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# VILLAGE

**A**s a keen cyclist, last September I came to the Vaucluse department of north-west Provence with a plan to tackle Mont Ventoux, among the toughest climbs of the Tour de France. Then I arrived at my hotel, Crillon le Brave, and found its tranquil beauty fostered a sense of ease in me that was at odds with going hell-for-leather up the side of a mountain.

The hotel crowns a village of the same name, the honey-coloured buildings of which drip down the hillside into a sea of Provençal green, a verdant landscape of vineyards and olive groves. While some hotels can corrupt their natural setting, that's not the case here – Crillon blends perfectly into the scenery because it is made up of what were once villagers' homes, most of which were built in the 17th and 18th centuries.

## A SENSE OF PLACE

Although the village, which dates back to Roman times, thrived through the ages, a malaise had set in by the start of the 20th century. Inhabitants had deserted it, a situation compounded by two wars and a lack of direct water supply. Yet its beauty meant it wasn't to be forgotten; in the 1970s, new owners began to resurrect the houses, and by the late eighties the first of several buildings was acquired for transformation into a luxury hotel.

As such, its grounds aren't like that of your average hotel – it's a labyrinthine series of sun-baked cobbled roads, tumbling stone staircases and shady tunnels. In spring 2017, the property was taken on by Patrick Pariente as part of real estate firm Bertie Albrecht Company. Together with his daughters, Leslie Kouhana and Kimberley Pariente, he has focused on retaining its original features while upgrading the interiors and facilities (and the hotel was refurbished over winter 2018-19 after my stay, reopening for the season next month). →



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# IDYLL

Whether you're in search of relaxation or adventure, Crillon le Brave in Provence is a beautiful getaway



37

PICTURED: Crillon le Brave's honey-hued stone houses



And what original features they are. Spa treatments take place in the tranquil vaulted stables of the 18th-century Maison Décor, next to the church in the heart of the village. In Maison Reboul, a door in the floor leads to the wine cellar of former inhabitant Monsieur Robert Reboul, where he made his own vintages (rumour has it the impressive cellar the hotel now boasts would have had little competition). Maison Roche, the first building acquired in 1989, was the home of the priest and thus also served as the village school.

There is much to explore, but I arrive at sunset so my first priority is to make my way up to the terrace, where I'm greeted by the sight of Provence laid out before me, aglow in golden light. If the weather is clement – which, of course, it often is – you can enjoy an evening meal here from the fine-dining Restaurant La Madeleine while taking in the view.

A level below the bar and restaurant terrace is a pool of aquamarine, surrounded by loungers for guests to make like lizards and bask in the sun. Needless to say, it is infinitely more inviting than nearby Mont Ventoux, which looms out of the landscape, its barren, windswept summit scant reward for the 21km ascent with a 1,610-metre elevation gain.

In the 1967 Tour de France, UK cyclist Tom Simpson died trying to get the top, although he had amphetamine and alcohol in his blood system, as was the custom for competitors at the time. I'm assured that it's not a fate that

A pool of aquamarine is surrounded by loungers for guests to make like lizards and bask in the sun

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Pétanque terrain; the cheese board; the complex from above; classic French décor; bathtime vistas

has befallen the many people who stay here with the intention of making it to the top. Still, the pool seals the deal – I'll give Mont Ventoux a miss this time.

#### LAZY DAYS

Last year, responsibility for fine dining at the hotel was placed in the hands of chef Julien Marseault, whose culinary philosophy sees him combine produce of Provençal provenance with his own heritage (encompassing Brittany and Corsica) in dishes such as lobster salad with peaches and nectarines, balsamic basil and smoked beef. Tasting menus get oenological support from the extensive wine cellar, with sommelier Gaëlle Devos able to provide astute wine pairings for each course, many from Provence itself.

I plump for the seven-course tasting menu. It is sublime, with a cheese board worth losing the top button on your trousers for. Not only do I head to bed in an over-sated torpor, but I also awake with a woolly head. Fortunately, not too woolly to prevent me watching a



stunning sunrise that sets the Virginia Creeper adorning the buildings ablaze.

While enjoying a suitably reviving breakfast on the terrace, I ponder how to spend the day. Now that I've crossed mountain scaling off the to-do list, there is little on the agenda except a good spa treatment and a dip in the pool, before gazing at the scenery for a few hours. Still, by late afternoon I feel compelled to try to burn off some of the many calories I've totted up. I take advantage of the free bikes offered by the hotel and cycle to nearby Bédoin, a lovely downhill journey.

Bédoin is a bustling little village, particularly if you manage to visit on Monday's market day, and a pastis in one of the pavement cafés is recommended. As night falls, I tackle the uphill cycle back, the stars above providing a visual feast to fuel my efforts.

#### SUITE LIFE

Should you decide to exert yourself on a visit here, the accommodation at all levels will provide a comfortable sanctuary in which to recuperate. However, if you

have the means, the Suite Prestige Ventoux takes some beating. Set across two floors, it has a pair of roll-top baths positioned side by side and a private terrace with superlative views that can also be enjoyed from the upstairs bedroom.

On my last day, it's back to the pool again. In between dips, I enjoy watching the mix of guests staying at Crillon – from the young men powering up and down the pool before they head off to take on Mont Ventoux in the afternoon, to the peaceful white-haired couples relaxing quietly and companionably together.

An early evening stroll through the hills, one of several guided routes provided by the hotel, is a fitting finale to my visit. I return as the sun sets, the shadowy silhouette of the complex against the ochre sky drawing me back.

Whether you are looking for a restful break from the daily grind, a romantic escape with a loved one, an action-packed weekend of mountain biking or a more leisurely one exploring the nearby Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine region, Crillon le Brave is a wonderful choice. ■

■ Internet rates for a stay in May start from £343 per night for a Superior room. The hotel can arrange transfers from Avignon (40 minutes), Marseille (one hour 15 minutes) and other destinations. It offers a range of experiences showcasing all that the area has to offer, from weekends taking on Mont Ventoux by bicycle to tours of the local vineyards. [crillonlebrave.com](http://crillonlebrave.com)