

Travel

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'Who would have thought El Tel would come up with a cool rustic chic hotel?'

Terry Venables opens a boutique hotel in Alicante

Château de Saint Paterne in Normandy (2); below, vineyards in Alsace (3)



The 50 best holidays in France

From fairytale châteaux and chic city breaks to coastal campsites for families, **Carolyn Boyd** picks the best trips for 2015

Best for foodies

1 Gastronomic Lyon

With Eurostar's new direct route to Lyon opening on May 1, and with journey times at just over four and a half hours, it's time to book the train from St Pancras International for a foray to France's foodiest city. Star chef Paul Bocuse has several restaurants here: the three-Michelin-starred L'Auberge du

Pont de Collonges, as well as four brasseries — Le Nord, Le Sud, L'Est and L'Ouest — each offering a different dining experience. Also try the city's famous bouchon restaurants: these traditional taverns serve typical Lyonnaise cuisine, where carnivores will delight in the meaty menus. Stay at Cour des Loges (0033 457 747 474, courdesloges.com), a hotel with its own Michelin-starred restaurant.

Details Eurostar has returns to Lyon from £89 (0343 2186186, eurostar.com)

2 Cookery break in Normandy

The fairytale Château de Saint Paterne in Alençon in Normandy is introducing new cookery-and-sightseeing breaks for this spring and autumn. The charming 15th-century château was once the romantic bolt hole for the French King Henri IV, and is now the family estate of chef Charles-Henry de Valbray, who has taken 20 years to restore it to a sensational standard. This six-day, five-night stay includes two cookery courses, visits to Second World War sites

near Caen, a trip to the Loire Valley, with wine tastings, market and village visits as well as time to enjoy Charles-Henry and his wife Ségolène's heart-warming hospitality.

Details €1,500pp for five nights' B&B, two lunches, two dinners (with aperitif, wine and drinks), guides and tours (00 33 2 33 27 54 71, chateau-saintpaterne.com)

3 Cycle through Alsace

What better way to work up an appetite for Alsace's hearty cuisine than a cycling tour through the region's verdant vineyards? Cycling for Softies' new seven-night gastronomic



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itinerary will have you pedalling along the gentle cycle paths by the river Rhine, exploring medieval villages, enjoying wine-tastings in vineyards, and eating meals in Michelin-starred restaurants. Stay in four-star hotels in Kayserberg, Oberbergen and Sélestat.

Details From £1,624pp, half board, including bike hire and equipment (0161 248 8282, cycling-for-softies.co.uk)

4 Languedoc wines

Raise a toast with the finest wines in the Languedoc-Roussillon region under the expert guidance of top wine journalist Andrew Jefford. Wine tour company Arblaster and Clarke's new trip for 2015 will get you an early dose of southern French sunshine as you travel around the area staying in three and four-star hotels and sampling the corbières, minervois, Pic St Loup, St Chinian and La Clape wines.

Details Five nights including seven meals, visits and tastings costs £1,995pp (01730 263111, winetours.co.uk)

5 Foodie Vendée

Le Manoir du Moulin, a luxury B&B in the Vendée, has a bounty of foodie experiences on offer for 2015. Try its "chef experience" and learn from the top local chefs who are invited to demonstrate their knowhow in front of groups of four to six while they prepare a gastronomic three-course meal. Or check into the new gîte — opening spring 2015, sleeping up to six — and relax in the beautiful grounds while a gourmet barbecue is prepared.

Details Chef nights are from €55 based on a minimum of four people, BBQ d'hôte from €20pp. Suites from €130, gîte costs €1,600 per week (00 33 626 972 412, manoirdumoulin.com)

6 Bordeaux vineyards

Gastronomes are in for a treat if they check into Château Cordeillan-Bages for its two-night kitchen discovery package. The Relais & Châteaux property nestles among vineyards near the Gironde estuary north of Bordeaux. It is the domaine of two-Michelin-star chef

Jean-Luc Rocha, who has also just been awarded a fourth chef's hat by the Gault & Millau 2015 restaurant guide (five is the top). Rocha will give you an exclusive peek behind the scenes of his kitchen and let you into the secrets of his world-class cuisine with a special mini-demonstration. The two-night stay includes a tour of the château's wine-making facilities, followed by an introductory wine-making course at Cercle Lynch-Bages.

Details A package for two costs £1,402



and includes the above experiences and two nights with breakfast, dinner in the restaurant and one dinner or lunch in the Café Lavinal bistro in Bages (00 33 556 592 424, cordeillanbages.com)

7 Wine hotel in Languedoc-Roussillon

Wine lovers will adore a stay at Hotel Riberach in Bèlèsta in Languedoc-Roussillon. This former wine cooperative has been transformed into a chic hotel-cum-wine cellar by its architect owners, with industrial-style decor, fantastic views and many of the bedrooms in the former wine cellars. Its restaurant is run by Laurent Lemal, who was a runner-up in the prestigious competition Meilleur Ouvrier de France.

Details Double rooms are from €130 (00 33 468 503 010, chateauxhotels.com)

Best new places to stay

8 Provence vineyard

The Clos de l'Ours guesthouse, set in the heart of a vineyard close to the Gorges du Verdon, only opened last summer, but has already gained many fans. Furnished in a modern style with a mix of natural materials, its rooms are spacious and each enjoys wonderful views of the vines and surrounding countryside. Fabienne and Michel Brotons are welcoming hosts, and the domaine is the perfect place to switch off from the world.

Details Doubles from €150 (00 33 494 047 769, chateauxhotels.com)

9 Loire manor

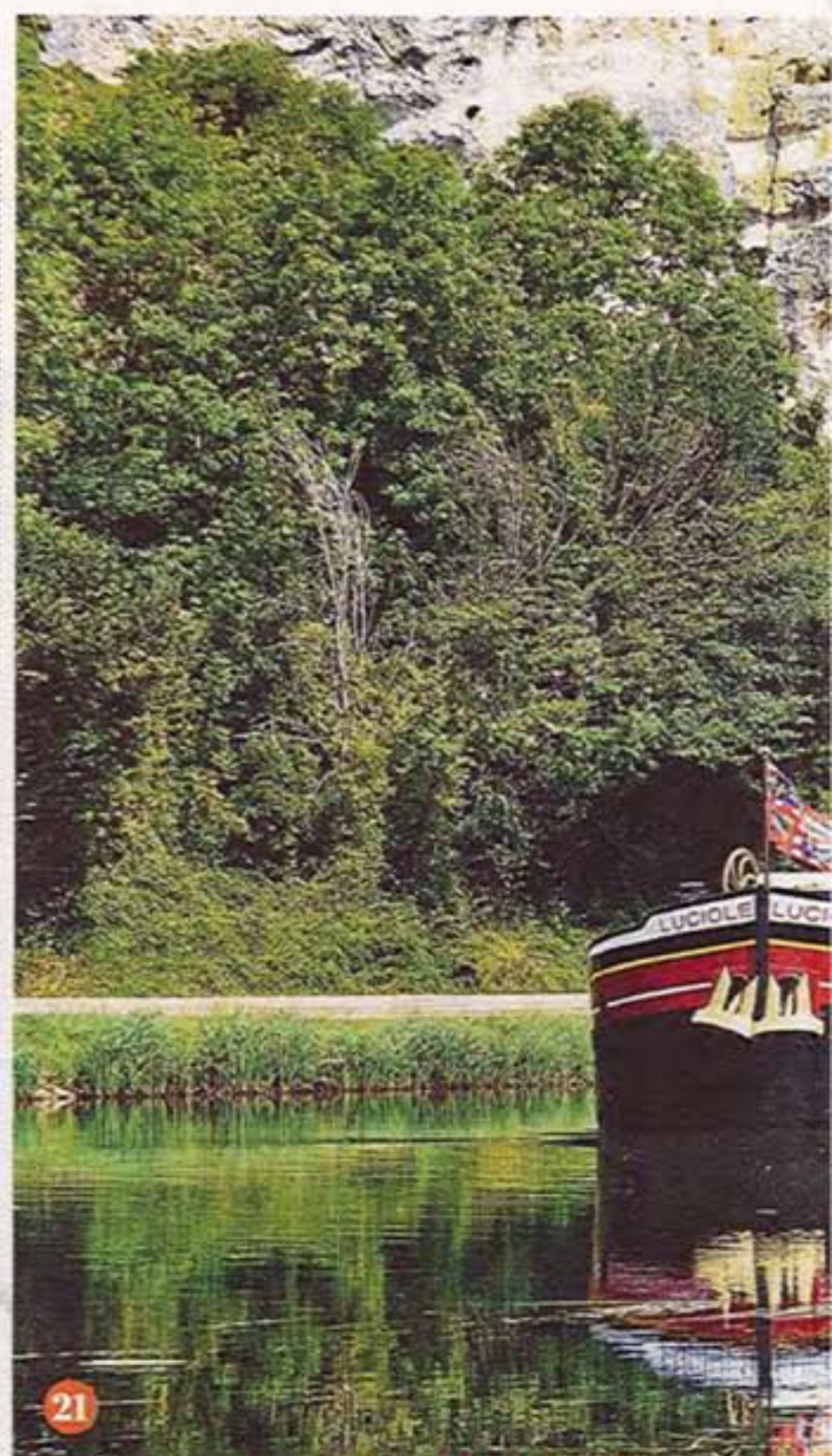
Winner of the 2014 Alastair Sawday's award for best self-catering property, the Clos des Capucins manor house is a great place for a family get-together, with some good additions for wine lovers. Surrounded by gardens and a 15-hectare biodynamic vineyard run by Fiona Beeston, the wine journalist and author, the property sleeps up to ten people and has spectacular views of Château de Chinon, which was once the residence of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Details A week for ten is from €2,200 (00 33 247 976 582, sawdays.co.uk)

10 Grand dame of Paris

Later this year, the Hôtel de Crillon, one of the grandes dames of the French hotel world, is reopening after a chic two-year renovation. The highlight is that Karl Lagerfeld has been called upon to bring his signature style to the historic hotel, built in 1758, by designing two suites. Now part of the Rosewood Hotels and Resorts group, the Hôtel de Crillon was built as a private residence at King Louis XV's behest and first opened as a hotel in 1909. Also reopening next year is the Ritz, after a chic two-year renovation.

Details Room rates are yet to be set (00 33 144 711 500, crillon.com)



11 Sofitel Paris

For those whose budget won't quite stretch to the Crillon or the Ritz, the newly refurbished Sofitel in the fashionable Faubourg St Honoré district of Paris, has chic style without the price tag. The 147 new-look bedrooms, lobby and bars — the creation of top interior designer Didier Gomez — opened late last year, and the restaurant will launch in early March.

Details Double rooms are from £245 per night (00 33 144 941 414, sofitel.com)

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12 Chic stay in Arles

This hotel opened quietly in 2014 after being revamped by Christian Lacroix, who is from Arles. It's in a former 17th-century convent, with 52 rooms, a gourmet restaurant and a heated pool by cloistered gardens. The style is flamboyant, with bold patterned wallpaper and striking colours.

Details Doubles are from £120 (0871 6630624, mgallery.com)

13 Midi-Pyrenees lodges

This new holiday village in the heart of the Midi-Pyrenees region aims to offer high-end luxury that is also eco-friendly. Opening in April, its six four-star lodges will offer a kitchen-cum-living area, two en-suite bedrooms and a terrace, making it ideal for family holidays. On the rest of the site, there is a spa and a heated pool, fitness room, children's play areas and numerous activities. Book now for a 30 per cent reduction on weekly stays.

Details From €350 for a week in low season (00 33 623 865 203, domainedemassoulac.com)

14 Montpellier spa

With the recent addition of a second swimming pool and newly expanded spa area, the stylish Domaine de Verchant just outside Montpellier makes for a great city-break destination, where relaxation is on the menu, too. Taste the estate's own wines, stroll around the gardens or use the spa where there is a hammam, indoor heated pool and treatments available. Couples can book the private area and have the steam room, balneotherapy bath and terrace to themselves.

Details Rooms from £133.92 per night (0330 1003180, mrandmrsmith.com)

15 Burgundy boat houses

The latest glamping trend is the Toue cabanée, a kind of gypsy caravan on water. These distinctive wooden boats originated in the Loire valley in the 17th century and now make a great base for those who fancy a few nights on gentle waterways throughout France. One of their newest locations is on the Burgundy-Auvergne border, where 12 boats have become a Village Toue, at the Domaine des Demoiselles.

Details A week for up to five costs €592 (00 33 385 537 660, village-toue.fr)

Best for families

16 Stay at the zoo, Maine-et-Loire

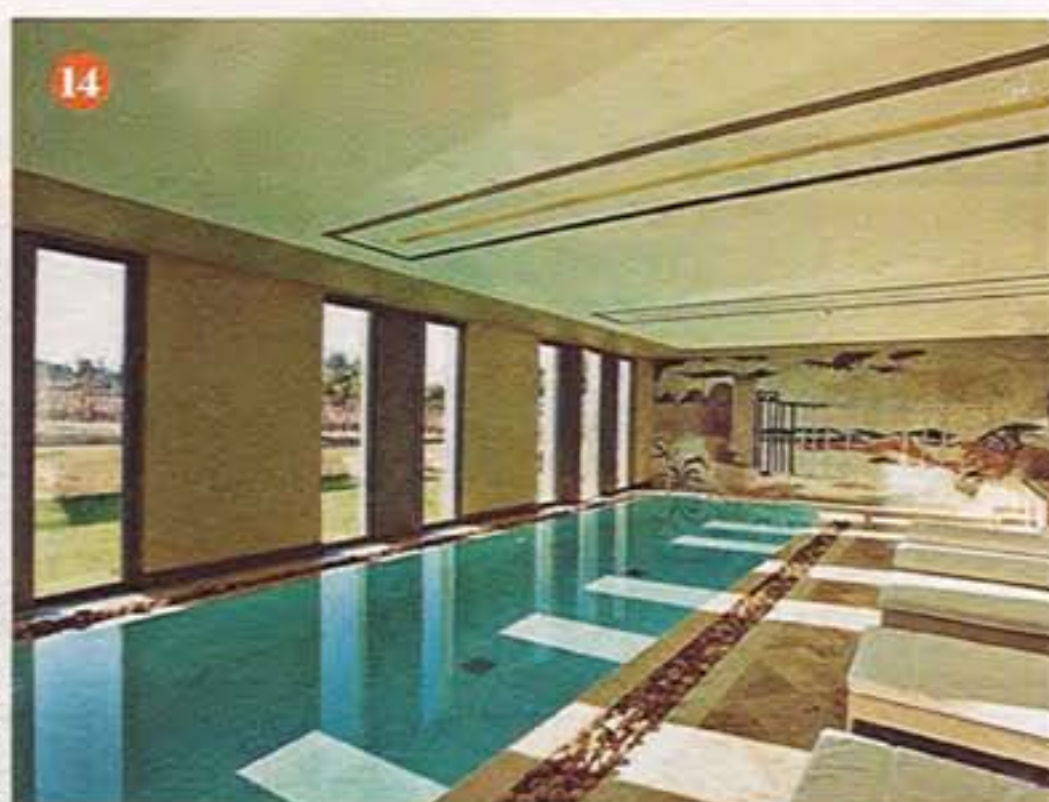
At Zoo de la Flèche, between Angers and Le Mans, the specially created luxury lodges have windows looking directly



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14

into the animals' enclosures. Choose between a night with wolves, white tiger, lemurs or, new for 2015, a villa next to the polar bears' pool. The lodges and villas are beautifully decorated, and evening meals are provided.

Details From €115pp half board (00 33 243 481 914, safari-lodge.fr)

17 Château in Provence

Let your children indulge their fairytale fantasies by staying at your very own château. The tower has a brand new kids' dormitory and crash pad, packed with books and toys for keeping the little ones entertained while parents relax.

The imposing 16th-century Château Aubenas is based near the pretty medieval village of Forcalquier. **Details** A week's stay for up to 12 in five bedrooms costs from £2,880 to £5,755 per week (020 7563 7903, cvvillas.com)

18 Farm fun in Lorraine

The family of rustic glamping sites known as Featherdown Farm (or its French name, Un Lit au Pré — a bed in a meadow) has a new site in the eastern region of Lorraine. At Le Domaine du Cloître Saint-Christophe, you will be sleeping in a spacious, well-equipped tent warmed by a wood-burning stove. The site is in a medieval monastery dating from 707, at the heart of a forest close to the River Meuse. The Dutch hosts, Savine and Pieter Priester, run a stud farm and breed beautiful Friesian horses that you can ride.

Details A mid-week stay for three nights costs from €399 for six (01420 80804, featherdown.co.uk)

19 Boutique retreat in Aveyron

If you want a family holiday that makes you feel like you're at a luxury hotel, where the kids are entertained and the parents can relax and indulge in great food and wine, then the Mas de Jouas is the place. For 2015, its seven-night packages include your stay in one of the three luxury suites, each with adjoining children's room, six evening meals for children and five gourmet meals for adults, plus babysitting for one night. It also provides all the baby and child equipment you could possibly need.

Details Seven nights costs from €1,650 for two adults and two children (00 33 565 811 268, masdejouas.com)

20 B&B in Limousin

The beautiful Château Ribagnac family-friendly B&B is set in 35 hectares of parkland. Youngsters will love the nature trails, outdoor games, fishing and the



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new swimming pool. Parents will appreciate the elegant decor, excellent food and separate mealtimes. Franco-British hosts Patrick and Colette Bergot, whose renovation of the once-dilapidated château featured in the Channel Four series *No Going Back*, have everything on hand for a relaxing stay. **Details** Half-board stays cost from €180 per night (00 33 555 397 791, chateauribagnac.com)

21 Barging in Burgundy

Round up the family for a week aboard the lovely *Luciole* luxury barge in Burgundy. For youngsters, there's cave climbing, horse riding, canoeing, tree zip-lining, paint balling and go-karting. For parents there's the chance to sit back and enjoy the tranquillity, superb meals and wine tasting. The barge sleeps 14, and can be booked by the cabin.

Details The toue cabanée barge in Burgundy is from €90 per night for up to five (01625 576880, bargeluciole.com)

22 Cycle the Loire

For a laid-back ride through the magnificent château country, book on to InnTravel's new family cycling package. From the Loire to the Cher. This six-night, self-guided trip, with B&B, will have you pedalling past stately châteaux, through the beautiful town of Amboise, and on towards the River Cher. The gentle day-long itineraries are ideal for families wanting to go at a slower pace, with picnics, canoe trips, cave visits and afternoons by the pool all on offer.

Details From £2,395 for six nights' B&B for a family of four, including two dinners, luggage transfers, maps and bicycle hire. Flights and transfers are extra (01653 617001, inntravel.co.uk)

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Best for camping

23 Burgundy Hobbit house

At the Domaine de la Pierre Ronde, a glamping site with treehouses, yurts, teepees and gypsy caravans in the heart of the Morvan natural park, a French couple have recreated Tolkien's vision for Bilbo Baggins's lodgings. Under a grassy knoll, it comes complete with round red door, stone walls and a tree trunk in the centre, and sleeps four. Sheepskins and blankets add to the cosiness, making it a great bolthole after expeditions through



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Middle-earth. There are mountain bikes, fishing and boating and donkeys to ride.

Details From £117 a week (00 33 699 093 021, domainedelapierre ronde.com)

24 Camp in Brittany

Check into Eurocamp's new Avant holiday home accommodation at the Domaine des Ormes and you will never want to camp in a tent again. The new mobile homes have outside decking, large bedrooms, an iPod dock, full-size fridge-freezer, gas barbecue, hairdryer and black-out blinds. The campsite is in 400 acres of wooded park land and is a fantastic destination for families, with a great swimming pool complex, and lake for watersports.

Details A seven-night break from May 16 in a two-bedroom Avant holiday home costs from £441 (0844 3348398, eurocamp.co.uk)

25 Sleep in a cow in Burgundy

This four-metre by ten-metre wooden cow (yes, a cow) offers accommodation for up to nine people in four dinky rooms and two hammocks. It is decorated with all manner of bovine-inspired furnishings and decor, and there is also a kitchenette, a bathroom and a terrace on the roof. The Vache Ecolodge is the latest addition to the Diverti'Parc, which also offers accommodation in gypsy caravans, star-gazing cabins and wooden barrel-like pods.

Details £148 on a B&B basis based on two sharing, £12 per additional person (00 33 385 795 908, divertiparc.com)

26 Pitch up near Cannes

A new addition to the excellent Les Castels campsite chain is the Domaine de la Bergerie, a beautiful wooded park between Cannes and Saint-Tropez. Just ten minutes' drive from fine sandy beaches, the five-star site has a range of accommodation, including the "premium" mobile homes with roof terraces and flat-screen TVs. Facilities include the superb pool complex, a fitness centre, and tennis courts.

Details A special "Prêt à Partir" weekend rate for spring or autumn starts at £169 for two nights in a mobile home for up to four people (00 33 498 114 545, domainedelabergerie.fr)

Best for active breaks

27 Cycling in Corsica

Enjoy the dramatic coastline of Corsica on two wheels with Corsican Places' new eight-day cycling trip around the beautiful Cap Corse. Starting and finishing in Bastia, this self-guided trip has you pedalling between top hotels on this peaceful peninsula, enjoying pretty villages, fishing ports and spotting Genoese and Paoline towers dotted along the coast.

Details Seven nights' B&B costs from £1,133pp, with five days' bike rental, and flights (0845 3302059, corsica.co.uk)

28 Chamonix on foot

If you're up for a challenge, then book on to On Foot Holidays' new tour around Mont Blanc, which will have you following in the footsteps of Roman legionnaires, as well as walking through flower-filled meadows, climbing to 3,840m in a cable car and trekking along the breathtaking Grand Balcon Nord. This seven-night tour is not for the fainthearted, but your efforts will be rewarded with sensational views over glaciers, gorges and valleys.



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Details Seven nights' B&B costs from £845pp including evening meals, four picnics, route information and luggage transfers (01722 322652, onfootholidays.co.uk)

29 Cruise the Midi

Climb aboard a river cruiser for an activity holiday that also gives you plenty of time to relax. Nicols Boating has a new base opening on the Canal du Midi at Port Lauragais this year, and its two-night or seven-day trips will have you pulling on ropes and jumping on to canal banks while you negotiate the locks, not to mention cycling along the tow path. Make stops at Carcassonne en route to Toulouse, or try cassoulet in Castelnaudary.

Details Two-night weekend breaks cost from £369 and a week costs from £737 for a three-cabin boat that sleeps six people (02392 401320, boat-renting-nicols.co.uk)

30 Snowshoe in the Jura

The lovely La Chandoline lodge in the heart of the Jura mountains is now combining two of its most popular activities — snowshoeing and watercolour painting. The seven-day, six-night trip combines indoor and outdoor sessions and will open your eyes to different artistic techniques, not to mention a stunning landscape.

Details Seven days, six nights and five days of watercolour and snowshoeing, full board, including shoes and poles, costs from £480 (00 33 384 412 693, lachandoline.com)

31 Mountain highs in Chamonix

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the "golden age of mountaineering" the



resort of Chamonix is hosting several events and exhibitions. More intrepid visitors can follow in the footsteps of the original mountaineers; those who like to take things a little easier can take the heritage and photo walks on offer. **Details** See 1865.chamonix.fr or chamonix.com for details of the events. Collineige has a number of luxury serviced chalets in the area, costing from £635 for a week for two adults and two children (01483 579242, collineige.com)

32 Amble in Alsace

Head into the pretty Vosges mountains in Alsace for a peaceful walking holiday, based at the Hôtel Villa Rosa in Trois-Epis. This lovely little hotel is run by the welcoming Anne-Rose, who grows the fruit, vegetables and flowers and uses them in dishes for her convivial tables d'hôtes evenings, the perfect way to end a day of exploring the many walking trails in the surrounding mountains.

Details Doubles rooms are from €64 (00 33 389 498 119, villarosa.fr), regional information at tourisme-alsace.com

33 Walking near Calvi

Strap on your walking boots for HF Holidays's walking package in Corsica, which takes in some of the most beautiful parts of the island. Choose from itineraries that cover sections of the famous GR20 trail, the breathtaking Balagne area, glittering coastal paths and the historic town of Calvi. The company is now offering flights into Calvi from Stansted or Manchester, which means a short



transfer to the Grand Hôtel Calvi, with its excellent panoramic restaurant, Celu Mare.

Details Seven nights' half board costs £1,024pp including flights (0345 4708558, hfhholidays.co.uk)

Best for special interest

34 Photography near Carcassonne

Brush up your photography skills with expert help at a beautiful country house close to Carcassonne. Your tutors will be Marianne Niermans, a former television journalist, and the international press photographer Christophe Loviny, who are offering four-day workshops — in English — at Niermans's 18th-century house set in five acres of beautiful grounds. Stay in an apartment for four in the house or in a self-catering cottage in the grounds (which sleeps eight in four bedrooms).

Details Seven nights in the apartment (property reference 215438) costs £1,095 in May. The cottage (reference 215437) costs £1,095 in May or £1,295 in June (cheznous.com)

35 Drive a 2CV in the Dordogne

What can be more French than pootling through the Dordogne behind the wheel of a Citroën 2CV? The Snail's Pace holiday, from Cross Channel Sports Cars, offers a stay in a lovely rustic gîte, or even a gypsy caravan, along with the hire of a Dolly 2CV.

Details A week in a gîte, sleeping up to six costs from £990, including car hire. Airport transfers are extra (00 33 563 945 831, ccspportscars.co.uk)



36 Le Mont by balloon

Mont Saint-Michel becomes an island again this year following a 20-year project to remove the man-made causeway. One hotel with an excellent vantage point is Le Manoir de la Roche Torin, outside the village of Courtils, which offers a special package that includes a hot air balloon ride. Alternatively, take part in a special nocturnal tour of the medieval streets and abbey during July and August.

Details Three nights' B&B in a double room with bay view, with balloon ride and glass of champagne, costs £1,480 for two people (00 33 233 709 655, manoir-rochetorin.com). More information on access and tours at monuments-nationaux.fr

37 Flowers of the Riviera

Spend eight days enjoying the nature of the French and Italian Rivières with Naturetrek's new holiday that hops between the two countries. The Maritime Alps span the border and the combination of the altitude and different geology makes it the perfect home for a huge variety of plant life. You walk between 4 and 14km a day, exploring the amazing floral biodiversity.

Details the one-week trip from July 8 costs £1,395, with full board but not flights (01962 733051, naturetrek.co.uk)

38 Spa and slim in Aquitaine

The Prés d'Eugénie hotel in Eugénie-les-Bains was once a favourite spot of Empress Eugénie, the wife of Napoleon III. The Relais & Châteaux hotel that now occupies her former residence has a top-class spa. As the owner of the hotel is the three-Michelin-star chef Michel Guérard, who specialises in cuisine minceur (slimming cuisine), the hotel is also the ideal destination for those wanting to enjoy good food without piling on the pounds.

Details A three-night package with slimming cuisine and one meal at the three Michelin-star restaurant, as well as nine thermal treatments at the spa costs £1,125 (00 33 558 050 607, relaischateaux.com/guerard)

39 Classic cars in Cognac

Drive through the countryside between Le Mans and Charente, bound for cognac country. Classic GT tours can organise bespoke tours in their classic and modern cars — choose from Citroën 2CV, MG B or Mazda MX5, or upgrade to a Lotus Elan, Citroën ID 19, MG C or Mercedes 220CE Coupé. Stay in a charming chambre d'hôtes or a gîte.

Details From £775 for four to six nights, including transfers, two or three nights' half board at each place and car rental (01483 281282, classicgt.co.uk)

40 Cruise the Loire

New to the CroisiEurope range of river cruises is the Loire Royal Legacy trip, which cruises from the coast at Saint-Nazaire to the vibrant city of Nantes and on towards Angers and the Loire Valley châteaux, before returning via Saumur. The eight-day holiday offers plenty of interesting excursions, including a visit to the Guérande salt marshes, Château d'Ussé — which inspired *Sleeping Beauty* — and muscadet wine villages.

Details Eight days are from £1,329pp, including all meals, some alcoholic and other drinks, and excursions to Loire Valley châteaux (020 8328 1281, croisieurope.co.uk)

41 Spa stay in Alsace

Those in need of serious pampering will love the new spa at the Relais & Châteaux hotel Hostellerie La Cheneaudière in Alsace. Though many French spas are fairly clinical in their decor and approach, the warmth of the pine-panelled relaxation rooms, all with spectacular views over the forested Bruche Valley in the Vosges mountains, will set you at ease. Try the wonderful selection of nature-inspired treatments before heading to the hotel's gastronomic restaurant for dinner.

Details The gastronomy-spa package, with afternoon tea, one night's B&B, three-course meal in the restaurant and access to the spa costs from £130pp (00 33 388 976 164, relaischateaux.com)

Best for culture

42 Concerts in Paris

Music lovers won't be able to keep away from the City of Light's jaw-dropping new concert hall, the Philharmonie de Paris, in the Parc de la Villette. Designed by top architect Jean Nouvel, the 52m aluminium and steel-encased building will open in January, and will host the David Bowie exhibition originally at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2013, between March 3 and May 31. Stay at the Hôtel de La Trémouille.

Details Book tickets for Philharmonie de Paris on 00 33 144 844 484, philharmoniedeparis.fr. Hôtel de La Trémouille doubles are from £255 (00 33 156 521 400, tremouille.com) ▶