

Luxury travel

Linger in a regal new stay in the Languedoc

Château Capitoul near Narbonne combines first-class wines with top-end hospitality, discovers **Anthony Peregrine**

If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times: Languedoc is the stretch of southern France that curves round the Mediterranean from the Rhône towards the Pyrenees. It ranges from sea to mountains via lagoons full of flamingos and plains full of vines. It is hot, rocky, dry and combustible. The locals have been uppity since their 13th-century Cathar heretics took on the king and pope and lost. They still play rugby as though exacting revenge.

In the more recent past — the 19th to mid-20th centuries — the region grew rich producing plonk to slake the staggering thirsts of the French working classes. (Back then, some industrial-town bars sold wine by the hour.) More recently still they developed the seaside for popular holidays for French folk who didn't aspire to the Riviera further east.

It's all been pretty tumultuous, yet here's the thing — the Languedoc is still routinely billed as "the undiscovered south of France". Please. Get a grip. The English were here during the Hundred Years' War. The Scottish poet Tobias Smollett passed through, as did Sherlock Holmes (*Adventures of the Empty House* etc); millions of French people too — the region has been discovered to death.

Nor should it come as a surprise that in the past three decades the Languedoc has been broadening its appeal. There's now much less wine produced, and what there is tastes very much better — none will rip out your throat. The region has also embraced more ambitious tourism (that's code for "has attracted more rich people"). I've also mentioned this quite frequently, but no one has taken notice: they are still discovering that undiscovered France can be civilised.

It was, therefore, with relief that I made

recently for the Château Capitoul, just opened near Narbonne. The hotel, villa and vineyard project exemplifies exactly what I've been on about for ages: the bringing together of first-class wines and top-end hospitality. I'm hoping that this will put the matter to rest definitively.

Capitoul is the third château venture of Karl O'Hanlon and his wife, Anita, both from Dublin, and the Bonfils family, who are key wine producers in the Languedoc — and it has cost them about £35 million. They are among those continuing to smarten up the region, but with feet grounded in land and landscape; Riviera rootlessness isn't their thing.

For a start, the 240-acre site couldn't be more Languedocien were it to put on a rugby shirt and beret and start playing pétanque. It's on the edge of the Clape massif, the only mountainous part of an otherwise flat coastal area. Rocks rise sheer through pine trees on one side; on the other is the Bages lagoon and sea; between are vines, pines, olives, a canal and marshy bits — keep your eyes open, turn through 360 degrees and you get the entirety of Languedoc landscapes in one panorama. This saves a lot of travelling time.

The focal point of Capitoul is a smallish 19th-century neo-gothic château built to show off someone's wealth in the boom years of cheap wine. It's brick and stone, and has white rendering and a damsel-in-distress tower, which contains the spiral staircase to the first and second floors — a minimum of puff is required. That said, the rooms are big, comfortable and contemporary; all blues, greys and marble, suitable for a diplomat and her design-student daughter.

The same could be said of the 44 villas, newly built in three hillside terraces, just beyond another pine wood. These are the lynchpin of the operation. They have all been sold to private owners (mainly from the UK and the US), but are managed by Capitoul and available for self-catering rental when the owners are not there, which is most of the time. They are expansive and comforting in unchallenging styles (who needs to be challenged by their fixtures and fittings?).

There are no splashes of yellow or daft exhortatory slogans plastered on the walls ("Wake up and be awesome!"). You have solid dining tables, great beds, Italian kitchens, more bathrooms per villa than anyone needs, private gardens and, in



The pool terrace at Château Capitoul

Need to know

Anthony Peregrine was a guest of **Domaine & Demeure**. B&B doubles in one of eight hotel bedrooms at Château Capitoul cost from £265; self-catering in a two-bedroom villa is from £470 a night (chateaucapitoul.com)

Château Capitoul



Robine Canal in the city



most cases, pools. Views to the lagoon make being mesmerised the only option. Rent one of these and you'll feel as though you've "arrived". Then again, you'd need to have arrived to afford it in the first place, but that's life.

Elsewhere, this is a hospitality set-up grafted on to a winemaking operation. I would call it a "resort", but that conjures up images of Club Med. Here luxury is anchored in the natural surroundings, wildlife and farming. (If that sounds right-on, so be it.) The former winery — there's a new one round the back — has been expanded to house the reception, a restaurant and bars fronting terraces of the sort where, in adverts, beautiful people in white sip wine and laugh blithely as the sun sets over the Mediterranean while hazy lounge music plays. Here we can all join in, although I'd go steady on the blithe laughter.

So you wander — past trees bent as though fleeing, for this can be a windy spot. Grounds cede to vine fields, ceding to pastures of horses and cattle, ceding to garigue and wilderness. You're out of reach of wi-fi in short order. Strolling by the villas, you'll bump into a vast infinity pool, tennis courts and a boulodrome. There was nothing but rocks, Aleppo pines and holm oaks here before; predictably, radical ecologists — Narbonne has its share —



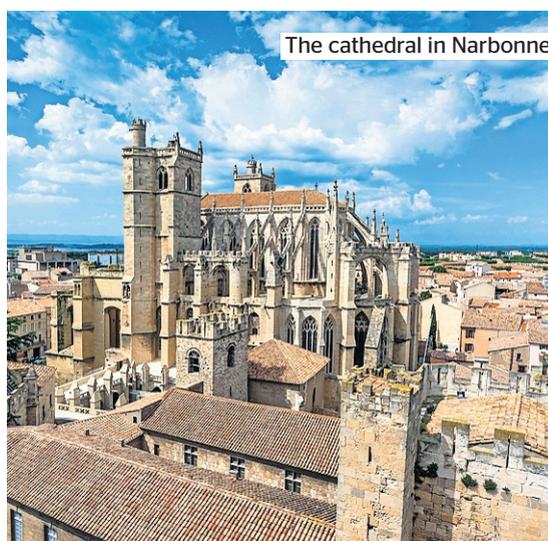
went ape. During construction there were nasty rumours about the project, with some surfacing in the local press; "On vous aura" ("We will get you") was daubed in graffiti on a wall.

The O'Hanlons came through this by out-greening the greens. It's what they had wanted to do anyway. Opponents said that there were four at-risk lizard species on the site. Wrong, O'Hanlon said, there were five, and the objective was to ensure they thrived, which — thanks to the building of more than a mile of dry-stone walls full of cavities, plus other lizard-friendly hotels — they have. As have birds,

GRÉGOIRE KUENY, ALAMY



A room at the château



The cathedral in Narbonne

mosses, insects and bats, not least Leisler's bat, which (like the O'Hanlons) is more usually found in Ireland; cherish this beast, for it eats mosquitoes.

Equally annoyingly for the naysayers, the pines and oaks have been flanked with 65,000 plants of more than 100 Mediterranean species. They sweep across the site in waves. As developed by the dry-garden specialist Olivier Filippi and the Chelsea Flower Show medal-winning designer James Basson, these require no fertiliser or pesticide and almost no water, which is just as well because there's not much — it rarely rains here. Once established, the swathes are going to look terrific, continuing the landscape of the Clape massif by other means.

Then you wander more — maybe to the wine store, where, if you're lucky, Jean-Michel Guiraud will host a tasting. I've done a zillion wine tastings, including a few with Guiraud, and there is none better. "This," he said of Capitoul's Maelma red, "is to drink by the fire with a dog at your side." Of another he said: "And this is exuberant, full of conversation." And in both cases they absolutely were.

Wine tourism is a key aspect of the Capitoul agenda, with walks, talks and masterclasses. You can also join in with harvesting and wine production. "We're not Bordeaux or Burgundy," Laurent

Bonfils said. "We're Languedoc. We don't have big heads. We want wine tourism accessible to all." Absolutely everyone, but especially those who can afford £265 a night. "Exactly. Everybody," he said with a broad smile. He smiles often, as you would if your family owned 17 wine domains and châteaux.

Bikes are available to borrow, and after 15 minutes' pedalling along tracks, you arrive in Gruissan, the loveliest spot on this coast, simply because it has been there for ever and has spun out to seashore only recently. You may remember Gruissan's beachside chalets-on-stilts from the 1986 film *Betty Blue*. Near by, the more modern Narbonne Plage has three miles of flat, safe beach.

Going the other way, the main town of Narbonne is a 35-minute pedal, or a ten-minute drive. You need to see this place, if only for the brand-new Narbo Via Museum. Designed by Norman Foster's practice, its job is to recall that in Roman times Narbonne was a regional capital and main Mediterranean port. No space here to do it justice, but please go, it's riveting (£7, narbovia.fr). As is much else in Narbonne, including the episcopal complex of palace and cathedral, and the most vigorous covered market in southern France.

Back at the Capitoul you might use the Cinq Mondes spa. (I didn't. Though it

looked comprehensive — hammams, indoor pool, treatment rooms — but I get my wellness from the wine shop.) Or the bars. Or the dinner table. The Capitoul's posh restaurant, the Mediterraneo, opened the night after I left, illustrating my customary lack of foresight. The aim, they said, was Michelin stars via top-class tweaks to Mediterranean cuisine, on menus from £56. I'm sure it works well — perhaps you'd let me know when you've been.

Across the gravel terrace the Asado is a mix of Argentine open-grill cooking — with 500C ovens that can apparently cook a chicken in five minutes — and French brasserie, embellished by a huge terrace with killer views. It bounces with sharp black, gold and brown decor, grand chandeliers, Languedocien fare and dishes delivered with panache (duck breast, prime rib, sea bream, turbot), from £15. Happiness-producing-wise, it made my top three restaurants of 2021 so far.

This was helped by the Franco-Polish woman celebrating her 42nd birthday with friends on the next table. Towards the end of her meal she came across to give me a kiss, crying: "I'm so pleased to see you." As I told my wife, I'd never seen her before, but I shall be back there next year to celebrate her 43rd — we seemed to get on so well. There are lots of other reasons too, of course. Please see above.

5 more luxury hotels in Languedoc-Roussillon

Hôtel Richer de Belleval, Montpellier

The chef twins Jacques and Laurent Pourcel have this summer opened a flagship hotel containing the new version of their Jardin des Sens restaurant. It's in a magnificent 17th-century hôtel particulier — Montpellier's town hall until 1975 — on one of the city's most elegant squares. The style introduces sober splashes of the 21st century alongside columns, vaulted ceilings, frescoes of all ages, patios, courtyards and phenomenal attention to detail. Alongside the principal restaurant (mains from £53), the Pourcels have a less ambitiously priced bistro spot, with two courses for £32.

Details Room-only doubles from £188 (hotel-richer debelleval.com)

Hôtel Les Roches Brunes, Collioure

Collioure is the poster child of the Roussillon coast, between Perpignan and the Spanish border — and the entirely renovated Roches Brunes is the hotel from which to appreciate it. The name tells no lies — it's on rocks over the sea, with direct access to the beach. All rooms have Med views so need little in the way of decor. The restaurant majors on Mediterranean food with an Italian accent.

Details Room-only doubles from £128 (hotel-lesrochesbrunes.com)

Margaret Hôtel Chouleur, Nîmes

Another ancient townhouse — in the historic heart of Nîmes — re-emerges as an elegant hotel. Rooms are as someone from the siècle des lumières would favour were they to show up in 2021. Space, wood and colour are abundant, and there's a swimming pool in the interior

garden. It's small, but what do you expect amid the streets of the city centre? In the hands of Georgiana Viou, the Rouge restaurant gives Med cooking a Beninese slant. And there's a courtyard coffee shop too.

Details Room-only doubles from £192 (margaret-hotelchouleur.com)

Domaine Tarbouriech, Marseillan

On the back of the region's most celebrated oyster-farming outfit, and on the banks of the oyster-filled Thau lagoon (near Sète), the Tarbouriech family have established what may be the only oyster-based hotel in France. It's a classy operation — no slumming it in ramshackle oyster huts. We're talking rooms and suites in venerable buildings, and lodges in a 13th-century barn. There are swimming pools, oyster bars and a cracking main restaurant serving dishes including oyster, octopus and shellfish risotto (from £24).

Details Room-only doubles from £132 (domaine-tarbouriech.fr)

Domaine de Biar, Lavérune

Tarbouriech was oysters; here, in the countryside at the gates of Montpellier, it's horses. What was in Louis XV's time a royal farm has a fine old house of manorial mien, 125 acres of grounds, many horses (for breeding, stabling and training) and quite a few cattle. The aristocratic charm is complemented by New Age stuff such as yoga and hammams. The restaurant is pretty right-on too, with ample vegan options and mains from £18. In the unlikely event that the swimming pool proves insufficient, Med beaches are five miles away.

Details Room-only doubles from £144 (domaine-debiar.com)



A suite at Margaret Hôtel Chouleur