



Bendor Island, Provence



Royal Beaulaincourt Hotel, Pas de Calais

offers standard hotel stays or custom hiking packages including B&B, picnic lunches and a drop-and-collect service (B&B doubles from £90; [chambresdhotels-bordustard.fr](http://chambresdhotels-bordustard.fr)).

**Details** A night's self-catering for four from £93 ([slow-village.com](http://slow-village.com)). Take the ferry to Roscoff

## Bordeaux beyond the wine

Everyone knows Bordeaux is great for wine buffs with its vine-tangled history, buzzy wine bars and corkscrew-shaped Cité du Vin attraction (£20pp; [lacityduvin.com](http://lacityduvin.com)). Arguably the southwest's most elegant city, it isn't bad, either, for walkers now that its grand

boulevards and medieval lanes have mostly been pedestrianised. What's often overlooked, however, is how family friendly it is. The city's strollable size, acres of green space and child-friendly attractions like the Water Mirror, a play area with a reflective shallow pool and fountains (free; [bordeaux-tourism.co.uk](http://bordeaux-tourism.co.uk)), along with Darwin creative village — a converted barracks with street art, cafés, shops and a skatepark and a lakeside beach (open July and August) — make it a corking destination for all ages. Now, the city also has a chic guesthouse that's great for families: Maison Hubert's five rust and moss-coloured suites each have two bedrooms. Breakfasts can be delivered to your suite, there's a concierge to help tailor-make your stay



Belle-Ile-en-Mer, Brittany

and, if you have young kids and can't face travelling with all the usual clobber, pushchairs, high chairs, baby baths, monitors and a whole lot more are free to borrow. The train from Paris takes two hours.

**Details** One night in a B&B suite for four from £207 ([maisonhubert.com](http://maisonhubert.com)). Fly or take the train to Bordeaux

## Beer and biking in the Ardennes

Some of us may see a beaded glass of some crisp local brew as a fitting reward at the end of a day's exploring. The Lille-based beer tourism agency L'Echappée Bière takes a different tack, encouraging visitors to northern France to design their whole stay around the amber nectar. More cultural odyssey than booze cruise, the beer-focused weekend packages include two nights' accommodation, a self-guided ebike tour, a microbrewery-based escape-room game, two tours and tastings at craft breweries, and a free morning to explore local towns or hike along recommended walking trails. Dinners at local restaurants can be added on. One of the most popular holidays starts and ends in the town of Haybes in the Ardennes region, with accommodation at a homely B&B, Le Clos Belle Rose. Beer tastings take place at the Brasserie Ardennaise de Haybes, a heritage brewery dating from 1870 that reopened as a microbrewery two years ago, and at a rare wood-fired brasserie, Caracole, just across the Belgian border.

**Details** Two nights' B&B from £215pp, or two nights' half-board from £283pp, including activities ([echappee-biere.com](http://echappee-biere.com)). Take the train to Lille

## Stay in an urban oasis in Paris

Away from the peep shows and sleaze that Paris's Pigalle neighbourhood was traditionally known for but is slowly sloughing from its streets is a new arrival, Hôtel Massé — a model of minimalist, mid-century restraint. Opened by the young brother and sister duo Corto and Éole Peyron last September, the hotel's 40 bedrooms are clean-lined, timber-trimmed cocoons, their cappuccino colours and spare style offset by a standout art collection and thoughtful extras, such as chocolates from the local bean-to-bar brand Plaq and bathroom products by Typology. Breakfast features just-baked pastries from the local bakery Le Pain Retrouvé and, this month, the hotel is opening the bar-restaurant Trente next door. The hotel is walkable in ten minutes from the Gare du Nord. Its sense of calm dictates a gentler Parisian experience, so swerve the big sights in favour of a meandering stroll among Pigalle's boho clothes shops and independent cafés. Have a mooch in the nearby Musée de la Vie Romantique, the former home and studio of the painter Ary Scheffer, and its greenhouse tearoom, reopened last month after a renovation, with an exhibition highlighting the evocative skies of Paul Huet's paintings (free; [museevieromantique.paris.fr](http://museevieromantique.paris.fr)).

**Details** Room-only doubles from £155 ([hotelmasse.com](http://hotelmasse.com)). Take the train to Paris

## Explore the villages of the Drôme region

When does a holiday really start? If, for you, it's the moment you slide your feet into a pair of hotel slippers, the Hotel Pantoufle, 20 minutes' drive from Montélimar in the hilltop village of

Marsanne in the Auvergne Rhône Alpes region will be a perfect fit. Taking its name from the French word for slipper, this intimate 17-room retreat aims to set a homely tone — albeit one where uncluttered bedrooms are decorated in restful mocha shades and natural materials, and where you can swap washing up for a swim in the outdoor pool or a massage in the spa. Wander Marsanne's village lanes, with their sleepy, sun-baked houses, potters' studios and farmers' market; walk along the Serre de Paruel trail, enjoying shady forest trails and views of the Vercors mountain range; cycle over to the pretty medieval village of Mirmande or chew over Montélimar's history of nougat-making at the Musée Arnaud Soubeyran (£4; [nougatsoubeyran.com](http://nougatsoubeyran.com)). Then return to sip glasses of the local Clairette de Die, and eat posh croque monsieurs (£16), or duck breast with a lavender-spiced crust (£20), in the hotel's bistro restaurant.

**Details** Room-only doubles from £102 ([pantoufle-hotels.fr](http://pantoufle-hotels.fr)). Take the train to Montélimar or fly to Nîmes

## Montpellier for Mediterranean coast and city culture

Struggling to choose between city and sea? With the coast just seven miles from the cultured Mediterranean city of Montpellier, it's a decision that needn't be made on this break. Spend a day exploring graceful boulevards and grand old mansions, duck into the Musée Fabre to admire Alexandre Cabanel's Fallen Angel (from £7.80; [museefabre.fr](http://museefabre.fr)) and cool off in the shade of the botanical gardens (free; [montpellier-france.com](http://montpellier-france.com)). Come in summer and you can graze your way around the Estivales events that take place every week in July and August, bringing a festival vibe to alfresco sipping and dining ([montpellier-france.com](http://montpellier-france.com) will have more information on this year's events nearer the time). To spend a day exploring by bike, hire one from Véloplage in Villeneuve lès Maguelone and pedal out to the beach through the flamingo-filled Palavas lagoons (one day from £8.60; [montpellier.fr](http://montpellier.fr)). Guests staying amid the leafy opulence of the Domaine de Biar château, a pale and glimmering 13-bedroom hideaway on the city's western fringes, can set off straight from the door on one of the hotel's electric bikes. Another option is Tribe Montpellier, an outpost of the affordable luxury hotel brand that is opening near the city's Sud de France rail station later this year with a rooftop plunge pool and co-working space (rates not released yet; [tribehotels.com](http://tribehotels.com)).

**Details** Room-only doubles from £180 ([domainedebiar.co](http://domainedebiar.co)). Fly to Montpellier

## Arty beaches of Trouville, Normandy

For many visitors to the belle époque resort of Trouville sur Mer, familiarity breeds content. Once a humble fishing village, Trouville was "discovered" by artists and writers in the early 19th century and, when a railway line opened a few decades later, it brought a tide of bohemian Parisians to its shores. For a salty rest cure, the town remains hard to beat: kick off your shoes to walk along the beach, explore the fish market, feast on oysters at the hip bistro Turbulent (£15; [turbulent-trouville.com](http://turbulent-trouville.com)), and

More great French breaks

► venture across the River Touques to swanky Deauville. In summer you can swim in the outdoor pool too (£4.30; trouville.fr). Then retire to the beachfront Hotel Flaubert to fall asleep to the sound of the waves. Named after the writer, who was a regular visitor to Trouville, this half-timbered guesthouse was recently revamped in nautical navy and white but still has a pleasingly between-the-wars air. There's no restaurant but the bar is a chic spot for a glass of champagne.

**Details** Room-only doubles from £129 (flaubert.fr). Take the ferry to Le Havre or Caen or fly to Caen

## Water therapy, Nouvelle-Aquitaine

Pack away that Dryrobe. Peel off the woolly hat. The new beachside Bel Hôtel on the island of Oléron is all about harnessing the wellness potential of the waves, but it's done with a bit more glamour here. What was formerly the Novotel Thalassa has been reinvented by the MGallery hotel group, on the country's second-largest island after Corsica, which lies off the west coast of France and is linked by a road bridge. While it's often overlooked by British visitors in favour of its smaller, more bobo neighbour, the Île de Ré, the French have long been lured by Oléron's wild-edged sand dunes, pine forests and oyster harvests. The bulky Novotel Thalassa was built in the 1970s as a kind of marine-themed answer to Champneys. While its more clinical take on wellness gradually fell from fashion, demand for treatments based around the healing properties of the sea, and seaweed, haven't. When the revamped property reopens in May, it will have a lavish spa and thalassotherapy centre, complete with swimming pool, hammam, sauna and 27 treatment rooms. For a more low-key flavour of the island, the family-friendly Hôtel Le Vert Bois is close to a beach, with a swimming pool and sauna on site, plus surf and bike rental.

**Details** Room-only doubles at the Bel Hôtel from £168 (belhotel-oleron.com); room-only doubles at the Hôtel Le Vert Bois from £95 (hotel-vert-bois-oleron.com). Take the ferry to St Malo or fly to La Rochelle

## Palaces, markets and art in Albi, Occitania

Often pitched as an easy day trip from nearby Toulouse, Albi more than warrants a weekend break in its own right. This Unesco World Heritage listed capital of the Tarn department, in southwest France, shares the striking, rosy-hued brickwork of its larger neighbour, its ruddy skyline dominated by the almighty medieval cathedral of St Cécile (£5.20; cathedrale-albi.com). Other attractions include a striking art nouveau covered market and the Palais de la Berbie, an ornate bishop's palace built in the 13th and 14th centuries that's now home to the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, housing the world's largest collection of works by the Albi-born artist (£5.20; musee-toulouse-lautrec.com). Albi's greatest draw, however, is how walkable it is, with much of the city centre now pedestrianised and, as of last summer, a spectacular new car-free walkway encouraging walkers and cyclists to take a scenic saunter across the Tarn River. Stay at Villa Caroline, an immaculate four-bedroom B&B (one of them a family room) with a terrace overlooking the cathedral and



Le Chalet Olivet, Loire Valley



Hôtel Bellevigne Bourgogne, Burgundy

a shared kitchen for making snacks and suppers on the hop.

**Details** B&B doubles from £95 (villacaroline-albi.com). Take the train to Albi or fly to Toulouse

## Wander through La Rochelle, Charente-Maritime

La Rochelle is an ancient port city, flanked by three medieval watchtowers and known as the White City for its luminous limestone architecture. Those who want to explore the city's seafaring history can visit attractions such as the Maritime Museum (£6.90; museemaritime.larochele.fr) but this is arguably a city best enjoyed by wandering. Stroll its cobbled streets, stop for bowls of mouclade (delicately spiced mussels) in harbourside bistros, or dip into the city's well-established cycle culture by hiring a bike (one day from £9.50pp; cycling-tour.fr) and

pedalling out along a network of flat, well-marked coastal trails. In April a new aparthotel, Coureilles, opens in the city's Minimes district (rates not released yet; @coureilles). Set within a restored manor house and surrounded by shady gardens, its restaurant is set to be a highlight, and is headed up by Gault & Millau Young Talent award-winners Alexis Guillon and Charlotte Troi of a smart nearby restaurant, Opaline (restaurantopaline.com). Alternatively, stay at the Maison des Ambassadeurs, near the city's elegant 19th-century covered market, with an outdoor swimming pool and fleet of bikes to hire (from £14 per day). The city is three hours from Paris by TGV.

**Details** Room-only doubles from £108 (maisondesambassadeurs.com). Take the train or fly to La Rochelle

## A cute chalet and river walks in the Loire Valley

Built in 1862 by Swiss carpenters, Chalet Olivet was displayed at the World Fair in Paris in 1889 as a fine example of Swiss craftsmanship before being sold and transported to the Loire Valley for private use. Now owned by the model turned tableware designer Alice Moireau, the waterside gingerbread cottage is an interiors influencer's dream, with its doll's house aesthetics and on-trend tiling (peppermint stripes in the kitchen, Tetris-style pastel flowers in the bathroom). Adult bikes and a rowing boat are included with the two-bedroom rental, and there's plenty to do locally to spin out a short break in this quieter corner of the Loire. Spend a morning following the Watermills Trail on foot along the banks of the Loiret river, wander into the town of Olivet to seek out cafés and farmers' markets or catch a bus or tram into Orléans to explore its

medieval and 18th-century architecture and soaring gothic cathedral. There's also the Joan of Arc walking trail to follow (tourisme-orleansmetropole.com). Take the train from Paris to Orléans (1 hour 10 min) then taxi (15 minutes) or bus/ tram (30 minutes).

**Details** Two nights' self-catering for four from £561 (lechaletolivet.com). Take the train to Orléans

## Burgundy's new Route du Cassis walking trail

If you are a fan of crème de cassis, the blackcurrant liqueur traditionally made with Noir de Bourgogne berries, Burgundy's new Route du Cassis should be on your weekend wish list. A 55km self-guided trail between Dijon and Nuits-Saint-Georges, it's downloadable on the Balades en Bourgogne app (free; lacotedorjadore.com). In the meantime, visitors can plot their way around the trail's six stages, and find out about producers, restaurants and farm shops along the way, on a dedicated section of the Cote d'Or website (lacotedorjadore.com). Highlights include the Cassisium, a kind of distillery experience for blackcurrants, with tours in English (2.5 hours £9pp; cassisium.fr) and seventh-generation blackcurrant farmers the Oliviers, of La Ferme Fruirouge (tour and tasting £3.50; fruirouge.fr). It's possible to drive the route, or to better savour the countryside as well as the cassis, by cycling it. A day's bike hire (£48) or 2CV hire (£298) can be added on to stays at the chic Hotel Bellevigne Bourgogne, in Chambolle-Musigny, 30 minutes' drive south of Dijon.

**Details** Room-only doubles at the Hotel Bellevigne Bourgogne from £85 (bellevigne-hotels.com). Take the train or fly to Dijon or the ferry to Calais