

# THE CRÈME DE LANGUEDOC

Autumn is the best time to explore the restaurants and markets of the Languedoc, and all from the comfort of a 19th-century château, says **Lucy Tobin**

**W**HEELS crunching on the gravel driveway of our south of France weekend château, we parked our rented gold Renault Mégane next to another gold Renault Mégane. Which was next to a blue Mégane. And just across from a red one.

The French haven't lost their nationalism – in car-buying terms, anyway. But luckily for us, the car park monotony was the only dash of dullness in an indulgent Languedoc weekend.

Château Les Carrasses is like the love-child of a rustic French farmhouse and Babington House in Somerset; a sprawling 19th-century domaine surrounded by acres of vineyards, where the grape-pickers' rooms, gardener's cottage and stables have been converted into gorgeous minimalist villas and the original house has spacious apartments.

But our first impression of its 2.5 hectares were the lavender and jasmine plants, which gave the air a constant sweet perfume far better than any scented candle could hope to mimic.

That, plus the soothing decor – our three-storey villa was all cream walls, exposed beams and white muslin drapes – meant we felt holiday-relaxed only a few hours after stepping off a Ryanair flight from Stansted. It only took that long as we drove from the airport nearby to the medieval walled castle town of Carcassonne. Large groups of tourists thronged the charming zigzagging streets.

And the local dish, a stew-like cassoulet, was a great lunch after a 5am start to get to Stansted on time.

Soon, though, we began the 45-minute drive to Château Les Carrasses. And what a drive: the French landscape was a beautiful patchwork – glistening emerald vineyards and hills, speckled with purple wildflowers and bright red poppies.

After rumbling through the vineyards we reached the château with its stunning limestone turret. Les Carrasses opened in 2011, but its 28 suites, apartments and villas, all with well-equipped kitchens and barbecues and many with gardens and azure pools, still look brand



**Southern comfort:** Le Grand Salon two-room apartment, with period features and vineyard views, at Château Les Carrasses

new. It's also very family-friendly, with a kids' club, pétanque, beach volleyball court, clay-court tennis, free bikes, wi-fi and DVDs, plus a glasshouse full of books and toys.

But the sprawling gardens, and the way many families use the château as a base to explore the Languedoc, means there's also plenty of room for couples to escape.

There is no room service or daily maid service but you can order breakfast croissants if you don't want to visit the daily buffet (price €12) of fresh fruit, croissants, meats and cheeses.

Still, with the nearest Intermarche a 10-minute drive away in Capestang, an on-site shop or welcome bowl of fruit would have been welcome.

We used that Intermarche, and a visit to a nearby market, to rustle up lunches and dinners of rotisserie chicken and salads. But tastier still were the fresh young asparagus salad, "blue" (to the French, this seems to mean pretty-much-still-swimming) tuna steak, fillet beef and strawberry soup we enjoyed in Les Carrasses' smart-casual brasserie (a three-course meal with wine was €60), while supping the wines from grapes grown a few metres away.

The château's Irish owner, Karl O'Hanlon, wrote most of the guest-room manual from his experience living nearby, and it shows: it was packed with ideas for days out and restaurant recommendations, as well as advice on when

they were open, which is useful in a region where most restaurateurs seem to deny the existence of Monday and the rest shut for dinner.

It was the guide that sent us to Pezenas market, its shaded streets hosting artisan potters and pretty glasswear. Later we cycled down the hill at the château

and along the calm Canal du Midi, needing to ride off the calories of lunch to make room for dinner. Another morning we tackled the hour-long drive to Marseillan, lunching on Nicoise and buffalo mozzarella salads at La Maison de Camille, then gorged on salted caramel ice cream.

For gourmards, a string of Michelin-starred names dominate the Languedoc eating scene, including Auberge du Vieux Puits with three stars to its name. But nearer, and cheaper, was Au Lavoir, a boutique hotel down a crumbling road where surly staff were made up for by the juicy beef tomatoes stuffed with cod, lamb shoulder with new potatoes and baby vegetables, and a dessert of pear tart with oozing caramel ice cream that saw me beg for the recipe. The staff just shrugged.

Then it was back to Les Carrasses, for more relaxing on the rooftop bar terrace in its underground cave bar with live music.

Next morning, there was just time for a last session of lazing by the warm pool and a game of pétanque.

In truth we were both hoping some logistical cock-up (another ash cloud, perhaps) meant we could stay in the sunny paradise for longer. It would be lovely here in any season.

No such luck, though; the Mégane was ready and waiting to take us away – along with three of its newly-arrived brothers and sisters.

## DETAILS: FRANCE

Ryanair flies from Stansted to Carcassonne, returns from €45, ryanair.com. Two-nights in a Chateau Suite from €279 (based on two sharing) B&B with one three-course dinner in the Brasserie. Valid from November 1, 2014, to March 31, 2015 (excludes Christmas, New Year and February 14),lescarrasses.com



**Picture perfect:** the market in the historic town of Pezenas sells fruit, vegetables, flowers and artisan food

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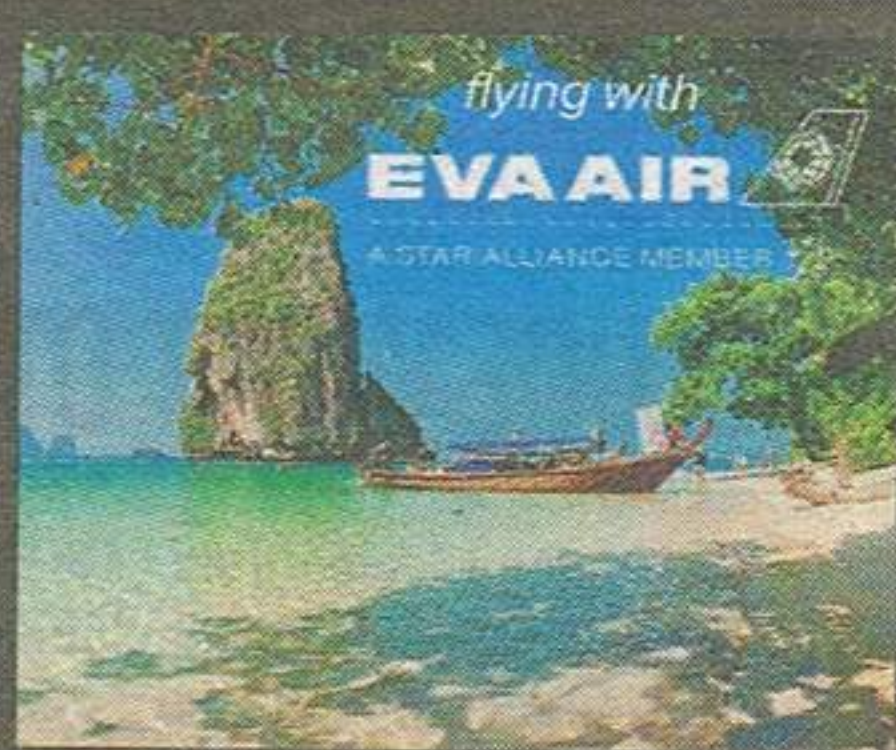
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