

Chateau les Carrasses

Charm, Cheer & Comfort



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The Château Les Carrasses is a 19th century wine-producing estate, restored and converted into a luxurious holiday residence, with independent residences, a restaurant, a cellar and first class hotel services.



When England proves to be as miserable as this May has been – with buckets of rain, seemingly arctic winds, no sun to speak of and a nervous undercurrent of political troubles – it's a relief to know that the beautiful sunshine filled South of France is only around 3.5 hours away, door to door from London.

And it's in this spirit that I embarked on a weekend to the Languedoc region on a rainy Friday morning with plans to return that same Sunday, but intentions to relax, rejuvenate, and invigorate my soul.

Flying into Montpellier, the heart of the Languedoc, is easy: a quick hour, swift transit, and it's not as touristy or mainstream as its neighbour Nice or decadent Cote d'Azur. No, Montpellier retains its fairytale rustic Southern charm: think rolling unspoiled vineyards, olive trees, gentle mountains set against the breathtaking snow-capped Pyrenees in the distance, and myriads of quaint, golden French villages throughout the country roads.

My place of home that weekend was Chateau Les Carrasses – a stunning 19th century wine domaine set amongst rolling hills of vineyards, about 5km from a small town called Capestang on the Canal du Midi. Though the chateau has all that one would need, the small town nonetheless offers a few small supermarkets, a lush Sunday market, a butcher, and of course, a baker. There is also a highly acclaimed restaurant called La Croisade not too far North, that is worth visiting. Despite being nestled amongst sun-kissed vines, the Chateau is only half an hours drive south from the sea-front, with the beaches of Valras Plage and Serignan Plage very nearby.

The Chateau really does have all that one needs, though. Built in the late 1800s, yet refurbished in 2011, the estate is a luxury development of 28 holiday apartments and villas, with 10 acres of gardens, concierge services, a kids' club, a terrace, bars, a wine salon and a restaurant. Activity wise, one can enjoy the beautiful grounds – a landscape of ancient trees, olive groves, vineyards, and blossoming flowers – as well as the more cultivated activities, like floodlit clay tennis, boules, a communal barbeque area, the vast heated infinity swimming pool, mountain bikes, and personal trainers. There is of course, a huge sun terrace fitted with a hot tub, sun loungers and parasols. In short: one arrives to Chateau Les Carrasses to relax, eat well and drink fine wine, lounge, play, and relax some more. What more one could want from a weekend in the South of France, I truly cannot fathom.





Upon arrival to the sun-filled chateau, I checked into my room, one of the Maisons de la Cave villas. This was a breath-takingly spacious 3 floor villa, that sleeps 6 guests with two private rooms featuring huge, comfortable double beds on a mezzanine third floor, and one master bedroom on the ground floor. All rooms came with an equally spacious en suite set in marble and pebbles, offering a large power shower, and all the amenities one would expect of a luxury home. The ground floor also featured a living room space with sofas, comfortable lazy-boy chairs, a book shelf, roaring fire for the winter, a television and, my favourite, a spectacular view onto the vineyards and Pyrenees beyond. The lower floor is the space of the kitchen, a large and, yes, spacious, expanse of contemporary fittings with Chateau Les Carrasses wine already chilled in the fridge and awaiting consumption, as well as all the basic supplies to start your trip: tea, coffee, washing powder, etc. Another living room area is here, and an exit onto a private terrace that features a small heated private swimming pool, private sun loungers and a dining table. Perfect for families who want a home away from home, or couples looking for an indulgent private escape, these villas cater to all.

This is far from your average luxury complex of suites and villas, though. In Chateau Les Carrasses, every single room and villa is decorated in its own unique style and arrangement. The colours may harmonise, and there may be a theme with the interiors – one of subdued greys, deep blues, purples, and muted tones – but each chic room is different, rendering the experience truly exclusive and intimate.

Once settled, I enjoyed two Chateau Les Carrasses cocktails on the poolside terrace with the spectacular view of the vineyards and Pyrenees. Our lovely host suggested we try the house cocktail, a delicious concoction akin to an Aperol Spritz yet more fruity, and, indeed, potent. Two of these was quite enough.

Dinner, that Friday, was a delightful experience of tapas and the Chateaus resident wine, offered to guests and locals alike throughout the evening. At the excellent rate of less than 6 euros one could order a plate of Mediterranean tapas to share, and enjoy with their wine. We chose to sit outside under the canopies of the trees, though indoor eating was fine too. The tapas were fantastic, featuring tiny French beef tartar with a miniature quail egg yolk perched on top, small local fish dishes, Iberico jamon from Spain, and little tomatoes stuffed with risotto. Fresh and locally sourced, the excellent food was complemented wonderfully by the Chateaus own wine – with Languedoc grapes creating a sumptuous fruity Grenache rose, more complex white, and earthy, deep red. With the delicious food and wine enjoyed against a backdrop of live music, bustling crowd of locals and guests, and vibrant conversation, this May evening was a true delight.



The following morning, I woke refreshing and rejuvenated after an excellent nights sleep in the large, comfortable double bed in the mezzanine. Breakfast was in the main restaurant and featured a delightful spread of continental breakfast foods, presented beautifully. There was an abundance of freshly home baked croissants and pain au chocolat, which were, undoubtedly, amongst the best I have ever tasted, as well as freshly baked baguette and wholegrain bread. Jams and marmalades (homemade by Chefs Valere Diochet and Alex Chevrel), cheeses, meats were in vast array, as well as fresh granola, oats, cereals and all the nuts, seeds, and dried fruits to render breakfast fit for a king. The coffee was made to order, and excellent, as were the fresh juices.

Our first activity of the day, was kayaking. Somewhat trepid about this, having never kayaked on a river before, we made our way to the middle of the River Orb to the picturesque little town of Roquebrun. Canoe Roquebrun, our kayak company, was where we met our kayak guru, Phillippe the owner. Roquebrun, about 20 minutes from the Chateau, is a small town of beautiful golden, sun-beaten houses, with red-tiled roofs, framing the valley of the River Orb. With stunning views of vineyards, and miles of lush, green terrain set against a breath-taking backdrop of snow-capped mountains, Roquebrun is allegedly one of the prettiest towns in France – and this really is no surprise.

Given the width of the River Orb, its length, and meandering route through the foothills of a spectacular valley, kayaking is a well frequented sport. Phillippe helped us rent wetsuits, helmets, life-jackets and shoes according to size, before bestowing us with a kayak each and driving us 15 minutes to the start of our journey up the river. One can do as long or as short a route as they wish. We were tempted by the 21km route, with significant rapids (Phillippe looked genuinely nervous at one point when I looked keen but confessed never having kayaked before), or shorter routes. Given our time constraints with lunch-plans, we settled for the 3 hour journey and 15km route, which, sadly, was less violent and dangerous, but no less scenic.



Slowly meandering down the Orb River took us through a deep, wide gorge of mountainous terrain, with trees lining the rocks and tall mountain top peaks. Redolent of a more wild landscape one would expect of a less populated place, this was escapism at its finest, and the splashes of warm Spring-time river, sights of wild fish and turtles, and chirpings of birds, amplified the experience. Only the few arching bridges, knocked down and weathered by time, served to interrupt the ambience with reminders of civilisation. With this route, and perhaps thankfully, none of the rapids were significant and all were manageable for a first time kayaker, though one of our experienced fellows in the group did capsize, so the adventure element was evidently left in tact.



For three hours, we traversed this river, fluctuating between wide expanses of silent, calm river, and torrid, frenetic rapids. The overarching effect was one of restful ambience that never became too dull, and simultaneously never too tiring; three hours, felt like one.

Upon arrival to Roquebrun, we changed out of our wet-suits (which were indeed, wet: be warned), and began to head our way across one of the picturesque bridges into town for lunch. Lunch was at Cave Saint Martin, a locals' favourite spot run by Raymond who, as a Dutch expat, fell in love with Roquebrun and settled into life here. A fantastic spot under kiwi trees along the river with spectacular views overlooking rose bushes, the Orb, vineyards, olive groves, poplar trees and the mountains (all of my favourite landscape items into one view), the restaurant's popularity was self evident. The menu, consisting of simple, local, fresh ingredients prepared on the day and altering accordingly, was short and sweet – tuna, goat, or beef, take your pick – and a small range of local Mediterranean tapas. I had the tuna, which came as a light yet abundant tartar with fresh green beans and a simple citrus dressing, as well as typical local anchovies and Portuguese sardines served out of the tin with fresh bread for the starter. In a similar vein, Raymond refused to cater to the commercials, and served only water, home-made lemonade, juices, and organic wine with lunch. The wine we had, a rose from the region entitled 'Carnaval' by Domaine La Fontude at 17 euros, was luscious, fruity and ripe, offering the thirst-quenching sugars we were looking for after hours of kayaking in the sun.

After lunch, which itself, took almost 3 hours, we lazily made our way back to the Chateau where we enjoyed an hour of respite and rest in our villas. At this point a spectacular thunderstorm broke out over the vineyards and mountains in the distance, offering a spectacular view from the window that rendered the early evening rest a true respite from the hot, and exhilarating, day.

Once the rain had subsided, I embarked on an exploration of the Chateau grounds. Traversing the property, I was filled with a sense of how perfect this space is for a family vacation away: with each villa as a self contained living space, including a pool, kitchen, two living rooms and spacious bedrooms, the variety of activities available mean that one really doesn't have to look far for a restful week away. At the same time, the Chateau's isolation and its beautiful setting in being nestled amongst rolling hills of vineyards, ensures its fit as a romantic get away for couples, or close friends.



By 8pm, it was time for dinner, which we took in the main restaurant of the Chateau, Brasserie Les Carrasses, as a formal, sit down affair. The restaurant at this hour was busy, though less than the Friday tapas evening of the night before which had a more spirited, social feel to it. The menu is of a French brasserie grill – casual yet high quality – offering such dishes like steak, fresh fish, burgers, and tartars, as well as salads and risottos. Essentially catering to all, the atmosphere is relaxed yet sophisticated and suitable for couples and families alike. To start, we enjoyed the freshly home-baked bread rolls with seasoned, freshly whipped butter, and amuse bouche shots of a mysterious citrusy, olive-oily, fennel broth (its description doesn't do it justice) and small spoons of whipped cream cheese with potato and chives. Both were lovely, and featured unexpectedly interesting flavours for what seemed to be a traditional brasserie. For the starter, I had fresh crabmeat with velvet crab jelly, vegetable tarte and curried flowers – another interesting concoction, which, though delicious, certainly required an adventurous palate when it came to the crab jelly. For the main, I had the dish of the day, which was a plump sea-bass fillet with fresh asparagus and rocket, served simply and elegantly. The high-quality freshness of the ingredients really shined through with this dish, and it was by far my favourite of the meal. To finish, I had the cheese platter, which was as fantastic as one would hope for in France, and we topped it off with sweet wines recommended by the waiter. All in all, an excellent dining experience and one I would recommend trying for an informal yet upmarket dinner whilst staying at the Chateau.

The next morning, we enjoyed another sumptuous breakfast in the Chateau before packing our bags and hopping into a taxi to go to our next destination, the younger, cooler brother of Chateau Les Carrasses, Château St Pierre de Serjac. Set about an hour away amidst more rolling vineyards, this is a chateau with a very, very different style. A magnificent vineyard estate and working winery with a hotel, spa, and luxury self-catering properties, this is the more chic venue for couples, singletons, and those looking for a more Riviera St Tropez feel to their Languedoc stay.

Chateau St Pierre de Serjac opened only in April 2016 after an extensive two year, 25 million euro renovation. The brainchild of hoteliers Karl and Anita O'Hanlan and winemaker Laurent Bonfils, the same creators of Chateau Les Carrasses, this is the sort of property one would entertain without kids – though kids are welcome, of course. It was originally restored in 1886 by Baron Cyprien De Crozals and designed by pre-eminent architect Louis Michel Garros. The estate covers 200 acres of land, with stunning views of rolling vines, olive groves and woodland, whilst the chateau's own winery has been bottling wines since this year, 2017. There is also an infinity pool, poolside restaurant, kids club, gardens, and a spa.



As a hotel space, the architecture is more minimalist, less old school chateau and more luxury getaway with a slightly more sophisticated touch. Think, black tables and chandeliers set against cream walls and modern paintings, back lit bars and old vintage wine barrels turned into chic tables. There are 8 spacious rooms alongside the bar and restaurant, each one in its own individual décor, yet also more decadent and modern than its parent chateau. The feel is intensely French Empire rubbing shoulders with Louis XVI with splashes of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and mid-century touches. Deep, velvet hues of blue and grey, vintage chandeliers, roaring 19th century fire places, velvet curtains and silks make these rooms – and the surrounding dining room spaces – feel indulgent and sophisticated. 6 of the rooms have steel Bateau tubs in the rooms, whilst each room has a vast double bed, luxurious bathrobes, fiber optic internet, flat screen TVs and well stocked mini bars. Gorgeous. There are also 36 other luxury self-catering properties available for rent all year around, with courtyards, private gardens, BBQs, sun loungers, outdoor dining facilities and 17 have private, heated pools.

The morning of arrival, we embarked on one of the best activities one can do at the Chateau – a cycle through the vineyards and olive groves. Borrowing the Chateau's own bicycles, helmets and locks, we set off on a delightful 3 hour trek that was surprisingly challenging at times, yet the scenery rendered the experience both breath-taking and relaxing for the soul. We arrived back ravenous (despite the huge breakfast) and settled down for a long and lazy lunch by the pool in the outdoor terrace area, before our late night flight home. Lunch was a delight of locally sourced French cuisine with a distinctive southern accent under the warm sun with panoramic views of the vineyards. I had a prawn salad to start, which was surprisingly Asian in flavour with a curry finish, and absolutely fantastic, and a steak tartar for the main. Finished with yet another cheese board, that was excellent, the chateau's food proved as excellent – if not, possibly, more sophisticated and interesting – than Les Carrasses.

Post lunch, and pre flight, we finished with a lazy afternoon in the spa. Hidden away behind the tranquil gardens, the Mediterranean Spa was a light-filled sanctuary of treatment rooms, pool, sauna, steam room, showers, Jacuzzi, and private sun loungers for post-spa chill – as well as private couples' sun lounge terraces for those who opt for a couples' massage. There is a truly French mentality of joie de vivre here, however, and the chateau's chilled rose wine sits next to the herbal teas for consumption, and dark chocolate is deemed a guilt-free post-spa treatment, just as worthy as the juices. I had a massage to unwind, which was as delectable as one would hope, before finishing the remainder of my trip sunning myself on the loungers.

Sadly, our trip came to a close on Sunday early evening and at 6pm we had to depart for the airport. Yet, relaxed and rejuvenated, this fact didn't deter us from our blissful state – and we returned to England feeling invigorated and energised. That these two chateaus are only a 4 hour door to door trip from my home in central London, is important: it means that these sort of retreats, for long weekends or longer, are really quite easy. But the sheer level of joy, whilst kayaking, cycling, eating, drinking, and resting, make them intrinsically high value. It's really a no brainer to go, when one can. All I can say is: do it. You won't look back.

For further information on Château Les Carrasses visit www.lescarrasses.com. To enquire / make a booking please call 0845 686 8067 / email resa@lescarrasses.com. A one night stay is from 219 Euro (sleeps 2).

