

# Travel & Outdoors

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*A museum in Picasso's final playground on the hillsides above the Cote d'Azur adds culture to the sunshine*

JEAN WEST

**O**n a traditional stone building atop a hillside in the French Alpes Maritimes I am watching an unlikely couple: tanned, lithe and naked, staring directly at each other. Bathed in the late summer sun, they are remarkable in their intimacy, unflinching in my voyeuristic gaze.

And that is how British sculptor Antony Gormley intended his lifesize rusting steel models to remain as they nonchalantly regard the march of time. Here on the roof of the new Musée d'Art Classique in the beautiful town of Mougins, where Pablo Picasso wrung out his last years of genius, these monuments form part of a body of work by a string of artists, past and present, that have fixed it firmly on the culture trail.

Wandering around this multi-million pound museum opened last year by British investment manager and collector Christian Levett and archaeological magazine editor Dr Mark Merrony, to impressive international fanfare, I see why art lovers the world over are earmarking it for pilgrimage.

Levett, the son of an Essex bookmaker whose company, Clive Capital, once shrugged off the loss of around £250 million in seven days, already owns two successful restaurants in the quaint haven. Chatting with diners later in his flagship, La Place de Mougins, I learn that the 41-year-old who chose their town to indulge his dual passion for art



## Where the art is

### Picasso landed in trouble after daubing his room with murals

and business and share his personal collection is something of a local hero.

Robert Deniau who runs Bureau d'Etudes, an architecture and decoration studio, says: "Levett has resurrected

this place and people are grateful. The financial crisis has affected all of us and he fell in love with Mougins at the right time."

The young hedge-fund tycoon, whose interest in art stemmed from a childhood collecting Victorian coins, employed a local architect to translate a former medieval townhouse into a sleek, beautifully lit shrine to more than 700 works spanning 5,000 years.

Ancient relics and modern displays by celebrated artists such as Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, Salvador Dali, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Gormley, Marc

Quinn and Damien Hirst and of course, Picasso, hope to draw up to 50,000 visitors a year.

After lunch I saunter through the pretty hamlet surrounded by olive, pine and cypress groves and fields sprinkled with wildflowers that so seduced such names as Winston Churchill, Yves Saint Laurent, Catherine Deneuve and Edith Piaf.

Just 15 minutes from Cannes and a half-hour from Nice, it still plays host to celebrities with its perfect views across the Cote d'Azur, close proximity to the Alpine town of Grasse and the pink geology of the Esterel Massif.

Recession aside, the street-side bars and boutique restaurants have the

whiff of a moneyed intellect that may have been out of step with Picasso's communist sensibilities but keeps tourism sweet.

The Spanish artist was eschewing civil war when he first arrived here in 1936 with lover Dora Marr. He landed in trouble with the proprietor of his hotel after daubing his room with murals and was instructed to paint over them in white the following day.

In 1961 Picasso returned, set up studio in Notre Dame de Vie next to a church of the same name, and remained there until a heart attack claimed him 12 years later. While his former home is closed to the public, tourism chiefs



The Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins

have capitalised on his memory and a thriving artistic community continues in his spirit of Bohemianism, peddling its wares in the shops and galleries that line the winding, narrow streets.

The new museum slots in perfectly, at pains to reflect how the beauty of the ancient world influenced neoclassical, modern and contemporary art. Entering the building, you are met by a series of busts and life-size sculptures including Marc Quinn's model Insulin, surreally fashioned from the alchemy of wax and the diabetic drug of the same name.

An ancient statue of the Roman deity Venus is juxtaposed with Venus by Yves Klein, Birth of Venus by Andy Warhol, and a head of Emperor Caracalla with a complementary drawing by Henri Matisse. In the Egyptian space are impressive sarcophagi, bronze and wood god and goddess figurines, along with depictions of the sphinx by artists such as Jean Cocteau and Rubens.

An astonishing array of helmets, some 3,000 years old, documenting a number of fairly serious head injuries are also showcased as lavishly as the latest fashions from Chanel, among the "world's largest collection of ancient arms and armour".

Dr Merrony, now museum director, remembers the frantic race to get it up and running: "It took three years to get this place opened and it was like a whirlwind. We had to reinvent the word 'problems' as 'resolvable'. It was a series of 'resolvables' on a daily basis."

One day isn't enough to see all that Mougins has to offer, so I return on a balmy September evening. The light from the tower of a church dedicated to St Jacques le Majeur proves a captivating ecclesiastical beacon. Dating back to the 11th century, it offers fabulous vistas over the Bay of Cannes. I peek inside the old washhouse where some diehards apparently still launder their smalls; an obscure but beautiful installation of gold wall-hangings gives it a contemporary makeover.

Every autumn the International Gastronomy Festival of Mougins nods to another great French passion. Some 120 international chefs from 14 coun-

tries, juggling 82 Michelin stars, are setting up camp. Hundreds of workshops, tasting sessions and demonstrations are on the menu.

So many strands and influences have shaped this place. Pre-Roman roots point to the tribal Liguarians who occupied the shores a thousand years before Christ. It was later inhabited by the monks of Saint Honorat, between the 12th century and the Revolution.

The old town was extended in the early 19th century and many of the sand-coloured buildings, with their stereotypical French shutters and jaunty windowboxes, date back to this time. I stay outside the village at Le Manoir de l'Etang, a heavenly 19th-century pile in rolling countryside overlooking a lotus flower lake.

The simple, agrarian Mougins has had to embrace commercial enterprise. Today it houses a popular international school and commuters for Sophia Antipolis - the region's Silicon Valley. But it retains immense charm.

This is not a place for your average backpacker; while you can get here by bus, it's a lofty haul up a 260-metre slope and steep for limited budgets. It doesn't go unnoticed that many visitors sport grey hair, sensible shoes and expensive cologne.

But if you love art, man-made or divine, sculpted into this unbeatable landscape, thrash a path for this tiny slice of hilltop heaven - but remember to keep it to yourself - space is limited.



**THE FACTS** British Airways return flights to Nice from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen start at £171, [www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com); Le Manoir de l'Etang, tel: 0033 (0) 492 283600, rooms cost €120 in winter, €160 summer; the Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins: 9.30am until 8.30pm daily (7pm and closed Mondays in winter). Prices: €12 adults, €7 seniors, €5 children, [mouginsMusée.com](http://mouginsMusée.com); the Tourist Office is at 18 Bd Courteline, 06250 Mougins, France, tel: 0033 (0) 493758767.

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# Bite into a Yorkie spa

When the hotel has a heated outdoor pool you might end up mistaking North Yorkshire for the Med

COLIN LESLIE

Daring to be different seems to be the key to success for the Feversham Arms Hotel in the market town of Helmsley on the edge of the North Yorkshire moors.

"People sometimes ask us to describe what kind of hotel this is and, to be honest, it's not that easy," admits the hotel's own website. "We're country but not country house, a bit stylish but not designer, run well but not stuffy, good food not complicated food."

Having spent a weekend at the Feversham, it's hard not to agree with the eclectic description.

The stand-out feature is undoubtedly the heated outdoor swimming pool, surrounded by gardens, a patio area with sun loungers, and a hot tub bubbling away nearby. Although many of the suites are poolside and overlook

this oasis of calm, careful consideration has been given to the landscaping, and it ensures a comfortable level of privacy either way.

There are 33 rooms of varying sizes, and the first-floor suite we were shown to was stunning, with a spacious bedroom with duck down duvet, large flatscreen TV and DVD, a well-stocked bathroom with double-ended bath and wet room, and a separate living area, equipped with a dining table, sofa, iPod dock, TV and a selection of magazines, guidebooks and what's-on literature.

Just 24 hours earlier, the Feversham's award-winning restaurant had reopened following a major refurbishment. This kind of upheaval can test the nerve of any kitchen team, but they were unflappable.

A thoughtful menu succeeds in delivering fine dining without over-the-top fuss. Local produce is at the heart of the menu and my highlights included perfect scallops, loin of lamb and Jervaulx blue cheese steeped in Yorkshire ale and served with chutney and oatcakes.

A "full Yorkshire" breakfast, or something lighter if you prefer, can be taken in the restaurant or in your room. The breakfast was of the same high standard as the evening menu, although it was a tad



## 48 HOURS IN Marrakech

■ **Friday, 6pm** Arrive at Les Borjs de la Kasbah ([www.lesborjsdelakasbah.com](http://www.lesborjsdelakasbah.com), doubles from £100).

■ **7pm** Take a horse-drawn carriage to the Djemaa el-Fna, the Square of the Dead, to watch snake charmers and fire-eaters. On the way, you'll pass the elegant minaret of the 12th-century Koutoubia Mosque.

■ **8pm** Dinner at Dar Moha (81 rue Dar el Basha, [www.darmoha.com](http://www.darmoha.com)) in the walled garden of a 19th-century mansion, accompanied by traditional musicians and belly dancers. Try the pastilla, a classic Moroccan dish of pigeon in thin pastry, flavoured with cinnamon and other spices.

■ **Saturday, 9am** Leave for a half-day

