

RURAL RETREATS

Escape from it all as you reconnect with nature – and silence



VILLA MARIE Saint-Tropez, France

In all the razzle-dazzle of Saint-Tropez, it's easy to forget the hills that rise up behind it are wild and beautiful. What's lovely about Villa Marie, a 45-room boutique hotel tucked away in those hills near the village of Ramatuelle, is that it offers a more relaxed, less self-conscious version of the local scene, in the most beautiful rural setting. And now you can gather all your favourite people together and take the whole thing over. Villa Marie feels like a Tuscan farmhouse with a generous helping of Riviera style, and offers the best of both worlds. Set in seven secluded acres of rolling pine forest and beautifully landscaped gardens (but just a 10-minute drive up the hill from Club 55), you can spend your days lazing by the pool (above), enjoying feasts with a view at the hotel's excellent al fresco Dolce Vita restaurant and embarking on forest and vineyard walks straight from the hotel.

Buyout rates from £20,740 per night on a B&B basis, saint-tropez.villamarie.fr/en



MELI
Paxos, Greece

Being an hour's boat ride from Corfu has kept the Greek island of Paxos gloriously unspoilt. While it has gorgeous beaches and turquoise waters, a stay at villa rental Meli (above), which is set within a heavily wooded estate surrounded by ancient olive groves, feels more like a hidden retreat than it does a Greek island beach break. A magical little hamlet of six traditional stone houses sleeping 22 between them, each has its own kitchen, pool and shaded outdoor dining area. There's also a large communal pool and a covered dining terrace for you all to get together at once. The rental also comes with a swimming platform in the sea, three golf buggies, two Suzuki Jimny jeeps and a 26ft Boston Whaler boat for excursions on the water. Meli's cooks will prepare three meals a day, and it's a 10-minute walk through the olive groves down to the beach and to Lakka, for tavernas and traditional bakeries. *From £17,500 per week, scottwilliams.co.uk/property/meli-paxos/*

Step outside into the deer-and-owl-filled estate and there's a wood-fired cedar hot tub (for 10) in the woods



DUN ALUINN
Aberfeldy, Scottish Highlands

It's clear that the new owners of what was formerly known as Tay House – an old Victorian school boarding house set in five-and-a-half acres just outside Aberfeldy – had great fun doing it up. It probably helped that one of them, Susie Whyte, spent many years as an architect and interior designer in New York and San Francisco. The result is the most extraordinary nine-bedroom fully staffed holiday rental with pared-back interiors that really highlight the house's original Queen Anne features. Then they've added beautiful pieces, such as a vast poured oak-and-bronze dining table, an orange B&B Italia corner sofa (left) and a white stone bathtub. And a cinema and a play den. The house has three working fireplaces, a great big kitchen for socialising in and no curtains (but blinds) in the windows to let the feeling of nature fill the space. Step outside into the deer-and-owl-filled estate and there's a wood-fired cedar hot tub (for 10) in the woods, a waterfall a 10-minute walk away, canoeing, canyoning and white-water rafting close by, along with guided walks with stops for gourmet picnics. *From £17,000 per week, scottwilliams.co.uk*

The vine inspiration

Monte do Freixo offers pared-back Portuguese style – and seclusion

I get my countryside hit by driving just an hour inland from Lisbon and crossing the 10½-mile-long Vasco da Gama bridge over the mighty Tagus River into one of the last, authentic, rural regions in Southern Europe. This is a world in which landscapes shift from sandy-floored pine forests to miles of red earth lanced with cork, oak and olive trees, and where bleating goats and sheep with their jangling bells are the only living things you'll see. My favourite place to stay is Monte Do Freixo Poente.

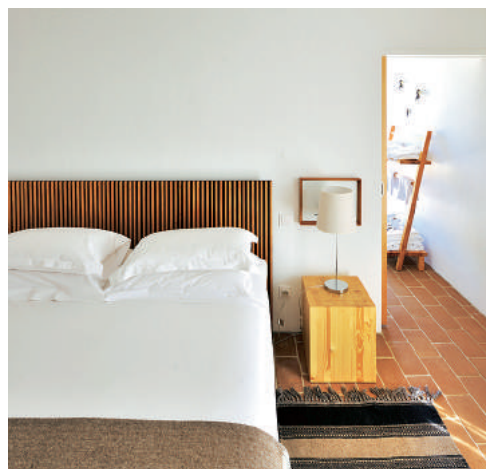
An exclusive-use three-bedroom house with an outdoor pool, it was once the family farm of José de Sousa Cunhal Sendim, owner of the award-winning modernist L'and Vineyards Hotel and Spa, a 20-minute drive away near the historic town of Montemor-o-Novo. While you can use all L'and's hotel facilities, including its indoor pool, the fine-dining restaurant and the Vinoble Cosmetics spa, the *monte* is all about pared-down luxury. On a tiny, dusty road, set in 1,200 acres, it was once where the farmworkers came together to meet, eat and rest. Today, the estate is home to a breed of Portuguese sheep, the *ovelhas merino*, and *porco preto*, the local black pigs. Nothing beats sitting on the shady veranda looking out across the endless, gently rolling Alentejan landscape. I love the monte's local terracotta floors, simple wooden furniture and wool rugs made in nearby villages.

All bedrooms are en-suite and there's a large open-plan sitting and dining room with comfy sofas arranged around a fireplace (right). This is heavenly on colder nights where dinners – which the hotel chef can deliver should you not feel like cooking – around the big, wooden dining table, sipping local red wine, can go on for hours. You'll also find a selection of art and architecture books, a record player and stack of 1980s vinyl (Roxy Music etc). And each morning, someone from L'and appears by magic with the most delicious organic breakfast basket. **Debbie Pappyn**

Monte Do Freixo costs from £385 in low season, including breakfast, l-and.com/monte-do-freixo



Dinners around the wooden dining table, sipping local red wine, can go on for hours





VILLA PEDUZZI

Como, Italy

Take the exclusivity of Lake Como to the next level with a stay up in the hills at Villa Peduzzi, a reimaged early 20th-century villa. Located by the tiny commune of Pigra, this modern rural hideaway, which sits in four acres of private garden and pine forest, combines showstopping lake views (left) with direct access to rustic mountain paths. There are eight bedrooms (all with balconies) sleeping up to 16 people, three kitchens, a gym and a spectacular infinity-edged pool. There's also a rooftop bar and a private children's playground with a trampoline and treehouse. Housekeeping staff, spa therapists and private chefs are close at hand, as are personal trainers and tennis coaches. Alternatively, you can hop on one of the villa's mountain bikes or hike the Belvedere Path which runs alongside the house. For forays on to the lake, the villa has its own luxury boat moored in Argegno, which is reached by a cable car close to the house.

From £2,350 per night, welcomebeyond.com/property/villa-peduzzi/

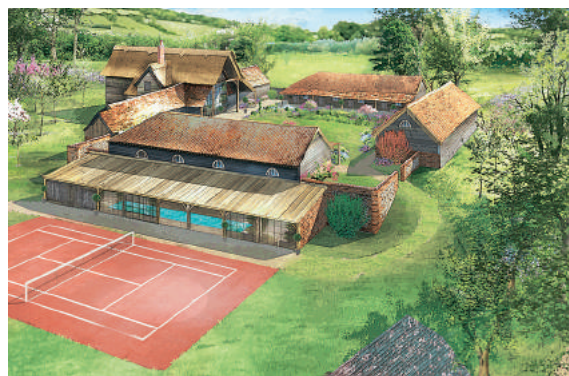
From ancient woodland and wildflower meadows to manicured gardens, this is a place to reconnect with nature

CHAPEL BARN

Wilderness Reserve, Suffolk

It's been 20 years since landscape designer Kim Wilkie first started work on the 5,000-acre Wilderness Reserve, a major conservation project that involved the extensive restoration of both land and the historic buildings that sit within it, deep in the Suffolk countryside. The houses became some of the UK's most coveted holiday rentals – and the landscape, which includes everything from ancient woodland and wildflower meadows to manicured gardens, is a place to reconnect with nature. This month, the reserve launches its best offering yet: Chapel Barn Estate (below), a cluster of six newly created holiday homes, chiefly the restored 15th-century Chapel Barn itself, which wraps around a central terrace and sleeps up to 42 in 18 en-suite bedrooms. It also comes with a cinema, indoor pool, hot tub and an underground party room with a bar. Should you desire, they'll prepare you six-course tasting menus, deliver luxury hampers or arrange a 'fire feast' by the lake: with flame-grilled local produce served on shared platters.

From £4,592 per night, wildernessreserve.com/chapel-barn



SONNWIES

Sud Tyrol, Italy

There are just a handful of luxury hotels where grown-ups and children are genuinely catered for with equal success. Sonnwies in the Italian Dolomites is one of them. Offering the perfect blend of stylish, modern alpine design in a beautiful setting, activities for all the family and lots of childcare are included in the price of the holiday, so everyone is guaranteed a good time. Right on the edge of an 2,625ft ski training slope, there is skiing for all ages and abilities in the winter, and everything from rock climbing and pony-trekking to animal-tending (there's a farm on-site) and aquatubing in summer. There's also a wellness centre and an excellent restaurant. Two new luxury mountain villas are their most exclusive offering yet, and are ideal for social distancing. Each has three bedrooms, a large heated pool (above), spacious living areas with working fireplaces and Finnish saunas.

Mountain villas from £1,600 per night, sonnwies.com