

Abbaye de la Bussiere, France: French abbey turned hotel is picture perfect



Abbaye de la Bussiere in Burgundy is movie-set perfect. *Photo: Philippe Giraud*

As Brian Johnston discovers, this former abbey is not just a hotel but an experience in itself.

My tourism map is full of squiggly coloured lines depicting wine routes in the vineyards surrounding Nuits-St-Georges. None veer westwards and that makes me feel adventurous as I swing into the hills, gears groaning. Sheep graze on uplands and tractors clank. This is a side of Burgundy I haven't seen before, somnolent and seemingly remote, though Dijon is actually only 30 minutes away. I am grateful for my GPS at innumerable country crossroads.

Finally, I cross a canal and spot a grand gateway. Beyond, a drive curves past willow trees and a duck-paddled pond. My destination looms. Abbaye de la Bussiere is movie-set perfect in honeyed stone and mullioned windows. My tyres crunch on gravel and, when I turn off the car engine, I hear bees buzzing.



The dining room has a church-like feel to it. *Photo: Philippe Giraud*

I gape like a gargoyle as I step into the hall. Arches soar and stained-glass windows throw an aquarium-like glimmer over carvings and statues. My suitcase is hauled away and before long I'm installed on the lawn, with a vial of cassis and a half-bottle of champagne. A Shetland pony crops the grass. I've fallen off the edge of the tourist trail into a pocket of Burgundy that might as well be Narnia.

The abbey was founded in 1130. Its first abbot, Englishman Stephen Harding, is credited with spreading the Cistercian movement across France. Most of the buildings date from the 13th century, including the eastern wing and refectory, but a century ago a neo-Gothic wing was blended with the old. Monks lived here for more than 600 years until the French Revolution, after which La Bussiere was in private hands until it returned to the Catholic Church in 1921 as a spiritual retreat.

Enter Clive Cummings, the second Englishman to make his mark on the property. Tipped off that the church was about to sell up, he arrived by train in 2005 to inspect La Bussiere and bought it the same day over tea with the Archbishop of Dijon. "That was the easy part," he says. "What followed were three legal cases, petitions from the villagers and reports on the local news about how I was going to turn the abbey into a playboy resort."



Soaring arches in the foyer. Photo: Philippe Giraud

What Cummings actually did was excavate the lake, renovate the gardens, remove 30 tonnes of partition walls from the buildings and rip out suspended ceilings to reveal original vaults. Remarkably, the hotel was opened within a year. By 2007, he had Relais & Chateaux accreditation and a Michelin star for his restaurant.

The dining room is wonderfully ecclesiastical, with church-like ceilings and sculpted heads that peer from the walls.

There's no refectory fare here, however. The cuisine is posh French, but chef Emmanuel Hebrard doesn't stick slavishly to tradition. He has a light, graceful touch that recognises modern tastes and occasionally wanders towards Asia: a prawn wonton as an amuse-bouche, sesame seeds on the Charolais beef.

A bitter chocolate sauce on my Bresse chicken is unexpected and perfectly wonderful. My meander through the degustation menu, accompanied by Burgundy wines, is perhaps the best meal I've ever had in France.

For the moment there are just 12 rooms and four suites at the abbey; the best have lovely views across the front lawns. All vary but, compared with the fabulous public areas, are devoid of ecclesiastical character. Still, they provide five-star comfort, while thick mediaeval walls and block-out curtains ensure I sleep like an abbot in his tomb.

Next morning, I munch croissants in a room dappled with stained-glass light and inspect the gargoyles that poke from cornices; more of the architecture that makes La Bussiere not just a hotel, but an experience in itself.

The writer travelled courtesy Relais & Chateaux and DriveAway Holidays.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

Etihad flies to Abu Dhabi (14.5hr) with onward connections to Geneva (7hr), a three-hour drive from the abbey. Return economy fare from \$1953 from Melbourne and \$1969 from Sydney, low season, including taxes. Phone 1300 532 215, see etihad.com.

GETTING AROUND

Leading Australian self-drive specialist DriveAway Holidays offers car hire in France from around \$300 a week. Phone 1300 723 972, see driveaway.com.au.

STAYING + DINING THERE

Abbaye de la Bussiere has double rooms from \$300 a night including taxes. Phone 1300 121 341, see relaischateaux.com/bussiere. Gastronomic menus at the Michelin-starred restaurant cost \$137 or \$188, Wednesday to Sunday; other times bistro menus are \$42 or \$115.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/travel/abbaye-de-la-bussiere-france-french-abbey-turned-hotel-is-picture-perfect-20140723-3cenj.html#ixzz397ak2qVB>