

Les Sources de Caudalie is built around a main building dating from 1856; around it little huts on wooden stilts offer guests a chance to reconnect with nature.



INTO THE WOODS

CONTEMPORARY DESIGN MEETS FRENCH COUNTRY CHIC AT LES SOURCES DE CAUDALIE

BY LAURA BROWN

Driving through the rolling hillside of the southern region of France, known as the Aquitaine, bordering Spain and the Atlantic Ocean, the road signs of Les Sources de Caudalie start to pop up en route through the little villages surrounding Bordeaux. Driving the rental car in the right direction, I wish for a more fitting mode of transport to guide us along the French country lanes. It's easy to close my eyes in the passenger seat and dream that we turn corners in a springy Citroen 2CV or a classic Peugeot 404 coupé cabriolet, with Grace Kelly hair, a haute couture Christian Dior dress and matching tortoiseshell sunglasses for a trip through this textured landscape.

A WARM COUNTRY WELCOME

The scenery is mesmerising, the route's roughened edges making for a perfect movie-style road trip. I crane my neck, looking for hidden mansions and romantic cottages peeking out from woodland and nearby towns. I can imagine this landscape being even more idyllic in its sun-kissed Indian summers, when the farmers bring their crops home from harvests and the sun sits in its best position in the crisp blue sky.

As we arrive at the estate on an early afternoon the chateau seems to be enjoying a calming afternoon rest. As the door opens to the reception, laughter and chatter from the French café around the corner greets us, whilst the receptionist takes our car keys to fetch our luggage – no need to hurdle suitcases through the lovely styled gardens on your way here.

We are welcomed into the inner gardens of Les Sources de Caudalie. At its centre is a calming lake, edged by grapevines and beautifully styled wooden fishermen's cottages. The lake, we later discover, is home to a pair of swans during the late spring and summer.

Our suite – a wooden cabin on stilts known as L'île aux Oiseaux (Birds' Island) has a veranda overlooking the lake and faces the main building built in 1856. A charming detail is the carriage at the back of the suite, styled to fit what I can only think of as a gypsy dollhouse with great eye for detail and sophisticated flair.



A 'PARISIAN CHIC' BOUDOIR

Stepping through a wall of flowing white sheer curtains, we enter our abode that will be home during our stay. The whitewashed wooden floors match the elegant French doors and windows with their dark grey shutters. With a king-sized bed against a mother-of-pearl mosaic tiled backdrop, a dusty pink velvet chaise longue facing an upholstered ottoman in the middle of the room, this suite reminds me of a Scandinavian hideaway with a hint of Parisian elegance. A collection of antiques is placed around the room in contrast to the contemporary brass stands, which hold large bulbs as lights.

Every two years the hotel finds a new designer, who reimagines L'île aux Oiseaux in a new style. This time round, the room has been designed by Delphine Manivet, a wedding dress designer from Paris famous for her dreamy ready to wear and couture collections (Lady Gaga has her on speed dial for timeless gowns). The room oozes romance and wedding bliss, which may be a little too much for grooms but we're sure they'll forget about the soft feminine decor as soon as they find out about the pillow menu that is available to add to the night's blissful comfort. ▶



In the morning, I dive into the hotel's 15-metre indoor swimming pool, a unique space housed in an imposing greenhouse built from 18th century timber. The bottom of the covered pool features the photographic work of artist and sculptor Mathilde de l'Ecotais. It is a stunning feeling to swim lengths above a gold tinted picture of Japanese puffer fish; the hues change according to the incoming sunlight.

A scrumptious breakfast in the main building is served, with elegant tables set with Toile de Juoy-inspired china, soft linens draped over tables to add a rustic element. Delicious freshly squeezed juices, buttery croissants, loafs of country breads, sweet and savoury Madeines, plenty of confitures and an array of French cheeses complement an impressive a la carte menu laden with healthy options and a selection of freshly prepared farm eggs.

DREAM AWAY AMONGST FINE ART

The estate consists of a chateau, a spa and the main building, with individually designed rooms. Each of these boasts its own balcony and is named after an aspect of the colonial trade routes that once passed through Bordeaux.

Scattered among the grounds of the hotel are little 'villages' of fishermen's cottages with wooden houses boasting names reminiscent of picturesque oyster fishing towns. A plaster clad *pigeonniere* (dove house) stands tall in the midst of these. Upon entering, one finds oneself in a little cocoon that nods wittily to its origin, with bird pattern wallpaper, parrot cushion covers and brass cage lampshades. The bathroom and upstairs bedroom are sophisticated, whilst the downstairs sitting room is snug and makes you want to not leave for a while.

The fisherman's suites along the village path can accommodate four people and have a contemporary spirit, with eclectic furniture and vintage reissues to emphasise a modern day serenity. Further away, in the woods, visitors can step back in time and discover the traditional Bordeaux residence Chateau le Thil, a collection of country homes equipped with modern amenities, which can be booked for private gatherings and small weddings. ▶

▶ **CURATED TO FIT A CONTEMPORARY ABODE**

The chateau and its countryside of woods, valleys and hills came into the hands of husband and wife Daniel and Florence Cathiard, former Olympic skiers and entrepreneurs, who they were looking for a new adventure. Now, more than 25 years later, their dedication has created an inimitable refuge known for its patented products and unique treatments based on the ancestral powers of grapes and vine. With their two daughters, who are in

charge of the hotel and the Caudalie spa, the family business has grown into a sprawling estate featuring spa, pool, rooms and grounds. Around the property it is evident that the owners enjoy modern art. Each year a piece is created to celebrate the grape harvest and give a sentimental nod to the success of the business. The Weathered Venus by Jim Dime, placed in the midst of flowing hills, stands tall as you walk the grounds of the chateau, whilst smaller statues are found on the lawns, adding a touch of urban sophistication to this country retreat.



With its magnificent spa, historic chateau, individual rooms and contemporary swimming pool, the Caudalie Estate offers an impressive stage in which its star protagonists can play the role of pampered guest.



A dove house has been reimagined as a space in which to rest one's wings.



► A DESTINATION FOR INDULGENCE AND WELLBEING

As I explore the grounds, crispy white lanes of crushed seashells and pebbles guide the way around the chateau whose history began more than six centuries ago. A serene wind gusts gently through the spring air, offering a soothing current through the lush lawns and well-tended gardens below. Rouge, a small lunch bar catches my eye, and before I know it, I find myself fingers deep in the deliciousness of Spanish tapas from just south of the French border. Salamis, squid drenched in Spanish olive oil, fresh capers, sardines and a little mason jar filled with butternut squash mousse are presented on a wooden board and accompanied by a crusty French baguette. The sun glances in whilst we finish off with a coffee which seems to only be an extra excuse to stay a little longer and linger.

The lingering continues as I set foot in the Caudalie spa itself – an epicentre of wellbeing rooted in the discovery of grapeseed polyphenols and their properties. To this day, Caudalie costemics continues to create new technologies based on the cosmetic values of the humble fruit that the region is famous for.

Here, in a calming 1,500 sq m retreat that has been housed in a contemporary barn, guests are pampered and ordered to relax while enjoying the peace and quiet of the countryside surroundings. I opt for an 80-minute massage, which is one of many unique Caudalie treatments that encompass wraps, scrubs and facials.

The rooms are calming and without realising, the music and ambience begin to work their soporific charms. As the lights dim, my mind is gently ushered into a relaxing state. The 80 minutes are, of course, completely necessary, as the therapist makes sure every muscle in the body is expertly de-knotted and soothed. Leaving the room in a slight haze, I am led back into the soothing environment of the spa to finish the day with a cinnamon infused tea and, of course, a little bunch of juicy grapes.

While it is tempting, after such a blissfully lazy afternoon, to just head to



the suite and order room service, the cozy lights of the main building beckon with the promise of a relaxed, romantic dinner at La Table du Lavoir.

The menu consists of delicious, country-style offerings, dishes designed to share heartily around the table. The tables of this 'Country Inn' are filled with couples, families and friends coming together to enjoy great food, sophisticated drinks and convivial company. For a more formal dining experience, La Grande Vigne offers guests fine dining courtesy of its two-star Michelin restaurant.

Finally, as the sun begins to set into the inky horizon, a return to the little suite on stilts is all that's left to do. As I approach, I see that the shutters have already been closed and the lights are on in welcome.

And what more fitting end to the evening, than to sit momentarily on the little wooden deck and listen to the late-night concert of frogs and owls, Caudalie's nocturnal orchestra. Nature's symphony brings with it the opportunity to drink in the sapphire night sky with its explosion

of stars, a canvas infrequently glimpsed from the orange lights of a city. Here, it takes a majestic centre stage and brings a moment of contemplation as we sit in silence, sipping on coffees from the espresso bar in the room.

The next morning, it is time to sadly gather up belongings and head back to the urban life, leaving behind the calm and inspiring estate. The rather sorry-looking rental is already parked by the front door, and with bags placed in the boot, there is nothing further to do than to take the inspiring and rejuvenating properties of La Caudalie – a memory that will curl around the subconscious for a long time to come. As I allow myself one backward glance, I notice a pair of doves cooing on the balcony ledge, as if entreating us to return. ■

Emirates and Etihad Airways fly direct to Bordeaux. Rooms at Les Sources de Caudalie start from 300 Euros per night. Suites start from 450 Euros per night. To find out more or to make a reservation, please email reservations@sources-caudalie.com, www.sources-caudalie.com