

I was intrigued and inspired by the idea of staying in a château built for Diane de Poitiers, Henry II's lifelong consort, a lady renowned for her beauty, intellect and sense of aesthetics. It's fair to expect a small luxury hotel to be charming, but nothing could have prepared us for the dramatic sight of the Château de Massillan's starkly beautiful proportions, revealed at the end of a suitable driveway leading into leafy grounds. The Richard Long style lavender bed in front of the main entrance added to the majestic impression, as well as reminding us well and truly that we were in Provence.

The sounds and scents that waft through the night as we walk into our castle are so characteristic of the region – cicadas, lavender, warm wind (no Mistral this evening), we'd know we're in the South of France with our eyes shut. We are greeted by smiling staff who turn out to be exceptionally professional, polite, charming and helpful. Along with a luxurious quantity of public space – with stone floors, antique mirrors,

chic chandeliers and a mixture of antiques, mid-century modern and perfectly contemporary pieces – the hotel has only 12 rooms, which makes Massillan homely rather than stately, and ensures that service is superlative.

Through to our suite, past old urns and the 21st-century fountain, which give a clue as to the style of our quarters. It is indulgently spacious, with an 18th-century chaise longue sitting next to a contemporary sofa, more antique mirrors, a Murano glass chandelier, and very cool wallpaper that turns out to be by those Glaswegian masters of fine-art wallcoverings, Timorous Beasties. The bathroom's simple design accentuates the beauty of the Provençal landscape and Massillan's lake – framed nicely as you lie in the bath.

It is no exaggeration to say that I have never come across a hotel offering such a dining experience as this. In these evocative surroundings, even the



simplest plate of cheese or Serrano ham is unforgettable. Presentation is creative and masterful, and the flavours light, delicate and fresh. Away from the big-city world of our usual life, where eating is all about refuelling and fast food, it is refreshing to eat at a relaxed pace, and to feel that the chef really cares passionately about every single dish he places in front of you. We were thrilled that supper consisted of six different courses, and perfectly satisfied with the no choice menu, which, in fact, made it even more enjoyable.

Waking up in the morning to the sounds of the water fountain, and the light and heat of Provence, is exciting and relaxing all at once. Breakfast is a healthy and simple combination of fresh fruit, cereals, cheeses, delicious breads, and apricot jam with lavender, plus some of the best coffee I have ever tasted in France. We take a walk around the herb garden; the air still has a fresh edge until midmorning, when the sun starts to mean business. We are almost

definitely walking in the formidable steps of Diane de Poitiers. Only a handful of families have owned the château since her day; the current owners bought Massillan in 2001. You can tell that Birgit Israel and Peter Wylly work in design: it takes professionals, and ones in love with their project, to combine respect for historic features with modern cool.

Poolside at hotels is not usually my favourite thing to do, but the size of the Château de Massillan and the limited number of guests make the garden feel like our very own, and the pool becomes the focus of our stay. The beauty of the setting, the water, heat, shade when we want it, native plants and trees and hypnotic sounds of the cicadas... time seems to slow until we have reached a state of perfect laziness. I keep meaning to wander over to the salon on the far side of the courtyard to leaf through one or two of the owners' design-led book collection – much more considered than a mere handful of coffee-table books – but, incredibly, ↓



I never get round to it. We do, however, manage to sample the wonderful cocktail list. And, one lunchtime, we make a foray to the extremely local Grillade d'Hélios, which might be Massillan's own restaurant it is so nearby. We share pizza baked in the wood-fired oven: so good, so simple – perfectly in keeping with our foresty setting.

We barely leave the compound all weekend and *je ne regrette rien*. By night, the courtyard is lit with sunken lights and candles, and decked with oleander and lavender. Massillan, the only crenellated castle I know of that has bedchambers in lavender blues, pale chocolates and dark honey, gets the balance between mediaeval and retro-chic just right, and the atmosphere is intimate, informal and genuinely warm. Whatever your reason for going to this place, just go.

Reviewed by Philip Treacy

Château de Massillan, Vaucluse, France

NEED TO KNOW

Rooms 12.

Rates €170–€625.

Check-out Midday, but flexible depending on availability.

Room service Guests can be served breakfast in their rooms on request.

Facilities All rooms are decorated with antiques. Suites have large terraces that open onto the courtyard.

Poolside The beautiful courtyard swimming pool is surrounded by stylish wooden sunloungers.

Children The hotel is not suitable for children.

Hotel closed From mid-October until Easter.

IN THE KNOW

Our favourite rooms The intimate suite is spacious and stands on its own in the gardens. Room 16 is the personal favourite of the hotel's interior designer owner. Room 15 has a big sexy chandelier and overlooks the fountain and terrace below.

Hotel bar Guests may enjoy drinks throughout the hotel and grounds.

Hotel restaurant Like the hotel itself, the daily four- or five-course set menu blends classic French cuisine with contemporary flair. There is also a wonderfully comprehensive wine list. A reservation is essential. Open for dinner 19h30–21h30.

Top table Alfresco in the oleander-lined courtyard.

Dress code Birkin/Gainsbourg chic.

LOCAL EATING AND DRINKING

Formal, Michelin-starred **Le Pré du Moulin** in Sérignan-du-Comtat (04 90 70 14 55) has a rich menu of forest mushrooms, asparagus, Mediterranean seafood, and truffles, combined with aromatic Côtes du Rhône wines. In Uchaux, **Côte Sud** on Route d'Orange (04 90 40 66 08) is great for a lunch or dinner of fine gastronomy. **Grillade d'Hélios** on La Martine (04 90 40 61 81) is a casual and relaxed restaurant with hearty rustic fare and barbecued meat dishes.

Smith

Smith members receive a selection of wines, hand-picked by the hotel sommelier, and an upgrade, subject to availability.

GET A ROOM!

Use our online booking service at www.mrandmrsmith.com to check availability and make reservations. Register your Smithcard to find out about current member offers for this hotel.

Château de Massillan

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