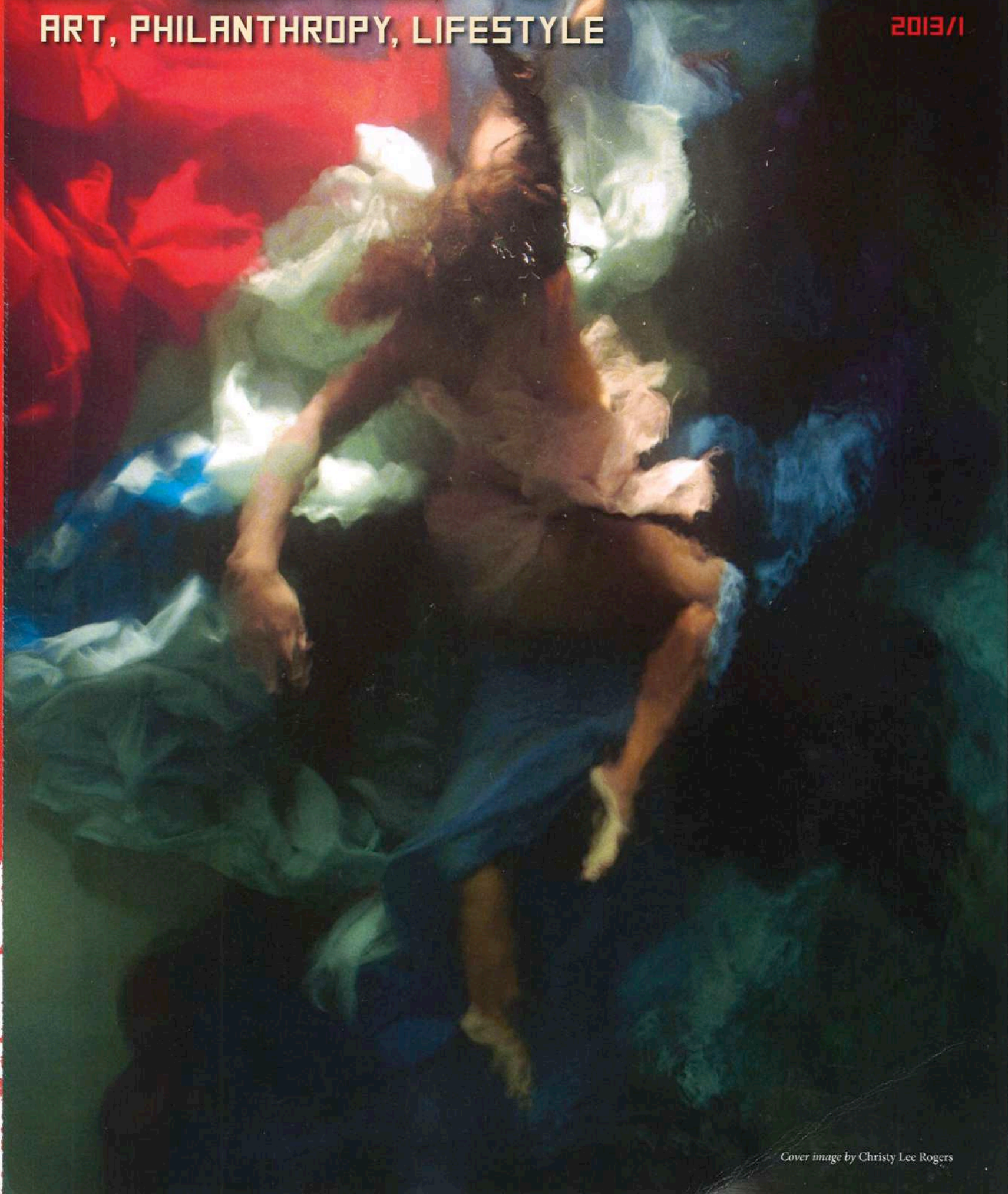


B BEYOND

ART, PHILANTHROPY, LIFESTYLE

2013/1



Cover image by Christy Lee Rogers

If you think of Nice as your Mediterranean gateway and have never been west of St Tropez, you are not in on a big secret: there is a *grèat déal* more about the South of France than glitz and megayachts.

Beyond that last western-most outpost of glamour that is St Tropez lays the vast and hugely varied expanse of Languedoc Roussillon, with grand estates, Cathare castles, Provencal *maisons de maître*, implausibly beautiful villages fringing the Canal du Midi, fortified cities and a spectacular landscape leading all the way to the Spanish border.

B Beyond flew to Carcassonne early October. The temperature on arrival was a perfect and balmy 26 degrees and remained so for the entire week we spent there.

Our intention was to explore the *arrière-pays* of Narbonne on each side of the motorway connecting the city to Carcassonne.

Although the casual tourist may not grasp the distinction, the locals would tell you that the Minervois, to the right of the high way, is quite different from the Hérault to the left.

The differences are subtle at first: both share that languid atmosphere of suspended time; gently rolling hills and ever-stretching vineyards; plane tree-fringed roads and tall dark green Cypress trees punctuating the landscape everywhere.

This is a hunting country too, with an abundance of wild boar, partridge, deer, all of which can be found on the menu of most restaurants, alongside local fish specialities and some of the greatest culinary delights France is justly famous for.

Our first stop was in the picturesque town of Fabrezan in the Minervois. The mistral-like wind was not strong enough to discourage outdoor diners sitting under the huge plane trees, discussing arts and politics in between robust portions of succulent food with some Spanish influence.

Beautifully aged stone buildings dominate the cobbled streets there and it is easy to see why the town is so popular with both the French and an increasing influx of foreign buyers.

The following day we took a drive towards Narbonne via Peyriac de Mer, a lively picturesque village on the edge of a salt lake formed by the sea jutting inland.

Narbonne itself is a beautiful ancient town well worth visiting for its cathedral, laid-back lifestyle and wonderful wine bars serving Franco-Spanish tapas.

Our main destination on this trip, however, was a French château in the Hérault area of Languedoc – Château les Carrasses.



THE 'other'



SOUTH OF FRANCE



The Château shows on the map between Quarante and Capestang, the latter known to boaters who motor down the Canal du Midi. It is difficult to do justice to that part of the world through eloquence alone or even pictures. To understand its addictive charm, you need to experience it.

To begin with, people in that part of France are just much nicer. Even if you struggle to understand their distinctive Southern accent, you wouldn't fail to appreciate the old-fashioned politeness, the obliging manner and the sheer warmth.

Quality does not come at a premium and no one is trying to pull a fast one. No fancy car drivers revving up their engines, no obsequious salesmen, no hassle. It is France the way you might have imagined it through reading very old novels.

Instead of the *Belle Epoque* architecture much further east along the coast, it's solid stone buildings with ornate tiles typical of the region; instead of nightclubbing, it's village fests; instead of ostentation, it's the quiet opulence of the grand estates – lifestyles world apart.

After a drink in the garden of a restaurant on the Canal du Midi, we try to follow the GPS instructions to Château les Carrasses – except, the GPS cannot find it.

Fairly equidistant between Quarante and Capestang, the

château is so discreetly sign-posted, blink and you'd miss it.

When we eventually find the turning, we are charmed by the view – it rises as if out of nowhere, dominating a winding road and its own vineyards – of course.

Château les Carrasses

The château, in its present state, has an interesting story to it and is part of an even more interesting concept, the brainchild of an engaging Irishman, Karl O'Hanlon.

One might argue that all Irishmen are engaging with their legendary easy charm. At first impression, however, Karl comes across as very French. He slips breezily in and out of the language and has the *soignée* informality that the French have perfected so well.

The son of a language professor and wine writer, he spent large portions of his childhood visiting the Languedoc vineyards and credits his father with building up the area's image from that of a bulk producer to one of a quality producer.

Later on, as a banker, he identified the region's other dormant asset – real estate. The Languedoc was and remains the best value property market on the Mediterranean coast between the *Côte d'Azur* and Spain.



CHATEAU
1 A 9



He came up with an ingenious model: having bought a derelict chateau, he set out to restore the main building and the many outbuildings into what it is today: a beautiful estate, with an infinity swimming pool, tennis courts, children's areas, gardens, vineyards and most importantly, 27 individual apartments, many with their own pool and garden.

The apartments were sold off plan and the estate is now run as a private owners club cum hotel with self-catering suites.

The chateau is a veritable mixture of formal architecture and informality. The ambiance everywhere is that of a community, something Karl is keen to maintain. The chateau is, in fact, the anti-thesis of exclusivity, he says.

Apart from encouraging all owners to participate in the on-going development of the estate, he plans hosting art and charity events and takes active interest in the life of the wider community of the neighbouring towns.

We take a walk around the vineyards and he points at tracks left by boar and deer (I'd had the evening before an

outstanding deer stew, clearly courtesy of a local hunter) and at a rustic building he plans to restore as an outpost for a wine-loving Robinson Crusoe.

Nor is Château les Carrasses the only estate in his portfolio – there are others that will be undergoing similar restoration.

He is passionate about his projects but without the intensity of city property developers – the laid back attitude of the Languedocians has clearly rubbed off on him.

Accommodation

We stayed in two separate suites on different floors of the main chateau. Each apartment was decorated in the style of its owner but with utmost regard to the fact that this is a historical building. Original features are kept authentic throughout, mixing effortlessly with modern comfort, from fast Internet to individual iPods, to perfectly equipped kitchens and bathrooms.

The views from each apartment are spectacular over the rolling countryside and of course, the pool area.







The restaurant

Owners and visitors have free access to the common parts which include a subterranean bar/cum art gallery, floodlit clay tennis court, boulodrome and barbecue area.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of staying there is the easy marriage between a 5 star accommodation and the freedom of it being self-catering. The Château manages to achieve the seemingly unachievable: unpretentious opulence.

Restaurant

The restaurant has the feel of a private club, with its deep sofas, coffee tables covered with magazines, book shelves and totally unobtrusive reception staff. The food is described as bistro-style but is on par with first class eateries in London. The menu offers very few options – always a good sign in this kind of setting.

Owners tend to sit together with guests or family, forming large tables and enhancing the club-like atmosphere.

We came into brief contact with some of them during our stay. An international bunch, they had only complimentary things to say about owning their own little domain on the grounds of the château. We spotted some of them pottering around their elaborate private gardens, others simply lounging by the pool, others still taking the estate bicycles for a ride.

The Château hosts regular wine and food courses and events and will be having a Rock Art event in the spring, all of which should be firmly on readers' calendars for 2013. **B**

Château les Carrasses

<http://www.lescarrasses.com>

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