

Central Languedoc



Cathars and canals are what central Languedoc is all about. Plus wine, plenty of it, and a strip of coastline with great beaches that's ideal for family holidays.

'*Le Pays Cathare*' (Cathar country) is the Aude *département's* tourist slogan. The resonances of this distant religious struggle are everywhere – especially in the hilltop castles of the south, bordering Roussillon. For centuries they were border bastions, marking the frontier between France and the kingdom of Aragon.

And canals: the smaller Canal de la Robine, which slices through the town of Narbonne, and the Canal du Midi. This miracle of 17th-century engineering ends its 240km traverse, leaking into Le Bassin de Thau. Within this shallow, protected saltwater lagoon, tonne upon tonne of oysters, scallops and mussels are harvested for dispatch throughout France.

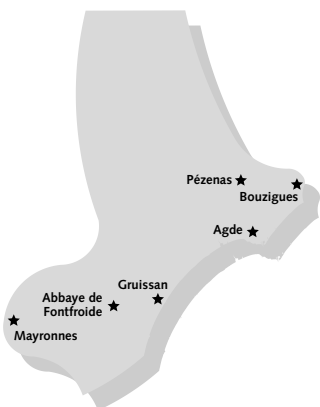
The Mediterranean holiday resort of Le Cap d'Agde offers a host of activities underwater (there are no less than eight diving schools), on the surface as you snorkel and peek down at its underwater trail, and above – windsurfing, canoeing and sailing.

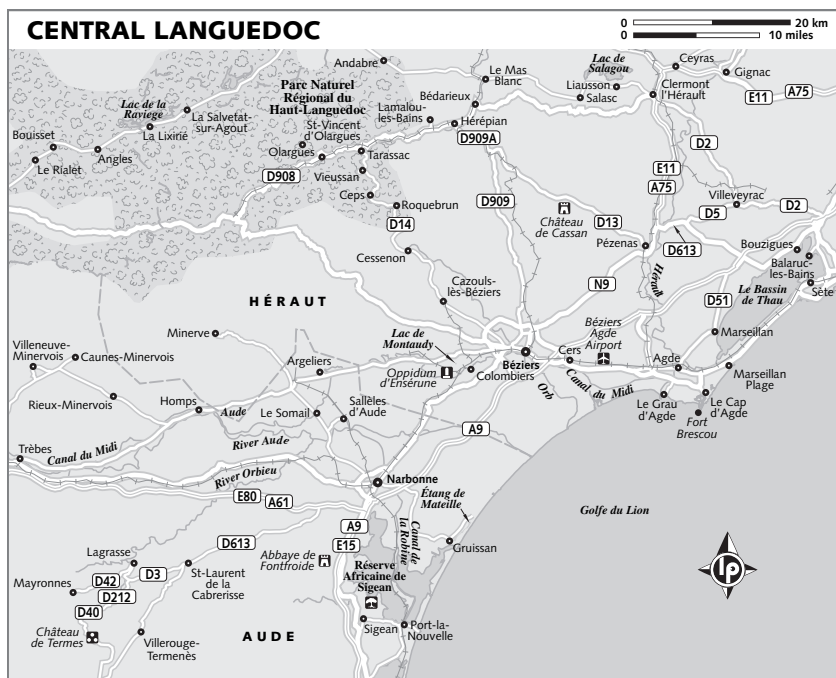
Much of the interior is striped by vines, extending to the horizon. Wineries abound, many of which, if you care to research and leave any preconceived ideas at home, belie the area's longstanding (but now rapidly fading) reputation as a source of cheap party plonk.

Two splendid sights will delight lovers of architecture. The 12th-century Cistercian Abbaye de Fontfroide with its exquisite cloister and rose garden bursting with colour sits all alone in its grounds. Pézenas, by contrast, is a whole town of elegant 17th-century mansions, these days occupied by artists and craftsfolk, and a particularly active cultural scene.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the **Abbaye de Fontfroide** (p122), then climb the hill behind it for a breathtaking panorama
- Learn all about wine and winemaking at Gruissan's **Cité de la Vigne et du Vin** (p125)
- Explore the 17th-century mansions of **Pézenas** (p131)
- Take the sculpture walk above the hamlet of **Mayronnes** (p124)
- Munch through the five-course lunch *menu* at **Lou Pescadou** (p134), Agde
- Study shellfish farming at the **Musée de l'Étang de Thau** (p137), in Bouzigues





NARBONNE & AROUND

Inland from Narbonne, once an important Roman town, lie the Corbières, rugged and sparsely populated. From their arid plains and slopes hectolitres of robust red wines are squeezed each year. The flat coastal littoral, less exciting, is separated from the land mass by shallow lagoons where waterbirds abound and, increasingly, plump shellfish are farmed.

NARBONNE

pop 46,500

Once a coastal port but now a whole 13km inland because of silting up, Narbonne is too often passed by as travellers speed along the A9, aiming for the more blatant charms of cities to the north and south. But it well merits a pause, for its Roman heritage, as a base for visiting the nearby Abbaye de Fontfroide, and perhaps to build in a one-day driving tour of the enticing countryside around.

History

In its time capital of Gallia Narbonensis, Narbonne was one of the principal Roman

cities in Gaul. Its port was an umbilical link with Rome, the mother state. Through the city passed the Via Domitia, the land artery that connected Rome to its colonies in Iberia, south of the Pyrenees, and to the settlements of inland Gaul. Through it flowed linen, timber and hemp from the Cévennes, ceramics, and amphora upon amphora of wine, all bound for Italy. The town was briefly conquered by the Muslims in the 8th century during one of their northernmost sallies beyond the Pyrenees.

During the Renaissance, the city received something of an economic boost when the Canal du Midi allowed its goods to be exported deep inland and as far as the Atlantic, but Narbonne, as port and entrepôt, died once the drifting sands left it high and dry, cut off from the Mediterranean.

A moribund subprefecture for centuries, Narbonne came to life again in the 19th century as a railway hub and centre for the burgeoning large-scale wine industry. To this day, and despite the increasing role of tourism, the town's fortunes remain linked to those of the grape.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS – CENTRAL LANGUEDOC

February

- **Fête du Mimosa** On a weekend in early February, Roquebrun pays tribute to the flower that heralds the end of winter.

March–April

- **Gregorian Chant** During Easter week, recitals of early church music at the Abbaye de Fontfroide.

April

- **Fête de Sainte Aphrodise** On and around 28 April Béziers commemorates its patron saint (see the boxed text p128).

May

- **Caritats** A couple of days in mid-May when Béziers goes all medieval.

June

- **Féria de Pentecôte** (Whitsuntide Festival) The first of Béziers' two annual bullfighting festivals.

July

- **Fête des Pêcheurs** For a weekend in late June/early July Agde and Gruissan honour St Pierre, patron saint of fisherfolk.
- **Festa d'Oc** A full week when Béziers celebrates Mediterranean music and dance.
- **Antiques fair** Narbonne's giant bazaar of the antique and just plain old.

July & August

- **Mirondela dels Arts** Two whole months of exhibitions, theatre, music and dance in Pézenas.
- **Festival d'Opérettes** Light opera and musicals from mid-July to late August in the lovely casino theatre at Lamalou-les-Bains.

August

- **Fête du Commerce et du Vin** Two days of early-August indulgence in Narbonne, to celebrate the grape harvest.
- **Via Mercadaria** Medieval revelry in Narbonne for a couple of days in the first half of August.
- **Féria** (☎ 04 67 31 76 76 for information) *Corridas* (bullfights), yes, but Béziers' much more general five-day celebration around 15 August, when the town's more Spanish than Languedocien.
- **Joutes Nautiques** Three or four times during the month, on the River Hérault in front of Agde's cathedral, boat crews try to knock each other into the water.

November

- **Fête du Marron d'Olargues et du Vin Nouveau** On a weekend early in the month, Olargues celebrates the year's chestnut and wine harvest.

Orientation

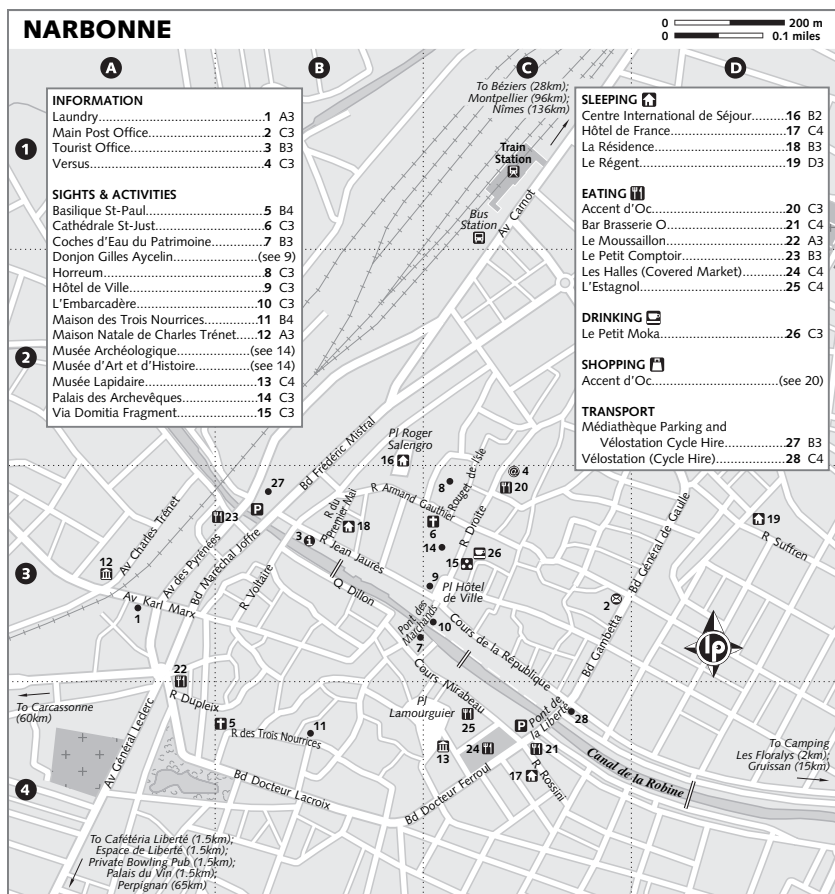
The Canal de la Robine cleaves north–south through the heart of town, which is bounded on its north side by the railway and adjacent bus and train stations. The eastern extremity of central Narbonne is defined by blvd

Gambetta, which runs into blvd Général de Gaulle.

Information

Laundry (1 av Karl Marx; ☎ 6.30am–8pm)

Main Post Office (blvd Gambetta)



Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 65 15 60; www.narbonne-tourisme.com; 31 rue Jean Jaurès; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun rest of yr)
Versus (60 rue Droite; per hr €5; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2am Sat, 2-7pm Sun) Internet access.

Sights

CATHÉDRALE ST-JUST

The august **Cathédrale St-Just** (entry on rue Armand Gauthier; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Oct-Jun) is, in fact, no more than its towers and a soaring choir which, at 41m, ranks as France's third highest. In the early 14th century, construction stopped when the city authorities refused to allow the demolition of part of the protective ramparts to make way for the cathedral's expansion, and it was never resumed.

The Notre Dame de Bethléem chapel directly behind the main altar has a haunting alabaster Virgin and Child and fine, much-knocked-

COMBINATION TICKET

Unless you're planning to visit only one of Narbonne's paying museums and sights, it makes sense to buy a four-museum ticket (adult/child €5.20/3.70), valid for three days, that gives admission to the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire and Musée Archéologique, the Musée Lapidaire and the Horreum. The more comprehensive Pass Monuments et Musées (€7.50) also includes the cathedral treasury and Donjon Gilles Aycein.

VIA DOMITIA

The first pick was wielded in 118 BC by order of the Roman general Cneus Domitius Ahenobarbus, who lent the least tongue-twisting of his names to this early highway, built to link Rome with its Spanish colonies.

Constructed with military intent, to speed the deployment of troops, it soon became primarily a commercial vehicle, moving goods, travellers and civil servants of the Empire reliably, though scarcely comfortably or swiftly in modern terms, over long distances. The road entered Gaul by the least forbidding of the alpine passes, crossed the swift-flowing River Rhône at Beaucaire and passed through Nîmes, Montpellier and Béziers. Just as, some 2000 years later, the railway junction enriched Narbonne, so the Roman town gained wealth from its position astride the Via Domitia and Via Aquitania, which headed westwards towards Toulouse and Bordeaux. Cobbled in towns, and beaten earth over a bed of gravel and pebbles between settlements, its every single Roman mile (1.481km, to be specific) was indicated by a milestone.

about polychrome stone carvings. When a thick overlay of stucco was removed in 1981, their fragments were revealed, then painstakingly reassembled over the next decade.

Highlights of the **treasury** (admission €2.20; ☎ 11am-6pm Jul-Sep, 2-5pm or 6pm Oct-Jun) are a beautiful Flemish tapestry of the Creation, woven in silk and gold thread, and a charmingly detailed little 9th-century ivory Crucifixion. Notice too the 13th-century leather and cast-iron lectern and folding chair, pure Art Nouveau in style and several centuries before its time.

Outside, grotesque gargoyles leer down upon the 16th-century **cloister**, strewn with pagan and palaeo-Christian relics of Roman Narbonne.

PALAIS DES ARCHEVÊQUES

The **Palais des Archevêques** (Archbishops' Palace; public areas free) houses Narbonne's **Musée Archéologique** (adult/child under 10 €3.70/free; ☎ 9.30am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Jun) with its impressive collection of Roman mosaics and paintings on stucco. Two other pieces from this era stand out: a finely wrought 1st-century statue of a very drunken, very hairy Silenus, discovered when the train station was being built, and the sarcophagus known as *Amours Vendangeurs* (Cupids Grape Harvesting), depicting chubby cupids plucking grapes as a colleague tramples their harvesting underfoot.

Many of the works exhibited in the **Musée d'Art et d'Histoire** (adult/child under 10 €3.70/free; ☎ 9.30am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Jun), including a Canaletto and a canvas by Peter Breughel the Younger, were picked up by successive archbishops of Narbonne during visits to Italy. They're an

interesting and motley collection, but the gallery's trump card is its unparalleled collection of 19th-century romantic depictions of the Orient in all their contrived, idealised excess – bare-breasted slave girls, shimmering fabrics and the delights of the harem.

HÔTEL DE VILLE

The elaborate mock-Renaissance 19th-century facade of Narbonne's town hall was designed by Viollet-le-Duc. Go inside for access to the **Donjon Gilles Aycelin** (place Hôtel de Ville; adult/child €2.20/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Oct-Jun), a large, square 13th-century keep. Climb to its highest point, 42m above the square below, to enjoy the best overview of town. In the square itself, there's a sunken stretch of the **Via Domitia**.

HORREUM

This long **underground gallery** (adult/child under 10 €3.70/free; ☎ 9.30am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Jun) of Gallo-Roman shops and storerooms recently got the 'living history' makeover. As you prowl its chambers, listen for sounds of the era – cattle lowing, hammers striking, vendors shouting their wares and fragments of conversation in Latin like it never was at school.

Some will find the experience here and at the Musée Lapidaire trivialising, but it does bring to life historical remains that would otherwise impress merely by their size and age.

MUSÉE LAPIDAIRE

It needed the vast nave of the deconsecrated Gothic church of Notre Dame de la Mourguie to house these monumental slabs of Roman

masonry, over a thousand of them, mostly rescued from Narbonne's Roman ramparts. Here at the **Musée Lapidaire** (☎ 04 68 65 53 58; place Lamourguier; adult/child under 10 €3.70/free; 🕒 9.30am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Jul-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Jun), every last one is numbered and most bear inscriptions, motifs or bas-reliefs. But these massive blocks are upstaged by a spectacular 30-minute **sound-and-light show** (every hour on the hour). On a grand scale, as befits the setting and its contents, it projects onto the walls of the nave art from Roman times to the Renaissance. Never mind that most illustrations pertain to Italy rather than Languedoc; just go with the flow of music and images.

OTHER SIGHTS

The 13th-century **Basilique St-Paul** (rue Dupleix; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), built above a 4th- to 6th-century necropolis (see the pair of recycled sarcophagi embedded in the west wall below the towering organ) looks sadly chipped, peeling and rundown these days. If the sacristan's around, ask him to unlock the gate to the small palaeo-Christian cemetery, revealed at the end of WWII as German prisoners cleared debris from the square above.

The **Maison des Trois Nourrices** (House of the Three Wet Nurses; rue des Trois Nourrices) derives its name from the busty ladies that prop up the elaborately sculpted window frame of this small, much-restored Renaissance palace. Odd, however, that there are five of them, two big and three small. In the less spectacular window on the side wall are seven forlorn rams, forever unable to nibble at the floral garlands that swag beneath them.

Take the footbridge over the railway tracks to visit the **Maison Natale de Charles Trénet** (☎ 04 68 90 30 66; 13 av Charles Trénet; adult/child €5.20/3.70; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, afternoons only Oct-Mar). Outside the birthplace of this jolly Gallic crooner (1913-2001), a smiling statue with a red plastic carnation in one hand and his trademark hat beckoning to you in the other, invites you in to view memorabilia from his long career.

Activities

CANAL TRIP

From mid-June to mid-September, the *Tramontane*, a one-time working barge of **Coches d'Eau du Patrimoine** (☎ 04 68 90 63 98) chugs from its mooring beside Pont des Marchands down the Canal de la Robine to Port-la-Nouvelle (adult/child 12 to 16/child under

12 €23/20/free), leaving four times weekly at 9.30am and returning around 5.30pm. On Saturday at 10.30am and 11.30am, it does a shorter, one-hour cruise along the canal (adult/child 12 to 16/child under 12 €6/3/free) with on-board sampling of local specialties.

From Easter to mid-September, **L'Embarcadère** (☎ 06 07 74 04 57, 06 03 75 36 98; promenade des Barques), a silent, electric boat, also glides along the Canal de la Robine (1½-hour sailings adult/child up to 14 €7/3).

ESPACE DE LIBERTÉ

This modern **sports complex** (☎ 04 68 42 17 89; rte de Perpignan; 🕒 daily) boasts an ice rink, a bowling alley, three pools (one open-air, Olympic size and heated), water slides, a skate ramp, a great pub (p120) and a fantastic restaurant (p120). Take bus 3 from town or, if you're driving, follow signs for Perpignan.

Sleeping

Les Floralys (☎ 04 68 32 65 65, www.lesfloralys.com; chemin de Craboule/chemin du Maritime; site & 2 campers €17.10; 🕒 yr-round; 📶) The nearest camp site to town is this smallest, shaded 32-plot choice with a pool. Driving, follow signs for Gruissan. Cyclists and walkers can simply follow the canal towpath from Narbonne for about 2km.

Centre International de Séjour (☎ 04 68 32 01 00, www.cis-narbonne.com; place Roger Salengro; incl breakfast dm €15.10, s €25.10, d with shower €38, with bathroom €42) Large, in the heart of town and with its own canteen and café, this makes a great budget choice. Downsides are that it's only open when a group is in residence (but that's most days of the year) and – absurdly – it doesn't take reservations from individual travellers. Phone in advance to make sure it's functioning.

Le Régent (☎ 04 68 32 02 41; www.leregentnarbonne.com; 15 rue Suffren; r with shower €30-33, with full bathroom €38-48; 📶) Parking €4. This hyperfriendly 15-room choice offers exceptional value. The two rooms at roof level (€48) overlook the city, while the pair in the basement (€44) have their own separate entry and a small patio. There's also a roof terrace where all guests can lounge. Fact: until well after WWII, the building housed Narbonne's largest, best-reputed brothel. Should your bed shake, it's only the ghost of past patrons.

Hôtel de France (☎ 04 68 32 09 75; www.hotelnarbonne.com in French; 6 rue Rossini; r €30-33, with bathroom €50-68; 📶) Parking €7. Wi-fi available. At this particularly tranquil choice, tucked away

down a quiet side street, every window is double glazed. Rooms are individually decorated and most bathrooms are large with a separate toilet. Since it too has only 15 rooms, reservations are essential in high season.

La Résidence (☎ 04 68 32 19 41; www.hotelresidence.fr; 6 rue du Premier Mai; s €67-93, d €72-97; ☞ mid-Feb–mid-Jan; P) Parking €7. Occupying a sensitively renovated 19th-century building, this friendly, 26-room hotel has tastefully furnished, comfortable rooms.

Eating

Accent d'Oc (☎ 04 68 32 24 13; www.accentdoc.fr; 56 rue Droite; ☞ lunch only Mon-Sat Apr-Sep) Gaella, who's spent two years running a restaurant in New Zealand, will guide you through the choices at this great place for a lunchtime snack. Sample homemade sauces and spreads by nibbling tapas (€5) or tucking into the daily platter (€9), which includes creative dishes such as salmon tartare marinated in aniseed-flavoured virgin olive oil. Finish with one of the innovative ewes'-milk ice creams, churned by a local farmer. See too right.

L'Estagnol (☎ 04 68 65 09 27; mains cours Mirabeau; menus €18-30, mains €12-24; ☞ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat & lunch Mon) Dine on the ground floor, where the maroon leatherette seating could have been prised from an old railway carriage, or up on the 1st floor, overlooking the canalside park. Service is swift as the young team dash in and out of the kitchen and around the bar, fashioned from recycled wine crates. L'Estagnol is a hugely popular choice with discerning Narbonnais. If there's an 'r' in the month follow their example, order oysters – and leave a cranny for a rich homemade dessert.

ourpick Cafétéria Liberté (☎ 04 68 42 17 89; rte de Perpignan; menus €19-24; ☞ daily) You wouldn't expect to find one of the best meal deals in all France at a sports complex. But here in Espace de Liberté (p119), you'll eat magnificently, as little or as much as you wish. There's no à la carte and it doesn't take reservations. Simplicity itself. You select your main course and precede and follow it from the buffet. But what a buffet! Stretched out, it's 43m long, the largest in France, and holds over 200 items. There are hors d'oeuvres in plenty, good cheeses and many a mouth-watering dessert. Linger; once the children have licked their way through as many as they can of the dozen ice creams, release them into the adjoining African village playground (what's more, the buffet's free for

under-fives). Indulge yourself in the frondy air-conditioned interior or on the terrace, where jets squirt cooling water vapour.

Bar Brasserie O (☎ 04 68 32 55 25; 1 blvd Docteur Ferroul; menus €19.50-27, mains €12-15; ☞ Mon-Sat) Bright, modern and cheerful, O (no more, no less) serves quality French cuisine with an international glance. On the menu are dishes from around the world such as tagine, something simmered with tandoori spices, risotto and vegetables quick-fried in the wok. For a starter, indulge yourself with the *pyramide de foie gras*, served with mint-tea jelly and dates. O is also a pleasant, welcoming spot simply for a coffee or something stronger.

Le Petit Comptoir (☎ 04 68 42 30 35; 4 blvd Maréchal Joffre; menus €26.50-36.50, mains €18-25; ☞ Tue-Sat) Four large, mottled, stained mirrors, heterogeneous hanging lamps, dark-stained woodwork and a gorgeous Art Nouveau statuette holding aloft an absinthe bowl: all speak of bourgeois comfort and ease a couple of generations ago. But the food is strictly contemporary, impeccably presented and in a class all its own. The midday three-course special (choose from the portable blackboard) is particularly good value.

SELF-CATERING

Les Halles, Narbonne's imposing **covered market** (blvd Docteur Ferroul) constructed in 1901, is a colourful place to stock up on food, and is an architectural jewel in its own right.

Le Moussaillon (place des Pyrénées; ☞ Tue-Sun) Sea-fresh oysters, mussels and other shellfish are delivered here daily. Throw in a jar of its fish soup, pluck a bottle of chilled local white wine from the fridge and voila, there's dinner.

Drinking

Le Petit Moka (place Hôtel de Ville) This place serves excellent coffee. Sip your choice on its terrace, from which you can contemplate Viollet-le-Duc's contentious remodelling of the town hall's facade.

Private Bowling Pub (☞ 6pm-2am Mon-Fri, 2pm-2am Sat, Sun & school holidays) Out at Espace de Liberté (p119), this pub is far from private. It's a congenial, authentic place with six beers on draught, more than 50 in the bottle and at least a dozen varieties of whisky behind the bar.

Shopping

Accent d'Oc (☎ 04 68 32 24 13; www.accentdoc.fr; 56 rue Droite; ☞ Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, Tue-Sat Oct-Mar) Here's

THE 1907 WINEGROWERS' REVOLT

Just over a century ago, in June 1907, an estimated 600,000, possibly as many as 800,000, demonstrators packed the streets of Montpellier. Troops sent to quell resistance opened fire on demonstrators in Narbonne, killing six; the foot soldiers of a local regiment briefly mutinied in Béziers; the *préfecture* in Perpignan was burnt to the ground; and there were three days of intensive anti-government riots throughout the region.

The issue was wine, at the time the main source of income, directly or indirectly, of a very high proportion of the population. In a land where life had always been tough, the phylloxera blight had decimated vineyards only a couple of decades earlier. In the popular mind, two dubious practices had also led to the current crisis: *sucrage*, adding sugar to increase the alcohol content of a wine, and *mouillage*, literally dampening it, watering it down – accusations that were freely flung, not without some justification, at wine producers elsewhere in France.

But the main villain was overproduction as wine producers, recovering from the phylloxera crisis, grubbed out their infected vines and planted high-yield, lower-quality substitutes. Nature too led to an even greater glut. The bumper harvests of 1904 and 1905, not only in France but also in Spain and Italy, resulted in the price to the grower tumbling from a maximum of 24 francs per hectolitre in 1903 to only seven.

Languedoc-Roussillon, traditionally the producer of floods of cheap table wine, was also threatened by the import of rotgut, cheap wine from the vineyards of north Africa, and the popularity within France of absinthe, a fiery spirit.

The revolt fizzled out as rapidly as it had begun, but not before its leader, Marcellin Albert, today regarded as a local hero, had met the prime minister, Georges Clemenceau. One positive consequence of what might just possibly have led to the secession of the south, is the *appellation contrôlée* system, introduced after WWI to control, classify, protect and regulate wine production.

A century later, Languedoc-Roussillon wine growers are again demonstrating and voicing their grievances and a minority are resorting to small-scale violence (see p15). Their grievances echo those of 1907: the collapse of wine prices and a huge lake of unsold local stock. And there are two new factors. The French no longer enjoy their favourite tippie in such quantities and many can now afford to be more discriminating about what they sip. Abroad, the keen competition of the efficient, varietal wineries of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand has also hit hard.

And the economy of Languedoc-Roussillon is no longer the same. Wine is still hugely important as a regional earner, but the region has diversified and now derives wealth from tourism, cereals, car-parts manufacturing, high-tech ventures and other 21st-century activities. Just as significantly, the mayors and town councils who in 1907 resigned en masse, many joining the ranks of the demonstrators, are now considered by the more extreme demonstrators to be as indifferent to the winegrowers' plight as the distant central government in Paris.

the place for creative sandwich fillings – no colourings, no artificial flavourings and absolutely no preservatives – or original presents for the folk back home. Everything on sale, edible or decorative, is from Languedoc; almost all is sourced locally; and the sauces and spreads, both sweet and savoury, are all homemade. (See also opposite.)

Palais du Vin (☎ 04 68 41 49 67; 🗓 Mon-Sat) Top up on local wines at this shop, on the east side of the Espace de Liberté (p119) roundabout. It stocks over 1000 labels of Languedoc-Roussillon wine, all produced by independent growers. Prices are guaranteed to be those that apply at the vineyards them-

selves. It also sells every possible accompaniment and accoutrement for wine drinking, including lots you never knew you needed.

Getting There & Away

Narbonne is a road and rail crossroads. The east–west train line comes in from Toulouse and intersects with the main north–south route running from Paris to Perpignan and over the frontier into Spain. Similarly, the A61 *autoroute* leads to Toulouse (where it links with motorways for Bordeaux and the Basque country) and intersects just south of town with the A9, which runs south to Spain.

BUS

Let the train take the strain. Bus services, except to surrounding villages, are negligible.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Narbonne is just off the north-south E15/A9 *autoroute* and scarcely north of the E80/A61, which threads westwards.

TRAIN

There are frequent trains to Nîmes (€20.10, 1¼ hours) via Béziers (€4.80, 15 minutes), Agde (€7.80, 30 minutes), Sète (€10.80, 45 minutes) and Montpellier (€14, one hour).

Southbound, at least 10 trains daily run to Perpignan (€9.90, 40 minutes).

Westbound destinations by rail include Carcassonne (€9.40, 40 minutes), Castelnaudary (€13.80, 50 minutes) and Toulouse (€20.60, 1½ hours).

Getting Around

There are two central *vélostations*, beside Pont de la Liberté and in the Médiathèque car park on Blvd Frédéric Mistral, where you can hire **bikes** (per half-/full day €1/2) at an amazingly reasonable rate.

For a taxi, call ☎ 08 25 56 11 12.

ABBAYE DE FONTFROIDE

The 12th-century Cistercian **Abbaye de Fontfroide** (☎ 04 68 45 11 08; www.fontfroide.com; adult/child/student €9/2/6; ☎ tours every half-hr 10am-6pm mid-Jul-Aug, every 45min 10am-5.30pm Apr-mid-Jul, Sep & Oct, at least twice daily Nov-Mar), 12km from Narbonne, is sheer delight. Owned by the Fayet family for over 100 years, it's a splendid example of private initiative helping to preserve a national treasure that otherwise might simply have crumbled away. Highlights include its lovely cloister, the chapter house, the monks' dining room and sleeping quarters, and the delightful rose garden.

Entry is by guided tour in French. Ask for the English audioguide to keep up with the pace. Give yourself a good 1½ hours to enjoy both the tour and gardens.

For a magnificent bird's-eye view of the abbey and the draughty plain beyond, where 21st-century windmills twirl, take the steps beside a green *sentier* sign, choose either direction at a fork after barely two minutes, then aim for the iron cross that tops the hill. Allow 30 to 40 minutes for this exhilarating round-trip walk.

LAGRASSE

pop 600

The almond-shaped, once fortified village of Lagrasse, 42km from Narbonne and 36km from Carcassonne, derives its name from the Occitan *grassa*, meaning fertile, and you can see why. It looks over the river Orbieu to the largely ruined abbey that once controlled its destiny and down to the steeply humpbacked 13th-century bridge that connects village and abbey. Windows, punched like eye sockets into the much altered and restored ramparts, gaze sightless over the river.

The seasonal **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 43 11 56; www.lagrasse.com; ☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-7pm Jul & Aug, to 5.30pm other school holidays) is at 6 Blvd de la Promenade.

Though moribund outside season, it's a chic little place during its summer flourishing, as the inflated house prices and numerous artists' and artisans' boutiques attest.

In the **church** (entrance beside the Maison du Patrimoine), dedicated to St Michael, rosette windows, their original stained glass glowing warmly, shed limited light upon the nine side chapels. Each chapel's keystone carries the motif of a local guild or corporation – a pair of shuttles for the weavers, scissors for the wool carders, a couple of clogs for the cobblers.

Ten stout stone pillars support the wooden roof of Les Halles, Lagrasse's covered market, erected in the 14th century when it was the richest village for miles around.

Across the River Orbieu stretches the **Abbaye Ste-Marie d'Orbieu** (☎ 04 68 43 15 99; adult/6-15yr/under 6yr €4/1/free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul-Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm mid-Jan-Jun & Oct-mid-Dec). It's difficult to pin a dominant style upon this abbey, which has been modified and worked upon so much across the centuries (a tradition that lives on today as a small monastic community continues to restore the complex). Highlights are the Palais Vieux, the abbot's residence surrounding a pleasant little courtyard, some striking fragments of sculpture attributed to the Maître de Cabestany (p40), the abbey church, dating mainly from the 13th century, and the solid 40m-high bell tower.

LE SOMAIL

Le Somail, 14km from Narbonne, is a pleasant, laid-back little canalside hamlet. Once it was a staging post on the Canal du Midi when passenger boats and barges plied its waters. The long-abandoned inn, melancholy and so

in need of renewal, where travellers would disembark, dine and sleep, is some 200m south of the humpback bridge.

Nowadays, it's very much the preserve of passing pleasureboat folk and towpath cyclists. Among a trio of operators (see the boxed text p136), **Belle du Midi Cruises** (☎ 04 68 93 53 94; www.belledumidicruises.com) also offers **bike hire** (per half-/full day/week €12/18/80) for a short or long spin along the canal banks.

Floor-to-ceiling shelves are packed with secondhand and antique books at **Librairie Ancienne** (☎ 04 68 46 21 64; www.le-trouve-tout-du-livre.fr in French; 28 allée de la Glacière; ☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm daily Jul & Aug, Wed-Mon Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov, 2.30-6.30pm Wed-Mon Dec-Mar, closed 16-30 Nov), a wonderful, deep cavern of a place from which bibliophiles will extricate themselves with pain. Sections are labelled in careful, handwritten Gothic calligraphy.

our pick **Le Comptoir Nature** (☎ 04 68 46 01 61; http://comptoirnature.free.fr; mains around €15; ☎ Easter-Oct), a tiny, welcoming place with an attractive canalside terrace, is a bundle of worthwhile activities. Above all, it's a restaurant that sources its organic produce from small-scale local providers, then cooks them oh so lightly in order to preserve their flavours, juices and aromas. It's also somewhere to relax over a ewes'-milk ice cream, and a venue for Wednesday-evening *repas concerts*: jazz concerts with dinner (€25, mid-June to mid-September) and Sunday-lunchtime classical recitals (May to mid-June). Here too you can rent silent, gliding electric boats (€22 per hour) and (order at least a day in advance) bikes.

On the far bank of the canal, the barge *Tamata* is a floating village shop, **La Péniche Épicrière** (☎ 04 68 46 95 11; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct), that sells groceries, bread, wine, fruit, veg and tempting local specialities.

SALLÈLES D'AUDE

Sallèles, sitting prettily beside the Canal de la Robine barely 4km east of Le Somail, has been a wine town ever since Roman times. It's at the northern extremity of the Parc Naturel Régional de la Narbonnaise en Méditerranée, a protected area of countryside that loops around Narbonne in an inverted crescent and meets the Atlantic south of Sigeac.

What better place for the Romans to establish a pottery works than here, with water, clay and wood to hand and a ready market in

amphorae for exporting local wines all over the Mediterranean? So far, clay pits, 17 ovens and other related Gallo-Roman buildings have been revealed, and at **Amphoralis** (☎ 04 68 46 89 48; allée des Potiers; adult/child €4/2.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm daily Jul-Sep, 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Oct-Jun) there's a recreated kiln and potters' dwellings too. Signing in the museum is in French. Follow the canal westwards from Sallèles, passing by a ladder of six locks, for 2km.

Marie Godard has established single-handedly the **Centre Européen du Patchwork** (☎ 04 68 46 02 47; www.patchwork-cep.com; 32 quai de Lorraine; adult/child €3/2; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm daily Apr-Oct, Sat & Sun only Nov, Dec & Mar), a quilting and patchwork gallery and boutique in a former winery. Each of the former wine vats displays materials from around the world; bays illustrate, for example, the patchwork of Egypt, the Amish, India and South America. Upstairs is an art gallery with regularly changing exhibitions.

The **Musée du Vieux Sallèles** (☎ 04 68 46 93 40; 5 av Marcellin Albert; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 2.30-6.30pm Sat & Sun May-Sep), the village museum, has a large, heterogeneous collection of tools and equipment relating to daily life, agriculture and the wine industry.

our pick **Les Volets Bleus** (☎ 04 68 46 83 03; www.salleles.net; 43 quai d'Alsace; r incl breakfast €60-70), run by Nick and Isobel Evans and Nick's brother, Greg, is a delightful former wine merchant's mansion, immediately recognisable by its sheer size and blue shutters (its name means precisely the latter). Right beside the Canal de la Robine, it has a cosy sitting room, a small library of novels and guidebooks, and five large bedrooms, each named after a local vintage. St Chinian, one of two rooms overlooking the canal, has a particularly large bathroom with twin washbasins, a deep bathtub and separate toilet.

GRUISSAN

Gruissan, 15km southeast of Narbonne and once the home of fisherfolk and salt-pan workers, is now mainly a beach resort. In its old quarter, houses in tight concentric circles ring the ruined 13th-century Barberousse tower, to whose base you can climb. Just about everywhere you turn, you'll find water, whether lagoon, salt pan, canal or open sea. And long strands of sandy beach too...

By contrast, Gruissan has some particularly ugly, unimaginative holiday housing, both the cheap prefabs that back Plage des Chalets

THE LITTLE CATHAR CIRCUIT

Two abbeys, two castles, a medieval lunch, a couple of shortish walks to shake it all down and kilometres of exhilarating back-road driving: such are the treats along this spoon-shaped day drive (135km including the Mayronnes detour). It's an adjunct rather than an alternative to the main Cathar-country tour (p181). Much less travelled than the major route, it takes you into some of the wildest, least-populated countryside in all France.

Leave Narbonne, following green (not *autoroute* blue) signs for Carcassonne. After about 5km, turn left onto the D613. After a further 5km, turn left for the Abbaye de Fontfroide (p122). Allow around 1½ hours for a guided visit of the abbey and a stiff walk to the top of its backdrop hill.

Back on the D613, you'll soon see, away on your left, the privately owned pile of the Château St-Martin de Toques, elements of which are from the 10th century. The road rolls through a carpet of vineyards and seductive signs inviting passers for a *dégustation*. Better to drop in on the way home and pick up a sample or two of sturdy, chateau-bottled Corbières.

Stay with the D613 all the way to Villerouge-Termenès. After St-Laurent de la Cabrerisse, the road abandons the fertile plain to climb steadily into more arid, untamed lands of Mediterranean pine and prickly, forbidding *garrigue*.

It was in the village of **Villerouge-Termenès** that Guilhem Bélibest, the last known Cathar *parfait* (see the boxed text p197), was burnt at the stake in 1321. The story of this illiterate shepherd, caught up by a cause he can scarcely have understood, is told in a well-produced multimedia presentation at the village's 14th-century **castle** (☎ 04 68 70 09 11; incl audioguide adult/6-15yr/under 6yr €6/2/free; 🕒 10am-5pm or 6.30pm daily Apr-mid-Oct, Sat & Sun only mid-Oct-mid-Dec & Mar, closed mid-Dec-Feb).

In the castle's outbuildings, the **Rôtisserie Médiévale** (☎ 04 68 70 06 06; www.restaurant-medieval.com; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun Apr-Oct, lunch & dinner Sat, lunch Sun Nov, Dec, Feb & Mar) offers *menus* of three to five robust courses (€36 to €50) or an ample platter of roast pork with all the trimmings (€24). Forget naff Anglo-Saxon equivalents with their jesters, serving wenches and coarse jokes. This more tasteful – in every sense – Gallic interpretation features in the always-discriminating *Michelin Guide Rouge*.

Look below the stone footbridge beneath the castle walls to see a tiny *jardin des simples*, a traditional medicinal herb garden.

Driving on, turn right after 6km onto the D40, signed Château de Termes. As the narrow road descends to this attractive riverside hamlet, it's bordered – bizarrely in such a wild environment – by carefully shaped clumps of boxwood. From stream level to the **Château de Termes** (☎ 04 68 70 09 20; adult/child €3.50/1.50; 🕒 9.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm or 6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-Nov) is a sturdy walk that's well worth the effort for the spectacular panorama. Allow a good hour for the steep ascent and descent.

Continuing, the D40 edges its way through the tight Gorge de Termet, cutting through a couple of short tunnels. At a T-junction after 4km, turn right onto the D212, signed Lagrasse.

After 14km, there's an optional but recommended 15km round-trip detour along the D42 to tiny, road's-end **Mayronnes**. Each year, this minuscule hamlet commissions a team of sculptors to create works, the best of which (many of them fashioned from recycled scrap iron) are selected for display beside the Sentier Sculpturel, a clearly signed, out-and-back trail that climbs through *garrigue* above the vineyards of the valley. Leave your vehicle at a large panel detailing local walks just before the hamlet and follow wooden signs labelled 'Sentier Sculpturel' to walk this easy to moderate trail (all the climbing comes at the beginning). As you ascend, follow the red and white blazes of the GR36, then turn left at a sign marked 'Petite Boucle (Small Circuit)'. Allow 45 minutes to one hour (adding on 1½ hours if you choose to do the full circuit).

Just beyond the Mayronnes turning, fork left to reach Lagrasse (p122) after 4km.

After visiting the village, return to the fork and turn left onto the D3 to rejoin your outward route at St-Laurent de la Cabrerisse and return to Narbonne.

and more recent dull, sunburn-pink villas that spread like a rash along the coastline.

The friendly **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 49 09 00; www.gruissan-mediterranee.com; 1 blvd Pech Maynaud; ☎ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-Jun) has a free brochure, *Six Sentiers Pédestre pour Découvrir La Grande Nature de Gruissan*, that details six waymarked circular walking routes, all but one between 1½ and 2½ hours. It's in French, but maps are large scale and explicit. Another, in preparation when we last visited, will describe a number of mountain-bike circuits.

You can rent a cycle from both **Cycle Adventure** (☎ 04 68 49 17 26; 2 rue de l'Astrolabe, Gruissan Port; ☎ yr-round), behind Lidl supermarket, and **Luc Malleins** (☎ 04 68 49 49 52; Zone Artisanale Lot No 1, Gruissan Plage; ☎ daily Apr-Sep).

From its two bases (by Étang de Mateille, the inland lagoon, and beside the open sea at Plage des Chalets) **Gruissan Windsurf** (☎ 04 68 49 88 31, 04 68 49 33 33; www.gruissan-windsurf.com; ☎ mid-Mar-mid-Nov) offers instruction (three-day courses in windsurfing, catamaran or dingy sailing €108) and rents equipment for sea canoeing, sailing and windsurfing.

Even the most knowledgeable oenophile will learn something new at the **Cité de la Vigne et du Vin** (City of Vine & Wine; ☎ 04 68 75 22 62; Domaine du Pech Rouge, Les Ayguades; adult/8-15yr/under 8yr €6/3/free; ☎ 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, 2-5pm school holidays, 2-5pm Sat & Sun only rest of yr), run by INRA, the National Institute for Agronomic Research. It's also huge fun, including a film that, having shot one frame every three hours for a full year, compresses the life cycle of the vine into three minutes. At its 'palace of aromas', you can test and hone your sense of smell and taste.

Les Salins de l'Île Saint Martin (☎ 04 68 49 59 97; www.salins.com; rte de l'Ayrolle), with its vast salt pans just south of the old town, puts on 1½-hour **guided tours** (adult/child €6.60/3.90; ☎ 5 times daily Jul & Aug, twice daily Wed-Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct). There's also a small **museum** (admission free; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Apr-Oct).

For a walk among the pines of **La Clape**, the limestone massif that overlooks Gruissan, follow the **Cimetière Marin** up to the 17th-century **Chapelle de Notre Dame des Auzils**, once tended by a hermit and nowadays the goal of an elaborate Easter Monday procession and pilgrimage. Beside this uphill path and set like the Stations of the Cross, are memorials to sailors of Gruissan who lost their lives in near or distant waters – Hong Kong, Dakar, Colombo, Haiti. And to the crews of three submarines

(*three, for heaven's sake*) who perished in 1952, 1958 and 1970. Sadder even than these are the memorials to those, gone and now forgotten, where time and weathering has obliterated even their names. Perhaps saddest of all is the fact that the chapel remains locked (except 10am to noon and 3pm to 6pm in July and August) ever since thieves stole more than 50 *ex votos* – paintings, drawings and miniature boats left in gratitude by the faithful whose lives had been spared. Allow 30 minutes, out and back.

our pick La Perle Gruissanaise (☎ 04 68 49 23 24; oysters per 12 around €5; ☎ 8.30am-7pm), at the very end of the harbour spit, where lagoon meets open sea, is simplicity itself: you buy a lemon or two to garnish, a glass or carafe of chilled white wine from the local winegrowers' co-operative, and raw seafood. The Pearl of Gruissan sells nothing more. But here you'll find shellfish in all their smooth or crinkly manifestations, mostly culled from the company's own offshore beds. Bring along your own bread (ideally, brown and crunchy) and butter. Leave with the recipe sheet in English for oysters and mussels and perhaps a kilo or so of something for later.

You'll find nothing frozen, nothing plucked from a fish farm, at **La Cranquette** (☎ 04 68 75 12 07; 10 rue de la République; meals around €20; ☎ Wed-Sun Apr-Nov), a small, recommended restaurant in the old town. Although there's a handful of meat dishes, it's a pity not to choose from the ample selection of fresh fish and seafood, landed from the waters around Gruissan.

Five daily buses (€1, 30 minutes) normally run between Gruissan and Narbonne, with more frequent services in July and August.

RÉSERVE AFRICAINE DE SIGEAN

At the **African Reserve** (☎ 04 68 48 20 20; www.reserveafricainesigean.fr; adult/child €24/19; ☎ 9am-4pm & up to 6.30pm according to season), 15km south of Narbonne, visitors drive around the 'safari park' area, where lions, tigers, rhinos and other animals of the African bush and savannah range in semi-liberty in an environment that, with its scrub, lagoons and arid summer heat, resembles the lands where their ancestors roamed free. There's also a large walkaround area, plus a host of resident caged birds. Around 3800 animals, big and small, live in the park's 300 hectares, so allow half a day – one hour for the car tour and two to three hours of walking.

For those who arrive by bike or on foot, there's a free minibus around the reserve. For

motorised visitors, it's an 8km drive from exit 39 of the A9.

BÉZIERS & AROUND

Béziers is within easy reach of the Mediterranean coast. However, the most interesting terrain lies inland, beside the River Orb and nudging northwards into the Parc National Régional du Haut-Languedoc.

BÉZIERS

pop 69,000

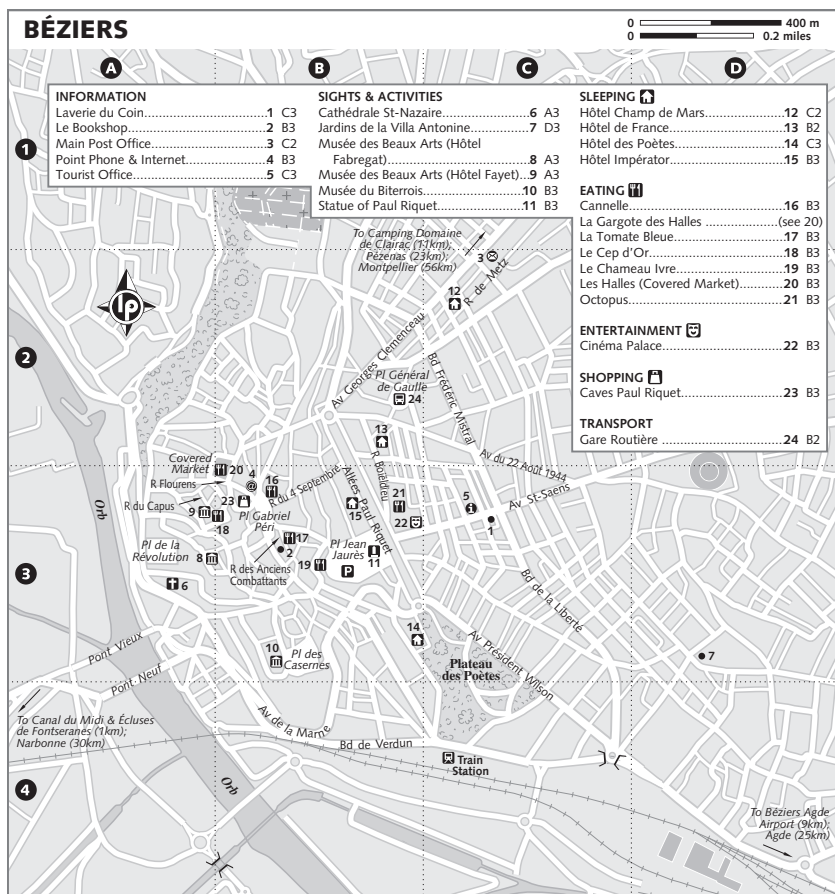
Apart from its impressive cathedral, Béziers is short on major cultural monuments. But it has some excellent, affordable hotels and

merits an overnight stop – perhaps two, since it's well placed for exploring the undervalued charms of the Orb valley, roaming the sandy Mediterranean coast and prowling the old quarter of nearby Agde.

Two spectator sports arouse the passions of true-blooded Biterrois, as the townspeople are called: *le rugby à quinze* (rugby union) and, casting a cultural eye southwards, *la corrida* (the bullfight).

History

Béziers, inland and beside the River Orb, was first settled by the Phoenicians. In Roman times, Baeterrae was an important military garrison and staging post on the Via Domitia. During the Albigensian Crusade, it suffered in



1209 one of that bloody struggle's most savage massacres when an estimated 20,000 'heretics', many seeking refuge in the cathedral, were slaughtered and the city was razed.

In happier times, the local tax collector Pierre-Paul Riquet (1604–80) moved heaven and earth to build the Canal du Midi (see p136). There's a fine statue to Béziers' most famous son on allées Paul Riquet.

Like Narbonne, its neighbour and local rival, Béziers' fortunes have been tied for the last two centuries to the wine industry, which gave impetus to its 19th-century expansion.

Orientation

The old quarter of Béziers is sandwiched between the River Orb and allées Paul Riquet. At the southern end of this broad boulevard that cuts north–south, Plateau des Poètes leads down to the train station.

Information

Laverie du Coin (cnr av St-Saens & blvd de la Liberté; ☎ 7am–7pm daily) Laundrette.

Le Bookshop (☎ 04 67 36 67 82; www.lebookshop.fr; 18 rue des Anciens Combattants; ☎ 10am–noon & 2–6pm Tue–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat) Small and well stocked, particularly with children's books and titles relating to Languedoc.

Main Post Office (av Georges Clemenceau)

Point Phone & Internet (4 rue Flourens; per hr €3; ☎ 9.30am–10.30pm daily) Internet access.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 67 76 84 00; www.beziers-tourisme.fr; 29 av St-Saens; ☎ 9am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–1pm & 3–6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–5pm or 6pm Mon–Sat Sep–Jun)

Sights & Activities

CATHÉDRALE ST-NAZAIRE

Béziers' fortified **cathedral** (place des Albigeois; ☎ 9.30am–noon & 2.30–5.30pm), its two towers more castle-like than ecclesiastical, is the most prominent building on the skyline. Its predecessor, like the rest of Béziers, was sacked and pillaged during the siege of 1209. Today's structure was built over the following 200 years in typical southern Gothic style. Inside, the baroque excess of its altarpiece is counterbalanced by the more modest walnut carving of the giant 17th-century restored organ, above which warm light floods in through the chequered rose window. Haul yourself up the 167 steps of the 47m-high tower (pigeon droppings become thicker as you ascend) for a panoramic view of the city.

Inside the 14th-century cloister, look for the large tablet dedicated to one Dorothea Smith, wife of

Bartholomew Walmesley, who died in Béziers in 1649. From the cloister, steps lead down to the formal Jardin des Évêques, a pleasant spot for a picnic overlooking the River Orb.

MUSÉE DU BITERROIS

This **museum** (☎ 04 67 36 81 61; place des Casernes; adult/child €2.60/1.80; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–5pm or 6pm Tue–Sun Sep–Jun) occupies what used to be the sleeping quarters of Béziers' fire brigade. Well displayed and illuminated, it recounts the town's history. The largest sections are devoted to Roman artefacts (including a well-preserved though crudely fashioned statue of Bacchus as a child) and winemaking, which, with tourism, remains the backbone of the local economy.

MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

The town's **Fine Arts Museum** (☎ 04 67 28 38 78; adult/child €2.60/1.80; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–5pm or 6pm Tue–Sun Sep–Jun) is housed in two mansions. The branch at **Hôtel Fabregat** (place de la Révolution) has a heterogeneous collection of canvases from the Middle Ages onwards and a sprinkling of contemporary works. The stern features of the anonymous banker in *Portrait d'un Banquier* were painted by Hans Holbein the Younger. Other highlights include Delacroix's *Sainte Catherine d'Alexandrie* (for which his cousin acted as model) and a misty *Le Marais aux Cinq Vaches* (Marsh with Five Cows – it sounds less prosaic in French!) by Corot.

Two of the three floors of the elegant though rundown, mainly 17th-century **Hôtel Fayet** (rue du Capus) are devoted to the creations and plaster maquettes of local sculptor Jean-Antoine Injalbert (see the boxed text p129).

A SHORT WALK

For a gentle, shady stroll, walk beneath the plane trees that line the wide esplanade of **allées Paul Riquet**, then explore **Plateau des Poètes**. At its heart is a tiny lake from which sprouts a positive jungle of bamboo.

ÉCLUSES DE FONTSERANES

Just southwest of town is this series of tight locks straddling the Canal du Midi. For more about this pleasant spot for a stroll or bike ride, see the boxed text p136. Bus 13 runs from the *gare routière* at least 10 times daily.

Sleeping

Domaine de Clairac (☎ 04 67 76 78 97; www.campingclairac.com; rte de Bessan; site, car & 2 people €14; ☎ Apr–Sep)

THE CAMEL OF BÉZIERS

You've never seen a stranger beast, with its sharp steel teeth and a neck that could belong to some giant bird of fable. And anyway, with only one hump it is, strictly and pedantically speaking, a dromedary. No matter. This odd creation, carried by four men who totter beneath it, takes to the streets every 28 April in honour of the town's patron saint, St Aphrodise, on his special day.

St Aphrodise, so the story goes, came to Béziers from Egypt around AD 60, riding his faithful camel. Persecuted for his zeal and success in converting the Biterrois, he was executed. Unfazed, he walked off with his severed head tucked under his arm. Upon the saint's definitive death, the town took over responsibility for caring for his camel, which died in peaceful old age.

The nearest camp site, surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, has plenty of shade and ample space between pitches.

Hôtel de France (☎ 04 67 28 44 71, www.hotel-2-france.com; 36 rue Boiëldieu; s/d with shower €34/39, with full bathroom €39/46; ☒ ☑) Wi-fi. This welcoming place breathes good taste. Its 21 rooms are individually and delightfully furnished in wrought iron, and most bedrooms are painted in an ochre and pastel-green wash. In several, toilet and bathroom are separate, and all rooms have double glazing. It's well worth paying the extra for one of the three deluxe rooms (€59). Ask for 208, on a corner, which has plenty of light and sleeps up to three.

Hôtel Champ de Mars (☎ 04 67 28 35 53, www.hotel-champdemars.com; 17 rue de Metz; r with shower €39, with bathroom €46-50; ☒ ☑) Parking €6 to €10. You'll recognise this cheerful hotel by its bright window boxes and the pair of oleanders standing sentinel outside. All 10 rooms – sink your toes into the thick, red piled carpet – overlook a quiet street and a private garden beyond. Those on the 1st floor, which cost no more, have a small balcony.

ourpick **Hôtel des Poètes** (☎ 04 67 76 38 66; www.hotelespoetes.net in French; 80 allées Paul Riquet; s/d from €46/55; ☒ ☑) Parking €6. This spruce, airy, cheerful, delightfully quiet option was radically made over in 2007 with great taste. Fresh flowers, floral-pattern bedheads, stylish furnishings – the feminine touch is everywhere. The two friendly owners speak excellent English, will collect your car from the nearby private garage, lend you a bike for free and even reserve a restaurant for you. Of its 14 rooms, six overlook the botanical richness of Plateau des Poètes.

Hôtel Impérator (☎ 04 67 49 02 25; www.hotel-imperator.fr; 28 allées Paul Riquet; s €51-71, d €61-85; ☒ ☑ ☑) Wi-fi available; parking €10. The Impérator, functioning as a hotel for more than a century, couldn't be more central.

Beyond its imposing neoclassical facade, most of its 45 rooms are large and high ceilinged and the bathroom, with its marble sink, is separate from the toilet. In summer, breakfast is served in the rear garden, where you could be 100 miles from the bustle of the *allées* just outside.

Eating

Le Chameau Ivre (☎ 04 67 80 20 20; 15 place Jean Jaurès; tapas €3-9; ☎ 2.30pm-midnight Mon, 10am-8pm Tue & Wed, 10am-11pm Thu-Sat) Primarily a wine shop, the Drunken Camel, with bottles ranged around every spare square centimetre of wall, is a very suave place for a snack and a snifter. Select from around a dozen tapas, every one of them fresh, and 15 or so wines served by the glass. If you're in company, choose from over 2000 varieties of bottled wines on offer, all of which are also available for sale. For something varied yet light at midday, go for the lunch special of three tapas, a glass of wine and coffee (€10).

Cannelle (☎ 04 67 28 06 01; 11 place Gabriel Péri; salads €9; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) 'Cinnamon' is a delightful spot for a light lunch or simply a decent infusion. The affable young team can offer you nearly 20 kinds of salad, a tempting two-course lunchtime special (€13), a bewildering range of quality teas (€3) and a selection of choice coffees (€1.80).

La Tomate Bleue (☎ 04 67 62 92 25; 23 rue des Anciens Combattants; 2-course lunch €11, mains around €14; ☎ Tue-Sat) The Blue Tomato (no, we don't know why!), with its ochre decor, tiled floor and bentwood chairs, is two things in one: a wine bar with an excellent selection of exclusively Languedoc wines by the glass, and a restaurant with a short yet creative menu.

Le Cep d'Or (☎ 04 67 49 28 09; 7 rue Viennet; menus €15-19.50, mains around €20; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) Although meat isn't taboo, the reputation of this longstanding favourite mainly

rests upon its fish dishes. Dine in the comfortable, intimate interior, where paintings and posters plaster the walls, or choose the small interior patio.

ourpick Octopus (☎ 04 67 49 90 00; www.restaurant-octopus.com in French; 12 rue Boiëldieu; menus €29, mains €26-28; ☺ Tue-Sun) It's the little touches that make this restaurant: a single red rose on each table, original artwork on the walls, three subtle *amuses-bouche*, creations that arrive on a small slate as a gift from the kitchen, cornets of pralines and glazed popcorn that come, unsolicited, with the coffee. And, above all, attentive yet never intrusive service. But more even than these, it's the quality of the cuisine that distinguishes this tasteful, relaxed venue where each tempting dish is a work of visual as well as gastronomic art. The lunchtime deal (starter, main, coffee and wine for €21 – or €29 if you can squeeze in a dessert too) is excellent value.

SELF-CATERING

Les Halles (place Pierre Sémard; ☺ 6am-2pm Tue-Sun) Béziers' covered market is *the* place to stock up on picnic and self-catering fare. In its southeast corner, La Gargote des Halles, an unpretentious market bar, will cook your purchase for €2 and, for an extra €1.50, add in veg ('whatever takes my fancy that day', the *patronne* explains) or a plate of chips/french fries. She'll also serve you half a dozen oysters and a glass of chilled white wine for €6. Right beside her bar is a stall selling organic produce.

Entertainment

All films at five-screen **Cinéma Palace** (☎ 04 67 77 52 76; 7 av St-Saëns) are shown in their original language.

Shopping

Caves Paul Riquet (7 rue Flourens; ☺ 3-7.30pm Mon, 9am-12.30pm & 3-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun) At this specialist wine shop, there's something for all pockets and palates. In addition to its carefully selected wines, it offers quality pastas, pâtés and local gourmet specialities.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Béziers Agde airport (☎ 04 67 80 99 09; www.beziers.aeroport.fr) is 14km from town, just off the N112. Airlinair flies once or twice daily to/from Paris (Orly). Ryanair flies to/from London (Stansted and Luton) and Bristol.

BUS

The *gare routière* is on place Général de Gaulle. Trains are a much more efficient option.

TRAIN

There are frequent trains northwards to Agde (€3.90, 15 minutes), Sète (€7.40, 30 minutes), Montpellier (€10.90, 45 minutes) and Nîmes (€11.70, 1½ hours).

Southbound, at least 10 trains daily run to Perpignan (€13.10, one hour) via Narbonne (€4.80, 15 minutes). Westbound destinations include Carcassonne (€12.90, one hour) and Toulouse (€27.70, 1¾ hours), often requiring a change in Narbonne.

Getting Around

For cycle hire, Béziers lags behind most major towns in Languedoc – parking Jean Jaurés, with capacity for more than 1000 cars, has precisely three bikes for rent!

However, from mid-March to the end of October, **Hôtel des Poètes** (opposite) hires out cycles (per half-/full day €10/15; free to hotel guests) to all comers.

For a taxi, call ☎ 04 67 35 00 85.

THE MASTER SCULPTOR OF BÉZIERS

Jean-Antoine Injalbert (1845–1933), son of a stonemason and, you might say, a chip off the old block, was, in his time, a rival to Rodin and one of France's most sought-after sculptors. His vigorous style was essentially neoclassical, seasoned with more than a hint of romanticism. His output was prolific; in an early example of mass production, thousands of plaster copies of his bust of Marianne, symbol of republican France, were cast and distributed to town halls throughout the nation.

You'll stumble upon his works all over town. In addition to the collection at Hôtel Fayet, his sculptures breathe the natural air in the town cemetery, in front of the cathedral, around Plateau des Poètes (in particular, his grandiose Titan fountain and sombre, monumental war memorial to the men of Béziers who fell in WWI) and, above all, in the Jardins de la Villa Antonine, his summer residence.

ROQUEBRUN

pop 600

Roquebrun is renowned for its benign microclimate that favours the nurturing of fine wines. You'll recognise it from a distance by its ruined 10th-century tower poking skywards. In early February, the countryside all around is a bright-yellow blaze of mimosa – there's even a Fête du Mimosa with a procession and a blessing of the plant by the village priest.

Roquebrun's **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 89 79 97; www.roquebrun.org in French; av des Orangers; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Jun & Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri rest of yr) is on the village side of the bridge.

Keen gardeners might want to visit the **Jardin Méditerranéen** (☎ 04 67 89 55 29; www.jardin-mediterraneen.fr in French; adult/6-15yr/under 6yr €4.50/2.50/free; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun-Fri, 9am-noon Sat mid-Feb-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov), where more than 400 species, both local and collected from similarly arid climates around the world, thrive in the thin soil.

In the past, cereals and vegetables grew in abundance on the flat, narrow plain at Roquebrun's feet, while vines flourished on the steep hillsides. Difficult to work, they still retain traces of terracing, long ago abandoned and tumbling. Nowadays, every spare patch of valley sprouts vines and every second house seems to be a *cave*. The village is justifiably proud of the recently awarded *appellation contrôlée* status accorded to its Saint-Chinian Roquebrun wines. To sample this and other local labels, call in at the **Cave de Roquebrun** (☎ 04 67 89 64 35; www.cave-roquebrun.fr; rue des Orangers; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-7pm May, Jun, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Nov-Apr) at the Olargues exit to the village.

Just upstream from Roquebrun's sturdy, six-arched stone bridge over the Orb, **Grandeur Nature** (☎ 04 67 89 52 90; www.canoe-france.com/orb; ☎ mid-Apr-Sep) rents canoes and kayaks. By the waterside, children can feed the flotilla of ducks that nest hereabouts.

There's a small **beach** just downstream from the bridge where you can stretch out or take a cooling dip in the river.

OLARGUES

pop 600

Olargues sits squat atop a promontory around which curls the River Jaur, a tributary of the Orb. There's no one, major sight; the pleasure lies simply in wandering its steep, cobbled

lanes and alleys. As you meander, look out for the faded, almost effaced signs of long-closed businesses: a tailor, a baker, a café, a hotel-restaurant and more.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 97 71 26; www.olargues.org in French; av de la Gare; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 3-5pm or 6pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jun) is just off place Alexandre Lassac.

From place Alexandre Lassac, the town-hall square, enter the old quarter through the Porte Neuve (New Gate), venerably old despite its name. Turn right beside the minuscule village museum to take Escalier de la Commanderie, a covered stairway where freestanding granite slabs constitute each step. Savour the brief, welcome shade its canopy offers in summer. Continue climbing to reach the 15th-century **bell tower**, the village's highest point. The tower and a few foundations are all that remain of the 11th-century fortress that once dominated the village. From here, enjoy the view of the winding River Jaur, spanned by the steeply humped, 13th-century **Pont du Diable**, the Devil's Bridge, oldest of the town's river crossings. To drop down to the bridge, turn right at a sign as you descend, then follow rue de la Comporte.

For outdoor enthusiasts, **Aventure 34** (☎ 04 67 23 27 92; www.aventure34.com in French; Le Mas de Gua), based a couple of kilometres away in the hamlet of St-Vincent d'Olargues, offers a host of activities, including rock climbing, canyon descents, caving and guided walks.

LAMALOU-LES-BAINS

pop 2200

The health-restoring waters of Lamalou-les-Bains have been exploited ever since the 17th century. But it was the arrival of the railway, completed in 1868 but long abandoned, that led to the construction of the spa's town houses and hotels, washed in pastel colours and built to cater for *curistes* and visiting celebrities such as Alexandre Dumas, André Gide and the sultan of Morocco, who came to sample its waters.

More than 15 springs spurt the length of the geological fault beneath the town. The Usclade, the one used in medical treatments today, emerges, rich in minerals, at a constant temperature of 52°C.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 95 70 91; www.ot-lamaloulesbains.fr; 1 av Capus; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat rest of yr) is at 1 av Capus.

Lamalou's most prominent building is its **casino**, the charm of its belle-époque facade

VALLÉE DE L'ORB & PÉZENAS

This circular driving route (135km including the Olargues detour) takes you up the vine-clad Vallée de l'Orb – where there's the opportunity for swimming, kayaking and canoeing – and into the Parc Natural Régional du Haut-Languedoc. Here, it takes in a couple of lonely villages, a small spa town and, to round off the day, a sumptuous, well-preserved 17th-century township.

Leave Béziers by the ring road, following signs for Bédarioux, then continue straight, signed Cazouls-lès-Béziers, where the Bédarioux road forks right. In **Cessenon**, a short stop at **La Ferme Zoo** (☎ 04 67 89 54 14; adult/child €7/6; 🕒 10am–7pm Apr–late Sep, 1.30–6pm Wed, Sat, Sun & school holidays rest of yr), a small zoo with farm animals and, more exotically, a camel, will set the children in the right mood for the day ahead.

Just beyond Cessenon, turn right at a roundabout, signed Roquebrun, to stay with the D14. Soon after, the road begins to climb steadily as you enter the more rugged terrain of the Parc Natural Régional du Haut-Languedoc, continuing to Roquebrun (opposite).

After exploring the village, turn left, signed Olargues, to stay with the D14. The road follows the course of the River Orb, running above the picturesque riverside hamlet of **Ceps** and below **Vieussan**, perched up high with, down in the valley below, its own splendid stone bridge. Between the two, look out on the left for the rusting roadside iron wheels and cogs. At harvest time, these once served to haul up *comportes*, deep, oval wooden trays brimming with grapes and other produce, from the fields across the river.

Below the single-lane suspension bridge at **Tarassac**, novices can paddle the River Orb at **Canoe Kayak Moulin de Tarassac** (☎ 04 67 97 74 64; www.canoe-tarassac.com; 🕒 Jun–Sep), based beside the village's former water mill. A 5km, 1½-hour unaccompanied trip from Colombières costs €21 in a kayak and €34 per two-person canoe. More experienced canoeists can undertake the descent to Ceps (10km, 3½ hours, €27/43) or as far as Roquebrun (15km, 4½ hours, €29/45).

Once over the bridge, turn left onto the D908 for a 12km round-trip detour to Olargues (opposite). Returning, continue eastwards along the D908 to visit Lamalou-les-Bains (opposite), a small belle-époque spa town that contrasts with the robust agricultural villages met so far.

Leave the D908 in the hamlet of **Hérépian**, turning right onto the D909A to cross the Orb for the last time and climb out of the valley. Around 8km later, go left onto the fast, good-quality D13, which leads to Pézenas (below), passing on your right the imposing pile of the privately owned, 18th-century **Château de Cassan**.

Allow a generous 1½ hours to wander the alleys and streets of the pedestrianised heart of Pézenas then, for speed, follow signs to the A9 *autoroute* for a swift return to Béziers.

diminished by gaudy contemporary signing. Inside, there's some lovely stained glass. Its theatre, which can accommodate 600, hosts an annual summer festival of operetta.

Down at valley level beside the D908, the simple, 12th-century **church of Saint-Pierre de Rhèdes** once welcomed pilgrims passing through as they followed the Chemins de St Jacques into Spain. These days, this lovely example of southern Romanesque architecture sits with dignity above the town cemetery, a space heavy with ostentatious mausoleums that are almost big enough to live in.

PÉZENAS

pop 7800

It's something of a surprise to come across a town of such manifest historical wealth in the heart of the Languedoc countryside,

well away from any major communication route. But there's good reason for the grandeur and even the hint of swagger that goes with Pézenas (that final 's' is pronounced; its citizens are known, less than obviously, as Piscénois, recalling the town's original name, Piscenae).

Information

The helpful **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 98 35 45; www.pezenas-tourisme.fr; 🕒 9am–9pm Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Sat, 2–5pm Sun Sep–Jun) is on place Gambetta, at the heart of the old town. During July and August it organises guided visits in English (€5) at 5pm daily – a useful introduction to the town.

Leave your car in one of several car parks that fringe the pedestrianised historic quarter and walk in.

History

Pézenas had enjoyed local fame for centuries as a market town, venue for commercial fairs and centre for trading in woollen cloth woven by peasants in the surrounding villages. But what brought it to the notice of all Languedoc and even the royal court in distant Versailles was its selection as the site for Languedoc's States General (roughly speaking, 'parliament') in 1456.

Some 70 years later, it was chosen to be the residence of regional governors, appointed by the king. In the 17th century its most famous governor, Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, brought to town artists and writers, while fellow aristocrats set up house, in the hope of acquiring favours or a commission. Money flowed in and the town was known without irony as the Versailles of the South. The next 200 years saw the building of the handsome *hôtels particuliers*, or private mansions, that you meet at almost every turning.

Sights & Activities

Each of Pézenas' historic buildings is signed multilingually. All the same, to explore the pedestrianised medieval town systematically and in some sequence you need the English version of *Pézenas, Ville d'Art* (€2), an easy-to-follow guide to the town's mansions and other prominent public buildings that's only available at the tourist office.

Highlights include **Hôtel d'Alfonse** (rue Conti), **Hôtel de Malibran** (rue Denfert Rochereau) and **Maison Consulaire** (place Gambetta), these days occupied by the **Maison des Métiers d'Art** (☎ 04 67 98 16 12), which mounts good temporary exhibitions.

Pézenas gives star billing to Jean Molière who, as a young, virtually unknown playwright, brought his troupe to town at the invitation of Armand de Bourbon. In **Hôtel Peyrat** (place des États Généraux), **Scénovision Molière** (☎ 04 67 98 35 39; www.scenovisionmoliere.com in French; adult/child €7/5; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon, Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun, to 10pm Wed & Fri Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sun Sep-Jun) illustrates the life and times of France's greatest comic dramatist in a state-of-the-art 3-D spectacle.

There's a more traditional presentation of Molière memorabilia and other reminders of the town's past (in particular, a magnificent set of Aubusson tapestries) at the **Musée de Vulliod-St Germain** (☎ 04 67 98 90 59; 3 rue Alliés; adult/child €2.50/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun,

10am-noon, 3-7pm & 9-11pm Wed & Fri Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun mid-Feb-May & Oct-mid-Nov).

Shopping

Many of Pézenas' historic buildings are occupied these days by antique dealers, artists, carpet sellers and craftsmen. The tourist-office pamphlets *Artistes et Galeries* and *Les Artisans Créateurs* have comprehensive listings and explicit maps. Should you fancy a little late-night shopping, these places stay open until midnight each Wednesday and Friday during high summer.

Pézenas is also a town for those with a sweet tooth. The *berlingot*, a kind of filling-wrenching humbug, has been made by the same family for over 150 years. Pick up a packet at **Confiserie Boudet** (place Gambetta). The town's other speciality, the *petit pâté de Pézenas*, has a curious link with the UK (see the boxed text opposite).

OPPIDUM D'ENSÉRUNE & BENEATH

Four communication channels pass around or through the hill on which the Oppidum sits. The Roman **Via Domitia**, which connected Rome with its possessions in Spain, once passed right by. You can walk through the **Tunnel de Malpas**, the only one along the length of the Canal du Midi, which cuts its way for over 165m through the hill. The first navigation tunnel in the world, it was pierced in only six days with nothing more than picks and shovels. Beneath – and crossing its trajectory with less than 2m to spare – a **railway tunnel** was pushed through in the mid-19th century.

Earliest, deepest and perhaps most impressive of all is the **Grande Maïre**, a 13th-century drainage channel that runs for 1365m, sloping to a depth of 30m before it dumps its waters into the River Aude. It's the main collector for a whole network of drainage ditches, totalling more than 10km in length, that suck the water from what's still called the **Lac de Montaudy**, described before it was drained as 'a stinking lake whose stagnant waters spread far sickness and death'. Centuries after being drained, it's still capable of flooding and again appearing as a lake after heavy rains. To appreciate the wonderful symmetry of its medieval field patterning, preserved to this day and radiating out like the spokes from a bicycle, you need to climb to the Oppidum.

LORD CLIVE'S LEGACY

The *petit pâté de Pézenas* is a confection of minced mutton laced with lemon rind, brown sugar and spices that's tucked into a cotton reel-shaped cone of pastry. The finer details of its origin vary according to the telling. But what's attested is that in 1768 Lord Clive, Viceroy of India, was advised by his doctor to take a health cure in southern France and lived for a season in the Château du Larzac, together with his wife, Marguerite, and a retinue of servants, including his Indian cook. Some say that Clive himself passed on the recipe to the Picnic Club, a gourmet group of which he was a member; others reckon that it was his Indian cook. Whatever, these meaty morsels are now firmly a part of Pézenas' culinary heritage.

The **Oppidum d'Ensérune** (☎ 04 67 37 01 23; www.oppidumdenserune.com; incl audioguide adult/child €6.50/free; 🕒 10am-7pm May-Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Apr & Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar, last admission one hr before closing) stretches along its hilltop plateau for more than 600m. This fortified town was lived in continuously from the 6th century BC until well into the 1st century AD, when the Roman occupation began to bite and the last inhabitants came down from their mountain fastness to settle on the plains. As you'll gather from a quick glance at the myriad artefacts, intact and in fragments – beads, brooches, lamps, swords, spearheads, coins, hairpins, jewels and so much more – in the **museum**, it was a place of considerable commercial importance that traded all around the Mediterranean.

Just as impressive is the 360-degree panorama: the bird's-eye view of Lac de Montaudy, the Pyrenees on the southern horizon, the Cévennes to the north and the thin line of the Canal du Midi, traceable into the distance by the horizontal smudge of plane trees that flank each of its banks.

La Maison du Malpas (☎ 04 67 32 88 77; www.lemalpas.com; 🕒 10am-6.30pm or 7.30pm daily Mar-Oct, to 5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Feb), the particularly helpful tourist office for the area, is just above the canal tunnel entrance at the base of the hill.

AGDE AREA

Agde comes in three very distinct flavours: the original settlement beside the River Hérault, Le Cap d'Agde, a vast summertime playground, and Le Grau d'Agde, sandwiched between the two and with the appeal of neither.

AGDE

pop 20,000

Old Agde, 24km from Béziers, was originally settled by the Greeks. Named after Agatha

Tyche, the Greek goddess of good fortune (its inhabitants are still called Agathois), it's by far the most charming of the three settlements. It was a bishopric from as early as 405 right up to the French Revolution.

The 17th century was its time of greatest prosperity. The construction of the Canal du Midi, which meets the River Hérault just upstream, brought even greater wealth to what was already a booming fishing and commercial port. From this time date many of Agde's imposing *maisons particulières*. But the Hérault, until then navigable, silted up and later Agde was upstaged as a port by Sète, whose harbour on the open sea could accommodate steamships.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 94 29 68; www.agde-herault.com in French; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is at 1 place Molière. Ask for the English version of its walking tour of the old quarter.

Sights & Activities

The dark-grey basalt of its imposing *maisons particulières* and the fortresslike, mainly 12th-century **Cathédrale St-Étienne** motivated Marco Polo to describe the town as the 'black pearl of the Mediterranean'.

The 26 well-displayed rooms of the **Musée Agathois** (☎ 04 67 94 82 51; 5 rue de la Fraternité; adult/child €4.50/1.80; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Sep-Jun), within an attractive 17th-century mansion, take you through Agde's long maritime and wine-producing history.

The tourist office sells tickets for three companies that run short **boat trips** along the Canal du Midi.

There's a magnificent *trompe l'oeil* painting on the east side of square Picheire. A true piece of urban art on the grand scale, it will have you blinking a couple of times to work out what's real and what's painted.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel le Donjon (☎ 04 67 94 12 32; www.hotelledonjon.com; place Jean Jaurès; r €42-79; ♿) Free parking. In its time a convent, then a coaching inn (today's garage was once its stable), this place is full of character. Each of its 20 rooms is nonsmoking, large and attractively decorated in typical Midi blues and yellows.

Lou Pescadou (☎ 04 67 21 17 10; 18 rue Chassefière; menu €15) Among the battery of restaurants splayed along the quayside, Lou Pescadou has been serving the same magnificent-value take-it-or-leave-it five-course menu (€15) ever since 1965. First, the do-it-yourself soup: smear a slice of toast with a clove of garlic, sprinkle on grated cheese and dunk it in the rich, fishy broth. Next, a steaming plate, piled high, of mussels. There follows a big bowl of *pâté de campagne* (country-style pâté), left on the table with no one looking or caring how much you dollop onto your plate. Then it's a giant grilled fish or slab of steak staring up at you from the plate, followed by an equally gut-busting dessert. Come back tomorrow, next week, next year and repeat the experience; Lou Pescadou is one of life's few constants.

our pick Larcen (☎ 04 67 00 01 01; 41 rue Brescou; daily special €10.50, with dessert €16, mains €18.50-23; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat Sep-Jul, lunch only Aug) A five-minute walk beyond the bounds of the old town, Larcen is strictly contemporary in both design and cuisine. The bowls and phials of spices on the side table as you enter give an early hint of its subtle, innovative style. Dishes (such as a 3cm-thick cross-section of pork, tender and cooked to perfection, garnished with hoi sin sauce and accompanied by polenta) are solidly based in French culinary tradition while drawing too upon international resources. Staff are pleasant, attentive and swift-moving. Eat in the attractive interior or on the large external terrace with its mature cypresses and shade-imparting palm trees. This popular place is often full, so be sure to reserve.

Getting There & Away

Bus 273 plies the 6km route between Agde and Le Cap d'Agde at least hourly, while the 272 runs between Agde and Le Grau d'Agde four times daily.

From Agde there are frequent trains to Béziers (15 minutes, €4) and Narbonne (30 minutes, €8).

LE CAP D'AGDE

Modern resort Le Cap d'Agde occupies a stubby promontory formed aeons ago by a distant lava flow. One of a chain of similar resorts along the Languedoc-Roussillon coast that were built in the early 1970s, it's still expanding. With its vast marinas and long, sandy beaches, it's hugely popular in summer, when there's enough going on to ensure that no one in the family can say 'I'm bored'. And yet despite all this, it's a strangely soulless place of vast parking lots and indifferent apartment blocks, sprawling and difficult to get around unless you have a car.

Information

Cap sur le Net (☎ 04 67 32 22 15; 21 place Agde Maritime; per hr €4.20, wi-fi per 40 min €2; ☺ 10.30am-1pm & 2.30pm-midnight Jul & Aug, 3-8pm Mon-Fri Apr-Jun & Sep) Internet access.

New Games Joux (☎ 04 67 26 86 38; place de l'Arbre, Centre Port; per hr €5; ☺ 10am-2am Apr-mid-Oct) Nearby, also offers internet access.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 67 01 04 04; www.capdagde.com; Rond-point du Bon Accueil; ☺ 9am-7pm or 8pm Jun-Aug, core hr 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-May)

Sights & Activities

Extending through Le Cap d'Agde and to east and west are 14km of wide sandy beaches, including the three Plages Richelieu in the heart of the resort and Plage Naturiste, a long strand at the eastern end that's reserved for nudists.

Cannons and cannonballs, swords encrusted with barnacles, pottery, jars and ranks of amphorae, a spare cranium, brooches, axe heads and so much more: the **Musée de l'Épêbe** (☎ 04 67 94 69 60; Mas de la Clape; adult/10-18yr/under 10yr €4.50/1.80/free; ☺ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2pm-6pm Wed-Sat & Mon, 2pm-6pm Sun Sep-Jun), a museum of marine archaeology, is a delight. Rarely for a museum and perhaps because most finds were made in the last 25 years, the divers and underwater archaeologists who made the discoveries receive credit and are named and pictured. Particularly well laid out and documented, it takes its name from l'Épêbe, its prime piece and a sensational bronze male statue. Unlike so many Roman bronze statues, which were melted down and recycled, it lay for centuries under the sea's protection until it was discovered and hauled ashore in 1964. Two other highlights are a bronze statuette of Eros, barely 70cm high,

armless, with elaborately curled hair and piercing eyes of silver foil, and another of a young Roman boy, altogether more finely crafted.

At the **aquarium** (☎ 04 67 26 14 21; www.aquarium-agde.com in French; 11 rue des Deux Frères; adult/child €6.90/4.90; ☎ 10am-11pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Sep-Jun), 28 saltwater tanks, representing Mediterranean and tropical marine habitats, house everyday and exotic creatures such as sea horses, octopuses, eels and a shark or two.

There's plenty of liquid fun at **Aqualand** (☎ 04 67 26 85 94; www.aqualand.fr in French; av des Îles d'Amérique; adult/child €24/17.50; ☎ 10am-6pm or 7pm Jun-Aug), with options ranging from gentle drifting to an adrenalin-pumping 20m vertical freefall drop.

Centre Nautique du Cap d'Agde (☎ 04 67 01 46 46; www.centrenautique-capdagde.com; av du Passeur Challiès; ☎ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sep-Jun), based at Plage Richelieu Est, offers courses in sailing, for both children and adults, and surf-boarding. It hires out surfboards, catamarans, dinghies and canoes.

No less than eight outfits offer **diving** courses and equipment hire. But there's no need for special equipment to enjoy the **Sentier Sous-Marin** (☎ mid-Jun-mid-Sep), just off the beach of La Plagette. As you explore this free underwater signed trail, you swim through and above five distinct environments, each with its characteristic plants and other marine life.

The dour structure visible out to sea looks like some Mediterranean Alcatraz. And indeed **Fort Brescou** was just that. On a small stub of a volcanic island, it was constructed as a defensive fort, then served as a prison. Between Easter and October pleasure boats visit it from both Le Cap d'Agde and Le Grau d'Agde.

Le Village Naturiste is a little township in itself with well over 20,000 bare bodies in high season: vegans and sun worshippers, lots of ordinary people who just like slipping their clothes off (somehow *naturisme* sounds so much more, well, natural than nudism) and out-and-out raunchy swingers.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Les Grenadines (☎ 04 67 26 27 40; www.hotelgrenadines.com; 6 impasse Marie Céleste, plage Richelieu Ouest; r €57-98; ☎ Feb-mid-Nov; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Free videosurveyed parking; free wi-fi. This little jewel is a haven of friendliness amid looming anonymous apartment blocks. Under new ownership, it's a family hotel par excellence (husband and wife in charge, sister cleaning

the rooms, brother the handyman and dad in charge of the garden). It's also a great choice for visiting families; six of the 20 rooms have a small balcony and a separate second bedroom with bunk beds. Rooms are neat and cheerfully decorated in green and light grey; there are fresh flowers in public areas; and, at the rear, there's a tranquil patio.

Le Brasero (☎ 04 67 26 24 75; rue de la Gabelle, Port Richelieu; menus €15-30, mains around €15; ☎ lunch & dinner Fri-Wed, daily in summer) At this busy, popular restaurant beside the port (you'll need to reserve), choose from fresh fish, seafood platters or meaty mains. Not least of its trump cards is its select wine list.

Getting Around

Le Cap d'Agde sprawls and you're at a big disadvantage without a car or bicycle. Three outfits rent out bikes by the hour or day; typical prices are €7.50/9.50/35 per half-/full day/week for an adult tourer or child's bike.

Cap Aventure (☎ 04 67 26 36 00; 19 av des Sergents) Beside Port de la Clape; it'll add a baby carrier for no extra cost and will also deliver to your accommodation for rentals of one week or more.

Passion Cycle Location (☎ 04 67 5114 21; av des Sergents) Beside the Spar grocery store a little south of the tourist office.

Rosalie & Cyclo (☎ 04 67 26 90 61; Mail de Rochelongue) Also rents out large, trundling four-wheelers with canopy for a family spin.

LE GRAU D'AGDE

This settlement at the mouth of the River Hérault (in Occitan, *grau* means a natural opening that connects sea and lagoon) still maintains a small offshore fishing presence. More demure, less hedonistic and with deeper roots than its brash younger sister along the coast, it has few special charms other than yet more beaches of fine sand.

LE BASSIN DE THAU

Le Bassin de Thau (also called the Étang de Thau) is significantly the largest of the several large lagoons that punctuate the Languedoc coastline. On its seaward side, a thin, wind-swept sand bar, the preserve of windsurfers and those seeking a quiet beach, links the fishing and commercial port of Sète to the holiday resorts of Le Cap d'Agde and Marseillan-Plage at the lagoon's southern end. Around 19km

CANAL DU MIDI

It all starts – or ends, depending upon where you're coming from – with an almost inconspicuous flow of fresh water into the salty lagoon of Le Bassin de Thau. Here beside La Pointe des Onglous there's just a tiny harbour and the stubby finger of a lighthouse to mark the occasion.

Only a few kilometres countercurrent brings you to the first of the canal's minor engineering miracles, completed in 1680, the year before the canal's inauguration. Le Bassin d'Agde is not only France's but the world's sole circular lock, controlling water flow for the canal, the River Hérault, which joins it here, and a side flow that slips up to the town of Agde (p133).

Moored to the canal bank southeast of Béziers, near the town of Cers, is one of Languedoc's most delightful sleeping choices, **L'Appart des Anges** (☎ 04 67 26 05 57, 06 11 11 05 87; www.appartdesanges.com; Cers; r €125; ☒ ☑ ☎). Jean Philippe and Christophe designed and built this canal barge with exquisite taste: angel statuettes and fresh flowers greet you at every corner – petite plastic ducks too – and real, live goldfish swim and bloop in the three cabins, each different in design. Expect too a silver chocolate fish on your counterpane. They've even fitted in a small pool and terrace, where you can sip a sundowner beneath twinkling fairy lights. To complete the cossetting, breakfasts are ample, varied and served until noon.

Immediately west of Béziers and a pleasant, easy walk from the heart of the city is the **Pont-Canal**. This grand aqueduct was slung across the shallow valley of the River Orb in the mid-19th century to iron out a kink in the canal and bear boat traffic.

Just upstream is the earlier Écluses de Fontseranes – brainchild of Canal du Midi architect Pierre-Paul Riquet. A minor miracle of construction for its time, it's a tight stepladder of nine locks in quick succession, allowing boats to gain or lose 20m in height over no more than 300m. At this popular spot for a canalside stroll, you can also hire bikes and, above the topmost lock, electric boats.

Skirting Béziers and just beyond the pleasant little port of Colombiers, the canal enters the one and only tunnel along its entire length, the Tunnel de Malpas (p132).

Moored at the grandly named port (really just a set of moorings) outside the village of Argeliers, **La Baïsa** (☎ 06 07 88 18 30; www.peniche-chambres-hotes.com; Argeliers; ind breakfast s €60-70, d €70-80; ☎ yr-round) has three cosy cabins. Just along the towpath beside the bridge is Le Chat Qui Pêche (The Fishing Cat). A bar-restaurant with a small terrace, it's typical of the many adapted, recycled lock-keepers' houses the length of the canal that, with water tourism, have found a new life and identity.

A little upstream from Argeliers, the Canal de la Robine, taking off southwards, follows the former bed of the River Aude. This commercially important link, constructed soon after the Canal du Midi was completed, allowed the city of Narbonne to lock into the Mediterranean–Atlantic waterway. It sluices through the seven locks of pretty Sallèles d'Aude (p123) and eventually joins the sea at Port-la-Nouvelle.

Back on the Canal du Midi, Le Somail (p122), today a sleepy hamlet, was once an important staging post for both passenger and freight traffic. Nearby, the Répudre aqueduct, 135m long and supported by a single arch, was France's first canal-carrying bridge, completed in 1676.

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

Belle du Midi Cruises (☎ 04 68 93 53 94; www.belledumidicruises.com; Le Somail)

Connoisseur (☎ 04 68 65 14 55; www.connoisseur.fr; 17 quai d'Alsace, Narbonne)

Minervoï Cruisers (☎ 04 68 46 28 52; www.minervoiscruisers.com; Le Somail)

Nautic (☎ 04 67 94 78 93; www.nautic.fr; chemin de la Pagèze, Agde)

Nicols (☎ 04 68 46 00 97; www.nicols.com; Le Somail)

Rive de France (☎ 04 67 37 14 60; www.rive-de-france.com; Colombiers)

Boat hire is normally for a minimum of one week and the season typically lasts from mid-March to the middle of October. Costs vary between €1050 and €2200 per week, and you don't need a special licence. For more background on the Canal du Midi see p30.

long and 4.5km wide, its shallow waters, warmer than the sea's, are favoured by sea bass, sea bream, mullet, sole and eels. But much more important economically and providing employment for some 1000 people are the lagoon's shellfish beds. Mussels, scallops and, above all, oysters, none of them indigenous, were introduced in the early 20th century.

First to thrive were the mussels, gregarious, happy to live in clumps and secure in their sexuality. Oysters, altogether more delicate and fastidious, morphing from male to female during their lifespan and needing space, were more of a challenge. Fact: an oyster produces more than a million minuscule larvae, of which only about 10 will reach adulthood, even in the protected environment of *le bassin*. They inconspicuously grow and multiply, each shell glued to one of around 1000 synthetic ropes that dangle from small rafts.

MARSEILLAN & MARSEILLAN PLAGE

Marseillan and Marseillan Plage: the relationship closely resembles that between Agde and Le Cap d'Agde, long-established settlement and upstart seaside resort. Except that Marseillan, though a pretty enough lagoon-side town, cannot match Agde's charms and long history. All the investment goes into Marseillan Plage, where you'll find the tourist office and overwhelming crowds in summer.

But take a little time to enjoy Marseillan's relative calm, here on the unfashionable side of Le Bassin de Thau. There's a unique little 17th-century covered market and an equally bijou old, and still just working, port (not to be confused with the modern marina).

One business that's unlikely to go under, despite changes in drinking habits, is the **Noilly Prat distillery** (☎ 04 67 77 75 19; 1 rue Noilly; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €3.50/2/free; ☎ 45min tours 4 times daily Mar-Nov). For nearly 200 years, Blanc de Blancs wines have been aged in oak vats then blended with the herbs that give this so distinctly French aperitif its refreshing cleanliness of taste. Tours can be in both French and English. If there are few English speakers in your group, you'll be given a four-page summary of the guide's patter.

If you find the Mediterranean daunting for sailing or windsurfing, the warmer, shallower waters of Le Bassin de Thau may tempt you. The **Cerde de Voile de Marseillan** (☎ 04 67 77 65 22; quai de Toulon; ☎ yr-round) runs courses in both and also rents out boards and boats.

With its trademark box of coloured pencils on each table, the modest, welcoming **Le Jardin du Naris** (☎ 04 67 77 30 07; 24 blvd Pasteur; menus €19-36, mains €14-18; ☎ Wed-Mon; (V)), with its floral interior garden, is ideal for doodlers (the best creations are kept) and also for keeping young children pleasurably occupied. Among the tempting dishes is the *brochette de crevettes et moules sur paillason de légumes poêlés* (skewered scampi and mussels on a bed of stir-fried vegetables). It offers a vegetarian *menu* (€19) and is excellent value for your euro.

It has to be Noilly Prat, the hometown brew, as an aperitif at **Le Château du Port** (☎ 04 67 77 31 67; www.chateauduport.com; 9 quai de la Résistance; 2-/3-course menu €19/29; ☎ lunch & dinner daily Jun-Sep, closed lunch Wed Oct-May), an impressive mansion with a freshly scrubbed facade (a pity about the bilious mauve paintwork, though). Beside Marseillan's old port and originally a wine merchant's residence, it has a small terrace for quayside dining (with views over the water to the twinkling lights of Sète) and an elegant interior dining room and wine bar. Dishes, as you'd expect, are mostly created around fish or shellfish.

BOUZIGUES

Oystertown, you might call it, the shallow waters at its feet bristling with poles to which the tender molluscs cling and grow. As you enter from the south, house after house sells shellfish, fresh culled and straight from the producer. Along the quayside a battery of restaurants serve up shellfish hauled from Le Bassin de Thau.

Scoffing shellfish apart, the main reason for visiting Bouzigues is its **Musée de l'Étang de Thau** (☎ 04 67 78 33 57; quai du port de pêche; adult/7-12yr/under 7yr €4/3/free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun). Very visual, it tells the story of the lagoon through multilingual panels, models, live fish and haunting early photos of local fishing techniques and the development of shellfish farming.

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