

France's 20 greatest villages, ranked and rated

Our expert reveals his favourite French communes, from Edwardian charm in Dordogne to the home of sauvignon blanc in the Loire Valley



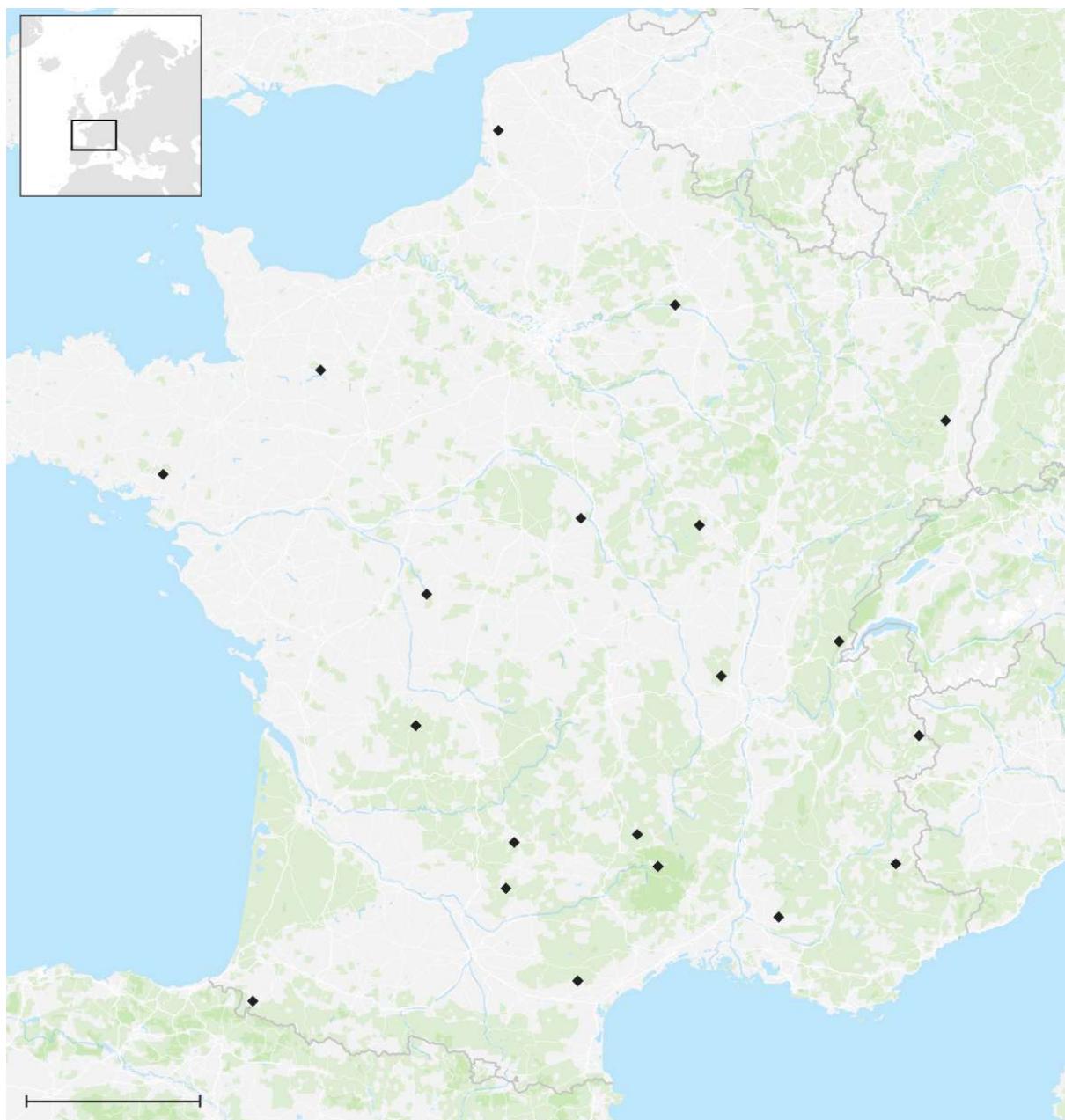
The hilltop village of Gordes in Provence is one of writer, Anthony Peregrine's, favourite French villages Credit: genekrebs/E+

The summer holidays are rolling around. Some people will be going to [France](#) and seeking out French villages – the ones fabled for markets, bars, boulangeries and a sense of communal purpose we sometimes think we've lost in Britain. But which villages? I've compiled a list of my top 20 – counting down to my favourite.

In a sense, the selection is nonsensical: there are so many variables, and some 36,000 French communes to choose from. But it's quite fun, and not to be taken too seriously. I've tried to avoid too many of the blindingly obvious (La Roque-Gageac, Mont Saint-Michel); too many of those which have more potters and ceramicists than bakers and grocers – in that case, the village is clinically dead – and too many of those which are shuttered in the off-season because they're overcome with holiday-home owners.

I've favoured instead those whose prettiness and life have substance and are rooted in history; those which maybe have a story to tell. I've randomly set a maximum population of 3,500 for a village (one slides slightly over that limit) and have attempted to focus on those French villages that I get most excited about returning to.

France's 20 greatest villages



1. St Jean Pied de Port, Basque country
2. Le Pont de Montvert, Cévennes, Occitanie
3. Angles-sur-l'Anglin, Vienne, Nouvelle Aquitaine
4. Montreuil, Pas de Calais
5. Kaysersberg, Alsace
6. Minerve, Hérault, Occitanie
7. Barcelonnette, Ubaye Valley, Alps

8. Bagnoles-de-l'Orne, Normandy
9. Saint Cirq Lapopie, Lot valley
10. Hautvillers, Champagne
11. Beaumont-du-Périgord, Dordogne
12. Sancerre, Loire Valley
13. Rochefort-en-Terre, Brittany
14. Gordes, Vaucluse, Provence
15. Saulieu, Burgundy
16. Rieutort de Randon, Lozère, Occitanie
17. Val-d'Isère, Savoie, Alps
18. Abjat-sur-Bandiat, Dordogne
19. Oingt, Beaujolais
20. Les Rousses, Jura

20. Les Rousses

Jura

Population: 3,663

Some 3,700ft up in the Jura, Les Rousses is where inside exists mainly to send you outside – notably skiing in winter. But in summer, you may succumb to biking, hiking, riding, zip-lining and being overcome by the ambient mountain grandeur. When all that pales, there's golf or an adventure park, or commando games in France's second biggest fortress, close to the Swiss border, where 140,000 wheels of local Comté cheese are maturing in the cellars.

At the nearby Arbézie hotel, the bar, stairs and bedrooms are bisected by the Franco-Swiss frontier. Last time through, I drank my first beer in France, my second along the bar in Switzerland.

Best bit: Like Skegness, the whole place is *so* bracing. You can feel your health improving the moment you arrive.

Where to stay: The four-star [Manoir des Montagnes](#) is mountain luxury at its most mountainously luxurious. Doubles from £102.

How to get there: Fly to Geneva and hire a car for the hour-long onward drive to Les Rousses.



The nature-rich village of Les Rousses is located 3,700ft up in the Jura Credit: Stephane Rouillard/Getty Images/iStockphoto

19. Oingt

Beaujolais

Population: 680

The almost-musical sound you hear on approaching Oingt – through vines, up the hill – will be that of the Barbary organ. They're keen on Barbaries here. There's a festival on September 6 and 7, 2025 and at other times, the sound may seep out from the Museum of Mechanical Music. In truth, they're full of ideas in this outstandingly preserved walled village overseeing the ruffled Beaujolais landscape.

Cobbled streets snake up the slopes forming an age-old conspiracy in which all may join. If this were Tuscany, it would be standing room only. But it's not; it's Beaujolais, and kept ship-shape by volunteers. Come December, they're the moving force behind a Christmas festival coating the village in 200 nativity scenes. In recent years, one person made his scene from tea bags, another used vinyl 45s.

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Best bit: The red-gold glow of gold stones at sunset.

Stay at: Seeking elegance and discretion? Try [Le Clos des Fayettes](#) maison-d'hôtes. B&B doubles from £152, two nights B&B from £228; or £114 per night.

How to get there: Fly to Lyon, hire a car and drive the hour to Oingt.



The gold-stone buildings in Oingt glow a red-gold at sunset Credit: Ludwig Deguffroy/iStockphoto/Getty

18. Abjat-sur-Bandiat

Dordogne

Population: 620

Of the many admirable villages in the Dordogne, only Abjat, off the beaten track in the north of the county, can assure you a game of conkers. Unknown in France, the crack of conkers arrived in Abjat with a couple from Northants who took over the village bar, renaming it the Entente Cordiale. Abjat is now the headquarters of the French Conkers Federation and hosts the annual National Conkers Championship (this year, October 4).

“It started off barmy,” says Stewart Edwards, the Northants man in question. “It remains barmy, but on a bigger scale.” To get conkered, head for the bar. That done, roam a much-beflowered and rather lovely village before exploring the deep green and watery surrounds.

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Best bit: In the village main street, the Entente Cordiale bar is where nation drinks with nation and everyone plays conkers. Or skittles. Or bar billiards.

Where to stay: [L'Auberge Gites and B&B](#) offers double rooms – with pool, boules, ping-pong and bikes for hire – from £64. Breakfast included.

How to get there: Fly to Poitiers then hire a car and drive two hours to Abjat.

17. Val-d'Isère

Savoie, Alps

Population: 1,629

In winter, the village 6,000ft up the Tarentaise valley looks like the most lavish of Christmas cards – Alpine chalets on steroids radiating from the Baroque church in the old centre. Trees are lit, mountains rise momentously on all sides; there's even a dairy farm to hand. So it's a proper high Alpine village, then, but so overlain with hip international gloss that it's promoted to a quite different realm, where peasant meets A-lister and most go skiing.

Skiing-wise – nowhere's classier or more expensive than Val-d'Isère. But the point for a non-skier like me (remember, this is *my* top 20) is the fact that the village lays on sufficient non-ski activities to fill a fortnight and barely bother the slopes. There's hiking on rackets, zip-lining, moon biking, dog-sledding, ice-floating, tree-top adventuring, snow mobiling or, in the Aquasportif centre, swimming, golf, squash – and more besides.

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Then comes summer, with more snow-free [high-altitude activities](#) than I can reasonably list. You might, as a minimum, go panting up the nearby Col de l'Iséran, among the highest road passes in France. It's perfect really; more so that many hotels, and quite a few of the village's 90 restaurants, remain open for the summer, so you're assured supplies of raclette and tartiflette. I ask little more of mountains.

Best bit: On the edge of the village, the [Ferme-de-l'Adroit](#) is a lone reminder of how the valley worked before skiing brought luxury. Fourth-generation farmer Lucille Mattis will explain the tough and tranquil sub-text to the mountains' story. You may find it more gripping than skiing tales of derring-do.

Where to stay: The [Avancher](#) has the right balance between Alpine tradition, class, comfort and not unreasonable pricing – for Val-d'Isère. Summer B&B doubles from £111.

How to get there: Train to Bourg Saint Maurice, then bus for the final leg up to Val-d'Isère.



Val d'Isère, a popular ski destination, sits 6,000ft up the Tarentaise valley Credit: ventdusud/iStockphoto/Getty

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16. Rieutort de Randon

Lozère, Occitanie

Population: 787

Villages apparently grow organically from the granite uplands (rocks, forest, rolling pasture-land) of the Lozérien Margeride. Rambling or driving through the remoteness, you'll seek a spot with a few facilities. Roll into Rieutort, a centre of rural life with cafés, shops, loads of farmers and a sense of sufficiency – plus a church where I once attended a wedding during which the priest wore wellies, for he was gardening later. I can vouch for that. It was my wedding.

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Back then, in one of the most profound bits of *La France profonde*, few had ever seen an Englishman, let alone an English bridegroom. But that was then. Now people say hello, and the surroundings are as magnificent as the Scottish Highlands.

Best bit: Hiking the upland surrounds on paths and springy pastures, by forest and fast-flowing streams. It's wild but rounded and forgiving: no ravines to fall into or crags to fall off. You'll meet no one for miles, except maybe a farmer who'll say nothing but will, if you ask nicely, give you a ride back on his tractor.

Where to stay: The refurbished [Hotel O'Mineola](#) has a stately appearance, practical double rooms from £53, a commendable restaurant and the warmest of welcomes from owners Cyril and Anastasie.

How to get there: Fly from Stansted to Rodez and hire a car. It's 1hr40 to Rieutort. Or drive all the way, leaving the A75 south of Clermont-Ferrand at junction 33, St Chély-d'Apcher.

15. Saulieu

Burgundy

Population: 2,283

The main reason for coming here is to celebrate François Pompon, creator of the Polar Bear, the greatest of all animal sculptures. He was born in Saulieu in 1855, went on to work with Rodin, and finally found fame with the bear in his 68th year. The original sculpture is in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, but there's a great copy guarding the main drag through Saulieu, plus other fine works in the village's small but splendid Musée François Pompon.

The second reason is gastronomic: halfway between [Paris](#) and [Lyon](#), Saulieu has been a foodie stopover for centuries. It still is, with the terrifyingly expensive Côte d'Or at its heart. Thirdly, it's a grittily disarming gateway to the Morvan granite uplands, the wildest slice of Burgundy. The place, in short, has pretty much everything.

Best bit: The eating. If loaded, head for La Côte d'Or, one of France's greatest restaurants. At dinner, expect little change from £400 for two, excluding wine. The associated [Loiseau du Morvan](#) bistro – in the Hotel La Tour d'Auxois opposite – is much more affordable; mains from around £20. More reasonable still, and excellent, is the [Restaurant 7](#); mains from £17.

Where to stay: The 17th-century former convent, [Hotel La Tour d'Auxois](#) – part of the Loiseau empire, across the road from La Côte d'Or - has doubles from £97.

How to get there: It isn't easy, but that's part of the attraction. The nearest airports Orly and Lyon are some 2hr30 away. A train from London, via Paris, to Dijon or Avallon is between five and six hours and hellishly expensive. In all cases, you'll need to hire a car – so I'd bite the bullet, travel all the way by car (Calais to is 5hr40) and make a proper trip of it.



Saulieu, halfway between Paris and Lyon, has long been a favourite foodie stopover Credit: Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo

14. Gordes

Vaucluse, Provence

Population: 1,666

Of all the celebrated villages in the Luberon stretch of Provence, Gordes is the most worthy. Prettiest, too, on its hill-topping site. It's now best-known in France for the Parisian artists and media glitterati who descend there, with discretion, in summer. Lots of other people do so, too. (Did you really think you'd have one of Provence's prettiest villages to yourself?) But they do so because it's a delight.

The hazards of a hard past have left it spilling down the hillside, its conspiracy of steep steps and stone streets barely one donkey wide. Visitors flow through, movie director Ridley Scott makes wine nearby and there's the château up top. Cafés hike their prices – but nothing tells you that the place was awarded the Croix de Guerre for its wartime role as a resistance centre. There's true grit beneath the glamour.

Best bit: Just down the road, the Cistercian Sénanque Abbey soars with sobriety, indicating that medieval monks weren't all debauched. Some had a sense of the sublime. Sénanque is the abbey on all the photos, waves of lavender to the fore.

Where to stay: At the gates of the village, the four-star [Jas de Joucas](#) slots peace and style among the pine trees. Doubles from £152.

How to get there: Fly to Marseille then hire a car for the hour's drive to Gordes.

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13. Rochefort-en-Terre

Brittany

Population: 635

Among previous inhabitants of Rochefort (near Vannes) was turn-of-the-20th-century Naia – a witch and a ventriloquist apparently possessing the power of ubiquity. She could be in two or more places at once. Naia wasn't entirely legendary. There are photos of her in the Naia Museum, though whether any depict her in different places simultaneously is unclear. We must also mention Alfred Partridge Klots, a US painter who restored the village château to Gothic and Renaissance glory. It's easy to see why Klots was seduced.

The stone structure of the village had (and has) hardly evolved in centuries. It's so pristinely preserved that it seems almost unreal. Almost. Rural squalor has been replaced by geraniums, buttresses stop the church sliding down hill and the Café Breton, serving since 1818, is among the oldest bistros in Europe. It's nicely adorned with Klots paintings.

Best bit: The village has devised several playful ways of exploring Rochefort, not least the [Escapados](#) open-air, round-the-village escape game.

Where to stay: A mile from Rochefort, the [Auberge Saint Hernin](#) is a real, stone country auberge with a real country restaurant – plus a garden and swimming pool. Doubles from £76.

How to get there: Ferry from Portsmouth to St Malo, then two hours to Rochefort.



The village of Rochefort-en-Terre in Brittany has been pristinely preserved Credit: Eduardo Fonseca Arraes/Getty/Moment Unreleased RF

12. Sancerre

Loire Valley

Population: 1,292

Obviously, there's the wine – the sauvignon blanc against which all other sauvignon blancs are measured and found to be a little too florid. But the wine has a home, and its home is here, in a Loire Valley hilltopper, a medieval warren of streets steep, sinuous and narrow. Driving through at speed counts as culling. There's been blood before, mind, when a 1573 Catholic siege reduced defending Protestants to eating cats, rats and crushed slate.

The diet has improved since, with the wine but also the Crottin de Chavignol goats' milk cheeses and other elements of Loire valley cooking. To get the best of a Sancerre white, I'd go for a salmon steak in a beurre blanc sauce.

Best bit: To taste Sancerre wines at their finest, head for the [Domaine Henri Bourgeois](#) in the Chavignol sector of Sancerre. They've been at it for generations and are largely on top of the job.

Where to stay: Just down the street from the Bourgeois winery, and also owned by the family, the [Hôtel Famille Bourgeois](#) is a smart village hotel with a gastronomic restaurant. Doubles from £76.

How to get there: Either drive all the way, leaving the A77 at exit 24. Or fly to Orly and hire a car for the two-hour onward drive.



Sancerre is a medieval warren of steep and narrow streets, and is known for its excellent sauvignon blanc Credit: Kloeg008/Getty Images/iStockphoto

11. Beaumont-du-Périgord

Dordogne

Population: 1,755

Built to a chequer-board pattern under Edward I – in the 13th-century when the English ran half of France – Beaumont is, like other bastide villages, as satisfactory for contemporary affairs as it was back then. Country life flows in from the surrounding area by tractor, bike and car to talk rugby or foie gras at cafés under the arcades of the central square.

Or to go to Mass at the fortified English Gothic church. Or to stock up chez Bariat, the sort of hardware shop which died out elsewhere when your grandma was a girl. It sells everything, from nails to grapefruit spoons, boot scrapers to mole traps and .22 rifles. Nearby, Australian Prudence Kilgour has the most seductive little perfume business in France. Beaumont, in short, is riveting.

Best bit: The arcaded central square. Small town architecture has come up with nothing better in the 750 years since Beaumont was created. Take a drink at any of the cafés, and get there on Tuesday mornings for the market.

Where to stay: Fifteen minutes from Beaumont, in the almost equally attractive bastide village of Monpazier, the [Château Hotel Edward I](#) – a 19th-century manor house – is where you go for a taste of graceful *ancien régime* living, but with greater comfort and much better food. Doubles from £82; dinner mains from £21.

How to get there: Fly to Bergerac then hire a car for the 30-minute onward drive.



Beaumont-du-Périgord dates back to the 13th century and is home to an English Gothic church Credit: Arterra Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

10. Hautvillers

Champagne

Population: 628

“My only regret,” said the ageing Maynard Keynes, “is that I haven’t drunk enough champagne.” It’s not a risk worth taking, so travel to the region. The big posh houses gather in Reims and Epernay – but the heart of the matter is out in the villages where family operations create independent champagnes in cellars dug out by great grandad with a pick-axe.

Prettiest of all is Hautvillers, base to 17th-century monk Dom Pérignon. He didn’t (as claimed) invent champagne, but certainly improved it. Stroll to his tomb in the village church along sunny white-stone streets hung with wrought-iron signs. Then stroll back to Champagne G. Tribaut whose vines sweep down to the river Marne with Renaissance rightness.

Best bit: Tasting bubbles at Champagne G. Tribaut. Valérie Tribaut is as welcoming as her champagnes are good value. The Cuvée de Réserve is a steal at £18.

Where to stay: [La Chevalée chambres-d'hôtes](#) with the Fedyk champagne-making family has – as you'd expect – classy double rooms, suites really, from £187, including breakfast.

How to get there: Best bet is to take your own car – you'll need to fill up the boot. Calais to Hautvillers is a little under three hours.



Dom Pérignon lived in the quaint village of Hautvillers, in the region of Champagne Credit: Malcolm Park / Alamy Stock Photo

9. Saint Cirq Lapopie

Lot valley

Population: 204

Unravelling down its rocky promontory way above the River Lot, Saint Cirq Lapopie is a marvel of vertical stone streets and surrealism – a work-out for both the thighs and the mind. There's barely a flat bit to be had as one roams a spot which has been hanging on – physically and figuratively – for centuries. Once famed for its castle and the production of wooden taps for barrels, it is these days set up to receive visitors – don't wear heels, for heaven's sake – and pilgrims to a temple of surrealism.

This is the 13th-century tower house of André Breton, kingpin of surrealism. It's presently the International Centre for Surrealism and World Citizenship, and intriguing. Granted, I'm no fan of this kind of thing – the synthesis of dreams and reality as a blueprint for the future

– but, when I was last there in spring 2025, I spent terrific moments discussing the same with the eloquent young fellows running the place. We parted friends, so I was appalled to learn a couple of days later that fire had consumed much of the property. The centre will be shut for 2025.

Focus instead on the ruins of the vertiginous castle, and on the church. Note the statue of local lad St Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, strangled on a cross while a missionary in Wuhan, China.

Best bit: The atmospheric sense of a solid past has absolutely survived into the tourist times of the 21st century.

Where to stay: At the foot of the village, the [Hotel-Spa Le Saint Cirq](#) is a classy base for both the village and the Lot valley. Doubles from £83.

How to get there: Fly Stansted to Rodez and hire a car for the 90-minute drive to St Cirq.

8. Bagnoles-de-l'Orne

Normandy

Population: 2,730

I choose Bagnoles not because it's a celebrated spa town (though it is: Roumanian royalty were regulars). It is, rather, for the associated, raffishly elegant Belle Epoque aspect which all self-respecting spa towns wear. This is a French version of Leamington Spa, but with its hat at a more rakish angle. Built round a lake as big as the village, Bagnoles is more garden than town, and more forest than either. It's edged by 18,000 acres of beech, oak, spruce, rocks and much else besides.

As I do, US billionaire Frank Jay Gould thought the place delightful. He invested much of his crooked dad's railway fortune in a casino and Grand Hotel. He expected gratitude, didn't get it, so cleared off to establish Juan-les-Pins on the Riviera. Bagnoles has, though, got on pretty well without him, a seam of Edwardian charm running through to right now.

Best bit: Just out of town, the [Manoir du Lys](#) nestles in the Andaine Forest, a manorial hotel with a formidable gastronomic reputation. Chef Franck Quinton probably knows as much about mushrooms as any person alive. Doubles from £101; three-course dinner menus from £76.

Where to stay: Slightly more modest, bang in the village centre – and much lovelier inside than it looks from the outside – [Hotel Beryl](#) is as friendly as it gets, overlooks the lake, has a spa and double rooms from £73; three-course menu is from £24.

How to get there: Ferry to Ouistreham with Brittany Ferries and then it's 90 minutes to Bagnoles.



Bagnoles-de-l'Orne in Normandy is surrounded by forest, and home to a huge lake Credit: cavallapazza/Getty/iStock

7. Barcelonnette

Ubaye Valley, Alps

Population: 2,492

In the Ubaye valley, Barcelonnette is so purely Alpine – mountains, surging river, crags, skiing – that you expect vigorous yodelling. So wherefore the mariachis? What's all this Mexicana? The Hotel Azteca? Adelita Mexican restaurant? The Baïta boutique with more Mexican stuff than they have in Oaxaca? A Mexican consulate, for heaven's sake? Simple.

Folk from the surging Ubaye valley traded far and wide. Notably, by the late 19th-century, over and away into Mexico, where they controlled 90 per cent of the textile business, and some 27 per cent of foreign investment. The exiles sent money home, or themselves came back rich, established fancy villas (and equally fancy tombs) – and lasting links with Mexico. The tale is well told in Barcelonnette's recently refurbished Musée de la Vallée – and celebrated every year in the glorious Fêtes Latino-Mexicaines (August 7-15, 2025).

Best bit: The aforementioned Fêtes Latino-Mexicaines celebrating Barcelonnette's Mexican connections roar into life every August. Mariachis, sombreros and dancers in dipping dresses abound. There's Mexican food agogo, theatre, concerts, ballet and much else besides (August 7-15, 2025).

Where to stay: If you're going to do the Mexican job properly, you need the four-star, arty [Hotel Azteca](#). It has doubles from £93.

How to get there: Fly to Nice then hire a car. It's three hours to Barcelonnette.



Barcelonnette is an alpine retreat surrounded by mountains and rivers Credit: Nature Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

6. Minerve

Hérault, Occitanie

Population: 101

This astonishing spot grows directly out of a rocky promontory almost entirely encircled by gorges meeting in a vortex of vertigo. Apart from houses which teeter on the edge – mothers must have palpitations – slaughter is the village's key claim to fame. The 1210 papal crusade against Cathars bade village heretics to renounce Catharism or die. Three gave in; 140 walked out of the town gate directly to be burned at the stake.

Little has changed since; the light and heat of centuries pours out of the huge sky onto dense scrub, rock and patches of vineyard – and the village crams in upon itself to shelter. Stroll the streets and you might just be strolling the 13th century. Well, not really. There'll likely be a bloke in a tracksuit. But it's as close as you'll get.

Best bit: Minerve, of course, gives its name to the Minervois appellation wines, among the most interesting from Languedoc. There's a minerality about them which reflects their

origins. For proof, call in at Domaine Cavailles at 2 Grand Rue in the village centre. Their red cuvée "Coralie" at around £6 is remarkable value.

Where to stay: In the heart of the village, the [Hotel Relais Chantovent](#) has simple double rooms at £51. Its restaurant oversees the gorges, with menus from £26.

How to get there: Fly to Béziers or Carcassonne. There's an onward drive of about an hour from both.



The village of Minerve grows directly out of a rocky promontory Credit: Shaun Egan/Getty/Digital Vision

5. Kaysersberg

Alsace

Population: 2,528

Alsace gets a kicking whenever Latin and Germanic worlds come to blows. Locals have thus taken refuge in epic domesticity rooted in hard work, fraternity and unflagging festivity. The result, notably along the wine route, is a succession of half-timbered villages overcome with flowers and joie-de-vivre, all the while wearing Sunday best.

Most seductive is Kaysersberg, its wonky cobbled streets winding blithely below vine-covered slopes of the incipient Vosges mountains. Up top is forest and what's left of the imperial château, down below the birthplace of Albert Schweitzer. It's all so tenaciously preserved that you want to wind it up and see how it works, to accordion accompaniment.

Best bit: Albert Schweitzer – theologian, organist, musicologist, writer, humanitarian, philosopher, Nobel Peace Prize winner and doctor – was among the greatest men of the 20th century. He was born in Kaysersberg. His birth house reopened in 2023 as the [Schweitzer Centre Museum](#) celebrating his life, thought and dedication to peace; entry £6.

Where to stay: The magnificent [Chambard](#) has double rooms from £221 and, under the commands of Oliver Nasti, one of Alsace's finest tables. It is double Michelin-starred, so don't be surprised by mains from £84. The associated traditionally Alsacien, winstub (brasserie) is much more affordable, with mains from £26.

How to get there: Either drive (Calais to Kaysersberg is 6hr30) or train it to Paris, then take the TGV Est to Strasbourg. The full journey should take slightly over five hours. Now take the train to Colmar and switch to the bus for the last leg – about 90 minutes in all.



Kaysersberg is a picturesque medieval village on the Alsace Wine Route Credit: Federica Gentile/Getty/Moment RF

4. Montreuil

Pas de Calais

Population: 1,900

Hill-topping Montreuil is better than we deserve, barely 60 minutes from the Channel. Beset by ramparts and equipped with a powerful 16th-century citadel, it had a starring role in Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It's also a repository of British military memories: in 1916, Field

Marshal Haig established GHQ here. An equestrian statue of the fellow recalls the episode (you can puff out the chest further at Agincourt; it's just half-an-hour east).

These days, Montreuil is a tight delight of unexpected squares, gardens and cobbled streets; the whole is punctuated by so many bistros and restaurants that the village reckons itself La Destination Gourmande. You'll get the idea at the Saturday market on Place General-de-Gaulle. To get you started: "Un Welsh" round here is a local version of Welsh rarebit. Hope that helps.

Best bit: The beam-and-bare-brick [Le Patio restaurant](#) absolutely sustains Montreuil's claim to be La Destination Gourmande. Dinner menus from £39.

Where to stay: The [Château de Montreuil](#) is less a castle, more the result of an illicit affair between a French villa and an English country house. It has lovely double rooms from £95, plus a first-class restaurant and most pleasing gardens.

How to get there: Ferry to Calais and a 60-minute drive.



The hill-top village of Montreuil is a delight of unexpected squares, gardens and cobbled streets
Credit: nobleIMAGES / Alamy Stock Photo

3. Angles-sur-l'Anglin

Vienne, Nouvelle Aquitaine

Population: 327

On its rocky promontory, Angles is so startlingly pretty that it brings me up short. From above the Anglin river – just before this joins the Gartempe valley east of Poitiers – the village unravels sharply down in a jumble of stone, horticulture and thigh-stiffening walkways. It requires no improvement.

What it needs, it already has: a castle crumbled to perfection, a reproduction of the world's longest Magdalenian sculpted frieze (20 metres of wild animals and naked women: sculptors' interests haven't changed much in 15,000 years; the real thing is nearby, too fragile for public gaze) and a sort of sunlit self-assurance. In this, one of the loveliest slices of unknown France, nearby villages have treasures of their own: unequalled Romanesque frescoes at St Savin, five châteaux in Chauvigny. But Angles has the serenity.

Best bit: The reproduction of the Roc-aux-Sorciers Magdalenian, with its 20 metres of wild animals and naked women, indicates that sculptors' interests haven't changed much in 15,000 years (£6.75).

Where to stay: The [Relais du Lyon-d'Or](#) hotel is a lovely village auberge; doubles from £101. Book the day before and you may dine there amid the wistaria on the terrace. Allow £30pp.

How to get there: Fly to Poitiers then hire a car for an hour's onward drive.



The pretty village of Angles-sur-l'Anglin is perched above the Anglin river Credit: Herve Lenain / Alamy Stock Photo

2. Le Pont de Montvert

Cévennes, Occitanie

Population: 291

RL Stevenson passed through Le Pont de Montvert during his *Travels With A Donkey In The Cévennes*. Let's forget that. The book is like being cornered by a hiking bore. More interesting is that this close-packed village – it stretches with sober dignity along the infant Tarn river in the lee of Mont Lozère – was a hotspot of the 18th-century religious wars pitting Camisard Protestant guerrillas against the Catholic royal authorities.

In the surrounding hillscape there's no thicket, dell, slope, cave or rock that wasn't roared over by the faithful keen to tear the other faithful apart. These days, there's a nestling calm, notably right now as the stone village adopts summer wear and sends walkers off in all directions. But the tough sub-plot lends resonance to the roaming.

Best bit: Not just walking – Le Pont de Montvert is a centre for all sorts of [outdoor activities](#). Rock-climbing rocks are to hand, as are via ferrata, canyoning, orienteering and much else besides.

Where to stay: [La Lozerette](#) – along the Tarn valley, just outside Le Pont de Montvert – may have only two stars but it's as comfortable as anyone needs (the bedding is terrific), with a garden, terrace and cracking restaurant. Doubles from £72; dinner menus from £27.

How to get there: Fly from Stansted to Rodez or Nîmes and hire a car. It's a little over two hours to Le Pont de Montvert from both.



Le Pont de Montvert is home to a wide range of outdoor activities Credit: Jon Sparks / Alamy Stock Photo

1. St Jean Pied de Port

Basque country

Population: 1,487

In the lee of the Pyrenees, St Jean (or Donibane Garazi, according to Basques), the pint-sized capital of inland Basque country, gathers in red-face, beret-wearing folk down from surrounding mountains for Monday markets, pelota matches and late-night bar-room singing about the wonders of being Basque. Modesty gets a look in, but not often.

Walled and self-contained, with narrow paved streets rising to seek the citadel up top, and a fine old bridge spanning the river below, St Jean is as sturdily pretty as Basques have been making it for centuries; it's welcoming, too. Pilgrims pause here, girding their loins for the subsequent 17-mile hike up the Pyrenees, en route to Santiago-de-Compostela. This makes everyone else feel guilty. Get over it with a glass of Iroulé guy red at the Hôtel les Pyrénées.

Best bit: To get into the swing of [Basque life](#), you need to see a pelota match. The trinquet (indoor pelota court) at St Jean hosts them regularly. Don't be tempted to bet. It's serious business. Locals have staked, and lost, farms on the game.

Where to stay: The four-star, family-run [Hotel Les Pyrénées](#) is the stately spot round here, with doubles from £102. Excellent restaurant, too, dinner menus from £39.

How to get there: Fly to Biarritz then hire a car for an hour's drive to St Jean.



St Jean Pied de Port, in the Basque country, has narrow paved streets rising to the citadel up top Credit: Daniele SCHNEIDER/Getty Images/Photononstop RF

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