

THERE'S been an increase in interest in experiential and solo travel – most of us want memories over material purchases and many of us are trying travelling alone – and I've found a retreat that can combine both.

I flew to Carcassonne, in south-west France and on arrival at La Belle Eco, a nearby ten-acre manor house, dating from 1875, the first thing that struck me was how secluded it was. Surrounded by a wall of established trees and with no immediate neighbours, the only sound I could hear was birdsong.

I could smell the heritage roses, immediately in front of the house and to either side, and nearby, the lavender that fronts the grass meadow. I felt like I'd wandered into a French cliché.

Ruby and her husband Dimitri bought the 19th century property four years ago.

It had been unoccupied for 70 years, the roof was leaking, there was extensive damage internally, there was no electricity, the wells had been filled in and the grounds were a mass of brambles, she recalled.

But obviously something chimed with the couple, as they decided to buy it. It's been four years of hard slog to turn the caterpillar into a butterfly.

The first thing Ruby did was to 'sort out the pool'. A short walk from the manor house, through a wildflower meadow, is the freshwater pool that had previously been filled with chlorine. It didn't support any wildlife – it killed it.

BUT now, there is natural filtration and the pool is so inviting, a gang of noisy frogs has moved in. A single waterlily is in bloom, with more to follow. There is something very special about swimming in fresh water outdoors, with the sun on your back.

The pool is surrounded by a suntrap terrace and next to it is an orangery with an honesty bar – the local organic wine is inexpensive and superb – and storage for towels and sun cushions. There's also a wood-fired hot tub and sauna.

The owners have decided to embrace permaculture – a type of agricultural ecosystem that is also self-sufficient. A food forest has been set up near the pool, with fruit trees and soft fruit bushes. This will take up to ten years to fully mature but already there are wild strawberries and edible leaves to harvest.

To the rear is a greenhouse and kitchen garden with vegetable beds, salad beds and fresh herbs.

All food and garden waste is composted, and other waste is reused or recycled.

Back to the house, the guest rooms are on the first floor up the grand original staircase. Everything has been preserved that can be



weekly market in nearby Revel. We split up, meeting up later for a coffee in the café in the square, and the plan was to buy something we could all share for a picnic lunch near the pool. I homed in on the cheese stall. When we met up, we were laden down with French sticks, fresh asparagus and fine beans, cherries, peaches, cold meats, pate, houmous and olives.

Before lunch, we had a pickling and fermenting session outside with Gemma. Showing us how easy it is, and how both processes are different, we peeled, chopped and sliced, and in pairs made our own jars of goodness.

After lunch, we went with baskets to the food forest to find flowers and leaves for table dressing. Once inside and after advice from Sarah, we made our own pretty displays in old bottles and glass vases.

THE gala dinner for our final evening would be in the grand dining room. Before that, we had to dress for the occasion.

If you haven't brought anything suitably fancy, upstairs, next to the laundry room, is a hidden delight – a room stocked with theatre outfits that Ruby has collected over the years. A flapper dress was found for me and feather boa. We also had a geisha, a sailor, several women of ill repute and a circus ringmaster.

The evening dinner table looked stunning with freshly ironed linen, polished silverware, vintage China, our table arrangements and lots of candles. We had artichoke to start – very French – and not something I've eaten for years. For mains, Sarah served local fresh baked trout. With refills of wine and a few toasts, we were beginning to feel sad our special few days were coming to an end.

The retreat had given us time to meet new friends and learn a bit about ourselves. It had felt like a warm three-day French hug, with a lot of happiness and shared experiences. It was just what we all needed.

Retreats can feel a bit worthy and serious, but the inaugural Feel Good Feasting retreat was hugely satisfying. I warmed to the other participants, who all had interesting stories to tell, in a place where we had the time to talk to each other. I learned a lot too, about cooking, natural food and nurturing.

The next morning, after another sumptuous late breakfast – and a few sore heads – we were taken to the airport for our flights home.

#### TRAVEL FACTS

Ryanair flies Dublin to Carcassonne three times a week from €63 return, [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com). The next Feel Good Feasting retreat is September 25-28. Prices start from €1,600pp based on two people sharing. Price includes transfers, activities, food and soft drinks. Local organic wine is available at around €13 per bottle. Visit [labelle.eco](http://labelle.eco).

BY  
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and anything that has had to be replaced has been done so in keeping with the period.

I was shown to my room, called Etoile. They are all

different – some are larger than others, some have an ensuite – but they have been renovated with the same care and attention, including a copy of the original

wallpaper, brass beds and fresh organic cotton linen.

Etoile has a coffee machine and kettle, a pretty posy vase of wildflowers from the garden and refillable toiletries in the ensuite bathroom. I noticed old school radiators and a plug-in traditional radio. It felt like the room of a distant relative with immaculate good taste. I was there for the Feel-good Feasting Retreat, run with Gemma Ogston, a friendly powerhouse of energy and positivity who believes 'cooking does not have to be complicated'.

With two children at home and a business to run, she's developed her simple, healthy cooking into something of a fine art and The Healing Cookbook is

out now. She gave me a signed copy and it's proving so practical and useful that I bought one for my daughter too.

We gathered to meet our fellow guests at the front of the house, with Ruby and Gemma explaining the plans. Yoga at 7am is optional – in fact, all activities are, but there weren't any I wouldn't recommend. There were ten of us travelling solo and one couple.

We moved on to the barn, where upstairs is a yoga studio with one side open to the trees and birds. Arranged in a semi-circle, we lay down for a sound bath session.

There is some skill to facilitating this, and our practitioner produced some

**Blissful isolation: Clockwise from main, La Belle Eco manor house; The Feel Good Feasting group; Some of the fresh food on offer; One of the stunning rooms; A sound bath experience; Owners Dimitri and Ruby; and Gemma Ogston**

beautiful notes, with just bowls and a gong. Feeling relaxed, we made our way to our alfresco dinner. Under candlelight, we tucked into gazpacho soup and organic roast local chicken.

The next morning, a fabulous breakfast spread was laid out in the family room next to the kitchen. A theme was slowly developing – excellent food and convivial company. As well as local bread, cheese and sliced meats, Gemma prepared us a smoothie and Sarah the cook offered fresh eggs to order from their own chickens. A noticeboard in the hall informed us of the plans for the rest of the day.

After breakfast, we watched Gemma prepare some vegetables for roasting

that she would be serving as soup for lunch. She included the chicken bones from the previous night's meal to make a stock. Then Fernando, the gardener, showed the fresh and wild plants and flowers that can be eaten as salad, all collected from the food forest.

We sat down and in small groups, we made our own salads. We had dill weed, nasturtiums, spinach, nettles, mint and flower heads of orange marigold, blue cornflowers and yellow mustard seed, among others, as well as fresh natural salad dressings that Gemma and Sarah had quickly rustled up.

Back inside, we had a meditation session with Tricia, a Canadian, who now lives in

France. She asked us to taste a strawberry carefully with our tongue, focusing on the smell, the texture and how the first bite feels. You don't have to slow-mo eating every time, but gulping down food, standing up or on the move, is bad practice. She urged us to always allow time for mealtimes and to not rush our food, something I can be guilty of, especially at lunchtime.

We spent some time after lunch relaxing by the pool in the sunshine on the oversized beach cushions. Some of the women decided to swim. It's impossible not to feel relaxed.

Then it was a quick change and into the yoga studio. After an indulgent warm and rich cacao drink Gemma

had prepared, we did some dance therapy. The event started with the blowing of a conch shell. At first, I thought it was a reimagining of a scene from Lord Of The Flies, but it was not as violent and a lot more fun – just dancing around and jumping, led by our lively instructor. It might sound a bit odd, but it did get the heart racing and made us all laugh.

After we had changed for dinner, there were cocktails using natural botanicals and then another huge outdoor feast. This time, it was jacket potatoes baked in a wood-fired oven, with chilli and other accompaniments, and of course, the local natural and organic wine, of which we were becoming very fond. Saturday saw us at the