

Reeves's over dogs in Brittany



Gucci pheasants on a designer shoot – there's nothing rough about *La chasse devant soi* at Château du Val. Though there is a naughty gundog

WRITTEN BY JANET MENZIES ♦ PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH FARNSWORTH

The French have no word for anything as un-chic as “rough shooting”. The nearest they get is the phrase “*la chasse devant soi*” that, literally, translates as “the hunt in front of you” – in other words, walked-up. If this prompts thoughts of sweaty days stomping over grouse moors in midge-infested tweeds pursuing the four elderly cock birds known to be on the estate, relax. At Château du Val on the south of the Brittany peninsula not far from Rennes, your hosts, Jas and Jocelyn Saini, have nothing so rough in mind.

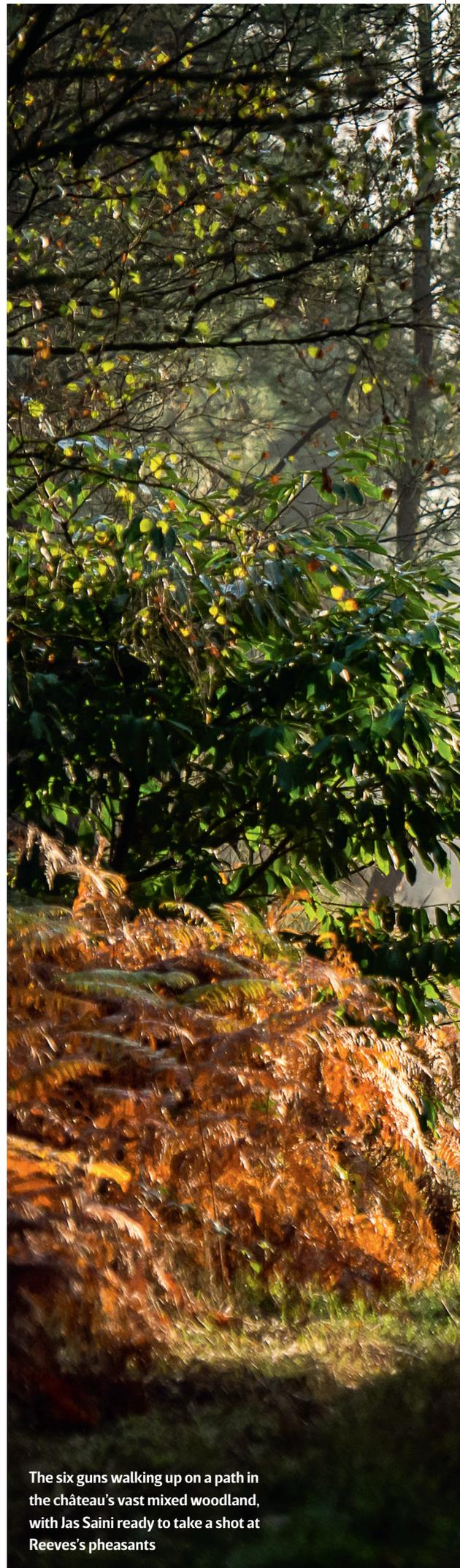
What you will find at Château du Val is designer shooting of the coolest kind. For starters, your quarry is mainly the Reeves's pheasant. If a pheasant were to be created by the Gucci fashion house, this is what it would look like: keynote golden plumage, tastefully highlighted in black and white, with an extravagantly long tail suitable for accessorising any Ascot outfit. Reeves's are not popular in England because they are aggressive birds, refusing to fly when driven

and attacking gamekeepers and other pheasants at every opportunity. It is also illegal to release them for sporting purposes in the UK though you might see escapees on some estates. Otherwise, you are unlikely to see them on a shooting date here.

FLEXIBLE ATTITUDE

In Europe, driven shooting is less prevalent and there is a rather more flexible attitude towards the sport. A certain *je ne sais quoi* is inherent in the day's shooting that makes the size of the bag and the height of the birds seem irrelevant. This was certainly the case at Château du Val. From the start of the adventure over Continental breakfast in the Gothic château's undercroft to the next day cruising around the gorgeous La Roche-Bernard on Brittany's coast looking for Sunday lunch, the *après chasse* made the whole thing feel like an early autumn holiday.

But before the tourism, the shooting. Six guns gathered in front of the château on a misty morning to be instructed on the format of the day. Four were experienced locals but our host, Jas Saini, talked us through →



The six guns walking up on a path in the château's vast mixed woodland, with Jas Saini ready to take a shot at Reeves's pheasants



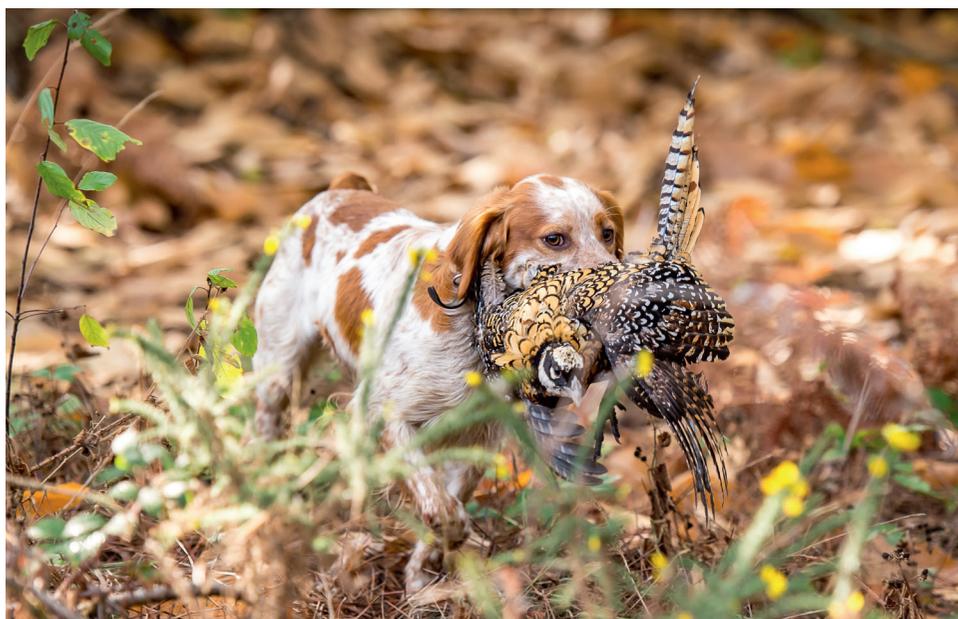
the format and safety. We would be shooting over pointers, with the Reeves's and also partridges as our main quarry. Ring-neck pheasants were off the menu, as Saini is trying to establish a wild population, but woodcock were on the quarry list, though it was a little early in the autumn to come across many. We would be shooting in the château's 300 acres of natural mixed woodland and rare lowland heath habitat. Given the trees and terrain, safety was vital and orange bibs a legal requirement. Our dog handlers, Alain le Tort and Cedric Marand, introduced themselves and off we strolled. Shafts of early autumn sunshine filtered through the mist in the Hollywood version of France, illuminating a sandy forest floor thick with bracken, gorse and heather – a little like the New Forest or Surrey Heath.

MISSING CANDI

Walking in pairs behind the dogs reminded me a lot of shooting over my own dogs. And, yes, sure enough, Marand was soon to be heard shouting across to the keeper, Michel Heligon: "*Michel, tu as Candi?*" Candi is Marand's love/hate favourite pointer, a Griffon Korthals, and "*tu as Candi*" roughly translates as: "I hope he's with you because I haven't seen him for at least 10 minutes." As it turned out, not only did Heligon not have Candi but Candi was off in the middle distance hunting possibly a hare or deer. Ah, pleasant nostalgia for all the seasons on the grouse moor I have spent shouting: "Get back here, Dutch. Has anyone seen him?" It turns out French and English shooting do have some things in common.

While Candi was being hauled back into line, we walked behind Marand's other pointer, Jali, appropriately enough a Brittany spaniel. It was wonderful to watch these unusual and traditional breeds working the forest they have hunted for centuries – like a living version of the medieval tapestries of the hunt of the Emperor Maximilian. Pretty soon Jali went on point, backed up by the prodigal Candi. Heligon called: "*Arret*" – the command to point. We stopped obediently and Heligon ushered us forward 30 metres or so as the two dogs lowered their noses. A Reeves's suddenly burst up in front of us, flying vertically into the tree canopy a lot faster than expected. Everybody missed. Even our photographer found the bird too quick to lay a lens on. While it is true that Reeves's are too big and encumbered by their dramatic plumage to fly well for any distance, we shouldn't overlook the fact that they can fly exceptionally in brief bursts – certainly well enough to get the better of three guns.

We carried on with the dogs well settled and working beautifully, taking in large arcs





of ground up to about 50 metres in front of us and dropping down into any scent they found. For the next point we were much more alert and the bird was shot, giving us the opportunity to admire its trademark tail. As we moved on again, picking our way through brambles and white grass, one of the guns, Hervé Bureau, a neighbouring château-owner, commented: “The dogs are half the hunt. I love to watch the dogs on point and when they have all come onto a point and you can follow the line of their noses to where the bird is. That is so satisfying. Actually shooting the bird feels less important.” For those who haven’t shot over dogs, this sums up the special buzz of working with pointers or spaniels, which for many is just as exciting as driven shooting.

With a double flush coming up quite quickly, our team of guns was beginning to get into the swing – literally. As the sun burnt off the last of the mist we stopped for a break, refreshing ourselves with a local version of

Marc de Calvados and fresh baguettes with cheese, which the dogs shared. The guns enjoyed working so closely with the dog handlers, Marand and le Tort, and there was a sense of teamwork and camaraderie that is sometimes missing from larger and more formal shoots. Marand and I spent a lot of the afternoon exchanging anecdotes about our best and worst dog moments in a specially adapted form of Franglais.

STARTING THE SHOOT

Saini explained how the shoot came together: “I’m English and I’ve arrived here in Brittany by an unusual route. My family were in India/Pakistan at the time of partition and my father had a difficult time trying to get us all out. We ended up in England with very little and worked up from there. When I sold my company successfully, my wife, Jocelyn, and I fell in love with Château du Val and the whole of this part of southern Brittany. There is plenty of rough shooting in

Above: Sophie Bureau, who lives in the neighbouring château. Left, from top: Roland Nilsson scanning the woodland; retrieving a hen bird; a pheasant skims the trees

the area. In France there are laws governing how the shooting works. If you own less than seven hectares, you have to put the shooting rights into the local commune and everybody in the commune is allowed to shoot on it. Here, we have more than 100 hectares, so we are allowed to develop it privately – although there is still a local feeling that it’s OK to come and shoot on it.

“Jocelyn’s father has a shoot in England, so he came over and worked closely with our keeper, Michel Heligon, to start the shoot from scratch. We’ve had a lot to learn, adapting English techniques to the way things are done in France. I think we are beginning to get there now, although there is always a lot to work on. Using a release pen has been a learning curve. We were getting too much predation at first, with the Reeves’s being very ground-based. So we introduced a pen but the French laws on rearing and releasing gamebirds are different and we have had to work with the local authorities to reach a →

“The dogs are half the hunt. I love to watch the dogs on point”



From top: Roland Nilsson and his wife, Sophie Bureau and keeper Michel Heligon; guns shot over pointers; guns had to be ready at all time

compromise. I think it is working though and I'm really hopeful that we are establishing a good wild bird population, too. We can also offer duck shooting on the lake, so it is a good mix. Another advantage is that Sunday shooting is allowed in France, which means that people coming over for the weekend can get an extra day in."

A FEAST AND FOLK SONGS

By now it was time to circle back round to the château for *un repas*. And what a large feast. I checked my watch as we wandered back to the château and discovered we had already walked nearly 10 kilometres. Perhaps still not quite enough to burn off the cassoulet, tarte tartin, wine, fruit, more cheese and... Meanwhile, Marand had disappeared, not in search of Candi this time but to get his wife and their accordions. Over lunch they entertained us with local Brittany folk songs, which turned out to be familiar. This north-western coast of France has much in common with Cornwall.

Saini agrees with this: "I think for English shooting clients, Brittany is a great destination. Of course it is a holiday setting, and it is so quick and simple to get to. Another big advantage is that it is much easier to bring your shotguns over with you on the ferry, sailing into St Malo or Cherbourg, if you don't want the hassle of getting them through airport security."

Unable to eat even one more grape, we set out again, this time taking in a loop of more open ground below the château. By now it was unseasonably hot, making scenting conditions difficult for the dogs. We worked our way back into the cooler cover of the woods and the dogs were able to provide some more flushes, though the guns still found it hard to adjust to the speed of the Reeves's upward bursts of flight.

Heligon explained: "It takes a while for the cock birds to develop the really long tails that look so dramatic. The younger ones have a tail of about 60 centimetres but then they will grow on to more than a metre. I have noticed when we have guests who haven't shot these birds before, they can be taken by surprise, because the birds are more challenging than you would think."

By the time my watch had registered 13 kilometres, we decided to head back to the cool of the château. We had enough birds in the bag but, ultimately, the Reeves's hadn't had to take us as seriously as we would now be taking them. ■

At Château du Val, 35550 Saint Just, near Nantes, France, Jas and Jocelyn Saini offer tailor-made shooting holidays based at the château. For more details, call them on +41 79 948 5222 or go to: www.chateauval.com