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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE THE LOCALS GO...

Parisians Escape to Deauville's Elegance

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

It's a sweltering summer day at the Paris fashion shows. As the models parade down the catwalk, a bejeweled socialite leans across to her companion and announces in one of those loud stage whispers that are designed to be heard by as many people as possible: "Thank God, tomorrow I leave for Deauville."

A series of deliberately evocative images is conjured up by the socialite's deceptively simple remark. Chic. Leisurely days by the sea. Horsey aristocrats. The Rothschilds. *Les années folles*. The Paris in-crowd. Aristocratic horses. New money. Huge old houses. Gambling. Good connections. Wholesome Normandy cooking. The good life.

Leaving for Deauville is a Paris ritual—part of what living in the "City of Light" is all about. Or is, at any rate, for those who can afford it. An elegant beach resort just a two-hour drive from the Eiffel Tower, Deauville is jokingly referred to as the "21st arrondissement" of Paris: a kind of honorary suburb for a city that is divided into 20 *arrondissements* or districts.

There are certain times of the year—notably holiday weekends in July and August—when *le tout Paris* descends on Deauville. The mile-long boardwalk known as *Les Planches* is packed with Parisians who would not be seen dead on the Champs-Élysées in the height of summer.
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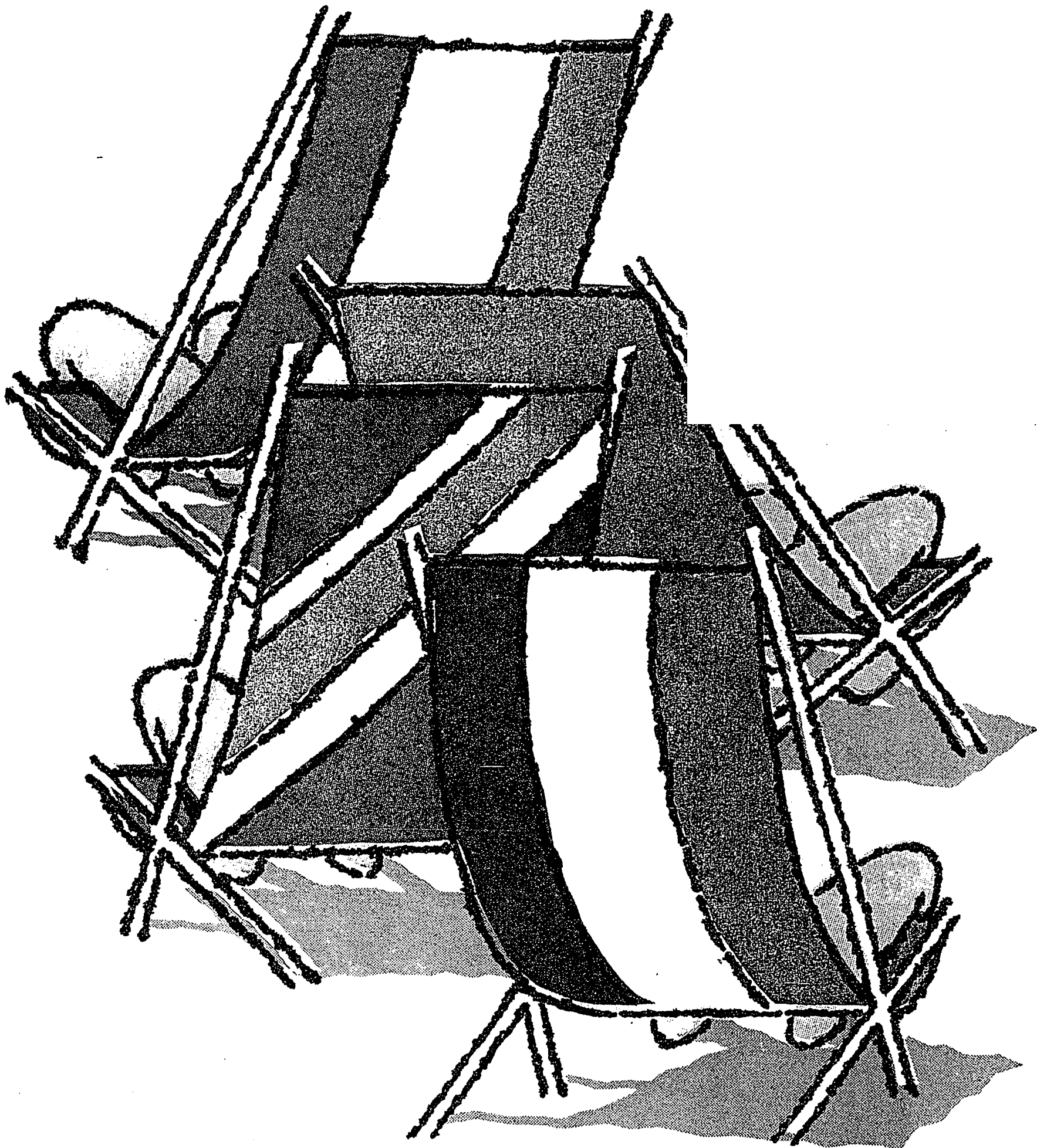


ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE MCCRACKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Deauville

DEAUVILLE, From E1

mer. So too are the casino and the racecourse.

The journey between Paris and Deauville was immortalized in Claude Lelouch's film classic "A Man and a Woman." Two Parisians, played in the movie by Anouk Aimée and Jean-Louis Trintignant, spend their weekends in the 19th-century resort. Romance blossoms as they travel back and forth, usually in the pouring rain.

"To leave and to come back is the law of the tides and the love affairs of Deauville," noted a prominent Paris writer, Patrick Grainville, in an essay on his favorite French seaside resort for the weekly magazine *L'Express*.

There are, needless to say, plenty of people who dislike Deauville. It is obviously not the place to go for the many Parisians who want to get away from other Parisians. It can be snobbish and claustrophobic, quite apart from expensive. The climate, which is often described as "English," is no match for the Cote d'Azur.

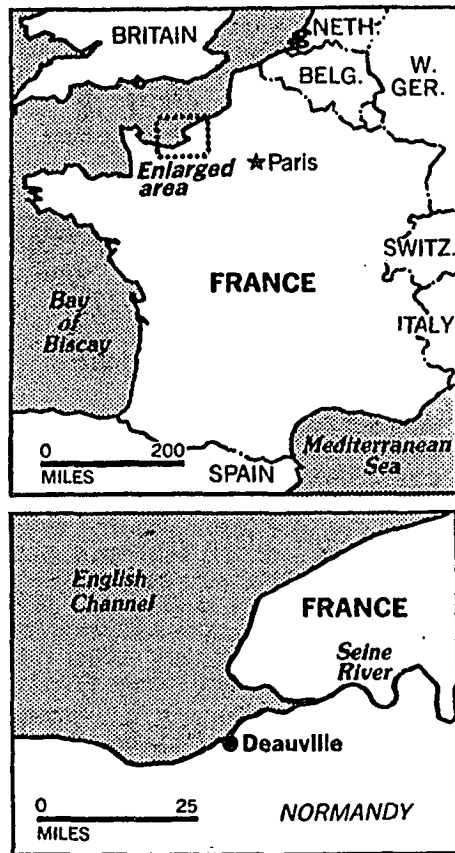
On the other side of the balance sheet, Deauville is exceptional for the range of pleasures it offers. It boasts unrivaled sports facilities, a night life that goes on until dawn and one of the most beautiful beaches in Europe. In August, it becomes the equestrian capital of France, with horse lovers dividing their time between the annual auction of yearlings and the two immaculately maintained race tracks.

And then, there is the convenience.

"Deauville is the nearest beach to Paris. It's the easiest place to get to if you want to spend a weekend by the sea," said Bernard Kanovitch, a leading Paris doctor who has been returning to Deauville for the past 15 years. "For me, it's like a home away from home. There's a whole group of us who go up there from Paris. We all have second residences up there. Our children play together and we continue conversations begun in Paris."

Deauville was founded in 1861 by the Duc de Morny, the illegitimate half brother of Napoleon III. The idea was to create a summer resort for wealthy Parisians, centered around a racecourse.

The town was laid out on a simple grid pattern: parallel rows of villas



BY LARRY FOGEL—THE WASHINGTON POST

and hotels crossed by a diagonal avenue. Aristocrats and millionaires competed with each other to build the most striking residences in what has been described as "neo-Norman style." The result is a kind of French Newport where the visitor is immediately impressed by ostentatious wealth.

The resort's two luxury hotels—the Royal and the Normandy—date from the period immediately before the first World War. They dominate the beachfront like two elderly duchesses, watching on, amused, as life passes them by in its endless variations. The Royal is austere and formal, its seven-story façade oozing good breeding. The Normandy, with its gabled roof and cottage-style architecture, looks homely and relaxed.

Standing between the two hotels is the casino, built in 1912 as a means of subsidizing the racecourses. A white neo-classical palace, it looks from the outside like the residence of a colonial governor in Africa or Asia.

Deauville's "golden age," everybody here will tell you, came after the war. The town was the direct beneficiary of *les années folles*, the crazy '20s, when a generation of affluent young people sought to for-

get the horrors of the war in an endless round of pleasure. Attracted by the racing and the casino, kings and millionaires declared this Normandy beach resort their own.

The international set was led by Alfonso XIII, the king of Spain, who paid several visits here before he and the Spanish monarchy were swept away by internal political upheavals. It included the future emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, the Aga Khan and a sprinkling of maharajahs and princes. King Farouk of Egypt lost millions at the casino. The French automobile king, André Citroën, ruined himself overnight.

"Deauville in August was the place to be, a must for gilded youth," recalled Guy de Rothschild, the international banker, in his memoirs. "In Biarritz, the casino played an almost incidental role. In Deauville, it was the real center of night life."

Visiting Deauville today, it is easy to feel nostalgic for a past that is on the point of vanishing forever. It is like turning up at a historic monument after the sun has gone down. Based on conversations with the caretakers and the vague outlines of a building against the fading twilight, you try to imagine what the place must once have been like.

Perhaps inevitably, the image that lingers is over-romantic.

"It was *la grande vie*," said Jacques Granon, director of Deauville's Hippodrome de la Touques for almost four decades. "The Deauville set divided their time between the casino and the racecourse. They would stay up all night gambling and then come out here at dawn, still in evening dress, to watch their horses train for the afternoon races. *C'était la classe, ça*." He paused, savoring the memory of more leisurely, frivolous times. "*C'est triste. Ça n'existe plus.*"

In the old days, Granon continued, nobody would have dared to show up at the Hippodrome dressed informally. A gentleman without a top hat was not a gentleman at all. Today, you can be a gentleman race-horse owner and walk around in jeans.

"The real break came with the students' revolution in 1968. There was an immediate change in social attitudes. People stopped trying to show off their wealth. The Rothschilds apart, there are now very few people who own big stables of up to 50 horses," he explained.

The big fortunes may have disappeared, but there still seems to be plenty of money in Deauville. Last year, a new record was set for the sale of a yearling at the annual auc-

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The waterfront at Deauville

tion: 9 million francs, or \$1.2 million. It went to a Japanese gentleman. At the casino, there are gamblers who play with 10,000-franc (\$130-dollar) chips.

Deauville also remains a resort where to be *seen* is as important—if not more—as having a good time. The crush on *Les Planches* on Aug. 15, France's traditional midsummer holiday, has been compared to the elevator up the Eiffel Tower on a busy weekend or a mass of heaving bodies on the floor of a popular Paris discothèque.

According to Elisabeth Gervais, director of public relations at the Deauville tourist office, Parisians who wish to be seen show up on *Les Planches* around midday. They drop in for aperitifs at the Bar du Soleil or, if it is full, the Bar du Mer farther down the boardwalk. For lunch, a table is waiting at *Ciro's*.

After lunch, the social whirl continues at the races, followed by a polo tournament or the yearling sales if it's the third week of August. That leaves time to change for

dinner at the Ambassador Grill (which has relaxed its black-tie restrictions over the past few years) and the serious business of the evening at the casino.

According to local folklore, it is the height of fashion to be seen on *Les Planches* on Aug. 31—but to be noticed there on Sept. 1 is exceedingly bad form. By that time, you should be back in Paris. In an attempt to prolong what is a very short season, the local authorities have recently begun organizing events later in the year, notably the Festival of American Cinema in the first week in September.

"In Deauville, there is also the sea," a French humorist, Tristan Bernard, once remarked. It was a clever way of saying that there is so much else going on in this chic resort, and the Norman weather is so unreliable, that the beach is often ignored.

In fact, the sea and the luminous light that suffuses the northern landscape are what make Deauville unforgettable. They were what attracted

the precursors of impressionism to the Normandy coastline in the 19th century—and they still exercise a fascination over 20th-century visitors.

The light is mellow, with more nuance than in the Mediterranean resorts along the Cote d'Azur. The colors seem to run together, a water color rather than an oil painting. Sea, sky and sand make an infinite variety of different patterns, depending on the time of day and whether the tide is in or out.

In the evening, a kind of incandescent after-glow seems to linger on the beach. Folded umbrellas stick out of the sand like multicolored fireworks waiting to be ignited. Horses canter through the surf, a study in seemingly effortless motion. A man and a woman walk hand in hand along the deserted seashore.

It is a sight that is worth all the chips in the casino—for this Parisian, at any rate.

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