

LAP IT UP IN LANGUEDOC

Children will have the time of their lives at this action packed chateau, says James Taylor

THE owner bustles in from a meeting. 'I just had a little word,' says Karl O'Hanlon, from Dublin. 'I want the staff here to be more relaxed, drop the formalities and undo the top buttons of their shirts'.

He whisks off a Spitfire-pilot scarf and sits down for a signature gin, basil, pepper and elderflower cocktail, a Serjac, which is Damien the barman's latest project.

'Anyway, hello,' he says. 'I'm Karl.'

As one of the new owners of the Chateau St Pierre de Serjac, he is clearly enjoying launching the Irish Revolution in this ancient estate with vineyard, hotel, restaurant, spa and luxury self-catering properties set in 200 acres in the South of France.

The idea is to run hotels that cross Irish charm with French perfectionism. Everything in Languedoc is a blend. Not a bad place to try another one.

For all its bounty, there's no doubt that France creates natives who can be a little dour. For example, in Beziers, just down the road, the mayor has banned drying laundry in public. Messy.

And it was round here that the French crusaders removed the noses, lips and eyeballs of 100 heretics and had them parade through the streets Indian file, led by one who had been allowed to keep a single eye. Tidy.

I notice the fireplace over Karl's shoulder. Marble, about 200 years old. Then a rattling sound. I'm sure it is the bones of the former owner Baron Cyprien de Crozals turning in his grave. Had the old fellow still been king of the castle, our family would have been in the dungeons.

With two young boys to entertain, we often leave muddy shoes in the bar, tennis racquets in the rain, boules in the shrubs, cycles in the vineyards and

clothes in the bath after a typical day of tennis, swimming in the huge, heated infinity pool and evenings *en famille* watching Netflix with steak and chips from the local supermarket.

Guided by a team of indulgent receptionists, we enjoy simple outings: the seaside, the zoo, canoeing on the river Orb, motorboating down the Canal du Midi and, yes, there is a spa at the hotel. Here, I learn that we adults are old ships covered with barnacles. An ayurvedic massage strips them off with herbal oils.

Karl launched his first place, Chateau Les Carrasses, in 2011. A big success. Serjac is the second, a £20 million renovation turning a bunch of rundown barns and houses into a working wine estate and luxury hotel.

Relaxed luxury is the philosophy. On arrival, we are shown to our quarters past emerald-green lawns and shaggy palms, down gravel paths leading to 36 self-

catering properties, most with 10ft floor-to-ceiling windows and private swimming pools looking out over rolling vineyards, which means you have your own place, as well as a fully-operational hotel to call on. Very luxurious.

Available for rent all year round, the buildings range from two-bedroom apartments to large four-bedroom houses.

EACH has a private garden with barbecues and sun loungers; 17 have private swimming pools. Inside resembles a double-page spread from Elle Decoration, with Nespresso machines, wifi, flat-screen TVs and sound docks.

In our house, just one implement is missing. A few minutes later, a brand-new Laguiole corkscrew arrives at the door. The senior child googles 'how to turn on Smeg hob'. Chandeliers dangle

heavily overhead, made out of bunches of giant glass grapes. Any one of them could put you into a coma for months. That might be over-relaxed.

Did I say grapes? Take a breath. Focus on the nose. Savour the honey-suckle with touches of flint and subtle oaky tones, the just-so balance of Grenache noir, Rolle, Marsanne and Viognier vines.

If a holiday at Serjac is essentially about a rest, sunshine, the deepest countryside and getting to know your nearest and dearest again — that is assisted by really good wine.

In tiny medieval Puissalicon, we meet Jean-Philippe Leca in a 500-year-old barn. His looks suggest a French movie star, but in fact he runs the family winery.

He pops open a range of organic wines called Le Manpot ('one-



Jump in: The infinity pool at Chateau St Pierre de Serjac. Right: Fun on the beach

Picture: GETTY

arm' after his Senator grandfather). Buy some. Whatever it takes. It's nectar.

TRAVEL FACTS

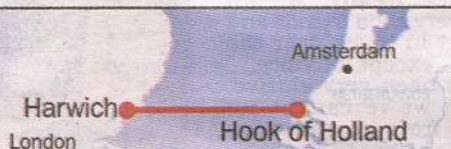
DOUBLE rooms at the Chateau St Pierre de Serjac (serjac.com, 0345 6866 505) from £172 per night, and seven nights during peak season in a three-bedroom house with pool costs from £3,800. Easyjet (easyjet.com, 0330 365 5000) flies from Gatwick to Montpellier from £77 return.

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