



## The Languorous Languedoc, Part I

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TRAVEL

*In the first of a two part special on the Languedoc region in southern France, Sophie McLean savours the sumptuousness of chateau-living, perfectly placed to begin an exploration of the region's fabled wine country...*

An hour on the runway at Gatwick and our candy-coloured orange plane finally takes off. Fortunately we are in good company, conversation is animated and there's a tangible sense of excitement to what lies ahead of us. I haven't been to the South of France in a while, and whilst my most recent memories of it are pleasant, they are also city based: a rainy weekend for a birthday in a delightfully ornate Nice. The next few days would turn that particular impression of this part of France right on its head.

A few hours later I'm behind the wheel, a slightly unsexy wheel I decide once I discover the place I'm staying at can allegedly also provide you with a Morgan to come and relieve you from your journey thus far (the closest airports are Montpellier or Carcassone). So with French radio tuned in and a promise of at least 25% of the playlist in 'langue authentique' we own the right side of the roads on our way to the door of our home from home for the weekend – Chateau Les Carrasses.

Pretty terracotta rooftops sprout from green fields and lines of trellis-trained vines dominate our speeding horizons from right to left. What I find surprising about our journey is the ethereal quality, already forefront in its visual presence. Splashes of colour from wild poppies and dandelions that grow unkempt paint the verges on either side of the smaller roads as we head off the motorway and deeper into the Languedoc's more rugged landscape. We cross the Canal du Midi, a 17th century UNESCO recognised piece of heritage that sits between us and the pretty town of Capestang – the nearest populated area to where we are staying. And as we navigate its windy narrow streets, it strikes us as a place that still owns a 'shhh, its-a-secret' status amongst those in the know. A clandestine, idyllic spot from which to watch the world.



At the top of the long, private driveway, such hushed secrecy is re-echoed moments later. We've arrived. Chateau les Carrasses is a relatively recently opened luxury five star property deep in the heart of this region's winelands. This turreted boutique lodging is part swanky self-catering, part fully-fledged hotel, co-owned by wine co-operative Vignobles BonFils. The subtle vinous theme is apparent throughout the common spaces, although as yet the list only features a few select bottles, very reasonably priced, and mostly under the house name itself. Similarly, although a heightened sense of grandeur greets you, the initial sentiment doesn't necessarily follow. Shoulders are relaxed and people chatter. There are no white tablecloths in the restaurant and the chef will happily be the one to serve you at the bar as much as in the kitchen. And if you stagger in weary and in need to refreshment after ride out on one of the hotel's bikes you'll be rewarded with cooling views from the extensive terrace over the pretty fields below, or impressive architecture in the orangery – said to be designed by Gustave (Eiffel) himself. Pair these vistas with a glass of the house NV sparkler and time will slip away all too easily.

The food here is recognisably French, taking influence too from the surrounding environment and seasons as you might expect. An asparagus consommé arrives to greet many of us over dinner, prompting flashbacks to the stacks and stacks of bright green tips we witnessed in their plenty at Narbonne's pretty covered market just the day before. Duck, scallops and pork also feature, whilst ceviche of the day proves a popular choice. The owners of this establishment are Irish, having moved over a number of years ago and are really making a go of local living. Their ambitious daughters are bilingual and they, like their parents are certainly no strangers to the wealth of activities the area can offer.



The immediate area to Chateau les Carrasses offers various options for day excursions. One of these must, of course, be of a wine theme. The Languedoc in recent years has grown in terms of quality – once being 'charmingly' known as the bulk producer of France, with an annual wine production more than that of Australia (and then some), there is no shortage of local wineries to visit. Happily, a number of these wineries have in recent years upped the ante in terms of their offerings whilst still remaining some of the best value wines available to buy worldwide. It's evident that the standard of local accommodation appears to be heading the same way.

Under the direction of the Chateau we visited the Capitoul winery in the AOP region of La Clape, set just off the Mediterranean; the water is visible on the horizon from the winery's pint-sized veranda. This AOP was only given it's more prestigious status as recently as 2009 and the wines are testament to this whilst still remaining very good value.

The potential for what can be found in the Languedoc's undergrowth doesn't stop with vines. As participants of a seminar and cookery class on truffles, we became overnight experts on the dizzying array of varieties. Under the eponymously named 'Claire de Truffes' instruction you'll be able to whip up quite the moveable feast (even if it's only to the side of your apartment's very own infinity pool, set next to the Weber BBQ, as standard).



On our final day, leaving the poppies to the happy gazes of the next visitors we potted around the neighbouring town of Pézenas before taking a boat ride in search of oysters from the many vast beds that sit atop the water of the Étang de Thau lagoon. Pézenas is home most famously to French writer Molière-unsurprising given its romantic, historical setting. Under domed ceilings we stand resting chins on hands, and elbows on stone balustrades contemplating an altogether novel-friendly life. It's fair to say that similarly, under the pretty chandeliers of Chateau les Carrasses, or in the wild escarpments of one of the neighbouring vineyards, one very such story could be written.

It just takes you to decide which characters to bring with you.

For more information on Chateau les Carrasses, visit [www.lescarrasses.com](http://www.lescarrasses.com). To discover the wines of the region more visit [www.sud-de-france.com](http://www.sud-de-france.com).

**Tomorrow, we delve further into the wines of the region as Lucy Shaw swoons over both the product and producer of one of the Languedoc's finest vineyards...**