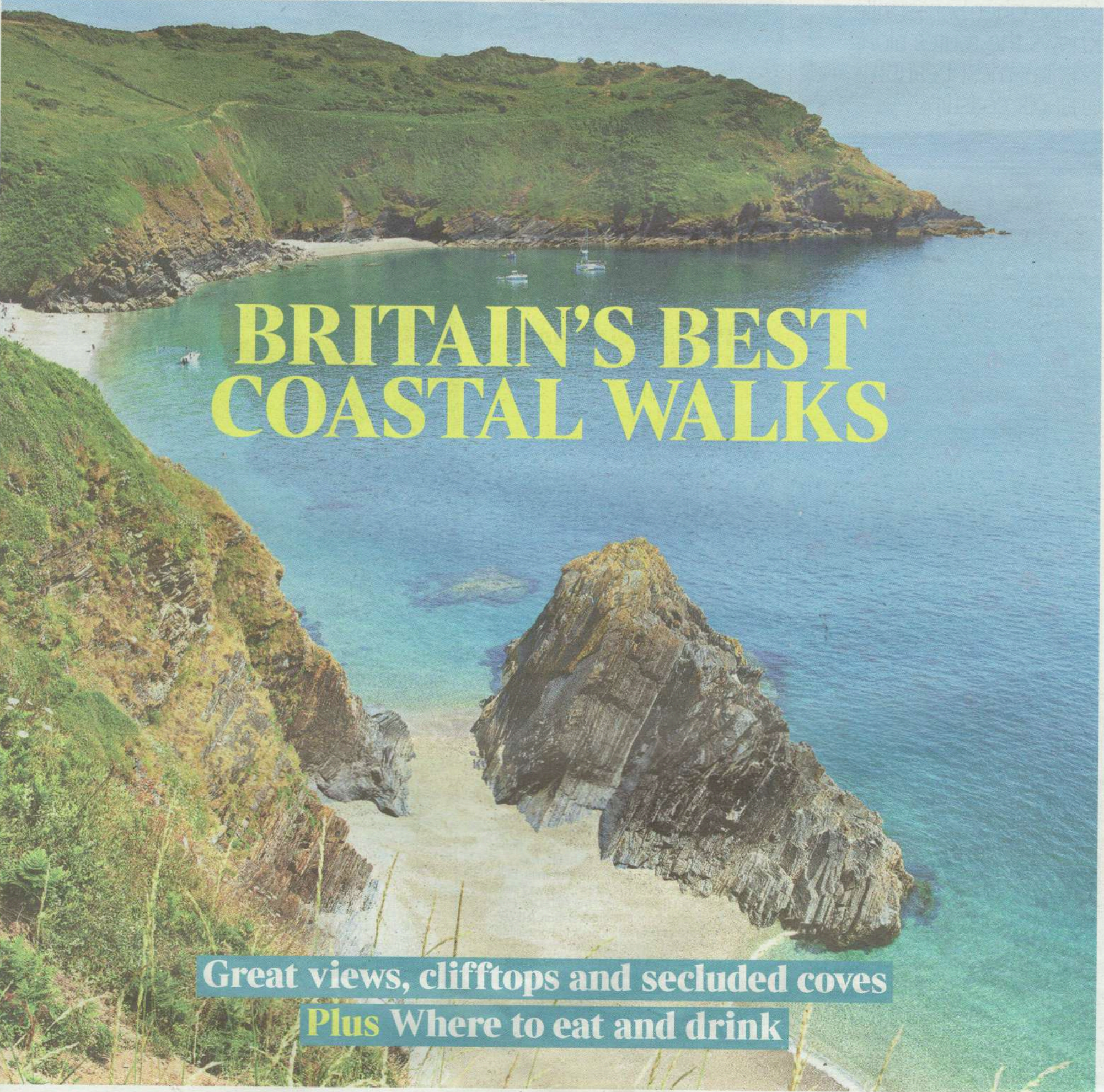




The tech that keeps my diabetic daughter safe by Suzi Godson

Weekend

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BRITAIN'S BEST COASTAL WALKS

Great views, clifftops and secluded coves
Plus Where to eat and drink

Luxury travel

Bubbles and bliss in the home of champagne

An exquisite hotel has just opened near Reims in northern France.

Jane Knight reports

The winemaker Hervé Jestin is cradling a barnacle-encrusted champagne bottle as he explains why he feels that parking a bottle of bubbly 60m deep in the ocean for 15 months improves its flavour. It's all about the lack of oxygen, apparently, having the same pressure outside and inside the bottle, low temperatures — and don't forget those continuously swirling Breton currents.

"The result is very interesting," he says of the champagne named Abyss. He's right: the 2012 vintage tastes more complex than many champagnes, a tad oakier, and yes, deeper — although that may be because at £130 (£116) it's one of the more expensive bottles I've tried, rather than being a real, er, sea change. Thankfully, there's no fishy smell on the nose, although in the darkened cellars a recent shipment of bottles has a definite pong de poisson about it. The cellars also house some terracotta "egg" barrels, the contents of which will be mixed with that from oak casks and a unique gold barrel.

Jestin is clearly no ordinary winemaker: he follows biodynamic principles (basically organic, with a hefty dollop of mysticism) that are pretty unusual in Champagne, where fewer than 2 per cent of champagne houses are certified as organic, let alone biodynamique. But then Leclerc Briant, the small producer in the heart of Epernay, is unusual in its own right, with American rather than French owners.

It was bought in 2012 by the Bostonians Mark Nunnally and Denise Dupré, who also own the Barthélemy Hotel in St-Ertais.

Take two hoteliers, give them a reason to visit Champagne and perhaps to notice that the drink so synonymous

with luxury comes from a region with a surprising dearth of upmarket hotels (apart from the grande dame Les Crayères, and L'Assiette Champenoise in Reims) and what do you get? A sparkling new luxury hotel, of course.

Cue the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa, just outside Epernay. Once a coaching inn where future kings of France would stop en route to their coronation (Napoleon came a couple of times), and a venue at which most local families have celebrated at least one big event, the hotel had been long overdue a makeover. It certainly got one under Nunnally and Dupré — only two walls of the original building have been retained, a contemporary four-storey building rising in its place.

At first glance, after a quick two-and-a-half-hour buzz down the A26 from the Channel Tunnel, I'm not that impressed. Pulling in from the road, the exterior looks so unprepossessing that my sister and I aren't sure we've come to the right place. But that's the point, as you realise when you see the building from the other side, across the Moët & Chandon vineyards — it has been beautifully designed, not perhaps to meld into the landscape, but to flow with it.

Once inside the light-filled lobby, you understand too that this is a hotel to be seen from the inside out. Wherever you go in this remarkable building — from the spa with its 25m pool to the restaurant with its rooftop terrace slung over the whole hotel — your gaze will be drawn to what must be one of the most bucolic scenes in Champagne, the vines stretching down to the little village of Châtillon-sur-Marne, with Epernay in the distance. The 49 rooms all overlook the vines too, although trees block the view from some. (It's worth paying a little extra for a Royal room — although don't expect much change from £500.)

The hotel is, in fact, a celebration of champagne, not in a tacky way, but rather with an authentic, local feel — just going through its credentials is like perusing a champagne list. The windows onto the vines come from the architect Giovanni Savio, known for his work with Moët & Chandon, while the interior design was the responsibility of Sybille de Margerie of the Taittinger family. She has done a beautiful job with plant



Need to know

Jane Knight was a guest of the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa (00 33 3 26 52 87 11, royalschampagne.com), which has rooms from €485 (£436) a night, and of SmoothRed (020 8877 4940, smoothred.com), which has a three-day Luxury Dom Pérignon Champagne Experience, staying at Le Royal Champagne, from £2,394pp. The price includes Eurostar and TGV travel (standard premier and first class) a champagne tasting menu, a full-day private tour with visits to three cellars and an exclusive Dom Pérignon tasting followed by a Michelin-star lunch

and flower motifs on the carpets in the corridors and splashed across a wall in each of the bedrooms, which are otherwise done out in neutral colours with wood floors so they don't detract from the outside vistas.

Still, there are little touches to reflect where you are, with plenty of bubble-shaped lights, sparkling chandeliers, and gold baubles on the walls. There are also nods to the hotel's past as a staging post, starting with a couple of ornamental horses in our room, then galloping up the stairwell to the restaurant, with its large equine frieze.

On the terrace, another member of a smaller champagne family has been at work: Arthur from Augustin Champagne has created a beautiful kitchen garden — he also supplies the restaurant with his organic fruit and veg.

We descend to the Salon Fines Bules tasting room, its glass cabinet promisingly full of bottles. Here, the sommelier Daniël Pires talks us through a comprehensive list featuring many small producers as well as the big names, with prices from €65 to €5,000 a bottle (we sadly don't taste the latter, but do sip — OK, slurp — some Champagne

Augustin Cuvée Air as well as a very tasty côte de blanc from Diebolt-Vallouis and a rose from Leclerc Briant). Then we're poored back upstairs on to the terrace where the magnetising view merits just one more glass before we eat.

Ah, dinner. The chef Jean-Denis Rieubland won two Michelin stars in Nice's Negresco Hotel and I'd be surprised if he doesn't bring at least one to the Royal Champagne in the near future. The gastronomic restaurant Le Royal is the flagship, with its 36 spheres of amber glass and gold-leaf ceiling. We sit by one of four portraits of the women in Napoleon's life, although I'm unsure if it's Josephine or not — I'm rather more enamoured with the sole wrapped round lobster in a champagne sauce.

While the meal is superb, I find the setting quite stark, and not nearly as lovely as the casual Bellevue restaurant, which spills out on to the hotel terrace from a welcoming room where a forest of chandelier lights twinkle in the sunset. Here the food gives the view a run for its money, especially the pots of sole, pork belly or lamb, which come with plenty of fresh garden vegetables. The hot weather means we can breakfast outside too, gazing down as Epernay's latest tourist attraction, a tethered hot air balloon, rises 150m into the sky.

It might be symbolic of Eugène Mercier's advertising campaign to offer balloon flights over the Eiffel Tower in 1900, but my sister and I are veteran hot air ballooners so we look for a different

way to see the region's vineyards. But which to choose — one of the hotel's electric bikes? Tuk tuk? Surely nothing as mundane as a car.

Enter the "buggy", a spluttering open-air, four-wheel-drive vehicle. It comes with a driver, who takes us on a two-hour romp through the vineyards. We learn a little as we go, stopping to examine the three varieties of grape leaf (pinot noir, pinot meunier and chardonnay) but mostly it's a fun way to whoosh through the rolling sea of vines. There's the added bonus of a spot of sightseeing. In Châtillon-sur-Marne we stop to walk up to the base of a 28m statue of Pope Urban II, who was born here in the 11th century. We examine the hole in his armpit, not a result of wear and tear, but a viewpoint from within. And in the 16th-century town of Dormans lies a beautiful memorial to soldiers killed in the First World War. Then, exchanging the buzz of the buggy for the silence of a Tesla, we head back to the hotel through the charmingly named village of Dicy.

So much for the vines, but what about the producers? With almost 2,200 there's something for everyone. "My lifetime goal is to try them all," says our driver and guide, Thibault. "Only 1,700 to go."

From previous visits, I can recommend Mumm, with its 24km of cellar galleries that include a central Chateau d'Élysées and streets named after champagne-producing villages. Pommery too, which labels its cellars, adorned with massive

A room at the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa. Top right: a lounge area at the hotel. Right: the pool. Below left: the bar

chalk reliefs, with signs marking the latest markets conquered (Dakar, Kyoto, Manchester). Don't forget the small producers either: Voiron-Jumel in the grand cru village of Cramant offers the most interesting tour I've been on, and sells a great bubbly for €15.90 a bottle.

Today, Thibault is taking us to Moët, the largest producer in the region: the LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton group is responsible for a fifth of Champagne's 300 million bottles a year. Of the 100km of cellars carved into the chalk beneath Epernay, Moët has 28km and you see a fair chunk of them, passing keratolins of bottles packed in musty-scented, dimly lit alcoves.

There are champagne tastings here, bien sûr, but for the bubble on the foam, you can upgrade to a special lunch at Moët's Trionan, a classical Versailles-style building with formal gardens and orangery. Manfully we make our way through delicious canapés to amazing pudding and rather strong cheese, all perfectly matched to champagne.

The afternoon gets even better: Moët also owns Dom Pérignon, so the second part of our tour whisks us off to the pretty little village of Hautvillers, where the 16th-century Benedictine monk blended different grapes and famously summoned his fellow monks to "Come quickly, I am tasting the stars!" when he first tasted champagne.

Anyone can visit his grave in the abbey. Not everyone, though, can pass through St. Helena's gate at the side and

visit the cloisters where two dozen or so monks once lived and see the original wine terraces and stunning view over to Epernay. It's a superb place for a private tasting of a top vintage, and I can report that the 2009 (€145 a bottle) is pleasing on the palate (though not as pleasing as the P2 2000 — a snip at €370).

We roll back to the hotel to collapse in our enormous bed, where we knock back the free soft drinks in the minibar.

The next day, I swear I am sweating pure champagne in the hammam, with its enormous bed, where we knock back the free soft drinks in the minibar. The next day, I swear I am sweating pure champagne in the hammam, with its enormous bed, where we knock back the free soft drinks in the minibar. The next day, I swear I am sweating pure champagne in the hammam, with its enormous bed, where we knock back the free soft drinks in the minibar.

Later, rolling around in the 25m-pool with its views over the corduroy striped vines, I reflect that Royal Champagne is easily the best French hotel I've stayed in. In this vista, this hotel, where you can feel part of the beautiful countryside yet be cosseted in absolute luxury — it feels good for the soul (although that may be the bubbles talking). And, as I blot out the requisite views by slowly submerging myself, I realise it's not just Abyss champagne that benefits from a dunking underwater.

