



THE HÔTEL DE LA CITÉ, AUDE

A stay at the Hôtel de la Cité in medieval Carcassonne is to step back in time and immerse yourself in a magical age when knights were bold and sturdy ramparts were all that stood between you and lawlessness. This gothic jewel, the only hotel set in the actual ramparts of the Unesco World Heritage Site *cité*, has just celebrated its 100th birthday, and what a 100 years it's been. A retreat for the rich and famous for decades, the hotel's visitor's book reads like a who's who of the 20th century. Grace Kelly has stayed here, along with James Stewart, the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson, the Queen Mother, Jacques Chirac and Winston Churchill, to name but a few. But this is no white elephant; everywhere you turn, luxury abounds. From the sumptuous limestone and mirrored bathrooms with heavenly bathtime treats, to the cosy Bibliothèque bar with resident pianist and delicious nibbles, guests can enjoy the very best the region has to offer in lovely surroundings. And breakfast is a particular pleasure, with a tasty range of breads and pastries, (there were hot options available for English breakfast-lovers) along with cheese, charcuterie and *confitures* – my favourite was the fantastic fig jam. The jewel in this golden crown is the magnificent Michelin-starred restaurant, La Barbacane, where Executive Chef Jérôme Ryon creates delicious, inventive cuisine using local ingredients, accompanied by vintages specially blended for the hotel by regional winemakers.

But perhaps the best bit of staying in this lovely Orient-Express hotel is its setting. My room led out on to the beautiful terraced gardens with the secluded heated



swimming pool and truly spectacular views across the surrounding countryside. Stroll around the terrace and amazing vistas greet you at every turn, allowing you to enjoy the location but offering a cool oasis in the heat of summer. And don't miss a visit to the *château* and a walk around the cobbled streets. With 52 watchtowers the medieval

citadel is the largest in Europe and is truly unique, just like this gem of a hotel nestled at its heart.

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Rooms from €205 per night (if booked in advance). Hôtel de la Cité, Place Auguste Port, 11000 Carcassonne. Tel: (Fr) 4 68 71 98 71, www.orient-express.com