



Le Logis de Puygât

STYLE Refined Renaissance retreat

SETTING Cognac country

'Everything we see and touch has elegance and originality, from the china and silverware we use at breakfast to the reclaimed trough redeployed as a washbasin'



Emerging through the massive arched entrance into Le Logis de Puygâty's great expanse of walled courtyard, we're met by complete silence. For a moment, all we can hear is our own footsteps. But we're not alone – Max, who owns Puygâty along with his partner, Pierre, is standing by with one of their dogs to greet us. An American/Belgian pair with a passion for furniture collecting and interior design, they restored the property to be their own holiday home – and then, I suppose, the guest list just got out of control. We're here to relax and reflect, just me and Mrs Smith, and to enjoy some precious time alone together; we've left our four children in the care of their grandparents and we've got two days of rural peace and quiet ahead of us.

If the exterior of this 15th-century fortified manor looks authentically austere – strong stone walls, beautiful proportions, a fine-looking turret – the interior design is pretty modern in style. Max and Pierre have used simple, rough-hewn materials and lots of wood, steel and animal skins, to keep an artisanal feel. The biggest, most attractive fireplace in the house (and there are quite a few) is in the living room. Adorned with a sort of chainmail curtain, it's what you're drawn to first, even when it's hot outside. Next to it is a pair of big armchairs and a low table with fresh flowers, candles and design books. Though much of the furniture has a 20th-century look, the colours used feel warm and antique, and the monumental beams and stone give the place a unique solidity.

I was born and bred in the southwest of France; my home town of Dax – also the first side I played rugby for, for eight years, before I moved on to Perpignan – is some 250km to the south of here. So the terrain around Le Logis de Puygâty feels familiar enough to represent a kind of homecoming, especially since I now live in the UK. All I can say is that I've finally found the most peaceful place in the south-west of France. It's funny, though: when we go into town, people start to recognise me – perhaps it would have been better to lie low at Le Logis. Max has recommended a good spot for dinner in Angoulême. Usually, the kind of places you find by the train station are, ahem, not that great, but Le Terminus is terrific, with very good fish – unexpected here in landlocked Charente. Afterwards, we continue our date at the cinema, where

we watch *Avatar*, supposedly as a test to see if it's suitable for the kids, but we love it.

When we want a drink back at Le Logis, there's an honesty bar: a few bottles of wine and brandy by the television. The house cocktail, made with cognac and lemon, will be whisked up in front of you if your hosts are around, and very good it is, too. Everything we see and touch has elegance and originality, from the china and silverware we use at breakfast (brought to us in our room) to the reclaimed trough redeployed as a washbasin. Our bathroom is very simple, absolutely nothing like the standard hotel facility; the massive shower, with natural stone walls like a cave, honours the countryside context perfectly.

On Sunday we spend the whole afternoon hanging out in our room, which is ideally kitted out for 'staying in', with a fireplace, sofa and soft armchairs. The white-clad bed is up on a mezzanine, decorated with more natural wood, stone walls, hessian and animal-skin rugs, which are an acquired taste, but definitely add to the warm atmosphere. Our windows are deep-set and small, which means it's blissfully shady and cool when the summer heat gets heavy, even if you can't fling them open to admire the view. Because





I work for the BBC and French TV as a rugby pundit, I'm used to my phone going off 10 times an hour. But here, inside these 500-year-old walls, the pinging is definitely less relentless, although that might just be my network, since Max and Pierre have made sure their ancient home is well and truly wired up for modern telecommunications.

There are animals living here, too: Max and Pierre's dogs, Nelson the black cat, the sheep, ducks, geese and a couple of donkeys who kindly provide our alarm call. It's OK, though – it's late morning by the time they rouse us. Actually, if you want to sleep soundly, definitely come and stay at Le Logis de Puygât. The only traffic noise around here is made by the sheep, who we notice having their breakfast at the same time as us, three or four metres away. And the custom-made cotton sheets are so comfortable we ask Pierre to order us a set.

On our second and last night, we take a nice fireside table for Pierre's table d'hôte – refined country cooking that's nothing less than awesome, especially the magret de canard, which, we understand, has achieved a measure of fame in *Côté Ouest* magazine (a sort of regional *World of Interiors*). Nelson is at our side throughout, which technically could mean we didn't get to spend as much time alone together as we'd planned. Feline gooseberry aside, we have luxuriated in 48 hours of the sleepest, least hectic, most calming time possible. Le Logis has given me a lot of inspiration, space to reflect on my goals, and consider the potential of the next few months. It's amazing what elegant interior design, historic architecture, great cooking, a beautiful location, friendly hosts and a bunch of cute farm animals can do...

Reviewed by Raphael Ibanez