



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LE COUVENT DES MINIMES EXTERIOR AND LOUNGE, DINING OUTSIDE AND IN AT ARMATHWAITE HALL; THE DIAL HOUSE HOTEL

where to stay

GOURMET BOLTHOLES

Helen Alexander, Rachael Oakden and Margaret Kemp visit welcoming retreats with gastronomic grazing on the menu

THE DIAL HOUSE HOTEL BOURTON ON THE WATER, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Built in 1698, Dial House is the oldest building in Bourton, it even pre-dates the small stone footbridges that span the River Windrush, a tributary of the Thames that meanders through the village. Having been lovingly restored and updated, the hotel brings a chic, boutique style to the Cotswolds – whilst retaining enough rustic charm to make this an ideal retreat from bustling London life. The house exudes an intimate atmosphere, a fire crackles in the living room and a narrow staircase leads to stylish bedrooms – many with four-poster beds. Decorated with pearlescent wallpaper and antique mirrors, the two dining rooms are beautifully light-reflecting in the evening – an ideal backdrop for head chef Jamie Forman's thoughtful portions and exciting flavours.

Foodie diversion: Cotswold Deli and Cheese Shop, Chipping Norton (01608 642843) offers an impressive selection of cheeses.

Details: The Dial House Hotel, The Chestnuts, Bourton on the Water, Gloucestershire GL54 2AN (01451 822244; dialhousehotel.com). Double from £170 with dinner and breakfast.

Come here for: a chic yet unpretentious retreat.

ARMATHWAITE HALL BASSENTHWAITE LAKE, CUMBRIA

The view from the dining room, across Bassenthwaite Lake to the northern fells of the Lake District, is so distracting that it's hard to turn away and examine the six courses' worth of options on the hotel's dinner menu. The French-influenced cooking is most successful in its execution of traditional, hearty dishes: a soup of butternut squash, blue cheese, sage and risotto had all the comforting creaminess of a runny rice pudding, while the oxtail ragout accompanying the beef fillet was so divinely fatty that dessert, rhubarb crumble tart, seemed an indulgence too far. With immense stone fireplaces and voluminous ceilings, Armathwaite Hall is built on a grand scale. However, this being Cumbria, the service couldn't be friendlier.

Foodie diversion: The Pheasant Inn (017687 76234) is a great dining pub and less than a mile away.

Details: Armathwaite Hall, Bassenthwaite Lake, Keswick, Cumbria CA12 4RE (017687 76551; armathwaite-hall.com). Double from £106 per person per night (based on two sharing), including breakfast.

Come here for: friendly formality in a spectacular setting.

LE COUVENT DES MINIMES MANE-EN-PROVENCE, FRANCE

This charming hotel and spa is located in a 17th-century convent, set among Mane-en-Provence's beautiful lavender fields. Offering a tranquil retreat, the property was opened by L'Occitane, known for their natural skincare products and fragrances, earlier this year. Using local artisans, architect Bruno Legrand combines simplicity and purity to transform the ancient stone buildings into a hotel and spa with two swimming pools and 46 rooms and suites, some of which have private gardens. The extensive spa menu features hydrotherapy and a range of indulgent body treatments for singles and couples. The spa's face and body scrubs all make use of convent-grown olives, lemons, verbena, honey and fragrant lavender. Talented young chef Philippe Guerin (ex-Chateau Saint Martin in Venice and Negresco in Nice) has created the restaurant, Le Cloître. He is proud of the organic produce gathered from his octager, nearby farms and allotments. The restaurant patio has a cool breeze wafting through it and offers the perfect spot to enjoy starters including ravioli stuffed with ricotta, served with red pepper jus and warm saffron tules. For mains, try Guerin's golden sea bass, served in a soup of spicy fennel with convent herbs, or roast lamb from Sisteron with stuffed courgette flowers. Goats' cheese, drizzled with olive oil, accompanies a fine selection from local cheese-maker, Monsieur Mons. Tempting desserts include light soufflés, raspberries perfumed with rosewater, lemon sorbet or gazpacho of fresh fruit. The poolside restaurant-bar, Bancaou, serves sumptuous buffet lunches and the chapel hosts musical evenings and art exhibitions.

Foodie diversion: La Maison des Produits de Pays (00 33 4 92 75 37 60; mane-en-provence.com), located near Le Couvent, combines the expertise of 40 top producers, craftsmen and artists of Haute-Provence. With regular wine and food tastings, come here to stock up on crème de marron, nougat, chocolates, local olive oils and tapenade, wine, and a variety of farm cheeses.

Details: Le Couvent des Minimes, Chemin des Jeux de Mai, Mane-en-Provence, France (00 33 4 92 74 77 77; couventdesminimes-hotelspa.com). From £288 per person for a two-night stay, with breakfast, dinner and spa treatment.

Come here for: a peaceful haven in rural France and a taste of organic, local produce. □