

*Get a taste of the royal life deep in the south-west French countryside*

**P**ICTURES of mills, the moulin, baguettes, wheels of cheese and other accoutrements of luscious French culture pattern brown and green billboards directing you in and out of small townships, villages and hamlets. French crooner Francis Cabrel is singing on the radio and all is well.

We're headed for the Dordogne region, specifically the area surrounding the historic town of Brantome, some two hours by car from Bordeaux. If you think this is a jolly around rolling French hills and chateaux sipping on wine and gnawing on cheese, you're right. Anything else would be sacrilege.

For a place set in deeply religious esteems, with traditional culture and heritage that sees Brantome and its epic abbey one of the most lauded and loved across the whole of France, one must obey the rules.

On arrival at Le Chateau du Roi, my friends and I delve into chatter in the drawing room over fromagey nibbles and a glass of the local vineyards' finest chilled rosé. We're really just setting the tone.

We're about to enjoy a few days of villa hopping that includes hunting, hiking and everything in between. No need for wellies and wax jackets, the region sees full seasons but long springs and summers. By the end of April, it's already 25 degrees at midday. Good job we have a pool, I think, changing in my turret-like, palace-like bedroom overlooking the terrace and glimmering water.

Like all of family business CV Villas' mini castles, the decor has been hand-curated by the family matriarch as part of a long renovation project of both long-time and newly procured properties steeped in history. Fresh flowers adorn every table, all 11 bedrooms are gloriously TV-free with heavy curtains, original wood floors and en suites with bathtubs and his 'n' hers sinks. Soft palettes of dust pink, royal blues, palm greens and eggshell carry a relaxed but elegant ambience throughout our chateau, and the kitchen's fridges are always stocked with refreshments. At night, the shutters are closed and the place is dead silent, with the sound of nothing but owls and possibly ghosts.

Next morning, we go hunting. Attila is one of the region's leading truffle-hunters. She has fluffy curls, a wet nose, a wagging tail and a penchant for the local white truffles that characterise the region alongside its other tasty morsels. We're hanging out with her and owner Jean-Paul Petit in Mareuil on a cool and fresh morning



BY  
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**Country chic: The town of Brantome. Right, Le Chateau de Roi. Below, the kitchen and a bedroom**



before the sun hits. It's amazing to see her work so diligently and excitedly, sniffing out these little golden nuggets with such ease. Petit makes a living from truffles, and tells me he most enjoys it shaved over steak, pasta or eggs — and always raw.

If I am going to turn into any animal after overconsumption on this trip, it would be a duck. I'm relieved to hear that foie gras production practices are now way less dramatic and intense than yesteryear.

Served the delicacy no less than three times during my stay in the region, I'm not surprised to find that this is the part of France from which it originates. Goose and particularly duck can be found on most menus, and in the flesh downtown at Tuesday or Friday markets.

Brantome town centre is a sight to behold. The bustling market is perfectly in tandem with the old-time quiet bustle of

the mills, river, stone bridges, cobbles and abundant green. The centrepiece is, of course, the abbey, built in 768 by Charlemagne. Its carvings — including that of the Last Judgement — are astounding, while the 15th century church part is all stained glass windows and brutal sacrificial depictions.

If 'quaint Renaissance town in full bloom' was a Google image search, Brantome would be the result, and you'll be forgiven by the sweet and proud locals if you can't stop gawping and snapping. The best way to do this is via one of the cute river cruises — around an hour and magically free of mosquitoes, you'll see all the bankside residences and gardens that enjoy the relaxed enchantment of Brantome. A fairground also runs along the water.

I forego the steep climb up to the bell tower offered on guided abbey tours — heights and confined spaces aren't my forte — and find time to explore the cobbled medieval streets of artisanal shops and boutiques instead.

I can't resist a gilt locket choker from the Belle Epoque era, served by a charming

lady named Rosalie doing aerobics behind the desk in her tiny and beautifully filled antiques emporium, Encore Une Fois, on Rue du Puyjoli.

She insists that she needs to keep moving to justify the wining and dining she so enjoys living here. I can't help but agree, and so I get moving with some lengths and a walk around the gardens back at our chateau before whipping back into town for a decadent Michelin dinner at Le Moulin de l'Abbaye.

We decide to take some rest from the hot sun for a little while and naturally head to the caves. Nestled underground are the grottoes of Villars, 20,000-year-old crystalline formations and cave drawings that take 45 minutes to wander through.

These visions are marvellous, shooting similar ones I've toured in Mallorca and even Belize out of the water. The shapes rise like organs, both bodily and churchlike, while other stagnates drop like Gaudi sculptures.

Back at the chateau, the Villas group can arrange a chipper and wise sommelier and charming and highly-skilled chef for your stay, and

the different-sized castles cater for anything from a girls' weekend to a wedding party. The one thing you will need to enjoy princess life is a car to dart about in.

We enjoy a wine tasting before a dinner of pan-seared duck breast, foie gras and baguette. Other dishes to crop up in the region might be river fish with ratatouille, steak and turnip soup, chicken roulade — and, always, copious wine.

Before heading back to Bordeaux airport, I do a supermarket sweep of violet mustard and canned confit duck to remind myself of the high life when I'm back at home. I consider putting simply a picture of a duck and Attila in my new locket as a homage to my luxurious week living in a castle.

#### TRAVEL FACTS

Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) and Aer Lingus ([aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com)) both fly to Bordeaux from €82 return. Le Chateau du Roi sleeps 22 and starts at €10,000 a week with daily maid service, concierge and welcome hamper. See [cvvillas.com](http://cvvillas.com).