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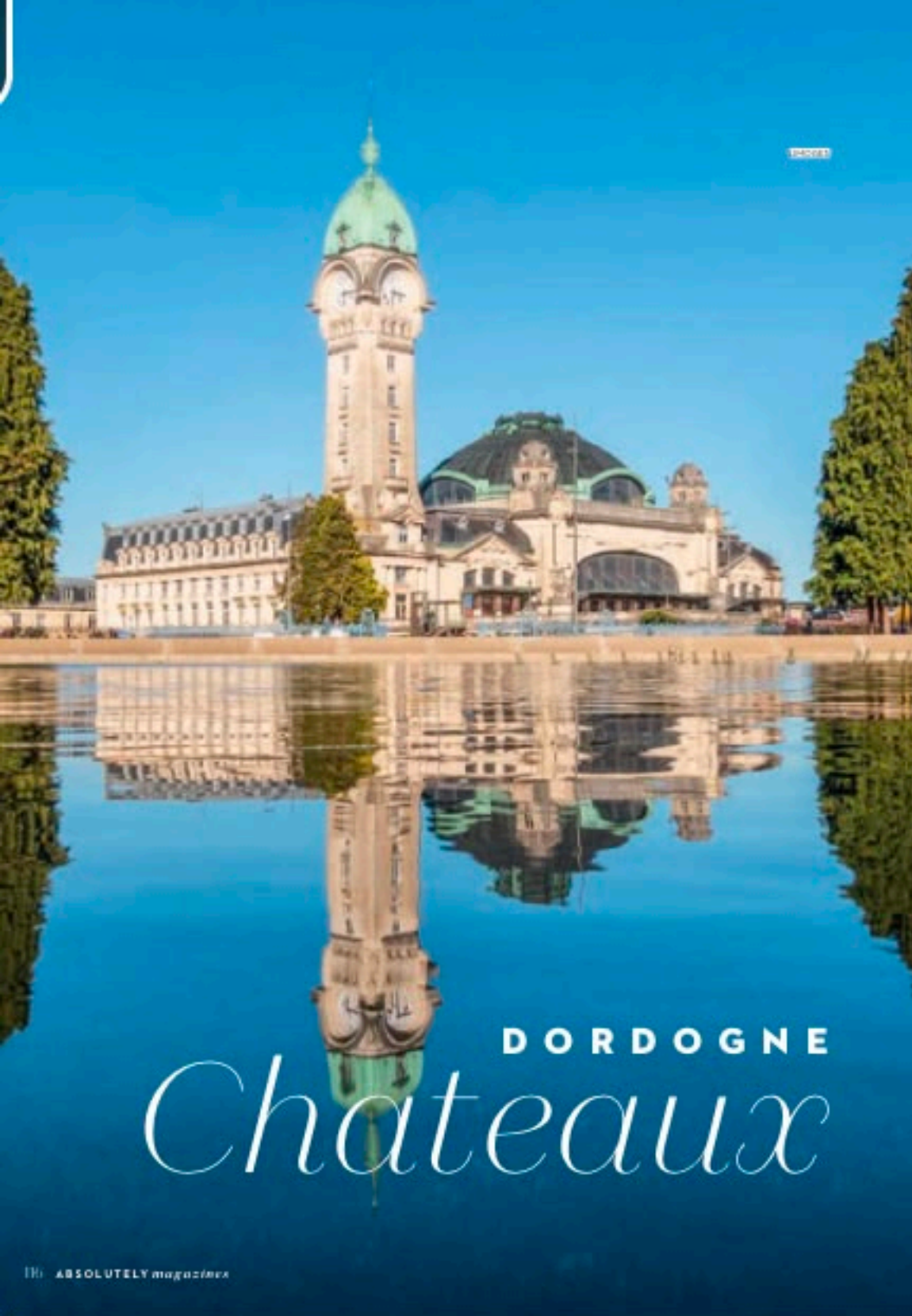
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DOROGNE

DOROGNE

Chateaux

Southwest France delivers a heady blend of beauty, history and indulgence, as **Sandy Cadiz Smith** discovers at three Relais & Chateaux gems

You have to remind yourself that Southwest France is closer than you think. Just a short flight from London to Limoges and yet we've been transported to a place where exceptional cuisine

and breathtaking landscapes come as standard. It's also steeped in history – from prehistoric cave art and medieval strongholds to centuries-old market towns.

Rolling green hills, serene lakes, and dense forests give way to Dordogne's dramatic river valleys, honey-coloured villages, and ancient castles perched above winding waters. Along the way, the culinary journey reflects the landscape. Tender Limousin beef, earthy mushrooms, frie gras, truffles, and walnuts. And whatever you sample is paired with delightful local wines.

Our journey begins in Limousin, a gentle, ten-minute drive from Limoges, at La Chapelle Saint Martin. This family-run chateau, home to 11 individually styled rooms and suites, sits in 35 hectares of woodland, bringing an immediate sense of calm and seclusion. It's a place designed for the ultimate relaxing stay. There are countless corners for reading, contemplating or simply taking in the view, while walking paths meander through ancient trees. An inviting outdoor swimming pool completes the picture – perfect understated luxury. Our culinary journey starts with its Michelin-starred restaurant, where we feast on dishes created using the best local produce and wines.

Morning dawns bright and clear as we head out to discover the region's famed porcelain at Bernardaud in Limoges. Afterwards, a gentle stroll through the town leads us to the atmospheric cellar of La Maison du Fromage, where a tasting of fine cheeses and wines is the perfect prelude to lunch. At La Table du Couvent, we are treated to French classics made with the freshest local ingredients. It's the sort of lunch you wish would go on forever.

But it's time to move on to visit Les





CHAPELLE SAINT MARTIN -
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ST JEAN DE LA TRINITE



CHATEAU DE LA TRINITE

SOUTHWEST FRANCE TRAVELLER

The three hotels we stayed in are all members of Hôtels & Châteaux

La Chapelle Saint Martin chapellesaintmartin.com

Le Vieux Logis leux-logis.com

Château de la Trinité chateau-delatrinite.com

Bernardaud porcelain factory bernardaud.com

La Maison du Fromage destination-livages.com/shopping-artisanal/la-maison-du-fromage

Lascaux lascaux.fr

Gouffre de Padirac gouffre-de-padirac.com

"River valleys, honey-coloured villages and ancient castles perched above winding waters"

Grottes de Lascaux. This fascinating prehistoric cave complex adorned with vivid Paleolithic paintings of animals, people and symbols is sometimes called the Sistine Chapel of Prehistory and provides a mesmerising glimpse into life more than 17,000 years ago.

Still dizzy contemplating the survival of such ancient marvels, we travel on to Périgord in the heart of the Dordogne. This is a region celebrated for truffles and it's also home to our next gorgeous hotel. Originally a family business, Le Vieux Logis is now lovingly overseen by four long-standing staff members who have preserved its family ambience. Dating back to the 18th century, the property has been beautifully restored, with 25 wonderful rooms, several cosy lounges, a swimming pool and newly designed gardens. It's welcoming and intimate, also luxurious. But the food is true star of the show. From a cheese trolley that makes you pause in happy indecision to a divine breakfast featuring scrambled eggs so delicious that I have to ask for the recipe. But the chef steadfastly refuses to reveal his secret.

And there are more unique experiences to come, as we discover at Château de la Trinité, a wonderful castle perched majestically on a cliff above the mighty Dordogne River. It's the perfect finale – grand and gracious with vast, luxurious rooms, sweeping views of the river and stunning gardens.

Once we've settled in and polished off a delectable lunch, a short drive takes us to Gouffre de Padirac. We descend over 100 metres into a natural chasm – an awe-inspiring underground kingdom of stalactites, stalagmites, with an underground river navigable by boat. It's vertiginous, a bit scary and quite otherworldly – definitely an unforgettable highlight of this region.

Southwest France is a treasure. The scenery is as varied as it is breathtaking. Every meal is a revelation and with hotels that are both unique and welcoming. Beauty and indulgence add up to a trip where everything that's glorious about France comes together in one beautiful package. 

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BARBADOE | CURACAO | SAINT VINCENT & THE GRENADINES



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