

Bolt hole



Le Couvent, Languedoc

A former convent offers serenity for sybarites, says **Anthony Peregrine**

The hotel: the problem is to stop myself gushing. What I'd like to say is that this is the finest, friendliest small hotel in France and I want to go back there right now. But much more in that vein would persuade you that the place was blackmailing me. So, I shall be measured and hard-headed and say straightaway that, for a bolt hole, this is quite a bolt.

It involves flying to Carcassonne or Montpellier, hiring a car and driving (90 minutes and 75 minutes, respectively) to that point where Languedoc stops making wine and starts rising, ruffled, rugged and wild. Le Couvent is slotted into a titchy street opposite the church in the small town of Hérépian, behind exterior walls evidently built for the reinforcement of vows.



Get thee to this nunnery

Brian Lancaster

"*Couvent*", as you know, means "convent". Nuns were here from the 17th century, and instilled an austere, stone-built serenity. That remains, but (I'm risking a gush) is now suffused with contemporary warmth and the sort of welcome you'd expect from distant, cultured cousins: informal but not matey.

You wander the downstairs warren — lounge with fireplace and books, little vaulted bar, winter terrace — as a house guest rather than a trespasser. The manager, Antoine Lopez, or one of his two staff will ambush you in the dining-kitchen, the heart of the establishment, for drink, any-time tapas and a chat. There's a small garden — and a dinky spa pool, which your cousins probably don't have. Civilised behaviour is assumed. Next time someone exhorts, "Get thee

to a nunnery", don't hesitate. You might hide here until the rest of the world catches up.

The rooms: not rooms but suites, 13 of them on three floors off a grand staircase worn irregular by generations of nuns scurrying up after 5am mass. The sisters would be a bit surprised by what has happened to their accommodation. It's still sober: burgundy stone floors and colour washes in the beiges and browns that nuns would doubtless favour if they ran Wallpaper magazine.

But this is sobriety for sybarites whose devotions demand space, ace drapes, modern chic that's also good for sprawling on, and really plumptuous bedrooms. I've rarely been happier in a hotel than lolling *en famille* in our suite's lounge,

drinking Scotch and listening to Blondie on the provided iPod.

Given the acreage available, we could have been joined by 15 for a cocktail party, with a further dozen — smokers, perhaps — out on the terrace. Thank heavens we weren't.

The food: simple, table d'hôte dishes taken all together round the kitchen table — or separately in the lounge, in your suite or wherever you choose. And £6.50 for guinea fowl in red wine or duck magret leaves a bob or two for a crack at the better regional wines. If you want something slightly more formal, L'Ocre Rouge restaurant, round the corner, offers a bright twist to regional fare, menus from £19.50. Ask for something — anything — with local black turnips. This will radically alter your attitude to this vegetable.

Book it now: this is quite possibly the finest small hotel in France

The surroundings: Hérépian itself is a pretty standard-issue southern French settlement but, immediately to the north and west, the Haut Languedoc nature park will chuck you up mountains, along rivers and gorges, and into hamlets so remote that they get yesterday's sunshine. The elements are grandiose, too, at the Cirque de Mourèze, a chaos of weird rock formations. Lamalou-les-Bains has thermal baths, a casino and golf, Pézenas has memories of Molière, and Béziers the Canal du Midi. "But why move from here?" said my wife, as she settled back in an armchair, the sun setting on the hills a little way beyond our terrace. I thought and I sipped and I said nothing.

The price: basic double suites start at £80 per night, but go for the deluxe, with salon, from £106. The Suite Prestige has two double bedrooms and a salon, from £154. For special two-, three- and seven-night deals — until April 30 — call 00 33 4 67 11 87 15 or visit www.couventherepian.com. Breakfast costs £7pp.

Getting there: Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies to Carcassonne from East Midlands, Stansted, Liverpool, Dublin and Shannon, and to Montpellier from Stansted.

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