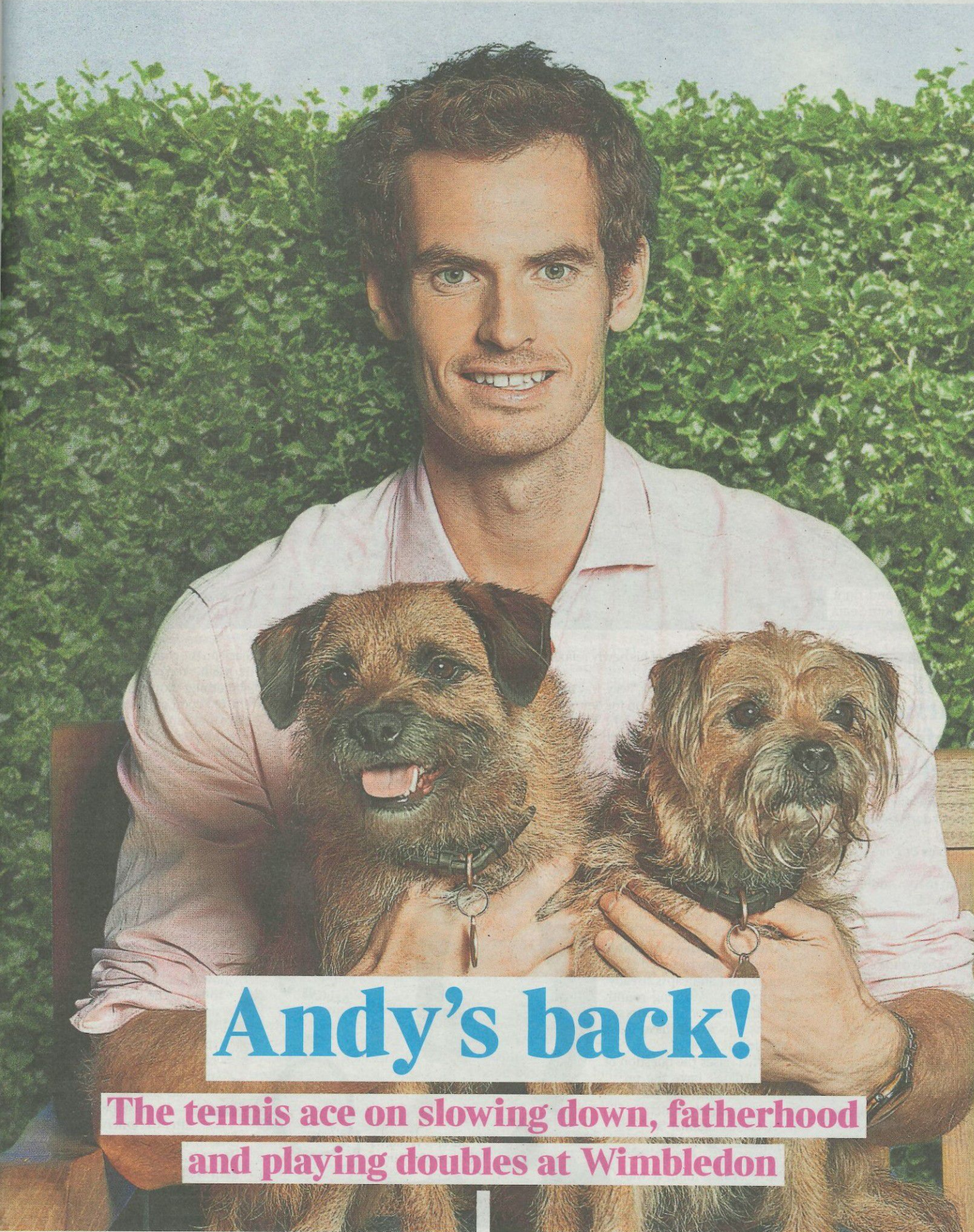




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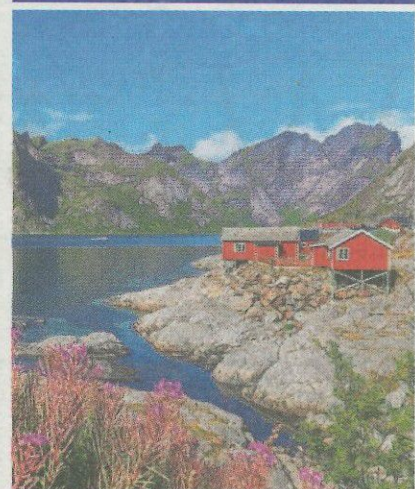
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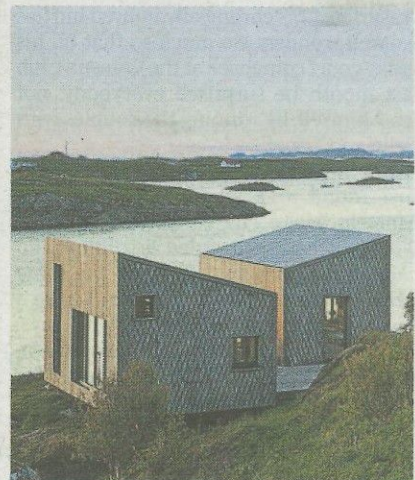
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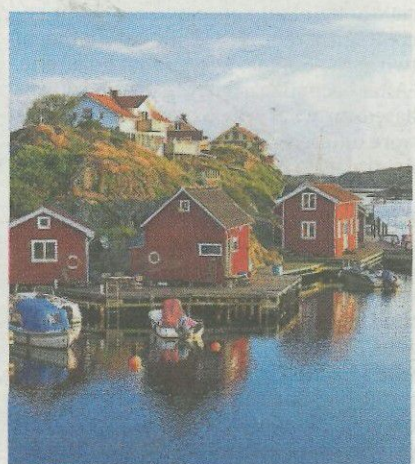
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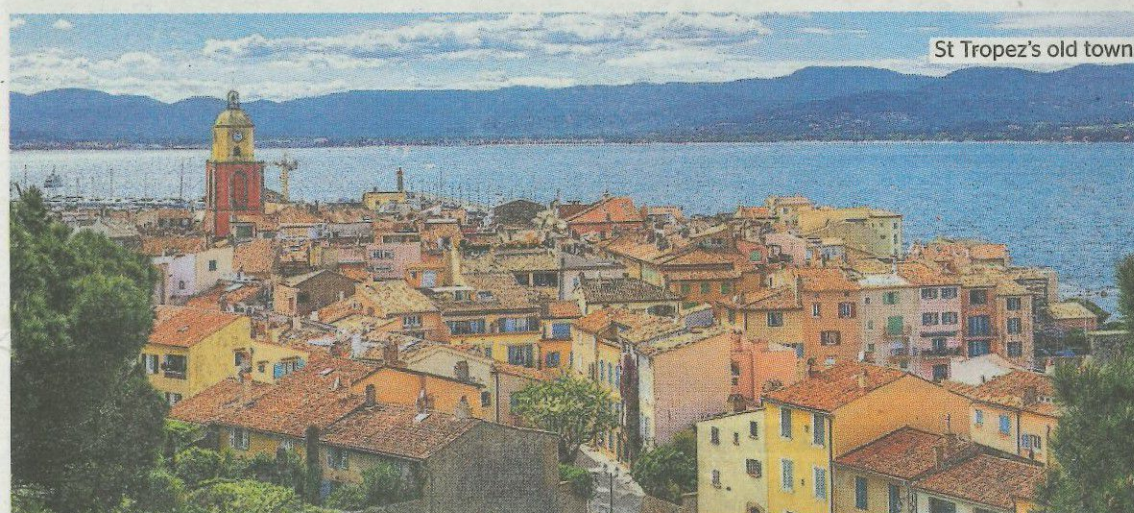


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# Luxury travel



St Tropez's old town

## How St Tropez got its glamour back

Cool hotels and beach clubs are giving the Côte d'Azur a new lease of life. **Carolyn Boyd** checks them out

It's the salty sea air that hits me first. I close my eyes in the bright sunshine to breathe it in and, bam, I'm under the spell of the shimmering Mediterranean. Even in the surrounds of a five-star hotel, with its chic design, manicured beach and alluring infinity pool, it's the sea, in its dazzling, turquoise glory, that reminds you what makes St Tropez and its beaches so irresistible.

Although artists had been inspired by the French Riviera long before a bikini-clad Brigitte Bardot tossed her lustrous locks on Pampelonne beach, it was Roger Vadim's 1956 film *Et Dieu Créa la Femme* (And God Created Woman) that put St Tropez on the map. And now, more than 60 years later, the area is back in vogue, with a raft of new luxury hotels and beach clubs offering outstanding service and exquisite design.

The smartest hotel is Cheval Blanc, where I've come for my first bewitching night of this trip to the Côte d'Azur. Cypress pines shade the tranquil terrace and it has a heavenly infinity pool. Adding to the new parade of opulent abodes is the five-star Lou Pinet, set in the burbs behind the town, with 34 rooms in three villa-like maisons surrounding a dreamy pool. Along the coast at Le Croix Valmer is Philippe Starck's new masterpiece, Lily of the Valley — all bold prints and amber hues. On Pampelonne the new beach club from St Tropez's Hôtel Byblos brings its laid-back style to the waterside, and just along the sand the smart La Réserve offers another Starck-designed beach hangout as an added attraction to its secluded paradise in Ramatuelle.

However, it is Cheval Blanc that sets the bar high — the latest addition to the hotel collection created by Moët Hennessy-Louis Vuitton, which also has properties in

the Maldives and St Barts. Here your Guerlain sun cream is applied with a facial massage by a beachside attendant, the pillow menu offers 11 choices, including silk, bamboo and spelt, and you can indulge in a six-hands spa treatment in which three beauticians simultaneously pouf your hair, paint your nails and buff your toes so that you're party-ready in an hour and a half.

Not that I have anywhere else to be — here is just fine; I tuck into a fresh, bistro-style lunch on the relaxed central terrace. As if this idyllic terrace weren't enough, my duplex room has two of its own — one on each level looking out beyond the pool towards the small private beach. Despite the mod cons in the room — three TVs (one in the bathroom), a lounge area, an iPad — the beach proves too much to resist and I head over to dip my toes in the Med. Gin palaces and cruise ships saunter past in the wide circular bay, but it's a little too chilly to immerse myself fully, so I retreat to the pool, swimming towards the peach-hued houses of St Tropez in the distance.

Inside, the spa seems vast for what is a bijou hotel of 30 rooms. It has five spacious treatment rooms, there is a hammam and an outside space set around an ancient, twisted olive tree. My massage comes with a choice of aromatherapy oils and, after opting for the house favourite, I am pummelled and pressed into relaxed ecstasy in a cloud of fig and jasmine flower.

Where the spa is white and calming, the rest of the hotel's decor and colour palette tunes into its setting, celebrating the heritage of the Riviera. The architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte has put the work of Roger Capron (a contemporary of the artists Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso) at the heart of the hotel's design after two of



the ceramicist's frescoes were discovered behind wall panels. You'll find the restored frescoes by a staircase featuring Capron's original balustrade. His signature tiled coffee tables festoon the communal areas and bedrooms, and there is artwork by his widow, Jacotte (now in her eighties), and books about his pieces. Cocteau-inspired, line-drawn figures adorn the rugs, and the accent colour that brings it all together is a breezy royal blue.

The design suits the setting perfectly — relaxed and understated, with exquisite detail — but what I love most about Cheval Blanc is its staff. They're discreet yet friendly, and everything runs like clockwork — nowhere more so than in La Vague d'Or, the three-Michelin-star restaurant where the chef Arnaud Donckele, who has worked in Paris's most starry restaurants, serves a menu imbued with Provence's sunshine-infused vegetables, silky olive oil and bounty of fish. What is astonishing too is how our server describes — from memory and in perfect English — each course as it comes with an enthusiasm that is a delicious teaser of the food.

Having gazed out towards its terracotta and peach houses from the pool, I'm eager to reacquaint myself with St Tropez, where designer chic meets fishing village. The harbour is buzzing, with deck hands slosh-

ing down the yachts and tourists ogling the gin palaces' interiors. I wander through its smart streets and arrive at Place des Lices, the main square, where beret-clad men play a pre-lunch game of pétanque in the marketplace and grey-haired women with capacious shopping baskets weave past white jumpsuit-clad fashionistas.

I duck down a narrow street, lined with jasmine-topped, peach-painted walls, and breathe in the fragrant air as I wander past a courtyard restaurant and the butterfly museum. It's closed today, but no matter: I have a date with the social butterfly's venue of choice — Byblos.

The hotel is an institution in St Tropez, having been built in 1967 by the Lebanese billionaire Jean-Prosper Gay-Para in an act of unrequited love for Bardot. Mick and Bianca Jagger celebrated their wedding there in 1971, and a parade of beautiful people — Lauren Bacall, George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio, Beyoncé, Naomi Campbell to name a few — have made it their St Tropez haunt.

There's a whimsical, almost kitsch air about the bold, colourful interiors, which feature further ceramics by Capron. This year the restaurant, which is overseen by Alain Ducasse, has been renamed Cucina and reinvented with an Italian menu.

Bigger news, however, is the new beach



Lou Pinet hotel



Lily of the Valley hotel



La Réserve hotel



A room at Le Cheval Blanc



Byblos Beach Ramatuelle

### Need to know

club, so I head down to Pampelonne for lunch there. I had forgotten how transfixing the colour of the water is. I take a seat in the restaurant facing outwards so I can watch the gentle stripes of blue and turquoise as they ripple in the waves, but the restaurant's design — the work of François Frossard, whose opulent style came to Byblos when he redesigned its nightclub, Les Caves du Roy, in 2017 — is just as appealing. Its white-linen tables and yellow-and-orange-cushioned chairs are shaded by natural linen woven between wood beams. The menu is a simple affair, but my copious Byblos salad, akin to a niçoise, is fresh and filling.

A short paddle along the coast is the beach club of La Réserve. Here the rattan lampshades and neutral canvas directors' chairs are shaded from the sun by stripped-back natural wood beams. Unlike Starck's other designs, the club has little by way of colour or bold patterns; all the better for showcasing the most spectacular colour of all — the jaw-dropping azure sea, which has me mesmerised as I sit back on a sunlounger for a few hours.

Starck has made a bolder mark on the Côte d'Azur at Lily of the Valley. The 44-room hotel promises another of the French designer's inspiring beachside visions, such as La Coorniche and Haaïtza

Carolyn Boyd was a guest of Cheval Blanc and La Réserve. **Cheval Blanc St Tropez** has B&B doubles from €850 (£760) a night (00 33 494 55 91 00, chevalblanc.com).

**La Réserve Ramatuelle** has B&B doubles from €850 a night (00 33 494 44 94 44, lareserve-ramatuelle.com). Sunbeds at the beach club cost from €50 a day. Transfers between the hotel and beach club are free.

**Hôtel Byblos** has B&B doubles from €480 (00 33 494 56 68 00, byblos.com). A day at Byblos Beach costs €40 per sun chair. **Lou Pinet** has B&B doubles from €430 (00 33 609 55 55 44, loupinet.com).

**Lily of the Valley** has room-only doubles from €650 (00 33 422 73 22 00, lilyofthevalley.com)

on France's Atlantic coast. While those feature bright whites, monochromes and a beach-hut vibe, Lily of the Valley — which looks over the pine-fringed Gigaro beach — tunes in to a more fitting palette for this location, with warm hues of gold and terracotta. At the heart of the hotel is a dazzling Moroccan-tiled pool; its enormous wellness centre is to be its USP.

While Starck's design at La Réserve Beach Club offers a castaway vibe, the hotel is sleek and bright by comparison. Set round the coast from St Tropez, it has 27 rooms, with Willemotte's modern design segueing into the cliffs high above a rocky cove. The main building is styled like a Japanese torii gate and the site looks out over the canopies of cypress pines towards the sea. The 14 private villas that surround it are almost indiscernible among the trees. As I'm welcomed into the open lounge I'm struck by the floor-to-ceiling windows that showcase the view, drenching me in that special Côte d'Azur light — the room is designed with neutrals, creams and natural wood furniture so that you bask in it, rather than being blinded or baked. It's a little cooler in the open-air Japanese restaurant, and the attentive staff are dishing out blankets to me and the diners.

The view is on fine form again the next morning. A pre-breakfast dip in the re-

freshing swimming pool and a visit to the expansive spa (which has an indoor pool, a fitness room and several treatment rooms) proves that the hotel is rather an antidote to the energy of St Tropez — somewhere to escape, hide and relax.

The Lou Pinet also capitalises on being "away from it all", tucked into the hills behind St Tropez, where the suburbs nudge up against the vineyards, its name comes from the Provençal for the cypress pines, two of which stand proudly overlooking the site. Before I leave St Tropez I drop in to see it. Although it's only a week before its scheduled opening date, it's more likely to be a month, judging by the multiple diggers at the entrance (I'd be inclined to wait a while before booking).

One of two hotels from Maisons Pariente (along with Crillon Le Brave in Vaucluse — see panel), Lou Pinet has been created by the previous owners of the Naf Naf fashion chain. Here I find the Parisian artist Alexandre Benjamin Navet drawing his signature coloured murals in bright pastels directly on to the wall. With its open lobby-bar area, dreamy swimming pool and Tata Harper spa, it promises to be a sanctuary from the buzz of St Tropez. Yet I can't help thinking there is something missing — the dazzling, bright blue sea.

## The other 'posh' Provence

While St Tropez is one face of Provence, head inland to the Luberon and Vaucluse and you'll find another. Crillon Le Brave, one of the area's most alluring hotels, is under new ownership, having been bought by Maisons Pariente, the owner of Hôtel Lou Pinet in St Tropez.

When I visited Crillon Le Brave ten years ago, I was in thrall: the hotel, which occupies different buildings in the tiny village, embodied the essence of the Luberon. From a CD of the *Jean de Florette* score that played as we entered the room, to the breezy linens and terracotta tiles of its interiors, and the chef who cooked lamb shanks over the open fire, I adored it.

Chefs move on and rooms are redecorated, but the constant at Crillon Le Brave is the view. From the terrace of the new bistro restaurant I take in the vineyards, olive groves and the fragrant maquis that spread out below.

The Parisian architect and interiors designer Charles Zana has drawn on the landscape's colour palette for the bedrooms, with muted tones of mustard, moss green and dusky blues.

Yet for all the enchantment of the setting and the hotel's polished new look, other elements prove vexatious. Service, though friendly, is a mixed bag. During dinner I notice two staff members bickering in the restaurant behind me, and when I want to buy that *Jean de Florette* CD in the shop, I can't because they don't know the price. Attention to detail is lacking too — the stupendous view is blighted by the sight of used towels strewn across the sunloungers round the pool, and dirty glasses piled on a side table.

Thankfully my disappointment is soothed at Château de Montcaud, an hour west, over the River Rhône. The four-star hotel was once a silk manufacturer's mansion, built in 1848. After lying empty for five years it has been transformed by the Swiss couple Rolf and Andrea Bertsch and is opening for its first summer season this year.

Set in expansive parkland, it has an outdoor pool and tennis courts, as well as bicycles to borrow. The spacious rooms have been styled by the Swiss interior designer Iria Degen, but it is the restaurant that makes Château de Montcaud most worth the detour. The chef Matthieu Hervé has worked for Daniel Boulud in New York and is setting out his vision at the Restaurant Montcaud and the adjoining bistro. A heavenly amuse-bouche of lobster in a zesty orange jelly sets the bar high for a meal that just keeps on giving, coupled by wines suggested by the sommelier Alexandre Cohen.

Afterwards, Andrea Bertsch tells me about their plans for the place, including an olfactory garden, and their work with a young Parisian silk expert. The Bertschs' passion for hospitality, heritage and cuisine combine to make Château de Montcaud enchanting, proving that star ratings can only tell you so much.

Carolyn Boyd was a guest of Crillon Le Brave and Château de Montcaud. **Hotel Crillon Le Brave** has B&B doubles from €350 (£315; 00 33 490 65 61 61, crillonlebrave.com). **Château de Montcaud** has B&B doubles from €147 (00 33 466 33 20 15, chateaudumontcaud.com).

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