

SHOTGUN (AND) WEDDINGS

The Chateau du Val, between Rennes and Vannes, is a place for shooting parties and wedding parties (if not at the same time) – and also for good food. ALASDAIR CROSBY went visiting



Owners Jas and Jocelyn Saini.



IT is another land: hills and woods, small villages and farmland. This quiet, green country is just an easy drive from Saint Malo: take the fast road south, drive a short way round the Rennes ring road and turn off towards Redon on the D117. Once back in the countryside, turn off at the exit marked 'Saint-Just'.... and start threading country lanes in the heart of rural Brittany.

Then the Chateau du Val comes into view: very much what a 19th Century gentleman might have imagined a mediaeval castle ought to look like. The original owner built the chateau not so much as a family home as a place for sporting and 'country house'-type parties. It incorporated all the latest and most luxurious features of the late 19th Century – as well as requiring an army of servants to run.

The 20th Century was not kind to big houses that required maintenance by an army of servants, but as far as the

Chateau du Val is concerned, in some senses nothing has changed too much: after a decline in its fortunes it is now once again an oasis for leisure, field sports and convivial enjoyment.

It is owned by a British couple, Jas and Jocelyn ('Joss') Saini. Jas owns a company connected with public healthcare I.T; his wife has family connections with the Duke of Richmond Hotel in Guernsey and grew up on a Wiltshire farm (which had a herd of Jersey cows). They divide their time between their holiday home at Chateau du Val and their working address in Geneva.

Restoring the Chateau has been an ambitious project for them. It was run down, but 'Jas and Joss' now run tailor-made shooting breaks: 'rough pheasant shooting' for corporate and private parties.

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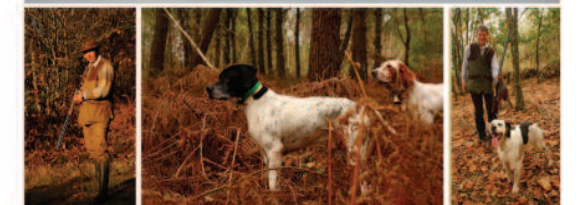
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The guests, depending on their number, can take over accommodation in the chateau (nine bedrooms sleeping 22) or the 'lodge' – the old stable block, an imposing building in itself, which sleeps 19 in six bedrooms.

'We are not a hotel or bed and breakfast,' Jas said, 'we are not geared up for individuals just passing through and staying for the night. But we think it is ideal for parties – perhaps shooting parties, perhaps wedding parties, perhaps family get-togethers for important celebrations. There is a great deal of space available, both inside and outside – in the grounds and the estate's woods and surrounding countryside and plenty to do on the estate and nearby.'

The on-site facilities include a 15m swimming pool with cover, an all-weather tennis court, private forest (with marked trails) and a lake with the possibility of course fishing.

A warm July afternoon was a good day to take the path with Jas through the estate's woodland leading to the lake, following the lead of Arti, the family black Labrador, padding along in front of us. The woods sweep down to the water's edge: this would be a good setting for a 'Famous Five' adventure story. Then we took the path uphill to view the tangle of gorse and brambles where the pheasant pens are located.

They rear Reeves pheasants, a beautiful bird where the cocks have a spectacular black, white, and gold plumage and tails that can reach five feet. The chicks are bought in at 10 weeks old and grow up in the safe tangle of undergrowth – about three acres – enclosed by fox-proof fencing and raptor-proof net covering. When they are adults they are let out of their 'pen', but the environment outside is just the same as the environment inside: furze and bramble and bushes. In this tanglewood the pheasants continue to live as wild pheasants should, enjoying presumably happy pheasant lives until one day they meet a hunter with a gun...

'With our hunters, the pheasants win most of the time,' joked Jas. 'This area is really a halfway house for the birds. They are wild still - it's not as if they are kept in small crates. We try to keep the same environment outside the pens as well as inside, so that they continue to feel at home. They know how to hide and how to nest.'

He continued: 'There were 27 days of shooting last season, with lots of regulars visiting and returning, including a party of friends from Jersey. We like people to have a good time, so they have to see the birds and have to have a chance to shoot them. Everyone shoots a lot of cartridges and no one goes away saying "we didn't see anything, we didn't shoot anything".'

'It's difficult to shoot the pheasants, but it's good sport. When you do bag one you feel a sense of achievement – it's not easy.'



There are no beaters employed to drive the game to the guns, and the number of guns are limited to a maximum of six, for security reasons. The guns have to stay in line and wear thin pink jackets – for their own safety.

The estate is also known for its woodcock - the woodland scrub is ideal for them. The estate also offers clay-pigeon shooting.

Visitors from abroad, who have difficulty in bringing their own guns through border controls, can rent one inexpensively from the local gun shop.

'It's a great day out, physically and mentally,' he said, 'and there's a great sense of camaraderie. Sometimes the guns walk some 20 kms – after that you feel like a whisky or two.'

And after that 20km hike and a whisky or two... it's dinner time. This is the department of Mark and Catherine Fowler, another English couple who do the catering at the chateau for English-speaking shooting parties, as well as for wedding receptions and other events. They live at Josselin (as many readers will know, a picturesque mediaeval town not too far away) where they run a cookery school and outside catering business, Cerise Sauvage.

This leads on to the question: 'what can a non-shooter do at Chateau du Val?' One answer is that Mark and Catherine are happy to organise a cookery workshop. They are the proprietors of one of Brittany's most popular hog and spit-roast event caterers, specialising in weddings, country fairs, private functions and corporate hospitality days – the range of their activity includes the Channel Islands as well.

Otherwise 'alternative activities' include horse riding at a nearby stables, or visiting the charming little town of Le Gacilly – home of the late Yves Rocher and the base of his world-famous company. Its narrow cobbled streets are full of arts and crafts people and flowers and botanical gardens.

But for the writer of this article (a covert archaeologist), especially fascinating were the many megaliths in the area; at one minor crossroads near the chateau were signposts pointing to megaliths in all four directions. It seems as if the area was more populous in the third millennium BC than in the third millennium AD.

Altogether, Le Val is an hospitable, interesting and attractive destination – both for those who shoot and for those who don't.

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