

French fancy

A CHATEAU holiday with kids? Yes, really. Sophie Tweedale travelled to the idyllic Languedoc in France to discover a whole new way to escape, en famille

As we drove through the vineyards that surround Château Les Carrasses in the heart of Languedoc, the turrets on our palatial home for the next few days rose into view. “Look, Mummy, a Disney castle!” my youngest said, confused. We had indeed slipped into some kind of fairytale setting – but this one was as magical and authentically French as they come.

Les Carrasses, in the South of France, is set on a gloriously idyllic wine estate. Built in the 19th century, it was restored and converted into a luxury hotel with self-catering cottages by Irishman Karl O’Hanlon and wife Anita in 2012. Their dream was an estate of holiday hideaways on a working winery with the highs of a five-star hotel; and it does not disappoint.

France has always been a great go-to with young kids (proximity, climate, great food – tick) and we’ve stayed at campsites and gites at infinitum, but with a growing number of accredited châteaux springing up all over France, château life – and château hopping – is the new luxe way to get away.

Located a family-friendly one hour and 45 minutes from London to Beziers, we opted for a rental car to get around, as the region is brimming with places to explore. Within half an hour’s drive after landing, we were gliding up the grand driveway – the boys quite literally open-mouthed – to our French castle in the sun.

The hamlet of buildings is set around two main courtyards, perfect for free-ranging toddlers and kids, and there’s an orangery for lolling about in, reputedly designed by Gustave Eiffel.

Our house, Maison des Vendangeurs, was a stone’s throw from the main château, with three huge bedrooms, an enormous, plush, living space, private garden and pool (heated from June but that did not stop the kids plunging in every day). There is also a heated communal infinity pool, barbecue area and tennis courts, but the biggest hit were the complimentary bikes, giving the kids free reign





Chateau Les Carrasses in the heart of Languedoc



The super-luxe houses on the estate are stunning

to head off on Bear Grylls-style adventures every morning.

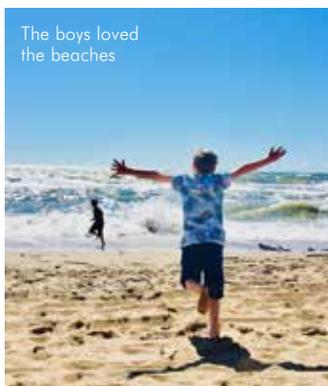
Although we went during the quieter month of April, during July and August there is a kids' club five days a week, and (hallelujah) babysitters on tap too.

Kids are made to feel so welcome here, even in the restaurant, where there was a brilliant mix of French rustic fare and tapas, enabling you to spend the evenings unwinding with a glass of estate vintage, as the kids run around to live music.

Nearby are top-notch day trips, such as the wine-making villages of Capestang and Quarante, with their sleepy cafes and restaurants, and only 30 minutes away, you can be curling your toes into powder-soft sand on the Mediterranean coast, at Massif de la Clape. In fact, there are miles of stunning, tourist-free Mediterranean beaches here, blissfully poseur-free compared to the neighbouring Cote d'Azur.

The artisan market in the pretty town of Pézenas is a must, and the kids adored visiting the giant citadel at Carcassonne, a turreted, medieval city that is fantastically Harry Potter-esque.

The adrenalin highlight of the stay came at Roquebrun, the perfect place for family biking escapades (all electric thankfully!). We took a tour with Devaltrot down into the gorgeous Languedoc Nature Park in the Orb Valley. It's not called the Mediterranean Garden for nothing; with its acres of lemon trees the views are breathtaking. And despite thinking it would end in A&E (me and them), the kids had the time of their lives



The boys loved the beaches

whooping their way along the tracks with our guide, Pascal.

Snail sampling is always de rigueur for any French jaunt I feel (in the vain hope they boys will eat anything then once home) and a stop at the rustic Le Petit Nice here did not disappoint – even our youngest son actually trying and liking the dish.

Our second stay of the trip was at the magnificent Château St Pierre de Serjac – the most recent offering from the O'Hanlons, opened in 2016 after a stunning £20m restoration project. A short drive north of Les Carrasses, it takes fairytale French holidays to another level. Nestled in 200 acres of vineyards, tucked away behind wrought-iron gates, stay in the main château house or one of the 36 self-catering cottages with private terraces and heated pools.

The feel is super-luxe, in an understated, 1920s Parisian-chic way, with floor-to-ceiling windows, velvet sofas, vintage chandeliers and rustic French dining tables. Our four-bed, three-storey villa even had it's own wine cellar.

The main pool area was stunning too – a heated infinity pool overlooking miles of fragrant groves. And a pool bar service that serves drinks and snacks to your sun lounger. Once again, the kids were made to feel incredibly welcome, a fact we loved. We hardly saw them as they pedalled off on the easy circuits that criss-cross the estate, and the boules and tennis courts were a hit too.

To be honest, we had to drag ourselves away from the free-standing roll-top baths with a view,

“The South of France is firmly on the tourist trail, so it felt blissful to find a path less trodden”



Editor Sophie and her children



RIGHT: Enjoy luxurious living
BELOW: Sample the wine from the estate
BOTTOM: The self-catering houses have a private terrace and pool

and never-get-up super-king beds for the two-hour hack we had booked with Centre Equestre De Cabrerolles in the nearby village. Conducted in French (enabled by the universal hand signals of stop and go), we clip-clopped off into the setting French sunset. Taking in the incredible views and smells as we meandered through the vineyards and rustic lanes, it was a brilliant activity the boys didn't stop chatting about for weeks.

Set in rolling countryside, there is so much to do in this area. We visited the fishing port of Marseillan on the Thau Lagoon, the home of Vermouth, and watched the boats making their way through the famous Nine Locks system on the pretty Canal du Midi at Béziers, a UNESCO World Heritage site, where you can even get behind the wheel of a (super-slow) electric boat, rentable nearby.

An overriding plus was the fine rustic food, from breakfast croissants to die for to a bespoke dinner menu where they customise to any fussy eater's taste. There's even (posh) pizza takeaway when you just can't leave the house. Whatever you do, do not leave without trying the Serjac signature cocktail, a combo of gin, pink peppercorns, elderflower and basil, and Serjac's very own estate wine – which I could have taken home by the crateload.

Our last day in paradise had to be spent doing nothing in Serjac's uber-spa Cinq Mondes. It was yet another 'never-going-home' moment, as we relaxed on sun loungers and faux-fur throws next to an indoor heated pool and pretty spa garden, with a heavenly spa treatment menu.

The South of France is firmly on the tourist trail, so it felt blissful to have found a path less trodden. With its mix of free-range fun for the kids and endless vineyards for the adults, châteaux life is arguably the dream mix for a family holiday. Looking for true luxury in the French countryside? It does not get any better than this.



Stay at Serjac in October for £282 per night for seven nights, based on a two-bed apartment with private terrace and 10 kids' club sessions. Prices start from £515 (sleeps four) in high season. A two-bed house at Les Carrasses with pool starts from £470 per night (sleeps four). serjac.com, lescarrasses.com



RIGHT: The second stop on their trip was at the magnificent Château St Pierre de Serjac, just north of Les Carrasses