



Looking for the perfect hideaway this Valentine's Day? Whisk your loved one off to one of these gorgeous French hotels and make it a trip to remember



### HUSH-HUSH HIDEAWAY

Jardins Secrets, Nîmes, Provence

As we're buzzed through a plain, grey door, what greets us feels little short of magical. Jardins Secrets is not so much a hotel as a beautiful private house that, since 2005, has allowed members of the public to pay for the privilege of staying there. And it really

is a privilege. Boutique-hotel lovers everywhere should salute Christophe and Annabelle Valentin for opening up their family home and garden. On the edge of the ancient town centre of Nîmes, this pink-hued 17th-century city villa has just four guest rooms.

The garden is what blows us away first. It banishes our mental cobwebs and ignites our enthusiasm from the moment we enter through that unremarkable gate. Rich, lush, colourful, it is full of olive trees, giant palms and bougainvillea.

The rooms are large, luxurious and decorated with impeccably chic French taste. Elegantly shabby antiques sit alongside polished modern pieces. There are thick, heavy drapes hanging next to delicate, decorative writing tables; we have a shiny new widescreen TV and a stunning, spacious old-fashioned bathroom. Each room is individually decorated and furnished, and all have double doors which open out on to the garden. The communal areas of the house are littered with books, photographs, musical paraphernalia and aviaries full of tiny singing birds.

Thankfully, there is no restaurant at

Jardins Secrets (though they offer one or two special dishes), otherwise we might never venture beyond our cossetting cocoon. We manage to poke our noses around Nîmes itself, heading for the Old City, a five-minute walk from the hotel. It is studded with Roman relics, including the huge and intact Les Arènes amphitheatre and La Maison Carrée—a grand first-century temple. There is a distinctly Spanish-tinged feel to this Mediterranean region—in its food, its fondness for flamenco and bullfighting, its relaxed but upbeat air.

Jardins Secrets is a hush-hush hideaway where we are made to feel welcome, but are left undisturbed. And thanks to low-cost flights from London, and Christophe happily shuttling us to the airport in less than 15 minutes, a two-day break really has been a two-day break.

Reviewed by William Drew

**Details:** All four of the hotel's rooms (there are more planned) are individually styled, and have views over the garden.  
**Rates:** 190–260€, excluding breakfast.