

Nicholas Watts enjoys a fabulous sporting weekend at a château in Burgundy.

We have all shot pheasants in England and we know that they generally are as good as anywhere in the world. Most of us have been to France and we like the French way of life. But what happens when you have an experienced English keeper presenting pheasants and partridges in Burgundy, home to the world's finest wines and fabulous food?

Burgundy is about a six-hour drive from Calais, and it resonates with the names of famous vineyards – Chablis, Côte de Beaune, Côte de Nuits, Maconnais, Pouilly-Fuissé and so on. The region's heritage is also famously rich. In the Middle Ages the Dukes of Burgundy rivalled the power of the Kings of France. There were two 14th century rulers, Philippe le Hardi and Philippe le Bon, who conducted courts which placed Burgundy at the forefront of European artistic achievements.

So when I received an invitation to sample the best that Burgundy has to offer, I accepted without hesitation. My wife Anne and I decided to motor because I was taking a gun but I am sure travelling by Eurostar would be quicker and, of course, less tiring. Leaving Calais, the French countryside is very flat, but that soon changes into big rolling hills. Further south one starts to see Charolais cattle and big hedgerows to contain them. In the autumn sunshine there were some cracking views of quaint French villages and cattle grazing in fields.

Château de Villette is situated near Autun in the village of Poil, southwest of Dijon in Burgundy. It is the very impressive home of Coen and Catherine Stork. I phoned in advance and Coen came out to meet us and showed us to our spacious, well-appointed rooms.

Drinks were served at 8pm and that of course was the time to meet the rest of the party, a group of four Englishmen and two Swiss who

BEAUTY *of* BURGUNDY

Château de Villette... the hosts have completed a major restoration of the property

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had also travelled by car, some of whom were on a return visit. As they all knew each other the party was already rolling with a great atmosphere. I could feel from the décor and how things were set out that we were to enjoy the very best of French wines and cuisine, and I was certainly not disappointed. Coen is in fact a real wine connoisseur.

The next morning dawned bright and clear with some mist in the valley below. A quick walk around the château in the early morning sunshine as the cock was crowing highlighted some of the differences between France and England. A full English breakfast was waiting for us back in the château but there was no time to sit and gossip as our briefing for the first day's shooting was at 8am. Driven boar were on the agenda and the briefing was mostly about safety. We would be using 9mm rifles and 280 grain bullets which would be lethal to a human at 500 yards. We had instructions not to shoot the large boar – they are reserved for trophy hunters, usually Germans. The tusks however, are not very visible when boar are running towards you. A boar with big tusks can easily go for over £1,000. We would be wearing red waistcoats and shooting from high seats, meaning that we would be mostly shooting into the ground. We had strict orders not to leave our high seats until the drive was complete.

We travelled to a delightful château with more safety briefing before heading out into the fields and into our high seats. The drives are quite lengthy as a lot of ground is brought in on each one. I had quite a good seat as far as seeing what was taking place. After about 20 minutes a party of boar came rustling through the bushes and my heart was suddenly pounding. I pushed the safety catch off and kept still but they veered left and went to my neighbouring Rifle who was able to bring one down with his second shot. Another small group came through to the right of me, which the Rifle on my right had a shot at but didn't connect. I would have to wait until I was able to test my skills at a running target with a rifle.

Once the boar had been gathered up, the second drive got underway. It wasn't long before three boar came through near my neighbour, all large ones so he thought it best not to shoot. A few minutes later I had boar in front of me heading my way. They were trotting diagonally across a grass field.



The Stork family

I slipped the safety catch off again as they were definitely heading my way. I initially selected the second boar as I thought the leader was too large. When they reached some oak trees they hesitated, the leader sniffed the air, my heart was pounding again, but the second boar was out of sight behind an oak tree. I could see the third one so I changed beasts, but just as I was about to squeeze the trigger my neighbour fired a shot and dropped the one I was aiming at. The rest of them broke into a run, squealing as they gathered speed. I picked out a medium-sized boar, fourth from the front, aimed about two feet ahead of it and squeezed the trigger. The boar somersaulted. I had connected! By the time I had recovered from my success the rest of the boar were at a gallop and my second shot was a miss. A few minutes later there was another boar heading towards me. It was a sow with youngsters still in pyjamas – youngsters with stripes down their flanks and obviously still suckling – and so I watched them trot past.

Lunch was in the château dining room, soup to start followed by venison stew with best Burgundy red wine. I think everyone had



Caption



The view from the high seat



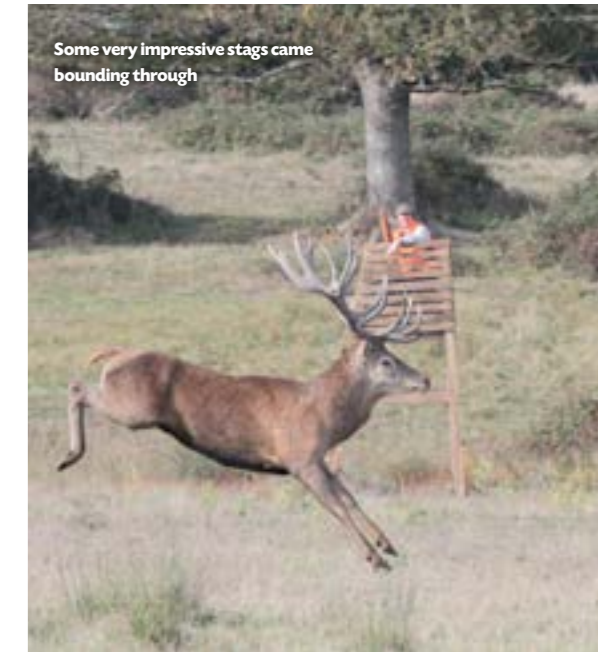
Lunch in the château dining room

shot a boar and so the lunch went down very well whilst surrounded by huge red deer racks of more than 20 points. Reds are obviously a speciality and we were told that we would see some this afternoon but like the large boar they were off the cards to us.

There was just one drive after lunch. We were delivered to our high seats and, waiting in the warm sunshine, I struggled not to drift into sleep after the lovely lunch... until I spotted the first boar. That certainly woke

me up but they were four large ones which I thought I had better leave. Two large stags came bounding through the line with massive heads, far larger than anything you could ever dream of seeing back home, and then some more boar, a whole line of them probably about 60. I never dreamt that I would see so many and they were heading my way. The two leaders were far too large to even consider – they were all trotting along following the leader. I chose my animal and slipped the safety catch off. I

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Some very impressive stags came bounding through

tucked my cheek tight to the stock, took careful aim squeezed the trigger and the boar fell. The shot split them up. Those in front of my shot galloped on while the rest changed direction to their left which gave the Rifle on my right a sporting shot.

I saw more boar but they didn't come my way. I suspect any that had been following would have now taken a different route, but I was quite satisfied and I was able to watch a black woodpecker come through the line, a rare sighting for me. The beaters and their hounds (all sporting orange jackets) were soon visible, and in front of us. They checked that the boar was dead as we climbed down from the high seats and found the boar to be a sow.

There was a cup of tea back at the château which in a way was quite an exciting interlude as we recounted our experiences. We had shot slightly over our quota of 20 but there was no extra charge as there were no heavy ones. It was soon back to Château de Villette where I was able to have a soak in the bath, thinking about the day.



Well presented partridges and pheasants

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Drinks and dinner were to follow. It wasn't snails or frogs' legs, but duck pâté followed by a Charolais steak with some nicely cooked vegetables and of course accompanied by some fine red Burgundy. Apple and quince pie followed by local cheeses, coffee and biscuits and an evening around a log fire. What more could a man want?

The next day was Sunday, another reason for coming to France. We were going to shoot pheasants. As I looked out of the window in the half light, mist was covering the valley bottom and two cock pheasants were strutting across the lawn, followed by three more. I just stood there soaking up the view. This was Burgundy, not Lincolnshire. I quickly dressed and went for a walk around the house before breakfast in the quiet autumn air, across to the gunroom. I was ready, even if the others weren't!

Continental and English breakfast left nothing wanting. Just a short briefing informing us that although we were in France it was English pheasant shooting run by an English keeper. We walked out across the gardens down a lane and onto the first drive. It wasn't long before we could hear the beaters and pheasants were trickling across the valley before the main flush which seemed to last for a very long time. It was early in the season and if there weren't

any pheasants now, there never would be. There were some good high birds, enough to get the Guns chattering afterwards. We had not drawn numbers, rather Coen had placed the Guns so that there was competition between father and sons and nephews and uncles, and it seemed to be working well.

On the second drive there were some partridges as well. French partridge of course, which flared very well over a tall hedge. After all that hard work we were ready for some liquid refreshments! For the third drive we were stood in a grass field with Charolais cattle and mushrooms where we were treated to some very presentable pheasants that really exceeded my expectations. I can't recall a grass field in England with such diversity in the grass sward. I was enjoying this, it was different.

One more drive before lunch standing on maize stubbles behind a tall hedge with partridge and a few snipe zigzagging through the line, which no-one managed to connect with. Some curling pheasants followed which usually manage to confuse the Guns but not on this occasion. Lunch was due to be served back in the château, but it was a mild day and no-one was hurrying to be inside. It was a proper French lunch, four beautiful and unhurried courses with excellent Burgundy wines.



There was one pheasant drive and one duck drive after lunch, with enough pheasants to cause one Gun to run out of cartridges. I was a bit apprehensive about the duck, but my fears were soon grounded as there were plenty of high birds and some were out of shot. A good drive to end the day with a bag of 250 head. There was dinner to follow and breakfast the next morning for those who had to rush back to England. It rounded off a hugely enjoyable weekend in France.

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