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This week's dream: a little corner of Blighty in rural Flanders

"Of all the First World War sites I've visited, Talbot House is the most evocative, yet most folk I know have never heard of it," says William Cook in *The Daily Telegraph*. Located in Poperinge, a market town in rural Flanders, it was the unique creation of two British army chaplains, Neville Talbot and Philip "Tubby" Clayton, who wanted to offer soldiers "a more wholesome form of rest and recuperation" than visits to bars and brothels. In 1915, they rented a townhouse from a Belgian family, and turned it into an "Every Man's Club – a cross between a gentleman's club and a traditional vicarage". Here, soldiers could play chess, billiards or ping pong, borrow a book, or enjoy a song at the piano, escaping for a while from "the horrors of the Western Front".

The house was named in memory of Neville's brother, Gilbert Talbot, who'd died in action earlier in 1915. It was "quaint and cosy", and "quintessentially British", a "home from home" for the Tommies who visited. There was a parrot that spoke fluent



Talbot House: "a happy place of pilgrimage and sanctuary"

Welsh, and a walled garden with a sign that read "Come into the garden, and forget about the war". Another sign, at the front door, read "All rank abandon ye who enter here" – a "revolutionary" instruction in an era when officers and men were "strictly segregated". And there was a rudimentary chapel in the attic with a carpenter's bench for an altar, where many men attended services, though this wasn't compulsory "or even actively encouraged".

The house has been "a happy place of pilgrimage and sanctuary" since it was opened to the public in 1931 – it's fascinating and "moving", well maintained, and full of mementoes from the Great

War. Guests can even stay overnight – an experience I found "supremely peaceful – like staying in the family home of an old, familiar friend". And there are many other wartime sites nearby, including the battlefield of Ypres, and Ypres itself, a "handsome" city where big crowds attend the Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate every night. Doubles cost from £19 b&b (talbothouse.be).

Getting the flavour of...



A peaceful oasis in Morocco

When I'm in need of a "tranquil", restorative break in Morocco – the country where I live – I often head for Skoura, says Alice Morrison in *The Guardian*. Set in the Dades Valley, which sweeps down from the High Atlas to the Sahara, this oasis town four hours' drive from Marrakech grew rich on trade in the Middle Ages, and has changed so little since that it feels "almost otherworldly". Its traditional rammed earth houses and kasbahs are set among verdant palm groves that I love to explore by bike, "whizzing down the dirt paths". The local people are mostly farmers, and traditional food made from local ingredients is easy to come by, including wonderful tagines. One kasbah, Amridil (pictured), is a museum of local life, and there's a lovely place to stay, L'uma Lodge, with a pool, an organic garden and a good restaurant.

Luxury caves in Basilicata

The caves of Matera, a Unesco World Heritage Site, are among the oldest continually inhabited

human settlements in the world, says Claudia Rowan in *The Sunday Times*. Spread across a cliff face below the town in Basilicata, southern Italy, they were evacuated in the 1950s owing to slum-like living conditions, but have recently found new life as bars, art galleries – and hotels. Among the latest openings is the *Vertera Matera*, a "sleek but discreet" luxury spa hotel with some rooms in caves and some in the old palazzi above. During my (very enjoyable) recent stay, I toured the upper town, with its "gorgeous" 13th century cathedral and "astonishing" view over the ravine. And I ate wonderfully well at every restaurant I tried, with a "delicate" sturgeon dish and "delicious" seafood pasta at La Nicchia nel Sasso. Although Matera is "James Bond-famous" now, thanks to *No Time to Die*, it's both calm and dazzling out of season.

A remote Greek mountain retreat

Think of Greek holidays, and chances are that summers by the seaside spring to mind. But the Pindus National Park is a "magnificent" destination all year round, says Lizzie Frainier in *The Times*. Set in the remote, mountainous northwest of the country, three hours' drive from Thessaloniki, it offers cross-country skiing in winter, wild swimming in summer, and wonderful hiking in spring and autumn (with wildlife including bears and wolves). In the nearby village of Metsovo, you'll find great food and some good museums. This October, I stayed at the family-run Grand Forest Metsovo hotel, and went on a nine-hour, off-road 4x4 tour of the park. Also enjoyable were a horse-riding adventure, and a truffle-hunting afternoon with some "adorable" lagotto romagnolo dogs, culminating in a three-course, truffle-themed "feast" served with rustic bread and local wine.

Hotel of the week



Mar Hall Golf & Spa Resort, Bishopton, Renfrewshire

This 19th century mansion sits on the banks of the Clyde just 20 minutes west of Glasgow, and 30 minutes south of Loch Lomond. It became a hotel in 2004, and has just emerged from a stylish £20m makeover, says Annabel Grossman in *The Independent*. Its 74 rooms have "rich, warm" decor, comfy king-size beds, and marble bathrooms. The restaurant serves Scottish classics, such as St Bride's Farm confit duck and Perthshire beef. There's a spa and gym with a 20m pool, and a "world-class" golf course. Other activities include falconry, archery and clay pigeon shooting. Doubles from £300 b&b; marhall.com.

