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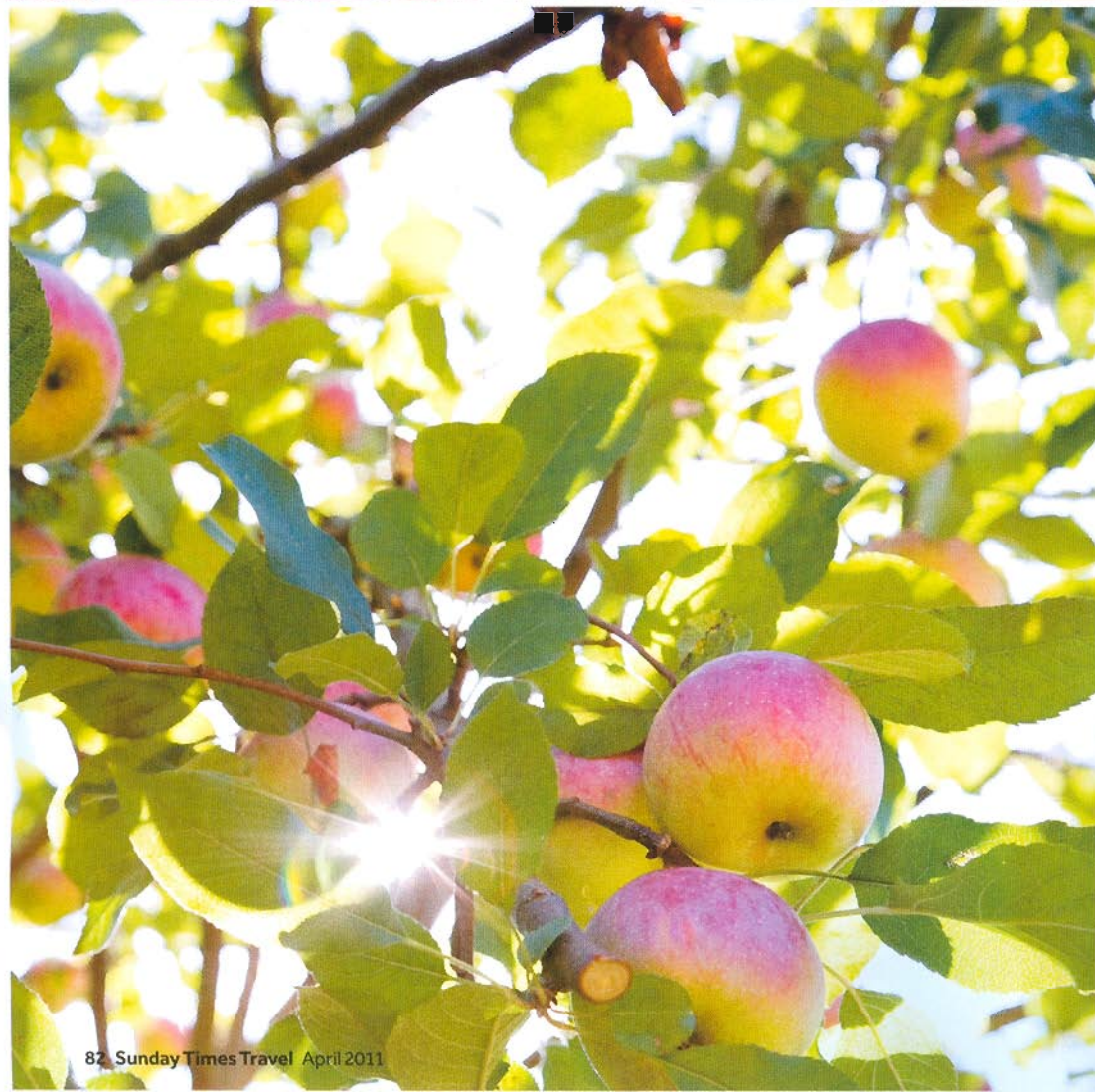
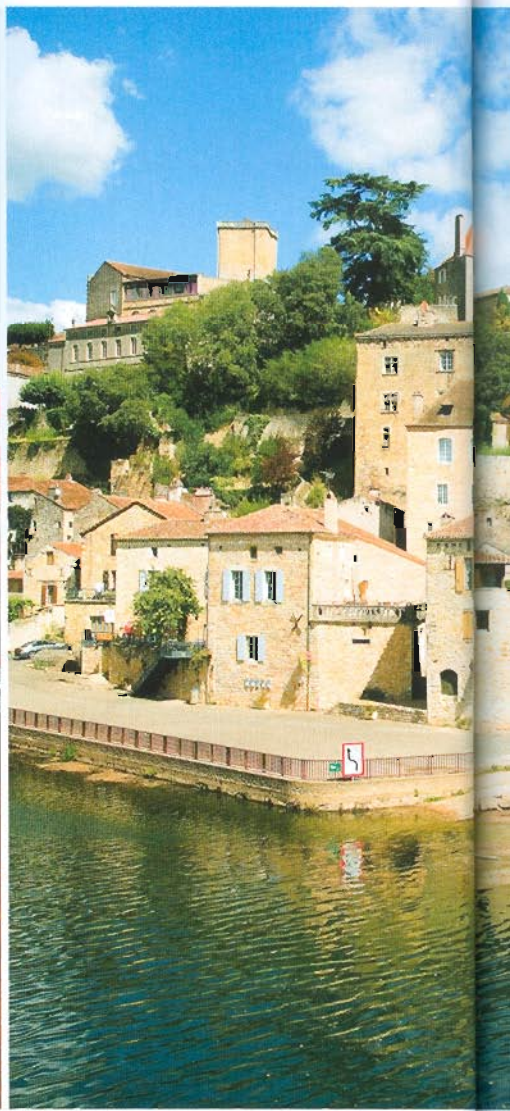
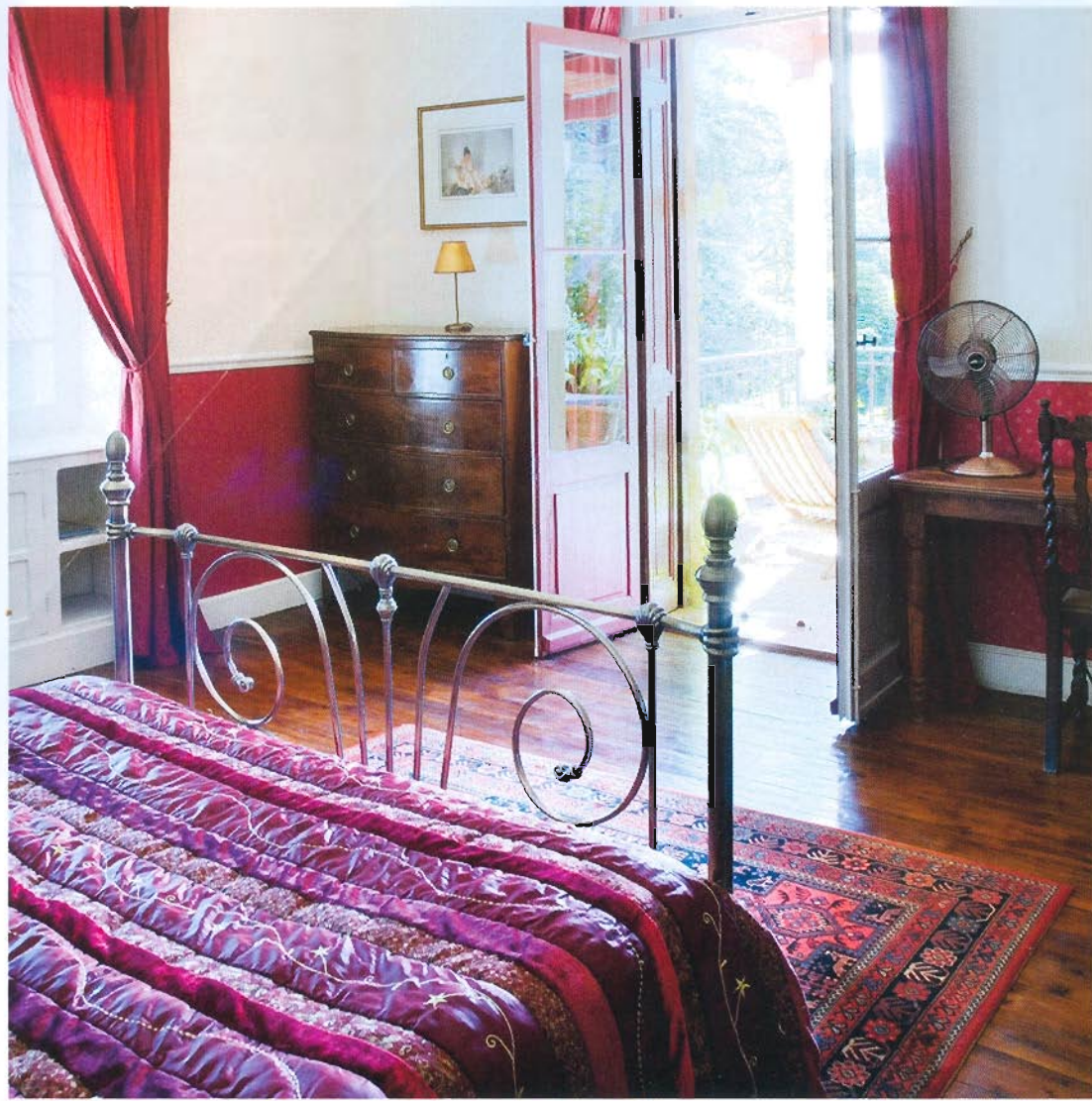
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OUR FRIENDS IN THE SOUTH

Not posh enough to have pals with a place in France? You are now. For less than the price of a 4* hotel room, you can live with the locals in a *chambre d'hôte* – like a B&B, says **Dana Facaros**, but with wine!

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES REEVE



We felt like Hobbits in search of the last Homely House in the Woods, puttering along third-gear roads through the deep forests of the Lot region, dodging the occasional wild boar before reaching the tiny village of Les Arques. Welcoming lights and aromas emanated from La Récréation restaurant, so we opened the door and followed the laughter coming from the table where William and Rosalie Haas held court, passing around a mobile phone. ‘Go on, have a look,’ Rosalie said, handing it over so we could watch the clip. ‘It was one of our guests’ – Julie’s – birthday yesterday, so as a surprise William did his version of *The Full Monty*.’

‘Not the *full full monty*,’ her hunky husband hastened to add. But it was a very funny performance. You would have thought it was a gathering of old friends, but not quite. All were guests at one of the best *chambres d’hôtes* in France, William and Rosalie’s *Domaine du Haut Baran*, a golden-stone farmhouse beyond the Medieval village of Puy l’Évêque.

Chambres d’hôtes are French B&Bs, and since the ‘80s they have mushroomed in the south of France. The first ones were often basic, and sometimes a tad too authentic.

Once, in Marseille, I was given a university-attending daughter’s bedroom, left in its original ‘*jus*’ as the French say – it came filled with *Thriller* paraphernalia and stuffed toys, and complete with a genuine *maman* in slippers seeing me off the next morning with a bowl of lukewarm coffee and a supermarket baguette. William and Rosalie, though, are emblematic of the new generation of *chambre d’hôte* owners. Unlike my Marseille *madame*, they offer guests warm, flaky croissants – as well as an intimate knowledge of their turf, and the chance to experience much more of it than you’d ever get in a hotel.

There’s nothing like writing a travel guide or two (my profession) to wrinkle them out. I kept running across lovely-sounding places, especially in the southwest – arguably the most hospitable corner of France – but book deadlines were always such that I never had a chance to enjoy them fully. When February rolled around with nothing on, I decided to revisit the four that seemed most tempting, whose owners really pull out the stops.

Rosalie, who earned her hospitality spurs in a top hotel in Cincinnati, is the >

Sun at lumière: clockwise from top left, a room at Villa Lafabrègue; the Medieval village of Puy l’Évêque (the *Domaine du Haut Baran* B&B is nearby); Carcassonne; an apple orchard in *Domaine du Haut Baran*



Crate expectations: left, greengages for sale in Place Carnot, Carcassonne; right, the pool at Villa Lafabrière

consummate perfectionist. 'It takes a half-hour just to light all the candles for dinner,' she said as she dashed about the baronial hall, while Kate Read, the Baran's talented English chef, whipped up a feast of pan-fried foie gras, duck breast with cherries and mango sorbet. William, the Baran's raconteur, chauffeur and *guide extraordinaire* has deep roots in the area: his French mother was born and raised a few kilometres away; his aunt, who lives in the next village, hand-painted the furniture in the pretty bedrooms.

Once the candles were lit, we took our cocktails out to the terrace sparkling with white fairy lights, gazing towards a sweeping emerald meadow in the woods. It was utterly idyllic, the only sound a trilling nightingale. It was so isolated I had to ask: 'How do people ever find you?'

'It wasn't easy at first! But over the years we've learned to offer something extra that makes us worth finding – family reunions, wedding parties, cookery classes and wine tours; our current group are doing a truffle tour. We get cyclists, artists groups, walking tours. We've just started all-inclusive spa weekends, with our two English masseuses. In fact, with advance notice, we can do just about anything.'

'Er, including the full monty?' I asked. Rosalie rolled her eyes. 'That was a one-off. Right, William? Wasn't it? William!' He just grinned.

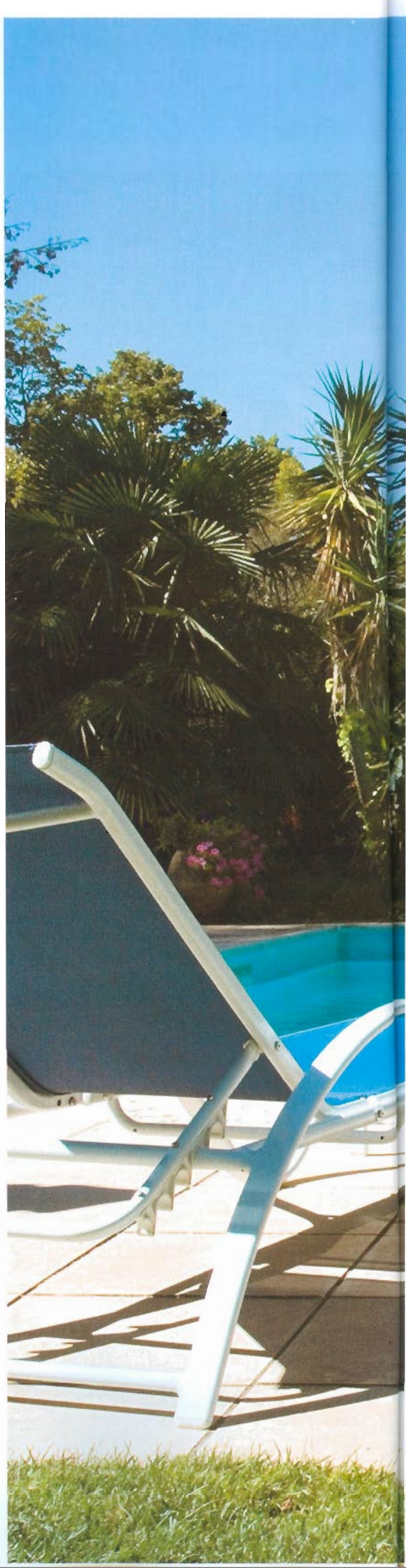
The February sun blazed the next day as I drove south to Carcassonne. Coachloads of pensioners and school groups were besieging the fairytale Cité, yet few

vehicles ventured down into the adjacent 13th-century Bastide (Medieval new town), built by King Louis IX, aka Saint Louis. While the Cité on the hill crumbled away, awaiting a kiss from its prince charming (the 19th-century restorer Viollet-le-Duc), this lower Carcassonne, where most people actually lived, became rich from textiles. In the 18th century it filled up with *hôtels particuliers* – grand private homes, as elegant as the time demanded – and in one of these Debrah Smith and Peter Woodcock have created 42 Rue Victor Hugo, or 42rVH for short.

Peter greeted me warmly. 'Come on up,' he said, as he ascended the grand staircase into the 21st century: under ceilings high enough to accommodate a giraffe were a sleek and convivial lounge, dining room and massive kitchen. Accommodation is in two chic apartments with designer kitchenettes, and a B&B suite – all designed by Debrah, who works in London when she isn't in Carcassonne.

It took about 30 seconds to discover that she and Peter were as smart, warm and contagiously fun as their pad. 'It's a shame you drove here,' said Debrah. 'People love it when Peter gives them a top-down pick-up from the airport on a warm day, feeling the wind in their hair as they peel off London clothes.'

Peter invited me to tag along as he went to buy supper ingredients in Carcassonne's outdoor market in Place Carnot, just a few minutes away on foot. He is an excellent chef – his cookery weekends are a popular option at 42rVH – and it was fascinating >





to watch him negotiate his way through the sensory assault of fragrant, perfectly fresh French produce, an astonishing amount of it locally grown. 'We're midway between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, so you get the best of both climates,' he explained. 'A lot of chefs come to us on holiday, then simply can't resist this stuff and end up cooking feasts.' He knew which onions didn't cause tears (a local variety called Citou, grown only within 30km of Carcassonne), who had the tastiest goat's cheese, and which rogue overcharged for spinach.

That afternoon I borrowed one of 42rVH's bikes for a pedal along the Canal du Midi, which curls through the centre of Carcassonne. Out of season, the waterway's famous plane-tree canopy was a tangle of branches above a silvery ribbon mirroring the soft winter sky. The scene had all the elegiac beauty of a Neo-Classical landscape painting, and it proved to be the perfect appetiser for a lovely evening. The chemistry of good food, good wine and good company worked its magic, and we stayed up late, chatting and laughing. But wasn't it tricky, having complete strangers sitting around your table? 'Do you ever get any bores?' I asked, thinking that would be the worst thing, being charming while your eyes glazed over. Debrah and Peter considered. 'Well, no! But we have had two couples who got engaged while staying here.' Somehow I wasn't surprised.

The next day was so beautiful that I took the scenic route, due south of Carcassonne, through classic Languedoc-Roussillon landscapes. Like the Canal du Midi, the old D-roads were lined with ancient plane trees, or squirmed through vertiginous gorges. My destination was Prades, a big town on the river Têt, where exiled Catalan cellist Pau Casals founded one of France's top summer music festivals. I'd seen pictures of Villa Lafragola, but they hardly prepared me for the real McCoy: a magnificent Neo-Renaissance Florentine villa built in the 1870s by a banker from Barcelona. Only a short walk from the centre of Prades, it's an oasis of calm in a walled garden with a pretty pool. Looming over the garden wall, startlingly close-up and personal, is the distinct 2,784m Pic du Canigou, the sacred mountain of the Catalans, so prominent it was long believed to be the highest of the Pyrenees.

A border collie and a chocolate labrador came bounding out. 'You don't mind dogs, do you?' asked Kate Wilcock. 'The collie belongs to a friend - we couldn't bear the thought of her having to stay in a kennel...' I liked Kate at once, and liked her even more when she gave me the Canigou room, with its genteel period >

Sleek and chic: the living room at 42rVH, a converted *hôtel particulier* in Carcassonne; chicken breast stuffed with smoked ham and goat's cheese at Domaine du Haut Baran





Supermarché: left, the market at Place Carnot in Carcassonne; right, the dining room at Château de Raissac



decor and large terrace, where you could easily spend hours lounging and contemplating the magic mountain.

We sat in the glassed-in breakfast room overlooking The View, next to a cosy area with tea- and coffee-making apparatus, stacks of books, films and a computer or two for guests. Villa Lafabrègue may look grand, but the atmosphere is warm-hearted and relaxed: offspring, ages 10-16, checked in for the evening as their affable – and fit – father, Nick, returned from leading a snowshoeing expedition. They were like a fantasy of the perfect family. I asked how they ended up in Prades. 'Back in 2003, Nick was working in London for an IT company, who were sending us to Australia; our bags were packed when it fell through. We had so been looking forward to the sun that staying in London seemed unbearable.'

Nick chipped in: 'Kate did the research and found that Roussillon gets 300 days of sunshine a year. And we discovered this place, which we swapped for the same price as our flat in London.' My eyes bugged out in astonishment as he quickly added: 'It needed a lot of work, though.' The fact that they arrived with four kids, including two-year-old twins, and made such a beautiful job of it is pretty astonishing.

The scenery around Prades is stunning – Roussillon, with its delectable climate, fertile coastal plain and dramatic scenery, is France's secret California – and Nick knows it well. 'The mountains, lakes and gorges just beg for walks, although the logistics can be daunting, even if you have

a car. What I can do is pick guests up at the airport, pack picnics and take them to the trails – or Roussillon's fortified towns and exquisite Romanesque abbeys.'

The villa's website lists 16 half- and full-day itineraries: along with the walking tours, there are soaks in the local hot springs, a spectacular ride on the Petit Train Jaune into the mountains, a jaunt to the Cathar castles, even the Dalí museum in Figueres. Although they don't do meals, Kate and Nick supply facilities for cooking your own, or recommend restaurants in Prades, or drive you to others nearby, including the celebrated Auberge St Paul in Villefranche-de-Conflent.

The next morning it rained, bucketing down, but even sun-loving Kate was glad to see it after several dry months. At least it made it slightly easier for me to leave their lovely home. Then the car's CD player broke, abandoning me to the cruel mercies of French pop. I got stuck in traffic in Perpignan, then in roadworks in Béziers, then by the cathedral (the replacement for the one that exploded like an overripe pomegranate in 1209 when the Albigensian Crusaders set it alight, along with the unfortunates taking refuge inside).

So I was a bit grumpy when I finally arrived at the Château de Raissac, only three kilometres from Béziers on a good day. It was a classic symmetrical cream-coloured beauty, set in a romantic park filled with magnificent trees, and it had been in the Viennet family since 1828. A pair of sphinxes glowered at each other across the courtyard. It was obviously a >

SOUTHWEST FRANCE

B&B for heads of state. This, I thought forlornly, is where my quest for the most *simpatico* hosts in southwest France is going to come a cropper. Chateau people always live in their own little world.

I couldn't have got it more wrong: the laughter started the moment I walked in. Jean Viennet's thick mane stuck out in all directions. 'I'm not as crazy as my hair,' he assured me, with a twinkle in his eye.

The interior of the chateau was as winningly odd as its owner; I expected the usual la-di-da Louis XIV furnishings (and there were certainly some splendid pieces), but as Jean's Norwegian wife Christine showed me round, I felt as if I had fallen into a playful imaginarium of the senses. Both are artists: Christine is a ceramicist (she has pieces in museums) and owns one of the world's largest private collections,

filling stables and rooms with shimmering colour. Jean's surreal oil paintings (many figures have two sets of eyes – 'to encourage people to see beyond their usual vision') and mermaid murals cover the walls. It's hard to believe that, 20 years ago, this was a leaking ruin, burgled of its fittings, its parquet floors set ablaze by vandals. (And it's interesting to note that all the most engaging versions of 'traditional French' I had seen on this trip came from couples with at least one non-native at the helm.)

'Do you like wine?' Jean asked. My eyes said 'Mais oui', so we hopped in the car and drove three kilometres to the 17th-century cellars at Puech Cocut (Cuckoo Hill), where the main family business is conducted – now in the hands of son Gustave. Because of its sunshine-and-quilt geography, Languedoc-Roussillon is the

most exciting wine region in France, and the Château de Raissac makes 600,000 bottles of the best, including a superb Viognier Muscat and a red Terra Incognita, some of it sleeping in 200 oak barrels, stretching off into the shadows.

The chateau's dining room was nearly the length of a football pitch, but as I was the only guest and already 'part of the family', we ate in the kitchen, with Christine and Jean's daughter-in-law, Marie, and their little granddaughters. Jean loves to cook, and the food and wine were delicious, the laughter infectious.

When, reluctantly, I dragged myself away for the rainy drive home, I realised I'd been right: Château de Raissac was indeed in its own little world. Like the other *chambres d'hôtes* I'd visited, it was a microcosm of everything we love about France. ■

Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

The airports at Bergerac, Carcassonne, Perpignan, Girona and Béziers are served by **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) from a number of UK airports. Toulouse is also convenient for the Lot and Carcassonne. **BA** (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) has flights from Heathrow from £118 return; **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick and Bristol; **Jet2** (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) from Belfast, Edinburgh and Leeds Bradford from £60. **Flybe** (0871 700 2000, www.flybe.com) flies from Southampton to Perpignan from £174, and **Bmibaby** (0871 224 0224, www.bmibaby.com) flies there from Manchester from £103. **Eurostar** (08432 186186; www.eurostar.com) has Paris returns from £69. TGVs to Perpignan or Béziers go from Gare de Lyon, and to Carcassonne from Gare d'Austerlitz; from £47 return.

WHERE TO STAY

Domaine du Haut Baran (00 33 5 6524 6324, www.hautbaran.com) has doubles from £134, B&B; add £45pp for one of Kate's five-course dinners plus the best AOC Cahors wine; a Secluded Manor Ride package includes six nights' B&B, transfers, four days' riding with horse wrangler/guide Lucky Luke, six meals, four lunches and a day touring Sarlat, from £2,000pp. **42rVH** (00 33 977 524436, www.42ruévictorhugo.com) has suites

from £110, room only; three-night gourmet breaks for two cost from £475, including airport pick-up and drop-off, breakfast in bed, cocktails and canapés on your first night, and a lavish four-course dinner on your last. They can also arrange a tour with wine whiz Wendy Gedney or a wine-tasting with Master of Wine Matthew Stubbs at Vinécole, south of Carcassonne. **Villa Lafabrière** (00 33 4 6896 2990, www.villafrench.com) has doubles from £60. B&B; a seven-night stay is £500pp, based on two people sharing, including breakfasts, picnics, your choice of excursions, airport pick-up and drop-off, transport to and from all activities, but not admission fees. Or rent the whole place: including the two *gîtes*, it sleeps 25. **Château de Raissac** (00 33 4 6749 1760, www.raissac.com) has doubles from £85. B&B; book ahead for dinner, £36pp. Stays include visits to the porcelain museum in the stables and a wine tour; massages and cooking lessons available; they also do weddings and receptions.

OTHER B&Bs

Château de Bellevue (Plassac, Bordeaux; 00 33 6 4275 9495, www.chateau-bellevue.de) offers languages, wine appreciation, blues singing, Latin dancing, golf, fishing, touring in a 2CV, and more. Doubles from £118, B&B. **Chez Passet** (Lézignan; 00 33 5 6291 9571, www.chezpasset.com), near



Lourdes, offers skiing, cycling, walking tours, wine weekends and airport transfers. Doubles from £77, B&B. **La Ferme de Souliès** (Casteljaloux; 00 33 5 5379 9554, www.lafermedesoulies.com) has organic breakfasts, massages and pottery and vegetarian cooking classes. Doubles from £93, B&B. **Lagranette** (Saint Salvy; 00 33 5 5347 6950, www.lagranette.net) offers family-oriented *chambres d'hôtes* (and gypsy caravans), with a pool, spa, meals, cooking and wine classes. Doubles from £58, B&B. **Haras Picard du Sant** (Lasserre; 00 33 5 6166 6534,

www.merens-ariege.com) offers themed weekends on an organic stud farm – from horses to hog-butcher – and airport transfers. Doubles from £42, B&B. **Mart'inn**, (Maubourguet; 00 33 6 2355 3482, www.mart-inn.com) can arrange Madiran-wine breaks, oil painting, culinary and spa weekends, from £71 for two, B&B. **Villa St Simon** (Blaye; 00 33 5 5742 9966, www.bordeauxwinevilla.com) does Bordeaux wine and chateau tours. Doubles from £65, B&B.

FURTHER INFORMATION
See www.tourisme-lot.com.