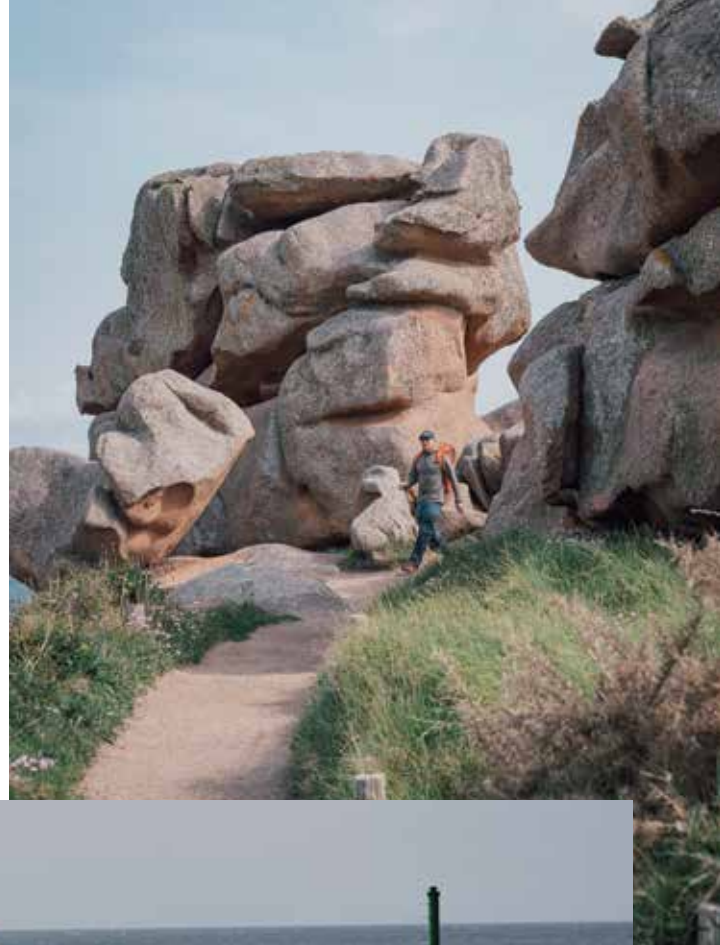
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROMAIN BASSENNE [CHÂTEAU RICHEUX & FERME DU VENT] AND MR XERTY/UNSPLASH [ABBÉY]

EXPLORE



REFLECTIVE MOOD

Another view of Les Jardins de Kerdalo. Right: the rosy rock formations of the Pink Granite Coast; a fisherman plying nearby waters.



THE PINK GRANITE COAST

When I heard the Paris-based shoe designer and interiors maven Christian Louboutin had bought a legendary botanical garden in Brittany called Les Jardins de Kerdalo, I knew I had to see it for myself. Before I left for France I reached out to the garrulous and dexterous designer to find out more. He explained he is wildly partial to Brittany – although born and raised in Paris, his parents were both fiercely Breton. He fell in love with the Kerdalo estate, a 17-hectare property with a stone mansion at its centre, in the late 1980s. This was a moment when, after working for his great mentor Roger Vivier, he decided to “pursue my other passion, plants and botany” and became a landscape designer.

One of his first jobs was for a friend on Bréhat, the most coveted of Brittany’s hundreds of small islands. The closest nursery was at Kerdalo, so Louboutin went there to buy some plants and got a sneak peek. (The gardens, obsessively cultivated by the Russian prince, amateur painter and horticulturist Peter Wolkonsky in the second half of the 20th century, were closed to the public at the time.) It was love at first glance, and so decades later when Louboutin heard that it was for sale, it took him two days to close the deal.

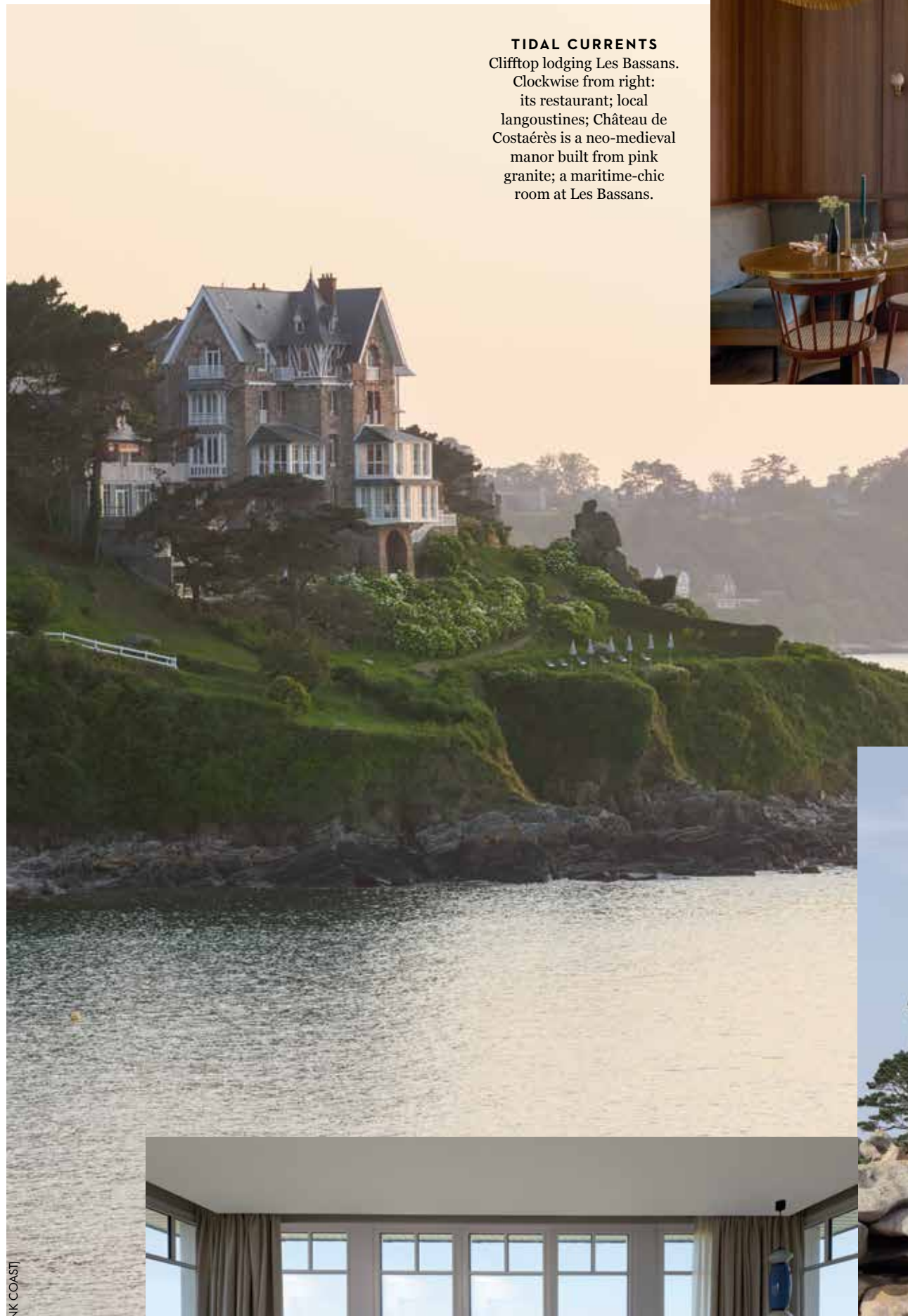
Since Louboutin bought Kerdalo, he has invested extraordinary thought and substantial capital into meticulously renovating the main villa, opening a small café in a greenhouse, and supporting a team of gardeners and botanists who are experimenting with more waterwise plants and trees in response to climate change. Before arriving, my expectations were high, but after wandering for hours through Kerdalo’s meandering paths and entering labyrinthine

walkways that lead to various cultivated tableaux, many anchored by follies and the colour palette of the trees and flowers, I left feeling completely enchanted.

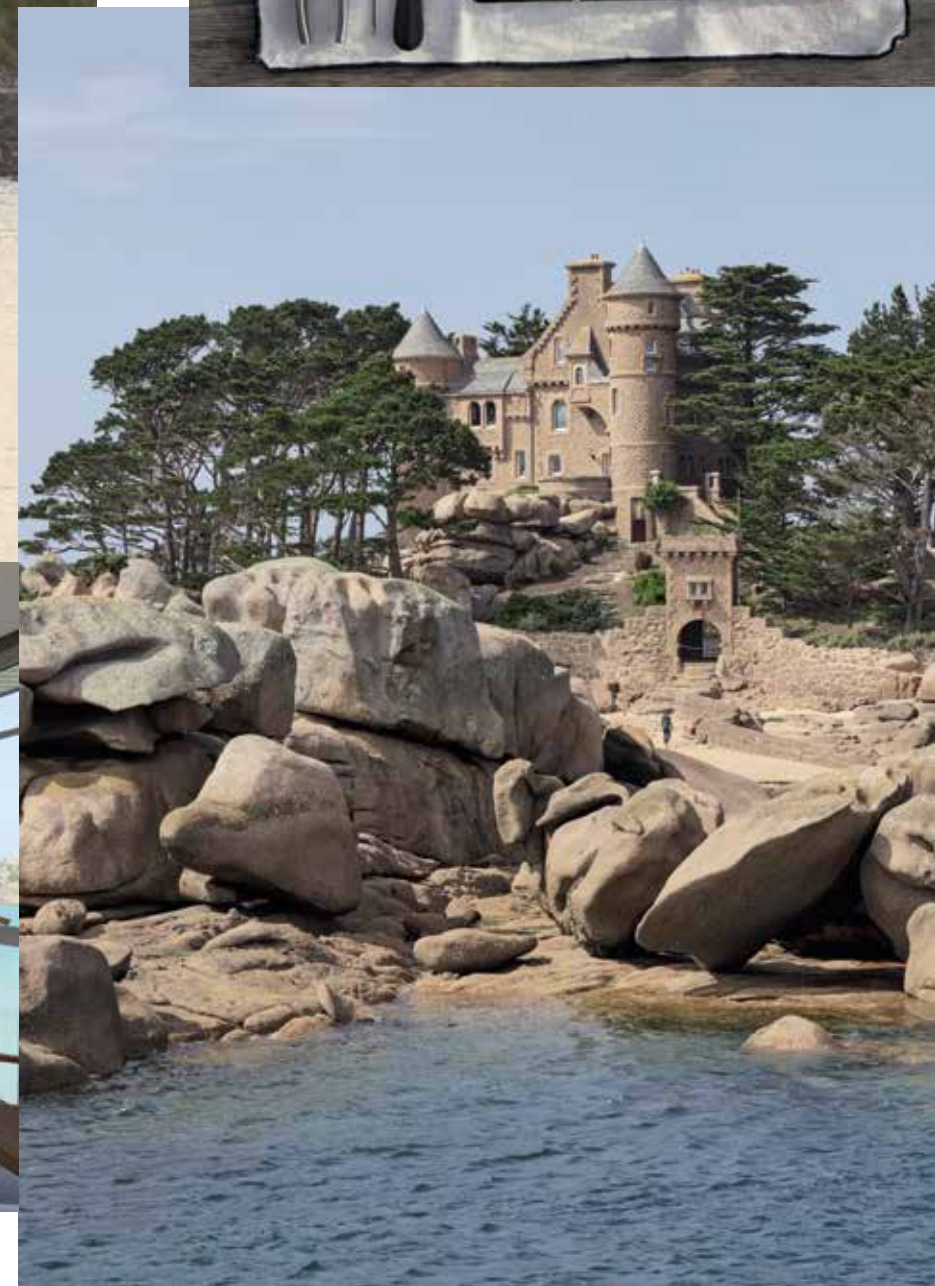
“Kerdalo is one of Brittany’s best-kept secrets,” confirmed Guillaume Foucher, co-founder of the design-forward French hospitality brand Fontenille Collection, which acquires noteworthy architectural landmarks and transforms them into stylish boutique hotels. Foucher and his colleagues recently remade a grand stone villa from the 1900s into their newest property, the 25-room Les Bassans, a 30-minute drive from Kerdalo. Perched on a steep slope that towers above a small sandy cove, the views of the ocean from the suites are breathtakingly vast. “The ever-changing skies offer a captivating spectacle, and the crystalline light is unique in France,” added Foucher. Instilled with warm wood, antique brass and telescopes, the crisply designed rooms have an understated nautical chic. Les Bassans was the ideal place to be based in this atmospheric part of Brittany.

The next day, I followed a path along the water, passing by the touristic town of Perros-Guirec, eventually arriving at the hiking trail that winds through Ploumanac’h, the heartland of the region’s legendary Pink Granite Coast. Monumental rose-toned boulders, sculpted over the centuries by water and wind, conveyed the impression of walking through a surrealist painting by Salvador Dalí. That evening, over savoury buckwheat galettes at a lively local restaurant, Foucher, who has seen every corner of France, opined Brittany was a place for “dreamers and poets and nature lovers. Brittany is a land apart, unlike anywhere else in France.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRITANNY TOURISM (PINK COAST)



TIDAL CURRENTS
Cliff-top lodging Les Bassans. Clockwise from right: its restaurant; local langoustines; Château de Costaérès is a neo-medieval manor built from pink granite; a maritime-chic room at Les Bassans.





ALL ROSES
Above: pink house at the entrance of Vannes harbour. Below from left: kouign-amann; biking around Île-d'Arz; lunch at Les Vénètes.



BRITTANY PITCH
Medieval architecture merges with urban life in the fortified town of Vannes. Left: a fragrant spice display at La Cale aux Épices.

VANNES AND THE GULF OF MORBIHAN

It's not merely the dramatic coast and bucolic pastures of Brittany that are so beguiling. Its historical towns are, too, especially the walled commune of Vannes. The capital of Morbihan department is about a two-hour drive south of Cancale, on the opposite coast. The architecture of the old quarter is a fairytale mix of colourful medieval timber-framed houses anchored by the 13th-century Saint-Pierre Cathedral. For at least two millennia, Vannes and the Gulf of Morbihan have been a hugely important maritime hub: first as a stronghold for the Veneti, a seafaring Celtic tribe, then later, during the Middle Ages, for privateers (government-sanctioned pirates).

Today, as far as I am concerned, Vannes is an important hub for decadent baked goods, notably the queen of all pastries, the kouign-amann (*kouign* is the Breton word for cake and *amann* for butter). Which is why, when I arrived in the Old Town, I headed straight to François, a tiny bakery that specialises in traditional Breton pastries, and ordered a kouign-amann crowned with caramelised apple. It was so delectable it almost made my brain short circuit. I realised I hadn't really savoured an authentic one before, just less rich and buttery facsimiles. It gave me the energy I needed to go shopping.

Vannes is filled with spiffy independent shops like Kermen, a concept store for men filled with what I can only describe as hipster yacht-club fashion and gear, and my favourite, La Cale aux Épices, a tiny boutique overseen by the affable Christophe Lemaire, who has travelled the world collecting spices from small farms and producers. Hundreds of vials filled with his rare collection of spices and peppers – he has 18 versions of curry powder alone – line the walls. I bought some spicy green peppercorns and a bottle of strong vanilla from Madagascar.

I could easily have stayed a night or two (for those who have the time, book Roscanvec, a restaurant with rooms), but I had planned to stay at the reopened

Les Vénètes, another ambitious restaurant with rooms, so close to the Gulf of Morbihan that it felt like boarding a ship. Certainly, from the perspective of my bed in a sea-view room, I appeared to be floating on water. Looking at a map of all the tiny islands scattered throughout the gulf, one can understand why this part of Europe was so attractive to pirates. While local legend claims there are 365 islands, one for each day of the year, only about 40 of them are recognised officially. Today, it's the preferred holiday destination for French sailors, both professional and hobbyists. The equivalent of a secret handshake for people who "belong" here is owning a *guépard*, a traditional sailboat built by local boatbuilders from polished oak that costs more than a sports car.

One morning I took a ferry to one of the islands. Île-d'Arz (population 321) is a wild, car-free strip of land with a few charming cottages and a couple of cafés, all partly obscured by hydrangeas, camellias and rose bushes. I rented a bike and followed the main road, stopping by a shop that belonged to Ferme de l'Île d'Arz, an organic dairy farm partly supported by the island residents. A young woman named Violaine explained that, thanks to the land given to them by the island, she and her husband have managed to start making a profit by selling milk, artisanal butter, crème fraîche, yoghurt and other products.

After sampling some of her exquisite ice-cream, I explored some more on my bike, ultimately parking it near an old stone mill to go for a swim. That night, back in my room at Les Vénètes, I read a bit about Jeanne de Clisson, the so-called Lioness of Brittany, a Breton noblewoman who lived in the early 14th century and became a privateer to avenge her husband after he was executed for treason by King Philip VI. No wonder the Bretons are so proud and don't want to associate with those other French people. I would always choose to be the Lioness of Brittany over Marie Antoinette. 🍷

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MORGANE SCHALLER (VANNES & ÎLE-D'ARZ)