





## *Le Mas de la Rose*

STYLE Genteel farmhouse

SETTING Van Gogh view

'Waking up is a delight. A sweet morning light washes over the room's natural tones, and sunshine tells us it is breakfast time'



**I**n a parallel universe, my grandmother is French, and she has a house just like Le Mas de la Rose, in the countryside near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. There's always a bed made up for me, a pot of herbal tea is ever-brewing and lunch is laid out at half past 12, in the garden, beneath the shade of a huge mulberry tree.

In the real world, the owner of Le Mas de la Rose is not my *grandmère* but Mme Luron-Huppert, who arrived from the north-east in 2004 to turn this traditional 17th-century smallholding into a luxury maison d'hôte. Driving from Avignon in our little rented car, after an hour or so, we find the right tiny woodland road and reach a charming gate that opens automatically. We are already being looked after.

The house looks very old and very solid, with its vast square stone walls and tiled roofs. The lit-up windows blaze welcomingly in the dark, and the night-sky stars seem magically bright to these fugitives from the big city. Paris is instantly forgotten when we see the shapes of

cypresses in the garden, vines on the terrace, and glowing blue swimming pool.

Our quarters occupy the same building as Mme Luron-Huppert's kitchen and dining room, but with own entrance. As it is late, I suggest to Mr Smith that we skip the full exploration until morning, and we head straight to the bedroom. We are led first into our own salon with a little open kitchen for tea-making, noting the antiques, woven-coir flooring and profound quiet. The bedroom walls are limewashed, the colours soft and neutral. It's Provençal for sure, but minus any patterns or too-cheerful hues. The cushion-covered linen-clad bed looks especially enticing. We press on reviewing until daybreak.

Waking up is a delight. A sweet morning light washes over the room's natural tones, and sunshine tells me it is breakfast time. Mr Smith, however, is impervious to nature's alarm call, wantonly asleep under the white sheets and duvet. I exchange bedded bliss for hot-

even, exploiting the ensuite's huge-windowed view of countryside and woodland. I don't recall savouring such a set. Finally Monsieur opens his eyes and declares he's woken. Outside, all is fresh; the Mistral that welcomed us yesterday is still blowing, erasing any wisps of cloud in the sky. I'm glad of the shawl that travelled with me from Paris: even in summer, that wind can be bracing.

astounding: the only word to describe this estate. Surrounded by rocky hills, grounds bursting with fragrant lavender, pine and cypress trees, this is unmistakably Mediterranean terrain. We dip our toes into the swimming pool, which has a sandy-looking edge. Wow, we have our own beach – well, beachette – right here in the garden. And there's a Jacuzzi set into one of its curves. Two cats come twining along a wall and chaperone us into the house. We find Mme Luron-Huppert in her kitchen. 'Vous avez bien dormi?' she asks. *Mais, bien sûr.*

Tables set for two, a big couch, lots of books and a wide fireplace greet us in the dining room. Breakfast is on the

terrace, ample and fragrant: great coffee, croissants, baguette, fromage frais, fruits... There's even jam from the Moulin du Calanquet – strawberry with black olives, how Provençal is that? Armed with advice from our hostess about local beauty spots and activities, we decide on a morning outing, with plans to flop by the pool when it hots up. Although we have a car and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is not so far away, we decide to walk. One thing, Madame warns: wild boar wanders hereabouts. We're unsure about whether to feel worried, or hopeful that we see one.

We step bravely (OK, gingerly) over the electrified barriers, Mr Smith propelling me with a gentlemanly hand. A scrubby path takes us swiftly among the vineyards and olive trees of Domaine de Valdation, a well-known Alpilles wine producer. The land was given by François I to his daughter as a wedding gift in the 1500s, its stony clay soil cultivated for wine and olive oil since Roman times. We consider calling ahead to make an appointment for a wine tasting, but sense





Le Mas de la Rose pulling us back to its terrace for a lunch of tomato salad, fresh bread, onion tart, ham and cheese. Reading in the shade and basking in the sun, our afternoon tails off into balmy evening. The air is sweet, time is slow, and there's nothing to worry about. We pull ourselves together sufficiently to consider a visit to St-Rémy in the morning, but that's it for organising.

If lunch is homely, dinner is a more refined affair of Provençal cuisine: we are served iced gazpacho, and a 'duo' of local lamb with vegetable tian and olive-oil mash. For our second night, a table has been booked at Sous Les Micocouliers. Three miles away in the village of Eygalières, the restaurant's name translates, long-windedly, as 'Beneath The Mediterranean Hackberry Trees'. The food is refined and contemporary, but the chef is clearly proud of local tradition, since our risotto is made with spelt, and the roast pork sourced from Mont Ventoux slopes. Our bottle of red wine, Vallon des Anges, is from the Domaine de Valdition, our rambling rendezvous yesterday. I look at Mr Smith. His face looks different. It has more colour, and there's something about his jaw... Ah, it's a huge smile. A bit like mine. They go nicely with our tans and our flapping white linen shirts.

After two days at Le Mas de la Rose, I no longer even dream of having a Provençal grandmother. So long as Mme Luron-Huppert is in charge, brewing herbal teas, ensuring the chic furnishings are just-so, and providing a kind and discreet welcome, I know there's a patch of the South of France we can call our own.

Reviewed by Ligia Dias