

*Jardins Secrets*

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## Jardins Secrets, Languedoc-roussillon

Jardins Secrets, Languedoc-roussillon: hotel review from Mr & Mrs Smith.



Jardins Secrets, Languedoc-roussillon, France - Mr & Mrs Smith

We reach a nondescript sidestreet in a nondescript part of Nîmes. There's a dreary grey door in a dreary stone wall. An impersonal sign sits next to an impersonal buzzer-and-speaker system. We are greeted by a rather sharp, disembodied French voice. The omens certainly aren't promising as this Monsieur et Madame Smith approach their refuge for the next 48 hours, seeking relief from stressful work, draining parenthood and sometimes-burdensome responsibilities. We don't mind admitting that, as we entered Jardins Secrets, we're feeling thoroughly nondescript and dreary ourselves.

Then we are buzzed in and those indicators prove to be wildly misleading. What greets us feels little short of magical - it feels rather like we're entering an entirely new world through that Narnian wardrobe of a grey door. Jardins Secrets is not so much a boutique hotel as a beautiful private house that, since 2005, has allowed members of the public to pay for the privilege of staying there. And it really is a privilege. Boutique-hotel lovers everywhere should salute Christophe and Annabelle Valentin for opening up their family home and garden. On the edge of the ancient town centre of Nîmes in southwest

Provence, this pink-hued 17th-century city villa has just fourteen guest rooms.

The garden is what blows us away first. It banishes our mental cobwebs and ignites our enthusiasm (and even our travel-dampened ardour) from the moment we enter through that unremarkable gate. Rich, lush, colourful, it is full of olive trees, giant palms and bougainvillea. There is a soft, dappled light, and wooden loungers are here and there, in areas of inviting shade. The water gently laps the sides of the small but beautifully formed stone swimming pool, which is partly shaded by more olive trees. In this garden, we will have breakfast, read, swim, talk, doze, drink wine, debate whether to return to bed, eat olives, drink more wine, and genuinely relax for the first time in months.

On our arrival, a smiling maid appears as if from nowhere and guides us straight to our chambre. There is no checking in here, no reception area, no handing over of passports or credit cards - you get the impression that your hosts just want you to enjoy the absolutely enormous bed, and everything else this lovely house has to offer, as soon as possible. The rooms are large, luxurious and decorated with impeccably chic French taste. Elegantly shabby antiques sit alongside polished modern pieces. There are thick, heavy drapes hanging next to delicate, decorative writing tables; we have a shiny new widescreen TV and a stunning, spacious old-fashioned bathroom.

Each room is individually decorated and furnished, and all have double doors which open out onto the garden. The attention to detail gives a clue to Christophe and Annabelle's own professional backgrounds: he is an interiors and food photographer; she is a stylist. Together they have created what we suspect is their dream come true.

Later, Annabel approaches and introduces herself, checking that we are happy with everything. The low-key, 'nothing is too much trouble' level of service is consistently excellent. For example, in the morning we get an unexpected copy of The Times laid next to our breakfast of fresh croissants and home-made preserves, and a plate of fresh charcuterie appeared with some aperitifs in the early evening.

The communal areas of the house are littered with books, photographs, musical paraphernalia and aviaries full of tiny singing birds. We stumble across other guests intermittently, at most. Even as we lie in

the garden (and we do a fair amount of this), the occasional sonic intrusions from over the walls - a nearby school, trains, a van rumbling down the street - only reminded us of how pleasant it was to be separated from the outside world.

Thankfully, there is no restaurant at Jardins Secrets (though they offer one or two special dishes), otherwise we might never venture beyond our cosseting cocoon. We manage to poke our noses around Nîmes itself, heading for the Old City, a five-minute walk from the hotel. It is studded with Roman relics, including the huge and intact Les Arènes amphitheatre and La Maison Carrée - a grand first-century temple. There is a distinctly Spanish-tinged feel to this Mediterranean region - in its food, its fondness for flamenco and bullfighting, its relaxed but upbeat air.

We wander the pedestrianised streets that connect a series of little squares, with cafés, restaurants, boutiques and often live music, before dining on simple-but-superb plats du jour at Le Grain de Soleil. Both evenings we sit outside on secluded restaurant terraces, consuming three courses, coffee and a more-than-decent bottle of Costières de Nîmes, all for less than €100. On our return to Jardins Secrets, we find two slices of divine chocolate cake, left in our room for late-night nibbling. The cake - already building an international reputation all of its own - is much like the place as a whole: personal, unexpected, romantic and delicious.

Jardins Secrets is a hush-hush hideaway where we are made to feel welcome, but are left undisturbed. And thanks to low-cost flights from London, and Christophe happily shuttling us to the airport in less than 15 minutes, a two-day break really has been a two-day break. How grateful we've been for every extra second that we can add to our demanding itinerary of commuting between bed and garden, interspersed with the occasional meal out. Having enjoyed such a special stay there, the temptation is to let Jardins Secrets remain our secret - consider yourself let in on it.

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## Jardins Secrets, Languedoc-roussillon

## Jardins Secrets, Languedoc-roussillon: overview from Mr & Mrs Smith.



Jardins Secrets, Languedoc-roussillon, France - Mr & Mrs Smith

This boutique hotel in Nîmes is a tranquil oasis, secluded and yet set in the heart of the town. From the song birds in the walled garden and the paraphernalia carefully placed in the communal areas, to the individual styling of the bedrooms, every detail of **Jardins Secrets** has been considered to create a romantic atmosphere.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- One of our most wonderful finds
- Owned by interior designer and photographer
- Spectacular French antiques

### ROOMS

**Favorite rooms:** All the hotel's rooms are individually styled, and have views over the garden. They are all beautiful: Room 1 is exquisite, with antique turquoise paintwork; Room 2 has lofty ceilings and bold black and white prints.

**Rates:** Low season, €195-€380; high season, €240-€380, excluding breakfast.

## FOOD AND DRINK

**Restaurant:** Only breakfast is served for €20; it's exceptional.

**Bar:** There is an honesty bar serving wine, beer, spirits, and so on.

**Room Service:** There is an honesty bar serving wine, beer, spirits, and so on.

## CHILDREN

It's not suitable for small children - the hotel is filled with highly breakable objets d'art.

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