



Weekender Le Passage

Moganshan is best known as a bolt-hole for escaping the Shanghai summer, but as **Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore** discovers, Le Passage hotel makes the mountains a perfect winter retreat too

The mountainous area of Moganshan is best known as a summer retreat. The area – dotted with pretty stone houses that wind up the steep hills – once served as a bolt-hole for Shanghai's foreign chattering classes in the early 20th century. Today, expats are flocking once again to its fashionable hotels (most notably eco-resort naked Stables) to escape the city's suffocating heat. But Moganshan is not only an antidote to the sweltering months; it can also serve as the perfect cosy winter getaway.

Few places are more fitting for a winter break than Le Passage Mohkan Shan, a hotel modelled after a French country home that sits half hidden in a valley surrounded by tea plantations and a bamboo forest. Founded by Frenchman Christophe Peres and his American wife Pauline Lee in late 2012, Le Passage epitomises colonial chic. The hotel is a new build but it is sometimes hard to tell. The nostalgic decor and design harks back to Moganshan's bygone days – when the area was a playground for the European jet set – with antique cement tiles, wooden flooring, chandeliers, and worn leather armchairs.

We arrive one Saturday afternoon and start our weekend as we mean to go on: with food. Afternoon tea is served in a room with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the terrace (the saltwater pool is heated all year round to 32C

making a steamy swim obligatory). Cakes and sandwiches are laid out, but the highlight is the Mogan Huang Ya, a signature tea brewed from leaves in the hotel's own organic tea plantation. Green tea was first produced here in the 1960s by harvesting wild plants sourced in the mountain. Today, the plantation – which we are assured has been free from pesticides, chemicals and artificial fertilisers for a decade – is harvested just once a year in the spring, a time known here as the 'first flush' for its high quality buds and leaves.

Le Passage has ambitions to define itself as a dining destination. Helming the kitchen is the Shanghai-born chef Meng Chen (also known as Jackie Chen) who made his name in London, where he rose up the ranks to become number two at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, overseeing two restaurants and a staff of 65. Things are rather more subdued at Le Passage; when we visit, the intimate Armand David Restaurant has only a

smattering of guests. But that hasn't dampened Meng's drive: his objective is to eventually win the restaurant a Michelin star.

To this end, meals are elaborate affairs. In the evening guests only have one option: a five course set meal for

580RMB/person that changes daily. The food, in true French fashion, is heavy on the meat, but vegetarian alternatives can be arranged. Our set includes moreish foie gras made in-house and served with a plum and herb salad and roast walnuts, a rich, creamy wild mushroom soup with truffle dressing, and a steak. The latter is so big that most of it goes uneaten.

Wines are equally luxurious: the cellar, where tastings are held, holds a vast selection of bottles from boutique French wineries handpicked by Christophe. It isn't cheap – bottles start from 380RMB and go up to 8,580RMB – but most are biodynamic, meaning that the grapes are grown without the use of chemicals and the wine is made without yeast

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Le Passage retains the charm of a countryside home



additions or acidity adjustments. It's claimed not to give you a hangover. A drink that might induce one, but – what the hell – is worth it anyway, is the Poire Pauline, a homemade brandy distilled in Le Passage with Moganshan pears.

It is tempting to spend the weekend at Le Passage lying around eating macarons or playing darts and board games in the salon, but the stunning vistas cannot be ignored. On the Sunday, after a hearty French breakfast, we complete a half-day hike to Moganshan Village and back. Christophe and Pauline's dog trots along with us and proves to be a worthy companion. For those who prefer human guides, however, Christophe offers cycle tours in the region. It is an activity for which he is somewhat overqualified, having cycled 12,000 kilometres across China in 2001. Ask him and he will be sure to share some of his tales from the journey.

At the end of a hard day walking, mostly uphill and in the rain, coming back is a treat. Le Passage started as a family holiday house for Christophe, Pauline and their children; it was only later that they made the decision to turn it into a hotel. It still retains the charm of a countryside home, including gracious hosts ever ready to help guests, a roaring fire, and some seriously good food. On that front at least, Le Passage might even beat mama's cooking.

Essential info

Getting there

Le Passage is around a two-and-a-half hour drive from Shanghai. For those without a car, high speed trains go from Hongqiao to Hangzhou regularly from 6.20am daily. The journey takes around an hour and costs from 73RMB one way. From Hangzhou station, Le Passage can arrange a pick-up service to take you the further one hour drive to the hotel. Alternatively, there is one daily train from Hongqiao to Deqing, a 30-minute drive from Le Passage. The one-and-a-half hour train journey leaves from Shanghai at 7.14am and costs 60.50RMB. Return trains from Deqing depart at 8am and cost 151RMB.

Contact and prices

Le Passage hotel, Xianrenkeng Tea Plantation, Ziling Village, Moganshan Town, Deqing County, Huzhou City, Zhejiang province.

Prices start from 1,500RMB/night for a deluxe room in the main house and go up to 3,800RMB/night for a Mezzanine Suite (prices include 15 per cent tax and service charge and breakfast). Throughout winter, Le Passage is offering a thirty per cent discount on these rates. For reservations email reservations@lepassagemoganshan.com or call 572 805 2958 or 186 5728 5900. See www.lepassagemoganshan.com for more details.

Get creative

For those wanting to get a bit creative, Le Passage has just launched a French cooking school. The idea is that you make a meal and then take it back to Shanghai with you, keeping the dish (an apron is also thrown in). The classes range from terrine de foie gras – taught by Fabienne, Le Passage's in house foie gras expert – to parmentier of duck, a sort of shepherd's pie made with duck confit. The hour and a half class costs 500RMB with a further 280–380RMB for the dish, depending on the size.