

Eat up the views

TRAVEL

A Provence boutique hotel offers access to fantastic food and wine amidst breathtaking surroundings

WORDS ASHLEY DAVIES

AT THE risk of making lazy generalisations about our neighbours across *la Manche*, it is something of a surprise to be in a room – or wine cellar, to be precise – with a French person who recoils at the thought of anyone eating the animals she farms. But Claudine Vigier is an expert cheese maker and she loves her goats like family. They pay her back with milk that makes extraordinary cheese – the kind of cheese that can be addictive.

We make dreamy faces, and little sighs of pleasure are audible as we sample her produce, which all comes from goat or sheep milk due to this part of France – roughly halfway between Marseille and Avignon in Provence – being too warm for cows. One of my favourites, partly because of its presentation, is Banon, which is emblematic of this area. It is a delicate little patty of creamy goat's cheese wrapped in chestnut leaves (these can't be picked off the tree and must be caught mid-air between falling and landing on the ground). The leaves give the cheese a musty flavour and, tied up with rough string, look like gorgeous little artisanal presents.

Claudine has been in the cheese business for 20 years and her husband, Roland Barthélemy – an *ambassadeur fromager*, no less – used to supply the good stuff to French presidents in Paris, but moved to Provence for love. And there is plenty to fall in love with in this area. We are staying at Crillon le Brave, a luxury boutique hotel in the hills, surrounded by vineyards and olive groves. It is made up of buildings that used to be the centre of a small village, with the oldest – formerly a stable – dating back to the 13th century, while most are from the 17th or 18th century. There are now 34 rooms in seven converted buildings, each stylishly decorated in natural colours and demonstrating that enviable Provençal chic. There is an original church on the property, and weddings of all denominations can be held here in the summer, providing the party book all the rooms in the hotel.

Outside, fat bumblebees buzz drowsily around the lush wisteria vines that line the many terraces on which you can dine, sip wine or simply watch the grapes mature from afar. Rosemary and lavender grow in abundance, and there are olive trees and cypresses dotted about near the exquisite swimming pool, which proves to be a welcome respite from the “short” bike ride to the local village, Bédoin (bikes are provided).



SPECTACULAR Hotel Crillon le Brave provides outstanding views from its terraces across the surrounding Provence vineyards and olive groves, and the food served up in its restaurants is impressive too

At this point I should clarify that I hadn't been on a bike for more than ten years and had no idea how fancy – and complicated, to this simpleton – the gears are these days. I also had no idea that the half-hour ride through picture-book scenery – meadows, vineyards and forests – would involve quite so many gradients. While my fit, lean companions make it look like no big thing, I bring shame upon my family name with my lame efforts. *Dieu merci*, then, for the relaxing full-body massage from Kelly Thomas at the hotel's mini-spa later that day.

The famous 1,912-metre-high Mont Ventoux, one of the most gruelling parts of the Tour de France, is just a few kilometres from here. It's not known to cyclists as the Beast of Provence for nothing. Pretty, leafy Bédoin is the starting point for lots of serious cyclists who tackle the mountain.

These cyclists, who whizz past us as if we're going backwards, probably haven't consumed what we have over this long weekend. As well as all the cheese – oh, the cheese – we learn about truffles from local grower Franck Jaumard, while his son Eric prepares some incredible treats for us, including truffle scrambled eggs. I am shocked to discover that what is sold as truffle oil is not in fact made with truffles, but with various components that mimic the flavour.

Crillon le Brave has three outstanding restaurants – one of which, Restaurant

Jérôme Blanchet, must surely be in the running for a Michelin star. Bistro 40k is so named because all the produce is sourced from within 40km. Finally there is La Grange, which is also the bar area. All three open out onto terraces, all with fantastic views.

During our stay asparagus is a frequent and welcome feature on the menu, as is – to the surprise of no-one – some pretty special wine. The most common grape in this area is Grenache, and the hotel has commissioned nearby producer Domaine du Tix to make a wine for its forthcoming 25th anniversary. One of the more special wines in this region is from Chateau Fondreche – a lake under the vineyards keeps the earth cool, making for a very drinkable freshness.

Our final day is spent in the breathtakingly pretty town of L'Isle sur la Sorgue (twinned with Penicuik), which is not actually an island but is built around the sparkling green River Sorgue. This is the place to come if you are in the market for some antiques, and there are scores of shops packed with marvellous finds at all prices. On Sunday mornings there's an enormous outdoor market where you can buy everything from artisan soaps to cheese, clothes, herbs, cured meat, fresh fruit, vegetables and fish, and more.

The town boasts several tempting outdoor cafes and restaurants (Keith Floyd once had one here), where you can have lunch under the shade of their huge, old trees and while away a few hours. We did just this in the delightful Le Jardin du Quai, a leafy garden positively dripping with wisteria.

Crillon le Brave is an hour's drive from Marseille Airport, so hiring a car is recommended. And for goodness sake, leave space in your luggage for cheese and wine. □

FACT FILE

Nightly rates at Hotel Crillon le Brave are available from £240 per room per night (including breakfast) for two people sharing. Hotel Crillon le Brave, Place de l'Église, 84410 Crillon Le Brave, Provence (+ 33 4 90 65 61 61, reservations@crillonlebrave.com, www.crillonlebrave.com).

The hotel is currently offering a special romantic package that includes massages, a bottle of Champagne and bouquet of flowers, a picnic hamper, dinner for two and a tandem bike ride. From £564 for one night. Ashley Davies flew to Marseille with KLM via Amsterdam (daily flights), but Ryanair has flights from Scotland to Marseille leaving Thursdays, returning Sundays, from £110.





DO NOT DISTURB

MORTON OF PITMILLY COUNTRYSIDE RESORT, KINGSBARN, FIFE

IT'S all about activities at Morton of Pitmilly, a former farm just outside St Andrews, now transformed and expanded into a countryside resort. Run by competitive tennis player Eilidh Smith and her stepfather John Parker, it is home to Scotland's only indoor dedicated tennis and leisure complex and has a swimming pool, gym, games room and spa treatment rooms too. As you'd expect, tennis short breaks with tuition from Smith, who is a qualified tennis coach, are popular. There are also foodie breaks on offer, linking up with Fife food ambassador Christopher Trotter who leads guests on culinary tours then workshops how to cook the products from the local larder.

The four and five-star accommodation in converted farm buildings and complementary new build comprises 16 holiday homes in steading and cottage-style properties. There are various sizes to suit any combination, from couples and families, to stressed out suits in need of free range thinking. There's also a children's play area, croquet lawn, football pitch, kids' cycle trail and a woodland trails around the 150 acre estate. Look out for the barn owl box and the chicken coops on your way round.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

It's five-star boutique with quality furniture and fittings and you can see why this place was a finalist in the recent Scottish Thistle Tourism Awards for Best Self Serve Accommodation. Sofas are vast, bathrobes fluffy and toiletries from Scottish Fine Soap.

ROOM SERVICE

Bramble Bank in The Steading had three ensuite bedrooms upstairs, one with a picture window allowing sea views all the way to the horizon. The living area was vast, with a fitted kitchen in one end, dining area and lounge at the other. The combination of super comfortable beds from Dovetail Enterprises in Dundee and the complete peace and quiet mean you wake rested and invigorated.

WINING AND DINING

It's self-catering, with plenty of storage if you want to take everything you need. Otherwise there is a range of frozen meals from COOK (www.cookfood.net) at reception, with choices such as Hearty Fisherman's Pie and Roasted Vegetable Lasagne. Reception also has staples such as bread, milk, tea, coffee, snacks and a whole lot more if you've forgotten anything. The eggs couldn't be fresher, delivered daily by the Morton of Pitmilly chickens, who provide a morning wake up call. Food hampers and butcher's packs can be pre-booked so you really need bring only the essentials. If you're there on a foodie break



with Christopher Trotter, you'll be able to whip up your own gourmet fare, such as seafood from Crail and Pittenweem, foraged herbs and roe deer and the best of local suppliers.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

We spent one of our weekend days exploring Morton of Pitmilly, with a tennis lesson, birdlife spotting walk around the estate, hanging around at the children's play area and then a long splash in the pool (there's a sauna and steam room too), followed by a DVD session in front of the huge TV. Next day we headed for the Sea Life Centre in St Andrews, where the penguins and meerkats were delighted to see us, then on to the beach for a blast of very fresh air as we walked the West Sands.

Pitmilly is well-placed to explore St Andrews and the East Neuk, and if golf isn't your thing, there are boat trips, or the more left-field Secret Bunker, a former nuclear bunker, just down the road at Troywood. Eilidh has also compiled a list of 101 activities to try, from having your photo taken on the Swilcan Bridge to climbing Largo Law on a quad bike.

LITTLE EXTRAS

Dogs are welcome at the management's discretion, as are guests' visitors (£5 per person per day to use leisure facilities).

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

The tennis lesson and facilities were excellent with Eilidh tailoring the coaching to suit ability. My budding Andy Murray thought it was ace. □

Janet Christie

Morton of Pitmilly, Kingsbarns, St Andrews, Fife, KY16 8QF, (01334 880466, www.pitmilly.co.uk) Bramble Bank (sleeps six), Steading property, three night weekend breaks until 20 June, £860. Other properties start from £365. Tennis Packages, two-night break, from £249 per person based on a group of six.