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The Interiors Bible

l'art de vivre

In the rural idyll of Languedoc-Roussillon, a 17th century convent has been painstakingly renovated to create a 21st century retreat offering a slice of "l'art de vivre" in France's Deep South.

An unmistakable and wholly appropriate air of calm restraint pervades Le Couvent D'Herepian, a new thirteen suite boutique hotel located in the Languedoc village of Herepian, close to Beziers in the south of France. The hotel is the latest development to open from the portfolio of Garrigae Investissements, a property company based near Corbieres and run by south of France native, Miguel Espada and his partner, Karl O'Hanlon, from Dublin. "Un luxe teinté d'austerité" – luxury with a hint of austerity – was the atmosphere the hotel's restoration architect, Bernard Chevalier, and interior designers, Dabadabada, were aiming to evoke, blending modern comfort with classic 'Cote Sud' design in textures and shades to complement and respect the building's religious origins and continue its traditions as a means of escape from the outside world.





As the name explains, Le Couvent d'Herepian was originally a convent, housing nuns from the order of St Martial and dating from the 17th century when Catholicism in Post-Reformation France was enjoying something of a revival under its Sun King, Louis XIV, Le Roi de Soleil. It is not known exactly when the nuns left the Couvent's cool, vaulted quarters, though of course following the French Revolution, many religious orders were forced out of their dwellings. What is certain, however, is that for a period later on, the convent was in use as the local school and is remembered thus by some of the older inhabitants of Herepian, a small village at the foothills of the Monts D'Orbs, which form the gateway to the wild, rugged beauty of the Parc Naturel Regional du Haut Languedoc.



The entrance of the hotel is via giant oak doors, opening on heavy iron hinges from impenetrable stone walls which line the tiny street running down to the old church in Herepian. Inside, a dimly lit corridor disappears ahead while a tall flight of limestone stairs rises under a vaulted ceiling, each tread worn by countless feet over centuries. On the left a blackboard recessed into the plaster coated wall announces the 'plat du jour'.

Antoine Lopez, the genial hotel manager, welcomes his guests in a small reception area just off the rustic kitchen, which with its large scrubbed wooden table, doubles as a communal eating area where breakfast is served and anytime tapas made from local produce, including goat's cheese with honey and preserves or meat and pate from Aninat, Rick Stein's favourite charcuterie, situated in the village, may be eaten.







On the same level is the atmospheric 'cellier', offering a selection of the abundantly good local wine and furnished in contemporary fashion with a zinc-topped bar and deep plum and wine coloured seating grouped in front exposed stone walls, simply painted. Around the room hang prints and paintings by the well-known artist, Simon Fletcher who lives close by.

Down a short flight of stairs is the salon. Here, guests can relax in a high backed fauteuil and read from the library or enjoy another local delicacy at the small dining table. In winter a fire roars under the vast plastered chimney breast and in summer the doors to the adjoining orangerie are thrown open, which in turn opens onto the garden where the terrace looks out over a higgledy-piggledy arrangement of terracotta tiled roofs as the village sprawls below with the dark outlines of the mountains in the distance.



The top two floors of the hotel house the thirteen bedroom suites which are all privately owned and rented back to the company in an ingenious scheme affording individual owners a guaranteed income, automatic upkeep of their property as well as access to other Garrigae developments. Each suite is different to the next, their configuration being dictated largely by a desire to preserve the 17th century architecture. All have a small kitchen, seating area and ensuite shower-room, and five have generously proportioned terraces overlooking the garden. Further accommodation will become available over the next year as plans are in place for a small development on the neighbouring field.





Further relaxation is available at the hotel's 'bijou' spa where guests can laze in the blue-tiled plunge pool under a vaulted ceiling while a little aromatherapy machine bubbles away on demand, scenting the air with essence of lavender. A full range of spa treatments using natural ingredients is also available and a UK company, Renew Retreats, run by the writer Helena Frith Powell, is organising holistic spa breaks at Le Couvent which include yoga and nutritional advice.

In the world outside the convent, there is also much to enjoy. The village, Herepian, has an atmosphere of authenticity that some French villages in the south of France, over-run with tourists, don't, and the entire region offers a wealth of activities for the visitor. Until recent times Languedoc-Roussillon was very much an 'undiscovered' part of France, enjoying quiet anonymity away from the hoards despite being blessed with 250km of coastline adorned by golden beaches, earning its reputation as a "secret Mediterranean". Its apparent lack of popularity was undoubtedly due to decidedly noisier neighbours who were the focus of visitor attention – to the east, rural Provence, besieged by those in search of Peter Mayle – or at least, the lifestyle he wrote about so tantalisingly, with the Cote d'Azur, playground of the rich and famous just beyond, and the Spanish border to the south.







Tourism in the region is very much on the increase today and according to national statistics, the Languedoc now welcomes more than 10 million visitors annually, with Ryanair forecasting passenger numbers in excess of 700,000 into Carcassonne alone. Long term settlement is also growing and the region draws in people from all over France attracted by its climate, cost of living and employment opportunities. The expatriate community too has expanded, some arriving to live in the Languedoc permanently, like Garrigae director, Karl O'Hanlon, and others residing part of the time in a growing number of holiday properties. O'Hanlon moved to the Languedoc from Dublin to join Garrigae as Director General in 2006 after serving his time in the corporate world working for the likes of the Boston Consulting Group and Bank of Ireland. He had been introduced to the area by his father who was a frequent visitor through his involvement in the wine industry.

The Languedoc is Europe's largest wine producing region and vineyards are a constant factor in the landscape here: row upon row of diminutive gnarled trunks appear to line every roadside, stretching away over undulating terrain as far as the eye can see. "I sensed early on that there was a real business opportunity down here," he says. "Visiting often with my father, I saw that there had been a first wave of immigrants—the creative crowd—artists, writers, academics, who had come in search of a lifestyle which would inspire and complement their work. I felt sure there would be a second influx of people who would be attracted by the lifestyle but who wouldn't have the time to restore a property that those in the first wave had."

With this thought in mind, Karl began to research potential property investments in the area. Eventually he met the son-in-law of a local Vigneron who had sold his business in Paris and had come back down south to develop a property business. This was Miguel Espada, founder and director of Garrigae Investissements. The two men found that they had similar ambitions and ideals, including a desire to preserve the authenticity of this corner of the Med. Their concept focuses on developing second homes to blend seamlessly with the environment, playing an active role in the local community, yet supplemented by hotel standard amenities and service. Le Domaine des Pins, a group of 15 stone-built villas in the village of Durban, near Corbieres, was the company's first project, earning a Bentley property award for the best French development in 2003. Three years further on and the business had grown sufficiently for O'Hanlon to give up the corporate life and move his family permanently to the Languedoc.

