



SILVERSEN
TO THE CURIOUS

DISCOVER MORE



FINANCIAL TIMES

myFT

HOME WORLD UK COMPANIES TECH MARKETS CLIMATE OPINION WORK & CAREERS LIFE & ARTS FTSI

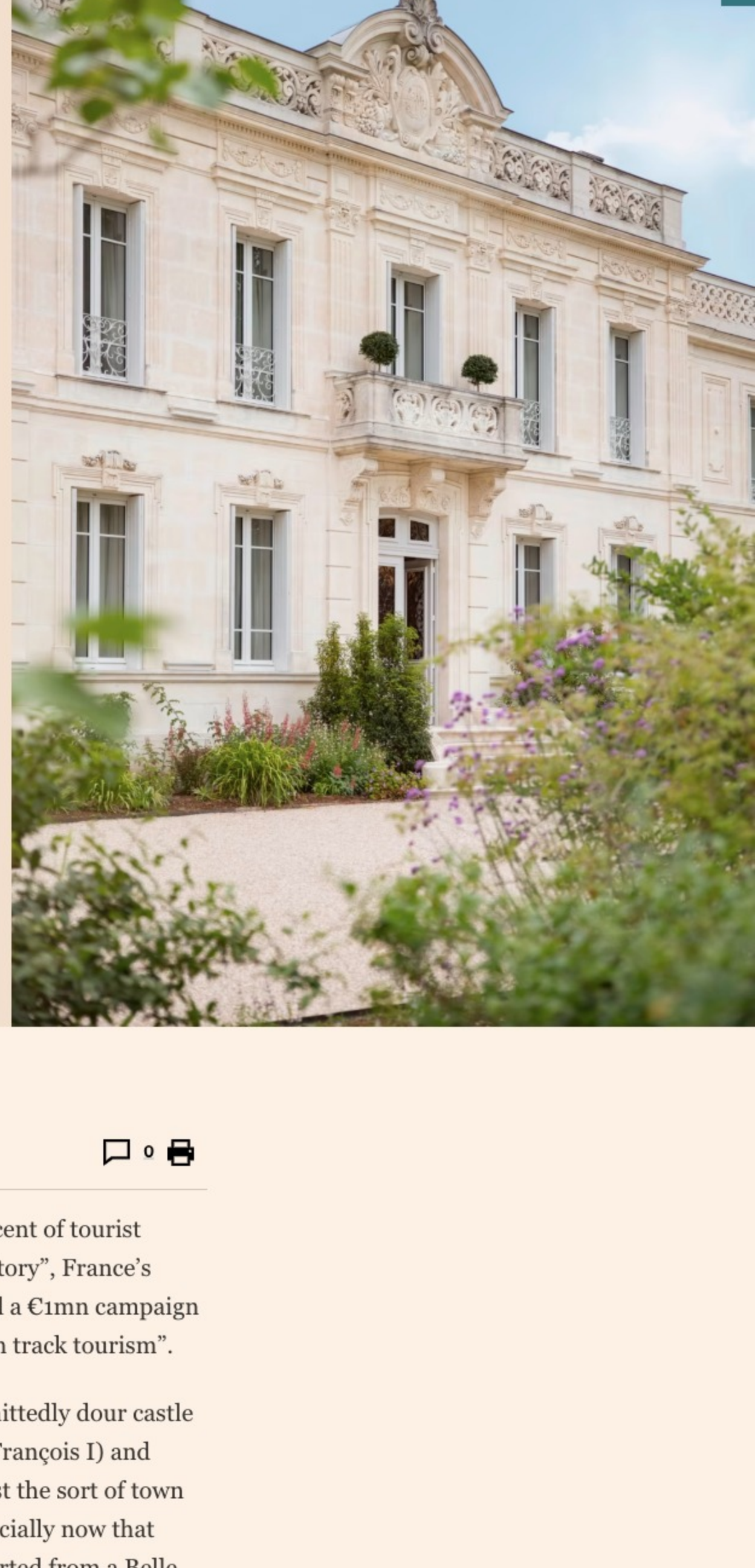
ePaper Portfolio Settings & Account

Feedback

Travel + Add to myFT

La Nauve: raise a glass to Cognac's new retreat

Key Notes | A Belle Époque mansion has been transformed into a refined 12-room hotel. Can it put Cognac on the map for tourism as well as brandy?



Claire Wrathall 37 MINUTES AGO



What's the buzz? In response to the finding that "80 per cent of tourist activity in France is concentrated on 20 per cent of our territory", France's minister for tourism, Olivia Grégoire, last month announced a €1mm campaign "to promote", she told *Le Figaro*, "year-round off-the-beaten track tourism".

With its celebrated distilleries, fortified medieval gates, admittedly dour castle (the birthplace, in 1494, of France's great renaissance king François I) and narrow streets of half-timbered houses, Cognac might be just the sort of town the minister hopes visitors will be inspired to seek out. Especially now that there's a superb hotel, La Nauve, on its western edge. Converted from a Belle Époque mansion and former distillery, it is surrounded by 4.5 hectares of grounds and newly planted gardens (give them time, and they should be glorious), alongside which flows the River Charente.

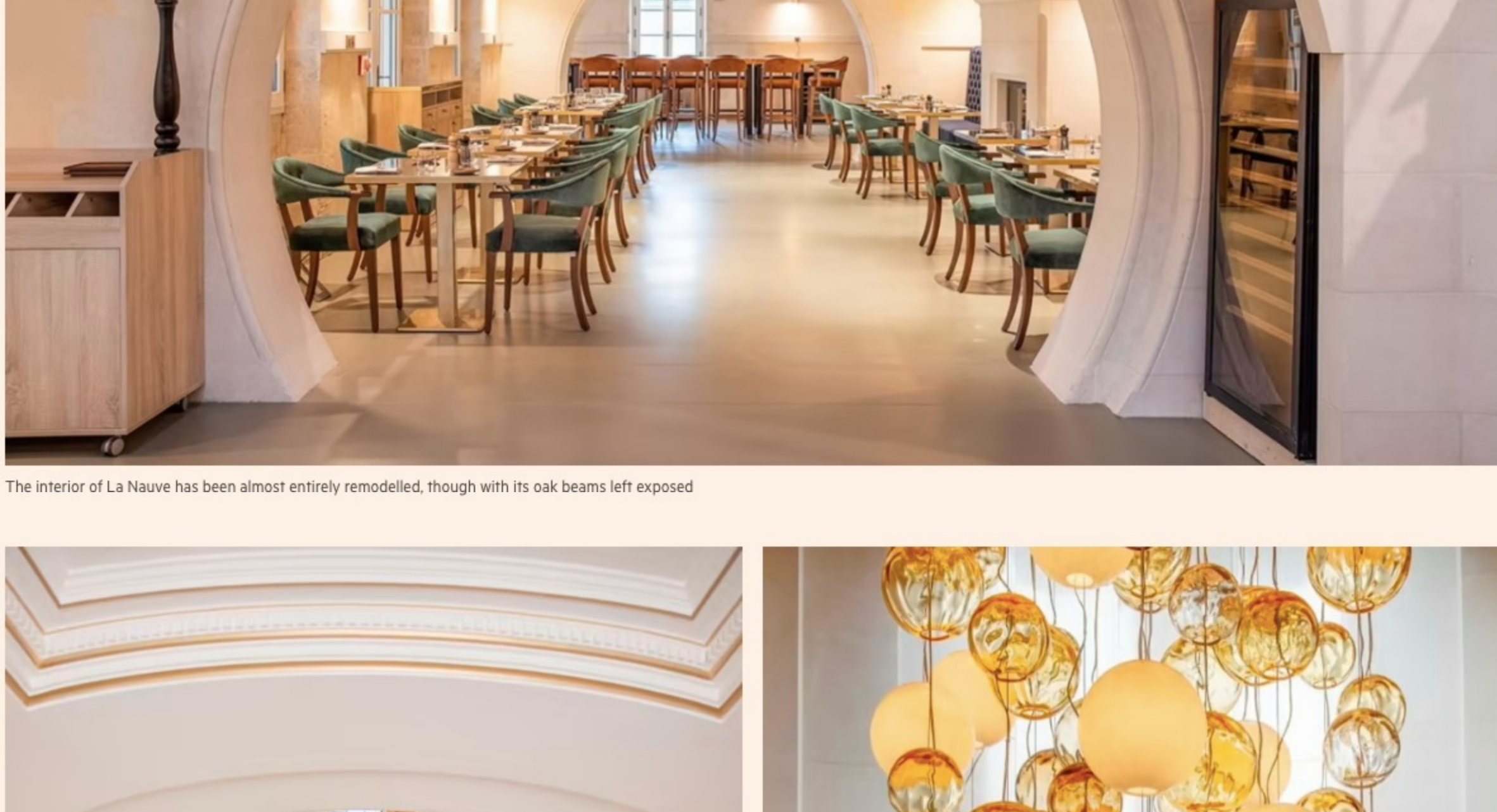


One of La Nauve's 12 bedrooms — four of which are in the adjacent Le Petit Chai © Lenaka.net

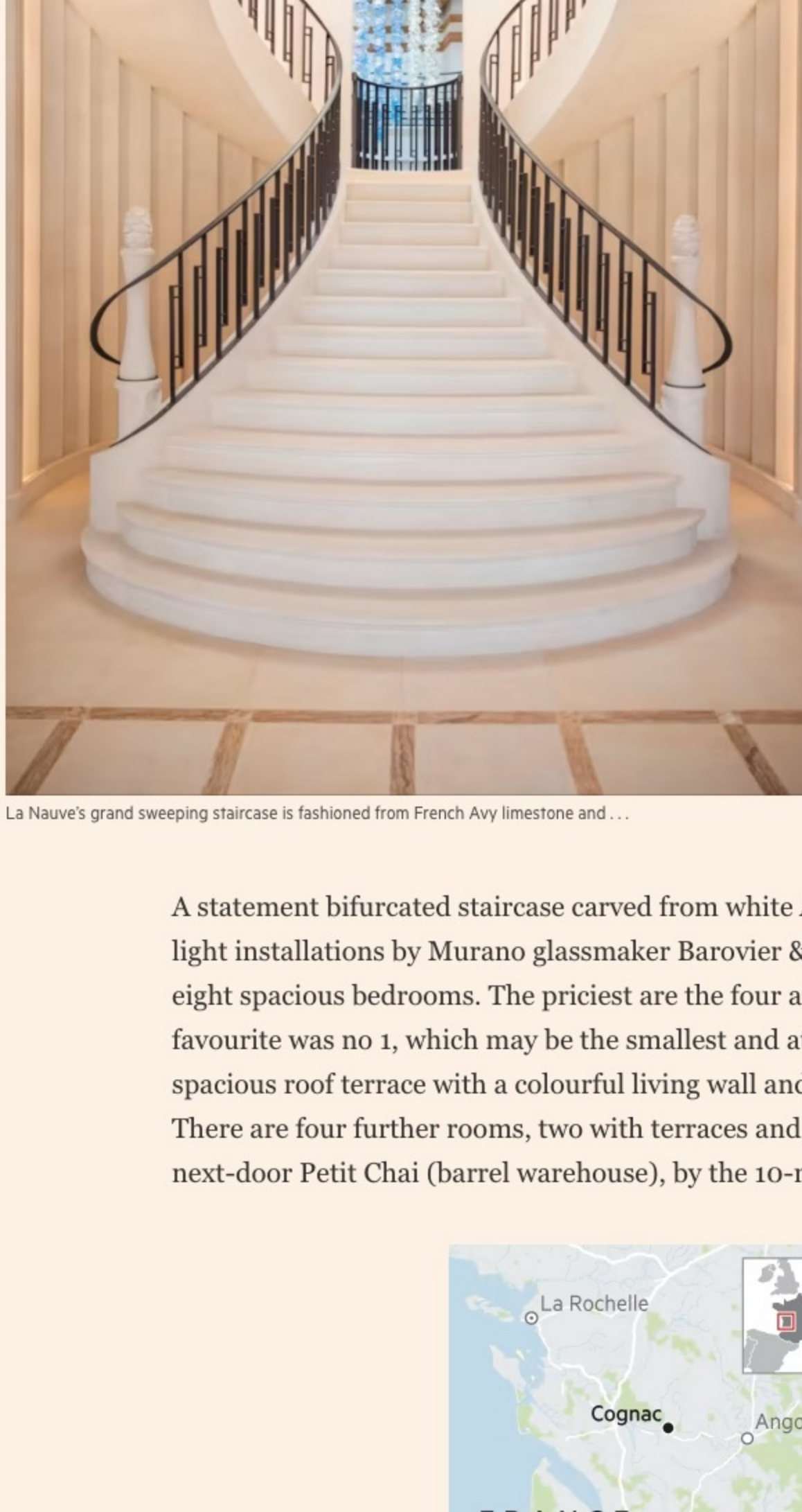
It's the second hotel from the Almae Collection (the first, Armancette, is in Saint-Nicolas de Véroc near Chamonix; the next will be Palladio's Villa Emo in Italy's Veneto), founded by the private equity investor Vincent Gombault and his wife, Florence, initially to develop residences. Its mission is "to reflect and honour its unique location with a life-enriching focus on art, design, gastronomy and community" — which I'd say it achieves.

Location, location, location La Nauve lies about an hour inland from the Atlantic coast, 106km south-east of La Rochelle airport; 128km north of Bordeaux; and 48km west of Angoulême, which has direct rail connections to Paris and where Wes Anderson filmed *The French Dispatch*.

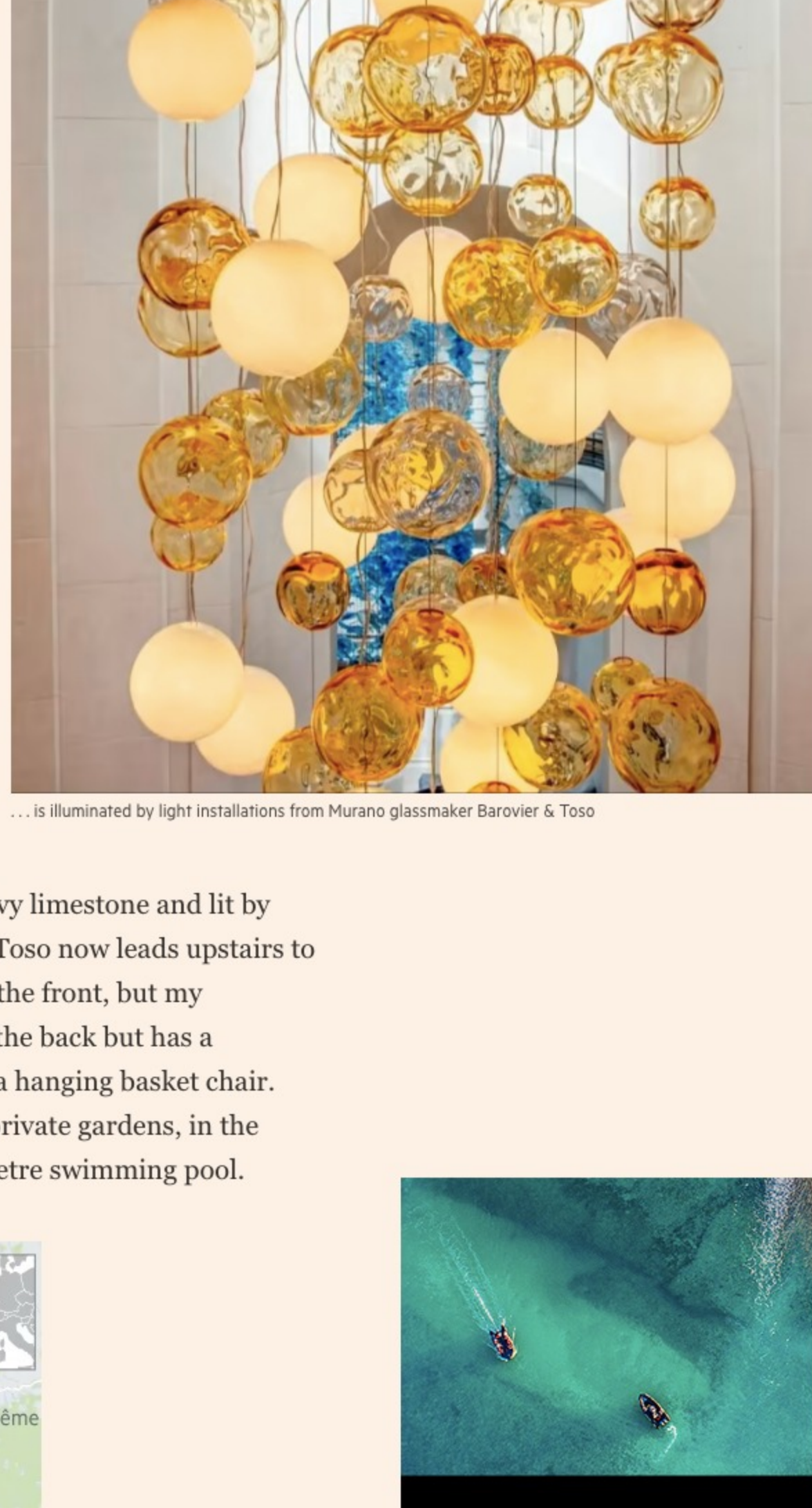
Checking in The main house was built in the 1870s, but though its ornate façade remains intact, its interior has been gutted to the rafters, its mighty oak trusses now exposed, and its interior almost entirely remodelled.



The interior of La Nauve has been almost entirely remodelled, though with its oak beams left exposed



La Nauve's grand sweeping staircase is fashioned from French Avy limestone and ...



... is illuminated by light installations from Murano glassmaker Barovier & Toso

A statement bifurcated staircase carved from white Avy limestone and lit by light installations by Murano glassmaker Barovier & Toso now leads upstairs to eight spacious bedrooms. The priestess are the four at the front, but my favourite was no 1, which may be the smallest and at the back but has a spacious roof terrace with a colourful living wall and a hanging basket chair. There are four further rooms, two with terraces and private gardens, in the next-door Petit Chai (barrel warehouse), by the 10-metre swimming pool.



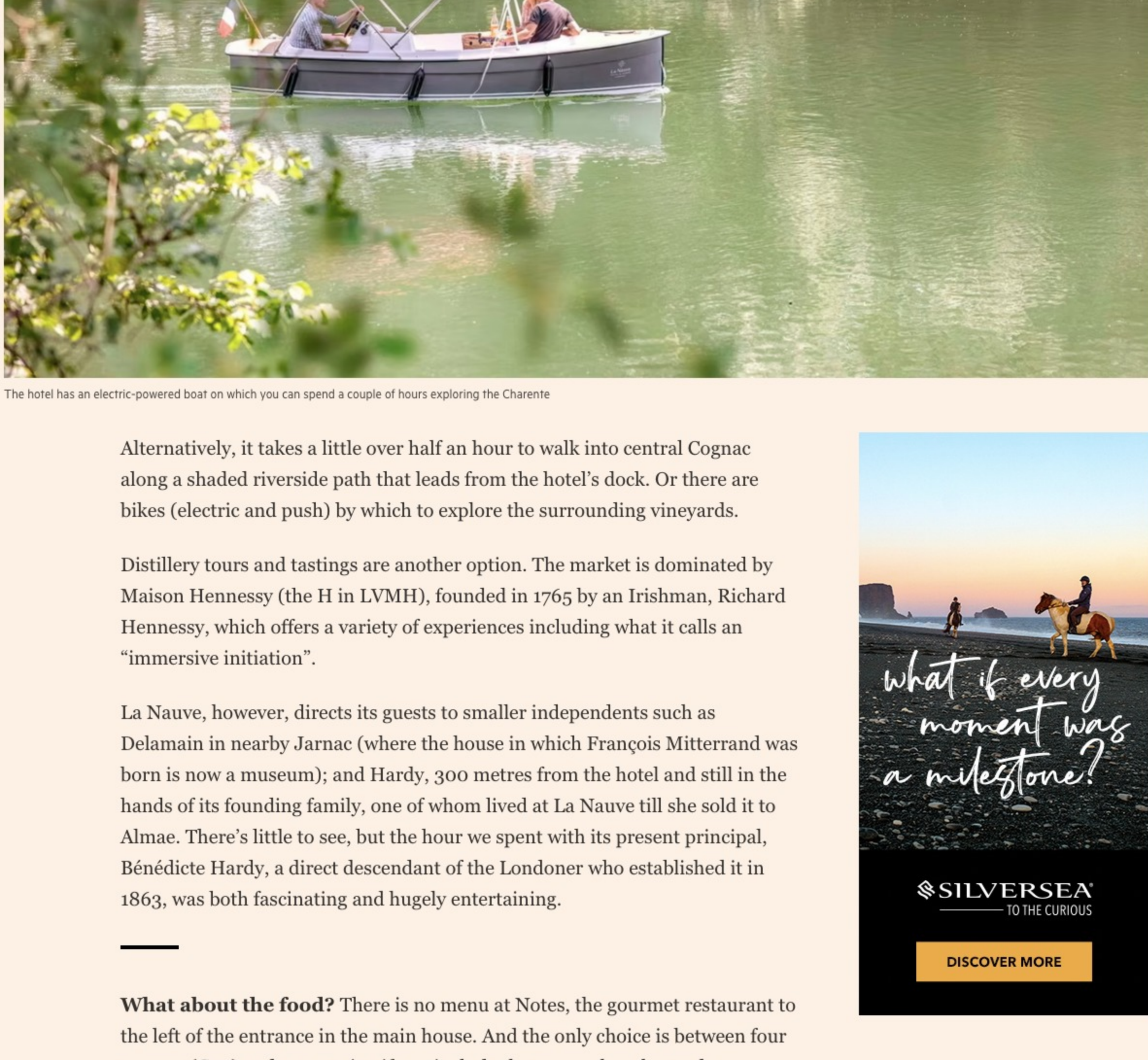
No expense has been spared in their décor. The floors are of end-grain oak with brass inlay to echo the slight iridescence of the polished plaster walls. And the curvaceous joinery is something to behold. All the doors and bedheads, which have integrated nightstands, are inlaid with marquetry in patterns inspired by the branches of the 150-year-old sequoia that dominates the main lawn, though they reminded me more of designs by Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

The bathrooms are marble and onyx, and the push-button shower was miraculously user-friendly. If only the lighting hadn't been so overthought, it might all have been perfect. There's no need for a downlighter by the bathroom that stays on all night, nor a motion sensor that floods the loo with light whenever you open the door. (Nor quite so much flood-lighting of the façade.)

What to do? The hotel has an electric-powered boat on which you can spend a couple of hours exploring the Charente, which Henri IV, the first Bourbon monarch of France, judged the most beautiful waterway in his kingdom. At one point a water snake crossed our path, and we spotted four fat coypus making their way down the wooded bank to bathe.



An aerial view of La Nauve's 10-metre swimming pool



The hotel has an electric-powered boat on which you can spend a couple of hours exploring the Charente

Alternatively, it takes a little over half an hour to walk to central Cognac along a shaded riverside path that leads from the hotel's dock. Or there are bikes (electric and push) by which to explore the surrounding vineyards.

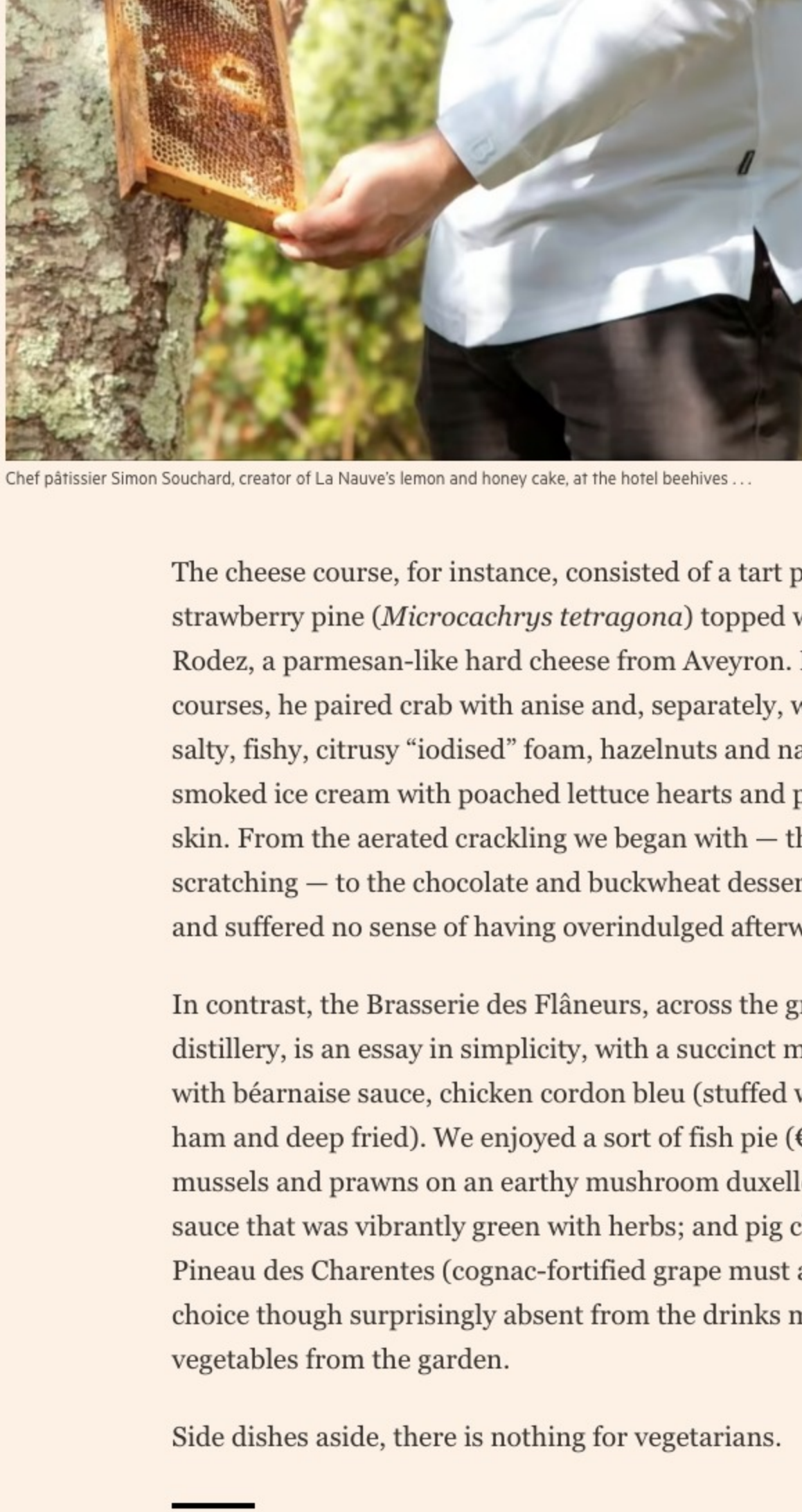
Distillery tours and tastings are another option. The market is dominated by Maison Hennessy (the H in LVMH), founded in 1765 by an Irishman, Richard Hennessy, which offers a variety of experiences including what it calls an "immersive initiation".

La Nauve, however, directs its guests to smaller independents such as Delamain in nearby Jarnac (where the house in which François Mitterrand was born is now a museum); and Hardy, 300 metres from the hotel and still in the hands of its founding family, one of whom lived at La Nauve till she sold it to Almae. There's little to see, but the hour we spent with its present principal, Bénédicte Hardy, a direct descendant of the Londoner who established it in 1863, was both fascinating and hugely entertaining.

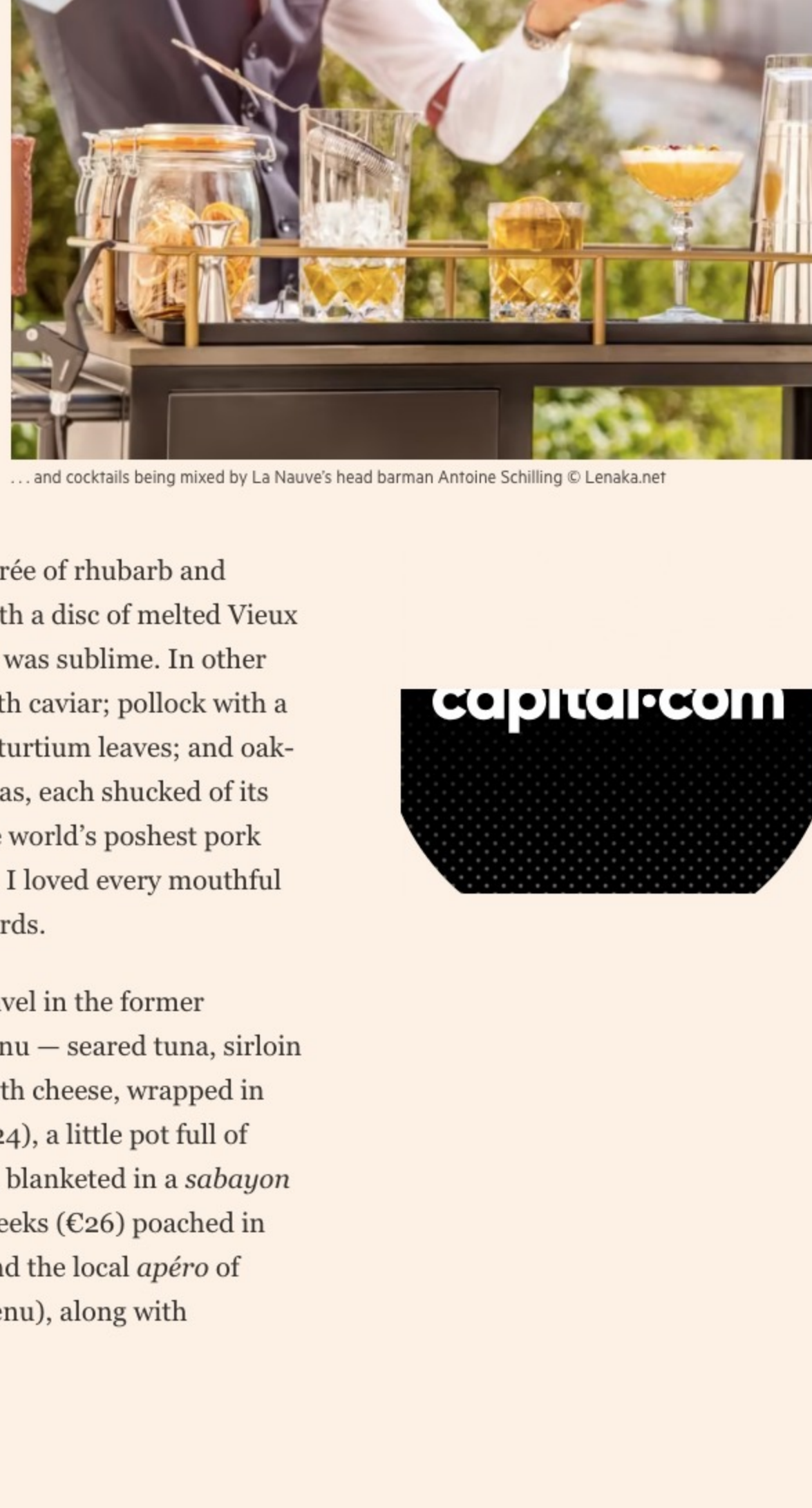
What about the food? There is no menu at Notes, the gourmet restaurant to the left of the entrance in the main house. And the only choice is between four courses (€70) and seven, nine if you include the *amuse-bouches* and pre-dessert (€110). Thereafter you are in the hands of its chef, Anthony Carballo, who was apprenticed to Yannick Alléno at La Meurice and will surely become a legend in his own right. For his is an inventive menu that navigates a path between the classic (lamb with smoked aubergine, black-wheat purée and an anchovy jus) and the outlandish, in the way he messes with convention and juxtaposes flavours and textures.



La Nauve's chef Anthony Carballo serves up an inventive menu that juxtaposes flavours and textures © Lenaka.net



Chef pâtissier Simon Soucard, creator of La Nauve's lemon and honey cake, at the hotel beehives ...



... and cocktails being mixed by La Nauve's head barman Antoine Schilling © Lenaka.net

The cheese course, for instance, consisted of a tart purée of rhubarb and strawberry pine (*Microcachrys tetragona*) topped with a disc of melted Vieux Rodez, a parmesan-like hard cheese from Aveyron. It was sublime. In other courses, he paired crab with anise and, separately, with caviar; pollock with a salty, fishy, citrusy "iodised" foam, hazelnuts and nasturtium leaves; and oak-smoked ice cream with poached lettuce hearts and peas, each shucked of its skin. From the aerated crackling we began with — the world's poshest pork scratching — to the chocolate and buckwheat dessert, I loved every mouthful and suffered no sense of having overindulged afterwards.

In contrast, the Brasserie des Flâneurs, across the gravel in the former distillery, is an essay in simplicity, with a succinct menu — seared tuna, sirloin with béarnaise sauce, chicken cordon bleu (stuffed with cheese, wrapped in ham and deep fried). We enjoyed a sort of fish pie (€24), a little pot full of mussels and prawns on an earthy mushroom duxelle, a blanket in a *sabayon* sauce that was vibrantly green with herbs; and pig cheeks (€26) poached in Pineau des Charentes (cognac-fortified grape must) and the local *apéro* of choice though surprisingly absent from the drinks menu), along with vegetables from the garden.

Side dishes aside, there is nothing for vegetarians.

The damage Rates for a double room start at €294 per night (or from €369 in July and August).

Elevator pitch *Luxe, calme et volupté*. As Charles Baudelaire put it in his poem *L'Invitation au voyage*: "There, all is order and beauty/Luxury, tranquillity and delight."

Claire Wrathall was a guest of La Nauve lanauve.com

Find out about our latest stories first — follow @ftweekend on Twitter

Sign up to the International morning headlines newsletter, every weekday

One-Click Sign Up

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

Reuse this content

Comments

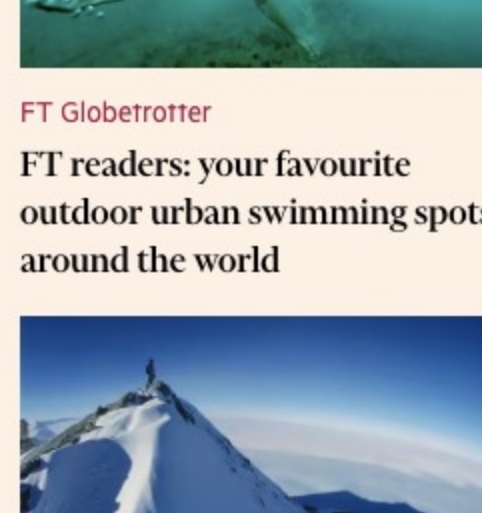
Latest on Travel



FT Magazine Simon Kuper
How will climate change affect the holiday map?



How To Spend It In...
A surf-lover's guide to Cornwall



FT Globetrotter
FT readers: your favourite outdoor urban swimming spots around the world



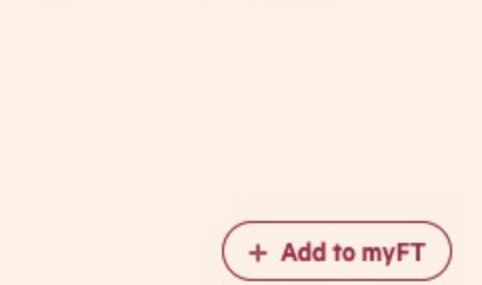
FT Globetrotter
A guide to the best Japanese restaurants in our cities



FT Globetrotter
A twirl around New York's cocktail scene with master mixologist Leo Robitschek



Travelists
Five summer beach clubs to book now



The Weekend Essay
Extreme tourism: "If it was safe, that's not an adventure"



Travel
The Norwegian island at the end of the road

Follow the topics in this article

Life & Arts

+ Add to myFT