



**GOLF IN THE
VAR
NO. 2
«GOLF DE LA
SAINTE BAUME»**

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This attractive 18-hole course at **Nans les Pins** - just off the N560 back road from Brignoles to Marseille via Auriol - proudly calls itself 'Golf de la Sainte Baume', implying crags and dizzy mountain heights.

But what makes it stand out, so to speak, in this part of France, is how gentle and flat it is. Here even golfers of advanced years, rather than technique, can haul a trolley round 18 holes and come back in without feeling like Hillary and Tenzing after a hard day on the peaks.

There are a couple of short, stiff climbs - a spine of hill runs through it and has to be surmounted twice, once in each half. But overall it's green and rolling - almost like an English parkland course, except for the craggy massifs to North and South (which incidentally keep wind speeds down as well).

It's not demanding - rated a lowly 123 under the French 'slope' system - but it's still a decent test for most golfers, measuring over 6,400 yards off the yellows and getting on for 6,700 off the whites. There's little trouble off the tees (the one testing water carry, at the 2nd, has a bail-out fairway alongside for the faint-hearted), the fairways are generous and the bunkers few and flat (nice soft sand, as well). The rough is mostly benign, without that annoying local tendency to turn into stony desert out of range of the fairway watering.

The greens are medium-paced, medium-sized and nearly all quite flat. Nevertheless a good score isn't all that easy to come by and there are several tricky holes. The spur of hill across the course demands a blind approach up a 100-foot slope to a narrow green at the 7th, and a blind drive over the same hill at the 15th (though not for the ladies, who start at the top!). There is also a stream meandering around; the French call these hazards a 'rigole', but it's no joke when your Sunday best drive down the hill at the 11th just makes the water. Perhaps the short holes are the biggest disappointment - all much the same and rather featureless (except for a 10 foot stone wall in front of the 8th green which may dismay the shorter hitter).

The course and greens are well maintained and the lush fairways put a spring in your step. The one drawback is that green staff seem to work without reference to time of day or who is on the course; you may sometimes have to choose between waiting ten minutes on the approach shot or winging the man on the mower.

Booking is relatively easy, but if you are two they will put you out with another pair unless things are very quiet. This may well be better than playing as a two in among the fourballs - there are usually plenty of holiday golfers and the pace can be slow. Many of the members are from the Marseille business community who make a change from the Riviera riffraff as golf partners- my playing partners have ranged from captains of industry to computer boffins.

Singles can easily pick up a game - just ask the efficient telephone / receptionist.

If you want to keep your competitive hand in, they run a Stableford 'Clasement' competition every Wednesday for French licence-holders to put in qualifying scores. Foreign handicap certificates are welcome and you tee off, normally in threes, from about 8..30am in ascending handicap order. This normally gives you a clear run at the course playing with people of your own standard.

There are plenty of expat members and the seniors section is active, with a regular programme of local matches and competitions. All in all, this course could be a serious contender if you are looking for a base for your golf in this

part of the world. It belongs to Open Golf, who own nine courses in France including Opio Valbonne on the Cote d'Azur, Servanes in the Alpilles and Le Touquet in the Pas-de-Calais. Members get a 25% reduction on all these courses and 10% off some of the group's hotels, including the Domaine du Chateauneuf within the course at Nans.

Prices for visitors are close to average for the region. Green fees are 55 Euros (45 on weekdays November-March, half-price for under 25s). If you're on tour or have keen golfing guests, 240 Euros buys you 5 green fees on 3 courses - Sainte Baume, La Salette (a course near Marseille I haven't played, but reputed to be excellent for mountain goats who hit dead straight), and Servanes (50kms east). Buggies are 36 Euros (don't bother), and a basket of balls on the high-quality, handily located practice ground is 4 Euros. All these are 2004 prices.

Bogeyman hasn't sampled the delights of the 4-star, 'Relais et Chateaux'-listed Domaine de Chateauneuf attached to the course. He can, however, report that the clubhouse is welcoming and relaxed, with a good bar - try a 'chose', the house special, a grapefruit-and-bitters mix rather like the English 'Gunner'. The restaurant offers a short menu including a plat du jour for around 10 Euros. On the debit side, changing facilities are minimal, as with so many courses in Provence. And if you are playing early, make sure you're well supplied with balls, tees etc. The 'pro shop' - much more shop than pro - only staggers into life around 10am.

All in all a friendly, not too demanding golfing experience. It might begin to pall after a bit if you are a top-notch player, but would be ideal for an outing with those guests who say they 'used to play quite a bit' but who might be disconcerted by some of the tougher propositions in the Var.

Bogeyman's at-a-glance ratings out of ten:
Course design.....7
Course condition.....8
Proshop... ..5

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Bar and restaurant7

Welcome and organisation... 9

Overall assessment..... 7.2/10

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