

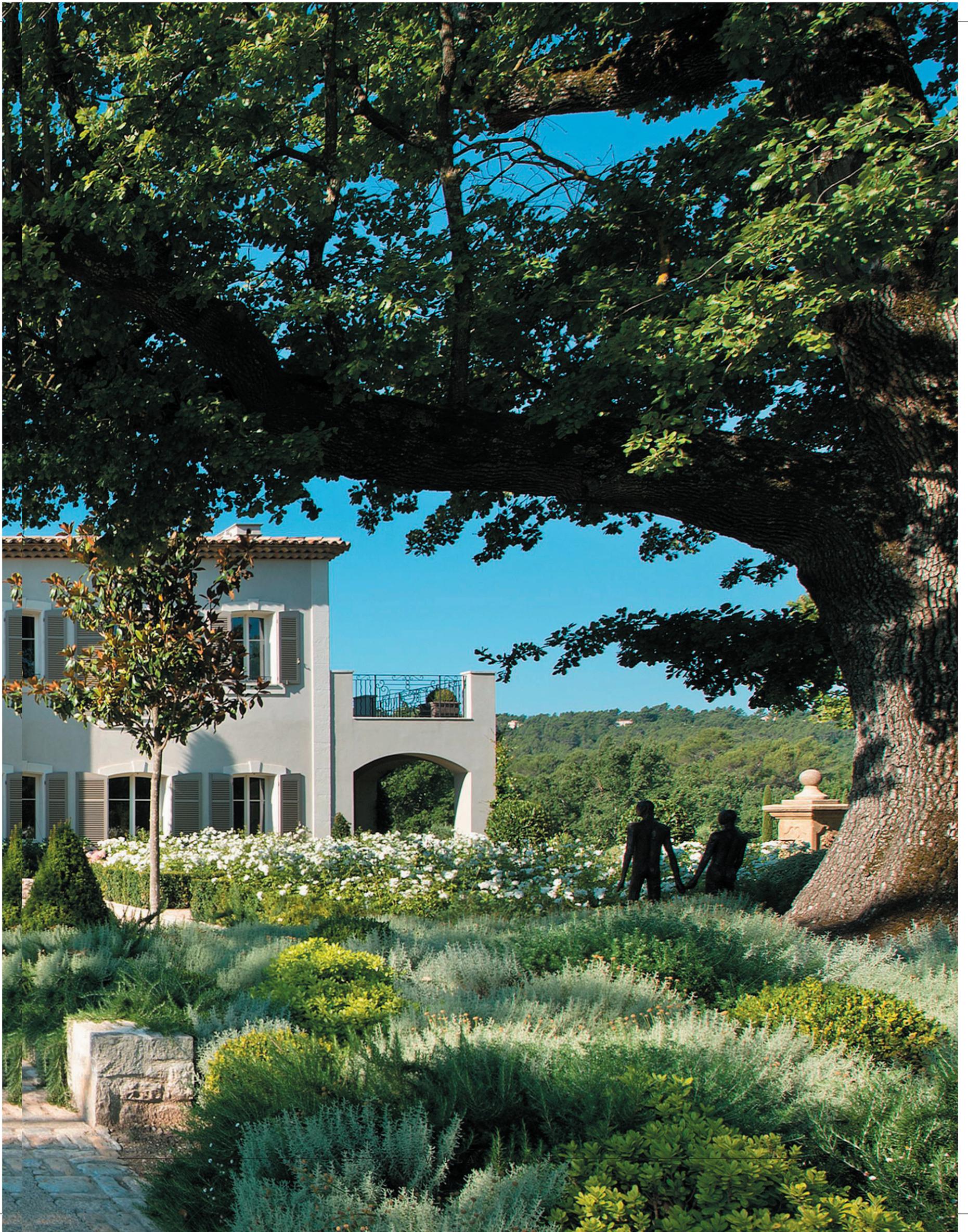
VOYAGE

Hidden *Treasure*

High up in the hills overlooking Cannes Nice and St Tropez is one of the glitterati's favourite holiday retreats. It is a little known secret, but for how much longer?

Words POLLY SWEET

*An exterior view
of La Bergerie
and its luscious
Mediterranean
landscape.*





Regular visitors to the Cote d'Azur will be familiar with many of the region's charms. From the postcard-worthy scenery to the local cuisine, the enviable climate to the glint of the Mediterranean Sea, the coastal stretch that runs from Toulon to Monaco is one of Europe's most alluring. While the

uninitiated might not venture much further than the beaches of Cannes and St. Tropez, it is within the hills overlooking the Mediterranean that the real stuff of celluloid unfolds. And it is here, in the thick of the Domaine de Terre Blanche that La Bergerie, a sprawling six-bedroom villa that is fast becoming a byword for 'Riviera Chic', is found.

Completed in 2012, the house is owned by British property developer David Rich Jones and his wife Laura, a couple that have made it their personal ambition to create the ultimate exclusive French holiday retreat. Marrying local know-how with international expertise, they hired a team of local masons and interior designers to guarantee the authenticity of the property but used their own familiarity with high-end overseas rentals to create a faultless experience. Even today they continue to hone the 'La Bergerie encounter' actively encouraging criticism and relying on feedback provided by their illustrious guests to ensure that their sky-high standards never slip.

Approaching La Bergerie from Aéroport Nice Cote d'Azur provides us with a welcome opportunity to discover the wilder side of the French Riviera (although it is also possible

to skip the notorious summer traffic and land at the Helipad nearby). Behind the gleaming boutiques of Cannes' La Croisette and the glistening yachts off the Cap d'Antibes is a wild tangle of brush and rockery that, at times, feels distinctly Middle Eastern. Climbing ever higher, past the green splay of Lac St. Cassien and skirting the picturesque villages of Seillans and Fayence, we soon find ourselves in the perched village of Tourettes that could be just another beautiful sleepy French bolthole were it not for its world class golf resort, spa and luxury hotel. Once a magnificent chateau owned by actor Sean Connery, the Domaine de Terre Blanche is today a 266 hectare slice of exclusivity, home to a smattering of private houses that enjoy all of the security of a family home along with the comforts of a five star hotel. Little wonder that it has been ranked fifth in CNN's Dream Holiday Home guide.

Tended to by a team of staff that include a concierge, chauffeur, chef and housekeeper, La Bergerie is the most dominant of the villas in the domaine, but despite its size and situation it remains far from pretentious. The gray concrete and stone façade was lovingly conceptualised by David, who insisted that the ruins of the sheep shed that once occupied the site should be given a new lease of life and integrated into the property somehow. Today, the same ruins take centre stage in the outdoor dining room, which is just one in a series of open air living spaces that make the most of the 300 days of sunshine that the region can typically expect each year. In keeping with its cool exterior, the interior of the house is a fluid and contemporary wash of

From left:
A view of the outdoor Mediterranean scenery; La Bergerie offers wonderful touches such as this outdoor water fountain.

Facing page from left:
The arched Roman columns of the property; an outdoor meal reveals delicious cuisine from the region.



white, gray, sage and stone warmed through by an eclectic mix of antiques picked up in local flea markets - the overarching impression is having stepped into a traditional French farmhouse, albeit one that has been given an extremely elegant makeover.

Keeping the design of the house fairly neutral and fuss-free has ensured that it wears well, but whatever the villa may lack in ornateness, it more than makes up for in technology - the basement features a fully equipped cinema while a cutting edge sound system pipes music throughout the house. Underfloor heating and Wifi exist in all of the rooms and the kitchens (indoor and outdoor) that would rival a Michelin restaurant's. This is vital to La Bergerie, because if the ambience of the house is set to the stylish courtesy of its interior, then the cooking on offer raises it to outstanding. Resident chefs Helene and Tess create dishes after exquisite dishes featuring organic produce from the gardens or from local farmers with highlights including fig and almond tart, soupe au pistou and grilled bonito that is melt-in-the-mouth tender. Having trained on board superyachts, Helene in particular is well accustomed to producing high impact feasts that will meet any requirement and her innate understanding of flavours and textures means that she is just as comfortable creating a simple omelette as she is a halal spread for 12 guests.

Although it would be perfectly conceivable to never feel the need to leave the house, part of the appeal of La Bergerie is its proximity to so many of the Cote d'Azur's more celebrated pleasures. A 25-minute car journey sees us into

Cannes where a day at sea on board the premier classic yacht The Blue Peter can be arranged. For land lovers, a stroll through the historic villages that surround the house offers up a chance to see local life in action, which is perhaps best viewed from the terrace of famed gastronomic haven Le France. A quaint bistro that buzzes to the gravelly tones of Edith Piaf, it is a French idyll and serves café au lait and tarte au pommes alongside Provencal cod and the creamiest fennel gratin.

Also situated nearby is the highly celebrated Chateau d'Esclans, which is rapidly establishing itself as one of the most exciting grape producers in the world. No Hamptons socialite could feasibly imagine throwing a dinner party without a bottle of its most famous export, Whispering Angel, during summer 2014 and if the flurry of orders from Beijing to Barbados is anything to go by, this year is set to be a record-breaker. The tangy tippie with its blush hue and scent of summer perfectly captures the Provencal dream. Like La Bergerie, it speaks of that French way of life that is so hard to define yet so easy to enjoy. And that really is worth savouring.

For more information, visit www.labergerie.com