

A picture-postcard château owned by an Irish family in the Languedoc region has been transformed into a luxury self-catering bolthole amid the vineyards and poplars of this glorious part of southern France. **THOMAS BREATHNACH** lost himself in this Gallic splendour for a few days

King of your own castle

It may be the timeless allure of *la belle vie*, but few European getaways seem conjure up the romantic notions of a sojourn in a French château. In spite of some preconceptions of stuffy Renaissance demesnes, gilded with gaudy chandeliers and July Monarchy portraits, nowadays manor stays don't have to be the ostentatious or even costly affair one might imagine, however.

A new wave of refurbished properties in France's increasingly *en vogue* Languedoc region are restyling the château niche while also shielding guests from the *choque-horreur* of hefty holiday bills. Just one hour east of the medieval city of Carcassonne lies one such regal bolthole: Les Carrasses, a sumptuously revamped 19th century château successfully seducing the luxury self-catering market.

The picture-postcard château, surrounded by vines, poplars and the ubiquitous waft of lavender, has been converted into 28 boutique apartments which meld traditional rustic appeal with impeccably tasteful décor - straight from the living section of *Vogue* or *Architectural Digest*.

On the grounds, there's the likes of a converted grape-picker's cottage and old forge while the château proper includes a lustrous loft suite complete with ergonomic furniture, a turret-cum-bathroom and a sizeable kitchen, kitted out with a Smeg oven simply begging for a cassoulet.

All rooms also feature iPod docks loaded with everything from Brigit Bardot to Yann Tiersen, designed to fast-track a calming mood of escape.

Although Irish-owned (by Dubliner Karl O'Hanlon and his family), Les Carrasses nonetheless prides itself in showcasing the true French *art de vivre* with a range of activities guaranteed to lull guests into a sense of Gallic grandeur. Clay tennis courts flank the gardens, an ultra-lux heated infinity pool overlooks the vineyards and a game of pétanque (a regional version of boules) makes an amusing means to while away an hour - particularly in the company of resident dog, Oscar.

Beyond the castle's majestic environs, meanwhile, guests can independently meander along the region or avail of some of the concierge's more bespoke gems.

One can hunt for *objets d'arts* amid the array of antique stores in the nearby towns, head horse-riding out in the wilds, or, being in the heartland of French rugby, head on an organised match soirée in nearby Montpellier or Narbonne.

Food and wine is one of the greatest draws to the south of France, however, and while most aficionados might pair the nation's viticulture with Bordeaux, it is, in fact, the Languedoc which is France's largest wine-producing region.

Since last year, Les Carrasses has been producing its own vintages and boasts an impressive cellar of deliciously plummy syrahs and peachy chardonnays along with some exemplary grand crus from neighbouring vineyards and beyond. *Formidable!*

Although there's the option to dine in the château's bistro (think seasonal rustic fare with an unpretentious gourmet twist), perhaps the greatest pleasure of a self-catering option is peddling yonder to the local marchés and épiceries to pick up the daily vittles.

The nearest village to stock up is Capestang, a quintessential French village populated by moustachioed old gents, baguette-wielding dames and ramshackle Renault 4s. Other shopping highlights include the city of Narbonne, with its vibrant covered market and gothic cathedral, and Pézanes, a bijoux box town bursting with olde world charm.

While it may lack the buzz of the Côte D'Azur, just a short drive away from Les Carrasses lies France's much lesser-known Amethyst Coast. A seaboard of go-slow fishing villages and sandy beaches, this rather reclusive Riviera is largely spared any touristy blitz or bling.

Mèze, a small fishing town softly splashed in shades of turquoise and apricot, makes a good entrée to the area, where locals and day-trippers gather for lazy lunches of moules-frites and bubbling bouillabaisse along the cobbled quayside.

Just a few gearshifts up along the coast, meanwhile, sits Bouzigues, the self-claimed birthplace of modern shellfish farming. The village sits on the shores of the Étang de Thau lagoon, a positive Neptune's larder heaving with gleaming mussels and oysters.

Fishmonger stalls peppered along the pier are the absolute go-to place to procure the makings of a sublime supper, where just €5 should bag a dozen oysters.

Granted, you still may have the task of shucking them open when you get back to base, but some things tend to feel just a little bit less laborious when you are the king of your own castle.



Opposite page, clockwise from main image The majestic environs of the castle; fresh produce at a local market; Les Carrasses now produces its own vintages; the nearby coast is a shellfish lover's paradise; Les Carrasses and its inviting pool **Above, from top left** Croissants and coffee on the terrace; the grape harvest; a sumptuous bedroom in the château



GETTING THERE
 Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from Dublin to Carcassonne from €66 return. Les Carrasses, near the village of Capestang, lies a one-hour drive from the airport, with the chateau's website (lescarrasses.com) running a handy car hire search engine to help you choose a rental.

STAYING THERE
 Self-catering rates at Les Carrasses start from €63pps for couples with rates dropping to €34pps for parties of six to eight, making it an attractive spot for a group getaway. The chateau is also offering an extra night free to Irish guests staying before 21st December.

