

Sandy Shores

Simone Hellyer explores the sandy shores of Le Touquet and discovers a long history of English influence at the popular French seaside resort

PHOTOS: Jean-David Hestin

On the north east coast of France sits Le Touquet – a quaint seaside town with a curiously English feel. Given that it can be reached from London in just two hours, Le Touquet is a convenient alternative to the British seaside.

It's hardly surprising then, that Le Touquet was once the playground of the top echelons of British society. Founded in 1837 by a Parisian, the town was purchased in 1902 by

Englishman John Robinson Whitley, who developed the town into a gambling and sport resort – the original tennis club, golf club, equestrian centre and two casinos are still in use today.

We fully embraced this sporty philosophy on our trip by taking to two wheels and exploring the town's very English history on a bicycle tour of the town. The tour takes in the very grand Westminster Hotel, which was once frequented by such luminaries as Noel Coward, PG

Wodehouse and Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. According to our guide, Edward VIII was a frequent visitor to the golf club, where he would insist on using only female caddies. In 1909, former Woking resident H. G. Wells fled to Le Touquet with Amber Reeves in an abortive elopement.

The Duke and Duchess of Westminster were also frequent visitors to Le Touquet and during the First World War, the Duchess even ran a military





hospital in one of the town's casinos. The town's most famous current resident, however, is as French as they come – president Emmanuel Macron owns a house in the centre of the town with his wife, Brigitte, and is said to be a regular at the tennis club.

While cycling along Le Touquet's suburban streets we couldn't help but be struck by the distinctly non-French feel of many of the buildings. In fact, if it hadn't been for the impressively wide cycle paths, we could have been in Surrey. That is, until we reached the stunning stretches of sand and dunes along the coast.

We stayed at Novotel Thalassa, a beautiful hotel that sits right on the beach and the phrase 'a room with a view' might as well have been invented my suite. With large glass doors that open out to the wide expanse of soft white sand that Le Touquet is blessed with, it would have been easy to remain here for the entire trip.

We eventually managed to tear ourselves away to explore a trail over the sand dunes towards the river. This easy walking route affords plenty of space for both walkers, runners and cyclists and we even spied a group of horse riders tearing along the sand.

Beach sports are big in Le Touquet too, and we saw a steady stream of kite surfers and sand yachters billowing past on our visit. For kids there is plenty of fun

to be had on the seafront all year round – with beach clubs, water slides and trampolines aplenty.

A great way to see the whole town is to climb the 274 steps of the lighthouse, which is located not by the sea, as you would expect, but in the middle of town. Unfortunately I was taken by a sudden bout of vertigo half way up the spiral staircase, so I had to take my companion's word for the view. But at the tiny museum

ABOVE:
Taking a bike tour is a great way to see Le Touquet

BELOW:
The medieval-style covered market

FAR BELOW:
Au Chat Bleu chocolate shop



below I did learn that the lighthouse was built to replace the town's two original structures after they were destroyed by German troops at the end of the Second World War.

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After all that activity, it was definitely time to refuel and luckily Le Touquet is well known for its cuisine. Bizarrely, one of Le Touquet's most famous 'local' dishes is Welsh Rarebit, but if you're looking for something a bit more French there are some great places to grab a bite in the town. During our 36-hour trip we enjoyed lunch at the newly-refurbished Novotel Thalassa hotel restaurant; sampled a spectacular three-course meal at Les 2 Moineaux; and a seafood feast at Perard. We also spied lots of cafés selling sweet-smelling crepes and ice cream. There are plenty of independent food stores too, including one full of quirky and colourful tins of sardines and a biscuit shop that lets you watch the buttery treats being made. One of the most charming shops we came across was Au Chat Bleu, a chocolate shop that has been open since 1920 and was named after the owner's two blue Persian cats.

For fresh produce, head to the medieval-style covered market, where three times a week you can pick up jams, fish, cheese and Ratte potatoes (a real le Touquet speciality). On our visit the market was transformed into a brocante market, with a veritable treasure trove of French antiques. The perfect place to pick up a gift before heading back to the train and making the most of Eurostar's extra baggage allowance. ♦

Good to know: Prices at Novotel Thalassa start from €162/ £141 per night half board. For more information visit letouquet.com. Eurostar fares from London St Pancras to Calais start £29 one-way. eurostar.com