

# THIS IS TRAVEL

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**ANDY SLOAN** finds history mixed with modern luxury on a quiet stretch of France's beautiful south coast

**T**HE taxi driver told me everything I needed to know.

"There's not too much to do here," he said, adjusting his sunglasses as he drove us away from Beziers airport. "But that's a plus as you're going to absolutely love the hotel."

Cue the start of five lazy days in the Languedoc, a comparatively untouched part of France's south coast region when compared to its name-check cousins along the Mediterranean.

He dropped us less than 40 minutes later in the quiet, oh-so-quiet, village of Hérépien in the Haut-Languedoc national park and ushered us through an innocuous doorway into a 17th-century haven.

The Couvent D'Hérépien, a former monastery turned school house, was saved from 10 years of neglect by the vision and boutique ambitions of Garrigae Resorts, a growing force in the region.

If it weren't for the proud signage in the village it would be easy to miss this gem, nestled in a quiet street opposite a disused church spire. And its frontage yields little clue as to the romantic splendours inside.

Sporting 13 suites, Le Couvent advertises 17th-century charm with 21st-century luxury. And it delivers on its promise, from the ancient, wide-stepped, high-ceilinged, carved stone stairwell and French country décor to the flat-screen TVs and Bose iPod docks with a pre-loaded iPod discretely located in each room.

There is also the option of a private terrace with wrought-iron furniture and deckchairs to while away the hours sipping any of the excellent local wines or simply admiring the stunning green hills of the Haut-Languedoc.

One of Garrigae's selling points is each suite has its own cooking facilities.

A hob, fridge, dishes and dishwasher, enables guests the choice of eating out or in, particularly those with children.

With a heated spa, masseurs, garden and outdoor pool in the grounds it would be easy to stay within the confines of Le Couvent for days, unwinding in its serene surrounds.

Proof of alternatives for those of a more restless nature came with the arrival of a cycle tour group.

The fact their exhausting, linear itinerary saw them loop back the next day to spend a second night at the hotel signalled its standing.

Le Couvent is run by the charismatic and ever helpful Antoine Lopez. An English couple who arrived too late for any local restaurants one evening were treated to some of his impromptu cooking, such is his sense of hospitality and love for food.

The hotel lacks a restaurant per se but proudly offers breakfasts and light lunches from the finest local produce as well as nightly meals in its cavernous kitchen at a shared table for 25 euros a head.



**Rooms with a view:** A balcony at Marseillan, overlooking the oyster fields of the Etang de Thau, separated from the Mediterranean by a thin strip of land



**Boutique ambitions:** Le Couvent D'Hérépien's 13 suites mix 17th-century charm with modern luxuries, left; a view over the village of Hérépien, right



The exquisite three-course, evening affair is largely pre-prepared off-site by local chef Michel Aninat to circumvent French laws that a 17th century building is never going to meet. And it outclassed the best local restaurant for atmosphere and quality.

Garrigae Resorts has carved a fine niche for themselves in this part of France and so, refreshed after two days of enjoying little else than an historic room with a view, the transfer arrived for a few days by the sea at one of their other developments.

In Marseillan, home of the aperitif Noilly Prat, Garrigae have refurbished a block of waterfront apartments which benefit from picture-postcard views.

Each balcony looks straight out across the oyster fields of the Etang de Thau, a huge salt-water lake

separated from the Mediterranean by a thin strip of land. Marseillan is something of an oasis, set back from the sea and the masses that throng to the Med's sandy beaches, granting it a relaxed, off-season vibe likened to the riviera before Brigitte Bardot and co led their glitzy invasion.

The port is based around a simple, rectangular stone dock lined with fish restaurants and space for around 20 yachts to moor up.

The wine warehouses are still in use although they no longer load their wares onto ships and a tour of the Noilly Prat factory for a handful of Euros shows how little life has really changed over the years.

Remember to pick up a bottle of the Ambre Noilly Prat, only sold in Marseillan and the pick of the three labels made there.

"I love the lake, it's a beautiful life here," said our guide for the

afternoon, retired, sun-kissed journalist Gerard.

For a meagre 10 euros each, he took my partner and I out on his yacht, handing over the rudder to her before we'd even left the harbour.

Fear, then concentration, then glee crossed her face as the sails filled with wind and we picked up pace across the lake.

"I'm out here every day anyway, where else would you rather be," he said, explaining his nominal charge

which probably funded lunch in any number of the excellent port-side restaurants sporting fresh fish, mussels and, of course oysters.

From our two-bedroom, self-catered apartment, equipped with a four-poster bed, secluded balcony space with recliners and a table, kitchen and lounge area, we lazily watched life on the lake planning our own Gerard-style, dream retirements in Marseillan. But I'll settle for a week next summer.

## Factfile

- Le Couvent D'Hérépien offers suites from 120 euros a night in the low season to 180 euros a night in the high season.
- Port Rive Gauche two-bedroom apartments cost from 130 euros a

- night in the low season to 260 euros a night in the high season.
- For more information go to [www.garrigaeresorts.com](http://www.garrigaeresorts.com).
- Ryanair flies direct to Bezier from Bristol Airport.