

7 REASONS TO CHECK INTO...

LE SAINT JAMES Bouliac, France

In the village of Bouliac near Bordeaux is a chic hotel with a relaxed vibe, fantastic food and amazing views

1 Cool, contemporary design

Originally an 18th-century farmhouse, this extraordinary hotel was designed by renowned local architect Jean Nouvel. His mission was to 'frame' the surrounding natural beauty – and the large glass walls do just that, creating a breathtaking display of the valley and the gardens for hotel guests. Every room is a room with a view, including the large, tiered restaurant, the modern bar and, best of all, the stylish bedrooms and suites, in which guests can enjoy the epic landscape from their beds.

2 Gastro chic Designed like a post-modern French film set with subdued lighting, Bauhaus-style furniture and dramatic sculptures, the hotel's gastronomic restaurant is nevertheless a warm, casual room which we found buzzing with friends, families and couples. Highlights from the five-course tasting menu include a starter of plump langoustines and avocado mousse (pictured) and a meaty main course of suckling pig with chard, chanterelle mushrooms and black truffle.

3 Canelés With their thick caramelised crust and soft custardy middle, these great little pastries, always made in an authentic fluted copper mould, were invented in Bordeaux. They are whipped out at breakfast time, coffee time and teatime and then after dinner, too...

4 Hearty portions It's not all about fine dining. Across the road and round the corner is the hotel's bistro, Café De L'Esperance, packed with locals

1 The high life: industrial materials create a cool, stylish hotel façade surrounded by the vineyard



all enjoying the short, sensible menu; a buffet of hors d'oeuvres for €9 per head, giant platters of entrées to share, such as Basque charcuterie for €15, and then a large choice of roast or grilled meat with fantastic home-cut chips.

5 Beautiful Bordeaux With its grand avenues and glorious riverside walks, this is the sixth largest city in France and, I'm told, was voted the second most beautiful after Lyon. Hop in a taxi and you can be browsing the city's shops, dining in its excellent restaurants or simply soaking up its history within 20 minutes. Plus there are weekend flea markets and farmers' markets. Pick up advice at the excellent tourist office before heading across the road to the Bordeaux Wine Council wine bar, where you can order small sharing plates and taste hundreds of different wines (baravin.bordeaux.com).

6 Cook your own lunch At the hotel's state-of-the-art culinary school you can spend the morning rustling up Michelin star-style dishes before devouring them with a glass of, yes you've guessed it, Bordeaux. Our tutor, the glamorous Cecile (pictured on the left, with me), put us through our paces making a delicious chestnut velouté garnished with Iberico ham and a Reblochon cheese cream, followed by langoustines on a butternut squash purée with chestnut gnocchi. This was great fun and highly informative, with lots of little tips on how to perk up your own dinner parties, such as easy ways to make herb leaf crisps and other garnishes; €85 per person.



7 The wine! Richard Bernard, the hotel's restaurant manager and head sommelier, will happily spend an hour sharing his knowledge, taking you through the major wine regions before focusing on Bordeaux. We learned why using the right wine glass makes a difference and the best ways to taste wine, before enjoying a delicious glass of Entre-Deux-Mers.

HOW TO BOOK

◆ Fly to Bordeaux from London Luton or Gatwick or Bristol, Liverpool, Belfast and Glasgow with EasyJet, from about £55 return (easyjet.com). ◆ You can book rooms or suites; doubles are from €195 in low season (saintjames-bouliac.com).

