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Pyrenean treats

Hotel: Family's mountain hospitality goes back a century

Cauterets, high in the Pyrénées and south of Lourdes, witnessed the birth of French tourism when 19th-century visitors were attracted by the apparently health-giving properties of its thermal waters. More recently the resort has developed into an intimate ski station with a reputation for reliable snow. The family-run Hôtel Lion d'Or opened in the town 100 years ago and although it has evolved with the resort, many things remain unchanged. It still serves a set dinner for all guests at 7.30pm, which gives everyone a chance to exchange pleasures over an apéritif and to meet Thomas, the latest generation of the Lasserre family to run the business.

Meanwhile, his mother prepares traditional Pyrenean food that is simple yet intriguing. I enjoyed a meal that included locally produced foie gras, black pudding and goat's cheese. At breakfast, Madame Lasserre's speciality is miroir d'eau - sweet little pastry pillows.

Despite the hotel being in a constant state of hardly discernible renovation, the Lasserres have chosen to retain many period features. Large converted oil lamps hang over the dining room and a large brass coffee maker, resembling a part from a Jules Verne machine, sits behind the bar.

Mostly, the continuity is in the careful preservation of the mountain atmosphere. The rooms, which are reached via a tightly wound wooden staircase, are unfussy and simply furnished. Lace covers the table-tops and the lampshades, while the floors are bare and just a little creaky. The light fittings are in brass and the telephone is a wonderful working antique.

However, the modern and spacious bathrooms do not conform to the Spartan tone. Space is tight in Cauterets and the rooms to the front are directly above a very narrow street. It is so narrow, in fact, that it is difficult to properly take in the hotel's elegant three-storey neo-classical façade. Most windows opening on to the street are full height and each has a cast-iron guard.

The hotel's central position means that it is just 50 metres from the Bains du Rocher thermal spa and a short walk from the main ski lift – an important factor when you are wearing ski boots.

Paul Lamarra

Doubles from €80, half-board from €144

www.completefrance.com
Chambre d’hôte: Corner spot with artistic flair

Bagnères-de-Bigorre was once a fashionable spa resort that thrived at the turn of the 20th century when bathing in its thermal waters was in vogue. Carroire would stay in formal hotels and spend the afternoons promenading on the Allées des Gouttes.

Times have changed but the appeal of the thermal springs remains and today’s visitors include walkers and skiers, who come to Bagnères to soothe their aches in the new, cathedral-like Aquensis spa.

Catching the wave of interest that Aquensis has attracted is the chambres d’hôte Les Petits Vosges. With its deep-red walls, bold green shutters and climbing roses, Les Petits Vosges is a local landmark. The brave colour statement is the work of owner Charal Emile-Lacoste, whose artistic flair also gives the interior its personality.

The residents’ lounge, the salon de thé and breakfasting room and the four bedrooms have been tastefully decorated with tric-a-trac salvaged from schools and dressmakers. Some would consider this approach has become passé, but Chantal carries it off well, helped in part by a building that, in occupying an awkward corner site, is made up of many quirky dimensions.

My room, named after the Columbian artist Fernando Botero, was on the first and second floors. The first floor had a large and unusually shaped bedroom with at least two aspects. Up another flight of stairs and tucked into the roof space was a cozy snug in which to nap or read.

Despite its corner position near the town centre, there is a surprising amount of outdoor space, with a terrace either side of the front door and a south-facing one on the roof.

Doubles from £65 including breakfast

Apartment: Perfect base for skiers and walkers

Whether you are heading to the Pyrénées to hike in the summer or ski in the winter, a self-catering trip will help to keep down the cost of your holiday. However, a limited budget need not mean compromising on comfort and Lagrange’s Glos Saint-Hilaire property on the outskirts of the resort of Saint-Lary-Soulan is a great place to relax after a day in the mountains.

Our split-level apartment slept eight, and so provided ample space for just the four of us. My husband and I plumped for the one double room on the upper floor (there was also a twin room and another with bunk-beds upstairs, while the fourth bedroom, with bunks, was off the kitchen-cum-sitting area). The one bathroom upstairs and the shower room downstairs both had powerful hot showers.

The living area could have been a squeeze (or eight, but the huge dining room table was great for family meals. The kitchen had a limited number of appliances, but the many plates, cups and glasses would have catered for a large group of skiers – the apartment’s usual clientele. We managed well enough with the hob and microwave oven, and the huge fridge was useful for storing the bounty from Arreau market.

The small outdoor pool at the back of the building was a lovely place to cool off after a day out, while the sauna, steam room and gym were at our disposal in the basement.

With friendly staff giving advice about activities in the area, and a comfortable seating area in which to use the Wi-Fi, the reception lounge almost had the feel of a hotel, but without the prices to match.

Carolyn Boyd

€ A four-bedroom apartment sleeping up to eight starts at £247 per week, self-catering