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LANGUEDOC

Eddi Fiegel finds the ingredients for the perfect weekend in the Languedoc



'There's nothing I love more than a find,' says my friend Maryam as we jostle among chic French country folk and dogged antiques dealers at the biannual Sunday flea market at Pézenas, near Carcassonne in the Languedoc region of south-west France. Second only to Lille's 'Braderie', this is the largest street market I've ever seen, with over 1,000 stalls sprawling along the low-rise, nineteenth-century streets of this small provincial town.

A tantalisingly sweet aroma of fresh crêpes and candyfloss permeates the air as we sift our way through art-deco crystalware, cast-iron radiators, vintage textiles, ornate rococo mirrors and bric-a-brac. There's even some musical accompaniment, with a traditional organ-grinder joined by Van Gogh's *Dr Gachet* playing the saw, complete with corduroy cap, handlebar moustache and hangdog watery eyes.

This is clearly a big event in the French antiques calendar and stallholders seem resolutely hard-nosed. Indeed, Maryam meets her match in a surly faced, Puffa-jacketed madame stallholder who gives her a seen-it-all, heard-it-all look of ennui as she attempts in vain to haggle over a ravishing Forties Sèvres coral-and-gold china coffee set that sings of Hollywood glamour.

Our weekend in the Languedoc had begun the previous day when we arrived at Carcassonne airport, only to be almost mowed down on the tarmac by the ferocious winds for which the city is famous. Happily, the gales abated as we reached the medieval walled old town – the largest in Europe – perched high up on a hill above the new town. With its vast ramparts, pointed grey turrets and steep cobbled streets, it's perhaps little surprise that the town regularly hosts large shoals of tourists, Japanese and otherwise, but it's worth the effort nonetheless.

By this stage we were more than ready for some down time, so with the Pyrenees to one side and the Montagne Noire hazy in the distance to the other, we set off along country lanes lined with plane trees to our hotel. Our driver alerted us to the first glimpse of our accommodation; in the distance, beyond rows of vineyards, I could see the fairy-tale white turrets of the Château Les Carrasses peeping out from behind the trees.

Recently opened as a complex of one- to three-bedroom self-catering apartments, the nineteenth-century chateau was originally built as a country retreat for the Prefect of Toulouse, a local nobleman, and stands on the site of an old resting stop on the St James pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

In my first-floor apartment, floor-to-ceiling french windows looked out to the pool, gardens



and vineyards below and the grandiose feel continued with an original, ornate black-marble chimneypiece in the salon/kitchen. The rest of the interiors, created by French designer Michelle Crouzet, are a modern, understated mix of muted greys and taupes, complete with Bose iPod docks and flat-screen televisions.

For supper, we could have gone into nearby Pézenas or cooked for ourselves, but the Château's optional dinner with local wines, hosted by British wine expert Matthew Stubbs, proved hard to resist. Each course and, indeed, each

wine, proved better than the last, from the fresh oysters and pear and blue-cheese salad, to the blissfully indulgent apple crisp with chestnut-purée ice cream.

The following day, before returning home, I squeezed in a quick stroll through the vineyards along the rough-hewn gravel path to the fields beyond. With only the odd farmhouse dotting the horizon and nothing but the crunch of my feet on the stones to break the silence, this was tranquillity itself. Now that's what I call a real find □

WAYS AND MEANS

Eddi Fiegel stayed as a guest of **Château Les Carrasses** (0845-686 8067; www.lescarrasses.com). One-bedroom suites in the chateau cost from €150. Both **Easyjet** (www.easyjet.com) and **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) fly to the Languedoc from the UK, to Montpellier and Carcassonne respectively. The **Pézenas flea market** takes place on the first Sunday in May and second Sunday in October.

The medieval old town sits on a hill above the modern part of Carcassonne (top). The biannual flea market at nearby Pézenas has over 1,000 antiques and bric-a-brac stalls (above)