

The New York Times

ON THE FRENCH RIVIERA, FITZGERALD FOUND HIS PLACE IN THE SUN



From left to right, the house on the sea wall in Juan-les-Pins, France, where F. Scott Fitzgerald lived and wrote, now a hotel called the Belles-Rives; and a cocktail at Fitzgerald Bar

Unless you happen to be on a billionaire's yacht requiring a deepwater port or are a paparazzo stalking Leonardo DiCaprio along the Riviera, you might have no reason to find yourself near Antibes or its charming little sister village, Juan-les-Pins, on a summer evening. And that would be unfortunate, because among the legendary diversions of Cap d'Antibes is exploring the rocky playground peninsula on the French Riviera that inspired one of America's greatest writers.

It's been almost a century since F. Scott Fitzgerald lived here, in a rented seaside house called the Villa St. Louis with his almost-mad wife, Zelda, and their towheaded daughter, Scottie. A few years after the Fitzgeralds left in 1927, the house on the sea wall in Juan-les-Pins was expanded into a hotel called the Belles-Rives, now with 40 rooms and five stars.

Fitzgerald and the rest of his Jazz Age set have been "borne back ceaselessly into the past," as he predicted in the most famous of his "Great Gatsby" lines, but the essential nature of Cap d'Antibes outlived them. The "diffused magic of the hot sweet South ... the soft-pawed night and the ghostly wash of the Mediterranean far below" that Fitzgerald described in "Tender Is the Night" is as palpable now as then, even as the demographics of the rich set that so intrigued him are now less Anglo-American and more Russian, Chinese and Arab.

From all the terraces of the hotel and from the restaurant perched on the low sea wall, one can still see the small blinking green lighthouse, just a hundred yards off, warning ships about the shallow rocky shore. The lighthouse, which Fitzgerald had seen on previous visits to the area, may have been the model for the green light on the dock that symbolized Jay Gatsby's longing for the elusive Daisy, and his ephemeral goal of belonging to the moneyed set.



F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda and Scottie in Antibes in 1926

During a recent stay in Antibes, I spent a few evenings at the Fitzgerald Bar, a jewel box of a room with a grand piano, mirrored tables, little leopard-upholstered Art Deco chairs and French doors opening onto the sea. I ordered a single "Green Therapy" cocktail of gin, cucumber and egg white (I might have been tempted to have another but they cost 20 euros apiece), and settled in to observe the swells swanning through the lobby.

The shimmery demographics of Riviera money are as varied as the schools of shiny fish flitting beneath the waves nearby. A diminutive young Russian woman in a white lace romper sprayed herself liberally with expensive perfume in the bathroom while her hulking boyfriend with his wraparound shades and security entourage waited.

Eight British financiers talked business around a table for four hours, drinking throughout and never seeming drunk. An elegant French couple of a certain age, his yellow cashmere thrown over his shoulders in the universal sign of Euro-maleness, studied the wine list carefully. A wedding party of Africans and African-Americans tripped through, decked to the nines, some in gleaming white linen and tapestried skull caps. Everywhere, women with freshly lacquered nails and sequins and lip-liner. Finally, a family of sportif Americans, discussing whether to sell New York and keep Hawaii and Colorado, or just stay right there and figure it out later.

Out on the bay bobbed the great yachts, most notably the enormous Ecstasea, built for the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich in the early 2000s, and reportedly since sold several times, including once to the crown prince of Abu Dhabi. It has its own Wikipedia page. On land, villas once owned by literary stars like Jules Verne and W. Somerset Maugham are now inhabited by wealthy Arabs and Russians.



The Cap is still democratic enough that many stretches of waterfront, usually rocky, occasionally sandy, are public. Here, among ruined walls and shallow pale emerald waters, middle-aged men and women snorkel and sunbathe topless, utterly careless about their flab. Beneath the waves, sunlight is cooled to heatless, quivering bars of gold.

Fitzgerald was famously obsessed with the mysteries of great wealth, what people do with it and what it does to them, big money's glorious power and ruinous effects, and the irreconcilability of the lifestyles of the rich with those of the rest of us. It became one of his great themes. In Antibes today, visitors can still watch, speculate and wonder about the demigods behind the villa walls and on the yachts, much as did the author of "The Great Gatsby," who supposedly concluded that the rich "are different from you and me."

The view from the terrace of the restaurant at the Belles-Rives hotel in Juan-les-Pins, which was a seaside house when Fitzgerald and his family stayed there in the 1920s.

Fitzgerald had spent time on the Riviera before, finishing "Gatsby" there. He lived in Antibes full time for two years and would later call them the happiest of his life.

Happy he was, but tormented, too. He started writing "Tender Is the Night" in Antibes, modeling his characters Dick and Nicole Diver on real-life friends, the wealthy Americans Gerald and Sara Murphy, who had bought a property on the western rocky cliffs of Antibes that they named Villa America.

The Murphys' elegant, exceedingly bohemian scene included a who's who of literary and artistic stars from Gertrude Stein and Picasso to John Dos Passos, Dorothy Parker, Hemingway and the Fitzgeralds.

He opened "Tender Is the Night" with a description of what is clearly today's Hôtel du Cap-Eden-Roc, a legendary pleasure palace built in the 1870s that Fitzgerald named Gausse's Hotel and painted rose instead of white. "Deferential palms" still "cool its facade," and for those who can afford rooms starting at \$500 a night and rocketing into the five figures, there are white marble steps that descend to a Versailles-like allée shaded by perfectly symmetrical Mediterranean umbrella pines and vast, pristine gardens (including a dog cemetery carved out 100 years ago for a wealthy and grieving guest).

The allée leads from the main hotel building to the beach house, with a wisteria-draped porte-cochere, grand pillared entryways and a deck cantilevered like an ocean liner above an infinity pool carved out of a white cliff. The nautical design of the beachfront restaurant mirrors that of the great yachts bobbing just offshore. Waiters in striped French boater T-shirts deliver cups of Nescafé that cost 10 euros apiece.

One of the charms of Antibes is that in spite of all the ostentatious, iron-gated mansions tacked to the edges of its rocky shores like glorious sea urchins, one is far more likely to encounter a regular Joe or Jacques than a millionaire on the streets of its two towns. Morning and afternoon, natives gather at the cafes, or play pétanque in the great dusty square near Le Pinede park, with its playground and strange, old round stone building charmingly signed “Bibliothèque Pour Tous.”

At night, when the sea breeze isn't blowing inland, Juan-les-Pins smells faintly like North Africa, a combination of diesel, dust, cooking oil and cloying flowers. The entertainment district has a seedy edge, with sidewalk seating at nightclubs like the Pam Pam and snack shops with all-American names — Monster Burger and Wall Street.

Aromas of bread waft from boulangeries like the Veziano, where the round-bellied proprietor Jean Paul Veziano sweats over the same bright yellow and black bread snacks that his grandfather made, using corn flour and squid ink. But this generation's Jean-Paul is known to global chefs like Alain Ducasse, and his breads turn up in their restaurants as well as in the Cap's finer establishments.



A game on the beach near the city center in Juan-les-Pins.

Along the edges of the marché, native Antibebans drink beer at metal tables and pull goodies from their market baskets — sausage and fried zucchini flowers and socca, the Middle East-influenced flat bread of chickpea flour and olive oil. In their clear enjoyment and simplicity, this crowd is reminiscent of the peasants and fishmongers immortalized in Picasso's drawings on display at the nearby Musée Picasso. The market is also lined with pricier bistros, proffering fine wines, foie gras and risotto or duck confit to hungry tourists.

The Greeks settled Antibes more than 2,300 years ago, and colonized and lived here in a city they called Anti-polis, the city opposite, because it faces Nice across the bay. In 1200, a church and medieval fortifications went up, and are still intact.

The Greco-Roman history is visible in the foundation blocks of the city walls and in excavated underground ruins visible through plexiglass portholes in some of the streets. Picasso drew many scenes at Antibes of bare-breasted women dancing with fauns, and of centaurs and nymphs. He said: "Whenever I come to Antibes I'm always attacked by the itch of antiquity."

Modern visitors to Antibes are more likely to be attacked by an itch for luxury, and at Fitzgerald's former villa, they find it. The current owner of the Belles-Rives, Marianne Estène-Chauvin, gave up a career as an art dealer in Casablanca to take charge of the hotel in the early aughts. It had been in her family for three generations, since her grandfather, a Russian émigré, bought the original villa in the 1930s and set about expanding it into a beachfront hotel. The Belles-Rives has since hosted celebrities including Ella Fitzgerald, Jean Cocteau and Josephine Baker (a photograph of her on the dock with a pet cheetah hangs in the bar).

Ms. Estène-Chauvin is proud of her property's Fitzgerald connection. "He was happy here." She has worked to cement the connection with him in part because local real estate agents have incorrectly identified a house next door on the beach, La Villa Picolette, as Fitzgerald's former dwelling.

To ensure her hotel's link to the author, Ms. Estène-Chauvin hangs black and white portraits of Fitzgerald and Zelda in the lobby, with its Art Deco elevator cage. She has posted a large framed quote from a 1926 letter he sent to Hemingway beside a potted palm: "With our being back in a nice villa on my beloved Riviera (between Nice and Cannes) I'm happier than I've been for years. It's one of those strange, precious and all too transitory moments when everything in one's life seems to be going well."

Fitzgerald might have been happy in Juan-les-Pins, but Zelda apparently was not. She was having a breakdown and eventually had to be institutionalized in the United States. Besides being a record of Jazz Age expat American life in Antibes and elsewhere in Europe, "Tender Is the Night" is also a mercilessly observed chronicle of a marriage collapsing. Eventually, the rich wife's madness is transferred to the once-sane husband.



Men play pétanque in the dusty square near La Pinede park in Antibes.

Fitzgerald and family left Antibes after 1927, never to return, headed eventually for Hollywood and the alcoholic decline that killed him in his early 40s. He took eight years to finish the novel partly because he had to keep stopping to earn money to pay for sanitariums and psychiatrists treating Zelda.

On the 50th anniversary of Zelda's 1948 death, Ms. Estène-Chauvin hosted a dinner at the hotel for 200 people, including Zelda's two granddaughters, and some members of the Fitzgerald Association. The granddaughters told stories that their mother, Scottie, had shared about Zelda and Scott's life in Antibes.

According to them, the villa was a place where the couple fought bitterly and constantly. Zelda kept fully packed luggage in every room, threatening departure at the slightest grievance. After one fight, she walked out in the noonday sun with all her luggage and tried to hail a taxi. Then, as now, Antibes taxis were impossible to come by, and she was eventually persuaded to come home. But their life together was coming to an end.

"They talked about how Zelda was not happy in her life here," Ms. Estène-Chauvin recalled of the granddaughters. "And how they left and never came back."

Ms. Estène-Chauvin showed old sepia prints of the property to the descendants, including one of an anonymous small blond child playing by the breakwater. The granddaughters realized that the child was their mother. "Everyone was crying," Ms. Estène-Chauvin recalled.

Five years ago, Ms. Estène-Chauvin created the literary Prix Fitzgerald. Annually since then, a jury of French writers and critics has selected an author working in a style or addressing themes that interested Fitzgerald. Past winners include Jonathan Dee, whose novel "The Privileges" satirized a modern New York hedge fund family, and Amor Towles, whose 2011 novel "Rules of Civility" looked at Manhattan's upper-crust in the late 1930s. In 2014, the writer-filmmaker Whit Stillman won the prize for his 1998 film and 2000 book, "The Last Days of Disco," about a group of upper-class New Yorkers coming of age in the 1980s. This year's Prix Fitzgerald nominees are John Niven, James Salter, Robert Goolrick, Adelle Waldman and Rachel Kushner. The winners will be announced at an event June 5.

Ms. Estène-Chauvin will host the winner for a night in Fitzgerald's old room. The awards ceremony, which includes a dinner and a midnight plunge, also relates to a bit of lore from the author's Antibes days.

The story goes that one night husband and wife had been fighting and drinking hard. Enraged by Zelda's taunts about his professional and personal failures, Fitzgerald stormed out to a Juan-les-Pins bistro down the street that employed a full-time orchestra, and persuaded the musicians to come home with him. He herded them into his room, then slammed the door and locked them in, ordering them to play all night if they hoped to be released by dawn. He then asked Zelda if she still thought he was a loser.

The legend doesn't include her response. But to commemorate the story, Ms. Estène-Chauvin sends musicians upstairs to privately serenade the winner of the Prix Fitzgerald for a few moonlit hours.