



AT HOME IN **PROVENCE**

Get lost to find yourself in Crillon le Brave...

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“
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small-scale intimacy.”



upscale travel
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At last, we're here in the tiny village of Crillon le Brave, literally a sprinkling of 16th-century honey-coloured stone manors atop a hill with a spectacular view of Mont Ventoux in southern France.

We're here, but where the heck is the Hotel Crillon le Brave, a four-star, Relais & Châteaux hotel? Humm. This home has a sign and the door is slightly ajar. We enter, tentatively. The place appears deserted. It seems someone enjoyed a pot of tea in the squishy loveseats by the woodburning fireplace, leaving nothing but pastry crumbs and a folded newspaper for someone else to clean up. Are we so frazzled after catching the bullet-nosed TGV (Train à Grand Vitesse) to Avignon at dawn that we've accidentally wandered into someone's home?!

Non! In fact, we are in Maison Roche, the first of the seven homes that now comprise the 32-room "hotel," which is cozily, subtly

and even intimately luxurious. We're here and we're pooped and we're dreading check-in. To our surprise, we're asked to sit on the terrace, where we lose ourselves in the herb-scented stillness that is Provence. What? No forms to fill out! It's an unexpected treat that only improves as we're given keys and champagne-filled flutes, then shown to our suite.

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It's as if Canadian owners Peter Chittick and Craig Miller have given us their charming, fully staffed country place for the weekend. The so-discreet-we-almost-didn't-see-it signage combined with the fact they've tucked the staff, computer, fax and all room keys out of sight perpetuates the fantasy.

I soon forget that I went south when I should

have gone north, drove the wrong way up a one-way street and cruised unaware through at least one red light in my quest for Crillon le Brave. If you don't get lost, the town is an easy 30- to 45-minute drive from Avignon and the TGV is the sensible option if you're arriving from Paris, as the 600 km., six-hour drive becomes a 2.5-hour trip on the TGV – smooth, silent and stress-free.

Hotel Crillon le Brave is magical, because it celebrates small-scale intimacy. Rather than knock out walls to create great lounges and reception areas, the partners preserved the houses' integrity and sense of space, leaving them much as they were after the town was virtually abandoned following World War II. Of course, they renovated and updated, but they left the nooks and crannies intact, perfect for long chats or lazy sessions with great books. As with everything at Hotel Crillon le Brave, nothing is obvious. The lounge(s) look like someone's living room or country-style rec



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room and the bar is often hidden behind a wall or a panel, while the waitstaff magically appear just as you decide you want a glass of the local red.

If you're feeling a little more sociable, you can leave your second-floor bedroom for the main floor and a spot on the sofa, preferably in front of a fireplace. One late night, we stumbled across an American couple sipping champagne in one of those living rooms. As we apologetically exited, they stopped us. "You're absolutely not intruding. Have some champagne!" they said and so we did.

Every meal celebrates the senses: whether you're breakfasting on the terrace, enjoying morning birdsong and lungfuls of fresh air with strong French coffee, flaky golden croissants, dense grain breads and luscious, ruby-red raspberries, or ensconced beneath the vaulted arches of Le Restaurant in the 16th-century Maison Roche, you're replete in every possible way. Local chef Philippe Monti, born and raised in nearby Bedoin, is fiercely committed to proudly Provençal cuisine while

maintaining the elegance and style associated with the best of French gastronomic traditions. Of course, wine is a part of French culture and it is particularly well celebrated here in Crillon le Brave, a town that overlooks the vineyards of the Appellation Côtes du Ventoux Contrôlée.

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Hotel Crillon le Brave, a precious hideaway, boasts an exquisite setting, whether you choose to settle by the hotel's pool or embrace Provençal cuisine with the hotel's culinary and wine programs. Of course, you can easily venture beyond the oasis that is Crillon le Brave and its hotel on bicycle or by car.

You can explore local vineyards by ambling down the hill to Château La Croix des Pins and others, or drive 30 minutes west to the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the Côtes du Rhône.

As we motored down the hill one lovely morning, we ground to a halt when we recognized the name of the wine we'd so enjoyed the previous evening. Of course, we stopped, chatted with the owners and left with eight bottles that challenged us as we trundled through the Paris Metro but proved worth the weight when sipped on a wintry Canadian evening.

At Hotel Crillon le Brave, you're in the very heart of Provence. Take advantage of it and explore the essence of southern France: small towns, open-air markets, Roman ruins (aqueducts and a Roman amphitheatre that's still used for performances in Orange), art galleries, castles, enticing tastes and textures.

The southern light and the lush Provençal landscape inspired Van Gogh and Cézanne. Isn't it time you let them move you to Hotel Crillon le Brave?

www.crillonlebrave.com