



FRENCH DRESSING

Lulu Townsend picks out her favourite small yet stylish French hotels

France has more wonderful, small hotels than any other country I have visited – I can't get enough of them. They exude a natural and effortless style, which soon becomes addictive. While some are modern, others are traditional, and quite a few have an enviable shabby-chic style. Not all have restaurants, but the common thread among them is passionate owners who thrive on making their guests happy. Here is just a taster of some of my favourites.

1 La Maison du Paradou, Paradou, Provence

La Maison du Paradou opened its doors in summer 2007 and, with only five glorious rooms, has been almost fully booked ever since. Opinions differ as to which is the best room here, but the biggest of the luxurious limestone bathrooms belongs to Violette. Light lunches can be enjoyed by the pool or under the pergola, and for a long, lazy lunch there is a fantastic bistro just a few minutes' walk away, serving the kind of French food you are always looking for: perfectly ripe cheeses, freshly made tarte Tatin, lamb that falls off the bone and the perfect bottle of red. (A double room costs from €285 per night; www.maisonduparadou.com)

2 Château les Merles, Bergerac, Dordogne

Château Les Merles is one of the countless little hotels in France that are decorated with effortless style yet are still incredibly good value. Here, while you may intend to play tennis or go round the nine-hole golf course, the temptation to sit in the bistro all day, enjoying the delicious food and wine, before heading back to your room for an afternoon snooze, is hard to resist. Bordeaux is an hour away and Bergerac is only 20 minutes. (A double room costs from €120 per night; www.lesmerles.com)

3 Jardins Secrets, Nîmes, Provence

With red clay walls adorned with bougainvillea, Jardins Secrets could easily be mistaken for an Italian villa. A former eighteenth-century inn, the hotel has been restored magnificently by the owners. A recently added cloistered spa and four new suites, all of which are furnished with silks and antiques, add to the romance of the place. The breakfasts here are simple but delicious, with a large choice of home-made jams and pastries. Although dinner is not served as a matter of course, the hotel is very happy to prepare a little something, but don't eat too much as you will find a delicious slice of

home-made chocolate cake waiting for you in your room – the perfect partner for a glass of Champagne. (A double room costs from €195 per night; www.jardinssecrets.net)

4 Château de Saint Paterne, Alençon, Normandy

A mere two hours' drive from Paris and four hours from Calais, this pretty chateau is ideal for families looking for somewhere to stay en route to the west coast of France, or simply for a long weekend away. This is a charming place to stay – each of the rooms has its own style, with something to suit everyone. The Orangerie is the newest and most private room, as it sits in the park just 50 metres from the chateau. The prettiest room in the main house is the Chambre de la Roseraie, which has its own little terrace and an adjoining single room, making it ideal for families. The food is delicious – the owner is the chef – and so it is a shame that lunch is not on offer for those who simply want to laze by the pool. (A double room costs from €135 per night; www.chateau-saintpaterne.com)

5 Le Manoir de l'Étang, Mougins, South of France

Le Manoir de l'Étang is a clever mix of modern Scandinavian design and French charm. Add to this a beautiful setting, delicious Italian food and a mere 20-minute drive from Nice airport, and you have the perfect recipe for an indulgent weekend. Shoppers won't be disappointed, as the picturesque town of Mougins, a few minutes' drive away, is full of pretty shops and galleries. Massages can be arranged and yoga courses and retreats are available in the hotel throughout the year, led by the world-renowned Maya Fiennes. Small dogs with well-behaved owners are accepted. (A double room costs from €200 per night; www.manoir-de-letang.com) □

Lulu Townsend runs a small company, Chic Retreats (tel: 020-7580 2663; www.chicretreats.com), which represents a careful selection of hotels worldwide, all with fewer than 30 rooms. The hotels featured above can all be booked through Chic Retreats



Travel Savvy Southern India has seen the recent launch of its first luxury train, *The Golden Chariot*, which journeys through the state of Karnataka between Bangalore and Goa. Styled in homage to the Maharajas' Palaces of Mysore, the interior is plush and decorative, with 26 twin-bedded cabins, 17 double cabins (all with TVs and DVDs), and two restaurants. There's even a gym and a small Ayurveda centre on board. The week-long journey takes in such sights as Mysore, Kabini, Halebidu, Hampi, Badami and the beaches of Goa. *Western & Oriental Travel* (tel: 0845-277 3355; www.westernoriental.com) is offering a nine-night itinerary (seven on the train and two in Bangalore) from £2,540 per person, including return flights PG □