

## Travel



The outdoor pool overlooking the vineyards and lagoon with the Pyrenees in the distance at Chateau Capitoul

Picture: Patrick Brunet



Château Capitoul sits in its own grounds, which include a vineyard

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# Escape to luxury in Languedoc – on France’s ‘secret’ Mediterranean coast

**Emma Newlands**  
emma.newlands@nationalworld.com

Its distinctive turret casts a commanding, regal view over the surrounding 240 acres of vineyards, olive groves and woodland, peeking above the leaves.

Château Capitoul is a high-end destination on the “secret” Mediterranean coast of the Languedoc region of France, with eight hotel rooms and 44 villas (some of which have their own pools), and gardens by renowned landscape designer James Basson, a four times Chelsea Flower Show Gold medal winner.

The property is in the

natural park of the Massif de la Clape. It is part of hospitality group Domaine & Demeure which aims to revive sleeping giant wine estates and other historic buildings, their first project Château les Carrasses opening in 2011, with Château St Pierre de Serjac following in 2016.

My trip starts by flying in to Nîmes direct from Edinburgh. (Other airports within 90 mins from Château Capitoul include Béziers, Perpignan, Carcassonne, Montpellier, Toulouse and Girona just across the border in Spain.)

The cream gravel driveway proves a rather impressive welcome to the property, and I check in at the grand reception in a modern-fronted building

that also houses the onsite winery. I head over to the neo-gothic white and terracotta chateau building and up the spiral staircase to my lodgings.

I am staying in the luxury suite, which has a cream, grey and blue colour scheme, and includes a freestanding silver-coloured bathtub in the main bedroom, plus living room area complete with teal-upholstered furnishings, and views in three directions including across the tranquil vineyards.

While the tiling of a hotel bathroom is not something that would usually strike me as anything particularly out of the ordinary, I find myself transfixed by the pristine slabs covering the floor and

shower area. Each one is a distinctive artwork forged by nature, collectively resembling an undulating pale blue sea with white-flecked waves crashing on sandy shoreline so vividly I can almost hear it.

However, I get the chance to see the sea in real life on a trip to Gruissan, five kilometres away along a cycle path through verdant fields, over a stream, and then the final stretch along the shoreline where a red and a blue rowing boat bobs quietly in the water.

Gruissan is an appealing destination, very much authentically French rather than overly touristy, full of cafes and restaurants. It is famous for its Barbarossa Tower, beneath which the

streets beneath snake round it in a design originally intended to make things difficult for invaders.

After refuelling on coffee and a goat’s cheese salad (no trip to France is allowed without either), I cycle a few minutes further to the Gruissan salt flats, a captivating stretch of pink-tinged water, bordered on the shoreside by picnic tables of diners tucking into oysters. Huge mounds of raw salt are piled up beyond the end of the path. You can get your hands on some of the product at an onsite shop selling it in every conceivable form - flavoured with everything from cumin to hibiscus.

I then head back to the chateau in time for a visit to the spa that is housed in

the basement, and I enjoy a back massage, one of the treatments on offer using products from French brand Cinq Mondes, along with a dip in the indoor pool (there is also a communal outdoor one overlooking the vineyards and lagoon with the Pyrenees in the distance) and steam room.

Dinner is at brasserie Asado, one of the property’s two in-house restaurants, and the more casual of the two, well suited to families and groups, housed back in the main building where I checked in.

Asado means ‘roasted’ in Spanish, with the menu based on products cooked over charcoal in an open plan kitchen. During my stay I try various items that

arrive with chargrill marks, including delicious Mediterranean tuna and an ultra-tender fillet of Aubrac beef.

The following day I head to Narbonne, a short taxi ride away, where I wander Les Halles, a food hall with dazzling, heavenly-scented displays of fresh produce, including brightly coloured macarons and oozing cheeses, all interspersed with tables packed with diners.

I learn more about such history on a walk through the vineyards, including how the salinity of the soil helps define the character of the grapes. Capitoul is the flagship estate of partners Vignobles Bonfils, a family firm with three generations currently working together, and the tour ends with a tasting in the shadow of rows of barrels, including delicious earthy reds, while there is also an on-site wine shop.

That is followed by dinner at in-house gourmet restaurant Méditerranéo, which is led by chef Valère Diochet. It offers a tasting menu, starting with an intriguing and delicious amuse bouche-style dish that arrives in the form of an



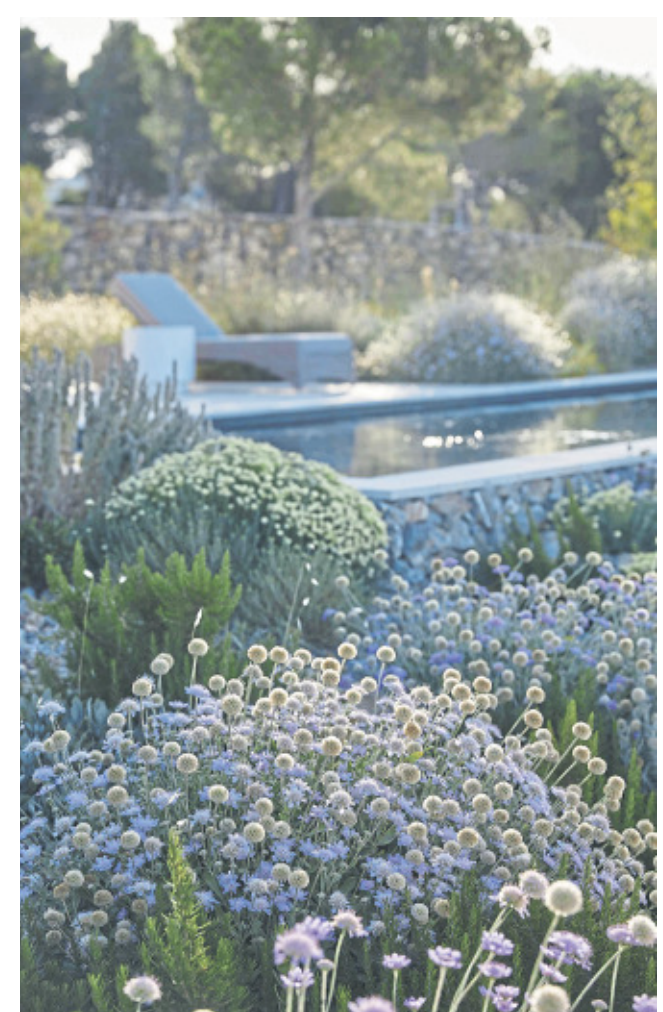
Rooms have views in three directions, including across the tranquil vineyards

olive accompanied by artfully placed leaves for decoration.

Château Capitoul was designed to “blend the facilities and style of a quality

hotel, the privacy of a villa rental, the authenticity of a working wine estate and the laid-back ambience and service of a private club”. I found, staying as a hotel

guest, that it offered a magnetic combination of high-end luxury with tranquil comfort, stunning scenery, and French charm both rural and urban.



The hotel gardens are by renowned landscape designer James Basson