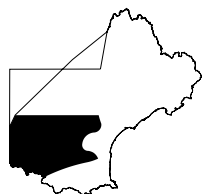


Carcassonne & South to the Pyrenees



No one forgets their first, stunning sight of Carcassonne's La Cité from a distance. Its witch-hat turrets glinting in the sunlight, it seems to rise from the plain like some medieval mirage. Within its ramparts, as you walk the cobbled streets, it's easy to understand why the town consistently figures as France's third-most-visited venue after Paris and Mont St-Michel.

La Montagne Noire, a sparsely populated land of small villages, stripes the northern horizon. To the west is Castelnaudary, where pleasure boats jostle in Le Grand Bassin, the Canal du Midi's only significant harbour. Surrounded by the golden wheatfields of the Lauragais plain, the town contests with Carcassonne (while grudgingly admitting a claim from Toulouse) for the title of inventor of cassoulet. Hereabouts, the food, like the wine, is hearty.

To the south of Carcassonne, following the reaches of the upper Aude Valley, the self-confident provincial town of Limoux boasts Blanquette de Limoux, a scintillating sparkling wine, and a carnival that, though small in participants, is France's longest lasting.

Heading westwards, up and over the wild, lonely Pays de Sault, the tumbling waters of the Ariège River cry out to be canoed, while the soft flanks and offshoots of its valley are honeycombed with caves where underground rivers flow.

We've set the bounds of this chapter in defiance of regional administrative boundaries, choosing to graft on the stirring Ariège valley, in the Midi-Pyrénées region and precursor of the Pyrenees, plus a couple of its side shoots.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gasp at your first glimpse of the towers of **La Cité** (p176), Carcassonne
- Sip a drink beneath the arcades of Mirepoix's **place Maréchal Leclerc** (p208)
- Learn about the Ariège valley's earliest inhabitants at **Parc de la Préhistoire** (p203)
- Climb to the ruined castles of **Châteaux de Lastours** (p187), then lunch in style at **Le Puits du Trésor** (p187)
- From Homps, chug along the **Canal du Midi** aboard the *Saint Ferréol* (p189), a traditional canal barge
- Scramble up to **Château de Peyrepertuse** (p196), most impressive of the Cathar castles
- Quaff Blanquette de Limoux and dine at **La Maison de la Blanquette** (p191), Limoux



CARCASSONNE & AROUND

CARCASSONNE

pop 45,500

From afar, Carcassonne's La Cité seems straight from a fairy tale. Bathed in late-afternoon sunshine and highlighted by dark clouds, this ancient town with its intact walls and pointed turrets is truly breathtaking. But once you're inside, La Cité loses something of its magic and mystery. Luring an estimated four million visitors annually, it can be trying in high summer. This said, you'll have to be fairly stone-hearted not to be moved.

Carcassonne is essentially two towns. Contrasting with La Cité, the Ville Basse (Lower Town), or Bastide, established in the 13th century, is altogether more tranquil.

This more modest stepsister to camp Cinderella up the hill also merits more than a browse.

History

Carcassonne features (as Karkaso) in *Geography*, the classic work of the 2nd-century scholar Ptolemy. The hill on which La Cité stands has been fortified since prehistoric times – by Gauls, Romans, Visigoths, Moors and Franks. In the 13th century, its ramparts protected one of the major strongholds of Cathar resistance.

When Roussillon, to the south, was incorporated into the French kingdom in 1659, Carcassonne's Cité was no longer a frontier bastion, strategically and militarily important (the border with Spain had been just beyond its walls). Gradually, the population drifted down to enjoy the greater convenience

FESTIVALS & EVENTS – CARCASSONNE & SOUTH TO THE PYRENEES

January–March/April

- **Limoux carnival** Masked revellers and musicians dance and process every Saturday and Sunday at 11am and 4.30pm from early January until two weeks before Easter.

March–April

- **Salon du Livre Ancien** Montolieu's secondhand- and antique-book fair, Easter weekend.
- **Swing à Mirepoix** A long weekend of jazz over Easter.

April

- **Semaine du Jazz** A whole week of jazz in Carcassonne from ultra cool to nostalgic, thump-thump Dixieland.

June

- **Festival Occitan** Mirepoix celebrates its roots.
- **Sent Joan Beth e Gran** Four days, mid- to late June, when St-Girons honours St John with traditional folk dances and concerts.

July

- **L'Embrasement de la Cité** (Setting La Cité Ablaze) More than 700,000 spectators pack the banks of the Aude to gasp at a fireworks display, Carcassonne's celebration of Bastille Day, rivalled only by Paris' pyrotechnics; 14 July, 10.30pm.
- **Festival de Carcassonne** (☎ 04 68 11 59 15; www.festivaldecarcassonne.com) Brings to town music – everything from Diana Ross and Deep Purple to The Tales of Hoffmann in 2008 – dance and theatre for a whole three weeks.
- **Festival de la Bastide** During the same three weeks, Carcassonne serves up around 70 free spectacles in the town's squares and public spaces.

of Bastide St-Louis, or La Ville Basse, down below. Thus began La Cité's centuries of decline and a rivalry between the two settlements that only ended when they were declared a single commune in the 19th century. As La Cité crumbled, La Ville Basse prospered and became, in the 14th century, one of Languedoc's major cloth-weaving centres. From this first major expansion stems its strict grid pattern, the classic shape of a *bastide*, or fortified town, that's sustained to this day.

By the 19th century La Cité was simply crumbling away. It was rescued by the elaborate intervention of Viollet-le-Duc, who also set his controversial stamp upon, for example, the cathedrals of Notre Dame in Paris and Vézelay in Burgundy. He stepped in only just in time. Already, tonnes of shaped stones had been carted down the hill, to be recycled as the Bastide expanded.

Orientation

The River Aude separates La Ville Basse from tourist-mecca La Cité, up on a hill 500m to the southeast. Pedestrianised rue Georges Clemenceau leads from the train station and Canal du Midi southwards through the heart of the lower town. Running at right angles to it is rue de Verdun, the main east-west street, where you'll find the main tourist office and other amenities.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Alerte Rouge (73 rue de Verdun, La Ville Basse; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Thu, to 11pm Fri & Sat) Buy a drink and you get an hour's free wi-fi. And here's a rare internet café that actually does great coffee.

LAUNDRY

La Lavandière (31 rue Aimé Ramond, La Ville Basse; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat)

- **Fêtes Historiques** Mirepoix brings its past back to its present for a long July weekend.
- **Festival du Folklore** Limoux's five-day international festival in late July with music, theatre and dance.
- **Festival du Folklore** Quillan's equivalent, also in late July, with a strong international flavour.
- **Jazz à Foix** Five evenings of jazz in Foix; late July.

July & August

- **Classical music recitals** A series of concerts in Mirepoix's cathedral.
- **Festival de St-Lizier** Spanning nearly three weeks, St-Lizier's impressive program of classical music.

August

- **Rite** A week in early August celebrating world music, dance and song; in St-Girons.
- **Festival de la Marionnette** A three-day puppet festival in Mirepoix over the first weekend in August with plenty of craft items and local produce on sale.
- **Vigne et Terroir en Fête** A weekend in early August when Limoux celebrates local wines and produce.
- **Fête du Cassoulet** Castelnaudary's homage to the classic dish it claims to have invented pulls in more than 70,000 visitors during last weekend in August.

September

- **Fireworks at Foix castle** The town celebrates its saint's day on 5 September.

December

- **Foire au gras** On the first Sunday of the month, Castelnaudary's high-cholesterol celebration of *confit de canard*, foie gras and other poultry products and by-products.

POST**Main Post Office** (40 rue Jean Bringer, La Ville Basse)**TOURIST INFORMATION****Main Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 10 24 30; www.carcassonne-tourisme.com; 28 rue de Verdun, La Ville Basse;

☎ 9am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun Sep-Jun) Borrow an audioguide to La Ville Basse (€3 for two hours) and explore, hands free.

Tourist Office annexe La Cité (Porte Narbonnaise; ☎ 9am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, to 5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun); La Ville Basse (av Joffre; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm mid-Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct)**Sights & Activities****LA CITÉ**

La Cité, dramatically illuminated at night and enclosed by two rampart walls punctuated by 52 stone towers, is one of Europe's largest city fortifications. But only the lower sections of the walls are original; the rest, including the anachronistic witch-hat roofs (the originals were altogether flatter and weren't covered with slate), were stuck on by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century.

Just outside the main entrance to La Cité, a magnificent two-storey merry-go-round (carousel) gyrates to corny old tunes. Beside it is a moon-faced bust of Dame Carcas (see p180) that's purest winsome Disney. They're emblematic of the blend of tack and charm within. If you pass over the **drawbridge**, you're faced with a massive bastion, the **Porte Narbonnaise** and, just inside, the tourist office annexe. Rue Cros Mayrevieille, suffocating in kitschy souvenir shops, leads up to place du Château, heart of La Cité.

Through another archway and across a second dry moat is the 12th-century **Château Comtal** (adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €7.50/4.80/free; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Mar). Bring plenty of patience to tolerate the slow-moving ticket lines. The entrance fee lets you look around the castle itself, enjoy an 11-minute film and join an optional 30- to 40-minute guided tour of the ramparts (tours in English in July and August). Descriptive panels around the castle, in both French and English, are explicit. For more detail, invest in an **audioguide** (1/2 people €4/6).

No one knows the true shape of the castle in all its detail since the city records were burnt not once but twice. Viollet-le-Duc based his plans upon a rare drawing to have survived the conflagrations. What's attested is that it was originally constructed in the 12th century

THE WINDY CITY

Carcassonne gets buffeted from two directions. The Cers, a biting winter wind that howls down from the hills to the north, can blow for days without respite. By contrast, the Altanus, also known as Le Marin, is a warm, humid wind that comes in from the sea.

Exploiting these twin natural forces, the Carcassonnais constructed windmills atop several of La Cité's towers – a long-standing tradition that's recently been revived in the modern wind farms of La Montagne Noire that swirl on the northern horizon.

by the Trencavel family, Viscounts of Béziers and protectors of the Cathars, then expanded in the early 13th century when Carcassonne was incorporated into royal domains after the Cathars had been crushed. From this time date its imposing barbican and surrounding moat.

Before leaving La Cité, stretch your legs with a short stroll along **Les Lices**, the long, grassy space between the two perimeter ramparts that was once used for jousting and archery tournaments.

South of place du Château is **Basilique St-Nazaire** (☎ 9-11.45am & 1.45-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9-10.45am & 2-6pm Sun). The 12th-century nave with its alternating round and square pillars is all that remains of the original Romanesque structure. It contrasts with the graceful Gothic choir and transept, where a pair of superb, glowing 13th- and 14th-century rose windows face each other. Notice how the statues on the pillars in the choir are, typically, sculpted from the columns themselves. On one wall is the grave slab of Simon de Montfort – scourge of the south during the crusade against the Cathars – but not, however, his body, which his son removed (and reputedly boiled) six years after his death in 1218. Aware of the probable fate of his father's mortal remains if the Cathars got hold of them, he took them north for reburial, to the family's power base near Versailles.

The **Petit Train de la Cité** (☎ 04 68 24 45 70; 20min ride adult/3-11yr/student/under 3yr €7/3/6/free; ☎ 10am-6pm mid-Jul–mid-Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm May–mid-Jul & mid-Aug–Sep), a train on wheels with multilingual commentary, runs along a length of Les Lices, between the two ramparts. Alternatively, you can hop aboard a horse-drawn **carriage** (☎ 04 68 71 54 57; adult/child €7/4; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr–mid-Nov),

hauled by a pair of magnificent dray horses, that does a shorter, 20-minute trip.

There's a rash of hole-in-the-wall private museums and initiatives, each eager to separate you from your money, including Memories of the Middle Ages, the Haunted House ("Shivers and Scares Guaranteed") and a particularly repellent exhibition of replica medieval torture instruments. All are very resistible.

From sq Gambetta down in La Ville Basse, it's an attractive walk to La Cité, offering perspectives that others won't see. Cross Pont Vieux, go along rue de la Barbacane, then up the ramp (which stars in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, featuring when Kevin Costner rides down it) and in through Porte d'Aude. Catching a bus to the main entrance is also an option. If at all possible, linger once the crowds have left, when La Cité belongs to its 100 or so inhabitants, those visitors staying at the hotels within its ramparts and a few others who've stayed behind, perhaps to dine or sip some wine at one of several great choices.

MAISON DES MÉMOIRES

This **cultural centre** (☎ 04 68 72 50 83; 53 rue de Verdun, La Ville Basse; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat) puts on temporary exhibitions. The Centre Joë Bosquet et Son Temps is on the 1st floor. Here, the Carcassonne-born writer (1897-1950) lived for more than 30 years. Shot and wounded in WWI, he never left his shuttered bedroom in all this time, writing poetry and a vast volume of letters and entertaining in his bedroom prominent literary figures of the time such as Paul Valéry, André Gide and Max Ernst.

BOAT RIDES

Lou Gabaret (☎ 04 68 71 61 26) and **Solal** (☎ 06 07 74 04 57) both chug along the Canal du Midi, departing from the bridge just south of the train station. **Sailings** (adult €8-10, child €6.50-7.50; 🕒 4 daily Jul & Aug, 1 or 2 daily Tue-Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) with commentary last 1¼ or 2½ hours and prices vary accordingly.

Queues for sailings will be shorter in high season (though parking's more of a problem) in **Trèbes**, 7km east of Carcassonne, where the **Cocagne** (☎ 06 50 40 78 50; Port de Trèbes; adult/child €8.50/6; 🕒 1-3 daily sailings Sun-Fri Jul-mid-Sep, 3pm Wed, Sat & Sun Apr-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct) does a 1½-hour cruise along the canal.

LAC DE LA CAVAYÈRE

In this lovely sylvan spot, you could be miles from Carcassonne. Laze on or swim from its sandy beaches (granted, you might find them crowded in high summer), spread a picnic or rustle up a barbecue, walk through the woods, push a *pédalo* or simply enjoy the tranquillity of this spot, once you've left the parking area behind. The lake's about 5km southeast of town and well signed from the Rocade Sud, the ring road that swings to the rear (south) of La Cité.

MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

Carcassonne's **fine arts museum** (☎ 04 68 77 73 70; 1 rue de Verdun, La Ville Basse; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm rest of yr) displays paintings from the 17th to late 19th centuries. Highlights include a striking *Larmes de St Pierre* (Tears of St Peter) by José Ribera in the first gallery; three portraits with finely detailed ruffs and embroidery by the 17th-century Flemish artists Michiel Janszoon van Mierevelt and Paul Moreelse; *Les Chérifas*, a vast oriental-exotic canvas by Benjamin Constant; and a whole gallery devoted to the works of Carcassonne artist Jacques Gamelin (1738-1803).

PARC AUSTRALIEN

It's probably too much like home for antipodean readers, but this **theme park** (☎ 04 68 25 05 07; <http://leparcaustralien.free.fr> in French; chemin de Bartavelles; adult/child €8/6; 🕒 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-6pm or 7pm Sun Easter-Oct), about 4km from La Cité, presents all things Australian, including bounding kangaroos, dromedaries and didgeridoos. Wander around at your own pace or join the 11am guided visit (in French). Leaving town, follow signs for Lac de la Cavayère.

SIMPLY STROLLING

Leave the crowds up high, cut loose and walk the attractive landscaped banks of the River Aude.

Sleeping BUDGET

Camping de la Cité (☎ 04 68 25 11 77; www.campeole.com; sites €16-22.80, for walkers €9-12; 🕒 mid-Mar-mid-Oct; 🚻) This well-maintained campground, about 1.2km south of town, has both a convivial snack bar and a pool. A walking and cycling trail leads from the site to both La Cité and La Ville Basse. From mid-June to

19

R. Gustave Nadaud

Pl. St-Gimer

La Cité

Pl. de l'Église

R. du P. de Maircou

R. de la Barbacane

See Enlargement

To Camping de La Cité (1.2 km)

5

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mid-September a shuttle bus connects the camp site with La Cité and the train station every 20 minutes.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 68 25 23 16; carcassonne@fujaj.org; rue Vicomte Trencavel; dm incl breakfast €16.90; ☹ Feb–mid-Dec) Carcassonne's cheery, welcoming, HI-affiliated youth hostel, in the heart of La Cité, has rooms sleeping four to six. There's a members kitchen, a summertime snack bar, a great outside terrace and a single internet station. It rents bikes (€8 per day) to hostellers. Although it has as many as 120 beds, it's smart to reserve, year-round.

Hôtel Royal (☎ 04 68 25 19 12; http://monsie.wana.doo.fr/royal_hotel in French; 22 blvd Jean Jaurès; r €45-50; ☹ mid-Jan–mid-Dec; ☎ ☒) Parking €8. Don't be deceived by the dowdy exterior. This attractive, great-value budget option serves a copious, varied breakfast. Its 24 rooms are comfortable, well appointed and equipped with ceiling fans. Those facing the busy street all have double glazing.

Hôtel Astoria (☎ 04 68 25 31 38; www.astoriacarcassonne.com in French; 18 rue Tourtel; d/tr €49/59, r with shared bathroom €32; ☹ Mar-Jan; ☎) Free parking. Rooms are fresh and pleasant, each with tiles or parquet flooring, at this hotel and its equally agreeable annexe. Bathrooms are a bit poky but all in all it's a welcoming place whose owners, Janick and Dominique Vall, are proud of its recent elevation to two-star status.

MIDRANGE

Chambre d'Hôte Nicole Cordonnier (☎ 04 68 25 16 67; http://legrandpuits.free.fr; 8 place du Grand Puits; d incl breakfast €52-65) Mme Cordonnier, herself a keen traveller, knows what travellers need. In the heart of La Cité, two of her three rooms are particularly large, have a kitchenette including microwave for self-caterers and can accommodate up to six people (€10 extra per person). The blue room has a private patio, while, upstairs, the orange one has its own terrace. The yellow room, more intimate, is ideal for a couple.

Hôtel du Pont Vieux (☎ 04 68 25 24 99; www.lacite.decarcassonne.fr; 32 rue Trivalle; s/d mid-Jul–mid-Aug from €56/78, rest of yr from €50/60; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) Wi-fi available; parking €6. Bedrooms, most with a bathtub, have attractively rough-hewn walls. On the 3rd floor, rooms 18 and 19 have unsurpassed views of La Cité, and there's a small terrace on this same floor, accessible to all guests. The buffet breakfast (€7) is truly

THE LEGEND OF DAME CARCAS

Dame Carcas was indeed quite a lady. In a folk tale that dates back to the Middle Ages – and one that's a rare example of Muslim forces from the south outsmarting the great Emperor Charlemagne himself – she saves the city.

The emperor's army had been besieging the Muslims, holed up in La Cité for five long years, and most of the defenders had died from hunger. When the Muslim emir was killed, it seemed as though the end had come. But his widow, Carcas, was having nothing of such defeatism.

Up on the ramparts, she fashioned men of straw and fired off salvos of arrows to boost apparent numbers. But the only food left was one piglet and a measure of wheat. To the dismay of her few followers, she fed the wheat to the pig, then tossed it over the walls. As the pig hit the ground, its stomach burst open and out spilt the wheat.

Seeing this and judging that food must still be plentiful inside the ramparts, Charlemagne called off his siege. Before his army could march away, Dame Carcas called for the emperor to make peace. He agreed and Carcas ordered all the trumpets to sound – 'Carcas sonne' (Carcas Rings Out), thus giving the town its name.

It's pure bunkum, of course, both historically and etymologically – not least because of the improbability of the Muslims allowing a pig to run loose around La Cité. But a nice tale all the same...

gargantuan, and there's a large garden with olive and fig trees and flowering shrubs.

Arcantis Hôtel Bristol (☎ 04 68 25 07 24; www.arcantis-hotels.com; 7 av Foch; s €63-68, d €78-83; 📞 mid-Jan–mid-Dec; 🅇) Parking €9. A plaster horse's head peers down, indicating that this 19th-century inn was in its time a staging post. Of its 51 rooms, 16 overlook the Canal du Midi (at no extra price), while most of the remainder give onto its quiet inner courtyard.

Hôtel du Soleil Le Terminus (☎ 04 68 25 25 00; www.hotels-du-soleil.com; 2 av Joffre; s/d €80/90; 🅇) Wi-fi €5 per hour (surely a record?); parking €9. Recently taken over by the Soleil group and close to celebrating its first century, this grand, 110-room hotel speaks tradition from the moment you enter the vast atrium with its elaborate stucco mouldings, billiard table, deep leather sofas and ornate staircase that you wouldn't be surprised to see Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers come tripping down at any moment. Guests can choose between bedrooms furnished *à la belle époque* or in contemporary style. On the downside, reception can be, to put it at its most kindly, brusque.

Hôtel des Trois Couronnes (☎ 04 68 25 36 10; www.hotel-destroiscouronnes.com; 2 rue des Trois Couronnes; r according to season €83-103; 🅇 📞 📺) Wi-fi available; parking €6 to €9. Set back from the River Aude, this attractive, modern hotel has uninterrupted views of La Cité from east-facing rooms (€17 extra). On the 4th floor (where there's also a heated indoor pool) there's a particularly good restaurant – see opposite.

TOP END

La Cité has a couple of splendid top-of-the-market choices.

Hôtel Le Donjon (☎ 04 68 11 23 00; www.hotel-donjon.fr; 2 rue du Comte Roger; d €105-158, tr €135-178; 🅇 📞 📺 📺) Wi-fi available; parking €8. Low-beamed, thick-walled, venerable and cosy, 15th-century Le Donjon was originally an orphanage. All rooms overlook either its shady garden or the ramparts. Of its two equally comfortable annexes, Les Remparts is more contemporary, if shorter on period charm, while Maison du Comte Roger, with its striking medieval staircase, has superior standard rooms.

Hôtel de la Cité (☎ 04 68 71 98 71; www.hotelde-lacite.orient-express.com; place Auguste Pont; r from €400; 🅇 📞 📺 📺) Parking €16. Neogothic Hôtel de la Cité has rooms fit for royalty (literally so: 'A favourite hideaway for Europe's crowned heads, film stars, writers and intellectuals', proclaims its glossy brochure), should you fancy a retreat in such august company.

Eating

LA VILLE BASSE

Au Bon Pasteur (☎ 04 68 25 49 63; 29 rue Armagnac; menus €15-28; 📞 closed Sun & Mon Jul & Aug, Sun & Wed Sep-Jun) At this welcoming, intimate family restaurant, the simple wooden tables and chairs belie the sophistication of the cooking. You can warm yourself in winter with the cassoulet or *choucroute* (sauerkraut), 100% authentic since the chef hails from the Vosges. Year-round, its *formule tour-*

istique (€16.50), a three-course special, and *formules de midi* (lunch specials, €12.50 to €15.50) both represent excellent value.

L'Oeil (☎ 04 68 25 64 81; 31 rue de Lorraine; lunch menu €13, other menus €18-30) Set slightly aside from the action in La Bastide, l'Oeil, whose speciality is grills sizzled over a wood fire, is the place to visit if you're feeling particularly carnivorous.

Restaurant Gil (☎ 04 68 47 85 23; 32 rte Minerveoise; menus €19-29, mains €9-19; ☞ Tue-Sat) Go downstairs, below street level, to enjoy quality Catalan-influenced cuisine. Particular strengths are its fresh seafood and fish dishes, mostly served grilled and unsmothered by superfluous sauces or adornment. Also, its three-course lunchtime *menu* (€12) offers a choice of *casoulet* or *confit de canard*.

Restaurant des Trois Couronnes (☎ 04 68 25 36 10; menus €21-29.50, mains €14-17) A particular bargain of this fine restaurant, on the 4th floor of Hôtel des Trois Couronnes (opposite) is its *le tout compris* ('everything included'; €21): three courses, a couple of glasses of wine, coffee and a magnificent panorama of La Cité thrown in. Down below, it runs a summertime terrace restaurant beside the River Aude with views that are almost as splendid.

L'Écurie (☎ 04 68 72 04 04; www.restaurant-lecurie.fr; 43 blvd Barbès; menus €23.50-30; ☞ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat

& lunch Sun) Enjoy fine fare either within this attractively renovated 18th-century stable, all polished woodwork, brass and leather, or in the large, shaded garden. Pick from its ample, well-selected list of local wines.

Chez Fred (☎ 04 68 72 02 23; www.chez-fred.fr; 31 blvd Omer Sarraut; menus €24-28; ☞ lunch & dinner daily Jul-Sep, Mon-Fri & dinner Sat Oct-Jun) With a large window pierced in one of the walls of the oxblood-red interior, you can peek at what Fred's chefs are rustling up; it's sure to be something creative. Alternatively, dine on its shaded tunnel of a terrace; the greenery's dense enough to blot from sight the ugly car park beyond. The scrummy desserts are as pretty as they're tasty, and the weekday *menu bistro* (lunch €16.50, dinner €20) is superb value.

Robert Rodriguez (☎ 04 68 47 37 80; www.restaurant-robertrodriguez.com; 39 rue Coste Reboulh; 3-course lunch menu €20, other menus €40-63, mains €28-38; ☞ Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat) Behind his bushy, curling Hercule Poirot moustache, Robert Rodriguez is as much culinary philosopher as chef – indeed he'd probably balk at the very word 'chef', considering himself an artisan who works with raw materials, exclusively organic. Beaming with bonhomie, he calls his intimate restaurant his *atelier du goût*, a workshop creating tastes. *Fraicheur, saison, tradition, créativité* (fresh, seasonal, traditional and

THE TOP FOUR CATHAR CASTLES: A DAY DRIVE FROM CARCASSONNE TO PERPIGNAN

This 205km route passes through some spectacular gorge scenery, takes in the four major Cathar fortresses and, towards day's end, runs beside some tempting vineyards.

Leave Carcassonne by the D118, signed Limoux. Follow the valley of the River Aude, at first gentle, then narrowing between steep cliffs, via Quillan, to take the D117, direction Axat, where you pick up signs for Château de Puilaurens (p196).

Back on the main road, after 12km take the D7, signed Gorges de Galamus, to pass through the narrow streets of St-Paul de Fenouillet (p235), in Roussillon. It's hairy in places and you'll be averaging no more than 30km/h (for an easier, though much less dramatic option, continue along the D117 for 8km to Maury, then turn left onto the D19 for the Château de Peyrepertuse). After 9km, pause at the car park overlooking the gorge and a small hermitage clinging improbably to the sheer cliff. At the T-junction in Cubières-sur-Cinoble, turn right onto the D14, which leads, via the village of Duilhac, to Château de Peyrepertuse (p196).

Return to the D14, pass through Duilhac and, just before Cucugnan, turn right onto the D123, following signs for Château de Quéribus (p197).

Head back to to the D14 and turn right, direction Tuchan, to drive between the rich Corbières vineyards. With Tuchan in sight, turn left at a roundabout onto the D611. Then, 1km beyond the village, take a narrow road through yet more vineyards to the fortress of Château d'Aguilar (p197).

Return to the D611 and follow it southwards. After 11km, if time allows, you can take the D59 to visit Tautavel (p235). Otherwise, follow signs for Estagel to rejoin the D117 and turn left for Perpignan (p211).

creative) is the leitmotif at this original spot with its hugely innovative take on traditional Languedoc cuisine.

LA CITÉ

Place Marcou is hemmed in on three sides by eateries, and throughout La Cité every second building seems to be a café or restaurant. For those we recommend, it's wise to reserve, particularly for lunch.

Restaurant des Musées (☎ 06 17 05 24 90; 17 rue du Grand Puits; menus €9.50-18; 🍴) This simple, unpretentious place has three rear terraces with views of the ramparts. It bakes its own organic bread and offers excellent-value meals, including a vegetarian *menu* (€10.50). It doesn't take credit cards.

Auberge de Dame Carcas (☎ 04 68 71 23 23; 3 place du Château; menus €14.50-20.50; 🍴 Thu-Tue) This casual restaurant specialises in suckling pig (model piggies, large and small, displayed around the restaurant give you a clue) and carries a fine selection of well-priced local wines. The ground floor is cosy and agreeably rustic, and you can see the chefs at work. The larger upstairs room offers more light, and there's an external terrace too.

L'Écu d'Or (☎ 04 68 25 49 03; www.restaurant-ecudor.fr in French; 7-9 rue Porte d'Aude; lunch menu €18, other menus €25-33, mains €18-20) Step down to semi-basement level to dine in style within the thick stone walls of this friendly spot. It serves, among many other delightful dishes, five varieties of cassoulet and a delicious range of creative desserts.

Chez Saskia (☎ 04 68 71 98 71; place Auguste Pont; menus €26-45, mains around €25; 🍴 daily Mar-Jan) This brasserie, where Chef Jérôme Ryon creates delightful, great-value dishes and a particularly rich range of desserts, belongs to Hôtel de la Cité (p180). All around its walls are photos of the great and good who have stayed at the hotel: Jacques Chirac, Winston Churchill, Yves Montand, Anthony Quinn, the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson, and many more, recognisable and less so. Two long, narrow wings extend either side of the restaurant's entrance. Choose the left, southern one for views of the square and Basilique St-Nazaire.

Comte Roger (☎ 04 68 11 93 40; www.comteroger.com in French; 14 rue St Louis; lunch menu €20, other menus €35-45, mains €20-28; 🍴 Tue-Sat Mar-Jan) Dine on the attractive terrace of this reputable restaurant, at its heart an old well, overhead a

trellis of vines. Or choose the equally tempting contemporary interior. Either way, the friendly young staff will take good care of you. Portions are ample, and main courses are cooked to perfection.

SELF-CATERING

Discover these markets in town:

Covered market (rue Aimé Ramond) Monday to Saturday.

Open-air market (place Carnot) Tuesday, Thursday and – the major one – Saturday.

Drinking

Cafés – each serving good-value lunches – overlook place Carnot in La Ville Basse and spill onto the square in summer. In La Cité, place Marcou is one big outside café.

La Cité des Arômes (14 place Carnot, La Ville Basse) In the northwestern corner of place Carnot this café wafts out scents of rich arabica and carries a huge selection of coffees.

Comptoir des Vins et Terroirs (☎ 04 68 26 44 76; 3 rue du Compte Roger, La Cité; mains €11-13) Of the several *caves* (wine cellars) and wine bars in La Cité, this recently opened place, affiliated with Hôtel Le Donjon (p180), is our favourite, not least because of its tasty dishes and snacks, such as the tempting midday slate (two/three dishes €15/18). There are plenty of wines on offer by the glass, and it's also a sales outlet for around 150 of Languedoc's finest vintages.

Shopping

The major shopping streets in La Ville Basse are rue Georges Clemenceau, rue de Verdun, rue Victor Hugo and rue Armagnac, with its art galleries and bookshops.

Esprit de Sel (☎ 04 68 72 03 01; 10 rue de la République, La Ville Basse; 🍴 Tue-Sat) This wonderful emporium is a place to browse and squeal with delight as you discover some unexpected treasure that you never knew you wanted or needed until now. Jocelyne Feller has an eye for quirky, off-centre items, ranging from the seriously retro to the last-minute contemporary. Penetrate deep into her three galleries to explore her wares, culled from suppliers both large and small and local producers – brollies, suitcases, boots, soaps and lotions, ornaments large to tiny, lampstands, ceramics, clothing, and much more.

La Ferme (☎ 04 68 25 02 15; 26 rue Chartran, La Ville Basse) A particularly well-stocked delicatessen, piled high with vintage cheeses, wines,

sausages and lots of other *gourmandises*, including homemade *crème Chantilly*.

L'Art Gourmand (13 rue St-Louis, La Cité) Chocolate fiends should descend upon this place, which sells a huge range of goodies. The ice cream is pretty great too – all 33 varieties of it.

Galerie Gérard Sioen (☎ 04 30 88 00 09; www.sioen-photo.com; 27 rue du Plô, La Cité; 🕒 10.30am–8pm mid-Jun–mid-Oct, 10.30am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm mid-Oct–Dec & Feb–mid-Jun) Call by the gallery of photographer Gérard Sioen to enjoy his sensuous nature photography and vivid human portraits. Themes range from nearby Cathar country to exotic locations around the world. Should you prefer to buy a print later, you can order via his website.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ryanair is the only airline to fly in and out of Carcassonne's **airport** (☎ 04 68 71 96 46; www.carcassonne.aeroport.fr), 5km from town. It flies to/from London (Stansted), Liverpool and the East Midlands in the UK, and Cork, Dublin and Shannon in Ireland.

BUS

We can only reiterate the advice of the tourist office: take the train. Eurolines and such intercity buses as there are stop on boulevard de Varsovie, 500m southwest of the train station.

TRAIN

Carcassonne is on the main line linking Toulouse (€13.30, 50 minutes, frequent) with Narbonne (€9.40, 30 minutes) and Montpellier (€21.20, 1½ hours). For Perpignan (€17.20, 1½ hours), change in Narbonne.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Agglo'Bus' Navette Aéroport runs to/from the airport (€5, 25 minutes), leaving the train station approximately two hours before each Ryanair departure and passing by La Cité 15 minutes later. By car, take the Carcassonne Ouest A61 motorway exit.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Several operators including **Europcar** (☎ 04 68 72 23 69), **Ada** (☎ 04 68 11 71 92), **Hertz** (☎ 04 68 25 41 26) and local company **Location Occitane de Véhicules** (☎ 04 68 11 74 10) have booths at the airport. Turn right as you leave the main building.

Don't think of driving into La Cité. Leave your vehicle in the huge car park (€4.50 for three to six hours) just east of the main entrance.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

At the time of writing, Agglo'Bus, the city bus company, had a temporary **information kiosk** (☎ 04 68 47 82 22) beside a large tiled concrete dome on blvd Camille Pelletan.

Buses run until about 7pm, Monday to Saturday. A single ticket/10-ticket *carte* costs €1.10/7.80.

Bus 2 runs roughly hourly from La Ville Basse to a stop just east of La Cité's main entrance. From mid-June to mid-September, a *navette* (shuttle service; 10am to 12.45pm and 2.15pm to 7.30pm Monday to Saturday) links La Cité, downtown and the train station every 20 minutes.

TAXI

Ring ☎ 04 68 71 50 50.

LA MONTAGNE NOIRE

La Montagne Noire is the westernmost extension of the Languedoc Range, the final spur of the Cévennes. Administratively, it demarcates the border between the *départements* of Aude and Tarn, as well as the regions of Languedoc and Midi-Pyrénées. Physically, it's the rain-gathering lid over the greatest aquifer in southwest France. It marks the watershed between two vital river systems, one flowing into the Aude and on to the Mediterranean, the other into the distant Atlantic. Without the skein of perennial streams plunging down the southern slopes of La Montagne Noire, there would be no Canal du Midi.

Castelnaudary

Castelnaudary lies almost exactly halfway along the Canal du Midi. It vies with Carcassonne and Toulouse for the title of World Cassoulet Capital, its cause and case promoted by the grandly sounding *Grande Confrérie du Cassoulet*. The town is also the metropolitan base of the French Foreign Legion.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 23 05 73; www.cas-tenaudary-tourisme.com; Halle de Verdun; 🕒 9am–1pm & 2–7pm Jul & Aug, 9am–12.30pm & 2.30–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–12.30pm Sat Apr–Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat Nov–Mar) is on place de Verdun. In July and August, it arranges guided visits (€4.50) in English.

GREAT CARCASSONNE ESCAPES

If you're inching your way through the summer crowds, you may feel the need to scream, slaughter a few of your fellow humans or, less contentiously, simply leave La Cité behind, at least until the morrow.

For a getaway picnic among the trees, retreat to the relative calm of Lac de la Cavayère (p177). We've selected some great places to eat and to sleep in the environs, all easily accessible for cyclists and motorists.

Sidsmums (☎ 04 68 26 94 49; www.sidsmums.com; 11 chemin de la Croix d'Achille; dm €21, d with corridor bathroom €42-47.50), in Preixan, 10km south of Carcassonne, is a warmly recommended spot to relax and recharge your batteries. You can hire a bike, take a guided walk with George the dog and cook for yourself in the self-contained kitchen. In the garden are four chalets (€46 to €51.50), each sleeping up to three, that share a common bathroom – like camping, only cosier. Lifts are possible by prior arrangement from Carcassonne town or airport. Otherwise, take the Quillan bus (four daily).

Rooms are dispersed around the buildings of the attractive, 17th-century **Château de Cavanac** (☎ 04 68 79 61 04; www.chateau-de-cavanac.fr in French; r €68-155; ☽ Mar-Dec; 🚗). Each is individually and charmingly decorated and named after a local flower (the decor colour-coded to the flower's hue, where possible). Beds are richly swathed in drapes and several are four-posters. Within the substantial grounds of this working vineyard are a tennis court, an open-air pool, a sauna and a small gym. The chateau's other massive (in every sense) attraction is its restaurant, in the former stables, with its gargantuan five-course *menu* (€42), which includes a kir aperitif, wine ad lib from the chateau's cellars, and coffee. Plentiful it certainly is, but it's for gourmets too with dishes such as *foie gras à l'Armagnac sur glace* (foie gras marinated with Armagnac and truffles on ice) and *cochon de lait rôti au miel des Corbières* (suckling pig in its own jus coated with local honey). From Carcassonne, follow signs for St-Hilaire, taking the D104, which becomes the D102. Turn left in the hamlet of Cavanac.

In Montredon, 3km northeast of Carcassonne, two sisters and their husbands run a fine overnight option and, within the same spacious 1.5-hectare grounds, a particularly satisfying restaurant. To get there, follow signs for Narbonne, then turn off the new ring road at a sign for Montredon, Madeleine St-Martin. Constructed in 2001 in the style of a sumptuous Languedoc villa, the **Hostellerie Château St-Martin** (☎ 04 68 47 44 41; www.chateausaintmartin.net; s €65-70, d €80-100; ☽ mid-Mar–mid-Nov; 🚗 🚗) has 15 spacious rooms with beds big enough for basketball stars, topped by oak bedheads. Reserve one of the seven 1st-floor rooms with views over to La Cité and the Pyrenees beyond. By contrast, the highly regarded **Restaurant Château St-Martin Trencavel** (☎ 04 68 71 09 53; www.chateausaintmartin.net; menus €32-56, mains €21-56; ☽ lunch & dinner Mon, Tue, Thu-Sat & lunch Sun) sits in a delightful, mainly 17th-century building, entered through the chateau's original 12th-century tower. Famed for its cassoulet, it uses exclusively fresh produce, and all desserts are homemade.

Canalside **Le Moulin de Trèbes** (☎ 04 68 78 97 57; 2 rue du Moulin; menus €20-36, mains €15-17.50) offers a lunchtime special (€15) with a self-service – and serve yourself again if you wish – buffet of entrées, followed by the dish of the day and dessert. As you eat on the shaded terrace, boats rise and fall before your eyes as they negotiate the lock. Take the D6113 from Carcassonne, direction Lézignan-Corbières, fork left into Trèbes, cross the Canal du Midi and follow it eastwards for about 200m.

In the hamlet of Pennautier, a mere 6km from Carcassonne, you'll find **our pick** **Les Chais du Château de Pennautier** (☎ 04 68 25 63 48; www.chateaupennautier.com; La Métairie Basse; 2/3-course menu incl glass of Château wine €19.50/23, mains €10.50; ☽ 10am-10pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun & Mon Jul & Aug; 10am-6pm Mon-Thu, 10am-10pm Fri & Sat Sep-Jun), the perfect lunch break in a relaxing, tastefully rustic setting. Nicolas de Lorgeril and his wife, Miren, have remodelled the old stables of the family vineyard into a tasteful wine bar and restaurant. Unadorned wooden tables and chairs, plenty of woodwork, the warm grey of the stone walls and an open fire in winter beneath a carved chimney breast: the decor is simple and uncluttered. The food, by contrast, is subtle, creative and, above all, exceptional value. Try, for example, the *tournedos de canard, sauce Cabardès*, a thick breast of duck in a sauce of Cabardès, the local *cru*. Before leaving, visit the *cave*, right next door, and perhaps pick up a bottle or two of Château de Pennautier, here at source. Take the D6113 from Carcassonne, direction Castelnaudary, and turn right onto the D203.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The waters of the Canal du Midi broaden into a minilake at the manmade **Grand Bassin**, bustling with craft in summer and a pleasant spot for a stroll around its perimeter at any time. Castelnaudary was the only significant port between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and the canal brought wealth both from the extensive passing water traffic and from cereals, grown locally and exported as flour or grains.

In the 17th century, 32 windmills twirled on every patch of high ground around the town. Now, only the restored **Moulin du Cugarel**, which continued milling until 1921, remains as a reminder. Slip up steepish rue du Château d'Eau, beside Hôtel de France et Notre Dame, to reach the windmill and orientation table, where you'll enjoy Tuscany-like views of the gentle Lauragais plain and, beyond, La Montagne Noire.

The motor boat **St Roch** (☎ 04 68 23 49 40, 06 62 03 49 40; www.saintroch11.com in French; ⚓ sailings 9am-6pm Apr-Oct) chugs around Le Grand Bassin on half-hour (adult/child €4/3) and one-hour (adult/child €7/5) circuits, leaving from quai du Port. It also does a daily two-hour cruise (adult/child €10/8) along the Canal du Midi, sailing at 2.30pm.

SLEEPING & EATING

Our pick **Hôtel de France et Notre Dame** (☎ 04 68 23 10 18; www.cassoulet.com; 2 av Frédéric Mistral; s/d €50/55; ☒ ☑ ☐) Wi-fi available; parking €5. Well established and over a century in business as both hotel and restaurant, the Hôtel de France has 17 excellent-value rooms, all large and with separate toilet and bathroom. There's no better place in all France to sample cassoulet than here in its restaurant (*menus* €20 to €30, mains €15 to €19.50). Said playwright, film director and renowned gourmet Sacha Guitry after dining here, 'Le Cassoulet de Castelnaudary était si bon, qu'en le mangeant j'ai cru me manger moi-même!' (The cassoulet was so great that, as I ate, I thought I was eating myself!). Eat in the bright, freshly renovated street-side dining room or the one at the rear with its warm, red colours and hand-painted murals. Your meal over, let the taste linger by taking away a can or jar of cassoulet, terrine, foie gras or other poultry product.

Hôtel du Canal (☎ 04 68 94 05 05; www.hoteldu canal.com; 2 av Arnaud Vidal; s €48-57, d €55-66; ☐) Free wi-fi and parking. This welcoming, contemporary place, right beside the Canal du Midi, has 38 rooms overlooking either the canal or the hotel's small garden. All except two have a bathtub, some come with a minifridge, all have

SKIRTING LA MONTAGNE NOIRE

This 105km day outing leads you westwards from Carcassonne to Castelnaudary, halfway point on the Canal du Midi. It then follows the flanks of La Montagne Noire through meadows and woodland with the broad, gentle Lauragais plain below and the Pyrenees crowning the southern horizon.

Speed along the A61 to Castelnaudary (p183) and allow at least an hour to explore the town. Leave Castelnaudary, following signs for Toulouse, then for St-Papoul and Saissac. Once you join the D103, you stay with it all the way, but for one curl, until Brousses.

Originally founded in the 8th century, the Benedictine **Abbaye de St Papoul** (☎ 04 68 94 97 75; adult/child €3.50/1.75; ⚓ 10am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, Sat & Sun only Nov, Dec, Feb & Mar, closed Jan) is worth a visit for its magnificent capitals alone. Those of its Romanesque apse were fashioned by the anonymous, peripatetic Maître de Cabestany (p40), whose distinctive carvings appear in parish churches throughout Languedoc-Roussillon (the abbey's former refectory has a small exhibition devoted to this master craftsman). Almost as impressive are the later, Gothic capitals of the cloister.

A further 15km brings you to Saissac, once a prosperous community thanks to its small-scale cloth mills. On a rocky spur stands the massive, substantially ruined pile of its mainly 16th-century **castle** (☎ 04 68 24 46 01; adult/6-15yr/under 6yr €3.50/2/free; ⚓ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm or 6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-5pm Sat, Sun & school holidays Nov, Dec, Feb & Mar).

In Saissac, briefly follow the D629 and turn left after about 2km to rejoin the D103, now signed St-Denis and Brousses.

From Brousses (p186), Montolieu (p186) is a well-signed 8km drive.

Leaving Montolieu, follow the D629 to return to Carcassonne via Pezens and the D6113.

fans, and all (a rarity in modern hotels) are equipped with a bidet. After beginning the day on the summertime terrace or in the breakfast room with its large windows giving onto the canal, you can borrow, for free, one of the hotel's bikes and go for a canalside spin.

La Belle Époque (☎ 04 68 23 39 72; 55 rue Général Dejean; menus €19-36, mains €17-21, grills €15-19; ☺ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, lunch Tue) Treat yourself to an aperitif from the long list of cocktails before tucking into a meal at this traditional restaurant with its upright bentwood chairs, pale-pink table linen and jolly mural of elongated 1920s figures posing on the promenade.

Le Tirou (☎ 04 68 94 15 95; www.letirou.com; 90 Av Monseigneur Delangle; menus €20, mains €16-24; ☺ lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, lunch & dinner Sat) Every major French gastronomic guide cites this primarily lunch-time venue and it's easy to see why. Le Tirou is renowned for its authentic local cuisine, including, perhaps inevitably, a lip-smacking cassoulet. Eat inside or, in season, on its attractive terrace giving onto the garden.

SHOPPING

Among Castelnaudary's many shops selling rich sausages, pâtés, terrines and preserves, two delicatessens stand out.

Maison Escourrou (☎ 04 68 23 13 93; www.escourrou.com in French; 30 rue de Dunkerque; ☺ Mon, Wed-Sat & mornings Sun) You'll recognise this place, its interior hung with diplomas and awards, by the stuffed goose that stares glassily through its window.

Escudier (☎ 04 68 23 12 79; 11 rue de Dunkerque) Further along the same street as Maison Escourrou, penetrate beyond the lovely wooden shopfront of Escudier. Everything at this smaller family concern is made, pickled and processed here on the spot.

Each Monday, there's a farmers market in place de Verdun.

Around Castelnaudary

Poterie NOT Frères (☎ 04 68 23 17 01; ☺ Mon-Fri), outside the hamlet of Mas Saintes-Puelles about 5km west of Castelnaudary, is the last surviving pottery from what was, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a major local industry. At this family concern, the Not brothers still throw by hand traditional pots, including the typical *cassole*: the only vessel, locals will insist, in which cassoulet should be allowed to simmer.

About 12km west of town, **Seuil de Naurouze**, the highest point on the Canal du Midi, marks the watershed between the Atlantic

and Mediterranean catchment areas. You'll scarcely notice the change in incline at this cycle-friendly spot with deep shade and a well-maintained towpath. Take advantage and rent a bike from **M and Mme Severac** (☎ 04 68 60 14 07; bike hire per hr/half/full day €5/8/13; ☺ 9am-7pm Thu-Tue Apr-Sep), who are based right beside the canal.

Brousses

Clearly signed from the hamlet of Brousses, the renovated **Moulin à Papier** (Paper Mill; ☎ 04 68 26 67 43; www.moulinapapier.com in French; adult/child €6/3; ☺ shop 10am-noon & 2-6pm daily, 1hr tours in French 2-8 times daily according to season) turns beside the River Dure. In the mid-19th century, nearly 70 paper mills and small-scale factories were powered by its waters. In the early 20th century, the advent of wood paste for paper-making demanded too large an investment for small producers and the mills rapidly fell into decline. The last one, which survived by producing cardboard for book binding, dolls and carnival masks, stopped turning in 1981. Brousses' renovated mill is much more than a museum to a dead practice. Revived, it produces and sells quality handmade paper fashioned from linen, cotton, rags, old jeans, straw and – to the manifest delight of younger visitors on the tour – horse dung. It's a 250m woodland walk from the parking area to the mill.

Montolieu

Montolieu, with over a dozen secondhand bookshops, will make bookworms squirm with pleasure. Sadly, the only one specialising in English titles closed down recently, but nearly all have a reasonable stock of books in the language.

The **Musée Michel Braibant** (☎ 04 68 24 80 04; rue de la Mairie; adult/child €1.50/free; ☺ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Apr-Dec, 2-5pm Mon-Sat Jan-Mar), on the main street, displays old binding and printing equipment.

The delightful, spruce **Les Anjes au Plafond** (☎ 04 68 24 97 19; www.lesangesauplafond.com; rue de la Mairie; r€55-68; ☺ Mar-mid-Dec; ☒) *chambre d'hôte* and restaurant is run by three enterprising ladies. The three bedrooms, each spacious, light and decorated in gay colours, have an equally dynamic original artwork by a local painter. The **restaurant** (2-/3-/4-course menu €14.50/17.50/21.50; ☺ noon-8pm Wed-Mon), bright with fresh flowers, has a different *menu* for each day of the week. Ingredients are fresh and organic wherever possible and all desserts are

whipped up on the premises. Why its name, Angels on the Ceiling? Look heavenwards...

LE MINERVOIS

With La Montagne Noire to the north and sliced through by the Canal du Midi on its southern flank, Le Minervois, sunbleached and with every spare patch seemingly colonised by vines, has a handful of sights, natural and manmade, that deserve your attention.

From Carcassonne to the Mediterranean stretches the world's largest wine-growing area. Le Minervois alone supports 30 cooperatives and more than 200 private wineries.

Minerve pop 100

Minerve, 45km from both Béziers and Narbonne, enjoys a spectacular position, dramatically poised on a limestone promontory way above the confluence of the River Cesse and the smaller River Brian. It's this as much as any attraction within the village itself that draws in visitors by the thousand in high summer.

The **Musée Archéologique** (☎ 04 68 91 22 92; adult/10-17yr/under 10yr €2/1.20/free; ☞ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mar-Nov) is something of a museum within a museum. Many of the displays are interesting enough in their own right, but most labels have remained untouched since the pre-word processor era. It's very much a geological display, with giant ammonites and trilobites discovered in the limestone lands around Minerve and pyrites from the worked-out gold mine of Salsigne, near Carcassonne. Other highlights include finds from the nearby Aldene cave (which revealed human footprints dating back 20,000 years), including a pair of bear skulls and some finely wrought Visigoth belt buckles.

In summer, when the water level's low to negligible, you can explore the two natural tunnels, 110 and 250m long, through which the River Cesse flows.

Relais Chantovent (☎ 04 68 91 14 18; www.relaischantovent-minerve.fr; s/d €35/42; ☞ Tue-Sun mid-Feb–mid-Nov; ☒), friendly and welcoming, has six simple, whitewashed rooms and makes an excellent budget choice. Reservations are essential, given its small capacity. Opposite and with magnificent plunging views of the River Brian gorge is its equally warmly recommended **restaurant** (menus €20-44, mains €14-20; ☞ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat & lunch Sun). The menu changes regularly

with the seasons – asparagus, a local speciality, in spring, for example, and truffle-based dishes with the onset of winter. Savour, any day, the scrambled egg with truffles macerated in white wine and alcohol. Here, too, it's prudent to reserve. If you've a head for heights, ask for a table on the slim exterior terrace.

Minerve is delightfully traffic-free so park – spaces are at a premium – on the far side of the modern bridge and walk in.

Castles & Caves

Nothing could be more starkly romantic than **Châteaux de Lastours** (☎ 04 68 77 56 02; http://chateauxlastours.lwd.fr in French; Lastours; adult/child €5/2; ☞ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm or 6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-5pm Sat, Sun & school holidays Feb, Mar, Nov & Dec, closed Jan), four ruined castles perched on a rocky spur high above the River Orbiel and its tributary, the Grésilhau. The oldest pair, the northernmost of the Cathar fortresses, remained unconquered and only fell to the crusader forces of Simon de Montfort when the defending lords negotiated a settlement. Beside the reception point is a small display of finds from a quarter of a century of archaeological digs. It's a stiff but exhilarating two-hour return trek to the castles. Ask for the accompanying brochure in English.

If time or energy are in short supply, you can enjoy a stunning view over the valley to the four castles on the opposite flank from the **belvédère** (viewpoint; adult/child €2/free, all admission free with castles entry), 2km away. Every Thursday in July and August there's a spectacular sound-and-light show.

Occupying the improbable premises of a converted textile factory, right beside the entrance to the Châteaux de Lastours, is one of the region's great restaurants, **Le Puits du Trésor** (☎ 04 68 77 50 24; www.lepuitsdutresor.com in French; Lastours). Its young chef, Jean-Marc Boyer, runs the main, Michelin-one-star **restaurant gastronomique** (menus €39-55, mains €21-31; ☞ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun) and also the adjoining **auberge** (menu €17, mains €8-10; ☞ lunch & dinner daily mid-Jun–Sep, lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun rest of yr), which shares the same kitchen. It's worth planning a day in Le Minervois around lunch here.

An attractive drive northwards from Villeneuve-Minervois along the valley of the River Clamoux brings you to **Gouffre de Cabrespine** (☎ 04 68 26 14 22; www.grottesdefrance.com; adult/child €8/4; ☞ at least 6 45min guided visits daily in French, Apr-Oct, self-guided tours 2-5.30pm

CANAL DU MIDI

The setting's simply arcadian as the golden sunflower and wheat fields of the Lauragais plain imperceptibly give way to the regimented vineyards of Le Minervois. From east of Castelnaudary to Carcassonne, the canal follows, broadly speaking, the line of the minor river Fresquel, now and again in tandem, usually at a certain distance, always straighter and more disciplined than its wayward, much more natural sister. From Carcassonne eastwards the Canal du Midi shadows the River Aude, sometimes as close companion, more often as a distant fellow-traveller.

Seuil de Naurouze (p186), just after the canal enters the *département* of Aude from the west, marks the highest point on the canal's trajectory from Toulouse to the Mediterranean. Here, at a trifling 190m above sea level, it takes something of an effort of the imagination to appreciate the significance of this understated spot. A modest obelisk honouring Pierre-Paul Riquet, the visionary who planned the Canal du Midi and forced through its execution, fittingly marks the watershed between the Atlantic and Mediterranean basins.

Around 12km eastwards, Castelnaudary (p183) is near-as-dammit halfway along the canal's trajectory. This much-underrated town is the sole significant port between Toulouse and the Mediterranean. At the manmade Grand Bassin, busy and bustling with leisure craft to this day, chandlers and boat repairers plied their trades and the grain harvests of the rich Lauragais plain were heaped aboard barges for shipment to distant markets.

Almost midway between the relative giants of Castelnaudary and Carcassonne, tiny Bram with its equally diminutive port is a lovely little haven, built in a circular pattern around its parish church.

The Canal du Midi sneaks discreetly through La Bastide, or La Ville Basse, the lower, less celebrated but no less charming half of Carcassonne (p174) and an ideal venue for a short canal joyride or longer boat rental. Near here, it meets and follows the snaking course that the River Aude has carved for itself over centuries. Eastwards, the triple-arched, 19th-century Le Fresquel aqueduct lifts both highway and canal, the one beside the other, over a shallow valley.

Trèbes, with its triple locks and ancient water mill, is barely 7km east of Carcassonne. Though smothered by traffic, it's a lovely little spot once you get down to canal level and walk free from the fumes. Arrive around lunchtime and relax on the restaurant terrace of Le Moulin de Trèbes (p184), where boats rise and fall before your very eyes as they squeeze themselves through the lock.

From Trèbes it's a tranquil haul along the canal beneath the gentle hills of Le Minervois and, more distantly, the altogether more spartan Montagne Noire, looming to the north. Soft lands of cereal slowly give way to vines, their regular lines marching with precision up to the horizon and striding over into the unknown and unseen.

Last, and most easterly (for this chapter), we retain a soft spot for little Homps (opposite), ignored by even the most detailed and yawn-inducing of French guidebooks yet managing to capture what the Canal du Midi's all about. With, as ever and all along the canal's length, its shade-imparting plane trees, a couple of modest cafés, a scuffed, just cycleable towpath and an *épicerie* where you can pick up basic foodstuffs and lots more, it has a canalside retail outlet that offers over 100 labels of Minervois wine, hoarding under one roof what it would take a diligent researcher a couple of weeks or more to sniff out.

Cruise-boat-rental companies along this stretch of the canal:

Castel Nautique (☎ 04 68 76 73 34; www.castelnautique.com; Port de Bram)

Connoisseur (www.connoisseur.fr) Castelnaudary (☎ 04 68 94 09 75; Le Grand Bassin); Trèbes (☎ 04 68 78 73 75); Homps (☎ 04 68 91 24 00; Port Minervois)

Crown Blue Line (☎ 04 68 94 52 72; www.crownblueline.com; Le Grand Bassin, Castelnaudary)

Les Canalous (☎ 04 68 91 25 99; www.camargueplaisance.com; Port Minervois, Homps)

Locaboat (☎ 04 68 27 03 33; www.locaboat.com; Argens Minervois)

Nautic (☎ 04 68 71 88 95; www.nautic.fr; 15 quai Riquet, Carcassonne)

For more on the Canal du Midi, see the boxed text p30.

Nov–mid-Dec, Feb & Mar, closed Jan), a chasm about 11km from Lastours. Extending deep into the mountainside, the Salle des Éboulis, its main chamber crossed by a high level walkway, is around 250m high, almost as tall as the Eiffel Tower. Significantly the largest, it's part of a whole network of underground galleries and passages, many with spectacular stalactites, stalagmites, coloured rock and crystals. Accompanied tours aren't obligatory and you're free to explore at your own pace, guided by the interactive information points en route.

Around 5km north of Lastours, **Grotte de Limouis** (☎ 04 68 77 50 26; adult/child €8/4; ♿ 4-8 45min guided visits daily in French, Mar-Oct, 3 visits daily Sun Nov), first explored in 1811, extends for nearly 700m into the mountain, where weird limestone and aragonite shapes, contorted over millennia by the waters, rear before you. Push on to the very end of the accessible part, about 500m from the entrance, to the cave's highlight – a gigantic 'chandelier' of whitest aragonite crystals, 4m high and 10m wide. Follow your way around with the English guide sheet.

Villages

Just outside **Villeneuve-Minervois**, 30km southwest of Minerve, there's a renovated, working **windmill** (☎ 04 68 26 57 56; www.moulin-benazeth.fr; adult/7-15yr/under 7yr €5/3/free; ♿ 10am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm May, Jun & Sep, 2-5pm Apr). The 45-minute guided tour (also possible in English) includes a video of how this long-defunct windmill was revived. It's a smart piece of marketing by the Domaine Bénazeth winery, responsible for its new life, which sells its quality Minervois wines at the shop on the site.

Caunes-Minervois, 6km east of Villeneuve-Minervois, is known for its distinctive pink marble, quarried in Roman times, still extracted today and evident in many of the village's more affluent historical houses and mansions. You'll also spot it in monumental buildings all over Languedoc and beyond. The settlement first spread around its Benedictine **abbey** (☎ 04 68 78 09 44; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €4.50/2/free; ♿ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun), founded in 780. Down in the crypt there are traces of the original church, while excavations have revealed the intricate, 12th-century herringbone-patterned flooring of the cloister. The

abbey's reception point is also the village **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 78 09 44; www.caunesminervois.com in French; same hours as abbey).

Hôtel-Restaurant Dalibert (☎ 04 68 78 00 54; Caunes-Minervois; menu €25; ♿ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun mid-Mar–mid-Nov) is within a Renaissance mansion (as you head for the toilet, stop to savour its delightful, if dilapidated, interior courtyard). Classical music plays and photos of the owner's great-grandparents keep an eye on you as you eat. There's no à la carte selection, but the one fixed menu has plenty of choice – though you may need an explanation of some of the more deliberately abstract definitions. You couldn't call it subtle cuisine and the owner has an irritating tendency to hum, but meat portions are large, and desserts (such as a particularly lemony *tarte au citron* and a giant chocolate mousse) are equally generous and lip-smacking.

The lovely little Romanesque church in **Rieux-Minervois**, 8km southeast of Caunes-Minervois, is known as **La Rotonde** (The Rotunda; ♿ 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm) for its 14-sided circular shape (imagine it with the side chapels, constructed later, stripped away). Its vigorously carved capitals were fashioned by the anonymous master sculptor the Maître de Cabestany (p40) or one of his apprentices. Don't overlook the striking, polychrome 15th-century *Entombment of Christ* in the chapel behind the main altar.

From the small port of **Homps**, on the Canal du Midi 12km south of Minerve, **Saint Ferréol** (adult/child €10.90/6; ♿ sailings 2.30pm daily Apr-Oct plus 4.30pm mid-Jun–early Sep & 10.45am mid-Jul–mid-Aug), a traditional *gabare* (canal barge) belonging to **Croisières du Midi** (☎ 04 68 91 33 00) does two-hour canal sailings.

Just beside the embarkation point, **Le Chai Port Minervois** (☎ 04 68 91 29 48; 35 quai des Tonneliers; admission free; ♿ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 3-7pm Sat & Sun May-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr), a consortium of more than 20 local winemakers, displays and sells at *cave* prices over 100 Minervois labels.

LIMOUX & AROUND

The route southwards from Carcassonne follows the valley of the River Aude, passing through gentle meadows and vineyards at river level and clinging to the slopes and rich deciduous woodland, before it enters

BLANQUETTE DE LIMOUX

No, not a white sauce to smother over veal but something altogether different that's peculiar to a small area around Limoux. It was in 1531 that the monks of the Abbaye de St-Hilaire (p192), deliberately or by some lucky chance, first put the bubbles into the local white wine, pressed from mauzac grapes. To this day, *blanquette méthode ancestrale* uses exclusively this same mauzac grape, which, because of fine white down on its leaves, led to the name *blanquette*. Sweeter and low in alcohol, it's above all a dessert wine. Blanquette de Limoux and Crémant de Limoux use a majority of mauzac grapes, blended in different proportions with chenin, originally from the Loire region, and chardonnay, the classic white grape of Burgundy. Both make an admirable aperitif or accompaniment to your meal.

As you travel the D118 or D104 between Carcassonne and Quillan, you'll pass by vineyards in plenty, each tempting you in for a sampling. The biggest player is **Caves du Sieur d'Arques** (☎ 04 68 74 63 46; www.sieurdarques.com; av du Mauzac, Limoux; ☎ 9am or 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm or 7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm Sun), which has a large tasting room. It also offers tours (€7, including a bottle to take away) that demonstrate how its range of wines (which include some fine reds too) are produced.

Typical of smaller family producers, **Domaine Castel-Nègre** (☎ 04 68 74 14 99; www.castel-negre.com; ☎ 10am-8pm mid-Apr-mid-Dec) produces more than 10 varieties of wine, all bottled on the premises, within its 14 hectares of vines. Look for signs 2.5km south of Alet-les-Bains.

a tight gorge as it threads its way towards wilder Cathar country.

LIMOUX

pop 9400

Limoux, famous for its carnival (see the boxed text p174), is an appealing alternative to Carcassonne for an overnight stop if you prefer to retreat to somewhere quieter. It's also an attractive venue for its own sake, ideal for exploring the Aude Valley, Cathar castles and into Roussillon and French Catalonia.

The town has two claims to wider fame and a pair of world records. Its exuberant carnival lasts from January to March, way beyond the usual Lenten limits that other carnivals observe, and is France's longest lasting. And Blanquette de Limoux, a very palatable bubbly, presents a credible case for being the world's first sparkling wine.

Information

Cyberpl@net (17 rue Toulzane; per hr €4; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-8pm Mon-Sat, 2-8pm Sun) Internet access.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 31 11 82; www.limoux.fr; promenade de Tivoli; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-7pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun) Shares premises with Musée Petiet.

Sights & Activities

The kernel of Limoux is **place de la République**, with its deep arcades, overlooked by half-

timbered houses and flanked by cafés and restaurants.

In the **Musée du Piano** (☎ 04 68 31 85 03; place du 22 Septembre; adult/10-16yr/under 10yr €3/2/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep), France's only piano museum, within the deconsecrated church of St Jacques, are around 60 keyboard instruments – pianos, upright, grand and square, clavichords, harmoniums and others you'd be hard put to name.

Musée des Automates (☎ 06 70 39 01 74; 4 rue Anne-Marie Javouhey; adult/child €5/3.50; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Jul-Nov, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Jun, 2-6pm Tue-Sun mid-Jan-Mar, closed Dec-mid-Jan) is draped in sensuous swaths of fabric and haunting figures that bob, bow and call you hither: these magnificent moving toys (though toys is too frivolous a word for such rich creations) will captivate you. Jean-Jacques Achache and Martine Morand ('spinners of dreams', they call themselves) have been creating *automates* for more than 30 years. Latterly, they've transformed a former factory into this magical, baroque cave of delight. You can also visit their adjacent studio and learn some of their secrets. This highly recommended personal creation (there are only about 15 such artists in the world) is 150m from the Musée du Piano.

Take time to visit the satisfying **Musée Petiet** (☎ 04 68 31 85 03; promenade de Tivoli; adult/10-16yr/under 10yr €3/2/free; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-7pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun), which displays the works of a fleeting

school of local artists who painted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Especially noteworthy are the canvases of the eponymous Marie Petiet (1854–93; the museum was donated to the town by her widowed husband). Locally born, she trained in Paris and died when only 39. The most vivid of her vigorous interpretations of local scenes and personalities is the outstanding *Les Blanchisseuses* (The Washerwomen). Entry is through the tourist office.

You might well smell the perfumed garden of **Jardin aux Plantes Parfumées** (☎ 04 68 31 49 94; www.labouichere.com; rue Dewoitine; adult/child €6/3; ☼ 10am–6pm mid-Jun–mid-Aug, 1–6pm May–mid-Jun & mid-Aug–early Oct), which extends over 2 hectares in the northern outskirts of Limoux, before you reach it. You can wander at will among some 2500 varieties of scented, colourful flowers, trees and shrubs.

On the east bank of the River Aude, just behind the municipal swimming pool, **Canoe Limoux** (☎ 06 86 57 80 68; www.canoelimoux.fr in French; rue des Violettes; ☼ yr-round) lays on canoe or kayak trips downstream to Limoux from Couiza (17km; adult/child €27/20) or Alet-les-Bains (10km; adult/child €20/15). Alternatively, you can take it easy and simply pootle around in a *pédalo* (€7 per hour).

Cycles Claude Taillefer (☎ 04 68 31 02 01; 18 Esplanade François Mitterand) rents out mountain bikes.

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **Grand Hôtel Moderne et Pigeon** (☎ 04 68 31 00 25; www.grandhotelmodernepigeon.fr; 1 place Général Lederc; s €80–140, d €95–169) Opposite Limoux's covered market, this venerable hotel and its restaurant in themselves merit a pilgrimage. Originally a convent, it became a private bourgeois mansion, then a bank (see the magnificent stained-glass window, a paean to commerce, halfway up the wide main staircase), then, in 1897, a hotel. Why 'modern' and why, for heaven's sake 'pigeon', you may legitimately ask. The name comes from the hotel's first proprietor, one Monsieur Pigeon, who installed a bathroom on every floor – a rarity at the time and regarded as truly modern. Does fate have a sense of humour, maybe harmony? The present owner is Jean-Luc Desmoineaux, 'Mr Sparrows', as he cheerily tells you. Long established the hotel may be but, with an investment of €1 to €1.25 million in the last five years, it also offers 21st-century comfort. Bedrooms are on

two floors, the lower one for smokers, the top nonsmoking ('that way because nonsmokers are fitter,' laughs Mr Sparrows). Spacious bedrooms have swaths of drapes, nearly all have a four-poster bed and all have bathrooms of Carrara marble. The large suites have stylish wrought-iron furniture, salon and separate second (ideally children's) bedroom.

Dine in its well-regarded restaurant (*menus* €44 to €49.50, mains around €35), with its original mouldings and smiling cherubs gazing down or, in summer, in the hotel's lovely floral interior courtyard. And save room for a sample or three from the groaning cheeseboard with a choice of over 25 varieties.

La Goutine (☎ 04 68 74 34 07; 10 rue de la Goutine; 2-/3-course lunch menu €11.80/14.60, dinner menu €22.80, hot dish of the day €14; ☼ lunch Tue–Thu, lunch & dinner Fri & Sat; ▼) In this land of strong meats such as cassoulet, *confit de canard* and foie gras, La Goutine is a welcome all-vegetarian alternative. Dishes, based upon fresh organic ingredients for the most part, change daily '*selon le goût de la Muse*' (as the muse sees fit).

our pick **La Maison de la Blanquette** (☎ 04 68 31 01 63; 46 bis promenade du Tivoli; lunch menu €18.50, other menus €26.50–40, mains €15–22) What a satisfying place this is! As you enter, there's an area for tasting the rich range of wines produced around Limoux, including, of course, its renowned Blanquette. Penetrate deeper to the restaurant, where the service is jolly, joshing and bustling, and where portions are fit for trencherfolk. Included with each of the *menus* is an aperitif of Blanquette de Limoux and half a bottle per person of local cabernet sauvignon, merlot, chardonnay or syrah rosé, all from Caves du Sieur d'Arques (opposite). For dessert, if you've the staying power, indulge in the *mousse de fraises*, fresh strawberry mousse crowned by a thick, curling quiff of Chantilly cream.

For self-caterers, there's a good **farmers market** (place Général Lederc) every Friday in the old and otherwise sadly unused covered market on place Général Lederc, opposite Grand Hôtel Moderne et Pigeon.

Getting There & Away

Three SNCF buses and six trains daily connect Limoux and Carcassonne (35 minutes). Southwards, five buses and two trains run to Quillan (40 minutes). Three daily buses (more during school terms) of **Teissier** (www.teissier.fr) run between Carcassonne and Quillan, two of them continuing to Axat (1½ hours).

ABBAYE DE ST-HILAIRE

The D104, less travelled than the D118, is a pretty alternative route between Carcassonne and Limoux, running through vineyards enclosed by *garrigue*, cork oak trees and wild strawberry bushes.

Precisely 13km north of Limoux, you reach the **Abbaye de St-Hilaire** (☎ 04 68 69 62 76; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun), in the village of the same name. Ask for its explanatory guide sheet in English. Even the most diehard unbeliever may wish to make a pilgrimage here, where Blanquette de Limoux first sparkled.

The arcades of this Benedictine abbey's harmonious 14th-century Gothic cloister are supported by slender double columns. Abutting it, the abbot's house has a lovely 16th-century painted ceiling, much touched-up in a 19th-century restoration (look for the three vignettes in the top right-hand corner, the middle one unequivocally erotic; the ecclesiastical 'restorers' omitted to blank out these relics of the time when the house was a noble mansion).

On the south side of the refectory, there's an unusual stone reading chair, set into the wall up high, from which the scriptures would be read as the monks dined.

Highlight of the Romanesque abbey church is the sarcophagus of St Sernin, carved by the Franco-Catalan Maître de Cabestany (p40), the itinerant 12th-century master sculptor. Though traditionally called a sarcophagus, it's too narrow to take a body and was probably originally an altar.

Leave the cloister by the steps on the south side to poke your nose into the caves, carved into the rock, where Blanquette de Limoux first fizzed. Before moving on, perhaps pick up a bottle or two from the outlet of **Caves Anne de Joyeuse** – could there be a happier name? – in the parking area immediately north of the abbey. You won't find Blanquette here, but you will come across quality red wines. Reds make up 85% of the production of this cooperative of growers, bearers for 15 years of the Protect the Planet label for its commitment to sustainable agriculture and biodiversity.

ALET-LES-BAINS

Alet-les-Bains is the first of five small towns to the south of Limoux that, together, make for a pleasant day's outing by car or bike. This little village, tranquil and bypassed by

the D118, lies 8km south of Limoux. Here, depending upon your mood, you can relax to your heart's content or sign on for some vigorous outdoor activity.

You may well have heard the name before. Alet-brand bottled mineral water is on sale throughout southern France. The 'les-Bains' tag is for the thermal springs, first exploited in Roman times but no longer used, at least for the moment, for their reputedly curative properties.

Healthy segments of the original late-12th-century **ramparts** still stand, either freely or incorporated into later structures, while on or around arcaded place de la République, at the hub of the village, are some fine half-timbered houses.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 69 93 56; info.aletlesbains.free.fr; av Nicolas Pavillon; ☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm or 7pm daily Easter-Aug, 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Feb-Easter & Sep-mid-Dec, closed mid-Dec-mid-Feb) is beside the substantial ruins of the 12th-century **Abbaye Notre Dame** (adult/child €3/2; ☎ same hours as tourist office), for which the tourist office sells tickets allowing self-guided visits, supported by an explanatory leaflet in English.

With its cables, ropes, pulleys and treetop links, **Accro'Parc** (☎ 04 68 69 94 86; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug only) is for all levels and degrees of boldness. Beginners can sign up for the green circuit (adult/child €12/10), while a swing through all four levels costs €20/17. It's just south of the village.

At the village's northern extremity and run by the same crew as Accro'Parc, **Eau Vive** (☎ 04 68 69 92 67; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug only) lays on kayaking and canoeing trips, with or without a guide.

The medicinal spa may be closed, but you can still drink and dunk yourself in Alet's waters. Around 200m upstream from Eau Vive, do as the locals do (often by the crateful) and fill your water bottles from the flowing taps of the old **village wash house**. Children can sit on the old blocks where the weekly wash was thrashed and paddle their feet in the waters that leave the ground at a constant 24°C. Above and in season, all can enjoy the Olympic-size **swimming pool**, which is also fed from the springs.

The characterful **Chambre d'Hôte Maison Val d'Aleth** (☎ 04 68 69 90 40; www.valdaleth.com; 14 av Nicolas Pavillon; s/d/tr incl breakfast €37/47/64; ☎), with four guest bedrooms, still preserves its 18th-century floors and doors, together with a chunk of the

village ramparts. British hosts Christine and Christopher Cranmer, Alet residents for 15 years, readily dispense information about the area and lend from their collection of walking and driving maps. There's a large garden for guest use. Warmly recommended.

The Cranmers also run **Camping Val d'Aleth** (site for up to 2 people €14, extra person €3.60; ☎ yr-round), a smallish, impeccably maintained 37-plot camp site extending below the house and along the riverbank with a backdrop of the abbey ruins. There's a children's playground and a brand-new sanitary block and good splashing and swimming in the Aude, where you can dip a line into the trout-stocked waters. They also rent mountain bikes (€9/15/70 per half-day/full day/week).

Once the local bishop's residence, Alet's only hotel, the **Hostellerie de l'Évêché** (☎ 04 68 69 90 25; www.hotel-eveche.com; av Nicolas Pavillon; r €55-64; ☎ Apr-Oct), a Logis de France, overlooks the river within its 3 hectares of wooded, grassy grounds. Nudging the abbey ruins, it could scarcely be more romantic. Its 30 rooms with tiled floors are simply – even frugally – furnished, but the setting is superb and the hotel runs a first-class restaurant (mains €11 to €21, menus €26 to €42).

ESPÉRAZA

Just off the D118, Espéraza has two splendid small museums within the same building beside the village station.

Over the years, the upper Aude Valley has revealed France's greatest concentration of dinosaur remains. Fair enough, so most of the specimens in **Dinosauria** (☎ 04 68 74 26 88; www.dinosauria.org in French; adult/child €7/5; ☎ daily 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Feb-Jun, Sep & Oct, 1.30-5.30pm Nov-Jan, closed major holidays) are faithful replicas made of resin, but there are still some pretty scary skeletons, including a fearsome 22m-long Mamenchisaurus. There's a decent representation of locally found bones, teeth, eggs and footprints, and the illustrative panels, in both French and English, are informative and give just the right amount of information. In July and August there are guided visits to nearby **Campagne-sur-Aude**, site of most of the local dinosaur finds. Ask at the museum for times.

The **Musée de la Chapellerie** (☎ 04 68 74 00 75; admission free; ☎ daily 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Feb-Jun, Sep & Oct, 1.30-5.30pm Nov-Jan, closed major holidays) recalls the not-so-distant

past when the town, like several neighbouring communities including Quillan, drew its wealth from hat making. Difficult to believe today, but during most of the first half of the 20th century Espéraza was the world's second-largest maker of hats, surpassed only by Monza in Italy. A walk around takes you through the hat-making process, stage by stage, machine by machine. Fancy a fedora? Perhaps a panama? Maybe a classic beret? Pick from the stylish creations for sale, on display as you exit.

Beside the museums is a well-stocked boutique that specialises in honey and other local products – wines, cakes, biscuits and much more.

To get off the beaten track – literally, and perhaps mentally too – from Espéraza, head towards Limoux, then take a minor road eastwards, signed Luc-sur-Aude, about 2km north of Couiza. A pretty 4km run through vineyards and *garrigue* brings you to **Solaroma** (☎ 04 68 74 20 65; www.solaroma.com; Domaine de Castillou; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri), well signed at every one of the track's several twists and turns. Here, at what was once the farm of Abbaye Notre Dame in Alet-les-Bains (opposite), Californian émigré Lorrie Hargis and her three-woman team distil perfumes from their organically grown mountain herbs, lavender and roses, supplemented by essences from places as diverse as Madagascar, Morocco, the Dominican Republic and Corsica. The sweet-scented boutique sells its own perfumes, essences, bath gels, shampoos and other

ROUND THE RENNES

An attractive 25km circuit along a side valley, through woodland, then up and over high open grasslands on a little-travelled back road lets you take in Rennes-les-Bains and Rennes-le-Château, two places with nothing in common but their names.

In Couiza, take the D613 eastwards and turn right onto the D14 after 6km, to reach Rennes-les-Bains after a further 2.5km.

Continuing, turn right after 3.75km at a large sign advertising Rennes-le-Château, then left at a T-junction 6.5km later to reach the chateau.

Return to the junction and continue straight ahead as the road drops steeply to return to Couiza.

THE MYSTERY OF RENNES-LE-CHÂTEAU

Béranger Saunière was appointed parish priest to Rennes-le-Château in 1885. That's certain and attested. What's also sure is that this priest of a humble, poverty-stricken village all of a sudden began living a life of luxury and spending conspicuously. He renovated his church, which was on the point of collapse, built himself *Béthania*, a grand villa in mock-Renaissance style, Tour Magdala, a tower to house his library, and, in the garden, a glorious, spacious glass conservatory where he could sit and contemplate the magnificent panorama extending southwards as far as the Pyrenees. And he entertained affluent guests from faraway places.

From here on there are multiple versions to his story and even more hypotheses. How did a poor parish priest suddenly acquire such wealth? Plenty of villagers attest to seeing him digging away at night in the churchyard and there was talk of strange parchments. Theories and fancies abound. Was it a cache of Templar treasure? A stash hidden by the Cathars? Could it be Visigoth loot, brought back from Jerusalem? A find of medieval gold coins? Wealth hidden from the anticlerical hordes of the French Revolution? Or even, whisper it low, the Holy Grail itself? In the renovated church, conspiracy theorists will ask, why the grimacing devil with staring eyes below the piscine, on the left as you enter? And how is it that in one of the friezes both Mary and Joseph hold a baby?

A more plausible, though equally unattested explanation is that the abbé used his forceful personality to persuade rich Catholic benefactors to invest in his parish. Then, when the scam became evident, they were too embarrassed at their gullibility to make a public fuss.

The Catholic Church also has a less than transcendental explanation of all this. It accused the abbé of dipping his fingers into church coffers and defrocked him in 1915 – something, wagging village tongues at the time would say, the priest was wont to do to his housekeeper, Marie Dénarnaud, who lived on in seclusion when the abbé died a couple of years later. She passed away more than 30 years later, taking her secrets with her. She and her master lie together, side by side, in the church cemetery.

You'll probably find the small plaque on the church's south wall in memory of this tiny hamlet's victims of WWI, their sepia photos staring at you, more moving than all the speculation and hearsay.

The vast majority of visitors to the site are as normal as yourself. This said, Rennes-le-Château has also become a magnet for believers in the occult, treasure hunters, *Da Vinci Code* oddballs, and those who place their faith in crop circles and the like.

toiletries, all concocted on the premises from natural ingredients.

RENNES-LES-BAINS

On the right before you enter the tiny spa village of **Rennes-les-Bains** (www.renneslesbains.org in French), you can explore the original, dilapidated *bains*, which were just that – simply body-sized individual concrete baths in which bathers steeped themselves. On the other side of the road, the warm waters, now untamed, still spurt into rocky pools, where you can dunk yourself for free, before they tumble into the River Salz, a tributary of the Aude.

Beneath the first of the dour spa buildings that flank the single street, there's a large, modern, naturally heated **swimming pool** (adult/child €4.50/2).

RENNES-LE-CHÂTEAU

What an upstart, paltry folly this is, when set beside most of the stolid, doughty, venerable

chateaux of Languedoc! But what a story it has to tell (see the boxed text above).

Entry to the church and small museum in the modest dwelling where the abbé actually lived is free. Allow a further half-hour to explore the rest of the complex, known as the **Domaine de l'Abbé Saunière** (☎ 04 68 74 72 68; www.rennes-le-chateau.fr; adult/child €4.50/3.20; ☎ 10am-6pm May–mid-Sep, 11am-1pm & 2-5pm daily Mar, Apr & mid-Sep–Oct, Sat & Sun only Nov–mid-Jan, closed mid-Jan–Feb).

QUILLAN & AROUND

Quillan is a good springboard for visiting Le Pays de Sault, enjoying an active day on the river or exploring the major Cathar castles. The town is sandwiched between the west bank of the River Aude and busy *blvd Charles de Gaulle*, beside which lie its hotels and the train and bus stations.

If you're passing by on a Saturday morning, browse its excellent farmers market in the parking lots alongside *blvd Charles de Gaulle*.

Information

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 20 07 78; www.aude-en-pyrenees.fr; sq André Tricoire; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Jun–mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat rest of yr), near the station and just off blvd Charles de Gaulle, occupies a distinctive Art Deco building that was once the town's bathhouse.

Around 11km south of Quillan, at the Rond-Point du Pont d'Aliès, where the D117 leaves the D118 to head towards the main Cathar fortresses, the seasonal **Maison des Pyrénées du Pays Cathare** (☎ 04 68 20 59 61; pat-axat@wanadoo.fr; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug) is well endowed with information about Le Pays de Sault and Cathar country.

Sights & Activities

You can exhaust the sightseeing pleasures of Quillan itself by a stroll along the riverbank, followed by an easy five-minute clamber from Pont Vieux up to the squat rectangular stone pile on the east bank, all that remains of the town's 13th-century castle. Built on the site of a Visigoth settlement, it was sacked by the Huguenots in 1575, then partly dismantled during the 18th century.

At the southern limit of Quillan, the **Centre International de Séjour Sports Nature**, known more simply as **La Forge de Quillan** (☎ 04 68 20 23 79) offers a huge range of outdoor activities – including **Forest Grimp**, an adventure circuit up in the trees – for both those who are staying there (see opposite) and droppers-in.

Several rafting and canoeing outfits operate on the stretch of the Aude between Quillan and Axat, especially within the **Défilé de la Pierre Lys**, a narrow gorge with towering, near-vertical walls to which climbers cling. In addition to simple canoeing, kayaking and rafting, between them the outfits offer a range of other waterbound activities with franglais names such as canoraft, tubing, challenge, kayak-air, hot dog and hydrospeed. This last, where you balance your torso on a baby bogie board and go with the current, is especially exhilarating when the current's running fast. The others we leave you to research.

Based in season north of Axat, where the small river Qurbajou flows into the Aude, **Roc Aqua** (☎ 04 68 20 53 97, 06 70 80 08 26; www.rocaqua.com in French; ☎ Apr–mid-Oct) does rafting, hydrospeed, hot dog and canyon descents.

In the grounds of Camping Le Moulin du Pont d'Aliès (right), **Pyrene Rafting** (☎ 04 68 20 52 76; www.pyrenerafting.com in French; Rond-point du

Pont d'Aliès; ☎ yr-round) offers the usual watery fun, plus canyon descents, climbing and – an original touch, here – donkey hire.

Just south of the village of St-Martin de Lys, **Rafting Aude** (☎ 06 87 37 24 74; www.embarquement-immediat.net in French; St-Martin de Lys; ☎ Jul & Aug) prides itself on its capacity to set droppers-in up and away immediately. It too offers water sports and canyon descents.

Just upstream from Pyrène Rafting, the particularly welcoming **Sud Rafting** (☎ 04 68 20 53 73; www.sudrafting.fr in French; Rond Point du Pont d'Aliès; ☎ Apr-Sep) does rafting, hydrospeed, canoeing and kayaking. For variety, sign on for its full-day *cocktail eau vive* (wild-water cocktail) of two activities and lunch.

As you pass by Belviane, 3km south of Quillan, call by **Les Ruchers de la Pierre Lys** (☎ 04 68 20 18 58). The Sardas, father and son, have been harvesting honey from the area for nearly 30 years – but not just any sweet honey. With 12 sets of hives set all around the Aude *département* and into neighbouring Ariège, their honey comes in different flavours: chestnut, pine, heather, thyme, lime – more than 10 in all.

In summer the **Train du Pays Cathare et du Fenouillèdes** (p235), a tourist train with open-top carriages on fine days, trundles from Axat along a spectacular route for 60km eastwards into Roussillon.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Le Moulin du Pont d'Aliès (☎ 04 68 20 53 27; www.alies.fr; Rond Point du Pont d'Aliès; per person/site €6.50/10; ☎ Apr-Oct; 🚰) Beyond the boxy mobile-home area, this camp site, right beside the river and with a couple of tiny beaches, offers safe water play (there's also a pool and a small children's playground) and has plenty of shade. There's a snack bar and small grocery store. Reservations are all but essential in July and August.

La Forge de Quillan (☎ 04 68 20 23 79; laforge.quillan@wanadoo.fr; dm incl breakfast €18; ☎ Apr–mid-Sep) This outdoor activity centre (above) functions both as the town's HI-affiliated youth hostel and a stay centre for groups.

Two hotels in Quillan, the one just up the road from the other, offer great-value accommodation and run equally reliable restaurants.

Hôtel Cartier (☎ 04 68 20 05 14; www.hotelcartier.com; 31 blvd Charles de Gaulle; r with toilet €37, with bathroom €47-55; ☎ mid-Mar–mid-Dec) Free wi-fi. Run by the

fourth generation of the Cartier family, this attractive Logis de France is altogether more cheerful than the Hôtel Canal. Its 28 rooms are clean as a new pin and have particularly large washbasins. The more expensive standard doubles are much larger, with a bigger bathroom and deep tub. The hotel's air-conditioned restaurant (*menus* €18 to €28.50, mains €13.50) is strong on local dishes.

Hôtel Canal (☎ 04 68 20 08 62; www.hotel-canal.com in French; 36 blvd Charles de Gaulle; r €40) Although this hotel has something of a gloomy, hangdog air about it, bedrooms are trim, tidy and well kept. In the same way, disregard the conventional, time-warp appearance of its restaurant (four-course *menus* €19 to €32, mains €13 to €18). The cassoulet's homemade and the four-course *menus* are imaginative and excellent value.

Shopping

Lumil (☎ 04 68 74 02 92; Zone Commerciale Plage Sud) In what's little more than a shed within the shopping centre just north of Quillan, Martine Clervoix and her daughter confect wonderful biscuits, chocolates, nougat, spicy cakes and jams, using wherever possible local ingredients – such as honey from Les Ruchers de la Pierre Lys (p195) and *garriguet*, speciality of the upper Aude and a delightful fusion of raisins, long macerated in Muscat de Corbières sweet wine, almonds, honey and flour.

Getting There & Around

Five SNCF buses and two trains daily run to Limoux (40 minutes), all except two extending to Carcassonne (1¼ hours). Additionally, three daily buses (more during school terms) run by **Teissier** (www.teissier.fr) go to/from Carcassonne, and two head south to Axat (20 minutes). Two buses daily connect Quillan with Perpignan (1¼ hours).

You can rent mountain bikes from **Cycles Bennasis** (☎ 04 68 20 18 91; 22 blvd Charles de Gaulle).

CATHAR CASTLES

When the crusade against them forced the Cathars into the arid mountains that once marked the frontier between France and Aragon, they sought refuge in these inaccessible fortresses that had long protected France's border. In a long but fulfilling 195km day of driving between Carcassonne and Perpignan (or vice versa) you can take in the major four of these

romantic mountain fastnesses: Puilaurens, Peyrepertuse, Quéribus and Aguilar.

Wrap up warmly for nine months of the year and brace yourself for gusts that can almost sweep you from the battlements. In summer, pack plenty of water and slap on the sunscreen since you're that little bit closer to heaven in every sense.

Ask at any participating site for the *Passeport des Sites du Pays Cathare*. This gives one free child entry and a €1 reduction on each adult entry to 19 castles, chateaux, abbeys and museums in Cathar country.

For other significant Cathar sites, see the chateaux Montségur (p198), Lastours (p187) and de Termes (p124), and the village of Villeroque-Termenès (p124).

For a driving route between Carcassonne and Perpignan that takes in the major Cathar strongholds, see p181.

For readers of French, www.payscathare.org has good practical and historical information on all significant Cathar sites.

CHÂTEAU DE PUILAURENS

It's a stiff climb up to 697m and the remains of **Puilaurens** (☎ 04 68 20 65 26; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☎ 9am–8pm Jul & Aug, 10am–5pm or 6pm Apr–Jun, Feb–Jun & Sep–mid-Nov), bounded by its four extant towers. At the time of the Albigensian Crusade, Puilaurens belonged to the Saissac family, attested as protectors of the Cathars, numbers of whom took refuge here. Later, the castle, like its sisters along the former border with Aragon and Spain, lost all strategic significance with the signing of the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659, which shifted France's frontier with its southern neighbour to the crest line of the Pyrenees themselves. After serving briefly as a prison, the castle, abandoned to the weathering of wind and time, fell into a long decline, from which, like its fellow fortresses, it was rescued by tourism.

CHÂTEAU DE PEYREPERTUSE

This **chateau** (☎ 04 68 45 40 55; www.chateau-peyrepertuse.com; adult/6–15yr €5/3, with falconry show €7.50/4; ☎ 9am–8.30pm Jul–Aug, to 8pm Jun, 10am–6pm or 7pm Sep–Dec & Feb–May), with its sheer drop of several hundred metres on all sides, is the largest and most impressive of these former frontier castles. At 800m and overlooking the present-day hamlet of Duilhac, it was once a vital element in the kingdom's defences against the periodic depredations of Aragon. For four

THE CATHARS

The term *le pays Cathare* (Cathar country) recalls the cruel Albigensian Crusade – the hounding and extermination of a religious sect called the Cathars.

The Cathars were the fundamentalists of their day: people of extreme beliefs, warily regarded by the mainstream yet convinced that they alone knew the one true way to salvation. Cathars (from the Greek word *katharos*, meaning 'pure') believed that God's kingdom was locked in battle with Satan's evil world and that humans were base at heart. But, they reckoned, a pure life followed by several reincarnations could free the spirit. Nostalgic for a return to the simplicity of early Christianity, reacting against worldly Rome and preaching in *langue d'oc*, the local tongue, the sect gained many followers. Its most extreme adherents were the ascetic *parfaits* ('perfects'), who followed strict vegetarian diets and abstained from sex.

In 1208 Pope Innocent III preached a crusade against the Cathars. The Albigensian Crusade had a political as much as a spiritual dimension, giving northern rulers the chance to expand their domains by ingesting Languedoc into the French kingdom. In the first ever crusade on Christian territory, up to 300,000 northerners – barons, knights and their retainers – marched southwards. Led by the implacable Simon de Montfort and frustrated by long sieges, they showed no mercy once a castle or town capitulated.

The major Cathar centres in Béziers, Carcassonne, Minerve and the dramatically sited fortresses of Montségur, Quéribus and Peyrepertuse were taken and hundreds of 'perfects' were burnt as heretics. In Béziers as many as 20,000 faithful were slaughtered. Montségur witnessed another cruel massacre in 1244, when 200 Cathars, refusing to renounce their faith, were burned alive in a mass funerary pyre. In 1321 the burning of the last 'perfect', Guillaume Bélibaste, marked the end of Catharism in Languedoc.

centuries, from the signing of the Treaty of Corbeil in 1258, the castle, like its neighbours, marked the frontier with Spain. Even on a less than clear day, you can spy from its battlements the castle of Quéribus, 5km to the southeast as the crow flies. Falconry displays and medieval combat are part of its summer fiesta.

CHÂTEAU DE QUÉRIBUS

Perched on a rocky pinnacle, **Quéribus** (☎ 04 68 45 03 69; adult/child €5/3, audioguide €2; 🕒 9am–8pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am–7pm Apr–Jun & Sep, 10am–5pm Oct–

Mar) sits 728m high. After the fall of Montségur in 1244, the Cathars made their last stand within its squat keep, which fell after a debilitating three-week siege in 1255. On a clear day you can make out on the horizon both the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees.

CHÂTEAU D'AGUILAR

Smallest of the quartet of chateaux, **AgUILAR** (☎ 04 68 45 51 00; adult/child €3.50/1.50; 🕒 10am–7pm mid-Jun–Sep, 10.30am–5.30pm Apr–mid-Jun, 11am–5pm Oct–mid-Nov) is sadly in need of care and attention. Easiest of access and only 96m above sea level, it overlooks the vineyards of Haut-Fitou. In 1246 it was annexed to the crown of France, just like its better-preserved sisters, as a consequence of the Albigensian Crusade.

LE PAYS DE SAULT

Le Pays de Sault, where Languedoc meets the Midi-Pyrénées region, is a wild, underpopulated, undervisited upland. Bounded by the River Aude to its east and dropping westwards towards the River Ariège, this austere plateau, which averages around 1000m above sea level, is rich in bird and animal life. You stand a good chance of seeing deer and wild boar and

SENTIER CATHARE

To really explore Cathar country, take the Cathar Trail. This tough but fulfilling 200km signed walking route runs from the Mediterranean to Foix (p199), in the pre-Pyrenees. It's divided into 12 recommended stages, though you're free to walk it as you will, and takes in the major castles. *The Cathar Way - A Walker's Guidebook* by Alan Mattingly gives a detailed description of the route. For more complete information, carry *Le Sentier Cathare*, published in French with explicit maps by Rando Éditions.

an even better one of spotting golden eagles and Egyptian vultures planing overhead. Its relative isolation also encourages a diversity of plant life, including more than 50 varieties of orchid alone. Clad in vast expanses of natural forest, 90% of which is beech or fir, it's also great trekking territory if you stick to the more open spaces – as does, largely, the Sentier Cathare (p197), which snakes through from its starting point in Foix.

PUIVERT

pop 400

Puivert, 16km from Quillan, is a pretty little village, set in a gentle, fertile plain, a true oasis if you've been out hiking all day.

Musée du Quercorb (☎ 04 68 20 80 98; www.quercorb.com/musee in French; 16 rue Barry du Lion; adult/6-15yr/under 6yr €4/1.60/free; 🕒 10am-7pm mid-Jul-Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Apr-mid-Jul & Sep, 2-5pm Oct, closed Nov-Mar) is a little gem of a museum. It illustrates traditional life through a series of faithfully reconstructed settings: the kitchen with the sound of clucking hens in the background, a replica forge where bellows roar and cowbells clang, sets illustrating the work of the barrel maker, wool carder, jet carver and, for those who can't get to see the original, a reproduction of the musicians' gallery, highlight of the town's chateau. Ask for the English version of its guiding pamphlet.

Little remains of the original structure of **Château de Puivert** (☎ 04 68 20 81 52; www.chateau-de-puivert.com in French; adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €5/3/free; 🕒 9am-7pm May-mid-Nov, 10am-5pm mid-Dec-Apr, closed mid-Nov-mid-Dec), site of the capitulation of the besieged Cathars to Simon de Montfort's principal lieutenant in 1210. What you see today dates to the first half of the 14th century. This was a time of transition, when chateaux were becoming places of ease and comfort, accommodating their style to the more sophisticated ethos of the Renaissance, and no longer stark medieval sites of last defence. From the medieval era, however, the Château de Puivert retained its reputation as a welcoming venue for poets and troubadours. Its highest point in every sense is the **Salle des Musiciens**, or Musicians' Room, on the top, 4th floor of the keep. Here, musicians of the time are sculpted in vigorous detail, playing the lute, flute, tabor, tambourine, hurdy-gurdy and other instruments of the day.

Less than 500m from the village, you can swim or enjoy a shaded picnic beside its

artificial lake. Here, **Camping de Puivert** (☎ 04 68 20 00 58, 06 22 45 15 74; per person/site €3/6; 🕒 May-Sep) offers superb views of the castle and its keep. Plots are separated by mature hedges.

CHÂTEAU DE MONTSÉGUR

This ruined Cathar **castle** (☎ info 05 61 03 03 03; www.montsegur.fr in French; adult/child incl museum €4/2.10; 🕒 9.30am-6pm or 7.30pm May-Oct, core hours 10.30am-6pm Feb-Apr, Nov & Dec, closed Jan) perches at 1208m atop its *pog*, the delightful Occitan word for rocky spur. Administratively just within the *département* of Ariège, for cultural and geographical purposes it's part of Cathar country and Le Pays de Sault.

A village – home to around 500 Cathars, protected by the massive stone chateau above – once clung to steep terraces hacked around the base of this sugarloaf hill. In 1243, royalist troops besieged the castle, to which the Cathar villagers had retreated, bringing up ballistae – giant catapults that hurled shaped, rounded rocks, each weighing around 40kg (several, including the largest, weighing in at 96kg, are on display in the museum). After a siege lasting nearly a year, the Cathars capitulated. On 16 March 1244, more than 200 – those who had refused to recant and embrace the orthodox Catholic faith – were burnt to death on a pyre at the base of the hill. Today, a small monument at the beginning of the ascent in the **Prat dels Cremats**, the Field of the Burnt Ones, commemorates their martyrdom.

It's a steep ascent to the crest (reach the plaque to local poet Maurice Magre and you've accomplished three quarters of the climb), but it's stepped nearly all the way. Nothing's left of the castle, apart from its exterior shell, nor of the dwellings, all of which were of wood. But it's well worth the effort for the magnificent wraparound vista. Allow one to 1¼ hours, including viewing time at the summit.

Down in the valley, around 2km beyond the castle car park, the hamlet of Montségur has a small Cathar **museum** (☎ info 05 61 01 10 27; admission free with castle entry; 🕒 core hours 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm May-Aug, 2-4.15pm or 6pm Sep-Dec & Feb-Apr) that displays finds from archaeological excavations over the last 50 years, mostly relating to the Cathar period. Most striking are the skeletons, found buried near the castle, of a couple who were probably victims of the massacre, since within each was embedded an arrowhead.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel-Restaurant Costes (☎ 05 61 01 10 24; www.chez-costes.com in French; r with shower €29, with bathroom €44-55; ☹ Feb-Dec; ☒) Wi-fi available. Converted from three village houses, this friendly hotel-cum-restaurant-cum-café is now in its third generation of owners. Its 13 rooms are big and comfortable and most have attractive oak floors. For true sybaritic indulgence, sign up for one of the four superior doubles, where the jacuzzi dispenses both soothing aromatherapy and chromotherapy treatment.

There's a café and a first-class restaurant (lunch *menus* €14.50, two-/three-course dinner €26/31, mains €19 to €21), where the food and even the wine are 100% organic and the bread is baked on the premises. Eat in the attractive restaurant, all local stone and wood, or outside on its ample terrace. The hotel also carries a good mini-bookshop on the Cathars, including a title or two in English.

LA VALLÉE DE L'ARIÈGE

The upper reaches of La Vallée de l'Ariège lead into the Pyrenees. It's not only the grandeur of the mountain range, rearing at the head of this glacial valley, that takes the breath away. Underground too is a place of superlatives, where you'll find Europe's largest cave and longest underground river.

The valley and its offshoots offer some great pre-Pyrenean walking, caving and canoeing. The limestone hills that loom up from it are riddled with caves and caverns, several open to the public. The booklet *Game for Anything*, available at any tourist office, used in conjunction with *Amateur de Découverte*, a free map of the area, gives an infinity of ideas for places to visit and outdoor pursuits.

FOIX

pop 9700

Foix, county seat of the Ariège *département*, sits in the crook of the confluence of the Rivers Ariège and Arget. Its 11th-century church and streets lined with medieval, half-timbered houses are watched over by the imposing Château des Comtes de Foix.

The composer Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924) grew up in Foix, where his father was a teacher at the local *lycée*, which today bears the name of his son. There's a statue in Fauré's honour

on the wide main boulevard, which also carries his name.

Though little or no evidence remains, minerals from the earth around Foix once brought wealth to some and great wealth to a very few. From medieval times until the late 19th century, gold panners would work the Ariège downstream from Foix, seeking the flecks and grains of gold that the river flushed down. Iron-ore extraction has just as long a history and the lode was mined in almost as individual a way. Villagers would haul out their day's pickings (the maximum daily quota was controlled by a cooperative of miners) and sell it, on the spot and for cash, to muleteers, who would transport the load to Vicdessos, just off the valley, where it was sold on to the foundry managers.

History

In medieval times, the Comtes de Foix, up there in importance with the Counts of Carcassonne and Toulouse in those days, had major political clout. Supporters of the Cathars, they only briefly lost their power in the general capitulation of Languedoc that marked the end of the crusade against the Cathars. In the late 13th century, the counts became corulers of Andorra in the Pyrenees, then inherited the Béarn region immediately to the west of their traditional lands. Most famous of a long lineage was Gaston III (1331–91), more commonly known by the name he coined for himself, Gaston Fébus, 'Gaston the One Who Resembles the Sun'. This larger-than-life writer of poetry, who invited troubadours and poets to his court, was also a keen hunter and a wily, autocratic politician with a ruthless streak, killing his son and heir and contriving his brother's murder. Flawed though he was, he's revered to this day in the valley as a strong ruler who fought for the interests of himself and his people.

Fébus and his successors spent most of their time in the newly acquired lands of Béarn, and from this time began Foix's slow decline, accentuated in the 17th century when its bishopric was taken away and bestowed upon Pamiers, to the north. Its revival began after the Revolution, when it was designated capital of the Ariège *département*.

Information

Cyberland (13 rue des Marchands; per hr €3; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 2-7pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 9.30am-7pm Fri, 11am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Sat) Internet access.

Laverie la Lavandière (cnr rue de la Faurie & rue Noël Peyrevidal; ☎ 8am-8.30pm) Self-service laundrette.

Taxiphone (4 av Général de Gaulle, per hr €2; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1-8pm Mon-Sat, 2-8pm Sun) Beside the post office; offers internet access and cheap international phone calls.

Tourist Office (☎ 05 61 65 12 12; www.ot-foix.fr in French; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Near the covered market on cours Gabriel Fauré.

Sights

CHÂTEAU DES COMTES DE FOIX

Foix's imposing **castle** (☎ 05 34 09 83 83; www.sesta.fr in French; adult/under 13yr/13-18yr €4.30/2.20/3.10; ☎ 9.45am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.45am-noon & 2-6pm Jun & Sep, 10.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-May; guided visits in English 1pm daily Jul & Aug), with its three crenellated, gravity-defying towers, stands guard over the town. It's changed its appearance frequently over the centuries – most significantly in the 19th, when it had an elaborate makeover, overseen by Paul Boeswildand, son-in-law of Viollet-le-Duc, who planned Carcassonne's reconstruction.

At the time of its rejuvenation it was in much more robust health than so many of its abandoned peers throughout France: Foix castle had always been occupied. Becoming barracks when the Counts of Foix decamped to Béarn in the 14th century, it later served as the local lock-up (seek out the graffiti scratched into the stones of the round tower by hapless, anonymous inmates) until the 19th-century restorers moved in.

The chief attraction is the magnificent view of the Ariège valley, Pyrenees and salmon-pink tiled roofs of Foix from the top of the circular tower. It's a treat that you more than merit after climbing the steep cobbles that lead to the castle, then hauling yourself up the tower's 134 steps.

In the square central tower is the resplendent four-poster bed reputed to be the one where Henri IV slept. Starting life as Henri III of Navarre and last of the Comtes de Foix, he relinquished his other titles when he assumed the throne of France in 1489. The castle **museum**, wordy and rather dull (each display room has a hand-held explanatory board in English) is something of a disappointment.

ÉGLISE ST-VOLUSIEN

Originally this **church** (place St-Volusien) belonged to Foix's historically prominent abbey (the

abbey was dissolved after the Revolution and its buildings today form part of the Préfecture building next door). Today's structure was rebuilt almost entirely in the 17th century, since the church that replaced the original Romanesque building was all but razed in 1580 during the Wars of Religion. Then, Protestant mobs took the bones of the eponymous local saint, St Volusien, and hurled them from the castle battlements. It's a cavern of a church, a vast ecclesiastical hangar, 55m in length. Its highlight, sheer size apart, is the set of sculpted choir stalls and misericords, originally carved in 1670 for the church of St Serin in Toulouse, that grace the otherwise unadorned choir.

JANICOL

Founded by husband-and-wife team Jean and Nicole, **Janicol** (☎ 05 61 65 25 63; www.janicol.com in French; 8bis rue de l'Espinet; ☎ 9am-7pm daily Jul-Sep, Fri & Sat Oct-Jun) is a recently established microbrewery. Here, you can buy their beers and, if the workload's low, visit the brewery. You'll find their products (savour especially their Bison Noir, or Black Bison) in specialist shops and at markets around the region.

Activities

Go canyon clambering, canoeing, mountain biking or hiking with **Pyrenévasion** (☎ 05 61 65 01 10; www.pyrenevasion.com), based in Cadirac, just outside town.

For walking, the tourist office sells *Le Pays de Foix à Pied* (€7.80), an excellent guide to 23 short and more challenging walks in the area, varying from two to seven hours.

Sleeping

Camping du Lac (☎ 05 61 65 11 58; www.campingdulac.com; 2 people & car €13.50-20, 4-person mobile home €47-86; ☎ yr-round; ☎) Beside the RN20 2.5km north of Foix, this attractive camp site has a snack bar, open June to September. Despite its name, it lacks a *lac* (though the pond's but a short walk away) but has a reasonably sized swimming pool.

Ferme de Caussou (☎ 05 61 65 34 42; caussou@voila.fr; Cos; r with/without kitchenette €55/50; ☎) This renovated farmhouse has six comfortable rooms, most with views over the plain to Foix's castle. Tuck into a copious four-course dinner (€17) on this working farm and leave with some of its lamb, rabbit, duck, sausages or fresh-picked vegetables. Look for the farm's sign, 3km from the tourist office and beside the D117, direction St-Girons.

Hôtel Restaurant Lons (☎ 05 34 09 28 00; www.hotel-lons-foix.com; 6 place Dutilh; d €52-71; ☒) Once a coaching inn, this well-managed hotel is now a three-star Logis de France with attractive, good-value rooms, 10 of which overlook the river. The hotel's restaurant (lunch/dinner *menus* from €11/14; closed for lunch on Saturday from September to mid-July) offers similar river views through its picture windows.

Hôtel du Lac (☎ 05 61 65 17 17; http://hotel.du.lac.foix.free.fr; rte de Toulouse; r €60-75; ☒ ☑ ☎) Free wi-fi. The 26 ample-sized rooms come with flat-screen televisions and particularly comfortable mattresses. Each one is individually decorated. Ask for one of the six at the rear that, at no extra price, overlook the lake. Surrounding the swimming pool are 10 chalets, similarly priced (€15 extra with kitchen facilities). Bathrooms are smallish, but large mirrors give a greater sense of space. There's a cosy bar with plenty of woodwork. The hotel's set back from the N20, just beyond Camping du Lac, and runs a quality lakeside restaurant, La Table du Lac (two/three courses €31/38).

Eating

Saveurs d'Ailleurs (☎ 05 61 02 98 50; 41 rue des Chapeliers; 2-course veg/normal menu €8.50/10, mains €5-8.50; ☎ 11.30am-3pm Mon-Fri) Established by five immigrant women who first met on a literacy course, the lunchtime-only Flavours From Far Away does exotic dishes from the Arab world and Orient, to eat in or take away.

Le Jeu de l'Oie (☎ 05 61 02 69 39; 17 rue de la Forie; mixed platters €10-14.50, mains €6-12.50; ☎ Mon-Sat Jul-Sep, Tue-Sat Oct-Jun) Look for the goose sign hanging outside this friendly place where you can see the chef working his magic before you. The restaurant is particularly strong on meat dishes such as *rognons de veau sauce au Cognac* (veal kidneys in a brandy sauce) and *fricassé de canard à l'Hypocras* (duck simmered with Hypocras, the tippie from Tarascon, up the valley – see p202). It also has a pleasant street-side summer terrace.

Boutique à Croustade Martine Crespo (☎ 05 34 09 34 27; 21 rue des Marchands; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon, to 6pm or 7pm Tue-Sat) Call at this attractive small restaurant with terrace, beside a quiet pedestrian square, to taste its *croustades*. This puff-pastry pie, typical of Le Couserans to the east, comes both savoury and sweet and with a huge choice of fillings. The *formule croustade* (€16) includes an entrée and both a savoury

and a sweet *croustade*. Also on offer are home-made lemonade and delightful juices of apple and bilberry, sourced from local fruits. There's a surprise for Anglophone readers that you won't necessarily discover easily...

Le Sainte Marthe (☎ 05 61 02 87 87; place Lazéma; menus €23-42; ☎ lunch & dinner daily Jul & Aug, lunch & dinner Thu-Mon & dinner Tue Sep-Jun) Toulouse and Castelnaudary may squabble for the title of originator of cassoulet, but you won't taste a more full-bodied, heartier one than here at this much-garlanded restaurant. The house recipe with all its ingredients and infinite seasonings is lyrically described in a full half-page of text on the printed menu. And the white beans (*lingots d'Ariège*) that give the cassoulet body are all sourced from the valley.

SELF-CATERING

In town, two tempting delicatessens call to self-caterers.

Aux Saveurs et Délices (☎ 05 61 03 18 48; 37 rue Labistour) In a charming half-timbered house, this place has an ample selection of bottled fruits, pickles and pâtés, jams, sausages, wines and ciders, mostly from around the Ariège département.

Les Terroirs du Plantaurel (☎ 05 61 65 05 00; 3 rue de la Préfecture; ☎ Tue-Sat) Beside the church, Les Terroirs is similar, if smaller, and has a good repertoire of cheeses.

Getting There & Away

Regular trains (€12.30, 1¼ hours) connect Toulouse and Foix. They're much more frequent than the intermittent bus service between the two.

AROUND FOIX Labouiche

Beneath Labouiche, 6km northwest of Foix on the D1, flows Europe's longest navigable underground river ('Venice of the Ariège' proclaims the publicity with more than a whiff of hyperbole). You can take a spectacular 1500m, 75-minute **boat trip** (☎ 05 61 65 04 11; adult/child €8.50/6.50; ☎ 9.30am-5.15pm Jul & Aug, 10-11.15am & 2-5.15pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10-11.15am & 2-4.30pm Sat & Sun Oct-mid-Nov) along part of its length. In high summer, when over 1000 visitors a day go with the flow, be prepared for a wait of up to an hour. Try to arrive in the early morning and wrap up warmly whatever the month – it's a constant 13°C 60m underground where the boats ply.

Les Forges de Pyrène

In Montgailhard, 4.5km south of Foix, **Les Forges de Pyrène** (☎ 05 34 09 30 60; www.sesta.fr in French; adult/5-11yr/12-18yr/under 5yr €7.50/4/6/free; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 1.30-6pm Jun & Sep, shorter hours rest of yr) spreads over 5 hectares. The main exhibition illustrates some 125 trades including a host of lost or dying skills such as glass blowing, tanning, thatching and nail making. In summer the site becomes a living museum of Ariège folk tradition as actors in costume play the role of crafts-folk such as blacksmith, baker, cobbler and basket weaver.

Tarascon

pop 3500

In the limestone hills around Tarascon is one of Europe's greatest concentrations of caves on the grand scale. The town itself has little to detain you, apart from its tiny distillery producing a revived medieval liqueur.

One small hillock disturbs the overall flatness of this riverside village. On it, the Tour de Castella, with a large round clock on one face, is all that remains of Tarascon's castle, demolished long ago.

Hypocras (☎ 05 61 05 60 38; www.hypocras.com in French; 1 rue de la Croix de Quie; admission free; 🕒 3-7pm Tue-Sat) is the tipple of choice in the valley. Legend has it that this drink was brought to France by the crusaders and that luminaries such as Gaston Fébus (p199), the most illustrious of the Comtes de Foix, enjoyed it. But, goes the story, the recipe fell into oblivion in the 18th century and a copy was rediscovered in the 20th. However dubious you may find the pedigree, it's a pleasant drink, originally taken as a tonic or medicine and nowadays more usually sipped as an aperitif or dessert wine. At the distillery showroom, near the tourist office, ebullient Jean-François Séguélas, third generation of these long-established Tarascon vintners, explains with passion the family product.

You don't expect to see a replica of a 1950s American diner in a small town in the pre-Pyrenees. But there on the main drag is **La Bécané** (☎ 05 61 03 61 72; 28ter av de Sabart; meals around €12; 🕒 Thu-Tue), slang for motorbike, and indeed with a couple of vintage models propped up inside, biker paraphernalia all around, high chrome bar stools, stark tilework and Buddy Holly staring down. The food ain't subtle, but the *hamburger maison* beats any fast-food

competition and is, as the menu avers, *fait avec amour* (prepared with love).

Grotte de Lombrives

Near the village of Ussat-les-Bains just south of Tarascon is Europe's largest underground **cave** (☎ 05 61 05 98 40; 🕒 daily May-Sep & school holidays). You can choose from several different routes, ranging from 1½ hours underground (adult/child €7.50/4.50) to – cave owners are given to exaggeration hereabouts – a five-hour 'journey to the centre of the earth' (€36/25), and an even longer seven-hour exploration (€44/30), new in 2008.

Grotte de Niaux

Snaking into the hillside 100m above the Vallée du Vicdessos, this remarkable **cave complex** (☎ 05 61 05 10 10; www.sesta.fr in French; adult/13-18yr/5-12yr/under 5yr €9.40/7/5.80/free; 🕒 yr-round) has revealed rock paintings of an antiquity and quality comparable to those at Lascaux in the Dordogne and Altamira in northern Spain. Unlike these two more famous sites, you can still visit the real thing, though it will require some forward planning. Since human presence is a threat (our very breathing can destroy the natural pigments), numbers are limited to groups of 20. Reservations are essential and can only be made by phone (there are English-speaking staff at the end of the line). Between April and December, there are from three to 11 guided visits daily, two of which are in English.

The wide mouth of the vast entrance cave, 55m high, narrows abruptly to a slim passageway 1.8m high and 1.45m wide, through which visitors, each issued with a flashlight, squeeze. The sheer grandeur of the site (just one element of a complex network that riddles the mountain) impresses as you penetrate 800m deep as far as the Salon Noir (Black Chamber). The rock paintings depict horses, bison, stags and ibex, all painted in colours derived from natural minerals and animal fat. Were they a record of successful hunting kills? Or shamanic and talismanic? Theories abound, but no one knows. What's more sure, thanks to carbon dating, is that the pictures were drawn over a relatively short time, between 13,900 BC and 12,900 BC.

The modern entry building resembles some giant, rusting insect, protruding from the mouth of the cave. Within it are a series of explanatory panels in French.

CAVE MAN

The discovery and first exploration of many of the cave complexes in and around La Vallée de l'Ariège, such as the Grotte de Niaux and Grotte de Bédeilhac, can be attributed to the Abbé Breuil (1877–1961). Father Breuil, or, to give him his full name, Henri Édouard Prosper Breuil, was a deeply religious man with a formidable intellect who was also a talented draughtsman. Many of the earliest reproductions of prehistoric cave paintings came from his pen.

An ordained priest and university professor, he wrote a prodigious number of books and articles. He studied cave art in the Dordogne area, introducing the world to the key site of Lascaux, and he also researched the equally significant site of Altamira in northern Spain.

He was also an avid traveller and his researches took him to exotic destinations such as China, Somalia, Ethiopia and South Africa, where, towards the end of his career, he continued his pioneering research while holding a professorship at the University of Witwatersrand.

The entrance to the cave is 5.25km west of the N20, at the exit for Tarascon.

If your schedule doesn't allow the planning that a visit requires, you can get a good sense of what's within from a visit to the Parc de la Préhistoire (below).

Musée Pyrénéen de Niaux

Midway between the N20 and the Grotte de Niaux, this splendid private **folk museum** (☎ 05 61 05 88 36; www.musee-pyreneen-de-niaux in French; adult/child €8/5; ☎ 9am–8pm Jul & Aug, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Sep–May) demands a stop. For more than 25 years Max Déjean (see p204), writer and photographer, has been foraging for the tools, artefacts and equipment of rural Ariège – items such as the set of knives used for slaughtering pigs before abattoirs became the norm, an entire village school classroom, carriages, clothes, a couple of scarecrows, a massive still that once rumbled from farm to farm to distil excess wine, vintage motorbikes rescued from lonely garages, and other wondrous bric-a-brac.

Parc de la Préhistoire

This **prehistoric park** (☎ 05 61 05 10 10; www.sesta.fr in French; adult/5–12yr/13–18yr/under 5yr €9.40/5.80/7/free; ☎ 10am–8pm Jul & Aug, to 6pm Mon–Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun Apr–Jun, Sep & Oct) offers a sensible and sensitive treatment of how our early ancestors lived. Particularly child-friendly, it's signed from the roundabout on the N20 just north of Tarascon.

Begin by walking the timeline that leads you back to the age when the Grotte de Niaux was first occupied. Through a variety of high-tech devices, the Grand Atelier presents the art of early man, including faithful reproductions of the paintings in the Grotte de Niaux's main chamber. Outside, there's a

'sound maze', a flint-knapping demonstration, a hunting section, tents and primitive shelters to crawl in, and plenty of other activities for kids. It's all very hands-on, and a guide sheet in English gives the text of all major information panels.

Other Caves

If you're not yet feeling troglodyte tendencies or if you want to avoid the crowds that can build up in high summer at major sites, consider these two caves. Each would be a star attraction if it was anywhere else in France but the Ariège valley, where the competition is fierce.

The yawning opening of the **Grotte de Bédeilhac** (☎ 05 61 05 95 06; www.grotte-de-bedeilhac.org in French; adult/child €9/5; ☎ 90min visits 10.30am–5.30pm Jul & Aug, 2.30pm & 4.30pm Apr–Jun, Sep & school holidays, Sun 3pm rest of yr), 35m wide and 20m tall, leads to a huge, 1km-long chamber within which is a rich variety of Palaeolithic paintings and carvings, mainly from the Magdalenian period, around 15,000 years ago. The cave is 5km from Tarascon along the D618.

The **Grotte de la Vache** (☎ 05 61 05 88 21; www.grotte-de-la-vache.org; adult/child €9/5; ☎ 90min visits 10am–5.30pm Jul & Aug, 2.30pm & 4pm Apr–Jun, Sep & school holidays) may be the smallest cave in the area, but it has thrown up by far the most archaeological remains. Its Salle Monique, where a band of prehistoric hunters established their camp, has yielded a rich treasure of carved bones and antlers, flint tools and weapons, of which only a fraction are on display. To get there from Tarascon, take a signed left turn shortly before the Grotte de Niaux.

Riding the River

The River Ariège offers some of France's finest canoeing. Two reliable operators are

MAX DÉJEAN

Max Déjean lives in a trim villa right beside his Musée Pyréneén de Niaux. You feel it has to be this way since the museum consumes such a large part of his time and passion. His love for the area is manifest and his roots go deep – very deep. ‘We know our family has lived hereabouts ever since the 16th century. Maybe longer,’ he says, adding with a twinkle, ‘Mind you, my great grandfather spent 10 years in California. If his wife hadn’t persuaded him to come back to the mountains, I might be American!’

His museum, now more than 25 years old, began with less than 500 pieces and now holds more than 4000. ‘Before we opened, my wife and I spent five years assembling what we thought of as a database: the objects themselves, of course, but also photos, lots of them, and boxes of tapes recording the voices of the old folk.’

Nowadays, aided by his mother, Odette, and daughter, Anne-Claire, either he buys new items at prices that clearly hurt, or they’re donated. ‘In those early years, we’d collect things that the old folk had no further use for. Today, the same article has turned chic and costs a fortune at auction,’ he says ruefully. ‘Mind you, don’t think they came free in those days. Lots of things we found, yes. But we’d also visit villagers’ houses, door to door. If they got an inkling you were interested in a piece, the old peasant mentality kicked in and negotiations got seriously tough!’

‘We began collecting and documenting at the last possible moment,’ he muses as he shows us around, ‘just as a rural world that had existed for centuries was disappearing for ever. And so rapidly...’

There are stories to so many of the items. Running his hand over a rough-hewn circular cupboard, carved from the trunk of a thick, centuries-old pine tree, he says, ‘A man called Gaston carved this for his mountain cabin. Everyone called him Sansou (Penniless) because he was always broke. I never knew him; he died in 1940, way before my time. But look, here’s his photo. I got it from his family, who also gave me the cupboard.’

He’s also proud of the portable shepherd’s cabin, used in summer when the flocks were led to the higher grasslands. ‘They’re common enough elsewhere in France but very rare indeed around here.’ And of his set of milking buckets. ‘Everyone has milking buckets,’ he scoffs, ‘but not ones like these. Look at the curved shape, the design, the way the milker sits astride. That’s very Ariège!’ Then he directs us to a pair of bear muzzles, one for a mother, one for a cub. ‘I got these at a sale of stock belonging to a collector in Paris. But they came with full documentation, they’re from round here, for sure.’

‘And,’ he says proudly, with a parting sweep of the hand as he shows us to the door, ‘I’ve done all this without a single centime of public subsidy.’

based beside the river, about 4km south of Tarascon.

Ariège Évasion (☎ 05 61 05 11 11; www.ariège-eva sion.com in French; Ussat-les-Bains; ☽ Apr-Oct), a well-established canoe and kayak outfit based 750m from the N20, lays on 3km, 6km, 12km and 15km canoe trips (€11, €15, €20 and €25) and also canyon descents. In winter, the team changes footwear and leads snowshoe treks. It also runs a well-maintained riverside **camp site** (person/site €5/5; ☽ yr-round), offering – how about this for an enticer? – a free half-hour per day of canoeing or kayaking for every site.

The name’s incongruous, but **Water Ploof** (☎ 06 31 72 86 58, 06 84 53 29 49; www.waterploof.com in French; Ussat-les-Bains; ☽ Apr-Sep) offers activities both sporty and fun. At its base less than 1km upstream from Ariège Évasion, it offers similar

canoe or kayak journeys of 6km or 12km, and also rafting trips (half-/full day €25/50).

Les Aigles du Château de Lordat

Leave the N20 at Luzenac for a steep 5km climb to the romantic 955m-high ruins of the mainly 14th-century Château de Lordat. The cableway and moving buckets that you pass under, for all the world like particularly uncomfortable bubble lifts, are bringing down talc from the quarries (opposite) for processing at the factory in the valley below. Here on this rocky spur, **Les Aigles du Château de Lordat** (☎ 05 61 01 34 22; adult/child €6.50/5; ☽ flights 11.30am, 3pm & 4.30pm daily Jul & Aug, 3pm Wed-Mon Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct) is a raptor show. It stars around 30 buzzards, falcons, owls and other raptors (not, however, the venerable Egyptian vulture, who died of

arthritis in 2008) that wheel, glide and do their stunts during a 45-minute spectacle.

La Carrière de Talc de Trimouns

Within the long, undistinguished factory building that hugs the river in the village of **Luzenac**, 9km northwest of Ax, around 10% of the world's talcum powder is processed. In summer, there are one-hour guided visits to the **talc quarries** (adult/child €7.60/2.70; ☎ 5 daily Jul & Aug, 4pm May, Jun & Sep–mid-Oct). Up high at 1800m and a 15km drive from Luzenac, giant machines claw at the hillside, extracting the planet's softest rock. Allow 20 minutes for the drive from Luzenac and join the group at the quarry car park. By the time you leave, you'll probably have inadvertently picked up enough to sprinkle between your toes for the rest of your days.

Ax-les-Thermes

pop 1500

With over 60 natural hot-water springs, Ax-les-Thermes (elevation 720m) came into being as a spa town. Reinventing itself, it nowadays also flourishes as a small winter skiing destination and base for summertime walking. It lies at the confluence of three rivers: the Ariège – here's scope for confusion – the Oriège and the smaller Lauze.

The village's name derives from the Latin *aqua*, meaning water, modified to Aqs, then Ax, while Les Thermes is for the thermal springs, or spa. Its waters (you get a strong whiff of sulphur as soon as you near one of the several outlets), spurting from the hillside at a scalding temperature of 78°C, the hottest in the Pyrenees, have been used for medical purposes for centuries.

INFORMATION

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 05 61 64 60 60; www.vallees-ax.com in French; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–7pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9am–noon & 2–6pm rest of yr) is on av Delcassé. It sells three walking guides (each €5) – *D'un Village a L'Autre: 23 Balades au De'part de 15 Villages, Lacs et Torrents: 20 Randonnées* and *Crêtes et Sommets*, detailing 17 walks in the area.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The heart of town is place du Breilh, on one side of which is the **Bassin de Ladres**, a shallow pool built in the 13th century to soothe the wounds of Knights Templar injured in the Crusades and the ulcers of the town's leper colony. Pull off

your socks, follow the example of the knights and steep your feet in its warm waters.

Little remains of old Ax, which has suffered from several devastating fires over the years. There are, however, a couple of interesting narrow streets with overhanging buildings between place du Breilh and place Roussel.

The long-established **Thermes du Teich** (☎ 05 61 65 86 60; ☎ Mar–mid-Nov), beside the River Oriège, have a pool, a sauna, a hammam and an aquagym (€12.80 per session), open to all comers.

Strictly contemporary, the fitness centre of **Le Grand Tétrás** (☎ 05 61 65 86 00; www.eurothermes.com in French; av Delcassé) also has a pool, sauna, jacuzzi, hammam and minigym (€13 per session), open to all.

Most modern of all, the brand-new building beside the casino in place du Breilh – still under construction when we last visited – is what was provisionally called the **Centre Thermoludique du Couloubret**. This leisure complex for the hale and hearty promises to be a place where all can splash, swim and relax in the warm waters for the sheer fun of it.

There's a **patinoire** (skating rink; ☎ 06 13 55 92 12; per hr incl skate hire €5; ☎ 1–10.30pm daily Jan–Apr & school holidays, Wed, Sat & Sun rest of yr) in the Parc du Casino. It's flooded for ice skating in winter.

SLEEPING & EATING

Le Chalet (☎ 05 61 64 24 31; www.le-chalet.fr; 4 av Turrel; r€50–56; ☎ Dec–Oct; ☎) The rushing of the swift-flowing River Lauze beneath will lull you to sleep at this attractive hotel-restaurant, a Logis de France, that overlooks the Thermes du Teich. Even if you aren't staying here, it's well worth dropping by to dine at its excellent restaurant (*menus* €26 to €45, mains around €19; open for lunch Tuesday to Sunday and for dinner all week during school holidays, open for lunch and dinner Tuesday to Saturday and lunch Sunday during the rest of the year).

our pick La Petite Fringale (☎ 05 61 01 36 40; rue Piétonne; menus €15–30, mains €14–20; ☎ closed Oct & Wed outside school holidays) Small – you might even say squashed – and with a kitchen that's bigger than the dining area, it's folksy, friendly, hippie at the edges and international, the walls a clutter of souvenirs from exotic holidays abroad. Its cuisine, by contrast, couldn't be more French. Specialities are pig, prepared in myriad ways, Ariégeois dishes and fondues. Portions are large, and clients stagger out satisfied. If you don't believe us, check the enthusiastic

graffiti tributes in the toilets. Down a pedestrianised alley near the Bassin de Ladres, it also has a small summertime terrace.

La Pizzatière (☎ 05 61 64 33 95; 2 rue Rigal; pizzas around €8) A couple of doors away from La Petite Fringale, this place stands out from Ax's dozen or so quick-fix pizza joints by the huge range of takeaways it offers and its 55cm-diameter giant for the truly ravenous.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most buses and trains serving Foix (see p201) continue as far as Ax.

Vallée d'Orlu

You can happily spend a whole day exploring and enjoying the three activities on offer at the head of the short Vallée d'Orlu. From the N20, it's a pretty 7.5km drive along the D22, following the Oriège river to road's end, where once there was an old forge.

At the **Maison des Loups** (☎ 05 61 64 02 66; www.maisondesloups.com in French; adult/4-12yr/under 4yr €6.50/4.20/free; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Apr-Jun, to 7pm Jul & Aug, 11am-5pm Sep & Oct), begin by watching the DVD, very visual and not too language-bound, with its twin themes of wolves around the world and the animals and plants of the Pyrenees. Then, take your time walking the 1km observation trail (or take the shorter option of about 500m). En route are seven observation towers. Try to coincide with feeding time (at noon, 3pm and 5pm in July and August; at 3.30pm only during other months). Along the *sentier traces*, children can enjoy guessing what the 15 footprints, all of Pyrenean animals and birds, belong to, then check each animal's call in the *auditorium*.

The highly recommended **Observatoire de la Montagne** (☎ 05 61 03 06 06; www.observatoire-montagne.com in French; adult/6-11yr/12-18yr/under 11yr €6.80/4.20/5.20/free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am or 11am-6pm Tue-Sun or Wed-Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct), right beside the Maison des Loups and the initiative of the local mayor, is a wonderful introduction to the natural life of the Pyrenees. Each of the small galleries represents one of the five zones, from valley farmland, through deciduous forest, evergreens and upper grasslands to the sparsely vegetated summits. And each explores the impact of the five main 'players': minerals, climate, water, vegetation and humankind. There are plenty of knobs and buttons that bring up short video clips and plenty of things to touch and sniff. The natural materials – cross-sections

of trees, dried grasses and compositions of stones and pebbles – are also aesthetically pleasing. It's gently didactic, pushing a firm ecological message, but it's also lots of fun. It's just a pity for non-Francophone visitors that, at least for the moment, such a resource is exclusively in French.

For something more vigorous, sign on for a three-hour session (all ages are catered for) at the **Akro Branch d'Orlu** (☎ 05 61 05 97 33; www.acrobranche-ariège.com in French; according to age €10-20; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-6pm or 1-6pm Sat & Sun May, Sep & Oct, 1-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Jun) adventure playground and assault course in the woods.

LE COUSERANS & AROUND

The D117 runs west, connecting Foix with St-Girons and St-Lizier, the actual and former main towns of the wild Couserans region. The emptiest corner of an underpopulated *département*, Le Couserans stretches southwards into the Pyrenees. It's harsh yet beautiful country where steep valleys split the mountains, down whose flanks tumble the myriad tributaries of its two main rivers, the Salat and the Lez.

ST-LIZIER

pop 1500

Nowadays a sleepy little place atop a hillock where even the sound of a car is an intrusion, St-Lizier was, in its time, a force to be reckoned with. It's easy to see why as you look up from the valley below. There, lordling it over all, is the massive pile of the Palais des Évêques, the Bishop's Palace, its very presence making clear to all around where power lay. From the 5th century until its suppression after the French Revolution, St-Lizier was the seat of the bishopric of Couserans. Its second bishop, one Licierius, was canonised by Rome and gave his name to the town.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 05 61 96 77 77; www.ariège.com/st.lizier; ☎ 10am-7pm daily mid-Jul-mid-Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat rest of yr) is on place de l'Église, opposite the church. In summer, it arranges guided visits that take in the church, its treasury and cloister, and an authentic 18th-century pharmacy.

At the time of writing, the 17th-century **Palais des Évêques**, within which are elements

of the original cathedral and the **Musée Départemental de l'Ariège**, was closed for extensive renovations.

The **church**, downgraded from its former status as cathedral, is a quirky little number. With its brick and stone octagonal tower and unadorned brick main portal it looks conventional enough from the outside. But once within, you sense how its transept and apse are decidedly out of kilter with the alignment of the nave. Head for the apse and its faded 12th-century frescos, above which a decidedly glum 14th-century Christ in Majesty peers down. In the interconnecting two-storey cloister, the capitals are carved in particularly intricate geometric designs.

Within the original town perimeter wall (much of which remains, having been incorporated into later structures, rather than simply demolished), the cobbled streets and lanes, bordered by half-timbered houses, merit a brief stroll.

ST-GIRONS

pop 6600

St-Girons, with less charm than St-Lizier, has a couple of first-class accommodation choices, both with fine restaurants, well worthy of a stop even if you aren't spending the night there.

Emulate, more modestly and economically, Cleopatra, who bathed in a tub of asses' milk. At the retail outlet of **Asinus** (☎ 05 61 04 65 91; www.asinus.fr; 30 av René Pleisaint; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), you can pick up a bar or two of asses'-milk soap. You won't see the animals, though: in summer they browse the grasses of the higher Pyrenees and for the rest of the year they nibble in their fields near the village of Castelnaud-Durban.

In July and August, **Horizon Vertical** (☎ 05 61 04 71 42; www.horizonvertical.net), operating from St-Girons' former railway station, lays on a range of outdoor activities, including caving, canyon descents and climbing.

Sleeping & Eating

It's worth coming to St-Girons simply to sleep. Take your pick from two excellent adjacent hotels, both with gourmet restaurants, that could scarcely differ more from each other. Or sleep at a hyperfriendly *chambre d'hôte* deep in the nearby countryside.

our pick **Château de Beauregard** (☎ 05 61 66 66 64; www.chateaubeauregard.net; av de la Résistance; r €60-100;

☒ ☎) Free wi-fi. Each of the 10 rooms here at what was once a wealthy cattle farmer's mansion is named after a French author. Constructed in 1820, it's been converted with flair and sensitivity by owner Paul Fontvielle, who has deliberately preserved features such as the original shutters and creaky floorboards. The hotel has the friendliness of a *chambre d'hôte* (for example, the three large, convivial tables in the breakfast room, whose verandah overlooks the extensive gardens), while offering the service, style and comfort of a top-class hotel. The spa has all the usual accoutrements and accessories, but is far from the usual clinical setting. Huge, heated by an open wood fire and preserving the original cobbles, it occupies the former horse stables. Stroll in the 2.5 hectares of leafy, flowering gardens or relax in the scented herb garden, from where the cook plucks fresh leaves daily. For true luxury, pamper yourself in one of the two *suites prestiges* (€180 to €200) – in a converted barn, though you'd never guess it – each of which has air con and a bathroom as big as your living room.

Eat beneath the giant chandelier, lit with equally jumbo candles, at the hotel's restaurant, **L'Auberge d'Antan** (five-course *menu* €33; open for dinner Tuesday to Sunday and for lunch Saturday and Sunday), open to all. Meats, such as the suckling pig that turns on the spit each evening, are cooked on an open fire, and all vegetables are organic, from the hotel's kitchen garden or sourced locally.

Hotel Restaurant La Clairière (☎ 05 61 66 66 66; www.hotel-clairiere.com; av de la Résistance; s €58-68, d €73-83; ☎) Free wi-fi. Attractively clad in shingles and also with an extensive garden and impressive views, family-owned La Clairière has a decidedly contemporary air. Its 19 rooms are cosy and spacious with plenty of light. Most have views of the park, and 11 have a child's bed, cosily tucked into an alcove of its own. Its air-conditioned restaurant (two-/three-/four-course *menu* €23/29/42; open for lunch and dinner Wednesday to Sunday and lunch Tuesday), with large windows on three sides, is equally of the present. The cuisine is modern, and dishes, delicately prepared, are almost as attractive visually, on the plate, as they are to the palate.

Chambre d'Hôte Jean-Pol Andrin (☎ 05 61 04 86 39; andrindury@orange.fr; Lescure; r incl breakfast €45; ☎) Here's a wonderfully welcoming, great-value rural option, run by Jean-Paul and his wife

Muriel, Parisians who left the capital in 2007 to forge a new life. Of its three rooms, two are en suite and the third has a shower. Children can romp with the owners' two boys, busy themselves in the small playground or dunk themselves in the pool while Mum and Dad sit back and savour the sweeping panorama of the Pyrenees or chat with walkers taking an overnight break from the Chemins de St Jacques and GR78 long-distance trails that pass nearby. Some 50m from the D119 turn-off for Le Mas d'Azil in Lescure, follow a narrow lane, signed *Chambre d'Hôte*, for 2.25km.

MAS D'AZIL

You can drive right through the main chamber of the *Grotte du Mas d'Azil*, following the D119 as it runs parallel to the swift-flowing River Arize. It's difficult to imagine, but the river once scoured out and filled this resonating space right to the ceiling. Evidence of human presence as early as 30,000 BC was found on the overhang above the river.

An equally vast **cave complex** (☎ 05 61 69 97 71; www.sesta.fr in French; adult/child incl Musée de la Préhistoire €6.10/3.10; ☎ 10am–6pm Jul & Aug, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Jun & Sep, 2–6pm Mon–Sat, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Sun Apr & May, 2–6pm Sun only mid-Feb–Mar, Oct & Nov) comes in at right angles. Inside, quantities of animal bones including those of bears and mammoths were swept down by distant inundations. Enjoy the sheer size of the Temple Cave, used as a refuge in the 3rd century by early Christians, in medieval times by the Cathars and, in 1625, by local Protestants, protecting themselves from avenging royalist troops.

You can walk through the complex unattended, but the caves, alas, are badly documented. The 45-minute guided tours, including a seven-minute DVD projected onto the cave wall, are exclusively in French. After visiting the caves, drive on for 1km to visit the small **museum** in the village of Le Mas d'Azil, which displays more finds from the caves.

To reach the cave, leave the D117 in the village of Lescure and take the D119 northwards for 13.5km. Park outside and take care when walking along the narrow, badly lit pavement that runs beside the road.

Once on the south side of the cave again, for speed, retrace your route to join the D117 again. For a different, more attractive return to the D117, turn left on the D49, signed *Allières*, 500m beyond the cave. Narrow, scenic and traffic-free, it has the bonus of a sudden,

magnificent panorama of the Pyrenees as you round a bend just before the cluster of houses that constitutes *Allières*.

FERME DES REPTILES

It's odd to find a **snake farm** (☎ 05 61 65 82 13; www.lafermedesreptiles.fr in French; adult/5–12yr/under 5yr €7/5/free; ☎ 10am–noon & 2–7pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 2–6pm Sun & school holidays Feb–mid-Jun & mid-Sep–mid-Nov) amid a peaceful agricultural area where normally only sheep and cows graze. But here pythons, boas, anacondas and plenty more slither and writhe. Turtles and tortoises as well move at their own pace. It's beside the D49, 1km from its junction with the D117, in the hamlet of Brouzenac.

MIREPOIX

pop 3050

Mirepoix, almost equidistant from Foix, Carcassonne and Montségur, is a typical little *bastide* settlement. Lying where the Rivers Hers and Countirou meet, it must rank as Ariège's prettiest village. It has known tough times across the centuries. A Cathar stronghold with some 600 inhabitants, it was overcome in 1209 by the forces of Simon de Montfort. Then, precisely 90 years later, the Hers burst its banks and all but swept the village away.

The new Mirepoix was built in the classic *bastide* grid pattern, with a central square, covered galleries and a fortified perimeter wall. However, those ramparts weren't strong enough to repel the robber bands who roamed the countryside in the 14th century and who torched the southern half of the village in 1362.

Since then, time has been kinder to Mirepoix. What you need to see is delightfully compact, with everything on or around its central square or an easy walk from it.

Mirepoix's friendly **Tourist Office** (☎ 05 61 68 83 76; www.tourisme-mirepoix.com; place Maréchal Leclerc; ☎ 9.15am–12.15pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–noon & 2–6pm Sat) is on the south side of the main square, beside the town hall.

SIGHTS

All around harmonious place Maréchal Leclerc, also known as place aux Couverts (the Square with the Arches) and place Principale, are multicoloured half-timbered houses with

classic wooden shutters. Beneath them and flanking the square are shade-imparting *couverts*, covered arcades, the longest in France and 6.5m deep, constructed so that carriages could run beneath them.

Loiter beneath the eaves and overhangs of the **Maison des Consuls**, in the square's northeast corner and nowadays a highly regarded hotel, and crane your neck upwards. Sculpted in wood all along their length are around 100 human and animal heads, fantastic, grotesque and leering, all of which in their time would have been painted in gaudy colours.

A short walk westwards of place Maréchal Leclerc, the solid **Porte d'Aval**, a fortified gate, is the last vestige of the walls that once surrounded the village.

Head northeast of the square along Ave du Pont and you'll pass a venerable **oak tree**, more than 800 years old, that's justifiably and officially classified as a historic monument, before reaching the handsome 206m-long **18th-century bridge** that spans the River Hers.

Abutting the square on its south side, **Cathédrale St-Maurice** (☎ 9am-7pm) is the source of Mirepoix's second superlative: its cavernous nave is the widest in France. Begun in 1298, its construction was interrupted by the Hundred Years' War (1355-1411). What you see today – the wide nave, main portal and bell tower, topped by its 63m-high spire – dates from the early 16th century, while the impression of height from the great barrel of a nave comes from the 19th-century vaulting that replaced the earlier wooden beamed ceiling.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hôtel Maison des Consuls (☎ 05 61 68 81 81; www.maisondesconsuls.com; 6 place Maréchal Leclerc; r €75-155) Each of the eight rooms within this historic building is named after a prominent personality from Mirepoix's past, and each is furnished in a different historical style. Ask for one of the four that overlook the square. It's

a cosy, classic, take-your-ease option, with period furniture, low beams and mature woodwork everywhere.

Saveur des Couverts (☎ 05 61 68 13 65; 20 place Maréchal Leclerc; salads €7-8, sandwiches €3-5, mains €9-12.50) Sip a coffee on the terrace beneath the arches or within the high-ceilinged interior of this splendid institution that's at once café and tea shop, patisserie (don't even look; you won't be able to resist the gooey cakes) and bakery, turning out a variety of crusty, crunchy loaves. Everything's confected here on the premises.

Le Comptoir Gourmand (☎ 05 61 68 19 19; www.lecomptoirgourmand.com; cours Maréchal de Mirepoix; menus €18-35, mains around €20; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat & lunch Sun) It's an unassuming building that, from the outside, might be a garage or warehouse. Inside only the ochre and rust Provençal tablecloths make a mark. But you're here to eat, and you'll eat very well indeed. Both the duck *pâté de foie gras* and *magret* (breast) are homemade, and the sauces are a delight to spoon up, while the *civet de chevrueil aux aïrelles* arrives in a cast-iron pot, the venison simmering in a spicy wine-and-cranberry sauce.

SHOPPING

Among the rubber boots, rakes, seeds and sacks of fertiliser within **Gamm Vert** (rue Victor Hugo), a supermarket belonging to an agricultural cooperative with branches in several Ariègeois towns, Les Sens du Terroir has a magnificent range of cheeses, wines, juices and lots more, mostly organic and sourced locally.

Each Monday there's a particularly large, rather upmarket market on the square in front of the cathedral. Bringing in traders from far around, it has the usual rack upon rack of clothing, new and secondhand, and a great selection of locally produced foodstuffs. It's also a good place to browse for books, craft and artwork.

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