

Mornings at Terre Blanche are long and languorous. One day, I manage to summon the energy to get up before eight, creeping on to the balcony to survey the cluster of terracotta-tiled villas below. There is no one around, and the only sound to disturb the quiet is the soft twittering of sparrows overhead. By now, the sun is peeking over the horizon, throwing shafts of dusty golden light across the countryside and brightening the honey hue of the lodges on the hillside.

Below, I hear the whirr of a golf cart as it runs along a lane nearby. Navigating the resort's sprawling 300 hectares, the buggies are its main mode of transport, carrying guests between spa appointments, lunch dates, golf rounds and its 115 private villas and suites.

Set in the sun-soaked terroir of Provence, the Leading Hotels of the World member has had a number of owners in its time, most notably Sean Connery, who bought the property in 1979. He commissioned the first fairways for the resort's two championship golf courses, although the project never quite came to fruition under his direction. In 1999, billionaire German entrepreneur Dietmar Hopp took over the site with the intention of turning it into a first-class golfing destination. Today it is a European Tour venue with courses designed by Dave Thomas, a golf school and a biomechanical performance centre designed to analyse and improve your swing.

While my golf skills are limited, I'm fairly accomplished at swimming lazy lengths in the infinity pool, lying prostrate on a massage table



Provençale peace

Provence's tranquil countryside is the perfect setting for a restorative weekend break, says Marisa Cannon

and perusing the resort's exceptional contemporary art collection, which includes 300 sculptures and paintings from Hopp's private collection. Wandering the grounds, I discover works by the likes of Joan Miro and Antony Gormley.

Cuisine is also a strong point here – there are a number of outstanding restaurants spread across the resort, from Les Caroubiers at the clubhouse to the elegant Le Faventia, which won its first Michelin star last year. The resort has also partnered with a nearby cooking school, should you wish to try your hand at dishing up some local fare.

I sign up for a class at the Institut Gastronomie Riviera, a butter-coloured country house in the

From left:
Terre Blanche's Villa Estérel;
1967 Citroën DS; the cellars at Château d'Esclans;
Terre Blanche's spa

a spin around neighbouring Tourrettes and to a nearby winery. Spoilt between a 1983 Rolls-Royce convertible, a 1966 Ford Mustang and a convertible 1967 Citroën DS, I opt for the French model after hearing it was Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's vehicle of choice in their 2015 film *By the Sea*.

The clouds look heavy, but the driver unfastens the roof regardless – "At least until it starts to tip it down," he says with a wink. Hopping in the front, I'm all for it, emulating Brigitte Bardot as we drive out of the resort, although half an hour later I'm more like a windswept Bridget Jones as we arrive for our tasting at one of Provence's largest producers of rosé, Château d'Esclans.



neighbouring town of Seillons. It's headed up by former Four Seasons pastry chef, Nicolas Denis, who gives us a quick tour of the rustic front room and garden before leading us into the kitchen, where the ingredients for our lunch – cod fillet with bayildi of vegetables, black olives and coeur de boeuf tomato coulis – have been laid out.

The recipe is fairly simple, but with praise lavished over us at every stage, I start to believe I am the next Raymond Blanc. After a quick lesson in making pesto, we slide our lovingly layered vegetable terrines to one side to start on our final course – vanilla panacotta with pineapple brunoise and mango and passion fruit foam. Once our work is done, Nicolas promises us each a job if we were ever inclined to stay, and leads us into the garden for a congratulatory Prosecco before lunch is served.

For celebrities stopping at Cannes and Nice for the film awards, Provence's evergreen lavender fields and twee country hamlets are a popular respite from the glitzy coastline. One company that has capitalised on this superstar allure is Rent a Classic Car, which does what it says on the tin with a fleet of 38 vehicles.

One morning, three beautifully maintained cars roll up to the hotel's entrance to take us for

Owner Sacha Lichine was recently dubbed the world's most prominent rosé winemaker by *The New York Times* – an apt description given the revival that his top-selling rosé, Whispering Angel, has spurred. In 2006, Lichine took over the estate on a punt, hoping to shed the wine of its tacky reputation. Since then, it has grown from a production line of 165,000 bottles in 2006 to five million in 2016. The wines aren't cheap, either – a bottle of the estate's top-end wine, Garrus, will set you back around €100.

Tom Schreckinger, director of communications at Château d'Esclans, says: "The engine that's driving this growth is the US, which represents over 60 per cent of our market. Rosé is in such an age of discovery over there and the Côte de Provence of course has a certain allure to those buyers."

Having sold out its entire stock last summer, there isn't a drop of Whispering Angel left to try, but we sample the Château's Rock Angel, Garrus and Les Clans wines instead. I drink most of what we try – it's too good to waste – and feeling warm and heady, I walk back to the car where our driver is waiting. He asks if I'm ready for lunch. It's barely noon, but it feels like early evening, and I delight in how long there is left until tomorrow morning. ■

■ Rates at Terre Blanche in April start from €450 per night for a Deluxe Suite King **terre-blanche.com**

