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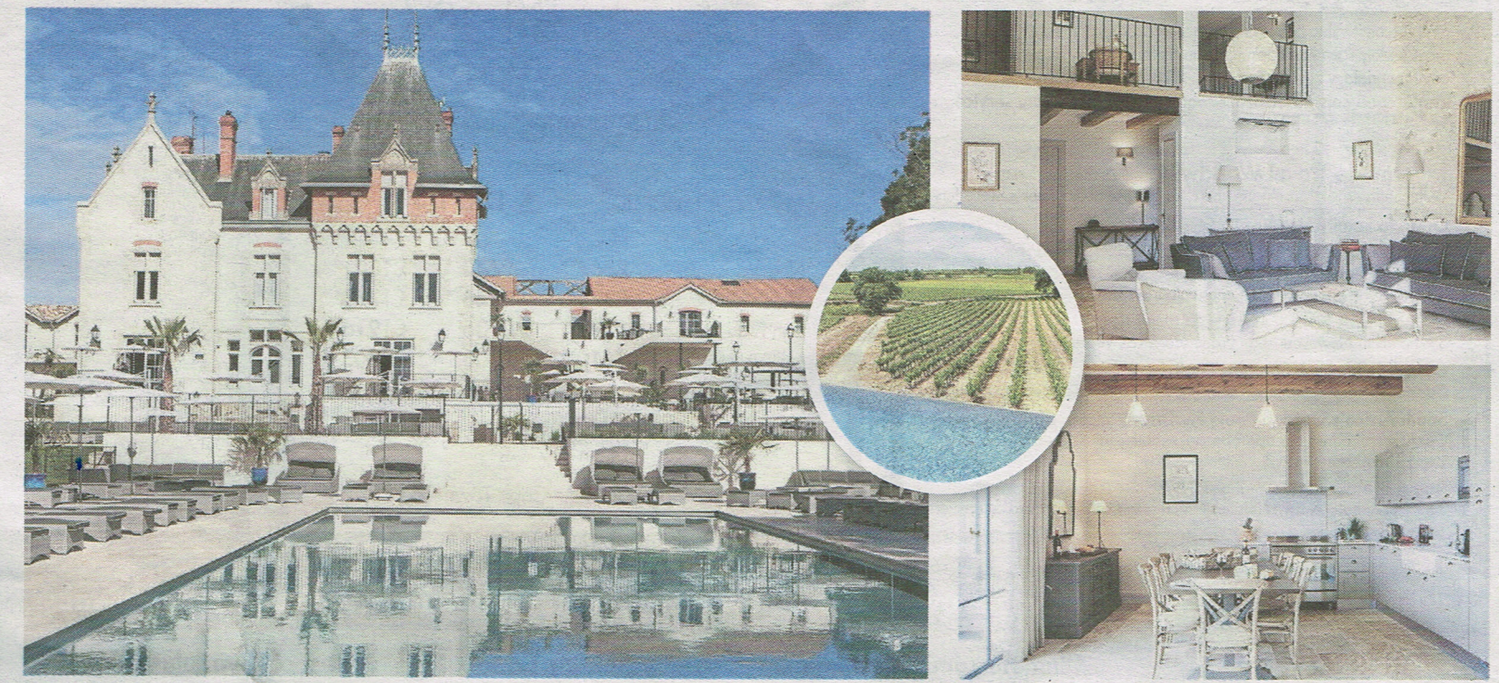
A vine old time in the other South of France

HOTEL REVIEW

CHATEAU ST PIERRE DE SERJAC

Languedoc, France

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Grand designs: clockwise from above, Château St Pierre de Serjac; a living area and kitchen at the property. Inset, vineyard views from one of the hotel's pools

WHEN it comes to the South of France, Provence and the Côte d'Azur tend to lap up the limelight. But with its silent villages, plane tree-lined byways, vineyard-draped hills and miles of Mediterranean coastline, neighbouring Languedoc has been quietly amassing devotees.

Two of these are Irish husband-and-wife team Karl and Anita O'Hanlon, who checked out of their high-flying careers in London and Dublin to relocate to the Languedoc and try their hand at the hotel business.

Partnering with French independent winemaker Laurent Bonfils, the couple's first project was the opening in 2011 of Château Les Carrasses, set on a hill between Béziers and Narbonne. Combining stylish surroundings with family-friendliness, it quickly became one of the region's go-to hotels.

Opened in April, the slightly more refined and ambitious Château St Pierre de Serjac is the follow-up. At the centre of the 200-acre estate is the suitably whimsical-looking, historic château that was once home to the aristocratic de Crozals family. Heart-gladdening scenes of vineyarded hills, fairytale châteaux and blue skies stretch out in every direction.

It's easy to see where the €25 million it cost to renovate the estate has gone. Laurent Bonfils has again partnered with the couple to produce the château's own wine – the grapes for the inaugural vintage have just been harvested from the surrounding vineyards.

The château proper has eight elegant bedrooms. The rest is a collection of 36 self-catering apartments and houses scattered across the sensitively restored outbuildings. These sleep between two and eight and have their own idiosyncrasies: the former chapel-turned-guestroom under the eaves of the château was hand-painted to return it to its former glory, while one of the apartments has a shower within a tower.

The apartments and houses all have the same decorative theme but with subtle variations. It's all reassuringly tasteful and chic, with grey modular sofas, upholstered linen chairs, wrought iron, lots of oak and high-spec bathrooms and kitchens. There's also speedy wi-fi, cable TV and iPod docks. Everything still feels very new, including the vegetation, which needs a little time to fulfill its potential.

O'Hanlon is an ardent antiques hunter – one of his insider tips is Béziers' undiscovered trove of local dealers – and if you show enough interest he might even offer to take you on an impromptu tour. The lofty rooms of the château are the perfect outlet for his passion, littered with finds such as the glittering, mid-century Venetian chandeliers that add wow factor to the main dining room.

The château's restaurant has serious gastronomic aspirations – local ingredients such as Aubrac beef and fish are given the gourmet treatment. During the busier summer months a simpler menu is offered on the terrace during the day, and there's also a cocktail bar just off reception.

There's no room service but plenty of thought has been given to what constitutes a relaxing stay – self-catering guests can order fresh bread and pastries for collection at reception in the mornings, plus picnic backpacks and pizzas or takeaway from the restaurant for dinner "at home".

Some of the houses have their own pools and in front of the hotel is a 30m heated pool and sun loungers. There are also communal barbecues if you want to get grilling with fellow guests. During school holidays the hotel hosts children's and teenage clubs for four- to 12-year-olds with activities including arts and crafts, sports and even archaeological digs. There are also scooters and bikes to borrow for freewheeling around the estate, plus tennis and boules courts and a spa with a tranquil indoor pool.

The area

The château is set in rolling countryside between the small villages of Pouzolles and Magalas. It's about 35 minutes' drive to the Mediterranean coast while handsome towns such as Pézenas, with its archetypal weekend food market, is 20 minutes away.

As well as numerous vineyards to taste there is much to explore here: the beaches of the coast, towns and cities such as Montpellier, Nîmes and Narbonne as well as the Cévennes National Park. The Canal du Midi is also nearby – youngsters will love the chance to get behind the wheel of one of the glacially slow electric boats that you can rent at Capestang.

The closest airport is Béziers, a 30-minute drive away, while Montpellier is an hour away.

■ *Chateau St Pierre de Serjac, D30, Puissalicon, France (00 33 4 67 80 76 00; serjac.com). A self-catering studio apartment sleeping two starts from €178. Double rooms in the château start at €220 B&B, with spa access.*

Rooms: ★★★★☆
Service: ★★★☆☆
Value: ★★★★☆