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strange one

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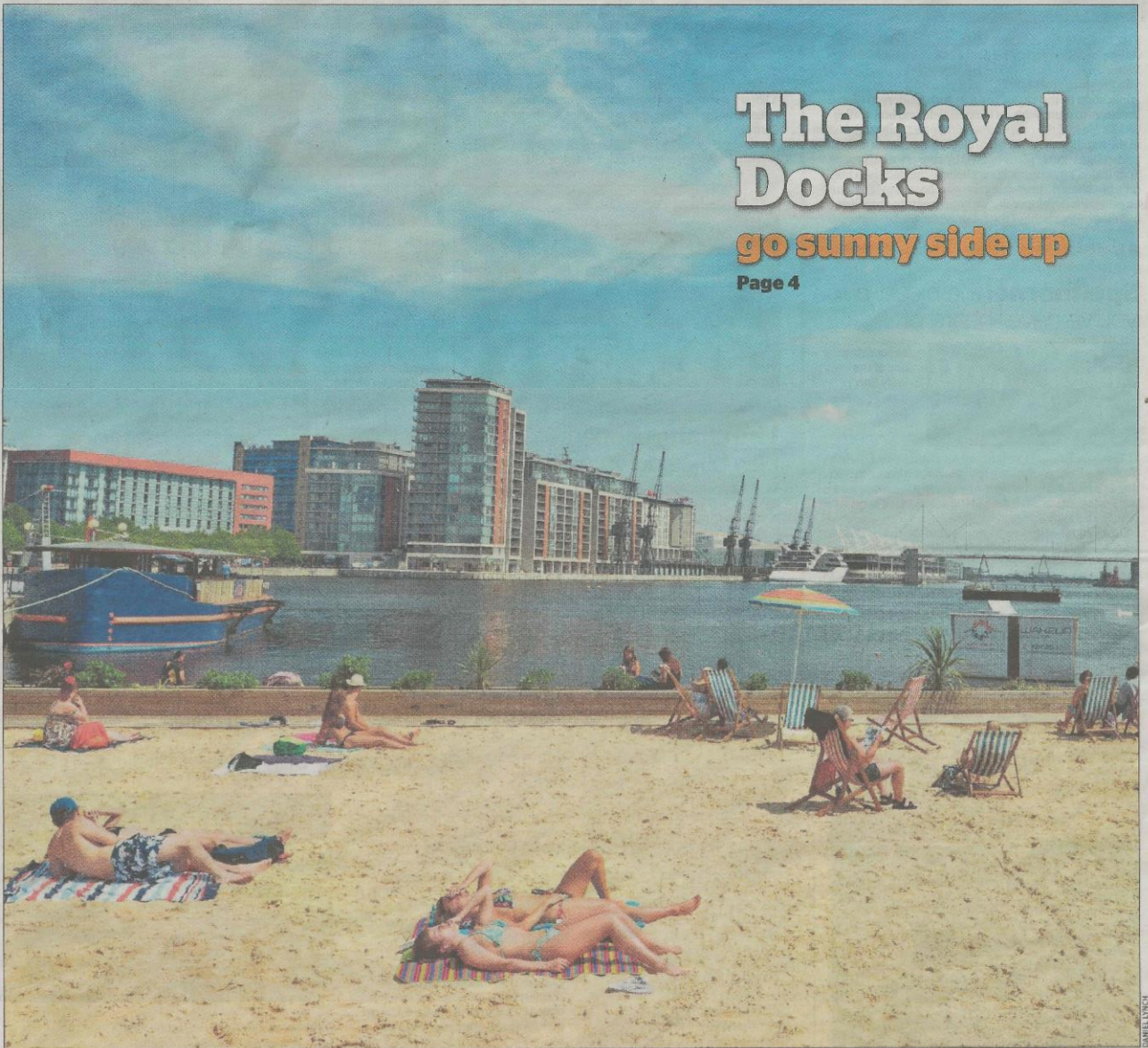
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DANIEL LEWIS

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Give in to French charm and village life in a cottage with a dreamy interior and breathtaking views, says **Cathy Hawker**

AN HOUR from the Med, 45 minutes from Avignon and immediately east of Châteauneuf-du-Pape's prime vineyards, Crillon le Brave is a sleepy Provençal village overlooked by Mont Ventoux, a favourite challenge for cyclists and hikers. The village has fields of olives and vines, a single church bell that peals on the hour and architectural remnants from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

There are 252 stone houses and seven of them belong to Hotel Crillon le Brave, a Relais & Châteaux property layered in dreamy Provençal style – rough-hewn terracotta tiles, smooth stone walls, shutters in sun-bleached blues and bare wood, and wicker ladder-back chairs that could be straight out of a Van Gogh painting.

The hotel opened in 1989 and for 25 years Canadian owner Peter Chittick has lavished attention on it, expanding it from the original 11 bedrooms to 32 today. Fellow directors include Robin Hutson, the founder of the UK's Hotel du Vin chain, whose wife Judy is responsible for much of the interior design.

In recent years the Hutsons have been busy opening their own new hotel chain back in Britain, including Lime Wood and The Pig in the New Forest, and The Pig on the Beach at Studland Bay in Dorset, to great acclaim and with enviable popularity. Judy has been so busy that the very latest Crillon le Brave refurbishments to five rooms and suites have been carried out by Winchester-based designer Penny Lydon. The Hutsons also live in Winchester.

"My brief was to complement the existing rooms designed by Judy and throughout I aimed to celebrate the beauty of the surroundings and make guests feel special," says Lydon. "The hotel is made up of everyday village homes and we have tried to retain the authenticity of a simple Provençal life with rustic but refined rooms."

Lydon mixed Pierre Frey linens with fabrics from designers inspired by 18th- and 19th-century French patterns, such as Nicole Fabre, Nicolas Herbert and British companies Blithfield & Co and Guy Goodfellow. Hand-blocked fabrics from India and cushion fabric inspired by the olive sacking used on Provençal farms bring an additional artisan influence to the décor.

Lydon sourced inlaid tables from Morocco and sea grass matting from Thailand, while paintings and prints are by Julian Merrow-Smith, a Provence-based British artist. Naïve-style iron chandeliers and wall lights come from Richard Taylor Designs in Chelsea and bedside lights in French oak from Katherine North Designs in East Sussex.

French firms used include Villa Alys, which supplied contemporary artisan lighting. Lumart for bathroom lights and Mis en Demeure for furniture and mirrors.

Lydon's background in the antiques industry came in useful for spotting



Provençal delight: stone houses of the Crillon le Brave hotel in the sleepy village it is named after, surrounded by fields of olives and vines

Londoners are conquering the hilltops of Provence



£476,000: five-bedroom house in Bedoin, near Crillon le Brave, with gardens, a pool and good views of Mont Ventoux. Through Janssens Immobilier (see Knightfrank.com)

bargains at local markets. The antiques market in nearby Carpentras was a fertile furniture source, along with the famous weekend markets at L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, number one with antiques hunters.

The hotel, rather like the village it is named after, is a jumble of levels and interlinked buildings. Every room and suite is unique and there are plenty of outdoor places to hide away and curl up with a good book.

A swimming pool and sun terrace overlook the quiet valley and there are two restaurants, with a third open only in the summer months, focusing on locally sourced produce. The hotel holds regular tastings in its atmospheric wine cellar, complete with 18th-century stable doors and 2,500 bottles.

"Guests come for the space and

peace but also for the smells and flavours of Provence," says general manager Sébastien Pilat. "They take a bike to the nearest market, or go for a wine tour to Châteauneuf-du-Pape."

"This Vaucluse region is the fridge of France, with lamb and white pig from Ventoux, strawberries from Carpentras and figs, asparagus and cherries."

PROPERTY IN CRILLON LE BRAVE

In between the new-build homes at the foot of the village and the older homes up above, Crillon le Brave still has some stone originals awaiting a makeover. A Provençal mas – or farmhouse – of 1,800 square feet with five bedrooms and a pool is £690,500 through Maurice Garcin, while newer



Understated luxury: rooms at stylish five-star Hotel Crillon le Brave start at £240 a night, including breakfast

homes of the same size start at £396,000.

"Buyers are starting to extend their search north from the Luberon to find alternative hilltop-perched villages," says Nicola Christinger of Home Hunts. "Crillon le Brave is very small but there are lots of larger towns and cities nearby, such as Avignon and Orange, for culture. Property is up to 15 per cent cheaper than in other areas of Provence, with two- and three-bedroom houses in Bedoin, two miles from Crillon, costing £200,000 to £277,000."

Popular villages include Caromb, Le Barroux and Beaumes-de-Venise for its delicious Muscat and extraordinary rocks and mountains. Knight Frank associate Janssens Immobilier has a four-bedroom 18th-century village house in Caromb for £535,000.

CONTACTS AND FACT FILE

Hotel Crillon le Brave: crillonlebrave.com
Eurostar: eurostar.com
Penny Lydon at Chalkhouse Design: chalkhousesdesign.com
Janssens Immobilier: through Knight Frank (knightfrank.com)
Home Hunts: home-hunts.com

■ Nightly rates at Crillon le Brave start from £240 per room, including breakfast. To book, email reservations@crillonlebrave.com or telephone +33 (0)4 90 65 61 61.

■ Eurostar summer services from London direct to Avignon take under six hours and this year run until September 13, with fares from £109 return. Visit eurostar.com or call 08432 186 186. Eurostar will launch an extended year-round service to the South of France next year.