

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



A wealth of treasures

The new Domaine de Rochebois puts France's Périgord Noir firmly on the must-visit destination map, writes **Rachel Roberts**

You may not be familiar with the Périgord region in France because Périgord is the ancient, still-in-use name for the southwestern Dordogne department.

As the country's third-largest region, it has perhaps the highest concentration of national gems – from time-weathered chateaux and archaeological marvels to troglodyte sites (cliff-carved dwellings), grand gardens and of course, the 480km Dordogne River meandering through its heart.

The Black Périgord area is one of four "colours" of the region, along with green, purple and white, and is just over an hour's drive from Toulouse airport. Luckily, we arrived at our "maison" for the next few days, the Domaine de Rochebois Hotel, located a short distance from Dordogne's medieval capital of Sarlat, at cocktail o'clock. We sipped a "Josephine Baker" inside the decadent, velvet-dipped Art Deco

surrounds of the Josephine Bar. The cocktail is made from a heady mix of cognac, champagne and orange essence and created in tribute to the superstar French-American cabaret dancer, who lived a stone's throw away at Château des Milandes.

If Baker was still alive – she died in 1975 – she would have loved to kick up her heels here, the only hotel in the region to hold the coveted five-star rating. Since being built in 1850, the elegantly imposing honey-hued limestone villa has had a spell as a religious centre, an orphanage and a noble family's residence.

Today's incarnation, co-owned and run by the Pruneyrac brothers (who were born into a Turkish hotel dynasty), boasts 40 luxury rooms and suites featuring décor in the calming

Glitzy A-listers are catered for with a private jet service and four helipads



Drone's eye-view of the Domaine de Rochebois, above; top topiary, main

Périgord colours. Other highlights include a nine-hole golf course set in part of the sprawling 33-acre grounds, an open-air swimming pool in the front of the hotel at the foot of a sweeping grand, balustraded stairway, and panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. But the headline act is the fine-dining experience in M restaurant, where executive chef Jean-Philippe Vecco is fast courting Michelin stars with his gastronomic alchemy.

Vecco has worked alongside industry legends such as Alain Ducasse and we sampled a seven-course tasting menu – five and nine courses are also options. The melt-on-the-tongue langoustine

with watercress cream, enlivened with citrus and wild myrtle, will live long in the memory, as will the dark chocolate dessert, featuring a surprising hit of wild fennel (it works). The lion's share of ingredients is sourced from local producers, such as Wilfred Bardet Bordeaux for exceptional meat and chocolatier Nicolas Berger Choisy-le-Roi, provider of the chocolate used in imaginative ways for our dessert. You can also use the excellent sommelier service to add perfectly paired wines.

Speaking of food, the area is also a go-to destination for truffle (the "noir" in part reflects this delicacy) and foie gras lovers. While the latter may be unpalatable for some, the quaint cobbled streets of Sarlat are lined with delicatessens offering every type under the sun. Thousands of wines are also produced in the Dordogne Valley and are all widely available too.

People also flock from as far as 200km away to rejuvenate at Domaine de Rochebois' 400m² Nuxe Spa, a franchise of the renowned Parisienne brand, which houses a private hammam and an aqua therapy pool. After experiencing a sublime deep-tissue massage with a selected Nuxe

oil, we can vouch for the treatments on offer. And glitzy A-listers are catered for with a private jet service, four helipads and villas with separate quarters for their entourage. Yet the atmosphere is far from intimidating; there's an intimate, relaxed vibe throughout.

As tempting as it was to stay cocooned in the luxury of the venue, we wanted to explore some of the many treasures on the hotel's doorstep. First on our list was a visit to Lascaux IV, International Centre of Cave Art, a perfect replica of the Lascaux cave which four teenagers famously stumbled upon in the 1940s, making one of the century's most important archaeological discoveries in the process.

Today, the more than 600 prehistoric paintings and engravings of animals such as bison, horses and deer, seemingly "dancing" across the cave walls, are housed in a 9,000 sq m complex representing 90 per cent of the original cave.

Thought to have been painted by nomadic ancestors more than 17,000 years ago, their technique of using bird bones to spray ochre and manganese pigments throughout, daubing red dots to mark acoustic sweet spots (apparently, they loved a good old jam – whistles and percussion instruments were found nearby) and the perfect strokes used to depict the creatures all point to a surprisingly evolved and sophisticated society.

We also learnt that one theory about Lascaux's purpose is that it functioned as a sort of shamanic cathedral, where prehistoric believers came to worship and dream – they didn't live there.

A short journey and fast-forward through time took us to La Roque Saint-Christophe and revealed exactly how the so-called troglodytes, or cave-dwellers, of the 16th century lived. Five levels carved out of the sheer cliff face still contain clues such as indentations where timbers were attached for lean-to homes and a sunken baptismal font in the grounds of a small church.

La Roque overlooks the tranquil Vézère river, which flows into the Dordogne river near Le Bugue and offers a bird's eye view of the remarkable landscape. Punctuated with ornate chateaux, swathes of



chestnut fields and rocky outcrops, it could be plucked straight from the pages of a fairytale. We also spied tiny canoes making their way up and down the river – the rivers are a popular tourist route and operators offer packages whereby your luggage is transported to hotels along the way.

We came full circle by ending our trip with a visit to Château des Milandes, where Josephine Baker lived in her "Sleeping Beauty" castle for 30 years. Ahead of her time in many ways – Baker not only became the first African-American woman to star in a motion picture, she refused to perform for segregated audiences in the US – she created the original "rainbow" family long before Angelina Jolie made it a Hollywood thing.

During the 1950s, Baker adopted 12 orphans from all over the world, partly to prove that "human beings of any race could live together". Today, visitors can view some of the children's rooms at Milandes, stroll around the well-kept grounds and see several of Baker's striking stage costumes, including a version of her famous banana skirt.

Of course, the fêted performer was also known for throwing a bash or two in her heyday and if she'd needed extra accommodation for visiting Hollywood glitterati, we're pretty sure that Domaine de Rochebois would have been just the ticket.

Stays at Domaine De Rochebois start at €175 for low season and €375 for high season. Visit www.rochebois.com



A very French bedroom, above, and the elegant pool, top

STAYCATION



When life's a beach house

A swanky coastal rental is the perfect base for a Northumberland break, writes Gaby Soutar

It's safe to say that Northumberland doesn't scrimp on sand. Some of the county's beaches go on for what seems like an eternity. I've never walked along a stretch like the one that runs from Beadnell to Seahouses.

It's so peaceful when there's so much to spare. To misquote The Stranglers, you can walk on the beaches without looking at any peaches. Or at least, not very many, and half of them are furry and belong to dogs.

The perfect base to explore this part of the world has to be Duneside House in Beadnell.

The detached two-storey property sleeps eight people, so the two of us were happily rattling around, like mice in a mansion.

The space felt very contemporary in appropriately coastal whites and blues, with the biggest collection of paperbacks and cookbooks I've seen.

The downstairs is almost entirely open plan, apart from the porch and shower room, and has bifold doors onto the enclosed garden. It also boasts three huge comfy sofas and a dining area with a wooden table to sit ten. I'd want to come here in the winter too, purely to have a shot of the wood-burning stove.

The kitchen has a bar seating area and is so well equipped there's even

a bread maker and an instant water boiling tap. You could host a soiree and invite everyone, including your most distant cousins.

Upstairs, there's a room with a trio of single beds to suit triplets, blind mice or bears, plus a double, a family room (one king-sized bed and a single) and a double en-suite.

We spend a lot of time snoozing, since we're enjoying the comfort and silence, which is only broken by the kerfuffle from local swallows.

The property is a shell's throw from the two-mile-long and horse-shoe-shaped Beadnell Bay. You can explore the harbour that's topped with empty creels and the cavernous 18th-century Beadnell Limekilns, owned by the National Trust.

In the water there are yachts named Bounce and Banjo, alongside kite surfers doing their thing.

You're never too far from the Mr Whippy van, which is parked in the car park, near the popular cocktail bar and restaurant The Landing. For something more substantial, in the older part of the village, there are other places, like The Craster Arms, near St Ebba's Church, or the slightly more upmarket Beadnell Towers.

Inspired by one of the guest book recommendations, we took that hour-long walk to Seahouses,



where you can play fish and chips roulette. There are too many of these purveyors to choose from and there's also the original home of kippers, Swallow Fish.

After lunch, if you can stomach a boat tour out to the Farne Islands to see the puffins, you've earned your sea legs.

We did something less challenging and visited The Alnwick Garden, which is like a modern version of the ones at Versailles, with dancing fountains and swings among a cherry blossom orchard.

In these recently revived grounds, they also have the less romantic Poison Garden, with a skull and

You're never far from the Mr Whippy van, which is parked in the car park

crossbones on its gates. There are regular tours around this attraction, and you can learn more about familiar plants, like the laburnum, cuckoo's pint, nettles or cannabis, but also common rue, which can cause third degree burns.

We were most scared of the deadly ricin, which is produced by the castor oil plant. It was used to assassinate Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in 1978, when a poisoned pellet was fired into his leg from an adapted umbrella. I remind myself to wear

Clockwise from main: the beach at Beadnell Bay; Duneside House; the spacious interior

thick gardening gloves next time I'm doing any pruning.

As well as beaches and gardens, Northumberland has castles galore. We snubbed Alnwick and Dunstanburgh in favour of Bamburgh, which is dramatically perched on a promontory.

Although its earliest recorded history dates back to 547AD, industrialist William George Armstrong bought it in 1894 and stuffed it with treasures. The armoury is probably more typical of this style of building, but I enjoyed the ceramics, and oil portraits of residents past. There's also an opportunity to check out the old dungeon and scullery, either of which I'd be relegated to, back in the day.

Anyway, even their grand kitchen can't measure up to the one at Duneside. It's our own castle for the weekend.

7 nights at Duneside House, Beadnell, Northumberland (sleeps 8) available through Crabtree & Crabtree from £1,646. 3 nights from £1,316, see www.crabtreeandcrabtree.com
Adult admission to The Alnwick Garden is £18, www.alnwickgarden.com
Adult admission to Bamburgh Castle is £15.50, www.bamburghcastle.com

WORLD WATCH

Sea how to help oceans when you go on holiday

Katie Wright outlines the steps you can take to minimise your impact on delicate marine ecosystems

From swimming and snorkelling to watersports and boat trips, oceans can be a source of joy and wonder on holiday.

But if you're not careful, it's easy to harm the delicate ecosystems that exist below the waves – and contribute to climate change.

"Protecting the oceans is crucial for the health and wellbeing of our planet," says Santi Mier, co-founder of Ocean52, a beverage company that donates 52 per cent of its profits to ocean protection. "They play a vital role in regulating the Earth's climate by absorbing a significant amount of carbon dioxide, thereby mitigating the impacts of climate change. Moreover, oceans are a source of food and livelihood for millions of people worldwide, and degradation can have severe consequences for coastal communities."

That's why it's important to make sure you minimise your impact in terms of plastic, pollution and sealife. Here's how to protect oceans when you're on holiday...

Use reef-safe sunscreen
"In 2018, Hawaii became the first nation to ban suncreams containing oxybenzone and octinoxate after scientists found these chemicals were harmful to ocean fauna," says Jo Royle, founder and CEO of Common Seas, a social enterprise tackling plastic pollution. While many sunblocks are labelled 'reef-safe' or 'reef-friendly', these terms aren't regulated, so it's important to check the ingredients list. Royle says: "Look for suncreams that contain active ingredients: zinc oxide and titanium. These physical UVB and UVA filters shield the skin from absorbing any

rays, whilst keeping ocean life happy."

Don't touch the coral
As well as being affected by chemicals in the water, coral is susceptible to physical stress. "Coral reefs are beautiful and it may be tempting to get close and interact with them for a closer look, but did you know they're actually small creatures in the same family as anemones and jellyfish?" Royle says. "To protect this delicate ecosystem already under threat, be careful not to touch or walk on the ocean floor."

Bring refillable containers
When taking drinks or a picnic to the beach, opt for reusable containers and don't leave any rubbish behind. "Every year 4.2 million tonnes of plastic waste is produced by the tourism industry, and 85 per cent of all marine litter is accounted for by plastic waste," says Royle.

Rob Greenfield, content creator at eco-community Earthtopia, advises: "Fill a reusable bottle with tap water – if safe to do so – and bring it to the beach along with reusable cutlery. If you're worried about tap water quality, try a reusable bottle with a filter in it."

Bin your butts
"If you smoke, make sure you bring a metal tin to the beach to put your cigarette butts in," says Greenfield. "They can take up to ten years to break down and release nasty chemicals like arsenic in the process."

Choose sustainable fish
As with buying fish to eat at home, it's best to avoid species where populations are low or where fishing practices harm other fish. "When eating out or cooking, check where your fish is from by asking the waiter or fishmonger," says Greenfield. "Make sure you only buy local line-caught fish to avoid eating any fish that has been caught using trawlers, which is unsustainable and can kill other marine animals as bycatch, or shipped over a massive distance."



It's fine to swim near a coral reef but don't poke the delicate system