

Destination Languedoc-Roussillon

'The next Provence' is the buzz on the street, much to the glee of the region's battalion of English-speaking estate agents, armed with a drop-dead-gorgeous portfolio of old stone *mas* (farmhouse) cradled between vines, terraced *maisons de village* – shutters bleached by the fierce Mediterranean sun – and bijou beach apartments, all on the market for a snip of the St-Tropez, Chianti or Brighton price tag.

Though precisely where this low-key neighbour to fat-cat Provence is, snug against the flamingo- and cowboy-specked delta of the River Rhône to the east and Pyrenean peaks soaring west into Andorra and Spain, not so many know. Sitting smart on the Mediterranean in the south of France, it sparkles just as brilliantly as the more easterly French Riviera, but without the glitz, without the glam, without the paparazzi fuss and, most welcome of all, without the crowds.

This is southern France back country – hot as hell in summer – where dusty dirt car parks hewed out between arid scrub and boulder skulk without care or finesse at the feet of ruined fortresses, impossibly built on rocky, wind-lashed outcrops to defend France's medieval frontier with the kingdom of Aragon. Here in this wild, barely populated countryside crusaders massacred Cathar heretics in the 13th century – let the thought fire your imagination as you hike step by step to the evocative ruins, stumbling as you do that little bit closer to heaven in every sense.

Outdoor aficionados seeking fun are amply rewarded in Haut-Languedoc, where spectacular galleries underground and the brilliant slashes of three river canyons above ground brutally pock high limestone plateaus. Nearby, France's largest national park protects mountains thick with chestnut forest and criss-crossed with hiking trails that reward with sweet mulberries. (Mad as a hatter, people said of Robert Louis Stevenson when he did it walking with a donkey called Modestine in the 18th century.) This naturally beautiful part of Languedoc is still sink-or-swim country where the torment of marrying top-end conservation policies with ekeing out a living is a constant for local farmers. Though these people are gutsy and determined, rising fuel prices in 2008 saw one more sheep and goat farmer bite the dust as working Haut-Languedoc's tough, unforgiving land just got too much.

More government aid is what cash-strapped grape growers in the vine-rich flush of the lower Languedoc – France's largest wine-producing region – say as they desperately grapple with the triple burden of cheap imports devaluing the French market, a steady drop in French wine consumption (50% less than in 1980) and rising production costs. What started out as a peaceful march of 4000 *vignerons* (winegrowers) asking for more state subsidies in Montpellier in July 2008 turned nasty when protestors threw Molotov cocktails and riot police were called in. Within days the violence had spread to other towns in the Languedoc: rioters overturned cars, vandalised banks, sabotaged wine-merchant warehouses, drained wine vats and rampaged through supermarkets mimicking the bottle-smashing campaigns of the balaclava-clad militant group CRAV (p32), which has hustled the government to better protect small wine producers against globalisation since 1976. Calm restored, the government did in fact

FAST FACTS

Population (2007):	2,548,000
GDP: €53 million	
Inflation: 1.6%	
Unemployment: 10.8%	
Coastline: 220km	
Sunshine: 300 days per year	
Land area: 27,376 sq km	
Vineyard area: 2900 sq km	
Annual wine production: 16 million hectolitres (33% of total French wine production)	
Annual wine consumption per capita: 55L	

announce an emergency aid package of several million euros to winegrowers in July 2008. Perhaps it had recalled that video threat CRAV had sent 12 months prior warning 'blood would flow' if Languedoc winemakers weren't helped.

Dramatic, yes, but this is a part of southern France teetering on the edge of Spain and passions do run high: take the French soldier who accidentally fired a round of live bullets instead of blanks during a military show near Carcassonne in July 2008, prompting France's army chief to quit in shame and the country to gasp in uproar.

Take the *corridas* (bullfights) that pack out arenas in Nîmes, Béziers and Céret, despite the fervent antibullfighting crowd that campaigns every season and did succeed in 2008 in getting a 10-year-old Mexican matador (56 dead bulls under his belt) banned from the ring in Nîmes. Matadors in the Camargue let the bull walk away alive (p36), but there is no way in Roussillon's Spanish-styled world – long-time part of Catalonia – that flamenco-loving folk would accept anything less than dead. It is as much part of their heritage as sangria, *sardanes* (p39) and the mythical mountain peak of Canigou (p230), worshipped by Catalans both sides of the border.

Montpellier, the hub of the region, with a university older than any other in France, sports a vibe as close to urban as you get in this predominantly rural part of the country, where signs reading '*fruits et légumes ventes*' (fruit and veg for sale) jump out at motorists every five minutes. Innovative, self-confident and razor-hot with students (one-third of the population), this is southern France's fastest-growing, most culturally vital city. Testament to this are the recently revamped Musée Fabre (p100), with its striking Daniel Buren entrance, and the €7 million Cité des Artistes, with artist workshops, galleries and recording studio, to open in 2010 in La Panacée, the old pharmacy faculty in the city's historic heart.

A major cultural coup for Languedoc-Roussillon in 2008 was its flush of Vauban citadels being inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage List alongside the Roman Empire's highest bridge (p86) and that miracle of 17th-century engineering the Canal du Midi. As you float along this graceful thread of water beaded with Zen moments, time dramatically screeches to slow-motion: pop a candy-pink cork out of a bottle of Pays de Vin d'Oc rosé, pedal the towpath to the next lock, lust after another Carcassonne turret view and know timeless moments like this are what this unassuming part of southern France is all about – serenity.

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Getting Started

Some places – Carcassonne with its witch-hat turrets and the wine-rich Côte Vermeille – are bona fide dream destinations that require planning months in advance in order to snag the best room in the house. But there are dozens of other places few people know about that are perfect for flying by the seat of your pants with no itinerary or reservation to speak of. Prices are on the rise as the buzzword spreads, but for the moment Languedoc-Roussillon is still very affordable for all budgets.

WHEN TO GO

Revel in Languedoc pleasures any time, although many swear spring is best, when peach trees bloom and almond trees flower pink against a backdrop of snowcapped Pyrenean peaks. September, when vines sag with plump sun-filled grapes, is second best. On the coast, beach bums bake from June to early September. Festivals (highlighted at the start of each regional chapter) and gastronomy (see p42) are year-round temptations around which to plan a trip.

High season is hot-and-bothered July and August, when French families flock to the region, clogging up roads (avoid driving on Saturday, that traditional arrival/departure day), bumping up accommodation prices and crowding beaches. Many shops take their *congé annuel* (annual closure) in August; Sunday and public holidays (p257) are dead everywhere.

This Mediterranean region enjoys hot summers and mild winters.

COSTS & MONEY

Accommodation is the biggest expense: count on €60 minimum a night for a double with bathroom in a midrange *chambre d'hôte* or hotel, and around €80 for a family room for four. Hostel-sleeping, bread-and-cheese-eating backpackers can easily survive on €40 a day; those opting for midrange hotels, restaurants and museums will spend at least €110. Various passes (p256) cut admission costs to museums, cultural sights and public transport in the region.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged its readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

See Climate Charts (p255) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Filled baguette €4

A coffee €1.40

Glass of wine/sangria
€2/3

Local/foreign newspaper
€1/3

Half-/full-day bicycle hire
€10/15

Canoe river descent
(12km) for one/two
people €30/45

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance (p257), ID card or passport, and visa (p261) if required
- Driving licence, car documents, safety triangle and fluorescent waistcoat (p264)
- Sunglasses, sun cream, hat, binoculars and mosquito repellent if bound for the flamingo-pink Camargue (p81)
- A pleasure-seeking palate and a thirst for good wine (p42)
- Your cycling legs and decent walking shoes (p59)

TOP PICKS

ATLANTIC OCEAN

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

Monaco



DRAMATIC DRIVES & TRAIN JOURNEYS

- Vallée de l'Hérault & Vallée de la Buèges (p111)
- The Côte Vermeille's coastal corniche (D914) and nail-biting high road (D86) inland through Banyuls vineyards (p221)
- The Vallée du Tech's trio of *cols* (mountain passes) from Prats de Molló into Spain (p226)
- Up the Pic du Canigou (p230): 22km of potholed motoring from Villerach to Chalet des Cortalets or by 4WD from Fillols
- Villefranche de Conflent to Latour de Carol aboard scenic mountain train the Train Jaune (p232)
- Rivesaltes to Axet aboard century-old narrow-gauge tourist train the Train du Pays Cathare et du Fenouillèdes (p235)
- Gorges de Galamus and the Cathar Castles (p181)
- The Corniche des Cévennes (p150)
- The plunging descent into the Cirque de Navacelles (p112)
- Up and over Mont Aigoual (p149)
- The road from Roquefort over the Causse du Lauzac to Ste-Eulalie de Cernon (p155)
- From Foix the D117 through the wild Pays de Sault and down to the Aude Valley (p197)

SWEET DREAMS ON FARMS & WINERIES

Be it of wine, foie gras or a fresh fruit tart, *dégustation* (tasting) is an integral part of overnight slumbers at these *chambres d'hôtes* (B&Bs), dreamily planted on farms or wine estates.

- Domaine Verchant, Castelnau-le-Nez, near Montpellier (p103)
- Château de Jonquières, Jonquières (p111)
- Domaine de Blancardy, near Ganges (p112)
- Ferme Auberge La Costa de Dalt (p229)
- L'Orri de Planès, near Mont Louis (p234)
- La Ferme de la Borie (p147)
- Ferme de Caussou, Foix (p200)
- Château de Mayragues, Castelnau de Montmiral (p250)

OUTDOOR ACTION

- Beach-bike it from Montpellier to the coast to have a stab at water-jousting in Palavas-les-Flots or Sète (p107)
- Paddle through green waters to abbey-rich St-Guilhem-le-Désert, then walk to the 'end of the world' (p110)
- Fly like a bird in a glider above the vines and scented scrubland of the Pic St-Loup (p112)
- Beach sail, windsurf or learn to kite-surf with a world champion in La Franqui on exhilaratingly windy Cap Leucate (p220)
- Take a walk on the wild side from lighthouse to dynamite factory along the Côte Vermeille's coastal path (p221)
- Summit Catalonia's most sacred mountain by mountain bike or on foot (p230)
- Pedal the Véloraïl du Larzac (p170) or canoe the Orb (p131)
- Swim the Cap d'Agde's Sentier Sous-Marin (underwater trail; p135)
- Freewheel down the steep slope of the Causse Méjean (p146)
- Trek between castles along the dramatic Sentier Cathare (p197) or with a donkey in the Cévennes (p146)

Shopping at the region's bounty of food markets (every village and town has at least a weekly one), staying at *chambres d'hôtes* and *fermes auberges* (p252) or supporting national park and nature reserve accommodation initiatives (p253); entertaining the kids with canoeing and snorkelling (p59), cave visits or learning how horse dung makes paper (p186) rather than huge theme parks; and leaving the car at home in favour of a bicycle (p265), canary-yellow mountain train (p232) or good old-fashioned hike (p62) are all ways of minimising your impact and travelling sustainably within Languedoc-Roussillon.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

For food- and drink-related literature see p42.

The Standing Pool (Adam Thorpe) Two Brits and their kids duck out of academic life in Cambridge for six months in a tumble-down farmhouse with pool in Languedoc. Being Thorpe, this is *not* your run-of-the-mill Peter Mayle-style 'Brit-board' travelogue.

Narrow Dog to Carcassonne (Terry Darlington; www.narrowdog.com) A hilarious read: Welshman Terry and wife Monica, both of whom love but know nothing about boating, boat down the Canal du Midi with their dog called Jim.

Hot Sun, Cool Shadow (Angela Murrills) 'Savouring the Food, History and Mystery of the Languedoc' is the strapline of this insightful travelogue written by a Canadian foodie in search of her dream house in the region.

Labyrinth & Sepulchre (Kate Mosse) At 500-plus pages these historical novels set in 13th-century Languedoc require stamina – or try short story, *The Cave* (2009). Background histories, anecdotes, musings on locations, characters and local legends etc fill Mosse's digital archive (www.sepulchre.co.uk).

Notes from the Languedoc (Rupert Wright) Languedoc food, wine, history, culture, local traits and quirks and a whole lot more are covered in this hard-to-put-down tour de force written in the form of letters.

Signs of the Heart: Love and Death in Languedoc (Christopher Hope) Languedoc lures all types, as this sharp, witty portrait of an eclectic bunch of foreigners, among them prostitute Lizzie from Lancashire, attests.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Comité Régional de Tourisme Languedoc-Roussillon (www.sunfrance.com) Fabulous regional tourist board website.

French Entrée Languedoc-Roussillon (www.frenchentree.com/languedoc) Features, listings and so on jam-packed with practical information on living, working and holidaying in Languedoc-Roussillon.

Languedoc Page (<http://the-languedoc-page.com>) Community-driven site covering history, activities, sights, lots of local chat and great links to Languedoc-Roussillon-related local blogs and books, online and in print.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Notes and posts on travel in France, plus the Thorn Tree forum.

Ocdiovisuel TV (<http://ocdiovisuel.midiblogs.com>) Partner channel of the region's newspaper publishing group: watch dozens of short films and videos of recent festivals, theatre, dance, street art and other cultural happenings in Languedoc.

TER-SNCF (www.ter-sncf.com/languedoc) Regional train tickets, fares and schedules.

Itineraries

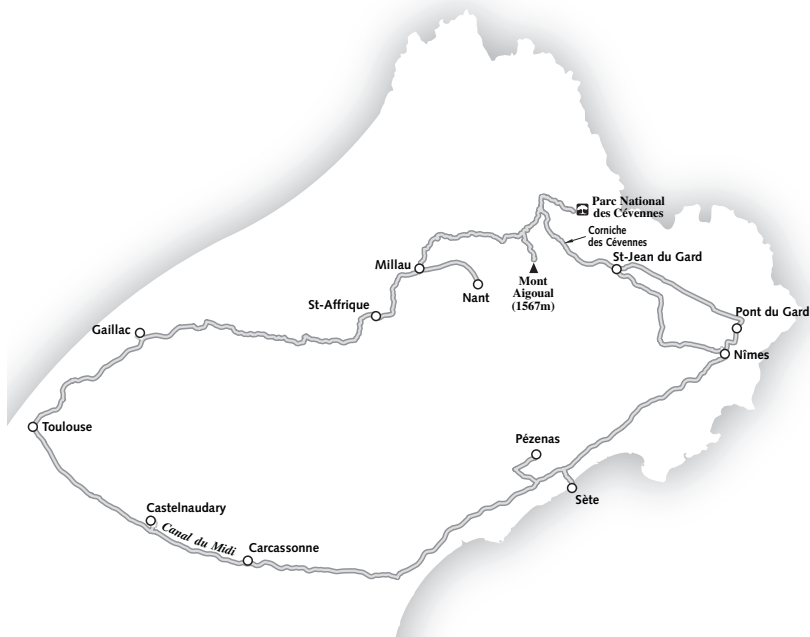
CLASSIC ROUTES

From the exhilarating *garrigue*-scented wilds of Haut-Languedoc to the dazzling-blue coast, this 1000km journey is just the ticket for time-crunched travellers who don't want to spend all day in the car.

ONLY THE BEST

Toulouse airport's baggage belt done, pick up some wheels and cruise to **Gaillac** (p251) for an exquisite taste of one of France's best-known wines at Abbaye St-Michel and lunch in its company at Les Sarments. Overnight in **St-Affrique** (p170) – Roquefort tasting obligatory – allowing you to do the **Pont de Millau** (p165) and **Millau** (p156) next day; or skip the icon and drive another 30 minutes to pretty **Nant** (p167), from where you can plunge the following morning straight into the **Parc National des Cévennes** (p145). Spend a couple of days exploring, not missing a day-hike up **Mont Aigoual** (p149) and a **donkey trek** (p146). Day four or five, wiggle along the dramatic **Corniche des Cévennes** (p150) to **St-Jean du Gard** (p93), then head east to **Le Pont du Gard** (p86) and the city buzz of Roman **Nîmes** (p69). Gulp sea air and enjoy nautical jousting in **Sète** (p107) before heading inland to **Pézenas** (p131). End your journey on a high with turreted **Carcassonne** (p174) and a bowl of cassoulet in **Castelnaudary** (p43) en route back to the airport along the westbound **Canal du Midi** (see the boxed text p188).

10 Days/Toulouse Airport Round-Trip



SLOW & GREEN

Three Weeks/Perpignan or Girona to Nîmes

Bags of time to hang, hike, bike and slumber sweet in B&Bs. From Perpignan or Girona explore the pea-green vineyards and rocky coves of Roussillon's stunning **Côte Vermeille** (p221) and its view-explosive **high road** (see the boxed text p223). Snorkel in the marine reserve or sea kayak around **Banyuls-sur-Mer** (p224) and overnight in forest at **Ermitage Notre Dame de Consolation** (p222). Next, follow the Vallée du Tech west to **Céret** (p226), from where you can continue to **Prats de Molló** (p228) for tree climbing and a night in a tree house; or climb north up dozens of hairpins to sleep between Pyrenean peaks in **St-Marsal** or **La Bastide** (p231). Your mission next morning is to conquer the **Pic du Canigou** (see the boxed text p230), after which consider a complete flop for a few days in slow **Llo** (see the boxed text p234) or push on north along the D7 around zillions more bends to the **Gorges de Galamus** (p235) and **Cathar castles** (p196) beyond.

Dig into Haut-Languedoc during the second part of your trip. Leave the A9 east of **Béziers** (exit 34; p126), plough north along the A75 to Clermont l'Hérault, then plunge east into green country lanes and the lure of a delightful chateau B&B between vines near **St-Guilhem-le-Désert** (p110). Zen out hiking and canoeing in its surrounding caves and gorges (overnight at Domaine de Blancardy), then mosey north to the **Cirque de Navacelles** (p112) and beyond to the **Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses** (p150). Watch rare takh cantering wild on the **Causse Méjean** (see the boxed text p153) and feel butterflies race as you explore the **Gorges du Tarn** (p153).

The final leg: enjoy farm feasts at La Ferme de la Borie and mountain biking around **Florac** (p145), then hit the road south for the salt pans, horse treks and bird life of **La Petite Camargue** (p81), a lazy stone's throw from **Nîmes** (p69).



It might not sound much, 1000km in three weeks, but this magnificent journey taking nature lovers up Pyrenean mountain peaks and across gorge-slashed plateau is laced with slow-going hairpins, cols and mountain tracks. Go slow, savour, enjoy.

TAILORED TRIPS

FAMILY FUN

Fun *en famille* knows no limits in this kid-friendly region. Pint-sized gourmands can meet fisherfolk on **Cap Leucate** (p220); visit a **Sétois shellfish farm** (p108); or get stuffed silly with France's longest buffet at Narbonne's **Cafétéria Liberté** (p120) or on Haribo jelly babies and liquorice at Uzès' **Musée des Bonbons** (p88).

Limoux's **Musée des Automates** (p190), the **Musée de la Mine** (see boxed text p249) in Cagnac-les-Mines, St-Jean du Bruel's **Noria water museum** (p170) and Toulouse's **Cité de l'Espace** (p241) appeal to kids. Animals thrill at Espérazas's **Dinosauria** (p193), **Parc de la Préhistoire** (p203), near Foix; the **Réserve Africaine de Sigean** (p125), near Narbonne; and at **wolf reserves** near Mende (p143) and in the Vallée d'Orlu (p206). Jungle flora fills Montpellier's **La Serre Amazonienne** (p100).

Energy-burner highlights: climbing up to **Fort Lagarde** (p228) to watch knights joust in Prats de Molló; biking and all sorts at **Cap Decouverte** (p249), near Albi; boating along the **Canal du Midi** (p61); horse riding around the **Pic St-Loup** (p112); hiking the **Gorges de la Fou** (p227); **tree climbing** in Prats de Molló (p228), Alet-les-Bains (p192) and Quillan (p195); and **sea kayaking or river canoeing** (p60).

Oddball musts: **Airbus factory tours** in Toulouse (p241); riding **Le Train Jaune** (p232) in the Vallée du Conflent or the **Train du Pays Cathare et du Fenouillèdes** (p235) in the Vallée de l'Agly; solar-energy discovery in **Mont Louis** (p233); and **caving** (p24).



WORLD HERITAGE

It seems that privileged Languedoc-Roussillon enjoys a disproportionately large share of world gems afforded precious protection by Unesco.

The site most know is **Carcassonne** (p174), a medieval fortified city with magnificent witch-hat turrets that ensure its ranking as France's third-most-visited sight. Almost as familiar an image is **Le Pont du Gard** (p86), a gargantuan three-tiered Roman aqueduct built some 50m high over the River Gard.

Of equally magnificent proportions is the World Heritage List's most recent addition: France's collection of 17th-century **Vauban fortifications** (p39), which includes **Fort de Bellegarde** (p225) on France's border with Spain, **Prats de Molló** (p228), **Mont Louis** (p233), **Perpignan** (p211), **Collioure** (p221) and – the most picture-postcard – **Villefranche de Conflent** (p231). Hop from citadel to starry citadel along the Chemin Vauban walking trail (p40) – or for a greater challenge join Spain-bound pilgrims on the **Chemins de St Jacques** (see the boxed text p63); the four walking trails crossing France have been protected as Unesco World Heritage sites since 1998.

A journey as compelling is a voyage along the 17th-century **Canal du Midi** (see the boxed text p30), considered an extraordinary work of civil engineering and a world treasure. In Haut-Languedoc the **Parc National des Cévennes** (p145) gets double protection as a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve.

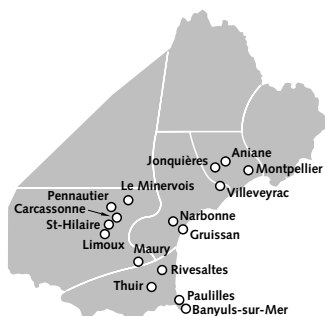


WINE & TRADITION

Get lost in a vine labyrinth, stimulate flagging senses and gen up on viticulture tradition at Gruissan's **Cité de la Vigne et du Vin** (p125). Lesson done, take a vineyard motoring or cycling tour: the D86 to/from **Banyuls-sur-Mer** (p223) proffers a high-drama panorama of pea-green vines on steep terraces propped up by drystone walls, and the actual town is riddled with *caves* (cellars) offering *dégustation* (tasting). Elsewhere in Roussillon, tour the **Caves Byrrh** (p219) in Thuir; taste sweet Muscat at Rivesaltes' **Domaine Cazes** (p220); and wine-dine in unforgettable style at **Les Clos de Paulilles** (p224) in Paulilles, **Château de Jau** (see the boxed text p235) in Rivesaltes or **Le Pichenouille** in Maury (see the boxed text p235).

In Narbonne the **Palais du Vin** (p121) stocks over 1000 labels of Languedoc-Roussillon wine, all produced by independent growers. In Montpellier **Maison Régionale des Vins et des Produits du Terrior** and **Château de Flaugergues** (for both, see the boxed text p105) are key addresses in town; nearby are Villeveyrac's 12th-century **Abbaye de Valmagne** (p110) and viticulture god **Mas de Daumas Gassac** (see the boxed text p110), in Aniane. Not far away, in Jonquières, **Château de Jonquières** (p111) is a fabulous wine-producing chateau *chambre d'hôte*.

For the Carcassonne-bound, there are **Les Chais du Château de Pennautier** (see the boxed text p184) and its dreamy wine-fuelled lunches, in Pennautier; St-Hilaire's **Caves Anne de Joyeuse** (p192), long known for its commitment to sustainable agriculture and biodiversity; the famed **Minervoise wine-producing area** (p187); and, of course, that wonderfully bubbly character **Blanquette de Limoux** (see the boxed text p190).



FABULOUS FOOD

The *plat de résistance* is cassoulet, despite the constant bickering as to what goes in it. Sample it in **Castelnaudary** at Hôtel de France et Notre Dame (p185); near **Carcassonne** at Restaurant Château St-Martin Trencavel (p184); and in **Toulouse** at Emile (p244) to decide for yourself which city is right.

Fattened goose and duck livers around the **River Hérault** (p110) and in **La Vallée de l'Ariège** (p199) are a real treat, as is *confit de canard* and any dish in the latter valley involving white *lingots* (beans) from its very own veggie garden, sausages or pâtés. Strutting into the Pyrenees, there are famed *boles de picolat* (spicy pork meatballs) and snails at L'Hostalet de Vivès in the **Massif des Albères** (p226), cherries in **Céret** (p226), unique fish dishes at L'Unique in **Prats de Molló** (p229), anchovies in **Collioure** (p221), sardines in **Port Vendres** (p223), and fresh shellfish as in heaven on **Cap Leucate** (p220) and in **Bouzigues** (p137), further north. **Sète** (p107) is equally fishy.

Nîmes (p69) is known for its *brandade de Nîmes*, and bull is the dish of day in **La Petite Camargue** (p81), best tried with Camargue red rice. Up north in the **Grands Causses** (p150), suckling lamb and Roquefort reign supreme, as do *trenels* (steaming packets of boiled tripe tied with string) and cheesy *alligot* in **Millau** (p156).



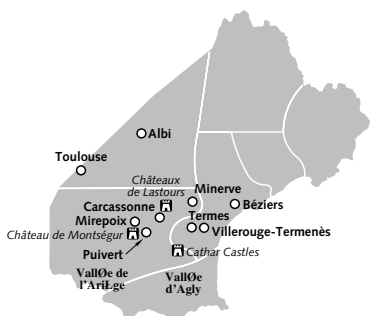
THE CATHARS

The Albigensian Crusade against Cathar heretics got going in **Béziers** (p126) in 1209. **Carcassonne** (p174) fell next, followed by **Minerve** (p187), **Puivert** (p198) and **Termes** (p124) in 1210. Crusaders besieged **Toulouse** (p238) three times but never conquered it, and they lost their leader outside its walls in 1218.

Feisty **Château de Montségur** (p198) held out for a year from its sugarloaf hill perch before capitulating in 1244; rebels were burnt in the **Prat dels Cremats** (The Field of Burnt Ones; p198). Catharism drew its last breath in 1321 with the stake burning of the last vegetarian, sex-abstaining *parfait* in **Villeneuve-Termenès** (p124). No church is more symbolic of orthodox Catholicism's victory than **Cathédrale Ste-Cécile** (p247) in Albi.

Languedoc's most-visited Cathar castles – **Peyreperouse** (p196), **Quéribus** (p197), **Aguilar** (p197) and **Puilarens** (p196) – teeter atop rocks south of Carcassonne. The trip can be done in a day (p181), but allow longer if you can. In Roussillon, a narrow-gauge train with open carriages chugs along the **Vallée de l'Agly** (p235) to Puilarens.

Least visited are the starkly romantic ruins of the **Châteaux de Lastours** (p187), a dramatic silhouette on La Montagne Noire skyline. Hike up, then lunch at **Le Puits du Trésor** (p187). Back in Carcassonne, buy evocative images of this wild, sultry *pays Cathare* (Cathar country) at the **Galerie Gérard Sioen** (p183). Roasting hot in summer, the **Sentier Cathare** (p197) that weaves past the Cathar fortresses is best tackled in spring or autumn; the trail starts in **La Vallée de l'Ariège** (p199), not far from **Mirepoix** (p208), one of the prettiest Cathar *bastides*.



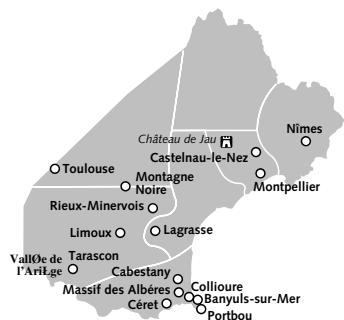
FINE ART

The region is a living art museum: Matisse and other Fauvist painters turned the fishing port of **Collioure** (p221) into the region's St-Tropez; Aristide Maillol lived in **Banyuls-sur-Mer** (p224), where his voluptuous sculptures fill a house museum; and Picasso and Braque donated canvases galore to the Musée d'Art Moderne in **Céret** (p226), among France's best. Art museums in **Nîmes** (p74), **Montpellier** (p100) and **Toulouse** (p241) complete the striking avant-garde composition.

Irresistible insider addresses for lovers of contemporary and installation art are **Château de Jau** (p235), where wine and art brilliantly mingle; Domaine de Verchant in **Castelnau-le-Nez** (see the boxed text p103), where wine and design woo one another; Le Jardin des Sens in **Montpellier** (p103), where the chefs' private art collection decorates walls; the cemetery in **Portbou** dominated by Dani Karavan's *Passage* (see the boxed text p225); and, for something a little different, the Musée des Automates in **Limoux** (p190).

For medieval-art aficionados, a treasure trove of Romanesque chapels is buried in the **Massif des Albères** (p225), and the art of an unknown master fills a Romanesque art museum in **Cabestany** (p211) and churches near **Limoux** (p192), **La Montagne Noire** (see the boxed text p185), **Rieux-Minervo** (p189) and **Lagrasse** (p122).

Harking back even further, prehistoric art decorates caves in **La Vallée de l'Ariège** (p199); techniques are explained in the **Parc de la Préhistoire** (p203), near Tarascon.



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A British writer living on the southern (French) side of Lake Geneva in a house with lake and Jura mountain view, Nicola is well and truly spoilt...so much so she only eats in places that cook up real-McCoy lake fish (most comes from Eastern Europe), and if the sky isn't blue she cannot possibly ski. A journalist by trade and a passionate foodie, she writes about France and its gastronomy for magazines and has worked on several Lonely Planet titles, including its tome of a France guide and 1st editions of *Provence & the Côte d'Azur* and *The Loire*.

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Miles has written or contributed to more than 30 Lonely Planet titles including *France*, *Brittany* and *Normandy* and – most satisfyingly of all – *Walking in France*.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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