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Hotel Le Couvent des Minimes****, Mane, Haute-Provence, France

Founded in 1613 for the nuns of Les Minimes, this delightful former convent was opened in 2008 after total renovation and transformation into a modern luxury hotel fitted with state of the art features yet retaining the textures and ambience of the ages. A place to restore one's soul and body from the cuisine to the restful gardens, from the l'Occitane Spa to basking in the sun by the pool. A good base to explore this region that is filled, like Le Couvent, with centuries of history.

Peter and Linda D'Aprix 2009



View of the chapel from the lower gardens.



The ancient stone walls that support the terraced gardens.



The patio where summer meals are served at one end and the other serves as an outside bar and lounge surrounded by the cloisters.



[zoom ++](#)
View of Le Couvent from the verdant terraced gardens.



The glassed in cloisters with the old stone doorway leading to the stairs up to the rooms.



[zoom ++](#)
The outdoor pool with the spa and its indoor pool to the right of the photo.

Photos by Peter D'Aprix © 2009

A great new discovery in the "Giano" country of Haute Provence is "Le Couvent des Minimes Hotel and Spa", former home of the Minimes nuns. This recently restored and beautifully converted building is located in the otherwise ordinary country village of Mane just outside of Forqualquier the county seat. "Le Couvent" is set in lovely and tranquil gardens some of which step up the hill in ancient terraces. It is a delight to the soul to meander through this atmosphere of genuine peace and harmony that has been bringing tranquility to souls for many centuries. Strolling among the fragrant plants and graceful pathways, whether you follow the winding hillside path of the stations of the cross or across flat land, you find yourself completely letting go of life's stresses and difficulties.

To further enhance this well-being, is a Spa by L'Occitane which is very well-equipped with treatment rooms, massage, beauty treatments and more as well as their own indoor pool and featuring the excellent products of L'Occitane (manufactured just a few miles away near Manosque home of Jean Giono). Also the cuisine of the hotel's restaurant "Le Cloître" provides an inner pleasure as well as a treatment to the taste buds. Philippe Guérin, "Le Cloître" Executive chef, has devised a sunshinefilled menu, blending the scents and flavours of Provence with Mediterranean tastes and smells. Made from natural ingredients, the dishes retain their regional identity but with a modern flourish, and his menus are testimony to the region's riches. In summer, "Le Cloître" is extended onto a delightful patio, where you can sample the wealth of the Mediterranean in caramel-coloured armchairs with white



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cushions. In summertime too, you can enjoy a light lunch beside the pool in the " Bancaou" bar-restaurant.



The pool table and room.



Fitness gym.



[zoom ++](#)
The " Le Cloître" outdoor restaurant and lounge.



" Le Cloître" restaurant.

Peter D'Aprix © 2009

We had a lovely dinner that was only marred by a disappointing dessert. But we noticed this is becoming a trend in many of our coverages this year. The main menu, however, was a delight of inventive re-interpretations of traditional tastes and marriages of Provençal tastes that are new and fun. Linda loved the starter fresh pea soup with mint and eggplant thinly sliced with local goat cheese while I relished the grilled sardines served on a bed of a "gelée" of bouillabaisse, a crusty wafer of fennel and a "rouille" and a finger of olive bread.

Linda then enjoyed the "Aiguillette de Saint-Pierre" with asparagus and a sweet and sour lemon sauce. She did not like the sweetness of the sauce; I on the other hand, loved it. I had the Sea Bass cooked on the skin side down that sat on a thick country stew of spring vegetables flavored with basil and Parmesan. Superb! It was the lemon dessert that let us down. The "greanité" of lemon had little taste, the 3 votive mini-disks of lemon were so sweet the lemon was over come. It was only the meringue of Kalamansi that opened in the mouth. But all in all, the cuisine of chef Guérin, trained by Jean Bardet of Tours fame, is a superb celebration of the tastes of Provence prepared in fun and delightful ways.



Appetiser Mousse of Pigeon wrapped in Swiss Chard with sauce from the pigeon juices.



Chilled mint pea soup with eggplant stuffed with goat's cheese.



Sardines sitting on a base of jellied bouillabaisse, a wafer of crispy fennel and a finger of olive bread all sitting on a "rouille".



Sea Bass roasted with "Bellota" ham set on a "stew" of spring vegetables.





The lemon themed dessert.

[zoom ++](#)

"La Barbue" (white fish) steamed in an emulsion of "Pitacou" and lemon served with asparagus.

Peter D'Aprix © 2009

The 46 luxurious rooms and suites follow through with the furnishings and soft Mediterranean colors adding to a sense of well-being. Despite hosting WiFi, flat wide screen TV, and many other modern electronic aids that have become indispensable, the rooms are still heavily steeped in history. They were remodelled to combine the charm of convent's history and the serenity of the site with the comfort of a very special place.

This new addition to the Relais & Chateaux group, opened in 2008, will be a welcome gift to the region especially since it is open all year and is the only luxury hotel and spa in the area. This region is due east of the now famous Luberon grouping of villages that includes Gordes, Rousillon, Bonnieux, Menerebes and Apt. Forqualquier and Mane are slowly gaining in note as they have not been trampled by the hordes of tourists that their more famous cousins have been. Instead, it has a more authentic, self sufficient provincial town famed for the company that makes arguably the best Pastis in the world, and now also the home to "Olivette" a boutique manufacturer of specialty olive oils from the former owner of L'Occitane. It is also the summer home of Pierre Boulez the well known conductor.

Rooms



Old world charm with new world comforts.



One of the several apartments



Bedroom of suite filled with warm provencal colors and loads of space.



Open plan ceilings add a country ambience of many of the rooms.

Architect Bruno Legrand was brought down from Paris (since he specializes in the restauration of old buildings, keeping their character and yet managing to bring them into the 21st century). He has gone to great lengths to render its original feeling to "Le Couvent" and harmonize the different buildings erected over the centuries. The simplicity, purity, and the beauty of the buildings are enhanced by a blend of modernity and sobriety. Luxury and refinement can be seen everywhere in the quality of the materials. White stone dominates, set off in the bedrooms by touches of pastel, plum or blueberry on the walls. The pale oak of the furniture, specially created for the hotel, blends in tonally with the linen chocolate brown or string colored curtains which match the piping on the damask velvet bedspread. Touches of color are given by the chairs covered in a flowered fabric in off-white, taupe, brick red, and chocolate or a striped fabric in grey, black, violet and pink. Heated stones in the parquet flooring lead from the bedroom to the bathroom, where rustic stone predominates with grey or chocolate brown stoneware for the bath and the shower, and hammered natural stone for the basins. For all of this, the faucet for the bathtub is not a high flow type, so allow plenty of time to allow your tub to fill.

As you explore the rooms and cloisters of the convent, you feel the centuries of the spiritual life. You are reminded of the generations who have lived and grown within these same walls. "Le Couvent des Minimes" was founded in 1613 by the Marquis Melchior de Forbin Janson for the nuns of Les Minimes, a mendicant order established by Saint Vincent de Paul, in Mane in what was to become the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence region. Today this is kept alive at the nearby "Priory de Salagon" (www.musee-de-salagon.com) with their medieval medicinal gardens. After the French Revolution, the Couvent des Minimes was to remain empty until 1862, when canon Terrasson, archpriest of Forcalquier, undertook its restoration and transformation into an almshouse.

A few years later, a community of Franciscan Missionnaires de Marie Sisters settled here and looked after the almshouse and its residents. Between two missions abroad, the Sisters cultivated terraced-gardens where they planted fruit trees and vines, crops which enabled them to provide food for the residents and for the recovery of the Sisters returning from tropical countries. In 1999, the Sisters left the Convent which was to remain empty until it became a place of physical, emotional, mental and, with luck, spiritual relaxation and well-being; it became the Relais & Châteaux "Le Couvent des Minimes Hôtel & Spa"

Today, this history and respect for natural environment and its healing properties is reflected in more modern approaches such as the solar panels installed along the access to the Convent which have been integrated into the surroundings as a « false lake ». The brilliance of the panels is used as a water mirror and light grasses have been planted to hide them without altering their capacity for collecting solar energy.

The garden of the Convent is a place which holds countless memories and tells the story of the Minimes, men and women devoted to contemplation and botany. It is also a place of beauty where the sweet-smelling plants which make up the products used in the spa appeal to the senses.

The "Jardin des Minimes" garden, created on the terraces is a blend of fragrances where lavender and hybrid-lavender, beehives and acacia trees, lemon balm, verbena, and lemon trees can be seen side by side, and which is an invitation to discover the plants from which the beauty products used in the spa are made.

You can take a real journey through time along the terraces or "bancaous" which are the image of the botanical discoveries made by the Minimes all over the world. The first part takes you through the trees and aromatic bushes of Provence from olive to almond, rosemary to lavender, and then on an escapade into the Mediterranean with argan trees, palm trees, jasmine, purple rock-roses, mugwort, myrtle.... The journey ends in the footsteps of Louis Feuillé, who was a student in the Convent des Minimes and brought back fuchsias, nasturtiums and papayas from his expeditions with an opening onto the world with Mexican sage, Argentinian plum trees, shea, canna, banana trees, or vetiver, ... In summer, spa treatments are provided in light structures that dot the terraced gardens overlooking the valley.

Spa



Water massage table.



Spa pool with view out main pool.



Twin treatment room.



L'Occitane Products.

The Spa at Minimes is built around the pure products of L'Occitane. Created 30 years ago, L'Occitane has become one of the leaders in natural cosmetics. The group produces its entire range in its Manosque factory. In 2007, the brand was present in 85 countries with around 900 shops, including 110 in France.

These treatments are provided in the 6 rooms of the Couvent des Minimes Spa by L'Occitane, including a room for dual treatments. The Spa also has:

-
- An indoor chromotherapy pool with daybeds,
-
- A laconium sauna (a gentle dry sauna at 55°),
-
- A caldarium (a humid climate at 45° with aromatic essence steam)
-
- Men's and women's saunas
-
- A relaxation area with natural hot and cold drinks
-
- A fitness area.

This is altogether a great place to spend a vacation relaxing, exploring and renewing the soul.

Relais & Châteaux Le Couvent des Minimes Hôtel & Spa
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 Fax +33 (0)4.92.74.77.78
 e-mail: reservations@couventdesminimes-hotelspa.com

Web Page: www.couventdesminimes-hotelspa.com

Accommodations

46 bedrooms, including 6 Suites, Satellite TV, DVD player, stereo in all the rooms, complimentary Wi-Fi Internet access throughout the hotel.

Restaurant and Bars

- Restaurant Gastronomique « Le Cloître » - Summer restaurant « Bancaou »
- Bar Lounge « Le Pesquier » - Musical bar « Le Caveau des Minimes »
- Room Service

Recreation

- Heated outdoor swimming pool - A tennis court
- A library - Golf course nearby
- A Park and aromatic gardens to explore

Business Area

- 3 private rooms for 2 to 50 persons, including one 12-person « Boardroom »
- The 250 sq. m. Church (150 persons) which can be used for private events, exhibitions, cocktails, galas

Le Couvent des Minimes Spa by L'Occitane (7500 square feet)

- 5 individual therapy rooms - One double room
- A lacunium - Two saunas
- A caldarium
- An indoor chromotherapy pool
- A state of the art fitness centre equipped with Techogym

Access:

TGV station (50 min) : TGV Aix en Provence - Motorway : A51 – Aix en Provence/Gap : exit 19
La Brillane (take road for Forcalquier, Volx, St Maime and Mane).
Airport: Marseille - (1 hour)
Transfer between Aix en Provence and the hotel on request

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