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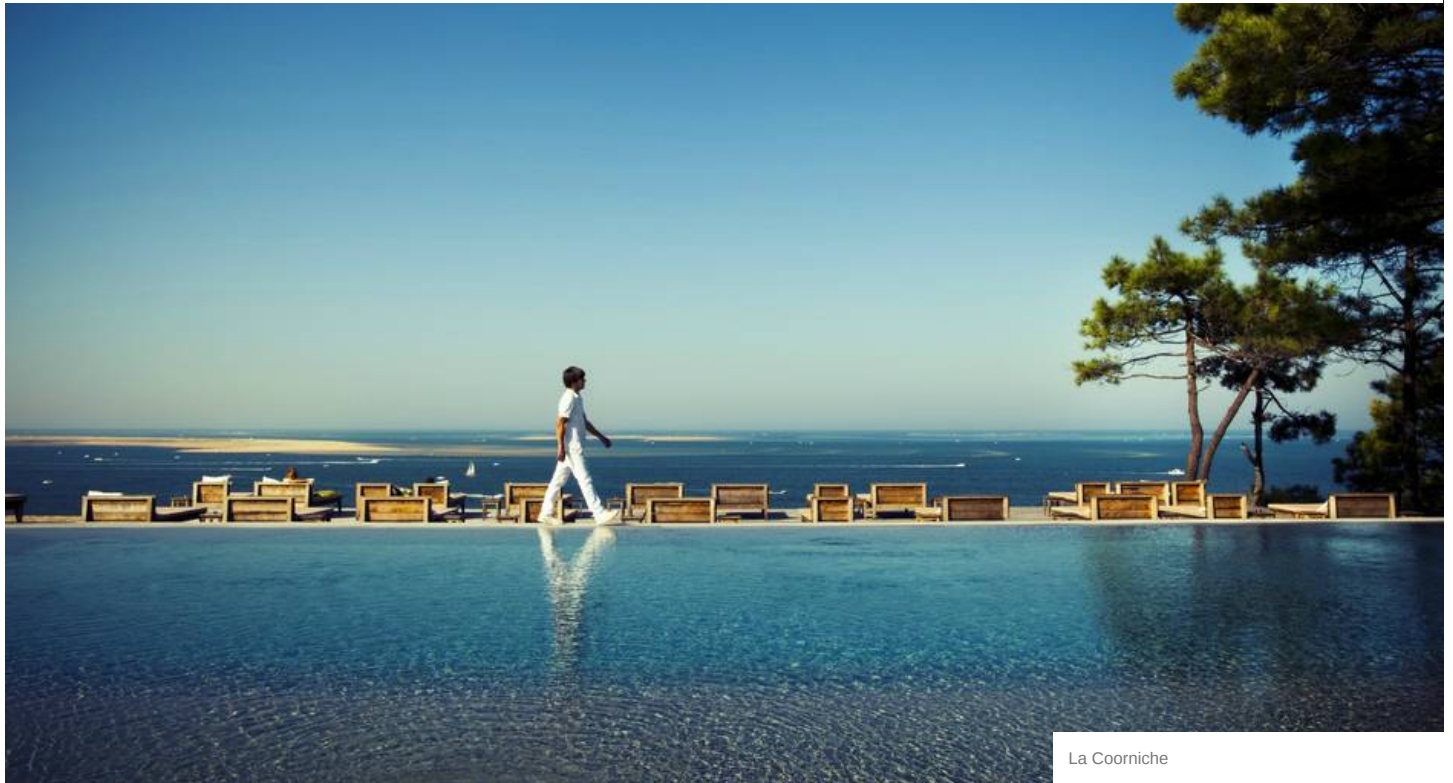
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La Coorniche

TRAVEL

Europe's exclusive beach retreats

Hidden and heavenly coastal resorts in Europe, for lazy days away from the madding crowd

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La Coorniche; Pyla-La-Mer, France

The Arcachon region near Bordeaux has forever felt like an outpost of France rather than France itself. There's a sense-smacking hugeness to the elements— sea, sky, vast sandy flatness – so that even Europe's biggest dune, the Pyla, doesn't seem excessive. The Arcachon basin has been celebrated since the mid-19th century, when the beau monde from [Paris](#) and beyond discovered its charms. Fancy villas slotted into the pines around Arcachon town. So, too, did hotels, among them the Corniche, a gathering place after 1930 for the rich and frisky. These days, the frisky and famous are once again present, though you'd never know. Here, there is always infinitely more space and stretches of sand than there are people to covet them. Marion Cotillard, Audrey Tatou and Philippe Starck are enthusiasts, the last of whom has given the old Corniche hotel a 21st-century makeover.

The location remains grandiose. Although the hotel is right by the Pyla dune, there is nothing but immensity before it. Public areas are barefoot-beach luxury, the restaurant isn't

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Sunset at La Coorniche

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overpriced. Outside the hotel, very little is new; life goes on as it has for decades. On the ramshackle terrace of Chez Cayouquette, in the quaint basin-side village of Gujan-Mestras, locals sit idly, as their parents did before them, enjoying oysters, brown bread with salted butter, and Entre-Deux-Mers wine, safe in the knowledge that everything is well with the world (lacoorniche-pyla.com; doubles from €380/£282, b&b).

Masseria Potenti; Salento Peninsula, Italy

It's the eye for detail in the tasteful peasant-chic design that really impresses at Masseria Potenti, a new Puglian retreat and wine estate on the Salento peninsula a mile or so back from some of loveliest sandy beaches on the Italian mainland. With just 18 cool, stylish suites scattered around the property, this feels like a true, lived-in Puglian masseria, or fortified farm. And although it is frequented by a mix of Milanese fashion types and hippy-chic international travellers, it is not in the slightest bit pretentious, thanks largely to the service provided by a team of friendly, sometimes endearingly shy locals.

The food follows the same authentic, unfussy route: from the homemade fig jam at the wedding feast of a breakfast to the succession of antipasti at dinner (mint-spiked aubergine balls, baby spinach tossed in olive oil), it's all simple, fresh and tasty. Yoga



Flowers in bloom at Masseria Potenti

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lessons, cooking classes or wild-plant foraging expeditions can all be arranged. But the default activity at Potenti involves less effort: a glass of the estate's excellent Bianco Potenti whitewine, by the vast pool, as whitewashed walls flare gold in the sunset(masseriapotenti.it; doubles from €180/£134).

La Plage Casadelmar; Benedettu Peninsula, Corsica

Corsica's secluded Benedettu peninsula is a world away from the yachts and designer

boutiques of nearby Porto Vecchio. Threaded with green waterways and sandy paths, this pine-fringed finger of land is one of the quietest corners in the Mediterranean: a sickle of golden sand on the southern tip of this chic island outpost. Tucked between the trees is La Plage Casadelmar, a low-slung, low-fi, high-style property, with 15 pretty bedrooms housed in small stone villas with terracotta-tiled roofs and sunny terraces trimmed with lavender and rosemary. Inside, a modish minimalism prevails, with white walls, bedding and poured concrete floors. Bathrooms in bright tangerine or muted sea blues provide splashes of colour.

While sleekly modern, the hotel remains in tune with its natural surroundings, its stone, glass, resin and oak echoing the colours and forms of the landscape. At lunch, guests gather in a restaurant of grey banquettes and copper pendant lights, or at a wooden beach grill under sail-cloth shades, to nibble on tuna niçoise. Benedettu translates in the local dialect as "blessed by the gods", a judgment with which it's hard to disagree(laplagecasadelmar.fr; doubles from €500/£372).



La Plage Casadelmar in Corsica

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The Hotel & Spa des Pecheurs; Cavallo, France

Scalloped with beaches and just over a mile

long, Cavallo is a [private island](#) that lies in the waters of the Strait of Bonifacio between Corsica and Sardinia. It amounts to little more than sand, maquis and tan and grey granite. It belongs to France but is owned mostly by Italians. In the 1970s it was a celebrity haunt. Then there was a disco. Today, apart from the single hotel, there is really only sun, sand, watersports and pizza. Inland, the scented scrub is latticed with



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footpaths and tracks plied by golf buggies. Cars are banned.

The Hôtel & Spa des Pêcheurs is the island's only vaguely formal retreat. The 50 rooms, all air-conditioned and refreshingly simple, occupy a medley of granite buildings at the water's edge. On one side are the yacht marina and The Port, the



The Hotel & Spa des Pecheurs

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latter basically the pier where the ferries dock, a shop, apartments and a pizzeria. On the other is the Shore Club, the hotel's smart snack bar, which fronts a pretty little bay enclosed by rocks and fringed by a white-sand beach. You could be in the Virgin Islands. The beau monde may have moved on. Their chic remains (hoteldespecheurs.com; doubles from €332/£247, half board).

San Fruttuoso; Liburia, Italy

It's no secret these days, the Ligurian littoral: the arc of coast from Genoa to the Tuscan border. Once, yes: in the days of Shelley and Byron, who fled here from the wintry north to live among its lemon groves and vine-covered hills. Now, in Portofino, the region's most exclusive resort, the lure of the little-known has long been sacrificed to the needs of the super-rich. But wait. Look harder, for even on this busiest of coasts is a fragment of a more peaceful past, a tiny cove that can be reached only by boat or on foot by way of glorious cliff-edge trails and thyme-scented headlands.

San Fruttuoso takes its name from the abbey that still stands on its pebbly shore, a



San Fruttuoso in Liguria

[Enlarge](#)

beautiful tenth-century building framed by limpid seas and forest-covered slopes. A waterfall tumbles through the trees, two tiny restaurants sell the freshest fish, and even at summer's height the bay remains a little-visited haven. At the end of the day, a few lucky souls can get a boat home to La Cervara, a former Benedictine monastery now transformed into one of the most magnificent exclusive-use villas in Europe, never mind Italy. Retreat to one of the nine suites, sip negronis in the formal gardens, listen to the organist in the private abbey or soak in the views over water, forests and little bays. (cervara.it; from €6,000/£4,460 a night, b&b, sleeping 12).

Can Simoneta; Mallorca, Spain

The long, straight drive flanked by olive trees that leads to Can Simoneta has a transformative effect on even the most burned-out traveller.

Stepping out of the car, visitors enter a soothing world of white slouchy sofas and natural linens, and then a wide lawn that leads to a cliff-edge view of the Mediterranean. It's all so relaxed, so rich with the scent of pine and salt, that it's almost soporific. Not that you'd know which of the hotel's pretty rooms to choose for a nap: one in the main house, in the cliff-lodging across the gardens or in the private and half-hidden Neptune suite. Some rooms have pitched, beamed ceilings, others have four-poster beds. Perhaps the best is the nine-room beach house (ideal to take with friends), a short stroll down the hill.

Those with more energy might take a walk down the stone steps from the cliff for a



[Enlarge](#)

picnic by the sea. Others might hike to nearby Canyamel beach or drive or sail to quiet coves along the coast: Cala Rotja, Cala Agulla or the idyllic Cala Torta, the last sheltered by dunes and pines. There's plenty to do inland, too, from exploring the tiny hilltop village of Capdepera, with its 14th-century crenellated castle, and nearby Artà, a pretty town with characterful

cafés and artisan shops, to riding a bike along the old railway line from Artà to Manacor (cansimoneta.com; doubles from €245/£182,b&b).

Areias do Seixo; Lisbon Coast, Portugal

An easy 30 minutes' drive north of [Lisbon](#), but far from the city's bustle, is Areias do Seixo, a hidden haven of a hotel that looks over broad dunes to the brisk, white-capped Atlantic beyond. Invigorating breezes blow in from the ocean and vivid, wild flowers of brilliant red and yellow add splashes of colour to the deserted beach.

Guests might collect shells, beachcomb or walk off anxieties before turning their attention to the hotel, whose interiors feel dreamy and ethereal, a mix of driftwood and pebbles, candles and flickering fires. The 14 bedrooms are snug sanctuaries of mirrors, patchwork quilts and wood-burning stoves, with fragments of poetry hand chalked on the walls. The bathrooms have chairs woven from driftwood and walls of sea-smoothed pebbles (the *seixo* of the name). Floors and baths – many of which are Jacuzzis – are fashioned from polished cement. Individual private terraces offer sweeping ocean views.



Areias do Seixo

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The hotel deck contains a swimming pool, and beyond it a campfire, where in the evening musicians sing and play the guitar for new guests. There is also an ayurvedic spa and a bar – try the delicious local Quintade Sant'Ana Riesling – and a restaurant that makes wonderful use of the bounty of the garden and the sea beyond (areiasdoseixo.com; doubles from €265/£197, b&b).

Greek Island Retreat; Petalioi Archipelago, Greece

This Greek island is so secret we can't name the owner: a prominent aristocrat, whose villa is a peaceful haven for private summer holidays. The island – part of the Petalioi archipelago – is a handy 45-minute speedboat ride from [Athens](#) and a stone's throw from the port of Marmari, and is covered with olive trees and wild thyme and edged with small, tranquil beaches.



Lunch at the Greek Island Retreat

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The villa itself is more than a century old: a family home that has been passed through three generations. Built in a neo-classical style, it has high ceilings, large windows overlooking gardens or the sea, and six bedrooms simply adorned with antique tiled floors and fireplaces. Its appeal, says its owner, is "its distance from the traditional jet-set holiday madness of some Greek islands, its privacy and its historical setting". Nearby is a calm bay, perfect for swimming and long *pied dans l'eau* lunches made with produce from the organic garden (welcomebeyond.com/property; from €9,500/£7,064, villa only).

Reviews by Anthony Peregrine, Tim Jepson, Lisa Grainger, Debbie Pappyn, Mary Lussiana, Charlotte Sinclair, Peter Hughes and Annie Bennett.

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