



Partying big time

JULIET CLOUGH selects four large houses available to rent for the house party of a lifetime





The big birthday bash; the family reunion; the anniversary that calls for celebration on a once-in-a-lifetime scale – you’ve got the charmed circle, all it takes now is the ideal setting. Once, the British house party was a weekend in a draughty castle or country house, the province of a tweedy upper crust. Reborn today to star on the social calendar of, well, anyone with pockets deep enough to let rip, the twenty-first-century house party has proved the salvation of many a stately pile. Both here and abroad, properties big enough to sleep more than 15 people are finding themselves refurbished for guests looking for relaxed hospitality with modern knobs on. What a good base should offer is not simply the opportunity to spend time in comfort with the people most precious to you, but the chance to escape with them into your own version of a castle in the air.

Le Domaine de Foncaudière

The option of self-catering, with a gourmet chef ever to hand – either for private meals or for when everyone feels like celebrating together – suits many groups, particularly when there are children involved. Sunk in rural slumber near Bergerac, Le Domaine de Foncaudière, a modest chateau built in 1733 and surrounded by medieval estate cottages, provides just that luxurious flexibility for up to 20 guests.

Ten sleep in the stone-roofed mansion, where eighteenth-century panelling and oak beams provide a backdrop for simply furnished interiors. The cottages, where once bakers and stableboys toiled, have been converted to standards of luxury undreamt of by their original occupants, with indulgences such as log fires and massages. In addition to the pool, there’s a wonderful games barn.

The 100-acre estate – dreamy garden with stone fountain, orchard and formal beech walk – stretches to orchid-speckled meadows and distant woodland. Beyond lie the infinite possibilities of Périgord.

Farmers’ market stalls groan with the stuff

of greedy dreams: truffles and foie gras, figs and fat *pruneaux d’Agen*. Miracle-working chef Vlado Skovrlj happily takes guests shopping and runs informal cookery sessions with the results, some specially for children. The whole thing is underpinned with thoughtful hospitality: pâté de foie gras and a glass of chilled Monbazillac on the terrace; wine tastings laid on by award-winning Château Masburel; visits to some of the Dordogne’s famous gardens.

One week’s accommodation only at La Domaine de Foncaudière (website: www.foncaudiere.com) costs from £8,295 (for 20 people), and from £3,850 (for 10 people, in the chateau only). For details, call A&K Villas on 0845-070 0618, or visit www.abercrombiekent.co.uk.