

Tents are so last century

Stephanie Hills spends the night in the Loire in France, in a cosy wooden cabin with a glass ceiling made for stargazing

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The sky at night ... stargazing through the ceiling window of a Carré d'étoiles

"Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises, Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not." So speaks Shakespeare's Caliban of his island home in *The Tempest*. I was reminded of his words when I awoke earlier this week in a "Carré d'étoiles" cabin in the fragrant, vine-heavy Saumur region of the Loire valley in [France](#).

From my bed, all I could see was the sky. Though I could hear that everything around us was already awake: birdsong filled the air, punctuated by the clucking of chickens and the strident call of a cockerel.

Carrés d'étoiles are a new concept in luxury [camping](#) and sustainable tourism: they are cube-shaped micro houses, made from recycled wood, where you sleep in a beautiful platform bed underneath a transparent dome. My friend R and I live in Paris, and waking up in our cosy nest over the hills and far away felt like we'd been whisked away to another world.

At the foot of our bed, there was a wooden ladder leading to the lower level, where loo, splendid shower, coffee machine and kettle, hotplates, microwave, fridge complete with jug of Saumur rosé, compact flatscreen TV, heater and comfy sofa bed all fitted inside a nine-square-metre space that managed to feel cosy, not cramped.

The stellar feature of the concept is that each cabin comes with a night sky observation kit: as well as the ceiling window for stargazing through, there's a €500 astronomical telescope, a star chart and [astronomy](#) games.

The Carrés d'étoiles project is the brainchild of Louis and Nathalie Blanco, who make the cabins. The first opened this year in Bourgogne, and there are already 23 available to rent in 12 locations across France, from the bucolic Omignon wildflower meadow site in Picardy in the north, to a site on the banks of the Durance river in deepest Provence.

The cabins are portable and designed to stand almost anywhere – by a river, on top of a hill – while having little impact on the natural habitat.

Our little Carré was in the grounds of the exquisite [Hôtel Le Chai de la Paleine](#), an old wine storehouse in the heart of the Loire-Anjou-Touraine regional park. There are three Carrés d'étoiles here, each enjoying its own corner of the garden, and there is also a *roulotte*, a glorious gypsy- wagon-esque wooden caravan, perfect for families. For those who are a little camping-wary, the rambling hotel has 12 gorgeous bedrooms, with wine-themed names such as Chenin, Pressoir and Pinot, which sleep up to five people. Upstairs are relaxing lounges and a library, which Carré guests can use too, while the grounds contain an old wash house where you can sip wine in the shade in summer, a play shed with toys, and a large games barn with ping-pong table and an informal dining/drinking area.

On arriving the previous afternoon, we had chosen, for exploration's sake, to head into the slumberous village of Le Puy-Notre-Dame for dinner, rather than take advantage of the Carré's dinner hampers. (The €30 "Country Basket" includes duck *rillettes*, unpasteurised Camembert, fruit tartlets and a bottle of red Saumur; the €45 "Gourmand's Pause" comes with foie gras, Camembert or goat's cheese, chocolate cake, and a bottle of Coteaux du Layon dessert wine).

Down the winding village streets we came to the only restaurant, Le Bouchon Ponot (24 rue de la Collégiale, +33 2 4153 6946), where we ate splendid hake in Béarnaise sauce, drank fabulous fizzy Saumur rosé and were romanced by some rotund and genial used-car dealers from the nearby town. Escaping back to our dreamy Carré, we despaired that the overcast evening would prevent us from stargazing. So we waited, sitting at the little table outside our Carré, wrapped up against the inclement weather and fortified by, what else? more Saumur. Suddenly, out of the darkness appeared a furry white shape with glowing eyes. It was Poutou, the owners' cat, who stopped for a kiss and a caress before vanishing again.

Poutou turned out to be a purry portent, for lo! . . . around midnight the clouds parted, and there was La Grande Ourse, or the Plough, sparkling above us. We hauled the telescope up the steps of the wooden platform built for the purpose, which stands in pride of place in the garden, and ogled the witching-hour canopy. It was fantastic.

In the morning, over the lovely continental breakfast that had been delivered to our Carré door, I looked at the last words I'd written in my notebook the night before, after watching yet more stars through the ceiling window from bed. They read "utterly snug".

- [Les Carrés d'étoiles](#) at [Hôtel Le Chai de la Paleine](#) sleep two (plus one on a sofa bed) and cost €90-€95 a night. Prices similar at other [Carrés](#) across France