



25 spectacular European national park stays

Immerse yourself in nature with these hotels, cottages and villas in some of the wildest reserves



Casalino cabins, Écrins National Park, France
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Green health, the experts call it — the way that spending time in nature can lower cortisol levels, reducing anxiety and blood pressure while boosting the immune system and mental health. There has been a slew of reports supporting this idea, and Scottish GPs are even now trialling “nature prescriptions”.

You’ve probably known all this intuitively for years. Think about those holidays that left you feeling renewed; I’ll bet each involved a good helping of natural beauty. While city breaks can leave you needing a holiday, trips that are set in gorgeous forests or on a wild coast have the power to calm, reset, revive.

Whatever the destination, the shortcut to guaranteeing natural beauty is to look for national parks and regional reserves. The trick is to match one with a stay that promotes connections with its surroundings. You want those “little-place-I-know” hotels in remote Andalusia, Tuscany or the Luberon; places where you’ll wake to nothing louder than birdsong, which wave you off for the day with a walking map, or which organise horse riding or canoeing then welcome you back with home cooking and a glass of something delicious. If you can find one in a private reserve, so much the better.

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If you’re hankering after the coast, consider the Alentejo in Portugal or the Maddalena archipelago off Sardinia. However, I’d urge you to explore even further off the beaten track. Places such as the Danish Wadden Sea, the Epirus mountains in Greece and the Triglav National Park in Slovenia all receive far fewer visitors than their more celebrated counterparts; if nature demands anything of us it’s that humanity takes second billing.

A final thought: as well as the health benefits of nature, those science reports noted a rise in feelings of generosity and often a rediscovered sense of wonder. In short, nature can make us better people. And you can’t ask more of a holiday than that.



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5. Dynamo Oasis Nature Reserve, Italy

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It's Tuscany but not as you know it: this 2,500-acre reserve of forest and meadows lies in the Apennine mountains in the San Marcello Piteglio region, an hour from Florence, and is supported by the WWF for its rewilding work. You may see red deer and golden eagles as you pedal a complimentary e-bike or go horse riding. First, though, you need to check in to the new “nature-first accommodation”, eco-speak for lodges sleeping three to eight that make a virtue of simplicity. Who needs bling with so much beauty outside?

Details B&B triples from £472 (oasyhotel.com). Fly to Florence

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