



Breath of fresh air in France

With its forests, beaches and pretty towns, the Pas-de-Calais area of north-eastern France is a delight, finds Bernadette Fallon

There's a hammock strung between two trees opposite the French doors to my room, one of the nicest sights in the world. And there's no shortage of trees to hang hammocks from in this 65-hectare woodland estate in northern France.

There are more than 30 different species of trees here but the most special tree of all is a Caucasian Walnut, introduced to France in 1784. And it's not just me who thinks it's special. This is one of France's designated 'remarkable trees', one of only 100 in the country, an honour awarded by L'Asociation ARBRES. With branches and foliage trailing almost to the ground, standing underneath it is like being immersed in a cocooning green fortress, a dappled retreat from the world.

"A lot of people experience a deep connection with this tree," says Florence Karras, owner of Domaine de Fresnoy and guardian of these trees for the next generations.

Domaine de Fresnoy is a medieval inn dating back to the time of the Knights Templar, an hour's drive from Calais and accessed by a narrow road through fields of vegetables and white poppies. There are just four bedrooms, all stylishly rustic with big modern bathrooms, each with its own garden entrance (B&B from 134€ per night for 2, Domainedefresnoy.com).

And after breakfast that morning – a mix of locally produced breads, cheeses, yogurts and cereals – Florence leads us on a magical walk through the woods.

Being around trees has been scientifically proven to lower



The beach at Le Touquet, main; the Thalassotherapy pool, above

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We eat nettle soup with nutmeg (who knew nettles tasted so good)

blood pressure, helping to support against heart disease, cancer and anxiety. Sitting on a swirling wicker armchair suspended from the mighty branches of a fir tree, eyes closed, feet raised off the ground, I feel no stress.

The stress levels continue to drop back inside the main house in a beautifully beamed room with a view of trees, where I have a Sokuatsu massage. What's a Sokuatsu massage you might ask (so did I). Originating in Japan, it's a full body massage given by the feet and Solange, who performs

it, appears to have the most flexible feet in the world as she works deep into the knots in my back and legs.

This is a community that supports each other. As well as Solange, I meet Daniela to hear about her chocolate business Cacao Cacao, exporting high quality sustainable chocolate, and every meal showcases the best of local produce. Like dinner that night, a homemade feast from local chef Katharine Tasker served in the small kitchen/dining room in the garden that guests can use during their stay.

We eat nettle soup with nutmeg (who knew nettles tasted so good, I vow to plunder the wild patch at the bottom of my garden as soon as I get home), cheese wraps smothered with oak leaf pesto (who knew leaves tasted so good, unfortunately I don't have any oaks in my garden), a crunchy salad and – just in case you're thinking it's all very healthy – a decadent chocolate cake, with slices so big I have to take half of mine back to my room for a midnight snack.

It's all washed down with Le Perlé, a sparkling 'wine' made from fermented redcurrants. Made by a local family, who produce only enough to supply this region, the next day we visit La Maison de Perlé and meet Romain and Martin, the brothers running the business started by their parents in 1985. The Delobels built the winery beside their home, and nothing has travelled very far here, including the apples for the cider which come from trees out the back. And we get to try it all – the sparkling redcurrant wine which is their most popular seller, as well as wines made from raspberries and cherries, the aforementioned cider and the alcohol-free Frenette, made from ash tree leaves, chicory and sugar. Tours are available free and a small shop stocks a variety of local produce (Leperle.fr).

Afterwards, we head to the coast, an hour's drive past pretty villages and roundabouts planted with flowers, for some Thalassotherapy. Located on the sea in Le Touquet, a resort town surrounded by pine forests, Thalassa Sea & Spa offers day spa experiences.

Thalassotherapy comes from the Greek word "thalassa" meaning "sea" and refers to treatments that use saltwater to soothe and revitalise the skin.

After lunch in Le Maison Mer, the airy dining room with gorgeous beach views where I make the most of the setting and eat fish for starters – lips-smackingly good fish soup – and mains – tasty monkfish – I change into my swimsuit and follow a programme of experiences that involves being pummelled by hot jets of water in a communal Jacuzzi

pool – bliss – as well as being immersed in hot seawater in a private room – ditto.

Afterwards we explore Le Touquet, with its food shops and delis, have coffee in the elegant bar at Hôtel Barrière Le Westminster, where Ian Fleming wrote Casino Royale, then drive half an hour to Montreuil-sur-Mer. Its ancient ramparts and cobbled streets inspired Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, though it's not, despite the name, on the sea.

We walk the 3km long ramparts to work up an appetite for dinner at the Anecdote restaurant, with its classic French cooking, rustic wooden floors and brick walls, where I eat more fish (sea bream) and the speciality dessert of tarte tatin, made with peaches instead of apples, and wish I had an extra stomach to fit in a second helping.

Then after another night in the Domaine, rather than spoil the chilled-out vibe with the shock of a frazzled airport, we drive to Calais for the ferry back to Dover.

DFDS runs up to 54 crossings per day on its Dover-Calais and Dover-Dunkirk services (day-trip fares from £39 return, short breaks from £99 return for a car and up to four people; www.dfds.com).

We've upgraded to the Premium Lounge (from £18pp) and relish the sea views from comfy armchairs as we tuck into complimentary sandwiches and glasses of fizz. The 90-minute journey flies by and priority boarding (from £10 each way) get us first on and off the ship.

For more information about the region, see Visitpasdecalais.com



A hammock to relax in at Domaine de Fresnoy



A cheeky charmer

The 25hours Hotel Copenhagen Indre By bursts with personality, sass and style, discovers Rachel Roberts

The 25hours Hotel Copenhagen Indre By would take the prize for the sauciest curtains I've seen, ever. We've just checked into our "Medium Passion" category room, and there's already much to take in (minimalists might run for the hills). Quirky touches include a giant cork pinboard-style covering on the wall, dotted with student-style keepsakes, and one-off "ornaments" such as a paint tin with a brush atop. Passion is reflected in the colour-of-love red and white geometric floor tiles and, as my brain organises the curvy squiggles running riot over the drapes: the outlines of female and male forms interlocking in an erotic, yet tasteful, jigsaw puzzle.

But beyond the ahem,

titillation, the racy pattern is actually a celebration of an important part of the hotel's history. It was in this very building, in one of its former lives as a university (it was also an 18th-century porcelain factory), that Denmark became the first country in the world to legalise pornography in 1969. 'Passion', alongside 'knowledge' are the twin themes that run through 25hours Hotel Copenhagen Indre By like seaside rock.

Founded in 2005, 25hours Hotels has sprung up in 15 cities worldwide, including Berlin, Paris and Florence, with nine more unique properties in the pipeline. Its slogan, "You know one, you know none" is a perfect description – this hotel portfolio is no bland, cookie-cutter-style affair. If you love fun and vibrant hotels with

unexpected twists, this is the one to book. All of the buildings must have a compelling backstory to make the cut and are chosen for their central city locations: the 243-roomed Copenhagen branch sits smack bang in the middle of the buzzy Latin Quarter, within easy walking or cycling distance of all the main attractions such as the famous Nyhavn harbour, Kongens Have (the King's Garden) and Tivoli Gardens. After a day of sightseeing, guests can reinvalidate in the hotel's outside sauna, which also features an ice-cold plunge pod.

Knowledge is a nod to the grand building's past as a place of learning, and it finds its playful expression in touches such as the twisty, gravity-defying book tower in the reception, the old-school typewriters that invite guests to bash out a letter (pop it into the onsite post box and the hotel will send it), and the 'tuck' shop, lined with colourful sweetie jars (and also some adult-themed toys and books). There are also 'vintage' dial telephones in all of the six categories of rooms.

There's also a super-cool 'listening room' with an epic vinyl collection and the Love Library, which is a cosy living room space complete

with a crackling log fire. The Assembly Hall bar, housed in a glass-ceilinged atrium with a suspended pterodactyl, is a stand-out feature of the hotel. Designed for both guests and non-guests to enjoy, we spent a lovely cocktail hour there, sipping amaretto sours – ordered off-menu – in the company of well-dressed Danes and a cosmopolitan, international crowd.

We dined in NENI, the hotel's restaurant renowned for its Mediterranean Eastern dishes. Groups can opt for the Balagan menu, a three-course affair that showcases the head chef's mastery of food from Jerusalem, starting at a very reasonable (for Copenhagen) £60 per person.

We sampled some of the mezze small plates, including the sublime hummus served with light-as-a-cloud pita bread, popcorn falafel with warming ginger and zingy lime, and tender chicken filet satay skewers. It was excellent, as was the buzzy atmosphere that took the experience up a notch.

Of course, a trip to Copenhagen wouldn't be complete without hopping onto a bicycle – after all, cycling is in the Danish DNA. We took advantage of the hotel's onsite Schindelhaeur branded bike

The reception at the 25hours Hotel Copenhagen Indre By

store, hiring them for the day at around £25 per person. Those staying in a top-tier Gigantic Room will find their bikes hanging on the wall, making it even more convenient.

Denmark's capital is fully geared towards pedal power, with separate cycling lanes for tourists wishing to discover the city. Although it took us a while to get the hang of the etiquette – holding your hand aloft to warn others you are stopping, for example – it was a brilliant way to find interesting places away from the usual visitor haunts.

We couldn't resist a jaunt to see perhaps Copenhagen's most famous landmark, the Little Mermaid. Inspired by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's poignant fairytale, the bronze and stone sculpture is undeniably gorgeous, if slightly underwhelming. But depicted sans clothes, we reckoned she would have felt right at home with those cheeky curtains at 25hours Hotel Copenhagen Indre By.

Medium Passion Room from £276 including breakfast, indreby@25hours-hotels.com

The search for value and adventure in UAE

Dubai may be famous for its extravagance, but you can still travel on a more modest budget, finds Rebecca Black

Across the creek from the bright lights and skyscrapers of Dubai, I feel like I'm another world away in a quiet and still traditional Emirati-style house.

People come from all over the globe to climb the world's tallest building, see the heaviest gold ring or to try and get their hands on the viral Dubai chocolate bar made famous on TikTok.

But there is another side of Dubai, rich with Emirati traditions, and dare I say it, even accessible on a budget.

From a dull and cold morning in the UK, it's a shock to the system as I land in 38C heat and a city that even at 2am is busy and bustling. A drive across the creek to the historic Al Seef area transports me to some welcome tranquillity.

We are greeted at the Al Seef Heritage Hotel by Hilton with a cool glass of pomegranate juice before a golf buggy speeds us to our rooms in a low, flat-roofed building, complete with veranda offering stunning views of the lights and city skyline on the other side of the water.

Tastes, sights, sounds of old Dubai

I'll never say no to walking in the footsteps of Beyonce. The next morning, I follow her lead by visiting the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Centre for Cultural Understanding (SMCCU) in one of the oldest areas of Dubai for a feast of both food and culture.

Over a brunch which includes a chicken biryani, rice, bread and small round donuts covered in date syrup, guide Noora Al



A desert safari is one of Dubai's must-do experiences

Marzooqi explains traditional hospitality in Dubai. Noora describes the layout of the old house and how the rooms were once used for living and hosting. She reveals that being served a small cup of coffee illustrates affection for guests – implying the hosts want you to stay with them for longer.

Exploring the souks

Dubai's oldest network of souks in the Al Khor area are another evocative way to feel the soul of the city. I find vendors selling everything from spices to gold to flowers, clothes, perfumes and many varieties of food lining the narrow streets.

A desert safari

One of the most magical experiences of my trip is a Heritage Safari by vintage Land Rover. The company, Platinum Heritage, ensures we are well prepared, wrapping our heads with scarves to protect from the sun.

As the sun starts to set, we arrive for a falcon display before going on to a beautifully set up camp for a feast under the stars. After a camel ride, we enjoy a musical performance and lie on carpets and low sofas for a guided star gazing session with shisha pipes.

Rooms at the Al Seef Heritage Hotel (hilton.com) start from 845 AED (£176) with breakfast. For more information, go to visitdubai.com