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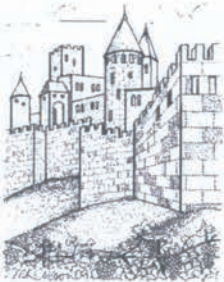
Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report®

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OPINIONATED REVIEWS BY A WRITER WHO TRAVELS INCOGNITO AND ALWAYS PAYS HIS OWN WAY

Escaping the Crowds: Another South of France



THE ANCIENT REGION of Languedoc-Roussillon is dominated by craggy, sunburnt mountains and quilted by seemingly endless vineyards, which follow the Mediterranean coastline

from the delta of the Rhône to the Spanish border. (Marseille to Perpignan is almost exactly 200 miles.) This is the other South of France, a world away from the glitz and the commercialism of the Côte d'Azur.

Though it has become France's Sun Belt (Montpellier invariably tops surveys of where the French would ideally choose to live), the Languedoc-Roussillon remains a settled sort of place, one still organized essentially around the roads and towns constructed during the Roman

Empire. The A9, the province's main highway, traces the Via Domitia that linked Gaul to Spain, and, with the exception of Montpellier, all of its main cities — Nîmes, Narbonne, Perpignan — were founded by the Romans. Just a few miles from Uzès, the Pont du Gard, a three-tiered aqueduct built during the first century, remains one of the most spectacular works of civil engineering in Europe. The Languedoc-Roussillon is also home to the extraordinarily imposing fortified city of Carcassonne, the exquisite medieval village of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert and the spectacular Cathar refuge of Minerve, officially selected as one of "Les Plus Beaux Villages de France." (The Cathars were a heretical Christian sect that flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries.)

Although it is the largest wine-producing region in France, the Languedoc-Roussillon has long been a quiet and self-contained backwater. But now, as so many people flock to Provence and much of the Riviera becomes distressingly overbuilt, the region is starting to stir, thanks to a constellation of superb small hotels. These have distinctive personalities and an abundance of style, but also represent tremendous value for the money. To be sure, many of the properties offer fewer services than traditional luxury hotels, but they also provide much more personal and richly textured experiences.

★ IN THIS ISSUE

1 | MAGICAL NEW HIDEAWAYS

Clos du Léthé Uzès
Jardins Secrets Nîmes
Baudon de Mauny Montpellier
Domaine de Verchant Montpellier
Le Couvent de Hérépian Hérépian
Le Relais des 3 Mas Collioure

5 | COTE D'AZUR UPDATE

La Réserve Ramatuelle

6 | OREGON'S WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Black Walnut Inn & Vineyard Dundee
plus fine local restaurants

8 | THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

★ ONLINE THIS MONTH

» Slide show of featured hotels
» Languedoc-Roussillon: images
and itinerary
» Wines of southwestern France
» Portland update

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at www.AndrewHarper.com

HIDDEN AWAY IN THE HILLSIDE HAMLET of Saint Médiers, the splendid **CLOS DU LETHE** is a hotel not soon forgotten (despite Lethe being the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology!). Not only is it the ideal base from which to visit enchanting Uzès, it is a small, beautifully decorated hotel of considerable comfort and distinctive charm.

The owners bought a ramshackle hodgepodge of buildings ranging from a medieval pigeon cote to a 19th-century stable and renovated them into a private house and a five-room hotel. The accommodations all enjoy a spectacular view of forests, rolling fields flecked with crimson poppies and the bell towers of Uzès, way off in the distance.

Our room, "La Blanche," occupied an old, barrel-vaulted stable and came with a white-painted floor, a white cotton-covered sofa, whitewashed walls and an exceptionally comfortable bed made up in white and oatmeal-colored linens. Doors led to a small garden with a private terrace scented by roses and flowering jasmine, where we found huge canvas-colored pillows on a sunbathing platform, plus a table and chairs for picnicking. The pool and Jacuzzi were just beyond a low hedge and surrounded by a wooden deck.

Our bath was equipped with a tub, separate shower, double vanities and a teak floor. All in all, we quickly became extremely fond of our temporary home, especially while enjoying a delicious country breakfast or a glass of cold rosé at the end of a day's sightseeing. The hotel has no restaurant, but Uzès brims with them, and the owners will gladly make suggestions and reservations.

➔ 93 *Deluxe Double*, \$\$ www.closdulethe.com



FEW HOTELS ARE MORE APPROPRIATELY NAMED than **JARDINS SECRETS**, an exquisite 14-room property in Nîmes. From the street, nothing hints at the luxuriance within. Stepping through the wrought-iron door, we found ourselves in a lush oasis, where a massive palm and several olive trees shaded a small plunge pool. Creeping bougainvillea covered the old stone walls with a blaze of magenta flowers. As we stood entranced beside a small fountain, a friendly young Dutch woman arrived to help with our bags.

This 4-year-old property has been a labor of love for Annabelle Valentin and her photographer husband Christophe, and together they've transformed an old coaching inn into a magnificently decorated hotel. The public rooms have been done in a sumptuous 19th-century style with rich colors, antiques and objets d'art.

Our room, "La Madone," was reached via a curving wooden staircase and it contained bronze silk damask curtains framing an exceptionally comfortable double bed. The adjacent bath, wood-floored like the bedroom, provided a soaking tub with a handheld shower and a single white marble vanity stocked with Savon de Marseille. A single white peony in a bud vase was lit by a small crystal chandelier. Modern comforts included air-conditioning and complimentary wireless Internet access.

Elsewhere, the principal amenity is an exquisite spa that offers a selection of Ayurvedic treatments and classical massages. A decorative tour de force, Jardins Secrets is a unique experience. Our only caveats are that there is no on-site parking — so drop your bags and then park in the garage at the nearby train station — and that there is occasional noise from passing trains. Otherwise, this is one of the most romantic hotels in the south of France. ➔ 92 *Junior Suite*, \$\$ www.jardinssecret.net

MONTPELLIER HAS ALMOST COMPLETELY CLOSED its old city center to automobile traffic, so when we booked at the **BAUDON DE MAUNY**, its English-speaking owner Alain de Bordas thoughtfully sent us instructions on where to park and how to reach the hotel. On our arrival, he buzzed us through the massive wooden front door of a biscuit-colored limestone mansion in the heart of Montpellier's charming Ecusson neighborhood. We found him waiting at the bottom of a wide staircase leading up to his splendid five-room hotel. In its gorgeous main salon, we settled on a sofa for a chat and to seek advice on the city's shops, galleries and restaurants.

Dating to 1777, this wonderful house has been in the de Bordas family for seven generations, which explains the unique style of the relaxed and patrician hospitality.

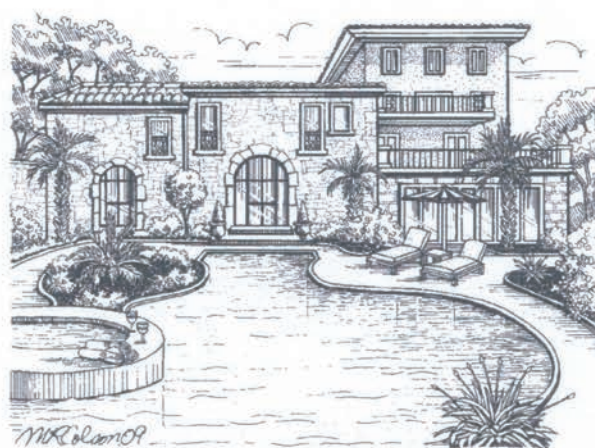
Showing us to our charming room, “Les Orchidées,” named for its English flower-print wallpaper, de Bordas explained that when he and his wife decided to create a hotel, they felt it was crucial to preserve every aspect of the original architecture. “We must think of the people who follow us,” he said. “In 100 years, someone might have another idea for the house, so all of the changes we made can be easily dismantled.”

Suffice it to say that we loved our willow-green room with its cool, polished flagstone floor, charming little salon with a tapestry-topped desk, and red leather sofa. To be sure, the bath was a little basic, with just a stall shower and a pedestal sink, but this was for us a secondary consideration. Uppermost in our minds was the privilege of inhabiting such a magnificent historic setting for a night. (Anyone requiring a more lavishly equipped bath can request the “Gypseries” suite, which has a soaking tub.) All rooms are air-conditioned and come with complimentary Internet access. **90** *Deluxe Double*, \$\$ www.baudondemauny.com

FANS OF CONTEMPORARY DESIGN and those wanting a pool, spa and gym during a visit to Montpellier might prefer the 20-room **DOMAINE DE VERCHANT**, located an easy 15-minute drive from the city in the leafy suburb of Castelnau-le-Lez. This 19th-century limestone manor house, set amid vineyards and century-old trees, has been lavishly renovated by owners Chantal and Pierre Mestre. The result offers a charming contrast between the old house’s traditional architecture, with its exposed beams and stenciled terra-cotta tile floors, and a sleek, contemporary décor. Every room here is individually furnished, but we loved “Blossomtime” on the third floor,

Two to Avoid

SINCE **LE VIEUX CASTILLON** (a Relais & Chateaux property) is located in the pretty village of Castillon-du-Gard, near the Pont du Gard, we thought it might be an ideal overnight after visiting the famous Roman aqueduct. Alas, this cluster of ancient stone buildings was a letdown in a variety of ways. Our non-smoking deluxe room had a nasty smell of stale cigarette smoke, no view of any kind and worn furnishings. The food at dinner was pretentious and absurdly expensive. Give this place a miss. A few days later, we spent a night at the **CHATEAU L'HOSPITALET**, in a respected vineyard near Narbonne, and from the distracted front desk to the motel-like room, plus an exceptionally poor meal at the hotel’s bistro, this place was a bust as well.



Poolside at Domaine de Verchant, Montpellier

which has views over the surrounding park and a private roof terrace with a heated Jacuzzi. The room itself was spacious and extremely comfortable, with a black-and-white color scheme and striking modern furniture from top manufacturers such as Poltrona Frau and Bellato. Its contemporary bath came with Alessi fixtures, a hydromassage tub and a separate rainfall shower. All rooms are equipped with high-tech fittings such as electrically operated curtains and a Bose DVD/CD player.

In addition to a small outdoor pool, the hotel has one of the most opulent spas in the south of France. Along with a beautiful indoor pool and sauna/steam rooms, there’s a Jacuzzi made from a massive carved-out boulder and a couples treatment room that has a private outdoor terrace overlooking the surrounding vineyards. A variety of massages and beauty treatments using Valmont and Anne Sémonin products is offered.

The menu in the hotel’s small, casual restaurant was designed by the Pourcel brothers of the Michelin two-star *Le Jardin des Sens*, and the wine list features the estate’s pleasant country vintages, the best of which are the whites and rosés. **90** *Deluxe Double with Sundeck*, \$\$\$ www.verchant.com

HEADING INLAND FROM BEZIERS on a sunny afternoon along the blessedly empty Départementale 909, we were reminded of what the Lubéron looked like when we first saw it in the early 1970s: an exquisite, idyllically tranquil region, carpeted with vineyards and dotted with pretty villages perched on hilltops. Arriving at Hérépian in the late afternoon (after a terrific lunch at *O-Bontemps*, a bistro in nearby Magalas opened by a Ducasse-trained chef), we found the front door of **LE COUVENT D’HEREPIAN** standing open. The office being unoccupied, we wandered around long enough to become utterly enchanted by this 12-room property, formerly a convent owned by the