



For those of us who live in the Middle East, the prospect of green rolling countryside, fresh air and the occasional afternoon curled up beside a roaring fire is ever-appealing. Even for the seasoned traveller, a few days respite from the Emirates' late summer sun is a welcome thought. And so, when my husband and I were invited to La Bergerie in the South of France at the beginning of October, we couldn't fill our Globe Trotter suitcases fast enough.

Situated in the hills that overlook Cannes, Nice and the Mediterranean Sea, La Bergerie is one of the most exclusive private houses in Provence. Set on its own 1.4-hectare plot in the midst of the highly sought-after Domaine de Terre Blanche golf and spa resort, the house caters to the well heeled and in-the-know in need of a few days (or possibly even weeks) holiday. Beautifully marrying privacy with service it offers all of the discretion of a private rental coupled with the amenities you might expect from a leading luxury hotel with a chef, concierge, chauffeur and staff all part of the offering.

The house itself is a refuge of taste and style, expertly decorated by interior designers Collection Privée and owners David and Laura Rich-Jones who have been developing properties in their native UK and abroad for the past two decades. Not for them the tasteless bling so often found in these parts – instead the house is an elegant combination of modern comforts and antique finds with contemporary artwork thrown in the mix. Ideally suited to those who travel in larger parties, it sleeps 12 with a master suite and three further double bedrooms on the first floor and a loft annexe with two bedrooms on the top floor – perfect for younger children or visiting guests. Bedrooms are in discreet shades of cream, moss, lavender and stone and all are en-suite, with bathrooms fitted to the highest standards and featuring their own unique touches. Our bedroom, a soothing grey cocoon with shuttered doors leading onto its own terrace, was annexed by a minimalist wet room, the wall of which was made up of hand applied mosaic tiles – a pattern that recalled the stone walls of the original bergerie on which the house was built.
















Downstairs, the layout reflects the almost year-round sunshine that Terre Blanche enjoys, with both indoor and outdoor living and dining rooms surrounding the giant stone swimming pool. Proportions and furniture are all supersize, from the two eight-seater sofas in the summer lounge to the coffee table in the indoor lounge, which is actually made up of three separate tables. Despite the impressive size of the house, there are still plenty of little corners into which to retreat for some privacy, from the sumptuous cinema room located in the basement to the library with its plump sofas and coffee table tomes that would take days to devour. In addition, extra space and accommodation for staff can be found in the grounds with a gatekeeper's lodge just up the drive and a new, La Petite Bergerie extension under construction.

Our flight from Dubai to Nice took just over six hours, enough time for lunch, a film and a quick nap before we disembarked under a rumbling grey sky. Our welcome party, led by our jovial driver Benoit, assured us that bad weather in the South of France never lasts very long. In truth, the rain could have poured down for days for all we cared as we were welcomed through the doors of La Bergerie by the smell of freshly baked fig tart and the eternally sunny Genevieve, our hostess for the week, who is perhaps La Bergerie's best-kept secret. Food, it has to be said, is the other and over the course of the next four days it was hard to tell where one meal ended and another began. Each morning we were set up for the day with a regal breakfast of buttery croissants, homemade granola and organic yogurts, and every evening we were welcomed home by tray after tray of titbits and canapés, one more inventive and delicious than the next from tempura winter vegetables to Parmesan nests to mini salmon quiches. Dinners included soupe au pistou, grilled bonito and wild mushroom risotto, all beautifully created by Tess the resident chef whose tarte au chocolat was surely her pièce de résistance.

Although it was tempting to stay at home and gorge on French fayre for the entirety of our trip, no visit to the South of France would be complete without a day at sea. So, after a restful first night, we found ourselves speeding across the Mediterranean courtesy of Captain Frank and the 23-metre Eden Erina. A lean, sleek, Arno-designed yacht capable of reaching 30 knots, she was the perfect vessel from which to enjoy the famous coastal views of Cannes, Nice and nearby Monaco, the islands of Saint Honorat and Sainte Marguerite and a snoop of the gardens of the Hotel du Cap. Even the water, a touch cooler than might be preferred in the autumn sun, felt warmer when enjoyed from the Eden Erina and a few of us managed a quick dip before diving into a restorative Champagne picnic. Back on land we drove home along Cannes's Boulevard de la Croisette, which allowed a brief glimpse of the town made famous by its annual film festival. A charming network of cobbled streets and cafés, designer boutiques and beachside restaurants it absolutely summed up the French way of life: a unique mix of glamour, glitz, fashion and food set beneath a halcyon sky.

Having enjoyed the pleasures of the sea, our second day took us inland, to the quaint little village of Fayence. Perched in the hills not far from Terre Blanche, it is the archetypal Provencal town with winding alleyways seemingly leading nowhere, a marché where red-cheeked farmers come to sell their wares, and the widely reputed Restaurant Le France which serves seasonal produce on its sunny terrace overlooking the village. While my husband entertained himself with a wedge-thick steak, I opted for cod and sweet potato gratin followed by tarte au pommes both of which were spellbinding in their simplicity. After some post-lunch shopping where we stocked up on lavender soaps and handmade napkins in traditional Provencal fabrics, we returned to La Bergerie to experience the Terre Blanche hotel's spa. With 14 treatment rooms, indoor and outdoor pools and a rosemary-filled garden that would unwind even the most weary it is a haven of wellbeing, conveniently located just a short golf buggy ride away from the house. For the more energetic, the hotel's impressive golf facilities are also just up the road and include two 18-hole courses and a dedicated golf academy that offers the Leadbetter method – ideally suited to those looking to lower their handicap while soaking up the Mediterranean sun.

Besides its proximity to the coast and the exceptional facilities on its doorstep, La Bergerie is surrounded by some of Europe's most famous producers of grape and our third day saw us discover the fruits of Chateau d'Esclans. Owned by Sasha Lischine, a second-generation connoisseur, the farm is fast becoming an industry leader and combines age-old know how with 21st-century technology to produce the most celebrated and expensive rose-hued grape in the world. Led by the charming Tom Schrekinger we discovered just quite how elaborate a process it is to create the perfect refreshment from the light and floral Whispering Angel (Chateau d'Esclans's most popular export and a favourite among the Hamptons set) to the velvety Garrus, the Chateau's top-end beverage.

As our trip drew to a close there was just enough time to take in one last dose of greenery before we returned to sandier climes. A stroll through the grounds of Terre Blanche under a perfect blue sky gave us one lasting impression of the house and its surroundings. While the return of the sunshine was welcome, we couldn't help but wish that we were back at the start of our trip, under a thundery grey sky, preparing to experience La Bergerie and the region all over again.





