

Like St Tropez before Bardot

Laid-back Marseillan can't claim to have the celeb clientele, glam bars and designer shops of its famous Riviera cousin, but that's why it's special

Sex-kitten starlets are thin on the sun-seared ground. So are €6,000 cotton beach dresses with Mongolian fur trim, Lamborghini Gallardos ostentatiously parked in front of harbourside cafes, and gin-palace superyachts. And you certainly won't see estate agents with details of stratospherically pricey villas in French, English and Russian.

Yet the petite port of Marseillan on the Languedoc coast, kissing a Mediterranean lagoon east of Béziers, has an undeniable frisson of St Tropez. Not the 2009 Riviera honeypot oozing bling, Eurotrash and traffic, but the serene isolated fishing village that first attracted artists and writers in the late 19th century, and then Bardot and the jet set in the 1950s.

As elsewhere in the south of France, looks count. While no doppelgänger, Marseillan shares strands of scenic DNA with its more famous Côte d'Azur counterpart. The views across its dazzling turquoise water to the hillside rooftops of Sète are reminiscent of St Tropez's to Grimaud and Saint-Maxime. And both ports have excellent beaches a couple of miles outside town - although you've far less chance of being hit by a wayward Cristal cork around Marseillan plage.

But it's the town's protected 17th-century harbour that really captures the early Riviera vibe. Low-level houses laced with wrought-iron balconies and splattered with flowers swaddle a channel that jiggles with small boats and yachts, with a left bank of thriving restaurants and cafes.

And now unpretentious, laid-back Marseillan has some seriously stylish new accommodation. Port Rive Gauche, a converted 19th-century wine storehouse (booming trade spawned several monumental cellars near the waterfront) has two-bedroom apartments with balconies and terraces bombarded with startling lagoon light - all whites and light greys with beams, limed wood floors, and artfully distressed furniture. The little touches - antique dressmakers' dummies to hang clothes, old trunks and French words spelt out in jumbo metallic letters - are guaranteed to induce serious interior design envy.

So far, so chic. But despite its cool contemporary mood, the development - the only hotel near the harbour - seems to slip easily into Marseillan life. It doesn't appear to be an early sign of St Tropez-isation. The port's holiday trump card, after all, is its low-key charm and authentic local activities. It's why I found myself on the water with Jean-Claude Caumil. The ludicrously healthy retiree offers boat rides around the Bassin de Thau but shows little evidence of brutal commercialisation. His afternoon trip costs just €8pp.

It wasn't just excellent value, it was also fascinating. The massive lagoon has more than 700 Mediterranean species, including seahorses, and lies at the eastern end of the Canal du Midi, the 240km Unesco world heritage site.

"Do you want Toulouse or Bordeaux?" asked Jean-Claude, as we dissected its narrow entrance, nosing alongside the abandoned rusting hull of the Louisdaky from Cape Town.

Like the best travel, it's the quirky surprises, rather than the well-known show-stoppers, that hit the high notes. After passing the famed Les Glénans sailing club, where you ring a bell to summon a water taxi across the canal, Jean-Claude turned back to the lagoon, floored the engine and made a gesture of an elderly jockey whipping a horse.



Boat d'Azur... Marseillan harbour

Mussels cooked over glowing embers came with zingingly fresh oysters

We bounced across the water like a giant Space Hopper, windsurfers and kitesurfers trailing in our wake.

After anchoring we spear-fished - I've never seen dorado laugh quite so brazenly - and snorkelled in crystal-clear shallows through waving seagrass. But best of all we simply slumped in the boat, let the sun freckle our faces and talked about nothing and everything. "I miss some things about work," mused Jean-Claude, who swapped his nearby hotel for 364 days a year on the water. "It had a nightclub and 250-cover restaurant. But it's good to relax."

He appears to have it nailed. And he's not alone. Locals around Marseillan have turned relaxation, lubricated with decent wine and fresh seafood, into an art form. A few hours later, I'm outside a white-walled, red-roofed chateau, sipping rosé and shooting the breeze with the owners, Pierre and Marie-Christine Fabre de Roussac. Tucked into magnificent towering trees, Domaine de la Bellonette is one of several grand estates lining the Bassin's north shore.

It offers spacious rooms with period furniture and a recently converted

studio, but I was there for a major foodie treat: the local speciality of *brazucade* - a mussel barbecue with shellfish straight out of the briny.

In the past, when fennel was as common as nettles, chefs would cover the crustaceans with a generous blanket of the herb, before torching it to generate a steaming scented infusion. When the shells popped, it was job done. Ours was a tad more mainstream, with mussels cooked over glowing wood embers, but it

still beat the hell out of burgers and chicken wings, particularly with its side-servicing of zingingly fresh oysters. "I once made a 12m-long *brazucade*," said Pierre, casually opening another Languedoc wine. "It was no particular occasion. Just pleasure. Why not? We are French. We are Gaulois."

And also, Pierre, because you don't have to cook on a £20 B&Q barbie. But it's hard to disagree with the south-west joie de vivre. A couple more wines and I was seriously considering relocating.

Spend any time in Marseillan and you're constantly pulled back to the Bassin de Thau. All life swirls around on or underneath it.

It's why I headed east along the shore to Medi Thau. It sounds like a centre for genetic engineering. And in a sense it is - only for oysters, not humans. The family firm has revolutionised the farming of the acclaimed crustaceans that thrive on the lagoon's phytoplankton.

Instead of submerging them on ropes for 12-18 months' growth, Medi Thau's solar-powered lifts regularly pull them out of the briny for hours sometimes days, at a time. The result is that, rather than endlessly gorging, the critters are forced to keep their mouths closed to retain water - a mini workout.

"We make them suffer a little," says fisherman and directeur général Florent Tarbouriech, as we cruise around the sun-dappled oyster beds. "It makes them stronger, more muscular, more fleshy."

The tubby, plump beauties are up to 17% bigger than normal, fit to graze dining tables in Venice, Hong Kong or Shanghai. They also have a suntan: exposure to ultra-violet rays gives them a delicate rose blush and the name Pink Diamond.

But in Marseillan you don't need to splash a second mortgage at a flas restaurant. Medi Thau serves the super-sized aphrodisiacs in its straw-roofed shack, dripping with geranium and surrounded by old fishing nets. The Pink Diamonds are extraordinary more like steaks than oysters, with an addictive sweet aftertaste.

"All this just by lifting them out of the water," says Florent, as he prizes open another fleshy specimen. "C'est très jolie. C'est incroyable." Which, worryingly, is exactly what director Roger Vadim and many others said about Brigitte Bardot in her 1950s St Tropez heyday.

But while Pink Diamonds are another recent development guaranteed to put Marseillan on the food and travel map, the small port seems more than capable of retaining its unhurried, sunny, bling-free charm.

● London to Montpellier by train cost from £109pp with Rail Europe (0844 8484064, raileurope.co.uk). Avis (08445 818181, avis.co.uk) offers seven days' car hire from £242. Port Rive Gauche (0871 2187066, garrigaeresor.com/rive-gauche) has four-person, two-bedroom suites from £130 per night B&B and €315 for three nights (single nights not available until September). It can arrange afternoon boat trips for €8pp, and a boat ride, oyster tasting and *brazucade* at Medi Thau for €50. Domaine de la Bellonette (0033 61304 4150, labellonette.com), doubles from €90 B&B.

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