



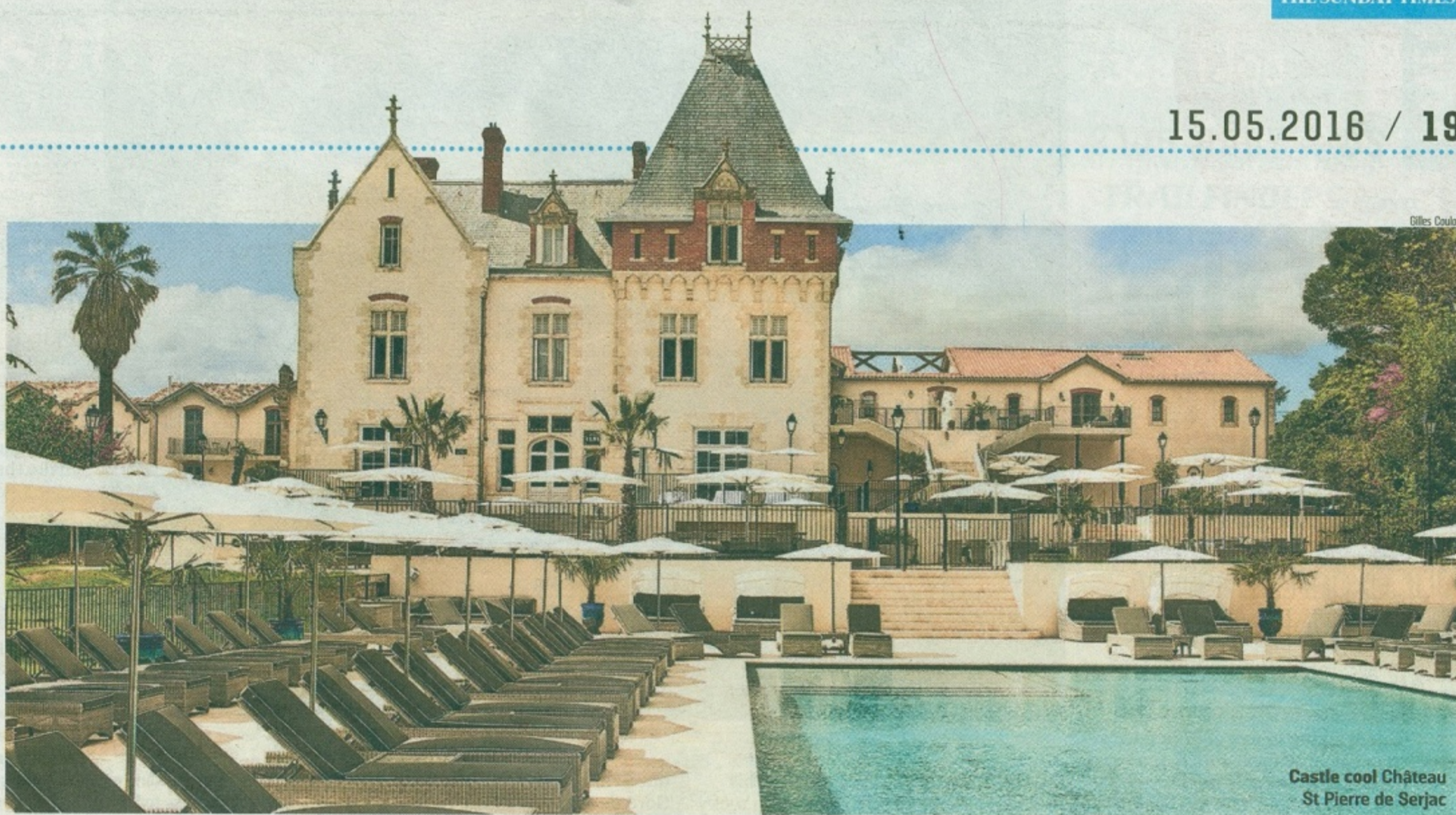
# THE SUNDAY TIMES

THE SUNDAY TIMES

TRAVEL

FRANCE

15.05.2016 / 19



Castle cool Château St Pierre de Serjac

I've spent quite some time with Languedoc peasantry: fishermen, farmers and villagers. In one of my smarter moves, I married into them. So I am well placed to tell you that, in general, they are not familiar with infinity pools, wellness treatments, bourbon-based cocktails or dinners at £45 a head.

So it was groundbreaking to be in the Languedoc and sitting in a deep armchair by an endless pool, shading the eyes, ignoring the luxury spa off left, sipping whisky and readying to eat *demi-pigeon rôti, pommes Anna confite et jus au parfum léger d'arabica*. "How's the peasantry getting on?" I asked.

"OK for the moment," she said, from the next armchair along. We were cruising up the social scale effortlessly.

Languedoc is the other south of France. Compared with Provence, it is generally considered earthier, wilder and more combustible. The flat coast hosts "popular" holidays (*populaire* being the French euphemism for downmarket). Villages are reputed to be dusty. Traditionally, its infinite vineyards provided plonk for the proletariat.

Yet the region is grandiose: rocky and roasted, intense and mineral, with stretches so remote that they receive yesterday's sunshine. It has taken a while for the world to catch on, but we're getting there. And in recent times, bright people have been adapting bits of it for high-end travellers.

Naturally, these people are billing their projects as "authentic Languedoc experiences". Which is daft. An authentic Languedoc experience would involve wellies, tractors and upper-body strength, which doesn't spell "Mediterranean holiday" to most. What we have, therefore, are pretend Languedoc experiences. And the most interesting of them exploit the happy coincidence that, as Languedoc has been coming

## Languedoc deluxe

Provence's poorer neighbour is starting to show off – with some truly tasty vineyard hotels. By **Anthony Peregrine**



to the world's attention, so its wines have also been improving outlandishly.

Thus, we contemplate multiple-star accommodation in top wine settings. As far as I could tell from my armchair at the Château St Pierre de Serjac, near Béziers, it was working fine.

I had, in truth, been confident the moment we turned in through the gates, which opened this spring. A straight drive flanked by infant cypresses divided the vines. The wine master's 19th-century chateau stood at the end, yet the style was formally informal, not feudal.



Sparkling company Bubbles in the lounge

About £20m has equipped the chateau with eight bedrooms, a frisky dark-blue restaurant and an English-country-house bar. It has further transformed

farm outbuildings into 36 self-catering villas, sumptuous enough to surprise any number of peasants. Each has its own garden, most have private pools, and ours,

anyway, bestowed the serenity that comes from space, loungers, the sense that everything has been thought through and an amplitude of bathrooms.

Elsewhere around what was effectively a hamlet, we came across tennis courts, woodland, a boulodrome, bikes, a BBQ area, a kids' play area and a Cinq Mondes spa from which I hurried as I hurried from all spas. It's doubtless fantastic.

At some stage, we bumped into the bar terrace, then the winery. It is co-owned by the Irish hotelier Karl O'Hanlon and the French wine producer Laurent Bonfils. They're also behind Château les Carrasses, which opened in similar vein 30 minutes up the road in 2011. Opportunities at both for tasting, sipping and drinking are frequent. Should he be around, Bonfils can talk to you about Languedoc wines until you need a lie-down.

Over the coming days, we bobbed into Béziers (much underrated), then down to Marseillan, a little oyster and fishing port of unsung loveliness on the Thau lagoon. There, the most ambitious of all Mediterranean holiday developments is taking shape. Backed by Propriétés & Co –

whose boss, Miguel Espada, has form in the field – the £113m, 15-acre La Baraquette will have a square, snops, flats, villas both posh and very posh, and a five-star hotel, with an associated vineyard, all on the lagoon banks. It's due in early 2019. Top villas will cost £2.7m; they'll be available to rent when not in use by owners.

"Overpowering for village and region?" I suggested to a nearby peasant, back at Château St Pierre de Serjac.

**Farm buildings are now villas sumptuous enough to surprise any peasant**

"Nonsense," she cried. "Languedoc can handle luxury." She paused. "We've toughed it out for generations. We're ready for wealth. Take my hand. It's time to dine."

• Anthony Peregrine was a guest of Château St Pierre de Serjac. Doubles start at £230 between June and September, houses at £1,980 a week (00 33 4 67 93 12 34, serjac.com). Ryanair flies from Luton to Béziers four times a week

### Posher than Provence: three more smart new places to stay

**CHATEAU CASTIGNO, ASSIGNAN**  
Having taken over the wine estate, the Belgians Marc and Tine Verstraete bought up buildings throughout Assignan, a fading village in the St Chinian hills, and turned them into an *hôtel éclaté*. Houses in the village have become self-catering accommodation and hotel rooms. There's also an expensive restaurant, a

tapas bar, a grocery and a lingerie shop (something of a surprise to the locals, that). The chateau has pools, terraces and cookouts; show up there and you may take vineyard trips on scooters or electric bikes, or in classic cars. *Hotel rooms from £196 a night; six-bedroom house from £5,510 a week; chateaucastigno.com*

**DOMAINE RIBERACH, BELESTA**  
Young people transform a co-operative wine cellar in the Pyrenean foothills into their own winery, have space to spare, so create a four-star eco-hotel. The restaurant and spa are first-class, the pool is filtered naturally by plants and the terrace views to the mountains are unbeatable. *Doubles from £122; riberach.com*

**DOMAINE DE VERCHANT, OUTSIDE MONTPELLIER**  
Five-star contemporary elegance, a glamorous poolside scene, a bar, a couple of restaurants and a spa, all slotted into a manorial wine domaine at the gates of France's most desirable city: what could possibly go wrong? *Doubles from £191; domainedeverchant.com*



Poolside at Château Castigno, in the St Chinian hills