

Fantasy stay Dordogne

Le Domaine de Foncaudiere is French for fabulous

A chateau that has George Michael singing its praises must be beyond most pockets, right? Wrong, says **Liz Edwards**.

THE FIRST comment in the guest book is from someone who's clearly had a fabulous time at Le Domaine de Foncaudiere. He brims with enthusiastic appreciation of the location, food, drink and hospitality – a return visit sounds like a dead cert. It's signed . . . George Michael.

Now I'm not one for seeking out celebrity haunts but his glowing recommendation did underline one of the many attractions of this chateau in Dordogne – that it's within reach of celebs and plebs alike.

If you happen to be rich and famous, or just plain rich, you can blow a good few grand on hiring the whole estate – two luxurious suites in the chateau itself and four cottages in the grounds sleep up to 30 people. But if your holiday budget is more piggy bank than offshore bank, you can rent one of the self-catering cottages individually and still have full use of the chateau's facilities.

Driving along undulating country lanes through lush woods, we first catch sight of Le Domaine across a valley. It's a beautiful place, a hamlet of 18th-century stone buildings surrounded by 40 hectares of fields and forests. The Dutch owner, Marcel, welcomes us into the main manor house with its hefty walls and steep sloping roofs. Through the library is the impressive lounge and we flop happily on to the large sofa.

Marcel is more hands-on host than hands-off owner, and he begins to tell us some of Foncaudiere's history: the dukes built their 1750s home on the site of a 14th-century castle.

Meanwhile, his friend Vlado emerges from the kitchen bearing carafes of local wine and platters of canapes. A big, exuberant Serb who spends summers acting as chef and running culinary courses at Foncaudiere, he's rustled up slivers of bread loaded with duck pate and foie gras, truffle and mushroom vol au



TO THE MANOR BORN: Grand in style and presentation the main house has everything one could desire when it comes to life's luxuries.



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vents, and fritons de canard (duck scratchings, but they taste much better than the translation suggests).

The welcome is overwhelming and I feel right at home.

Marcel tears us away from our snacks to show us around – besides the pool, several barns and some gorgeous views over the grounds, there are the cottages, carefully converted from their original roles as bakery, estate office and stables.

Each has its own garden area and inside they're beautiful: comfortable modern furniture complements oak beams, terracotta floors and open fireplaces. They're fantastically well equipped, too – bathrooms are luxurious, there's satellite TV and

stereos and the kitchen utensils extend to champagne flutes and oyster shuckers.

WE'VE decided against self-catering tonight in favour of Vlado's services and, true to earlier form, he spoils us rotten. Wonderful Bergerac wines accompany salmon tartare with truffle oil, strawberry and monbazillac wine sorbet, braised foie gras served with asparagus and raspberries, local cheeses, and strawberries dressed with balsamic vinegar and fresh basil. It reads, and tastes, like the menu of a top restaurant, but Vlado remains modest. He says: "My philosophy is:

don't complicate your life – keep it simple. I just use fresh, seasonal, local ingredients."

We don't plan to be quite so adventurous in our ingredient-gathering – the local market will do nicely – and Marcel and Vlado point us in the direction of Bergerac. It's a pretty, medieval town complete with half-timbered houses, museums highlighting the former port's wine and tobacco trades and a suitably big-nosed statue of Cyrano de. But we're here to shop.

Between Les Halles and the church-square market, there's a great choice of local produce. Some stalls sell leafy lettuces, plump artichokes and almost indecently large spears of

TRIP NOTES

- Getting there: Fly to Bordeaux via Paris. Abercrombie & Kent (www.akchapters.com) offers one week's self-catering in a Foncaudiere cottage, sleeping four or six, on an accommodation-only basis from £210 per person (\$494). Hiring the whole estate costs from £8295 per week for up to 20 people excluding flights, plus £315 per additional guest. Hiring Vlado to cook breakfast, lunch and dinner for 10 costs £785 per day.
- Further information: See Maison de la France (www.franceguide.com) or www.foncaudiere.com.

asparagus; elsewhere there's homemade honey, cheeses, wild strawberries, tapenade, preserved truffles and foie gras. The resulting lunch on the chateau's terrace is very tasty; the local rosé and spring sunshine encourage us to linger, admiring the formal garden and neighbouring orchards.

Foncaudiere is the perfect place to loll around, but we're also in a prime location for sightseeing. Marcel has told us that, thanks to the 100 Years War, the Dordogne has France's highest concentration of chateaux; following the course of the river, we spot plenty of cone-shaped roofs.

Castelnaud, our first destination, is not a chateau of the handsome variety, rather a hulking fortress on the banks of the Dordogne, housing a museum of medieval warfare. But besides the boys' toys, it also boasts the kind of sweeping views you'd expect from a defensive stronghold. Across the river on a high spur, we can see the Chateau de Marqueyssac. If Castelnaud is all about war, then Marqueyssac is about peace. Its shady gardens echo the contours of the surrounding hills.

We follow Marcel's advice to visit the medieval citadel of Sarlat and try local wines.

"We don't want to offer just a cottage or a room," Marcel says. "We offer an experience." And what an experience. Unlike at Club Tropicana, the drinks aren't free. But fun and sunshine? There's enough for all.