



| The Beauty of Beaune: Hotel Le Cep

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BY GABRIELLE SANDER ON DECEMBER 6, 2017

HOTELS

Many first time guests to the Hotel Le Cep book it as stopover, I'm told; a convenient mid-way point between Calais and wherever they're heading to in the south of France. They then fall for the hotel and the medieval town it sits in the heart of, and it becomes the destination, rather than a pit stop en route to or from somewhere else.

We found Le Cep in much the same way. Plucking a spot on the map that looked roughly equidistant to Uzes and Dunkirk, then searching the vicinity for a hotel with a suitable level of luxury to mark the final night of our week-long trip. We'd clocked up over 1000 miles by the time we reached the four-star boutique; a journey taking in Eprenay, Dijon, Pont du Gard, Chateauneuf du Pape, Orange, Tavel and Baron. A Small Luxury Hotel of the World, with an award-winning spa and Michelin Star restaurant next door, was just the ticket before we tackled the final stretch to homedrum.

When we arrived, a little after 6pm on a Friday, the reception area and bar was buzzing with a group of mostly American and British guests (the latter being the hotel's no.1 market in Europe), all dressed up to the nines and sipping on pre-dinner drinks. In the Salon Lousaine, which acts as one of the breakfast rooms by morning, another was tickling the ivories under the watchful gaze of an eclectic collection of past VIPs: Gene Hackman, Goldie Hawn, Sonia Rykiel, Jacques Chirac, Catherine Deneuve, The Cure... whose photographs deck the walls in industry-segmented montages.



The Salon Cheminee next door was empty, save for the plump armchairs, open fire and noble-looking, oil-painted folk keeping a following eye on things. A spot I imagine to be very cosy come Christmas time, when the decorations are up and the flames are sparked. A nice place to settle in for a game of Gin Rummy and a glass of Burgundy. And Burgundy you must, for Beaune is the wine capital of Burgundy; the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Climate de Bourgogne.

In addition to first timers, the family-run hotel caters for a high ratio of repeat guests; the many wine collectors and enthusiasts who choose Beaune as a central base from which to explore the 600+ winemakers along the Route des Grand Crus, and come to bid highly at the annual Hospices de Beaune wine auction.



This French abode has grown over the past 30 years, from the 21-room hotel it was in 1986 when the Bernard family arrived, to an eclectic warren connected by two 16th century courtyards. There are twenty-four pieces to date, acquired by 'playing Monopoly with the neighbours', made up of adjoining mansions, small apartments and attics, with the oldest part dating back to the 14th century. Not what you expect when you pull up outside the modest front entrance.

The 65 guest rooms, including 29 suites, are named after a different Burgundian wine, and are split into categories named after an appellation, ranging from Bourgogne to Nectar. Each one is very different in décor to the next, melding original features such as wooden beams, bare brick walls, claw-foot, freestanding baths, trompe l'oeil murals and antique furniture, with modern touches such as Nespresso machines, iPhone docs, Jacuzzi baths, all-singing showers, super soft Treca mattresses, and noise-blocking acoustic double-glazing.



One of the hotel's most charming parts is the Repunzal-like tower, accessed via a stone spiral staircase and home to the fitness center. Not so much for the workout, but for the panoramic views over the pretty, geometrically-tiled rooftops of Beaune and beyond. Another is the award-winning Spa Marie de Bourgogne – named Best Luxury Spa Retreat in Western Europe in the 2017 World Luxury Spa Awards – and well worth making time for while you're there. There's a wooden barrel-shaped sauna, hammam and hands-on massage offerings using the delicious Burgundy grape range, Vinesime, and a selection of sensory experiences, from cryotherapy, blanketing you in unfathomable below zero temperatures, to chromotherapy, boasting myriad mental and physical benefits. An impressive offering for a small medieval town in Northern France.

I managed to find an hour to loosen the knots from the long drive, and felt all the better for it. Had we stayed a little longer, we'd have been tempted to try one of the other activities the hotel offers; most likely taking the electric bicycles with chunky off-road tyres for a spin among the vineyards, or if we were feeling flush, a hot air balloon over the rolling premier cru terroir. Another time.



Here, the cuisine is a clever nod to the Burgundy region, a beauty to behold and downright delicious. Among the multi-course highlights, interspersed with fun little amuse bouche, was the Epoisses, the ridiculously pungent, A-star Burgundy cheese, with a Marc de Bourgogne washed rind. Worth stinking out your bag to smuggle a couple home. It was one of the first restaurants in Europe to offer its entire wine list by the glass, and with over 70 on offer, it's a great place to tick off a few Burgundies while you're in town.

In my little catch-up with Burgundy-born General Manager Jean-Claude he regaled some of the bugbears from his personal travels, and how he sought to eradicate them this one. For guests, this translates to an excellent level of service where you feel looked after, but not smothered. It means a 24-hour bar, so you can have a drink whenever suits; a 24-hour gym and round the clock room service, so you can work out and fuel up as you see fit. It means many of the spa treatments are pay by the minute, so you can squeeze some relaxation into however long you have.



Best of all, and something I'm yet to see elsewhere, it means breakfast ends when the last guest has left – which, as someone who suffers from hotel breakfast-induced anxiety at the thought of arriving too late, is a very welcome offering. With the generous spread of help yourself continental treats, as well as a bottle of Pinot Noir to sup at your will, it's one you'll want to linger at.

Hotel Le Cep may be conveniently located for wine lovers and road trippers, but it's these little touches and thought into what guests want from a relaxing stay that will have people returning time and time again. Consider it next time you're popping down to Provence.

Book a stay at Le Cep & Spa Marie de Bourgogne with Small Luxury Hotels of the World from €205 per night (two sharing). Visit www.slh.com or call +44 800 0482 314. For more information about Hotel Le Cep, visit www.hotel-cep-beaune.com.