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TRAVEL

Welcome to Club Med

Long lunch breaks, no late-night work e-mails, and a seasonal superfood diet—it's just another day in the South of France

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If I look out of my window at 4pm, winter and summer, in all weathers apart from horizontal rain, there will be a group of women sitting on the bench, sometimes on two benches. There might be half a dozen of them or more, ranging in age from their 60s to their 80s, possibly older. There are always at least a couple of little dogs, very

occasionally a husband. In summer, when the windows are open, I can hear their laughter, and conversations I like to think they've picked up every afternoon at four since they were girls. As futures go, this doesn't look like a bad one.

We moved to this village 17 months ago, swapping a terraced house in Hackney, east London, for a long-neglected one – yes, that cliché – in Marseillan on the Étang de Thau, a saltwater lagoon in southern France that opens into the Mediterranean.



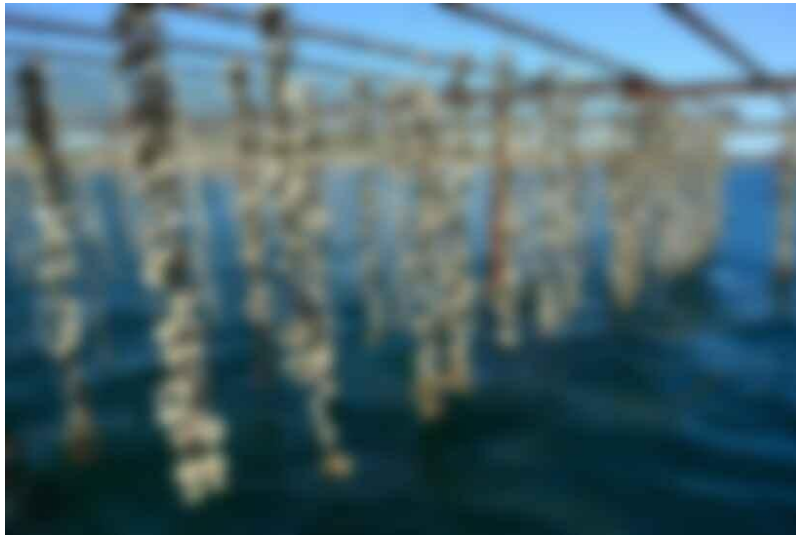
Marseillan, a French village on the Étang de Thau.

This month, two separate reports were published lauding the health-giving properties of the Mediterranean diet. The first appeared in the journal *BMC Medicine*, using data from more than 60,000 people. It stated that this diet – traditionally rich in fruits and vegetables, grains, seafood, nuts and healthy fats – could potentially lower the risk of dementia by almost a quarter.

The second, based on the work of a team at the University of Sydney and published in the journal *Heart*, stated that women who followed the Mediterranean diet could reduce the risk of early death by almost a quarter. I'd tell the women on the benches but I think they're too busy having a good time to care about the numbers.

I'm a food writer, so one of the great draws of this corner of France is close proximity to wonderful ingredients. The Étang produces 14,300 tons of oysters every year and 3,600 tons of mussels. In a village of 8,000 inhabitants, there are three greengrocers,

four bakers, a large butcher and several small shops selling oysters, mussels, and fish from the lagoon.



It's not Mediterranean food, it's just food. It's not a diet, it's just how things are.

Vines creep up to the edge of the village. When I walk my dogs through the fields each morning, chances are we're weaving past the grapes I used to add to my Ocado order when I lived in London, in the form of bottles of picpoul.

As each month goes by, it takes me longer to walk around the Tuesday market. I know more people now and they know me. We talk about what's good – recently, the first gariguette strawberries, prickly sea urchins, and bundles of asparagus, yours for only \$16.

Everyone is scandalized at the cost, sniffing that they're from Spain, waiting for the French asparagus to come in and the price to come down. By late spring, we'll be eating it every day.

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Then onward to the summer, with its artichokes, peas and beans, tomatoes and aubergines, peaches, melons and cherries, the best grown nearby and picked when

they're perfectly ripe. And with every new season, I gather new recipes, from the greengrocer, a neighbor, the man in the wine shop, one of our builders.



Le St. Barth Tarbouriech is a third-generation family seafood restaurant in Marseillan.

It's not Mediterranean food, it's just food. It's not a diet, it's just how things are. People eat seasonally here, on the whole, not just because it's better but because it's cheaper. No one's measuring out their (local, organic) olive oil in joy-defying teaspoons or weighing their walnuts. People's diets contain leafy veg and oily fish, of course, but many people slice into rich cheeses most days, and invariably pair it with good glasses of red.

On Sundays, the queue to pick up cakes from the baker is long and sociable. Here, in this provincial corner of France at least, balance is everything. Pouring small pleasures into each day is admired, gluttony or excess is not.

It's about more than just food. Most businesses close at lunchtime for an hour, two hours, three, four. I'm joking. No one closes for just an hour. After all these months, I still get confused about what time the local Spar (shelves of biscuits, cat food, pasta and washing up liquid, plus a 12th-century wine cave in the back), butcher, greengrocers and bakeries open after lunch.

Almost everything is closed on Sundays. The idea of spending time with your family and friends, or simply having time to yourself, is sacrosanct. It's frowned upon to

contact people about work outside of normal work hours. These are a very boundaried people.



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The climate helps. We spend a lot of time outside. Isolation, for many the torture of old age, is less likely to happen here. The ladies on the benches take up their space. If one of them didn't appear one day, the others would notice, would check on her. Their daily laughter must be worth more than a ton of healthy grains.

It's easy to romanticize Mediterranean village life. It's certainly not all baguettes and brie carried home lovingly in a straw basket. *Le fast food, le restauration rapide*, is increasingly popular. With more than 1,500 branches, France remains McDonald's largest market outside the US. Many insist they love McDo for the free wifi (sure, Jean), but the one nearest us often has large queues of people wanting, controversially, to eat outside conventional mealtimes, young people on dates and parents with small children who don't want to sit down for a two-hour lunch.

French women do get fat. Obesity is on the rise; 17% of French adults are now obese, double the number of 25 years ago (in the UK, it's 26%).

But there remains, in this village at least, a gentle rhythm of life, an attitude to seizing moments of pleasure, eating well, resting well and cultivating friendships, that's entirely

life enhancing and, ultimately, potentially life-prolonging.

Debora Robertson is a U.K.-based journalist and the author of [Notes from a Small Kitchen Island](#)

THE GUARDIAN

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