

A Whiff of LUXURY



Olivia Greenway flew to the south of France for a few days of five star seclusion



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The south of France has been popular with the British since travelling abroad was reserved for only the wealthy in Victorian times and earlier. Enjoying a longer season than places on a more northern latitude, its reputation in its 1960's heyday for playboys, James Bond, casinos, yachts and tiny bikinis still holds true today, but fortunately a less brash, more discreet side to it is also evident.

Away from the coast, just north of Cannes, gripping the side of a hill is Le Mas Candille hotel, watching over the town of Mougins below. This was the base that afforded me a few relaxing days in which to enjoy this particularly interesting area of France.

Just as all roads lead to Rome, at Le Mas Candille, most of the rooms take advantage of the far reaching view over Mougins and the mountains beyond. Floor to ceiling windows and generous balconies mean the view may be enjoyed in comfort with a nightcap or with morning coffee; the public terrace with the same view is ideal for a pre dinner drink and breakfast is served here in fine weather; the restaurant flings back its full length doors to make one feel one is dining outside, overlooking the valley. The hotel successfully marries that most challenging of partnerships – old and new.

They've kept the 18th century charm of the main building with wooden window shutters and iron fretwork, but allowed modern conveniences such as air conditioning, flat screen televisions, complimentary WiFi and Bose sound systems. The restaurant Candille, under the critical eye of head chef, Serge Gouloumes, has achieved a Michelin star. His style could be described as modern French; forget heavy, cream laden dishes; his food is light and bursting with flavour. Foie gras tartin with Armagnac is his signature dish starter, fish features heavily, cooked very simply and I'm assured his grandmother's whipped potatoes with truffle that accompany his beef tournedoes are divine.

A feature of the hotel is peace and quiet. There is no traffic noise and electronic blinds are used to block out natural light during the turn down service. As a result, a blissful sleep is almost guaranteed. I can testify to that as I missed breakfast one morning because I overslept.

The five star hotel is luxurious but not pompous or pretentious. Many well known and lesser known celebrities stay here – Raymond Blanc choose to rest his broken leg here in June "and moaned a bit about the steps" a hotel insider told me. But as in all the best places, discretion is the order of the day. "A photographer booked in recently specifically, we suspect, to be able to pap one of our well known guests, who was coming to the end of his stay here

with his wife", Anthony Torkington, managing director, told me. "They want a quiet break, like the rest of us. We tipped them off; they had dinner in their suite and then quietly departed."

If a bit of relaxation is on your agenda, you could easily spend all your days here. Even I was tempted to go on the exercise bike and treadmill – positioned, you guessed it, overlooking that valley again. As was the spa swimming pool with Jacuzzi and sun beds, surrounded by lawn. In the well kept gardens you'll also find table tennis and a boules court. The Shiseido spa is the first in Europe and I sampled a back massage. Weeks of hunching over a computer melted away the knots in my shoulders.

A larger pool, with obligatory view is another option. Sited next to the La Pergola terrace restaurant, this is ideal for more informal day time eating. If the weather is unkind or you don't feel like plonking your less than perfect body next to the beautiful people, there is plenty to do away from the pool.



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Being not far from Grasse, a trip to one of the town's most famous perfume factories was high on my agenda. Molinard was established in 1849 and much of the perfume making process is still done by hand. After a tour of the factory showing us the various methods of extracting the essences – from flowers, bark, vegetables and seeds - we then set to making our own. With pipettes and smelling wands, it took me back to chemistry lessons at school. Learning about top notes, base notes and middle notes, we all had to select five of our favourite basic essences from a selection of about 50 to make an exclusive product. I liked my creation but I'm not sure "Greenway" is any threat to SJP's Lovely, so she's safe on the best seller list, for the moment.

Half an hour by ferry from Cannes and you are on Saint Honorat island, owned by a Cistercian order of monks, who have lived here since the sixth century. No cars are allowed and the monks are from a silent order, so noise is discouraged. Over time, they have enlarged their monastery, named Abbaye de Lerins, set up a restaurant and turned their wine making commercial. The hard work has borne fruit as their Shiraz has just won a gold medal. They make only 40,000 bottles a year and as our guide explained, the wine here is quite superior to the "dustbin of wines" found elsewhere. As well as enjoying a convivial meal at the La Tonnelle, which has seating for 200 and specialises in Provençal seafood, you can climb up a medieval tower, your efforts being rewarded by superb views over the water to Cannes. On the ferry back, you can pretend you are very rich and choose your yacht.

Perfect for a few days break, if time allows you to extend your stay, hire a car and visit the cobbled medieval village of Antibes for supper, snatch a cocktail in the famous Victorian bar at the Negresco in Nice and visit The Maeght Foundation, a modern art museum set in a pine forest at Saint Paul de Vence.

Le Mas Candille, Mougins
www.lemascandille.com/home.html

The hotel is open all year. Rates from €245 per night room only. Special deals and inclusive meal arrangements with spa treatments are also available. See the website and contact the hotel to discuss your requirements. Guests can be collected from Nice airport and trips to the mentioned attractions can be arranged. Drivers may prefer to pick up a hire car from Nice airport.

Molinard, Grasse. www.molinard.com A 90 minute perfume lesson is €40. This includes your 50cl bottle to keep.

Saint Honorat island www.abbayedelerins.com Ferry trip from the quay at Cannes, opposite Sofitel. Return fare €12.

Easyjet fly from Stansted twice a day in the summer, with a reduced service in winter. www.easyjet.com Tel 01235 764377 Flights are from around £70 return (including luggage) per person.

