

JOIN THE JET SETE

Sunny canals and succulent seafood make a perfect break in a French Venice

by Julie-Anne Barnes

WHEN someone offers you a slice of gâteau voted 'the best in Europe', it would be rude to say 'Non'. It is a delicacy dating back to 1890 – and they can't have been wrong all this time.

The famous Frescati cake, filled with meringue, rum, raisins and decorated with coffee icing, has long been a favourite with locals in the French town of Sète, and is just one of several delicacies this coastal Languedoc town has to offer.

Sitting on the Mediterranean coast, Sète is a town bustling with artists, food lovers and wine experts, yet holds firm to its merchant roots. It takes its name from cetacea, an order of mammals that includes the whale, for it is said that when Greek settlers arrived in the area they thought the mountainous backdrop resembled a whale's back.

The town has the thriving and attractive air of a working port, in some ways redolent of Venice, with the sea on one side, a lagoon on the other, and a network of canals feeding right into the town centre, on which locals engage in the curious sport of water jousting, with rowing boats as steeds.

Arriving at Beziers Cap d'Agde airport, it is refreshing not to face the bustle of a larger international hub. It sets the tone for a part of France whose inhabitants pride themselves on a laid-back attitude compared to their northern, Parisian neighbours.

AND where better than to lay our heads for the first night than a converted monastery? Le Clos de Maussanne is a master class in gracious living, each of its five rooms hung with characterful paintings and furnished with antique style.

For the latter part of our visit we stayed at Le Grand Hotel, where you wake to a memorable breakfast served in what was once the courtyard of this



Picture perfect: Rowing boats on the Canal Royal at Sète

stunning canal-side building, a perfect vantage point from which to take in all Sète has to offer.

An enormous skylight feeds morning sunshine to the courtyard plants as you cross the cobble floor to the breakfast buffet, where pretty wooden boxes offering herbal teas sit alongside large trays of freshly baked breads, croissants and pains au chocolat, along with fruit, yoghurt and compote and the daintiest pots of jam imaginable.

An early-morning trip to the staircase waterway of the Fonserrannes Locks offers an opportunity to experience some of the charm of the Canal du Midi and the city of Beziers.

The last commercial barge sailed on the canal in 1987 but the charm and history of the canals survives along a 150-mile stretch protected by Unesco World Heritage status. Close by, the nature reserve of Les Orpellières affords similar protection to 370 acres and two miles of dunes and rare flora.

But perhaps a bigger local success story is the Méditau Marée oyster farm in Marseillan, producing 50,000 tons of shellfish a year through a novel approach to harvesting which has earned owner Florent Tarbouriech and his company international acclaim. The

farm uses solar energy to create a tidal effect, powering electric motors that wind up the ropes on which the oysters are grown for a total of around 12 hours per week. Struggling to survive out of the water for this period keeps the creatures fit and fleshy and I was assured by my fellow travellers that the result was some of the best oysters they have tasted.

EQUALLY enjoyable is a visit to Marseillan, with a chance to sample Noilly Prat, the celebrated local vermouth. The company, which has a street named in its honour, began operating in 1813, since when the local drink has always been aged outdoors in ancient casks.

Noilly Prat's recipe of herbs and aromatic spices remains a closely guarded secret, but the result is a lovely floral aroma with a hint of vanilla and spice, a real balance of flavour with a sweet fruitiness offset by a hint of clove.

The Languedoc is most noted for its wines, but there is so much more to enjoy, from the local hand-picked asparagus to a landscape that offers breathtaking displays, coastal or inland.

Pezenas is at the heart of a wine region, its medieval town centre



Cultured creatures: Marseillan oysters are famed for their taste

rich in history, and was once favoured by the kings of France. It was also home to the 17th century playwright Molière. Today, the old town is a centre of artisan crafts and antiques.

Close by, in this heart of the Languedoc, is Domaine Ollier-Taillefer, run by Francoise Ollier and her brother Luc, fifth generation winemakers whose organic wines help to promote the territory. Francoise is also part of an association of women winegrowers called Vinifilles, which helps her reach a more global market.

A final day beckons, with a visit

to the beautifully restored Chateau Les Carrasses which boasts luxury self-catering accommodation, an infinity pool and a brasserie that won't break the bank. Lunch there was the perfect send-off, whetting the appetite for an early return to a delightful holiday destination.

TRAVEL FACTS

Ryanair flies to Beziers Cap d'Agde airport from Edinburgh Airport on Wednesdays and Sundays. www.ryanair.com www.bezierscapdage.com

'YOU'LL like Kesgrave Hall,' said a friend who lives near Ipswich. And it looked pleasant enough on the website. Built in 1812 and Grade II listed, the house sits in 38 acres of land, with lush lawns and lots of mature trees.

There are 23 rooms, some in the main house, others in buildings close by. We were welcomed warmly on arrival and a friendly young man escorted us to our first-floor billet. We had been upgraded and he told us it was one of his favourite rooms.

Later, we wondered if he had ever slept in it, what with the drone of the air vent from the kitchens. But it was a big room with a free-standing tub at the end of the bed. There was also a separate shower and double basin.

Trouble was no one had checked it properly. There was only one towel and we had to rummage in the wardrobe



for pillows. Our friend joined us for dinner and was as surprised as we were about the ordering of food.

We had to write down what we wanted and then hand the piece of paper to a waitress or take it to the order desk. For heaven's sake!

'What is this all about?' I asked. 'Just something a bit different,' said the waitress, sheepishly. And a complete waste of time. I scribbled

His mission: To test hotel hospitality to the limit

AN INSPECTOR CALLS



down everything, but she couldn't read my writing. We could have forgiven all this nonsense if the food had delivered. Quite the reverse. We shared a dull fish platter to start and then my main course (called 'caught in the middle') of Dingley Dell fillet of pork holstein arrived.

It duly had a fried egg and anchovies on top – which helped because the meat and its batter tasted of nothing at all. One of us had a 9oz rib eye that looked

like a thin minute steak. No marbling, no natural juices, no taste. Our friend got on a little better with his Sutton Hoo chicken, but was confused by the pomegranate couscous and tzatziki upon which it sat.

To make matters worse, there was a piercing spotlight above us, and we didn't think the noisy open-plan kitchen worked.

No form-filling at breakfast, thank goodness. But the jars of yogurt were so small you couldn't get a teaspoon into them. And it was dispiriting watching the staff squirt disinfectant on the tables.

We didn't much care for Kesgrave Hall. Our friend called to apologise for recommending it. We told him to get over it.

Kesgrave Hall
Hall Road, Ipswich, Suffolk IP5 2PU
Tel: 01473 333741, milsomhotels.com/kesgravehall
Doubles from £125 B&B
★☆☆☆☆