

## A class act: Glamour and splendid isolation at a self-catering chateau

By [Stephanie Cross](#)

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An area liberally sprinkled with towers and pinnacles, walled towns and wineries, it can be hard to make a splash in the French region of Languedoc.

But Chateau Les Carrasses is certainly holding its own. Poised above a charming canal-side village and less than an hour from Montpellier, the white façade of this former winery has more than a touch of Hollywood glamour about it.



**Drink in the view: Chateau Les Carrasses' white façade has more than a touch of Hollywood glamour about it**

Inside, I find myself gently enveloped in class. Farrow and Ball decor? Check. In-room pre-loaded iPod and dock? Check. Walk-in showers? Need you ask. From my north-facing windows, there are views over the Orangerie, a delicate structure designed (or so it is alleged) by Gustave Eiffel - he also constructed quite a well-known tower you are probably familiar with.

Suites on the opposite side of the Chateau benefit from a sweeping panorama that takes in the bulk of Narbonne's 13th century cathedral and the far-off outline of the Pyrenees.

Come supper time, I am far too relaxed to raise a finger in my Smeg appliance-fitted kitchen, so I wander down to the Salon where head chef and former New York Times food writer Anne d'Ravel serves up the sweetest scallops I've ever tasted.

Though the Chateau opened its doors less than a year ago, founder Karl O'Hanlon (yes, he's a Dubliner) speaks proudly about the number of repeat bookings they've had already.

It's easy to see why guests would want to return. The Chateau couldn't be better located: the fortified city of Carcassonne, a World Heritage Site, is seventy minutes away; Beziers, with its thirteenth-century cathedral and notable Musee des Beaux Arts, is thirty minutes' drive, and Narbonne, home to a fabulous, daily indoor food market, twenty. Roman, Renaissance and Medieval treasures, all waiting to be explored.

My mini-break, however, begins in pretty-as-a-picture Bouziques. This pastel, harbour-side town is a heaven for seafood lovers, with boat trips offering a close-up view of the region's celebrated oyster beds.



**Enveloped in class: The Chateau's suites feature stylish furnishings and muted tones**

Back on shore, the many cafés and restaurants offer a chance to indulge at extraordinary (in a good way) prices. It's a feast for the eyes as much as the taste buds: at Chez Le Tchepe, a no-frills kind of place heavy with the scent of the sea, they serve up craggy platters towering with shells and bristling with oursins: claret-coloured, spined sea urchins. It's like stumbling into Neptune's larder, even if these latter are, I confess, more memorable visually than gastronomically.

If water is your element, then this part of the Languedoc is for you. The nearby canal town of Sete is known for its canoe jousting – teams of six trying to tip each other into the drink to the accompaniment of on-board bands – while the river Orb, which tumbles through the area, is a major draw for kayakers.

And for those who like to keep dry, the narrow but well-maintained roads offer excellent cycling through varied terrain, with coastal planes rising to the foothills of the Languedoc National Park. And at Creissin Equitation I watch as a handful of late-afternoon riders, mounted on a handsome array of bays and chestnuts, float around white-fenced paddocks.

As for leisure facilities back at the Chateau, I am spoilt for choice: a floodlit clay tennis court, a stunning infinity pool and even boules courts, if I'm feeling particularly French.

As Karl explains, Les Carrasses was intended to combine the facilities of a hotel, the freedom of self-catering apartments and the character of the original 19th century winery. Accommodation ranges from double-bedded apartments such as the one I find myself in, to three-bedroom houses in the winery's old outbuildings, many with private sun terraces and pools.



**On the waterfront: If water is your element, head for the canal town of Sete**

I take a particular shine to La Maison du Marechal Ferrant, the converted former home of the estate's blacksmith. The bedrooms, with their massive wooden beams, are a reminder of the building's past, but the kitchen, a double-sinker, couldn't be more modern: ice-maker; five-burner gas stove with extra-wide oven; marble-topped island bench. I keep expecting Jamie Oliver to appear.

Refreshingly, self-catering is a practical option here too, not just a nice-in-theory, pain-in-practice one. While the Chateau reigns in splendid isolation amid surrounding fields, it's less than a kilometre to canal-side Capestang with its Intermarche and Lidl (there's an impressive thirteenth-century church for good measure as well).

A short drive further and I arrive in diminutive Poilhes - more picturesque, plane tree-lined streets – where those taking a night off from domestic duties should seek out La Tour Sarrasine for a sensational dinner on the banks of the Canal du Midi. For my money, an evening spent here has more romance than a month in Paris: heading home to the Chateau under the stars, the world and its cares feel a lifetime away.

Sadly, the unseasonable February cold somewhat curtails my plans: it struggles to rise above minus five for the duration of my trip. Hard to believe that the bare vines - shivering twigs in the pale yellow soil - will ever sprout green again.

Nevertheless, I decide that a brisk trot around the twisty old streets of Pezenas, half-an-hour's drive from the Chateau, is worth the risk of frostbite. The market brims over with regional produce including Brebis, a creamy sheep's milk cheese, Roquefort - the home of which is just ninety minutes away - and (of course) shellfish. Order your oysters here and, a leisurely café au lait later, return to collect them shucked. Pezenas is also the spot for antiquing (possibly the world's most delightful verb?): signs for 'brocante' (junk) and bric-a-brac line the main street.



**Local flavour: Pezenas' market brims over with regional produce**

A bag of hot roasted chestnuts just about restores my circulation, but for a longer-lasting glow a visit to Domaine de L'Arjolle winery is in order. Its 60 vineyards yield everything from Grenache and Syrah, the local varieties, to Zinfandel. With an unmistakable twinkle of pride, the estate's founder, Louis Marie Teisserenc, shows off his 800-barrel, state-of-the-art, architect-designed wine cellar.

'I honestly believe that the Languedoc is the world's most interesting wine region,' Karl enthuses when I return, bottles clinking, to the Chateau. 'It has everything: a diversity of climates from sunny, coastal planes to mountains; a diversity of grapes, from ancient all-but-forgotten-varieties to modern hybrids; and wine makers from old school purists to complete avant-gardists.'

In fact, I'm left wondering if there's anything the Languedoc doesn't have. Perhaps I'll ponder the subject a little longer as I relax back at my castle.

## Travel Facts

Chateau Les Carrasses is offering a special package from €250 (around £208) per person including a bottle of champagne upon arrival, two nights in a luxury house or apartment with two or three bedrooms\*\*, each with en-suite bathroom; two breakfasts, one lunch, a three-course dinner with aperitif and wine and a late checkout.

To enquire or to make a reservation call 0845 686 8067 or email [resa@lescarrasses.com](mailto:resa@lescarrasses.com) quoting booking reference 'MailOnline'

For further information on Château Les Carrasses visit [www.lescarrasses.com](http://www.lescarrasses.com)

*\*\* House or apartment depending on availability the day of your arrival. Minimum of four people. Offer available for stays before the end of April*