

PORT RIVE GAUCHE

IT'S been just over a year since the love affair started. Not with handsome French hotel owner Miguel Espada—although he IS gorgeous—but with France and the Languedoc region.

It was over a chilled glass of Sauvignon overlooking the sun-drenched hills of Les Faïches that Miguel, who owns the Garrigae group, told us he was renovating ancient buildings throughout the region and turning them into hotels and rental properties.

And that's how The Husband and I found ourselves at his newest hotel in Port Rive Gauche—an old fishing town in Southern Languedoc which looks like St Tropez used to be before the jet set swarmed in and made it noisy and expensive.

Our stunning two-bedroom apartment was a stone's throw from the shimmering waters of the Etang De Thau lagoon and every day we were woken by the dazzling light created by sunlight dancing on the water.

Once we'd oohed and aaahed at how gorgeous it all was and how we wanted to live there, breakfast would arrive and we'd sit on the deck eating warm croissants slathered in raisin jam (a speciality of the region) and pain au chocolat with a pot of steaming café crème

CAROLE MALONE says wine,

to wash it down thinking we'd truly died and gone to heaven.

There was no sound, no noise other than ducks bobbing on the water who somehow sensed when the croissants had arrived and made no secret of their desire to share them. (Yes, we gave them a few crumbs).

Being in Port Rive Gauche, an easy 50-minute drive from Montpellier airport, was like stepping back in time. No cars can get onto the port, which is lined with pretty cafes, glorious restaurants (selling six oysters for about a fiver and the freshest seafood in the world), ice-cream parlours and gift shops.

But the feeling is of a time gone by. Yes 21st century life is there but it's calm and restful, not showy or brash. Everyone sits on the harbour drinking coffee, pastis or small carafes of local wine (£4.50) nibbling on tapas and looking out at the myriad boats moored there.

Take your French phrase book because English isn't widely spoken which adds to the charm. However, don't worry too much because I found my A-level French came back thick and fast halfway through a carafe of house wine.

The Husband and I had a fantastic after-

noon on a sailing ship called Pollux which is moored in the port. Our captain was Albert who, when our shoulders were virtually touching the water as we raced across the wind-tashed waves, assured us that he was a four-times French sailing champion so we weren't to worry. We didn't and it was an unbelievable experience.

Albert teaches his guests the rudiments of sailing—how to steer, put the masts up, and gauge the speed. By the end of the afternoon, with his pidgin English and our rudimentary French, we knew all about his family, his kids, and his life.

DIVINE

And, once we'd parked the boat (sorry moored it), Albert brought out a bottle of rosé and we all sat on deck in the afternoon sunshine toasting life, living and ourselves.

If you want to eat post in Port Rive Gauche try Le Chateau du Port, a Michelin-starred restaurant which the word divine doesn't even cover. For a wonderful lunch and not too expensive, go to the Cote Sud brasserie. We had tapas—anchovies, sweet-tasting squid and house wine—all for about £15.

The town of Marseillan is five minutes walk

food & peace of southern France is to die for

but also in port is the place where the famous vermouth Nolly Prat is made. Of course, the Husband and I had to go for a tasting.

I'm not usually one for guided tours but this one was fascinating because we saw how vermouth is made and stored in more than 80 gargantuan Canadian oak casks. And then there was the tasting at the end where we got to drink cocktails and eat chocolates made from Nolly Prat.

After three days, we moved to Couvent d'Hérépian, a converted convent about 50 minutes drive from the Port and another of the gorgeous Frenchman's hotels.

Now I'm going to stick my neck out here and say the food was the best I've had anywhere. None of it is made on the premises as French laws forbids cooking at Le Couvent.

But it's brought in from a restaurant (all produce from local farms) in the village where the chef is Michelin starred. There is no choice. So if you want to eat at the convent you get

what you're given. But don't worry, it's out of this world. We didn't have one bad meal.

Yes there are other places to eat locally, but we didn't bother. We didn't want to miss what was being served at Le Couvent.

We ate quail, scallops on pea purée, belly pork, lamb rump and the best dauphinoise potatoes I've ever tasted. The desserts were a divine fruit crumble, melon served with two sweet lemon pastry cases filled with minced lamb (yes lamb) mixed with lemon and lime confit (the best one).

OK, I should stop talking about the food and tell you about the place. Le Couvent is a 17th century convent Miguel has sympathetically converted à la Garrigae style. It has 14 rooms—some looking out onto the cobbled streets of Hérépian and the church tower and the rest onto the gardens and the spa.

Oh yes, I forgot to mention the wonderful spa where Michelle works her magic. I had two massages and reflexology and it's no exaggeration to say I was transported. Before she treats people Michelle fasts and meditates. But rest assured, whatever SHE does, what YOU feel afterwards is renewed, refreshed and bloody marvellous!!

Le Couvent has kept much of its charm. The stone floors and steps are as they would have been in its convent days. Every room has stone work and beams but the Garrigae touch is that of old French mixed with new. The colours are all minks, blues, slate greens and greys.

GLORIOUS

The gardens aren't huge but they're big enough to house a swimming pool, loungers and pretty tables where you can read in the shade and sip rose wine till its time for dinner.

Remember that Languedoc is a famous wine region with lots of vineyards open to the public. It's best to hire a car so you can drive round this glorious countryside not a million miles from British shores.

And that's what's fantastic about this place. You feel like you've been transported to a beautiful foreign land—and of course you have. It's close enough and easy enough to pop over for just a weekend. But make it more—you'll regret it if you don't...

GETTING THERE
PRICES for Le Couvent d'Hérépian start from £125 (£111) per room per night and for Port Rive Gauche from £130 (£116) per apartment per night. For more details visit www.garrigae-resorts.com easyJet flies from Gatwick to Montpellier with