

SPEAR'S

TOP FIVE COUNTRY HOTELS & RESORTS



CASTLEREAGH LAKE, SUMMERVILLE PHOTOGRAPHY BY MASSEY, TEA TRAILS

Alila Fort Bishangarh near Jaipur, India

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Perched magnificently upon a granite hill, Alila Fort Bishangarh appears seamlessly sculpted from the surrounding rustic terrain, overlooking 360-degree views of the impressive Rajasthani landscape. Opened in July 2017, Alila Fort Bishangarh is the first internationally managed property in the Aravalli mountain range, about an hour's drive southwest of Jaipur, in northern India. Built inside the 230-year-old Fort Bishangarh, this heritage address took nearly a decade to complete. It's the kind of place where you expect to find a hidden trapdoor or a spiral staircase leading to a secret lair — a mix of raw history and mystery. Apart from opening walls to connect rooms and making space for elevator shafts, Jaipur-based firm Sthapatya Architects kept the entirety of the original structure intact. 'Each window and entrance portal, arches and columns, railings and jaali screens (latticed window patterns), turrets and walls ... everything had to be fully in sync with the original fort,' Ritu Khandelwal, principal architect of Sthapatya Architects, has said. 'We were very careful in not making a "palace" and, instead, let it reverberate the story of the fort.' The slickly, contemporary interiors should complement the monumental 18th-century lines of the military fort that houses it and overlooks the village of Bishangarh, about an hour-and-a-half's drive from Jaipur airport. But it's the drill-down cultural experiences for which this company is known that are likely to make it a standout. Drawing on their local knowledge, Alila Journeys and Experiences offer unique interactions with the destination based on guests' personal preferences. The journeys revolve around various themes such as History, Adventure, Enlightenment, Gastronomy, Agriculture and more, connecting with the environment and community.

Auberge de Soleil Rutherford, Napa Valley, California

aubergeresorts.com
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Of the three Auberge resorts in Napa Valley (Calistoga Ranch and Spa Solage being the other two), Auberge, with its Mediterranean vibe, is most definitely the grand dame, now 35 years old. The views across the estate are highly prized. On a clear day you can see as far as San Francisco in the south and Mount St Helena in the north. This is an adults-only retreat in the heart of California wine country, where the restaurant boasts a selection of 15,000 wines. As well as 50 rooms there are eight new deluxe suites created by San Francisco interior designer Suzanne Tucker. 'This redesign blends the natural romance of Auberge du Soleil's spectacular setting with a contemporary sensuality that is very fresh,' said Tucker. 'The effect is a sophisticated country escape that is chic and seductive.' The beige, sandstone and terracotta walls are complimented by bleached woods. Bedrooms have custom-made mattresses and hand-carved headboards. Two of them boast a fresco shower and bathtub for bathing under the stars. All rooms are equipped with high-definition Samsung televisions, Blue Ray DVD players, Bose Bluetooth audio players and high-speed Wi-Fi. There are two separate residences on the property, Maison Arles and Maison Bandol. Each has two king bedrooms and two one-bedroom suites, private outdoor areas, its own hot tub, and magnificent views across the estate. The wedding trade is big in Napa Valley and the Auberge had to move on three planned ceremonies during the wine country fires in October, as much for logistical as safety reasons, but the property itself was not damaged. The restaurant here has won 11 consecutive Michelin stars, and you can dine beside the pool. *Forbes* magazine has rated it as the only five-star hotel in the Napa Valley.

La Bastide de Gordes Luberon, France

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Considered one of the most beautiful villages in France, Gordes is a 'village-perché' (perched village) sat upon a calcareous outcrop of the Vaucluse Mountains in the Luberon Valley, the region made famous by Peter Mayle in his memoir *A Year in Provence*, round 40 kilometres east of Avignon. Its buildings, constructed from pale limestone, are interspersed with cobbled streets and with cypress trees. It was a hive of resistance activity during World War II, for which the town was awarded the Croix du Guerre, and subsequently attracted artists including Marc Chagall and Jean Deyrolle. There are several nearby attractions, such as Roussillon and Lacoste, the Abbé de Seyanque, and the Village of the Bories. Nestling among the ramparts of the citadel-city is La Bastide de Gordes, a palatial five-star boutique hotel in four contiguous buildings dating from the 12th century, which reopened at the end of June 2016 after a €20 million refurbishment. Its new 800-square-metre Sisley Spa, renovated by designer Christophe Tollemer, reopened in April 2017. It has 40 rooms and suites, beautifully landscaped Mediterranean gardens, and three swimming pools on different terraces, including a 30-metre pool for serious swimmers. The sumptuous quality of the room furnishing is an appropriate match for the majestic landscape outside. The largest suite, the Duc de Soubise Suite, is 113 square metres, but for those in search of the ultimate in spaciousness and privacy there is a 350-square-metre private villa with its own swimming pool and terraces. The hotel has three restaurants: L'Orangerie, La Citadelle and Pèir. The latter is a gourmet experience with a menu conceived by Pierre Gagnaire, based on locally sourced ingredients, and prepared by chef Léo Forget.

The Inn at Little Washington Virginia, USA

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The tiny Virginia village of Washington — population 130 — that predates its giant namesake 70 miles away has been home to one of America's most treasured rural retreats, and a centre of gastronomic pilgrimage for four decades. Not so much a restaurant with rooms, as a restaurant with half a hamlet attached. Chef Patrick O'Connell, president of Relais & Chateaux North America and an acknowledged pioneer of contemporary American cuisine, holds sway over a bucolic backwoods empire whose uncertain beginnings took a chance with a lease on an old gas station in 1978, and never looked back. As the man grandly christened 'the Pope of American cuisine' approaches a fifth decade in his picture-perfect redoubt on the edge of the Blue Ridge mountains, the gas station has become a restaurant with a mile-long list of accolades including two Michelin stars. Together with surrounding properties, there are now 24 rooms and suites, all meticulously and somewhat theatrically restored and named after the personalities associated with America's gastronomic evolution over the last half a century. Alan Greenspan, one of an apparently unending list of celebrities to visit the Inn, commandeered the entire place for his wedding in 1997. With a street named after O'Connell, a farmer in residence to tend the market garden, and the old post office earmarked for a bakery, though the casual observer wouldn't know it, the stamp of his success is all over town. There's plenty to do if you can tear yourself away from the Inn, too: Thomas Jefferson's prized home Monticello is nearby, as are the Luray Caverns.

Palé Hall Hotel Wales

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This is the only five-star hotel in North Wales. Owners Alan and Angela Harper took ten months to restore the yellow sandstone, Gothic Revival-style country home (1871), which is a Grade II-listed property on a 50-acre estate. It reopened as a family-run hotel in September 2016. There are only 18 rooms, but you don't have to go far to eat very well. Head chef Gareth Stevenson will be cooking under the supervision of renowned British chef Michael Caines, who won two Michelin stars at another country house hotel, Gidleigh Park in Devon. If you prefer, you can book a more intimate dinner in the library. Palé Hall has had some illustrious guests: Queen Victoria stayed there for ten days in 1889, while Winston Churchill was a visitor in the 1950s, when it was owned by the then Duke of Westminster. In the Victoria suite you can use the original bath and basin used by the monarch. The bathroom in the Churchill suite is marble-lined, with a copper and zinc bath. Some of the spacious rooms have large baths within the bedrooms themselves. The decor is not exclusively Welsh or English: Angela Harper has chosen to wallpaper the breakfast room with scenes of Venetian canals and gondoliers (inspired by her favourite Venice hotel, the Gritti Palace). Although this hotel is remote — located beneath the Berwyn Mountains, just outside Snowdonia National Park — there are plenty of country activities available in the vicinity. You can fish on the River Dee, sail on Bala Lake, walk the Denbigh Moors and Snowdon's trails, and watch or participate in the classic-car rallies Alan Harper intends to organise in the 'Evo Triangle', a network of local roads famous for testing new cars. The hotel is a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World group, and it is also dog-friendly.



Churchill Suite
Palé Hall Hotel

'Palé Hall has hosted Queen Victoria — guests can use the original bath and basin used by the monarch'

Palé Hall
North Wales

SPEAR'S

TOP RECOMMENDED COUNTRY HOTELS & RESORTS

The Craigellachie Speyside, Scotland

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It's easy to see why guests like Kate Moss and Noel Gallagher choose the rustic-glam Craigellachie for parties

The Craigellachie
Scotland, UK

Built in 1893, where the rivers Fiddich and Spey come together, the small 26-room hotel stands at the very heart of Speyside and its malt whisky trail. It feels like a countryside family home, with Johnston's of Elgin cashmere-topped mattresses, Egyptian cotton sheets and classically designed bathrooms. Five of the rooms have access to the garden, with dog beds available on request for four legged guests. The hotel also features a billiards room and a basement cinema room which can be used for private screenings. The Quaich bar, with red leather chairs and green velvet sofas, feels like a members-only club. With this combination of rustic and glam, it's easy to see why guests like Kate Moss and Noel Gallagher choose it for parties.

Bishop's Lodge Santa Fe, New Mexico

bishops lodge.com
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This grand 1920s ranch resort situated on 317 acres in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rocky Mountains, is being re-envisioned as one of the top resorts in the nation, honouring the property's rich history while incorporating state-of-the-art luxury features throughout. Due to open in early summer 2018, Bishop's Lodge will include 120 new and renovated guest rooms and suites. The renovations include a restaurant, an Auberge Spa, two swimming pools and 12 residences. The resort will feature a 3,500-foot event tent in the front lawn, alongside a preserved chapel constructed under Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy. Also on the lawn, Auberge plans to have luxurious tents for a high-end glamping experience.

The Lakes by yoo Cotswolds, Gloucestershire

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The Lakes by yoo is the ideal base for a Cotswolds spa break. With interiors designed by Kate Moss, Elle MacPherson, Jade Jagger and Phillipe Starck, the Lakes by yoo are a gorgeous design-led holiday destination. The properties are arranged into five categories, beginning with 'Special' and progressing to 'One of a Kind'. If you can drag yourself out of your cosy cabin, you can arrange bike loans with the concierge — in fact, you can arrange pretty much anything with your concierge, from a private chef to a massage — and pedal around the any of the six clear-water lakes. Located in the glorious Cotswold water park, The Lakes is only 30 minutes from Cheltenham, Stow on the Wold and Bourton, and only 15 minutes from Cirencester.

Ceylon Tea Trails Bogawantalawa, Hatton, Sri Lanka

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Regarded as the finest stay in all Sri Lanka, Tea Trails offers truly superior luxury in the island's historic tea country in the central highlands. The world's first tea bungalow resort, its five restored colonial-era tea planter residences boast period furnishings, a butler service and world-class cuisine. Perched at an altitude of 1250 metres, it borders the World Heritage Central Highlands and offers breathtaking panoramas of the mountains, lush rows of tea fields and the waters of Castlereigh. Each bungalow is unique and oozes ambience while offering guests the feel of a private residence. Rates include all meals and drinks, including top wines and spirits. Even service, taxes and laundry are included: no chasing guests around with bills here.

Les Sources de Caudalie Bordeaux

sources-caudalie.com
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An extraordinary collection of contemporary buildings, created from recycled local materials and designed to blend in with the estate of Château Smith Haut Lafitte, Les Sources de Caudalie is surrounded by its own vineyards and lake-filled gardens. There's a wide choice of accommodation, a panoramic cigar bar, a choice of restaurants and a spa offering grape-based therapies. The rooms and suites are styled to reflect the Aquitaine region. For nature lovers, the L'île aux Oiseaux Suite in the heart of the vineyards has an unexpected avant-garde interior design. Staff can organise activities, including wine tasting, cookery classes, grape harvesting, and visits to the vineyard and cellars. The spa has a new indoor pool and an outdoor pool, too.