

# Haut-Languedoc



Haut-Languedoc, high or upper Languedoc, is indeed just that. Deeper inland, it's also nearer the clouds and a whole world away from the busy coastal corridor of Bas-Languedoc. Much is green, cloaked in pine forest and chestnut woods. On the high limestone plateaus, by contrast, thin grasses whisper in the wind, offering sparse sustenance to the flocks of sheep that are likely to be your only companions.

Two splendid parks offer protection and nurturing to these lands, much abused in the past by overlogging. Within the Parc National des Cévennes, over 2000 plant species thrive, and deer, beavers and vultures, long absent from the park, have been successfully reintroduced.

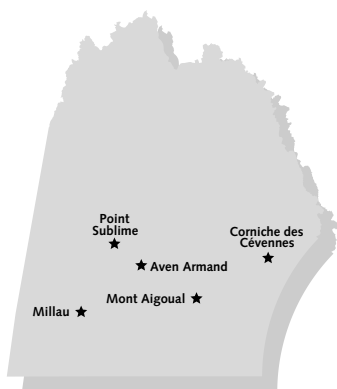
Vistas are broad on the high plateaus of the Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses. Water, percolating through the soft rock over millennia, has honeycombed the hills with underground caverns and natural galleries. Splitting plateau from plateau are three gorges, sliced through by the rivers that give these sheer clefts their names: the Tarn, Jonte and Dourbie.

Two human achievements stand out, one prehistoric, the other strictly contemporary. Little-visited Cham des Bondons has Europe's second-largest concentration of menhirs – more than 150 of them, heaved into place around 4000 years ago by sheer muscle. In our own day, the Pont de Millau road bridge, slung like a gossamer thread across the wide Tarn Valley, is both a technological miracle and a dazzling 21st-century icon.

Haut-Languedoc is shared between Lozère, France's least-populated *département*, the western, wilder part of the Gard – and, in this chapter, a fragment of Aveyron that belongs here, both culturally and geographically.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Hire a donkey and walk a stage or two of the **Robert Louis Stevenson trail** (p146)
- Survey 13 *départements* from the tower of the observatory atop **Mont Aigoual** (p149)
- Follow the spectacular **Corniche des Cévennes** route from St-Jean du Gard to Florac (p150)
- Fly over the **Pont de Millau** (p166) in an ultralite plane
- Drop into the cool of one of Haut-Languedoc's many caverns, such as **Aven Armand** (p152)
- Get butterflies looking down at the **Gorges du Tarn** from Point Sublime (p154)
- Thrill at a glimpse of the rare Przewalski's horse or **takh** (p153)





## MENDE & AROUND

It's wild country, here at the northern tip of Haut-Languedoc – fitting territory for both a wolf and a bison reserve. The grassy moors of Aubrac, punctuated by outcrops of black basalt, give way to the high plateau of La Margeride, where the winter winds howl and flurry the snow. And haunting all, to this day, is the dark legend of the Beast of Gévaudan...

### MENDE

pop 12,600

Mende, a quiet little place straddling the River Lot, is the capital of Lozère, France's least-populous *département*. Its oval-shaped

centre is ringed by a one-way road that acts as something of a *cordon sanitaire*, leaving the old quarter almost traffic-free.

### Information

**Comité Départemental du Tourisme** (☎ 04 66 65 60 00; www.lozere-tourisme.com; 14 Blvd Henri Bourillon; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Fri) Tourist information for the Lozère *département*.

**Salle Antirouille** (place du Foirail; per hr €1.60; ☎ 2pm or 3pm-8pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sat) Internet access. Free wi-fi.

**Post Office** (6 Blvd Soubeyran)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 94 00 23; www.ot-mende.fr; place du Foirail; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-4pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS – HAUT-LANUEDOC

### May–October

- **Festival Nature** More than 500 events – guided walks, exhibitions, lectures, demonstrations – organised by the Parc National des Cévennes throughout its domain.

### July

- **Jazz festival** A week-long wail in Millau around mid-July.
- **Marvejols en Scène** Marvejols hosts three days of street theatre and music in the second half of July.

### August

- **Journée des Bergers** Shepherds and sheepdog demonstrations, plus a local produce market in Florac, on a weekend early in the month.
- **Pétanque World Series** Held mid-month for five days in Millau, the world series' 16 competitions (including just two for women in this male-dominated sport) attract more than 10,000 players and over twice as many spectators.
- **Grandes Fêtes de Mende** Mende's big annual bash: four days around 20 August with a procession, fireworks and lots of other jollification.

### November

- **Concours de la Soupe** Florac's three days of fun – street concerts, bands, children's activities and more – built around its Soup Challenge on the nearest weekend to All Saints' Day (1 November).

Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat Sep-Jun) Free wi-fi, which extends to the café terrace nearby.

## Sights

### CATHÉDRALE NOTRE DAME

Mende's twin-towered **cathedral** (place Urbain V; ☎ 9am-7.30pm), visible for miles around, seems disproportionately large for such a small town. The statue beneath its main portal hints why. It represents Pope Urbain V, born in nearby Grizac, who remembered the land of his birth and, from distant Rome, gave orders for its construction in the 14th century.

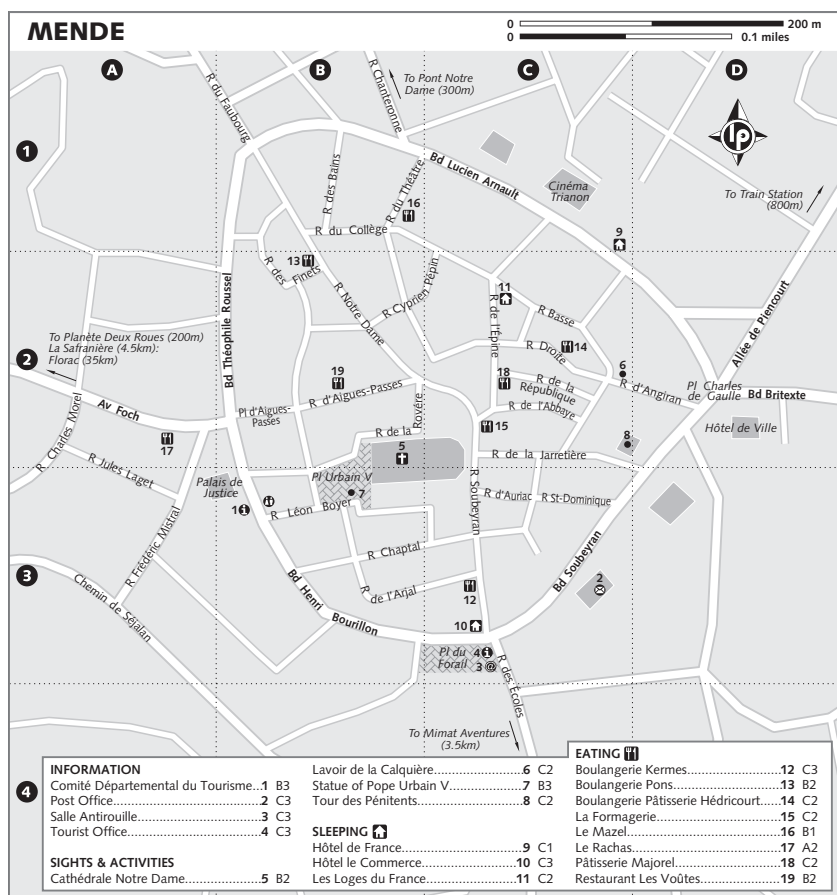
The cathedral briefly boasted the largest church bell ever cast. In 1512, the bell, all 25 tonnes of it, was hauled to the top of the newly completed steeple. 'Non Pareille', it was called, The Unrivalled One. It swung and clanged for only 67 years. On Christmas Eve 1579, while the Catholic faithful were attending mass, the Huguenots captured Mende, slaughtered most of the congregation, hacked loose the bell, then melted it down to make cannons. They spared nothing but the clanger, which itself weighs in at a hefty 470kg and is displayed just to the left of the west-end entrance.

The dark interior makes the pincushion panes of the 17th-century rose window at the west end positively glow, but you'll have to peer hard to make out detail on the eight fine 18th-century Aubusson tapestries, hung high above the nave, that illustrate the life of the Virgin.

### OTHER SIGHTS

One pleasant feature of Mende on a hot day is its spurting fountains, more than 15 of them, bringing sweet water to the city. What's less evident is the long-established network of underground channels, leading the off-flow from the surrounding hills into the River Lot. Several resurface and swirl into the **Lavoir de la Calquière** (rue d'Angiran), where the town's tanners used to wash their hides.

The **Tour des Pénitents**, once one of around 15 similar towers, is all that remains of the 12th-century ramparts that encircled the town. Reconstructed after the Hundred Years' War, they survived until 1768 when, following an outbreak of plague some years earlier, they were pulled down 'so that the air might circulate more freely'.



**Pont Notre Dame** was for centuries the only bridge that spanned the River Lot. The fine humpback, double-arched creation you see today was built after the original was comprehensively wrecked during the Wars of Religion.

## Activities

Recently, and to its credit, Mende has introduced several fresh outdoor initiatives.

**Mimat Aventures** (☎ 04 66 45 00 24; adult/child up to/over 1.5m €19/12/16; 🕒 9.30am-7.30pm early Jul-late Aug, 2-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-early Jul & late Aug-Sep), high upon Causse de Mende, which looms above town to the south, is a treetop adventure park with 76 aerial activities for all ages. Here, too, you can rent mountain bikes.

Montée Jalabert recalls the victory in 1995 of ace French racing cyclist Laurent Jalabert, who pounded up the mountain to take that day's leg (it was 14 July, France's national day) of the **Tour de France**. Get a card from the tourist office, punch it in the control box just beside the office, then again at the *col* to register your finishing time, and drop your card in the box there. Back home, wait for the postman to bring your diploma. Anyone can sign on simply for the fun of competing against themselves, while perhaps fantasising about leading the peloton home, like Jalabert, at the end of a gruelling *stage*. The climb's a mere 3.1km in length but, with an average incline of 10%, it's guaranteed to make you sweat.

**Planète Deux Roues** (☎ 04 66 49 17 00; 5 av du Pont Raupt) hires out tourers and mountain bikes for €10/16/36 per half-/full day/three days. Should you wish to share the burden or haul the kids, it can also rent you a tandem or trailer.

Altogether less gruelling and also for free, a signed 4.5km interpretive **walking** trail leads from the entrance to Mimat Aventures through forest and open land along the Causse de Mende.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hôtel Le Commerce** (☎ 04 66 65 13 73; www.lecommerce-mende.com in French; 2 blvd Henri Bourillon; s/d/tr €41/51/55; ☹ closed 2 weeks Apr & 2 weeks Oct; ☒) Opposite place du Foirail on the busy ring road, this agreeably labyrinthine hotel, run by the same family for three generations, has 10 impeccable rooms. The owner is an ale fanatic and its popular bar carries a great range of beers, on draught and in bottle.

**Hôtel de France** (☎ 04 66 65 00 04; www.hotelde-france-mende.com in French; 9 blvd Lucien Arnault; d €58-75; ☹ mid-Jan-Dec; ☒) Most rooms at this one-time coaching inn (whose owner speaks excellent English) have sweeping views over the valley and gardens below. Rooms 1 to 3, 8 and 10 are large, with separate toilet and gleaming bathroom. For families, a duplex (€93 to €123) stretches beneath the eaves. Barely a minute away, the annexe, Les Loges du France, a recently refurbished 16th-century mansion, has four equally attractive rooms (€85 to €88). The hotel also runs a first-class restaurant (*menus* €28 to €31; open lunch and dinner Sunday to Friday and dinner Saturday).

**Le Rachas** (☎ 04 66 65 12 62; 5 av Foch; menus €13; ☹ Mon-Sat) This popular, no-frills restaurant serves wholesome, family fare. It's nothing fancy: the table coverings are of custard-yellow plastic and the soup tureen gets passed from guest to guest, but so many locals can't be wrong...

**Le Mazel** (☎ 04 66 65 05 33; 25 rue du Collège; menus €15.50-28, mains €9-17; ☹ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun, lunch Mon mid-Mar-mid-Nov) This restaurant, with its stylish decor – don't be deterred by the bleakly modern surroundings – serves up mainly local cuisine, imaginatively prepared. A recognised gourmet venue, it offers exceptional value.

**Restaurant Les Voûtes** (☎ 04 66 49 00 05; 13 rue d'Aigues-Passes; menus €21; ☹ daily Jun-Aug, Mon-Sat Sep-May, closed 15-30 Sep) This restaurant has a

## CROQUANTS DE MENDE

You'll only come across these finger-shaped biscuits in Mende. Crunchy with both almonds and hazelnuts, they travel well (if you have the will power not to nibble your way through them) and make for a tempting snack. Two long-established makers are **Boulangerie Pâtisserie Hédrucourt** (☎ 04 66 65 31 37; 13 rue Droite), and **Pâtisserie Majorel** (☎ 04 66 65 17 85; 2 rue de la République; ☹ Tue-Sun, closed 1-15 Feb, 1-15 Jul, 1-21 Sep), founded in 1901, specialising in handmade chocolates, ice creams and other sweet and sticky confections, and still baking *croquants* according to great-granddad's recipe.

splendid setting, deep in the vaults of an ex-convent. Run by three brothers, it offers salads big enough to fill a fruit bowl (€8.60 to €9.70), pizzas (€8 to €10) and grills (€12.50 to €14), all to eat in or take away. It also does a great all-on-one-plate lunchtime special (€12.50).

**La Safranière** (☎ 04 66 49 31 54; Chabrits; menus €22-46; ☹ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) The decor's strictly and strikingly contemporary – slim, wrought-iron chairs, fresh flowers and plants, jute floor covering and original artwork around the walls – in this converted farmhouse. In the kitchen, the young chef, returning to his roots and the family land, prepares creative, visually attractive dishes, while his wife maintains the friendly ambience up front. Sip an aperitif or linger over a coffee outside beneath a canopy of tangled vines, watched over by a quirky sculpture of recycled scrap iron. La Safranière is on the outskirts of Mende in the suburb of Chabrits.

## SELF-CATERING

Mende is particularly well endowed with delicatessens, traditional grocers and patisseries.

**La Fromagerie** (30b rue Soubeyran) Overlooked by the buttresses of the cathedral's east end, La Fromagerie makes its own ewes'-milk cheeses. Also called Au Sourire de la Crémère, it has an impressive range of cheeses, jams, regional meats and pâtés.

**Boulangerie Kermes** (3 rue Soubeyran) and **Boulangerie Pons** (31 rue Notre Dame) are a pair of classic bakers and cake makers.

Saturday is market day, when stalls selling produce from the farms around take over Place Urbain V.

### Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the train station and most pass by place du Foirail, beside the tourist office. On weekdays there's one bus daily to Rodez (☎ 04 66 65 19 88; €13.20, 3½ hours) and at least two to Le Puy-en-Velay (€17, two hours). Northbound, two SNCF buses run daily to/from Clermont-Ferrand in the Massif Central (€28.80, three hours).

The train station is about 1km north of town across the River Lot. There are three trains daily to Alès (€16.20, 2½ hours) and up to five trains or buses daily run westwards to Marvejols (€6.30, 50 minutes).

### LOUPS DU GÉVAUDAN

Wolves once prowled freely through the Lozère forests, but today you'll see them only at **Loups du Gévaudan** (☎ 04 66 32 09 22; www.loupsdugevaudan.com in French; adult/child €7/4; 🕒 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 5pm or 6pm Feb-May & Sep-Dec), about 10km north of Marvejols. The park sustains around 100 Mongolian, Canadian, Siberian and Polish wolves, plus, as of 2008, a small pack of Arctic wolves, all living in semi-freedom. A thoughtful exhibition details the myths, black propaganda and persecution that these magnificent animals have endured over the centuries. Interpretive panels are in French and English, and there's an informative booklet in English included with the entry fee, an element of which helps to sustain the larger scientific observation park (closed to the public).

#### THE BEAST OF GÉVAUDAN

For three long, terrifying years, between 1764 and 1767, a wild beast preyed upon flocks and solitary travellers in the Gévaudan, above Mende. Parish records tell how it killed close on 100 people and – particularly chilling, this – devoured most of their corpses after first decapitating them. Others were wrenched by friends from the jaws of the beast and survived.

Hysteria prevailed. Three teams of hunters, each with several hundred beaters, tried to eliminate the monster. Several wolves, everyone's *bête noire*, were killed, and the biggest, culled in 1765 by a certain Antoine (who claimed the substantial reward on offer) was declared to be The Beast.

Despite this confident pronouncement, The Beast continued to kill. Local marksman Jean Chastel shot a particularly burly wolf on 19 June 1767. And the killings ceased. But to this day, rumours still insinuate themselves. Perhaps a sadist in wolf's clothing, never apprehended (most of the victims were shepherds and shepherdesses)? Just possibly a scourge from on high, sent to punish sinners, as the Bishop of Mende proclaimed? No one will ever know...

### RÉSERVE DE BISONS D'EUROPE

Near the small village of Ste-Eulalie-en-Margeride, this **bison reserve** (☎ 04 66 31 40 40; www.bisoneurope.com in French; 🕒 10am-6pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, to 5pm or 6pm rest of yr) was established with 25 European bison transferred from the Bialowieza forest in Poland.

Within their 200-hectare reserve, the bison, now numbering around 40, roam freely. Visitors, by contrast, must follow a 50-minute guided tour, either by horse-drawn carriage (adult/child aged three to 11/child under three €12/6.50/free) or, in winter, by sledge (€14.50/8/free). From mid-June to September, you can follow a self-guided 1km walking path (adult/child aged five to 11/child under five €6/4/free) around the periphery.

### MARVEJOLS

pop 6000

Indeed Marvejols is yet another town that suffered severely during the distant Wars of Religion. But whereas Mende was pillaged by the Protestant forces of the fanatical Captain Merle, it was the equally ruthless Catholic troops of Admiral Joyeuse who, in 1586, torched the town as a reprisal for its acceptance of the Protestant 'heresy'.

Today Marvejols, summertime excepted, is a sleepy sort of place, a centre for the surrounding agricultural communities. The interesting part lies within its car-free old quarter, defined by three fine city gates: the main Porte du Soubeyran, the Porte du Théron and the Porte Chanelles. The latter two these days house flats within their side towers, and there's even a laundrette within Porte Chanelles. The main street, rue de la

## DISCOVERING AUBRAC & LA MARGERIDE

This day drive (145km including detours) is one of contrasts. The grasslands and basalt of Aubrac give way to the high plateau of La Margeride, one of the least populated and most isolated parts of France, with its granite outcrops, little-penetrated pine forests and lonely meadows. There's plenty of open countryside, ranging from gentle to spectacular, a couple of small towns, and close encounters with both wolves and European bison.

Leaving Mende, follow signs for Marvejols (p143). Having explored its historic centre (half an hour should be fine), leave town by the D809, signed Aumont-Aubrac, then turn right after 8km onto the D253 to reach the Loups du Gévaudan (p143) wolf reserve 3km later. You'll need at least an hour – more if you want to explore the museum area in depth.

Return to the D809 and continue straight as it nears an A75 motorway entry point. Soon after, turn right for an 8km round-trip detour to **Roc de Peyre** (1179m), a volcanic plug more typical of the Massif Central to the north. You'll easily spot this lone protuberance by the white cross and communications antenna at its summit. Climb the 76 steps up to the orientation table for a magnificent 360-degree panorama.

Back on the D809, drive through Aumont-Aubrac and stay with signs for St-Alban-sur-Limagnole, 13km beyond. The road runs briefly beside water meadows for what's just about the first flat stretch of this up-and-down day.

Stop briefly in **St-Alban-sur-Limagnole** to visit its lovely Romanesque parish church with its triple-arched bell tower, typical of La Margeride and the Auvergne to the north. Like Aumont-Aubrac, the village is a way stage on the Chemins de St Jacques route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. You'll probably see pilgrims bearing staff and scallop shell, now three days out from Le Puy, France's main departure point.

Walk up to the restored Renaissance **chateau** (which these days houses the small tourist office) and go into its resplendent inner courtyard. This, like so many public buildings hereabouts, both sacred and secular, is adorned with mottled pink granite, hewn from local quarries. During WWII, the village, because of its remoteness, was a place of refuge and retreat for *maquisards*, resistance fighters, including the poet Paul Eluard.

From St-Alban, pass through Ste-Eulalie-en-Margeride, following signs for the Réserve de Bisons d'Europe (p143), where bison freely roam.

Return to Ste-Eulalie and turn left onto the D7, signed Le Viala. At an X-junction, go straight over to stay with the D7 and follow signs for Serverette, where you turn left with the D806.

In the village of St-Amans, look out on the left for a bright-yellow sign, **Ferme de Fioaugé** (☎ 04 66 47 34 65; adult/child €3.20/2.60; 🕒 2-7pm daily Jul & Aug, Sat & Sun only Sep-Nov & Feb-Jun). Follow the road for 2.5km to this working farm that raises deer and sheep and has a small exhibition about sheep farming and the wool trade.

Go back to the D806 and turn left to return to Mende.

République, becoming rue Jean Roujon, slices north-south.

Marvejols' helpful **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 32 02 14; www.ville-marvejols.fr; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 4-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5.30pm Sat rest of yr) is beside Porte du Soubeyran, the main gate into the old quarter. Up high above the entrance to this venerable portal, an inscription recalls how King Henri IV, local hero to this day, ordered the town's reconstruction after the destructive mayhem of the Wars of Religion.

The town's near-contemporary hero is sculptor Emmanuel Auricoste (1908-55), who fashioned in the 1950s two striking works that

struck deep local chords. A striking presence in place Soubeyran, his interpretation of beloved benefactor Henri IV portrays the king as a spindly being with elongated legs and fingers, at the same time supremely human, yet regal.

Auricoste's other haunting legacy to the town is his menacing Bête du Gévaudan (see p143) in place des Cordeliers. Fangs bared, genitals swinging, crouched low and poised to pounce, it may prowl around your dreams for a day or two...

## LANUÉJOLS

At the entrance to the village of Lanuéjols, 12km southeast of Mende, there's a large 2nd-



century mausoleum temple, sunk down beneath the level of the land today. It was erected in memory of the two sons of a certain Lucius Julius Bassianus, a rich Gallo-Roman landowner, farmer for sure and probably owner of the iron ore and lead mines that were exploited nearby. The temple stands proud and well preserved amid the remnants of a later 4th- and 5th-century necropolis.

Also worth a brief visit is the simple Romanesque parish church with its cleanly proportioned choir and apsidal chapels. Its graveyard is a mirror image across the centuries of the mausoleum site below. Here, simple graves cluster around the church while grander, more portentous family tombs sit separately.

To get there, leave Mende by rue des Écoles, beside the tourist office, signed Causse de Mende, and follow the D25 to Brenoux. Turn left on the D41 to reach Lanuéjols after 3km.

## PARC NATIONAL DES CÉVENNES

Drier, hotter and in general leafier than the Auvergne to its north, the Cévennes region has more in common with Mediterranean lands. Dotted with isolated hamlets, the park harbours a huge diversity of fauna and flora (an astounding 2250 plant species have been logged). Animals such as red deer, beavers and vultures, long gone from the park, have been successfully reintroduced. The park covers four main areas: Mont Lozère, Mont Aigoual, the Vallées Cévenoles (Cévennes Valleys), and much of the Causse Méjean (p152).

The best overall map of the park is the IGN's *Parc National des Cévennes* at 1:100,000.

### History

Nowadays also recognised as a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve, the 910-sq-km Parc National des Cévennes is the largest of France's national parks. It was created in 1970 to bring ecological stability to an area that, because of religious and later economic upheavals, had long had a destabilising human presence. Population influxes, which saw the destruction of forests for logging and pasture, were followed by mass desertions as people gave up the fight against the inhospitable climate and terrain. Emigration led to the abandonment of hamlets and farms, many

of which have been snapped up by wealthy Parisians and foreigners.

### Activities

The small resort of **Prat Peyrot** (☎ 04 67 73 19 80), high up on the southern flank of Mont Aigoual, has 14 short downhill runs and seven cross-country ski trails varying in length between 5km and 15km. Mont Lozère too has plenty of cross-country ski potential. **Donkey treks** are popular in the park in warmer months. There is 600km of donkey- and horse-riding trails, and 200km is marked out for mountain-bike enthusiasts.

An equally well-developed network of trails makes the park a **walking** paradise year-round. It's criss-crossed by a dozen GR (*grande randonnée*) trails, and there are over 20 shorter signposted walks lasting between two and seven hours.

Florac's Maison du Parc (p146) has a dozen excellent wallets (€5 each) describing circular walks from various starting points within the park. Ask about its **Festival Nature**, a summertime mix of outdoor activities, lectures and field trips.

### FLORAC

pop 2000

Florac, 79km northwest of Alès and 38km southeast of Mende, has no great attractions of its own. Its strength is as a base for exploring the Parc National des Cévennes and the upper reaches of the Gorges du Tarn. Lively in summer and moribund for most of the rest of the year, it's draped along the west bank of the River Tarnon, one of the tributaries of the Tarn, with the sheer cliffs of the Causse Méjean looming 1000m overhead.

Through Florac too flows the slim Pêcher stream, another tributary of the Tarn, that bears off-flow from the Causse Méjean. Between the two cascades as it tumbles through town, fat, protected trout laze and steady themselves against the current.

### Information

**Florac Cyber Café** (12 rue Armand Jullié; per half-hr/hr €3/4; ☎ 10am-8.30pm Jul & Aug, 2.30-8.30pm Sun & Mon, 10am-noon & 2.30-8.30pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jun) Internet access.

**Laundrette** (11 rue du Pêcher; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 45 01 14; www.mescevennes.com in French; 33 av Jean Monestier; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun)



## TRAVELS WITH A DONKEY

The Cévennes were even wilder and more untamed back in October 1878, when Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson crossed them with only a donkey, Modestine, for company.

'I was looked upon with contempt, like a man who should project a journey to the moon, but yet with a respectful interest, like one setting forth for the inclement Pole,' Stevenson wrote in his *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

Accompanied by the wayward Modestine, bought for 65 francs and a glass of brandy, Stevenson took a respectable 12 days to travel the 232km on foot (Modestine carried his gear) from Le Monastier-sur-Gazelle, southeast of Le Puy-en-Velay, to St-Jean du Gard, west of Alès. Afterwards, he sold his ass – and wept.

The Stevenson trail, first retraced and marked with the cross of St Andrew by a Scottish woman in 1978, is nowadays designated the GR70.

Whether you're swaying on a donkey or simply walking, you'll find *The Robert Louis Stevenson Trail* by Alan Castle an excellent, practical, well-informed companion. Consult too [www.chemin-stevenson.org](http://www.chemin-stevenson.org) and pick up the free pamphlet *Sur Le Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson* (On The Robert Louis Stevenson Trail), stocked by tourist offices, which has a comprehensive list of accommodation en route.

## Activities

The tourist office has details of a whole summer's worth of outdoor activities (see also p145). For information on the park's rich walking potential, call by the well-resourced **Maison du Parc National des Cévennes** (☎ 04 66 49 53 01; [www.cevennes-parcnational.fr](http://www.cevennes-parcnational.fr); ☎ 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.30pm daily Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct, Mon-Fri only Nov-Easter). It occupies the handsome, restored 17th-century Château de Florac, stocks an English version of the guidebook *Parc National des Cévennes* (€15) and has a splendidly informative **interactive exhibition** (admission free), *Passagers du Paysage*, with captions, a recorded commentary in English (delivered, alas, by a couple of morose, monotone native speakers) and a 15-minute slide show.

## DONKEY TREKS

Why not follow the lead of Robert Louis Stevenson and hire a pack animal? Several companies that operate around Florac are in the donkey business. They include **Gentiâne** (☎ 04 66 41 04 16; <http://anegenti.free.fr>) in Castagnol and **Tramontane** (☎ 04 66 45 92 44; [chantal.tramontane@nomade.fr](mailto:chantal.tramontane@nomade.fr)) in St-Martin de Lansuscle.

Typical prices are €45 per day and €210 to €275 per week, and both outfits can reserve accommodation for you along a route they'll be happy to advise you about. Though each is outside Florac, they'll transport the dumb creatures to town or to a place of your choosing for a fee (around €1 per kilometre).

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

**CévennesÉvasion** (☎ 046645 1831; [www.cevennes-evasion.com](http://www.cevennes-evasion.com) in French; 5 place Boyer) rents mountain bikes for €13/19 per half-/full day and furnishes riders with handy colour route maps. In summer, it'll haul you for free (minimum five people; usually achieved on a summer's day) up to the Causse Méjean, from where you can whiz effortlessly back down. The team also arranges caving, rock-climbing and canyon-clambering expeditions (trust these guys; they hung the fireworks up high for the spectacular opening-and closing-ceremony pyrotechnics at the Athens Olympics). They also run guided and independent walking holidays, where your accommodation is pre-booked and your luggage transported onwards daily.

## LOOKING FOR THE BIG FOOT

Dinosaurs roamed the Cévennes millennia before today's trekkers left their bootprints. Beside the village church in St-Laurent de Trèves, 9km south of Florac, a short, 400m round-trip leads past sets of dinosaur footprints to a lovely vista beyond.

## Sleeping

Florac has a pair of quality municipal riverside camp sites.

**Camping La Tière** (☎ 04 66 45 04 02; [mairie@ville-florac.fr](mailto:mairie@ville-florac.fr); site & 2 people €10; ☎ Jul & Aug) Just south of town, and considerably smaller and simpler than the other camping ground, Camping La Tière is open only in high season, but it's an

### JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BARTHES

In the 1990s, Jean-Christophe Barthes left his native Montpellier and bought himself 70 hectares of hillside and a seriously ruined farm whose buildings had languished unused since WWII.

After 10 years' hard labour, he now runs a successful organic farm that's all but self-sufficient. He gestures to the dinner table, groaning with sausages fat and thin; cylindrical *tomme* cheeses, tiny *pêlardons* and stout nameless ones furry with mould; pâtés; honey; jams; and a wonderful concoction of beans, chestnuts and yet more sausage. 'Only the wine isn't mine,' he grins.

He shrugs off all the reconstruction. 'Yes, there are the buildings,' he says. 'But what makes me even prouder is the way I've given new life to the land' – terrain that had deteriorated into scrub and wilderness without the presence of animals and regular cropping for hay. 'And the return of the swallows too,' he muses. 'At first just one or two and now a colony of annual nesters.' No animals means no flies and no dinner for the swallows. 'The more the flies, the more these graceful swallows,' he grins.

His goats give the milk that makes the cheese. He feeds the litres of whey runoff from the cheesemaking to his pigs, who finish up as truncheons of sausage hanging like stalactites in his cavernous storeroom. The cows? 'I have the space so why not?', he shrugs. And his bees busy themselves all alone and independently.

Nowadays it's not enough to be simply a farmer. With his boundless energy and infectious ready smile, Jean-Christophe runs a splendid *chambre d'hôte* (below), together with a *gîte d'étape* for hikers walking the GR70 trail that passes nearby. He sells his produce in nearby markets and is a leading light in the local farmers association. In summer, he arranges group visits to watch the milking of the goats and then follow them to pasture. On summer evenings, he puts on dinners of goat kid, roasted on a spit in the huge hearth of his equally grandly proportioned dining room. And somehow, some time, he manages to sleep, though you wonder how...

attractive option. Plots are demarcated by mature hedges and it too is right beside a river – the Tarnon, which flows into the Tarn.

**Camping Le Pont du Tarn** (☎ 04 66 45 18 26; www.campingpontdutarn.com; site & 2 people €14; ☞ Apr–mid-Oct; 📍) To the north, beside the D998 and 2km from Florac, this large, attractive camp site is shaded by plane, lime, maple and ash trees. There's a snack bar and you can swim either in the pool or the River Tarn, which flows right by.

**La Carlène** (☎ 04 66 45 24 54; lagrave.alain@wanadoo.fr; 18 rue du Pêcher; per person €13; ☞ Easter–Oct) This luxury *gîte d'étape* (walkers accommodation) is, understandably, a trekkers' favourite, though you don't have to be a hiker to enjoy its comforts. Within an 18th-century town house, it has self-catering facilities. All rooms have corridor bathrooms, and there's a pair of cosy doubles on the top floor.

**ourpick La Ferme de la Borie** (☎ 04 66 45 10 90; www.encevennes.com in French; incl breakfast s €22–29, d €35–44; ☞ Mar–Nov) You'll be bowled over by the sheer enthusiasm and *joie de vivre* of host Jean-Christophe Barthes. And you'll groan contentedly as you head to bed after a blowout dinner of produce from his organic farm, preceded by an aperitif on the terrace

and accompanied by as much wine as you wish. Arrive by 6pm and you can watch the goats being milked. You're lulled to sleep by a silence few city dwellers ever experience, broken only by the soft clop-a-lop of cow bells. Linger a little next morning and you can see the cheese being made. Ask Jean-Christophe to show you the dinosaur footprint and be sure to reserve – by phone, since there's no email link from the website.

**Auberge Cévenole** (☎ 04 66 45 11 80, 06 32 72 71 98; La Salle Prunet; r €43, with shared bathroom €33; ☞ mid-Feb–mid-Nov) The welcome's particularly warm at this small eight-room hotel, set back from the N106 in the hamlet of La Salle Prunet, 4km southeast of Florac. Rooms are excellent value. If en-suite facilities aren't important to you, take a peek at the three particularly attractive 2nd-floor rooms, snug beneath the roof. Between them, mother and son run a splendid restaurant (lunch *menu* €12.50, other *menus* €20 to €24; open lunch and dinner daily July and August, lunch and dinner Tuesday to Saturday and lunch Sunday mid-February to June and September to mid-November).

**Hôtel Les Gorges du Tarn** (☎ 04 66 45 00 63; www.hotel-gorgesdutarn.com; 48 rue du Pêcher; d €45–60; ☞ Easter–Oct; 📍) Free wi-fi and parking. Most rooms

in both the main building and annexe of this 26-room Logis de France, set back from a quiet street, have been recently renovated and are bright as a new pin. Studios (doubles/triples/quads €60/70/80) on the top floor of the annexe sleep up to four and have a large working surface plus fridge and self-catering facilities. The hotel also has an excellent restaurant (right).

**Grand Hôtel du Parc** (☎ 04 66 45 03 05; www.grandhotelduparc.fr; 47 av Jean Monestier; r€50-70; ☞ mid-Mar–mid-Nov; ♿) The 55 rooms of this venerable hotel are divided between two wings – the older one with its classic wooden shutters and the new, faced in attractive local stonework. Grand indeed, this hotel sits in its own extensive grounds with a pool, a terrace and delightful, well-tended gardens shaded by mature cedars. It also runs a creditable restaurant.

## Eating

In summer L'Esplanade, a shady, pedestrianised avenue, becomes one long dining area where you can eat well and economically at one of the restaurant terraces.

**Chez Les Paysans** (☎ 04 66 31 22 07; square Maury; menus €12-16, mains around €10; ☞ daily) At this restaurant and delicatessen, you can sample fresh, very reasonably priced fare either inside or on its vine-shaded terrace in the sure knowledge that you're eating produce that has been sourced locally.

**La Source du Pêcher** (☎ 04 66 45 03 01; 1 rue de Remuret; menus €18-38; ☞ Apr-Oct) With a wonderful open-air terrace, perched above the little River Pêcher, La Source is very good and oh, how it knows and shows it (just look at the ostentatious display of medallions and shields from gastronomic bodies – most of them none too fresh, it must be said – that fringe the door). This said, you'll eat very well indeed, if you can stomach a little ritual humiliation from the prickly owner. He won't take reservations, so arrive early.

**La Lozerette** (☎ 04 66 45 06 04; www.lalozerette.com in French; Cocurès; menus €18.50-48, mains €13.50-17; ☞ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, dinner Wed Easter-Oct) You won't be serenaded by *La Cigale au Violon* (Cicada with Violin), the quirky wooden statue that graces the dining room. But you will enjoy cool jazz trilling in the background, delicate cuisine, attractively presented, and attentive service at this hotel, a mere 5.5km northeast of Florac along the D998. La Lozerette also has a handful of attractive rooms (€51 to €78).

Florac also has two impressive hotel restaurants:

**Grand Hôtel du Parc restaurant** (☎ 04 66 45 03 05; www.grandhotelduparc.fr; 47 av Jean Monestier; menus €19-28, mains €9-14.50)

**L'Adonis** (☎ 04 66 45 00 63; 48 rue du Pêcher; menus €17-44, mains €17-20; ☞ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue, lunch Wed) Restaurant of Hôtel Les Gorges du Tarn.

## Shopping

**Chez les Paysans** (☎ 04 66 31 22 07; square Maury) Affiliated to the Boutiques Paysannes movement (p95), Chez les Paysans has a wonderful selection of local produce, all brought in by small farmers in the area.

**Maison du Pays Cévenol** (☎ 04 66 45 15 67; 3 rue du Pêcher; ☞ May-Dec) Another gastronomic treasure trove, this place sells local specialities including liqueurs, jams, *pêlardon* cheese and chestnuts in all their guises.

**Atelier du Sucre et de la Châtaigne** (☎ 04 66 45 28 41; 64 av Jean Monestier) The Atelier du Sucre also specialises in homemade goodies, based in particular upon chestnut flour and honey.

## Getting There & Away

It's a serious pain without your own vehicle. One **Transports Reilhes** (☎ 04 66 45 00 18, 06 60 58 58 10) minibus runs to/from Alès (€13.50, 1½ hours) Monday to Saturday, leaving from the old railway station at 9am.

## MONT LOZÈRE

The Mont Lozère range, in the park's northern sector, is of tough, impenetrable granite, from which the rainfall sluices in small streams. It's the source of the River Tarn, which flows in its early stages through the spectacular Gorges du Tarn (p153). Shrouded in cloud and ice in winter, bright with bloom in springtime, Mont Lozère is a summertime delight of heather, blueberries and flowing streams. Its grasslands, strewn with rock fields and hefty boulders, revealed by erosion, provide fodder for the sheep that graze the slopes in the warmer months.

## Le Pont de Montvert pop 300

An attractive 20km drive northeastwards from Florac, following the upper reaches of the River Tarn, brings you to Le Pont de Montvert. It's a pretty little village of grey granite houses whose two sections, on each side of the river, are connected by a narrow 17th-century humpback bridge.

The national park's **Musée du Mont Lozère** (☎ 04 66 45 80 73; incl audioguide adult/6-18yr/under

## LES AGNEAUX DE PARCOURS

If you're in the Parc National des Cévennes during the right months of the year and if you hit upon the right restaurant, you can enjoy some of the sweetest, tenderest lamb you've ever tasted.

To label a lamb *agneau de parcours*, the farmer must conform to strict conditions laid down in the park's 'agricultural charter'. The animal must be raised within the boundaries of the park and fed entirely on cereals or chestnuts grown within its limits. Only lambs born between January and May qualify, provided that they've been put out to grass for at least three months. They're slaughtered when they're between 3.5 and 10 months old and weigh from 14kg to 21kg. So there's no temptation to slip you a joint of something different, participating farmers undertake to sell exclusively *agneaux de parcours* during the permitted period, July to December.

Even more prized – and costly – is the *agneau de lait*, a suckling lamb. Only on sale from late April to the end of June, 95% of its food intake must be its mother's milk, supplemented in the second and last month of its life with hay or organic cereals and concentrates.

Park offices carry a leaflet listing farmers that raise *agneaux de parcours* and restaurants where you can be sure to find their meat.

6yr €3.50/2.50/free; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 3-6pm Apr, May & Oct) is within a quite hideous hexagonal concrete structure that's set apart from the village. It's an intriguing record of the tough rural life that was people's lot until very recently. It's quite visual, with plenty of tools, artefacts and displays featuring full-size mannequins, and it's very well documented in French – no bad thing, since the English audioguide commentary is excruciating.

## La Cham des Bondons

Here, at La Cham des Bondons (*cham* means plateau in Occitan), strewn over an area of around 10 sq km, is France and Europe's second-largest concentration of menhirs. They're exceeded in number only by those of Carnac, in Brittany. But unlike Carnac, which swarms with visitors in summer, here you'll find yourself almost alone among these pillars, chiselled from blocks of granite. Erected between 2500 and 1800 BC, some are more than 5m tall. Were they part of a religious, maybe solar cult? Phallic earth symbols? Or, then again, simply landmarks?

At the southern limit of the menhir fields are **Les Puechs**, round and symmetrical as a pair of breasts. Local legend has it that they were clods of mud that Gargantua, Rabelais' larger-than-life hero, scraped from his boots. It's well worth climbing the evident path to one of the summits for a superb wraparound view.

To reach La Cham des Bondons from Florac, take the N106, direction Mende, then turn eastwards at Col de Montmirat.

## MONT AIGOUAL

On a clear day, the panorama from the summit of Mont Aigoual (1567m) will linger on the retina for ages. On the very best days, the eye sweeps over 13 *départements*, from the Alps to the Mediterranean and south to the Pyrenees. But do check the weather forecast first. Year-round, you're likely to experience buffeting winds. Gusts can tear across at more than 250km/h and every month has more than 20 days when winds exceed 60km/h. The mountain's also wet, soaking up more than 2m of precipitation every year. The summit is an invigorating experience at any time, but the air is at its clearest in winter, when the snow falls heavy and lingers late. Summer days, by contrast, are often hazy.

It's easy to understand why the meteorological station at the summit, embattled against the elements and over a century old, was built like a fortress – though the decidedly superfluous crenellations are a bit over the top! Climb the iron spiral staircase to the roof of the tower, the tip-top point, where there's an orientation table.

Within the main building there's an extensive free **exhibition** (☎ 04 67 82 60 01; www.aigoual.asso.fr; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm May, Jun & Sep). It's fascinating stuff where you can learn about cloud formation, weather prediction, the mountain around the calendar and much, much more. Captions are only in French, but the majority of the exhibition is highly visual.

If the wind allows, spread your picnic at the table beside a signpost where three long-distance trails intersect and thread like modern

lay lines: the GR6, which runs from the Alps to the Atlantic; the GR7, running from the Vosges mountains on France's border with Germany to Andorra in the Pyrenees and on into Spain; and the short (all is relative) 78km, six-day GR66, also called the Tour du Mont Aigoual, that runs around the mountain.

The best way to savour the many facets of Mont Aigoual is to take the **Sentier des 4000 Marches**, a satisfying 22km, eight-hour hike from the village of Valleraugue, on the south side of the mountain. This signed out-and-back trail leads in turn through oak forest, chestnut groves, beech wood and, up above the treeline, subalpine meadow. From here until the summit, it offers a constant sweeping panorama until you again plunge into woodland.

These days, Mont Aigoual and the neighbouring Montagne du Lingas have a thick skirt of beech trees, thanks to a successful reforestation program that counteracted years of uncontrolled logging.

Altogether less strenuous, the **Sentier des Botanistes**, a 1.5km circuit that begins well below the summit on the south side, also gives great views. It looks down upon the Hort de Dieu, a modest-looking arboretum that, nevertheless, had huge importance in the early 20th century, when it was the base for experiments researching the optimum methods of reforestation.

At Col de la Serreyrède, 7km from the summit on the southern slopes, **Maison de l'Aigoual** (☎ 04 67 82 64 67; www.causses-aigoual-cevennes.org in French; ☞ 9.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm or 1pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Wed-Mon Sep-Jun) is well endowed with general information about the Parc National des Cévennes, including walking and mountain-biking opportunities. Beside it, there's a delightfully cool drinking fountain and **Terres d'Aigoual** (☎ 04 67 82 65 39; www.terres-aigoual.com in French; ☞ Tue-Sun), a member of the Boutiques Paysannes cooperative (p95), which sells a superb range of local specialities direct from the producer.

If your itinerary takes you southwards, continuing down through the Cévennes Méridionales and the town of Le Vigan will bring you to the spectacular natural site of the Cirque de Navacelles (p112).

### Abîme de Bramabiau

Just off the D986 on the northern flank of Mont Aigoual, the **Abîme de Bramabiau** (☎ 04 67 82 60 78; adult/13-16yr/6-12yr/under 6yr €7.50/5/3.50/free;

☞ 9.30am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-6pm mid-Mar-Jun & Sep, 11am-5pm Oct) has been carved by the River Bonheur, which here rejoins the outside world after coursing through the mountain for more than 700m. A guided 45-minute visit takes in the spectacular, noisy waterfall (*bramabiau* in the local patois means the oxen that low) as the river meets daylight again, bursting out of l'Alcôve, a rocky cirque. You're then led into a high gallery, where a second waterfall rushes. A narrow walkway more than 20m above the river leads you through other, less dramatic chambers, then out into the daylight and a superb view of the Bonheur as it flows freely again. It's a fairly constant 8°C deep inside, so do pack a sweater.

### VALLÉES CÉVENOLES

The Vallées Cévenoles, the park's most easterly area, extend into the neighbouring *département* of Gard. Their arid south-facing slopes are clad predominantly in holm oak and *garrigue*, typical Mediterranean scrub and heathland. On other shadier, more gentle slopes sweet chestnuts, first planted in the Middle Ages and staple of the local diet until quite recently, flourish, together with indigenous beech woods and conifer plantations.

This eastern approach is the most spectacular way to enter the park, following the **Corniche des Cévennes**, a road that winds along jagged ridges and above plunging ravines for 56km, from St-Jean du Gard to Florac.

## PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DES GRANDS CAUSSES

The Grands Causse, the Massif Central's most southerly expression, are mainly high, limestone plateau. Scorched in summer and windswept in winter, the stony surface holds little moisture. The least dribble filters through the soft, porous rock to emerge in the valleys at its feet. Beneath the plateaus lies an underground world, scoured out by the waters over millennia, whose caves and fissures make it ideal for cavers. Sheep grazing remains the dominant economic activity. Much of the milk that the ewes produce is sent to Roquefort for processing into the famous blue-veined King of Cheeses.

### CHESTNUT: THE ALL-PURPOSE TREE

In the Cévennes, the chestnut tree (known as *l'arbre à pain*, or bread tree) was the staple food of many Auvergnat families. The nuts were eaten raw, roasted and dried, or ground into flour. Blended with milk or wine, chestnuts were the essence of *bajanat*, a nourishing soup. Part of the harvest would feed the pigs, while the leaves of pruned twigs and branches provided fodder for sheep and goats.

Harvested at ground level with small forks – of chestnut wood, of course – the prickly husks (called *hèrissans*, or hedgehogs) were removed by being trampled upon in spiky boots. Nowadays, they're the favourite food of the Cévennes' wild boars and still feature in a number of local sauces and desserts.

Nothing was wasted. Sections of hollowed-out trunk would serve as beehives, and smaller branches would be woven into baskets while larger ones were whittled into stakes for fencing or used to build trellises. The wood, hard and resistant to parasites, was used for rafters, rakes and household furniture – everything from, quite literally, the cradle to the coffin.

To learn lots more about the importance of the chestnut to the Cévennes, take a look at <http://chemins-chataigne.com>.

The Rivers Tarn, Jonte and Dourbie have sliced deep gorges through the 5000-sq-km plateau, creating four *causses* ('plateaus' in the local patois): Sauveterre, Méjean, Noir and Larzac, each different in its delicate geological forms. One resembles a dark lunar surface, another's like a Scottish moor covered with the thinnest layer of grass, while the next is gentler and more fertile. But all are eerie and empty except for the occasional shepherd and his flock – and all offer great walking and mountain biking.

The park was created in 1995 and embraces nearly 100 communes with a total population of around 65,000 souls – though you'll ask yourself where they've all got to. Millau, at its heart, is a good base for venturing into this wild area. To stay at the very centre of the *causses*, Meyrueis is your best choice.

### Information

#### Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses

office (☎ 05 65 61 35 50; [www.parc-grands-causses.fr](http://www.parc-grands-causses.fr) in French; 71 blvd de l'Ayrolle, Millau; ☎ 9am-noon or 12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Fri)

### MEYRUEIS

pop 1100

You'll find wild water just about everywhere you turn in this pretty little village (elevation 705m), at the confluence of the Rivers Jonte, Brèze and Bétuzon. At the head of the spectacular Gorges de la Jonte, Meyrueis (pronounced may-rue-ees) also marks a meeting of a craggier kind, where the Causse Méjean, Causse Noir and Massif de l'Aigoual all con-

verge. There's an ample choice of both restaurants and hotels overlooking the Bétuzon, where you can dine or drink on terraces bright with flowers.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 45 60 33; [www.meyrueis-office-tourisme.com](http://www.meyrueis-office-tourisme.com); quai Sully; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-8pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-May) is in Tour de l'Horloge, one of the last surviving vestiges of the medieval ramparts that once ran beside the Bétuzon.

There's a small farmers market every Wednesday. From mid-June to mid-September it's held on place André Chamson; the rest of the year it's on Quai Sully.

### Activities

**Anatole Rando'Ane** (☎ 04 66 45 66 48; [www.ane-et-rando.com](http://www.ane-et-rando.com); Ribevenes; ☎ Apr-Oct) is beside the River Brèze, 3km upstream from Meyrueis. It hires donkeys (per day/three days/week €41/105/210) for walks in the Cévennes, ranging from a day to a week or more, with or without a guide.

A host of outdoor activities, including caving, climbing, canoeing and guided walking and mountain-bike tours, are run by **Fremyc** (☎ 04 66 45 65 37; [www.nature-cevennes.com](http://www.nature-cevennes.com) in French). Biking options include being driven to the summit of Mont Aigoual (p149), then coasting down alone and at your own pace (half-/full day €29/38). It also rents out bikes (per half-/full/three days €17/26/57). In July and August, you'll find Frédérique or Michaël (hence the name) promoting their services at a stand beside the tourist office.



## Sleeping & Eating

Since Meyrueis is popular in equal measure with walkers, cyclists and visitors to the nearby attractions, we give you a full range of accommodation options.

**Gîte la Draille** (☎ 04 66 45 65 37; www.nature-cevennes.com in French; 465 rte de Florac; half-board dm €29, per person d €39; ☞ mid-Mar–mid-Nov) This modern stone building on the outskirts of the village is a popular rendezvous for walkers and cyclists. It's run by the Fremyc duo (see p151), who can give you plenty of advice about local biking and hiking opportunities. There's a bar with a wood-burning stove for colder nights and, for summer evenings, a broad terrace with views over the valley below.

**Hôtel Family** (☎ 04 66 45 60 02; www.hotel-family.com in French; quai Sully; r €39-49; ☐ ☒ ☞ ☑) Free wi-fi and parking. This spick and span hotel, originally three separate houses, has been run by the Julien family for four generations. The 48 bedrooms, though on the small side, couldn't be trimmer and the welcome's particularly warm. A stag's head peers down in the pleasant top-floor lounge with its deep, comfy chairs. Across the river and accessed by its own wooden bridge, there's a leafy garden and a large pool. The restaurant (lunch menu €12.50, other menus €22 to €27), open to all, is equally bright and cheerful.

**Hôtel Saint-Sauveur** (☎ 04 66 45 40 42; www.hotel-sauveur.com; place Jean Séquier; r €44-57; ☞ Mar-Nov) In this imposing former *hôtel particulier*, or urban mansion, constructed in the 18th century, rooms are comfortable and well priced. Its terrace, overseeing the street and river below, is shaded by a venerable, century-old sycamore. If no one's at reception, contact Hôtel Sully, next door.

**Hôtel Restaurant Château d'Ayres** (☎ 04 66 45 60 10; www.chateau-d-ayres.com; r from €124; ☞ mid-Feb–Dec; ☒ ☑) If you're seeking true tranquillity, this magnificent hotel, set in an 18th-century chateau, won't disappoint. It's surrounded by 6 hectares of wooded grounds (in which you can canter; guests can hire horses). The 29 rooms are exquisitely and individually furnished with antique pieces. Choose the Blanche de Castille room in one of the twin towers and you'll be sleeping where Général de Gaulle more than once stayed. The three intimate dining rooms of its gourmet restaurant (lunch menu €22, other menus €31 to €47, mains €19 to €38), hung with tapestries and graced with monumental fireplaces, are the vestiges

of the 12th-century Benedictine monastery that originally stood here.

In culinary terms, there's little to choose between the restaurants, independent and attached to hotels, that border the Bétuzon. This said, **L'Aven Gourmand** (☎ 04 66 45 56 05; place Sully; menus €16.50-26, mains €10-14; ☞ lunch & dinner Fri-Wed) stands out for its position, whether you stop by for a *crêpe* (€4.50 to €8.50) or a full meal. Eat inside, at the coveted tables directly above the river or on the slim terrace that runs beside it.

## Getting There & Away

On weekdays, one daily bus (€7.40, one hour 20 minutes), run by **Kaolis** (☎ 05 65 61 30 88), makes the trip between Meyrueis and Millau.

## CAUSSE MÉJEAN

The Causse Méjean, tallest of the four *causses*, averages 950m in height. Defined to the north by the Gorges du Tarn and, southwards, by the Gorges de la Jonte, it looms over Florac on its eastern flank. It's the most barren, isolated and little populated, with only 1.4 inhabitants per square kilometre, who survive from cattle rearing and tourism. It's a land of poor pasture where crops grow only in occasional fertile dips and bowls, known locally as *do-lines*. Streams, where they occur, gurgled down into the limestone through sinkholes, funnels and fissures. Such a combination of water and limestone has created some breathtaking underground scenery.

## Aven Armand

The spectacular **cavern** (☎ 04 66 45 61 31; www.aven-armand.com; adult/16-20yr/5-15yr/under 5yr €8.50/7/5.80/free; ☞ 9.30am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am or 10am-noon & 1.30-5pm or 6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov) of Aven Armand, on the plateau's southwestern side, was scoured out of the mountain around four million years ago. The slow drip, drip of water, rich in limestone deposits, over the last 250,000 years has created a bristling subterranean forest of stalactites and stalagmites. Discovered in 1897 by the eponymous Louis Armand, who lowered himself down through the one natural entrance high in the chasm's ceiling, it's nowadays reached by a funicular railway that drops 60 vertical metres. Within an area that exceeds that of Notre Dame, the world's greatest concentration of stalagmites, 80% of them still growing, rear like piles of

## TAKH

Up high on the Causse Méjean is the nearest that France can approximate to the steppes of Mongolia. Where thin grass ripples in the chill winds, the first element in an experiment in rescue and rehabilitation is taking place. Here, roaming free within an extensive enclosed area, live *chevaux de Przewalski*, the descendants of a species of horse that was reduced at one time to only 13 living beings. Never domesticated, they were wiped out in their native Mongolia half a century ago. You can spot them at a distance year-round, while in summer TAKH, the not-for-profit association responsible for their revival in the Cévennes, runs an **information centre** (☎ 04 66 45 64 43; www.takh.org; 📅 Jul & Aug). The organisation's title adopts the horse's Mongolian name – altogether easier on the tongue than 'Przewalski's horse' (the species is named after the Russian geographer and explorer who was the first to describe it; it's also sometimes called, with less precision, the Asian, or Mongolian, wild horse).

Horses and centre are 18km from Meyrueis. Take the D986, direction Mende, and turn right after 10km onto the D63 at the Aven Armand crossroads. If you want to push on, it's an exhilarating drive onwards to Florac along the high plateau northeastwards, as you continue along the D63.

pancakes, while relatively younger stalactites stab dagger-like from the ceiling. Among them is the world's tallest, at 30m – though there are stories of a 32m-high rival, still to be verified, in Slovenia.

Guided visits, lasting about 45 minutes (there's an accompanying information sheet in English) head underground about every 20 minutes. Thrill seekers can sign on (in advance) for a roped descent through Armand's original hole in the roof (€45 per person; Friday evening, July and August only).

A **combination ticket** (adult/16-20yr/5-15 yr/under 5yr €11.80/9.30/7.80/free) also includes admission to the Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux (p155).

## Ferme Caussearde d'Autrefois

In the hamlet of Hyelzas, at the end of the road, 4km beyond Aven Armand, this cluster of 18th- and 19th-century **farm buildings** (☎ 04 66 45 65 25; www.ferme-caussearde.com; Hyelzas; adult/7-14yr/under 7yr €5.20/2.15/free; 📅 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Apr-Jun & Sep) overlooks the Gorges de la Jonte. Uninhabited from 1946 until their recent renovation, they illustrate the tough peasant life of the *causses*. Some may find the place overromantic and simplistic, but what's undeniable is that it's helped to regenerate a hamlet that was dying and that now boasts a cheesemaker, a *gîte d'étape* and a baker.

## Chaos de Nîmes-le-Vieux

This extended jumble of **rocks and pinnacles** has nothing to do with Nîmes, just as Montpellier-le-Vieux (p155) has only its name in common with Montpellier. The difference is that this

one's free. At the Col de Perjoret, 12km east of Meyrueis on the D996, take the narrow, signed, blacktop track to the left. After 3km, turn left for the hamlet of l'Hom, from where you can ramble and scramble among these contorted, pitted dolomite shapes, left standing when the limestone that once enclosed them weathered away.

## GORGES DU TARN

Though all three of the gorges that slice through the *causses* (Tarn, Jonte and Dourbie) are spectacular, the Gorges du Tarn are markedly the most awe-inspiring. Until the construction of the road in 1905, the only way to move through them was by boat. The attractive stone houses and hamlets that cling to their slopes, once tumbling and neglected, have now been restored and given a new life, thanks to tourism.

From the village of Ispagnac, 9km north-west of Florac, the gorge winds southwestwards for about 50km, ending just north of Millau. En route are two villages: medieval Ste-Énimie (a good base for canoeing and walking along the gorges) and, 13km downstream, La Malène, smaller but equally attractive and with the same opportunities for outdoor fun.

The gorge, 400m to 600m deep, marks the boundary between the Causse Méjean to its south and the Causse de Sauveterre to the north. From these plateaus, the canyon below looks like a white, limestone abyss, its green waters dotted here and there with bright canoes and kayaks. In summer the riverside road (the D907bis) is often jammed with cars, buses and caravans: every sum-

mer's day, well over 2500 vehicles grind through Ste-Énimie.

For a truly magnificent bird's-eye vista, make a 12km detour along the D995, which climbs steeply from the pretty hamlet of Les Vignes near the gorge's southern end, up to the viewpoint at **Point Sublime**.

## Activities

### CANOEOING

Riding the River Tarn is at its best in high summer, when the river is usually low and the descent a languid trip over mostly calm water. You can get as far as the impassable Pas de Soucy, a barrier of boulders about 9km downstream from La Malène. Downstream from here, there are further canoeing possibilities.

The Ste-Énimie tourist office carries information on the veritable flotilla of companies offering canoe and kayak descents. Some of these:

**ADN La Cazelle** (☎ 04 66 48 46 05; www.lacazelle.com in French) In Ste-Énimie.

**Canoe 2000** (☎ 04 66 48 57 71; www.canoe2000.fr) In Ste-Énimie and La Malène.

**Au Moulin de la Malène** (☎ 04 66 48 51 14; www.canoebanc.com) In La Malène.

**Locanoë** (☎ 04 66 48 55 57; www.gorges-du-tarn.fr in French) In Castelbouc and Ste-Énimie.

Typical trips and tariffs for canoe and kayak descents:

Castelbouc–Ste-Énimie	€14	7km	2hr
Ste-Énimie–La Malène	€19	13km	3½hr
Castelbouc–La Malène	€22	20km	1 day
Ste-Énimie–Les Baumes Basses	€23	22km	1 day

If you'd rather someone else did the hard work, spend a lazy, effortless hour with **Les Bateliers de la Malène** (☎ 04 66 48 51 10; ☹ Apr-Oct), who, for €19.50/9.75 per adult/child under 10, will punt you down an 8km stretch of the gorge, leaving from La Malène, then drive you back.

### WALKING & CYCLING

The Sentier de la Vallée du Tarn trail, blazed in yellow and green, runs for around 250km, from Le Pont de Montvert on Mont Lozère, down the gorge and all the way to Albi, near Toulouse. The GR60 follows an old drovers' route, winding down from the Causse de Sauveterre to Ste-Énimie, crossing the bridge and continuing southwards up to the Causse Méjean in the direction of Mont Aigoual.

Less strenuously, there are well over a dozen circular, signposted day and half-day walks in the stretch between Ispagnac and La Malène.

**ADN La Cazelle** (☎ 04 66 48 46 05; www.lacazelle.com in French), in Ste-Énimie, rents out mountain bikes (per half-/full day €12/20).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Camping Les Gorges du Tarn** (☎ 04 66 48 59 38; fax 04 66 48 59 37; 2 people, tent & car €8.20; ☹ Easter–mid-Nov; ☹) About 800m upstream from Ste-Énimie, this, the cheapest of the several riverside camp sites, also hires out canoes and kayaks.

Two splendid *chambres d'hôtes* lie at each end of the Gorges du Tarn.

**La Pause** (☎ 05 65 62 63 06; www.hebergement-gorges.dutam.com; rte de Capluc, Le Rozier; d/tr/ste incl breakfast €46/63/90; ☹) At the southern end, in the village of Le Rozier, where the River Jonte flows into the Tarn, La Pause has three tastefully furnished rooms decorated in attractive colours with impeccable bathrooms, plus a couple of suites sleeping three or four. The larger suite has two interconnecting rooms, ideal for a family. From the small pool and terrace there's a plunging view over the green valley to the hamlet of Peyreleau. At breakfast, jams – fig, quince, cherry and more – are all made by your hostess, Pierrette Espinasse. To get there, turn left, signed Capluc, after the village church.

**La Maison de Marius** (☎ 04 66 44 25 05; www.mai.sondemarius.info; 8 rue Pontet, Quézac; r incl breakfast €50-80; ☹ Mar-Oct) At the gorge's northern limit, in the hamlet of Quézac, near Ispagnac, Dany Méjean runs a rural *chambre d'hôte* in the village of her birth. Each delightful room has its own character: Montagne, huge, all checks and stripes with a giant bathtub; Le Toit (the roof) with an even larger bathtub of Roman proportions, an integrated salon and beds that rise at the touch of a button; and La Lucerne, equally large and a special bargain at €50. And you've never tasted sweeter water, drawn from the nearby mineral springs. To get there, skirt the village (its main street is unidirectional against you) and follow signs from the church.

**Château de la Caze** (☎ 04 66 48 51 01; www.chateau.lacaze.com; d €118-166, ste from €180; ☹ Easter–mid-Nov) This fairy-tale 15th-century castle, overlooking the River Tarn between Ste-Énimie and La Malène, is a fabulous top-end option. Rooms are the last word in luxury, and it boasts a renowned gourmet restaurant. In the annexe – less romantic but equally comfortable – all rooms are suites, three have ample balconies,

and toilet, shower and bathtub are all separate. It's essential to reserve.

## Ste-Énimie

pop 500

Ste-Énimie, 27km from Florac and 56km from Millau, tumbles like an avalanche of grey-brown stone, blending into the steep, once-terraced slope behind it. Long isolated, it's now a prized destination for day visitors from Millau, Mende and Florac and a popular starting or finishing point for canoe or kayak descents of the Tarn.

Ste-Énimie's **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 66 48 53 44; www.gorgesdutarn.net in French; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-Easter, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Easter-Jun & Sep) is 100m north of the bridge. It stocks maps and walking guides, including IGN Top 25 map No 2640OT, *Gorges du Tarn*. There's also a small seasonal **annexe** (☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sun-Thu Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fr mid-May-Jun & 1-15 Sep) beside the bridge in La Malène.

Highlights of Ste-Énimie's small, cobbled old quarter, where most houses have been re-pointed and restored, are the 12th-century Romanesque **church** and the **Halle aux Blés**, where cereal crops brought down from the high *causses* were bartered for wine, fresh fruit and walnut oil.

## Château de Peyrelade

A short distance west of the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Jonte, the romantic ruin you'll spy high above the valley is the **Château de Peyrelade** (☎ for information 05 65 59 74 28; adult/8-12yr/under 8yr €3.50/1.50/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 2.30-6pm Sun-Fri 15-30 Jun & 1-15 Sep). Destroyed in 1663 by order of Cardinal Richelieu, like so many bastions of regional power in Languedoc, its oldest parts date from the 11th century. Even if the chateau isn't open, the panorama of the Tarn valley and *causses* make worthwhile the 1.25km drive along a narrow track between cherry trees, up above the village of Boyne.

## CAUSSE DE SAUVETERRE

The Causse de Sauveterre falls precipitously – near-vertically in places – to the Gorges du Tarn on its eastern flank. It's the northernmost of the *causses*, dropping more gently to the valley of the River Lot, which marks its limit in that direction. Dotted with a few compact, isolated farms that resemble fortified villages, its every potential patch of fertile

earth is cultivated, creating irregular, intricately patterned wheat fields.

The *causse* takes its name from the village of Sauveterre, a pretty little place of stone houses and shepherds' huts at the *causse*'s eastern edge, above Ste-Énimie.

The least arid of the plateaus, it has three distinct zones: the Causse du Massegros, around 750m high, a land of bare pasture and sparse pine forests; the Causse Boisé, in the centre and rising up to 1000m, more undulating with spiky rocks and cleft by rocky gulches whose waters flow into the Tarn and Lot; and the Causse Pelé in the east, bare, rocky and exceeding 1100m in places.

## CAUSSE NOIR

The Causse Noir, about 200 sq km in area, is the smallest of the *causses*. Its name, the 'Black Causse', harks back to an earlier time when the plateau was almost entirely covered by pine forest. It's here in particular that you'll come across fields of limestone, eroded and weathered into fantastical shapes.

Rising immediately east of Millau, it's defined by the Gorges de la Dourbie on its southern side and drops steeply to the Gorges de la Jonte at its northern limit.

## Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux

Lying 18km northeast of Millau, **Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux** (☎ 05 65 60 66 30; adult/5-15yr/under 5yr €5.30/3.80/free; ☎ 9.30am-6pm or 7pm Apr–mid-Nov) is a wide area of jagged rocks above the Gorges de la Dourbie. Water erosion has created more than 120 hectares of tortured limestone formations with fanciful names such as the Sphinx and the Elephant. Three trails, lasting one to three hours, cover the site, as does a **tourist train** (adult/5-15 yr/under 5yr €3.40/2.40/free).

If you're here outside official opening times, there's nothing to stop you wandering around freely.

## CAUSSE DU LARZAC

The Causse du Larzac (800m to 1000m) is the largest of the four *causses*. It's an endless sweep of distant horizons and rocky steppes. On them perch medieval villages such as fortified **Ste-Eulalie de Cernon**, long the capital of the Larzac *région*, and **La Cavalerie**, both built by the Knights Templar, a religious military order that distinguished itself during the crusades. For more on the *causse* and its villages, see p167.

## GORGES DE LA JONTE

The Gorges de la Jonte, 15km long, cleave east-west from Meyrueis to Le Rozier, separating in dramatic fashion Causse Noir from Causse Méjean. They're much more lightly trafficked – though busy enough in summer – than the more famous Gorges du Tarn.

### Dargilan

Just south of the gorge is this **cave** (☎ 04 66 45 60 20; www.grotte-dargilan.com; adult/6-18yr/under 6yr €8.50/5.80/free; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-4.30pm or 5.30pm Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct). Even larger than Aven Armand, it's less visited but just as spectacular. The expanse is known as La Grotte Rose, the Pink Cave, because of the dominant shade of its variegated natural colouring. The culminating point of the one-hour, 1km tour through this vast chasm, largest in the Cévennes, is the sudden, dazzling exit onto a ledge with a dizzying view of the Gorges de la Jonte way below.

### Belvédère des Vautours

This **vulture viewing point** (☎ 05 65 62 69 69; www.vautours-lozere.com in French; adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €6.50/3/free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, to 6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) is just west of Le Truel on the D996. Reintroduced in 1970 after having all but disappeared locally, the vultures now freely wheel and plane in the *causses* skies and nest high in the sheer cliffs on the opposite side of the valley.

The viewing point – look down, too, for a great perspective on the valley bottom below – has an impressive multimedia exhibition, including live video transmission from the nesting sites. It also organises half-day **birding walks** (adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €7/3.50/free) to the surrounding gorges. Reservations are required.

## MILLAU & AROUND

### MILLAU

pop 21,900

Millau (pronounced mee-yo) squeezes between the Causse Noir and du Larzac near the spot where the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie join each other. Though falling just over the border into the Midi-Pyrénées *département* of Aveyron, it's tied to Languedoc historically

and culturally. Famous within France for glove-making, it's also the main centre for the Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses and a take-off point for hiking and other outdoor activities – particularly hang-gliding and paragliding, exploiting the uplifting thermals.

### Information

**ABCD PC** (cnr rue Droite & rue Solignac; per hr €3;

☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-12.15pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 1-7pm Sat Sep-Jun) Internet access.

**Cyber Espace** (☎ 05 65 59 83 30; 2 rue du Barry; per hr €3; ☎ 3-7pm Mon, 10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) Internet access.

**Laundrette** (14 av Gambetta; ☎ 7am-9pm)

**Main Post Office** (12 av Alfred Merle)

**Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses**

**office** (☎ 05 65 61 35 50; www.parc-grands-causses.fr in French; 71 blvd de l'Ayrolle, Millau; ☎ 9am-noon or 12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Fri)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 65 60 02 42; www.ot-millau.fr; 1 place du Beffroi; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Easter-Jun & Sep; closed Sun Oct-Easter)

### Sights

The 42m-tall **beffroi** (belfry; rue Droite; adult/under 18yr €3/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm mid-Jun-Sep) has a square base dating from the 12th century and tapers into a 17th-century octagonal tower, from where there's a great overview of town.

**Musée de Millau** (☎ 05 65 59 01 08; place Maréchal Foch; adult/19-25yr/under 19yr €5/3.70/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm May, Jun & Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) has a rich collection of fossils, including mammoth molars and a 4m-long, near-intact skeleton of a prehistoric marine reptile from the Causse du Larzac. In the basement is a huge array of plates and vases from **La Graufesenque** (p165). Also in the basement, look out for the *plomb du Larzac*, a 1st-century talisman made of lead and designed to counter evil spells. The 1st-floor leather and glove section illustrates Millau's tanneries and their products through the ages with a video, machinery and plenty of samples.

A combined ticket (€7) includes admission to La Graufesenque archaeological site, at the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie. To really explore Millau, invest in a *passé patrimoine* (€12), which gives access to Millau's museum, La Graufesenque, Le Beffroi, La Halle Viaduc and a couple of other town sights.

*Continued on page 165*



Continued from page 156

At the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie, **La Graufesenque** (☎ 05 65 60 11 37; av Louis Balsan; adult/19-25yr/under 19yr €4/2.70/free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun) was in its time the largest pottery workshop in the western Roman Empire. Wares fired here have been found as far away as Yemen, Mauritania and northern England. After watching a 10-minute video, walk the perimeter of the excavated area (it's estimated that around 80% still lies under the soil), guided by the booklet in English lent to you at reception. It's quite legitimate to pick up a shard or two as souvenirs from the pile of discarded fragments. Their rarity value is low, however; a team of around 500 potters worked to shape the 10,000 to 40,000 pots that were crammed into the kiln for each firing. Several million were turned out during La Graufesenque's heyday, which lasted barely a century and came to a swift end, once the kilns had devoured the woods and forests for miles around.

In the 1960s, there were around 80 glove-making companies, big and small, in Millau. **Cause Gantier** (☎ 05 65 60 03 05; blvd des Gantières; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat), in business for over a century and crafting gloves for fashion houses such as Chanel and Hermès, continues that tradition. Beware: nearly all 20 members of Millau's *Collectif du Cuir*, its leather association, import their leather goods and trade on their past reputations and (no longer so good) names. But buy here, at its shop, and you can be certain your gloves were made by the craftspeople you see before you or by their colleagues in the workshop upstairs, who between them fashion more than 25,000 pairs each year. Whether you slip on a glove or not, this architecturally pleasing new building merits a visit to watch craftfolk at work, learn about a skilled trade and savour the antique machinery on display.

At street level at the **Millau Halle Viaduc** (☎ 05 65 60 95 05; www.millau-halle-viaduc.com; place de la Capelle; adult/child €4/3; ☎ 10am-7pm or 8pm Apr-Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Nov-Mar), there's a small free exhibition with video clips and multilingual text about Millau, the Grands Causses and the Pont de Millau. Down below, the theme is bridges, physical and metaphorical, around the world. The 20-minute video, with shots of the world's

major bridges linked by a piece of sentimental, sci-fi hokum, is less than thrilling.

The **Pont de Millau**, slung across the wide Tarn Valley to link the Causses du Larzac and Rouge, takes the breath away. Designed by the British architect Sir Norman Foster, it carries more than 4.5 million vehicles each year. It's a true work of industrial art and an amazing feat of engineering. Only seven pylons, hollow and seemingly slim as needles, support 2.5km of four-lane motorway. Rising to 343m above the valley bottom, it ranks among the tallest road bridges in the world.

More than three years in construction and costing in excess of €400 million, it gobbled up 127,000 cu metres of concrete, 19,000 tonnes of reinforcing steel and 5000 tonnes of cables and stays. Yet despite these heavyweight superlatives, it still looks like a gossamer thread. Far from detracting from the charms of the hitherto unspoilt countryside around the town of Millau, this vital link in the A75 motorway is a true 21st-century icon.

**Viaduc Espace Info** (☎ 05 65 58 80 65; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar), at ground level beneath the bridge, tells the story of its construction through a variety of media. For those who want to get even closer, it arranges one-hour **guided visits** (adult/6-17yr/under 6yr €5.50/3/free) four times daily.

## Activities

### HANG-GLIDING & PARAGLIDING

Several outfits run introductory courses (around €325 for five days) and tandem flights (€55 to €70). Two long-established players:

**Horizon** (☎ 05 65 59 78 60; www.horizon-millau.com in French; 6 place Lucien Grégoire) Also offers caving,

### OF GLOVES & CHEESE

Why was this smallest provincial town, far from the sea and any significant communication route, once the world's largest maker of gloves? And why are gloves and cheese so symbiotically linked?

It's the sheep, those poor exploited sheep, their milk taken for Roquefort cheese and their lambs, known locally as *regords*, killed soon after birth for their soft skins, which, tanned and transformed, would grace the hands of ladies around the world.



## NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PONT

You don't have to have a vehicle to visit the Pont de Millau.

An open-top, bright-yellow **bus** (☎ 05 65 61 20 77; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €10/6/free) with guide leaves place de la Capelle at least hourly between 9am and 5pm. During the one- to 1¾-hour tour, there's an introductory video, you see the bridge from below and enjoy the perhaps dubious advantage of being 'the only ones privileged to drive along the former site tracks'.

For a leisurely glide along the Tarn Valley, including an original, crane-your-neck perspective of the Pont de Millau from below, take a one- to 1½-hour boat trip with **Bateliers du Viaduc** (☎ 05 65 60 17 91; www.bateliersduviaduc.com in French; Creissels; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €19.50/12.50/9.50; 🚢 hourly from 9am Apr-Oct). Reserve by phone or at the information booth as you enter the village of Creissels, 2km south of Millau.

For an even more original angle with the thrill of the wind in your hair, **Millau ULM** (☎ 0685 7481 74; www.millau-ulm.com in French) will fly you above the bridge in an ultralite plane (€85 per half-hour).

canyon descents, rock climbing and Naturaventure, a multiadventure trail.

**Roc et Canyon** (☎ 05 65 61 17 77; www.roc-et-canyon.com in French; 55 av Jean Jaurès) In summer it's based beside Pont Cureplat. Also offers caving, rock climbing, canyon descents, rafting and bungee jumping.

## ROCK CLIMBING

The 50m- to 200m-high cliffs of the Gorges de la Jonte are an internationally renowned venue for climbers of all levels. Both Horizon and Roc et Canyon (see p165) offer monitored climbs and can put you in touch with local climbers.

## WALKING & CYCLING

Pick up a copy of *Les Belles Balades de l'Aveyron* (€8), on sale at the tourist office. You can navigate by the explicit maps even if you don't read French. It describes 22 walks around Millau, the Gorges du Tarn and the Grands Causses, all waymarked and varying from 1½ to six hours. It also details 10 mountain-bike and 10 tourer routes.

If you're after more demanding trekking, the GR62 crosses the Causse Noir, passing the Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux before winding down to Millau, while the GR71 and its spurs thread across the Causse du Larzac, passing through its Templar villages.

## Sleeping

**Camping des Deux Rivières** (☎ 05 65 60 00 27; camping.deux-rivieres@wanadoo.fr; 61 av de l'Aigoual; site & 2 people €14; 🚰 Apr-Oct) Just over Pont de Cureplat, this is the closest of several huge riverside camp sites beside the east bank of the River Tarn.

**Gîte de la Maladerie** (☎ 05 65 60 41 84; chemin de la Graufesenque; dm €13) In grounds on the south bank

of the Tarn, this friendly *gîte* is open year-round. On foot, follow the river upstream. If you're driving, turn left (east) after Pont du Larzac.

**Hôtel La Capelle** (☎ 05 65 60 14 72; www.hotel-millau-capelle.com; 7 place de la Capelle; r €45-48, with shared bathroom €30; 🅇 🅈 🅉 🅊) Free wi-fi; ample free parking in the square below the hotel. In the converted wing of a one-time leather factory, La Capelle is a great budget choice. The hotel's large terrace with views towards the Causse Noir makes for a perfect breakfast spot. All rooms with bathroom overlook the Causse and have separate toilet. Some have air con (€5 supplement).

**Hôtel des Causses** (☎ 05 65 60 03 19; www.hotel-des-causses.com; 56 av Jean Jaurès; d €50-60, tr €65-75; 🅇) Parking €7. This 19-room hotel offers a friendly welcome and comfortable, well-maintained rooms. A Logis de France with double glazing throughout, it also has a good restaurant (see p168).

**Hôtel Emma Calvé** (☎ 05 65 60 13 49; www.millau-hotel-emma-calve.com in French; 28 av Jean Jaurès; r €51-73; 🅇) Parking €10. The 13 rooms of the Emma Calvé (named after the French soprano who spent her last years in this former bourgeois mansion), all repainted recently in a variety of hues (corridors are a rather bilious green), offer plenty of variety. Four in a small annexe (€63) give directly onto the rear patio, where there's plenty of greenery. Room 8 (€73) has its own spacious enclosed verandah overlooking the patio. Room 4, large and the original owner's chapel, has charming leaded, stained-glass windows that diffuse the light.

**Cévenol Hôtel** (☎ 05 65 60 74 44; www.cevenol-hotel.fr in French; 115 rue Rajol; d/tr €62/72; 🅇 🅈 🅉 🅊) Free parking. On the fringe of town, this modern concrete block with its uninspiring exterior is considerably more cosy within. Its 42 rooms –

two with disabled access – are spacious (ask for one facing south with views over the *causses*). Bathrooms, all renovated in 2008, have a particularly large shower area.

**Château de Creissels** (☎ 05 65 60 16 59; www.chateau-de-creissels.com; r new wing €63-72, old wing €79-97; 🚗 Apr-Oct) In the village of Creissels, 2km southwest of Millau on the D992 and well signed, this castle has a split personality. Rooms in the old 12th-century tower breathe history, while those in the larger, more modern 20th-century wings have balconies overlooking the large

garden. There's an excellent restaurant (p168) and a terrace offering great views.

## Eating

**Bar du Tour de Ville** (☎ 05 65 60 07 05; 7 blvd Richard; menus €13) Earthy, noisy and popular, this family-run bar-restaurant (ebullient Dad up front, hair blow-dried and paunch oozing over his belt, mum in the kitchen and two daughters serving) attracts all sorts: workers, families and intellectuals. They come to enjoy the two excellent-value and unchanging three-course *menus*, one

### THE CAUSSE DU LARZAC CIRCUIT

On this spectacular 140km, circular, Millau-based route, you'll learn all about sheep and Roquefort, France's favourite cheese, visit three classic Templar villages, trundle along a revived railway line, understand why water matters so much in the Cévennes and head home along the twisting Gorges de la Dourbie. Should you choose to linger en route, there's a warmly recommended *chambre d'hôte* towards the end of the day.

Leave Millau by the D992, which becomes the D999. Around 3km beyond St-Affrique (p170), at Pastoralia, the sheep, without whom there'd be no Roquefort, are queens, and children can pet their lambs.

Retrace the route as far as the turn-off for Roquefort (p169). Allow time to visit a cave where the cheeses are matured. In the village, fork left on the D23, signed Ste-Eulalie, to drop steeply to the Cernon Valley, then climb equally vertiginously to the Causse du Larzac. Look out for the typical *lavognes*, small, carefully constructed, stone-lined reservoirs that retain the rainwater. After 11km, make a brief stop in **Viala du Pas de Jaux** to visit its fortified, 30m-tall, commanding **Templar tower** (admission free; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct), built around 1430 to serve as a granary and place of refuge during the Hundred Years' War.

Here, you could pick up an audiopass (€16) that includes audioguide rental and entry to historical sights in Viala du Pas de Jaux, Ste-Eulalie de Cernon, La Cavalerie, and a couple of other Templar sites.

After 4km, turn left on the D561, detouring right at the railway viaduct 1.5km from Ste-Eulalie de Cernon (p170) to take a leisurely pedal on its Vélorail du Larzac, an even more relaxing trip on its *train touristique* or a heart-stopping bungee jump from the viaduct itself.

About 2km beyond Ste-Eulalie, take the D277 and, after rejoining the D999, reach **La Cavalerie**. Founded by the Templars, this fortified village was for centuries a resting point for travellers making their way over the lonely Larzac plain. Its still largely intact defensive walls were constructed by the Knights Hospitalliers.

Continue along the D999 for a further 15km (taking care not to stray left off the road and into a military firing range) as far as **Nant** with its two splendid bridges, an attractive early-18th-century covered market and the 12th-century abbey church of St Pierre, notable for its finely chiselled geometric capitols.

Here, you can either head for home or continue along one of the relatively broad, cultivated stretches of the Gorges de la Dourbie for 7km to St-Jean du Bruel (p170).

In Nant, if it's getting late, you might think seriously of overnighting at **Chambre d'Hôte Lou Damadou** (☎ 05 65 62 26 73, 06 76 01 60 23; www.gites-nant.com; rue Damade; r incl breakfast €55). Catherine and Thierry Schreiber have renovated with great taste three town houses along a quiet pedestrian street, plus another large room in their own home. Each room is a fetching blend of contemporary touches and comfort that supplement the original floor tiles and preserved wooden beams. Each house has self-catering facilities.

Otherwise, follow the road to Millau (32km from Nant) through the steep and spectacular **Gorges de la Dourbie** for a fittingly dramatic conclusion to the day.

with *moules farcies à la Sêtoise* (stuffed mussels in a tomato sauce) and the other with *trenels*, little steaming packets of boiled tripe tied with string and a local speciality. Both *menus* include a quarter-litre of red wine, served in the jug.

**Auberge de la Borie Blanche** (☎ 05 65 60 85 88; rte de Cahors; menus €14-25, mains €9-15; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Thu & Sat, lunch Fri & Sun) In a vaulted former wine cellar about 3km outside Millau on the Cahors road, this traditional restaurant with a couple of wagon wheels and a yoke on the ceiling plays the rustic card (a pity, though, those skeins of fairy lights). The cuisine, by contrast, has superb taste. For starters, try the *foie frais de canard poêlé aux pommes*, cubes of apple and duck liver, crispy on the outside and melting in the mouth once you bite in. Discerning folk from Millau make their way out here in numbers, so be sure to reserve, even midweek. In summer there's a delightful outdoor terrace.

**Le Square** (☎ 05 65 61 26 00; 10 rue St-Martin; menus €18-27, mains €15-20; ☺ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, lunch Tue May-mid-Mar) It's essential to book at this intimate, highly regarded restaurant with its excellent-value four-course *menus* and pleasant contemporary decor.

**Capion** (☎ 05 65 60 00 91; 3 rue J-F Alméras; lunch menu €13.50, other menus €19-38, mains €14-18; ☺ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, lunch Tue, closed 1-21 Jul) Peer into the kitchen to see the young team at work as you walk past on the way to the freshly decorated main dining room. Portions are tasty and plentiful – none more so than the trolley of tempting homemade desserts and the rich cheese platter (where, of course, Roquefort stars).

**La Mangeoire** (☎ 05 65 60 13 16; 8 blvd de la Capelle; menus €19.50-46; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun, closed dinner Sun Nov-Apr) Millau's oldest restaurant, in the vaults beneath the former city walls, serves delightful, mainly regional dishes. Its pride is the open wood-fire barbecue. In winter, spits pierce wild game such as hare and partridge. Year-round, meat and fish (€13 to €18) are sizzled to perfection.

**La Marmite du Pêcheur** (☎ 05 65 61 20 44; 14-16 blvd de la Capelle; lunch menu €14.50, other menus €19.50-55, mains around €20; ☺ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon Jul-Sep, Thu-Mon Oct-Jun) A few doors from La Mangeoire and run by an engaging young couple, La Marmite is also attractively vaulted and has hearty regional *menus* within much the same price range. Try the chef's own creation, *oeufs à la cocotte au Roquefort*, three eggs baked

in the oven with Roquefort cheese, followed by the *marmite du pêcheur à ma façon*, of salmon, perch and red mullet, prawns and scallops gratiné.

Two good hotel restaurants:

**Hôtel des Causses restaurant** (☎ 05 65 60 03 19; www.hotel-des-causses.com; 56 av Jean Jaurès; menus €16-26; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Thu, lunch Fri) Has a pair of enticing regional *menus* and several hearty dishes from the Lyon area, the chef-owner's home town.

**Château de Creissels restaurant** (☎ 05 65 60 16 59; www.chateau-de-creissels.com; menus €24-50, mains €16-20) For classic French cuisine. The *menu du marché* changes daily. Lamb lovers will enjoy the *menu autour de l'agneau des Grands Causses* (€32) with two meat courses of tender local lamb, ewes'-milk cheese and panacotta, also made from ewes' milk.

## SELF-CATERING

There are markets each Wednesday and Friday morning in place du Maréchal Foch, place Emma Calvé and the covered market at place des Halles.

## Shopping

**L'Atelier du Gantier** (21 rue Droite) A wonderful little shop that sells gloves and only gloves of the softest leather. Hit the right moment and you can see staff sewing away at a trio of vintage Singer machines.

**Les Vitrines du Terroir** (17 blvd de l'Ayrolle) and **Le Buron** (18 rue Droite) are delightfully rich and pungent *fromageries* selling local specialties including Roquefort and Pérail du Larzac cheeses.

## Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (www.garieroutieredemillau.com in French) is beside the train station; its **information office** (☎ 05 65 59 89 33) is inside. There are two buses daily to Albi (€17, 2¾ hours), one of which continues to Toulouse (€26, four hours), and up to eight daily services to/from Montpellier (€17.70, 1¾ hours) and Rodez (€12.50, 1½ hours).

Train connections from Millau include Béziers (€16.80, 1¾ hours, two to three daily), plus Montpellier (€24.30, 1¾ hours, one daily) and Rodez (€11.30, 1½ hours, five daily).

## Getting Around

**Cycles Arturi** (☎ 05 65 60 28 23; 2 rue du Barry; ☺ Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, Tue-Sat Sep-Jun) rents city bikes for €9/12 per half-/full day and mountain bikes for €11/15.

## VINCENT COMBES

Vincent Combes directs Le Vieux Berger, smallest of the seven remaining Roquefort cheesemakers. Young, lithe and a keen mountain biker, he's the third member of his family to run this small concern, established by his grandfather in 1923.

It's this family-scale nature of the enterprise that he stresses when asked what differentiates his concern from the giants, such as Le Papillon and La Société. Mind you, all is relative; currently enjoying around 0.6% of the global market, Le Vieux Berger turns out an impressive 165 tonnes or so of Roquefort each year.

Vincent describes himself as an *artisan fromager*, a craftsman among cheesemakers. Sixteen suppliers provide the ewes' milk for his dairy, near the town of Rodez. 'We know each of our farmers and their milk comes to us, fresh and directly,' he says with pride. There's no instant production here. The curds and whey are heated gently and cooled correspondingly slowly. 'We're a small team, only nine of us, and every stage of the cheesemaking is undertaken by hand – the pouring into moulds, salting with special coarse salt and the turning of the cheeses – five times a day, one by one, during the early maturing.

'Don't think that the process is over, once my cheeses leave us', he stresses. 'If you and I buy identical bottles of wine, same vintage, same year, and each keep them in our cellars, the taste will be subtly different once we uncork them.' So, if you're lucky enough to come across Le Vieux Berger in some specialist cheese shop or delicatessen, treat it with the tender loving care it merits.

You'll find Le Vieux Berger for sale in Roquefort. Vincent talks with enthusiasm of the small exhibition centre and sales outlet on av du Combalou that, at the time of writing, was due to open in early 2009. Because of the extra care that goes into the production, you'll pay more for your cheese, but it will be money well spent. But don't count on picking up some for the folks back home; the temptation to nibble your way through your pack will almost certainly be far too great...

## ROQUEFORT

pop 700

There's only one reason to visit Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, which is little more than a steep single street and rather a dour sort of place. But gosh, it's a powerful one. In the heart of Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses and 25km southwest of Millau, Roquefort turns ewes' milk into France's most famous cheese. Its steep, narrow streets lead to the cool natural caves, where seven producers ripen 22,000 tonnes of Roquefort cheese every year.

Two of those producers offer tours of their caves, while a third has a smaller self-guided visit to a show cave.

**La Société** (☎ 05 65 58 54 38; www.roquefort-societe.com) has one-hour **guided tours** (adult/under 16yr €3/free; 📅 9.30am-6.30pm mid-Jul & Aug, core hr 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm rest of yr) that include a fairly feeble sound-and-light show and a sampling of the three varieties the company makes. Established in 1842, it's the largest Roquefort producer, churning out 70% of the world's supply, over 30% of which is exported.

Tours of the equally pungent caves of **Le Papillon** (☎ 05 65 58 50 08; www.roquefort-papillon.com

in French; 8 rue de la Fontaine; 📅 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm or 5.30pm Sep-Jun) are free and last 45 minutes to one hour, including a 15-minute film. Its shop and showroom, the starting point, are on the main road beside the village church.

For a more rapid appreciation of the Roquefort-making process, call by the showroom and sales outlet of **Gabriel Coulet** (☎ 05 65 59 90 21; www.gabriel-coulet.fr; admission free; 📅 9.30am-6pm or 7pm Jun-Aug, 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Sep-May). Here, you can descend into the vaulted, penicillin-streaked *caves* below the shop, wander at your own pace and take in the 10-minute video.

Between mid-June and mid-September, you can also visit some of the farms in the Roquefort catchment area that produce ewes' milk. For details, contact the **Tourist Office** (☎ 05 65 58 56 00; www.roquefort.com; 📅 9am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, to 6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar).

Roquefort's a parking nightmare. There's limited space beside the entrance to La Société's reception point. Better for all to leave your vehicle beside the tourist office at the main, western entry to the village and walk in.

## THE KING OF CHEESES

The mouldy blue-green veins that run through Roquefort are, in fact, the spores of microscopic mushrooms, cultivated on leavened bread.

The cheeses are ripened in natural caves, enlarged and gouged from the mountainside. Here, where the humidity's near maximum and the temperature a constant 10°C, draughts of air flow through the *fleurines*, natural clefts and chimneys, encouraging the blue *Penicillium roqueforti* to eat its way through the white cheese curds.

Made exclusively from ewes' milk (the prized local Lacaune ewe expresses around 200L of milk during her lactation period), Roquefort is one of France's priciest and most noble cheeses. In 1407 Charles VI granted exclusive Roquefort cheesemaking rights to the villagers, while in the 17th century the Sovereign Court of the Parliament of Toulouse imposed severe penalties on fraudulent cheesemakers trading under the Roquefort name.

## ST-AFFRIQUE

At **Pastoralia** (☎ 05 65 98 10 23; www.pastoralia.com in French; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €4.50/3.20/free, 2 adults & 2 children €15; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm daily Jun, Mon-Fri Sep & Oct), 3km west of St-Affrique, you're in a truly rural milieu – even down to the giant dung heap – surrounded by the experimental farm of the adjacent agricultural training school. In a former stable, Pastoralia tells the story of the 800,000 ewes who graze the high plateaus, producing nearly 200 million litres of milk annually, over half of which is turned into Roquefort and other regional cheeses. There are interactive panels with English translation, and a 10-minute film, and in summer you can feed the sheep.

**Hôtel le Moderne** (☎ 05 65 49 20 44; www.lemoderne.com; s €40-49, d €50-78; ☎ mid-Jan–mid-Dec; ☒) Free wi-fi. The 27 rooms, some with separate toilet and bathroom, are impeccable at this friendly hotel near St-Affrique's former train station. The groaning cheese trolley at its impressive restaurant (two-/three-course lunch *menu* €15/18.50, other *menus* €22 to €56, mains €15 to €21) bears no less than 13 kinds of Roquefort cheese, a couple of them organic.

## STE-EULALIE DE CERNON

A sleepy little spot outside summer, Ste-Eulalie was in its time the site of the **Commanderie** (admission €2.50, with audioguide €4) of the Knights Templar and later, the Knights Hospitalier. Added to and modified over the centuries, it served as each order's fortified regional headquarters. Opening hours are as for the **tourist information point** (☎ 05 65 62 79 98; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct) at its entrance.

**Vélorail du Larzac** (☎ 05 65 58 72 10, 06 81 66 63 49; www.veloraildularzac.com in French; adult €14; ☎ departures

every 2hr 8am-8pm Easter-Oct) is based at the former village station, 1.5km south of Ste-Eulalie. You can trundle along a restored railway line (7km out and back) on a pedalled contraption (children under 12 ride for free if accompanied by two paying adults). Alternatively, hop aboard one of the open-topped wooden carriages of the **train touristique** (adult/5-14yr/under 5yr €14/5/free; ☎ departures every 2hr 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 2-3 times daily May, Jun, Sep & Oct) for a 16km round-trip. Ring to reserve and bring cash; since there's no mains electricity they can't process credit cards. Allow two hours whichever mode you choose. Canny visitors pay a supplementary €2 to go by *vélorail* on the outward, downhill leg and return by train.

For a real adrenalin rush, jump off the viaduct where the railway line crosses the D561. In July and August from 4pm each Wednesday and from 2pm each Saturday, **Antipodes** (☎ 05 65 60 72 03; www.antipodes-millau.com in French) will, for €35, harness you for a bungee jump and give you a push.

## ST-JEAN DU BRUEL

In addition to a fine bridge spanning the River Dourbie, the village's main attraction is **Noria** (☎ 05 65 62 20 32; www.noria-espacedeleau.com; rue du Moulin; adult/child 5-12yr/student/child under 5yr €7/4/5/free, 2 adults & 2 children €20; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Jun & Sep-Oct). Noria, meaning water-wheel, is a revived mill, originally constructed in the 13th century. Today, a wooden water mill turns and, for six months of the year, when the Dourbie's flow is strong enough, turbines produce enough electricity to power a small village.

But Noria's remit is much wider, inviting you through games (there are even water-tasting sessions), machines, models and interactive

panels to reflect upon water in the widest sense, its origins and uses and the threats to its future availability.

## MICROPOLIS

'La Cité des Insectes' (Insect City), **Micropolis** (☎ 05 65 58 50 50; [www.micropolis.biz](http://www.micropolis.biz); adult/5-14yr/under 5yr €11.10/7.45/free; 🕒 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, to 4pm or 5pm daily Apr-Jun, Tue-Sun Sep-mid-Nov, Wed-Sun mid-Feb-Mar) is outside the village of St-Léons, off the D911 19km northwest of Millau.

Ever felt small? This mind-boggling high-tech experience happens in a building where grass grows 6m high. The swarms of facts

about insect life, all compellingly presented, seem equally tall but all are true. Broadening its focus, Micropolis' newest gallery illustrates the theme of biodiversity and human impact from tropical forest to torrid desert and in temperate climates nearer home. Captions are in French and English. Allow a good 1½ hours, perhaps rounding off with a meal at the pleasant, reasonably priced **restaurant** (mains €11.50-13.50; 🕒 noon-4.30 daily Jul & Aug, noon-3pm daily Apr-Jun, Tue-Sun Sep-mid-Nov, Wed-Sun mid-Feb-Mar) – try its *planche aux gourmands* (€12.60), a tray with main course, dessert and four side dishes of local specialities.

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