



A haven of peace and pastoral luxe – boutique hotel offerings in Provence take the pleasure principle to a whole new level, as Laura Henderson discovers

Ever since Lord Brougham stumbled upon the deep blue waters and cassia plantations of Cannes in 1834, Brits have been flocking to France’s southern belle region of Provence. The 1960s firmly established the area as Europe’s ‘ultimate’ summer retreat, with a growing throng of sumptuous villas and luxury hotels opening up. Running from Hyeres in the west to La Napoule in the east, the Côte d’Azur remains the region’s most desirable coastal stretch, embracing a cluster of quaint fishing villages turned pleasure ports such as Le Lavandou and St-Raphael; stately *Belle Epoque* mansions and boutique resorts in sought-after locations ranging from the traditional Corniche d’Esterel to the showy chic of St Tropez.

For visitors looking to escape the Riviera glare however, there’s nowhere more endearing than the region’s rugged *arrière-pays*. This aromatic *garrigue*-covered hilly hinterland provides welcome respite from the coastal buzz. Landlocked Vaucluse encompassing the Parc Naturel Regional du Luberon has a wealth of picturesque villages scattered across its rustic countryside, while the principal towns of Orange and the departmental capital Avignon offer a cultural fix with their lively café scenes.

One serene rural hideaway engaging in-the-know visitors for over four decades is the idyllic Benvenigudo country house hotel in the valley foothills of *bastide* town Les Baux de Provence. The stay-and-play concept of celebrated hoteliers Carole Beaupied and Victor Peutzer; the hotel was one of the first establishments to join the elite post-war genre of boutique accommodation with luxury trimmings.

Opening its doors again last year after a top-to-toe makeover – this graceful shuttered *mas* still has a centuries old feel; tasteful new additions to the hotel’s accommodation bringing an added touch of laid-back luxe to the offering.

Fragrant blooms, indigenous trees and vibrant foliage

conspire to create a serene and green setting for guests; the focal point of which is the hotel’s thriving organic garden bursting with unusual varieties of fragrant herbs together with tomatoes, soft fruit, courgettes and beans; fresh produce which resident chef, Mathieu Groshenry, creatively integrates into the dining repertoire at the hotel’s award winning restaurant.

Accommodation options embrace a bespoke yet diverse portfolio – junior suites, family suites, self-contained apartments and 19 luminous rooms decorated in graceful





Provençal style fabrics – a mix of rich and muted tones. Bedrooms are comfortable and spacious and sport large French-windows that open onto private terraces and secluded gardens. Modern day luxuries haven't been overlooked either with flat screen TVs, and broadband fitted as standard, while well-equipped bathrooms sport ceramic fittings and vintage mosaic tiles. Embracing the present while preserving the quintessential charms of yesteryear is what the Benvenugudo experience is all about – the pleasure principle here is truly *la France profonde* at its best. www.benvenugudo.com



DINING AT THE BENVENGUDO

A terrace decked with elegant wrought iron seating, Jacquard linen table décor, silver service and a landscape that changes with the seasons – dining at Benvenugudo is a memory to treasure.

Resident chef Mathieu GrosHenry is passionate about local Provençal produce and invites you to discover a different menu everyday based on fresh seasonal products including organic vegetables, herbs and AOP Vallée des Baux olive oil from the surrounding family-run estates. Mathieu is a master of gracious dining, preparing exquisite *entrées* such as veal carpaccio with capers and roasted scallops encased with spinach through to main course specialities including sea bass with butternut confit and wild honey. Pâtissier delights for those with a sweet tooth completes the haute cuisine dining experience with a tempting repertoire of desserts – fresh fruit tajine and *grand cru* chocolate mousse with a compelling strawberry and rhubarb *savarin*.

If you're looking for things to do during your stay, the hotel regularly runs cookery classes. Discover classic regional recipes and menus, learn how to cook with fresh, local ingredients and recreate the world famous Provence *cuisine*.

CHÂTEAU DES ALPILLES

Van Gogh had exquisite taste. Drawing inspiration from the St Remy de Provence countryside for many of his famous works – chances are one of his pastoral backdrops was the setting for the present day beauty that is Château des Alpilles.

Set in 7 acres of majestic parkland, this 19th century Great House on the outskirts of St Remy is steeped in yesteryear charm. Initially a simple farm steading - legend has it that this rural land belonged to a 13th century knight. It's easy to see why he chose this area. Lush gardens, canopied plane trees and fragrant lily ponds provide the perfect environment to chill-back. Perhaps that's why during the 19th century the aristocratic Blain family chose this delightful spot to construct a grand country retreat to entertain France's top political and literary figures. But as the family's fortunes receded, so did the property which eventually fell into picturesque disrepair.

Fast forward to 1979, the Bon family saw the estate's potential and set about restoring it to its glorious best. The result is something rather special – a graceful, comfortable and welcoming residence, with tastefully converted outbuildings, run by mother and daughter team Francoise and Catherine Bon.

A shady walk up the estate's imposing driveway flanked by a row of stalwart 200-year old plane trees, brings you to the main château entrance; inside, a graceful suite of day rooms filled with leather chaises longues, antique drapes and vibrant pop art. Guests are spoiled for accommodation choice.





Bedrooms with their high-ceilings, Souleidao fabrics and velveteen walls, all maintain a flow of high elegance.

Combining period style with the same high style home comforts; the ceiling beamed apartments and suites in the outer buildings have a spacious, open-plan layout; perfect for larger groups and families. Boasting accommodation for up to 12 guests - the Suites at The Cypress Farm are contemporary in style with bleached woodwork, leather furnishings and art nouveau lighting. Ideal for couples meanwhile, the Old Wash House sports three light, airy bedrooms decorated in a rustic style and comes with its own private terrace and solarium.

The sprawling grounds are a sensory delight – lily adorned garden canals, stone terraces with fragrant urns of flowers, beds brimming with lavender, rosemary and miniature fruit trees. Leisure facilities include a heated pool, clay tennis courts, boules lawn, sauna, and guest library.

Heading up the hotel restaurant Chef Mathias Bettinger, is a seasoned hand at preparing sun-filled dishes to satisfy the palate of the most exacting gourmets – mouth-watering *carré d'agneau roti* (roast lamb) with *Herbes de Provence*, tickling the palate with a *Trilogie Provençale* of artichokes Barigoule, eggplant *gratin* and *croustillant de chevre chaud* (goats cheese). Dessert might be *Nougat Glacé* with a *coulis* of summer berries or exquisite *fondant au chocolat* (warm chocolate sponge) with homemade pistachio ice cream. For after dinner cocktails, the Corbusier and Cassina-furnished bar welcomes you in convivial surrounds.

Summer at the Château is particularly enchanting. There's something about dining under the plane trees, or simply taking a cool-off dip in the pool – it sets the scene for total intimate relaxation. www.chateaudesalpilles.com