

Longing for Languedoc

Built in 1886 on the foundations of a rest stop on the pilgrim route de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle, Château Les Carrasses resonates with history. Michael Reed visits this fairy-tale from the past.





Above: The comfortable living room of one of the self-catering villas.
Left: A view of Chateau Les Carrasses over the inviting swimming pool.



My long weekend at 19th Century wine estate Château Les Carrasses in Languedoc in the South of France is about to begin, heralding a bright new start to the year. With the dashboard of my hire car peppered with stickers to remind me to drive on the right, I leave Montpellier airport behind and thread my way through vineyards and villages to my destination, two miles north of Capetang.

Approached by a boulevard of cypress trees, the château looks like a princess's retreat amongst a cloak of pines in the quiet valley. After checking in, my bag is whisked away and I am welcomed to sit and relax in the old winery that doubles as reception, bar and restaurant also selling jewellery and produce by local artisans. I savour tapas with a glass of wine as I chat to the receptionist, Sonia, for whom working here is clearly not a chore. "I love being here so close to nature and the wildlife," she said. The brainchild of former banker Karl O'Hanlon, the current incarnation of Château de Les Carrasses is composed of 28 apartments and villas, set amongst ancient trees. Sonia leads me to a villa in a set of four, with its own pool, snug in the west wing of the old winery.

Outside my front door sits a grizzled olive tree and inside it's reassuringly warm with brocante furnishings and oak floorboards, along with a shingled shower floor, designed to massage tired feet, and Fragonard toiletries. With feet refreshed, I have enough time for a quick nap before I crunch up the drive to try some local wine in the restaurant.

Ever patient, the maître d', Quentin, guides me through the dégustation and I find a velvety La Serre to suit my palate. Feeling suitably mellow, I'm joined by the manager, Lucy, at a table with fine views of the vineyard.





Left: A private villa and pool, garlanded by the orchard and olive trees.
Right: Get to know the local vintages at the Chateau's winery restaurant.



An amuse-bouche of salmon and passion fruit, caramelised sunflower seeds and mackerel pate is a yin to the yang of my pan-fried scallops, chestnut velouté and crunchy celery, served with nut oil and a dish of fresh vegetables, prepared by chef Alex, who works with head chef Valere, a man who has cooked his way through several Michelin-starred restaurants.

There then follows a gastronomic revelation: my dessert choice. A single candied whole clementine, served in sweet clementine sirop, which is three whole days in the making. It is sublime. "If you weren't here, I would lift the plate and suck it up," I confess to Lucy's amusement, when all that is left is the jus.

"This area is undiscovered, forgotten," laments Lucy over coffee, albeit with a smile that implies this is not entirely disagreeable. I have to wonder if that is part of the charm. Despite Lucy's nostalgia, the area offers so much, from horse riding, to assisted kayaking and skiing in Perpignan only two hours' drive away. For more local pursuits, the château has bicycles available for a leisurely ride through the vineyards – they are parked adjacent to the Le Orangery, thought to be designed by Gustav Eiffel. Narbonne Cathedral, a national monument of France – unfinished – is a mere half hour's drive away.

The next day, before I visit Les Carrasses' big brother, Château St Pierre de Serjac, I stop in to the nearby town of Pezenas, considered to be one of the most beautiful towns in the Languedoc-Roussillon area. I pull up in a back street and air my schoolboy French, asking for the market to the reply "Do you speak English?"

Lively crowds swirl round the square and its statue of Marianne, a familiar symbol of the French Republic, atop a column inscribed with "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité", the motto of France, as I window shop the tempting

food stalls. I almost succumb to a huge pan of bubbling stuffed squid, but decide to build my appetite for St Serjac. I leave with only a few token gifts for friends back home.

Château St Pierre de Serjac is even more luxuriously appointed than Carrasses, with an Art Deco twist, eight château rooms and a variety of accommodation on the estate, yet the atmosphere remains relaxed and friendly. As shadows lengthen, the sales and marketing manager, Darren, points out the location of a Karl's third acquisition on the horizon, resting on the skirts of Massif de la Clape and due to launch in January 2020.

After a fabulous meal with Darren, I relax with an Argan massage within Le Spa, an inviting 350m² Mediterranean sanctuary. Languishing in the Jacuzzi, I see Chardonnay contrails turn to Rosé in the sky. Sadly, it's time for me to leave.

Back at Carrasses, over a glass of wine, I decide to visit the Arena of Nimes in the east of the region before returning home. A few hours after my goodbyes the next day, I stand in this temple of the Holy Roman Empire and imagine Caesar himself giving the thumbs up to the Holy Trinity of Châteaux.

It certainly gets mine. ■

The Languedoc area is easy to reach, with superb motorway and high-speed rail links providing fast connections. No less than eight airports connect Languedoc to every major European city, including Béziers (30 minutes), Perpignan (50 minutes), Montpellier (1 hour), Carcassonne (1 hour), Nimes (1 hour 30 minutes), and Toulouse (2 hours).

For more information about escaping to Château Les Carrasses, see www.lescarrasses.com and for Château St Pierre de Serjac see www.serjac.com.

Own your own private hideaway in France



Sea Views

Agay, Cote D'Azur, France

Located in a quiet, sought-after private estate on the hill above the charming seaside town of Agay, this villa sits in a dominant position with beautiful views of the sea and the famous red hills of the Esterel. The mature Mediterranean-style garden features lavender, olive trees, wisteria and vines. The villa is only a five-minute drive from the town of Agay, and a 10-minute walk from the beach, so it is perfectly placed to enjoy all the French Riviera has to offer.

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Guide price: 895,000€

Restored Rarity

Le Bar-Sur-Loup, Cote D'Azur, France

Rare on the Cote d'Azur, this fabulous original stone-built Château is perched on the hill above the quaint, historic town of Le-Bar-sur-Loup. Originally built around 1800, the current owners have poured their time, love and resources into the careful restoration of this lovely property to return it to its former glory. The property offers five hectares of prime land, much of which has been groomed by an award-winning landscaper.

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Royal Retreat

Villefranche-Sur-Mer, Cote D'Azur, France

This home is fit for royalty as it was built by Belgium's King Leopold II in the later years of his life. It was finished in 1906 and designed in the typical Belle Epoque style. The gorgeous villa offers fabulous views to the south, over the bay of Villefranche. As well as 300m² of living space, the villa sits on 1,100m² of prime land, with manicured gardens and a large heated swimming pool.

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