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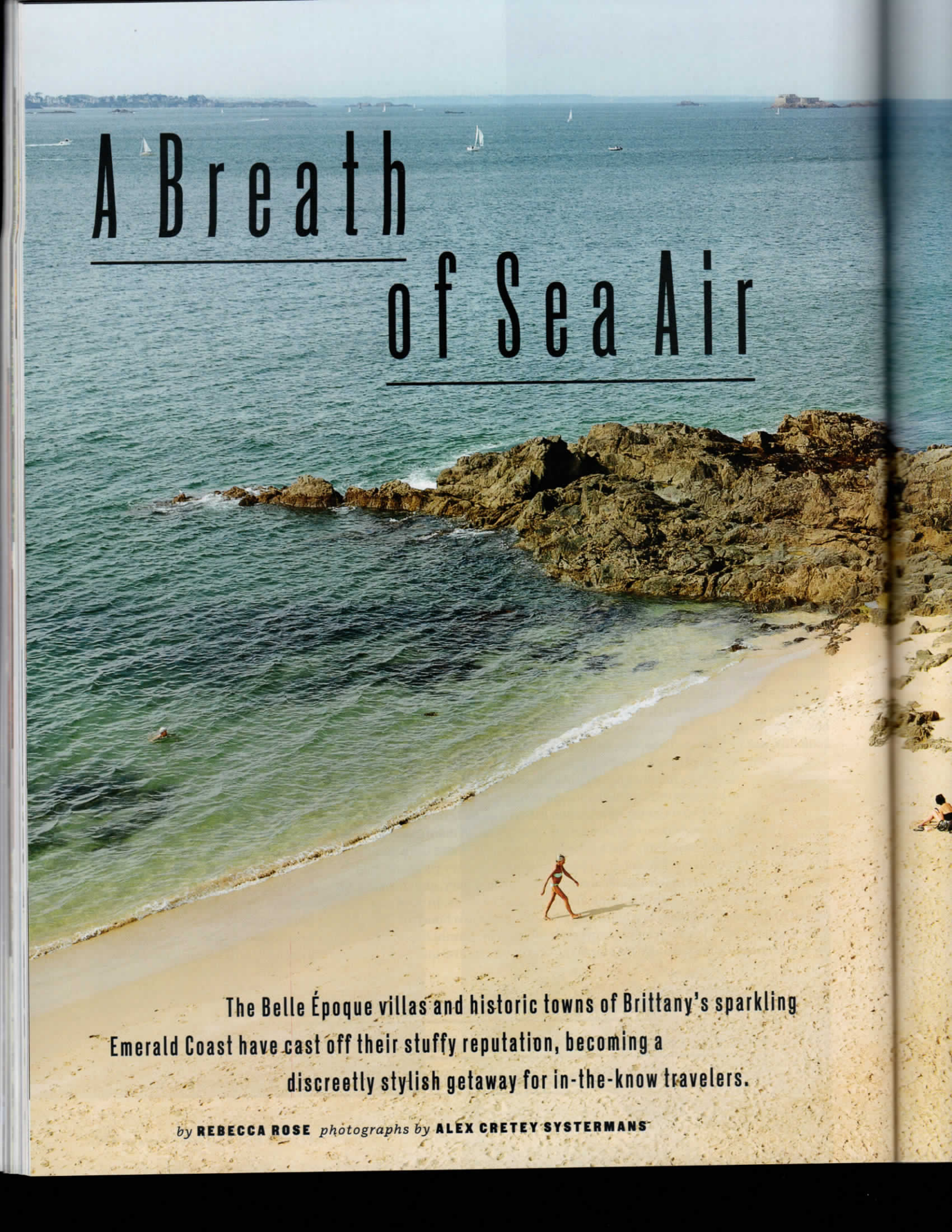
# TRAVEL + LEISURE

# THE EUROPE ISSUE

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# A Breath --- of Sea Air

The Belle Époque villas and historic towns of Brittany's sparkling Emerald Coast have cast off their stuffy reputation, becoming a discreetly stylish getaway for in-the-know travelers.

by **REBECCA ROSE** photographs by **ALEX CRETEY SYSTEMANS**





Môle Beach, in the town of St.-Malo, France, which is surrounded by historic fortifications.

**T**hat's where Chateaubriand was buried, standing up and facing out to sea," said our skipper, Nicolas, as we boated past a small rocky island off the coast of Brittany. It wasn't hard to see why the French writer demanded a sea view. This stretch of shore in northern France is known as the Côte d'Émeraude, or Emerald Coast, and it more than lives up to the poetic name. These transparent, blue-green depths alone were enough to entice me and my husband over from London for a long weekend.

That morning, we had left Castelbrac, our hotel, in a handsome, 40-foot wooden speedboat at 9 a.m.—perfectly timed for an onboard breakfast of coffee, warm *viennoiserie*, baguettes with local Breton butter, and a pot of chocolate-hazelnut spread. After passing Chateaubriand's burial site, we made our way back to the seaside resort town of Dinard. There, we encountered the Hitchcockian outline of a single villa on the cliff, tall and statuesque, looking down over a pale yellow arc of sand. Dinard is dominated by a trail of these grand, Belle Époque houses, which stud the cliffs on either side of the town like something from an Edward Hopper painting. Nicolas pointed out a huge walled house on the far side of the bay where Salma Hayek and François-Henri Pinault are said to spend their summers.

Once an unassuming fishing village, Dinard was "discovered" by a group of aristocratic English sea-bathing enthusiasts in the mid 19th century. These expats built the first cliff-top villas in the area





and invited their wealthy friends to do the same, quickly turning Dinard into one of France's first real seaside destinations—this despite Brittany's famously hit-or-miss weather. Even today, the town retains a British air; English accents can be heard in the daily market, and a statue of Alfred Hitchcock, once a frequent visitor, looms over the bay.

As we passed villa after villa, each with its own distinct style, Nicolas rattled off a list of names—mainly business tycoons and members of France's *grandes familles*, many of whom have kept houses here for generations. Their villas remain shuttered for much of the year, but are discreetly maintained between visits—hedges trimmed, swimming pools cleaned—just in case their owners decide to nip up from Paris for the weekend. (And with a new, two-hour fast train from the capital to the adjacent town of St.-Malo launching this July, their shutters may well be opening more frequently.)

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The majority of the discerning, monied types who holiday in Dinard wouldn't dream of setting foot in St.-Tropez. Too flashy, too "*m'as-tuvu*," as they say. They are less interested in Louis Vuitton, more in the understated goods for sale at Renouard, a low-key leather store that has been in business since 1891. And rather than sunning themselves on terraces

and people-watching, these visitors prefer to picnic on the sand, first stopping by one of the many *boulangeries* for a fresh baguette, then La Belle Iloise, a local institution, for sardines and beautifully packaged tins of fish pâté. Though this corner of Brittany has some of the finest sandy beaches and clearest seas in France, the likes of Catherine Deneuve and musician/model Lou Doillon can still stroll along the esplanade freely without fear of being snapped on an iPhone. The scene is stealth wealth at its most alluring.

**U**ntil recently, unless you were a lucky houseguest at one of the villas, Dinard had little to offer in the way of high-end accommodation. There are still a few seaside hotels big on slightly dilapidated Breton charm. At one, the Hôtel Printania, the waitresses wear Breton bonnets like women in Gauguin's Pont-Aven paintings, and there remain a few *lits-clos*—wooden box beds with shutters, originally designed to allow parents a little intimacy in the times when families all shared one room. And there is the Grand Hôtel Barrière, part of France's ubiquitous Barrière hospitality group, where Hugh Grant is reported to stay when he flies over to play the famous golf course at St.-Briac-sur-Mer.

But the new Castelbrac hotel has been a game changer for Dinard, proving that for all the town's





## The discerning, monied types who holiday in Dinard are less interested in Louis Vuitton, more in the understated local leather-goods store.

colorful history, it doesn't need to be stuck in the past. An extraordinary architectural mix of castle, mansion, and Art Deco ocean liner, Castelbrac traces its roots to 1865, when it was built for the Fabers, an aristocratic English family. Later, the villa was owned by a Crimean War hero named Colonel Hamilton, who dubbed it "Villa Bric-à-Brac" in honor of its mishmash of architectural styles. In 1934, France's National Natural History Museum purchased the home and turned it into a marine-research station and aquarium housing tanks of sea horses and conger eels.

Seven years ago, a businessman named Yann Bucaille bought Castelbrac with the intention of turning it into a luxurious small hotel. He insisted on preserving the eclectic look, from the tiled Arts and Crafts fireplaces to the round windows of the former aquarium, originally added to let natural light into the fish tanks and now the defining feature of a cool, nautically themed bar. It is this sensitivity to the building's history, combined with stylish interiors by Paris-based designer Sandra Benhamou, that makes Castelbrac so unusual—and so full of fun

*From far left: The pool at the Castelbrac hotel, in Dinard; a villa above Dinard's Ecluse Beach; a view of Môle Beach; Castelbrac's Salon Charcot lounge.*

discoveries. One morning I stumbled upon a 46-foot-long pool set high above the ocean, so narrow it could almost be missed. Not far from the bar, I found a small nondenominational chapel, newly installed by Bucaille as part of his vision for the hotel as a "Soul Haven" designed to nourish the senses.

Castelbrac's arrival has also coincided with the opening of several boutiques that wouldn't be out of place in Paris's fashionable Marais district. While exploring Dinard on foot one day—the sky was gray, but the sea was still that startling emerald—my husband and I concentrated on the cluster of streets just up from the beach. Here we passed an array of stylish storefronts: boutiques stocking Saint James's famous striped fisherman's sweaters; Papa Pique et Maman Coud, an upmarket accessories boutique for mothers and daughters; Lindfield & Co. Fine Teas, which sources the finest brews from Sri Lanka, Japan, and China; and L'Atelier M Chocolat, an artisanal chocolate shop run by a husband-and-wife team. Equally charming were the well-coiffed residents, popping out for their morning coffee, air-kissing in the road, and dashing about before everything closed for lunch. (Continued on page 64)