History

PREHISTORIC MAN

The region was inhabited around one million years ago. Around 450,000 BC prehistoric man settled in Tautavel near Perpignan: archaeologists discovered *l'homme de Tautavel* (Tautavel man) in 1971 in the Arago Cave here, the homo erectus human skull with large eye sockets and little chin being among Europe's oldest human remains. Watching archaeologists continue their excavations is a highlight of Tautavel's Musée de le Préhistoire (p235).

Neanderthal hunters occupied the Mediterranean coast during the Middle Palaeolithic period (about 90,000–40,000 BC). Languedoc's leading prehistory museum, the Parc de la Préhistoire (p203) near Foix, provides an engaging look at Palaeolithic life. Visit it as the perfect introduction to Grotte de Niaux (p202), where wall paintings of deer, fish and other animals are of a quality comparable to those of Lascaux in the Dordogne. The Grotte de Bédeilhac and Grotte de la Vache (p203) are other fine examples of prehistoric cave art here.

Prehistoric man used sheer muscle power to heave Europe's second-largest concentration of menhirs into place at La Cham des Bondons (p149), bettered only by those at Carnac in Brittany.

During this era, around 4000 years ago, warmer weather ushered in farming and stock rearing. Cereals, peas, beans and lentils were grown, humans fished with harpoons and villages were settled. Decorated pottery, woven fabrics and polished stone tools became commonplace household items.

View dramatic images of the dozens of dolmen and menhirs strewn around Languedoc and learn more about these mighty rocks at http://dolmen.wordpress.com and http://dolmen2.free.fr.

GREEKS & ROMANS

Greeks from Phocaea in Asia Minor colonised Agathé Tyché (Agde) around 560 BC and established more trading posts along the coast. They brought olives, grapevines and the human urge to build permanent structures and defend belongings – thus the mushrooming of oppida (hilltop settlements) at Ucetia (Uzès), Carsac (Carcassonne) and Montlaurès (4km northwest of Narbonne). The Oppidum d'Ensérune (p132), strung on a hill in central Languedoc, was inhabited continuously until the 1st century AD, when its people moved to the plains.

During the Second Punic War (218–202 BC) between the Romans and Carthage (a kingdom of traders based in present-day Tunisia), the Pyrenees proved a mighty enemy. Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed the Mediterranean Sea and headed with 100,000 men and 37 elephants across the Pyrenees on foot, along the entire Languedoc coast and north into the Alps en route to Rome. On sighting the snowcapped mountains 11,000 soldiers fled, depleting Hannibal's army notably in one fell swoop.

Only one of Hannibal's elephants survived; the rest are said to have been eaten by the Carthaginians.

TIMELINE

450,000 BC

Prehistoric man settles in Tautavel near Perpignan, leading to archaeologists' 1971 discovery of Tautavel man.

14,000–7500 BC

Man gets artsy on cave walls, sketching animals in charcoal then painting on top with manganese.

560 BC

Greeks colonise Agde and establish other coastal trading posts. They bring olives and vines with them.

Hannibal's path through Languedoc anticipated the footsteps of the conquering Romans who, with the entire region under their belt by 122 BC, laid the Via Domitia (p118). The 500km road connected Rome with its possessions in Spain; view a chunk of it in Narbo Martius (Narbonne), Languedoc's most significant Roman city and port, settled in 118 BC. Narbonne later became the capital of Provincia Gallia Narbonensis and flourished following Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul (58–51 BC) and its integration into the Roman Empire: delve into Roman treasures in the Musée Archéologique, gawp at oversized Roman masonry in its Musée Lapidaire and relive the buzz of Gallo-Roman shops and storerooms at Horreum (p118). Not far from Narbonne, Romans turned pots and cultivated vines in Sallèles d'Aude (p123).

The vast Roman province of Provincia Gallia Narbonensis, originally called Provincia Gallia Transalpina, embraced all of southern France from the Alps to the Mediterranean Sea and as far west as the Pyrenees.

Baeterrae (Béziers), another place where Romans made wine, was a key military garrison and Via Domitia staging post. La Graufesenque in Haut-Languedoc was the largest pottery workshop in the western Roman Empire. But it was in Nemausus (Nîmes) that Roman emperor Augustus really showed off with vast public buildings: the Maison Carrée; an amphitheatre where patricians watched gladiators fight; and the Pont du Gard (p86) aqueduct, part of a 50km system of canals built around 19 BC to shepherd water from Uzès to Nîmes.

In AD 284 Provincia Gallia Narbonensis was split into two provinces: the land on the Rhône's right bank (Languedoc-Roussillon) remained Narbonensis, and that on the left bank became Provincia Viennoise (Provence). Christianity also arrived at this time.

MEDIEVAL POWER GAMES

View Languedoc from a different perspective with Gustave Debris' 26 philosophical essays in *Luminous Debris,* each inspired by different archaeological prehistoric and Gallo-Roman objects uncovered in the region.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in AD 476, trouble arrived in the shape of invasions by pesky tribes greedy to claim Languedoc as their own. First the aptly named Germanic Vandals powered in, followed by the Visigoths (West Goths, from the Danube delta region in Transylvania), who made Tolosa (Toulouse) capital of their kingdom of Septimanie – presumably named after the seven notable Languedoc cities it had in its fold – from 419 until 507.

In the 8th century the Saracens (Muslim invaders such as Turks, Moors and Arabs) sacked and seized Narbonne and Carcassonne. Charles Martel (688–781) stopped Muslim attempts to conquer France in their tracks at the

OCCITANIA

The whole of southern France as far north as Limousin, Auvergne and the southern French Alps was part of ancient Occitania, known by the Romans as Aquitania. A cultural rather than political entity, the common language unifying medieval Occitania was Occitan or *langue d'oc,* first penned in the 9th century and the literary language of the 12th- and 13th-century troubadours (p38).

118 BC

Narbonne becomes capital of the Roman province, Provincia Gallia Narbonensis.

AD 284

Provincia Gallia Narbonesis is split onto two provinces: Narbonensis (present-day Languedoc-Roussillon) and Provincia Viennoise (Provence).

419–507

The Visigoths make Toulouse the capital of their kingdom of Septimanie.

I SPY…

the last three Cathars peering wistfully out at their persecuted country from the northern side of the A61 motorway, east of the Lagrasse and Lézignan-Corbières exit 25. The dramatic trio of 10m-tall figures were sculpted in cement by local Lauraugais sculptor Jacques Tissinier (b 1936) in 1980 and prompted French folk singer Francis Cabrel (b 1953) – who grew up in Toulouse – to break out in song three years later with 'Les Chevaliers Cathares' (1983; The Cathar Knights); listen to the tearful ode on YouTube.

Battle of Poitiers in 732. But it was not until his son and the first Carolingian king, Pepin the Short (r 751–68), kicked the Saracens out of Narbonne in 759 and Toulouse in 767 that the Muslim warriors were bid a final goodbye.

The entire Languedoc region now fell under the Germanic Franks. Charles Martel's grandson, Charlemagne (742–814), extended the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom, invading the Iberian Peninsula in 778 and creating the Spanish Marches (Marca Hispanica) – including present-day Roussillon and stretching as far south as Barcelona – in 795 as a buffer zone between two kingdoms. Upon his death regional unity disintegrated as counts in Toulouse, Roussillon and Barcelona assumed increasing power to the point that the region became a jigsaw puzzle of Frankish fiefdoms or counties headed by hereditary counts.

Lose yourself in medieval Languedoc with Fredric Chevette's *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours,* a compelling biography of Ermengard, extraordinary viscountess of Narbonne between 1132 and 1194.

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

It was one murder of one man that sparked the barbaric bloodbath: on 14 January 1208 papal legate Pierre de Castelnau met Count of Toulouse Raymond VI (1156–1222) in St-Gilles, La Petite Camargue (p85), to discuss heresy in Toulouse county. But the men couldn't agree, and on his way home the papal legate was assassinated, providing Pope Innocent III with the perfect excuse to call for a crusade against the Cathars and their dualist form of Christianity (p197). Arnaud-Amaury, abbot at Cîteaux Abbey near Dijon in northern France, was ordered to gather men and arms, and on 24 June 1209 the *ost* (crusader army) marched south along the Rhône Valley to Languedoc.

On 21 July it arrived in Béziers, knocked on its door and – when the Cathars weren't handed over – burnt down the town and massacred its population of 20,000 inhabitants. In early August the *ost* reached Carcassonne, besieged the city and forced it to surrender. Crusading lord Simon de Montfort was given the fiefdom and henceforth led the crusade. Between 1209 and 1211 Cathar strongholds fell like packs of cards, persecution being notably gruesome in Bram, 25km west of Carcassonne, where Montfort gouged out the eyes and cut off the ears, noses and upper lips of 100 prisoners and then had them led by a prisoner with one remaining eye to the undefeated

Reams of titles have been inspired by the Cathars, including Jean Markale's highly recommended *Montsegur and the Mystery of the Cathars*.

795

Charlemagne extends the boundaries of his Frankish kingdom, creating the Spanish Marches (Marca Hispanica), which stretches as far south as Barcelona.

1208

Pope Innocent III calls for a crusade against the Cathar heresy; persecutions continue until 1271, when Languedoc becomes part of the kingdom of France.

1278–1344

Perpignan serves as capital of the kingdom of Mallorca.

Châteaux de Lastours (p187) as a warning. Ironically, such barbarity only inspired the latter to resist all the more and it was another year before they too got the full-monty Cathar treatment.

Catharism was not unique to Languedoc: heretical movements had been knocking around Western Europe since the start of the 11th century, with heretics calling themselves *katharos* ('pure ones') being burnt on pyres in Cologne in 1143 and Liège in 1144. But it was in this volatile southern region powered by nobles that the social fabric best matched Cathar fundamentals – a fertile breeding ground, one might say.

Chasing the Heretics: A Modern Journey through the Medieval Languedoc by Rion Klawinski reads part travelogue, part history book as the author journeys around Cathar country.

The entire bloody crusade was not only about religion: it was an opportunity for lords from northern France like Simon de Montfort to extend their kingdoms in the south – which is precisely what happened in November 1215. After his forces (alongside those of the king of France) were defeated by Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Muret (1213), Raymond VI fled to England, and in his absence the Council of Latran stripped him of his land and title and made Montfort count of Toulouse instead – despite the city of Toulouse remaining unconquered. In 1217 Raymond VI returned to France, entered Toulouse and 10 months of siege later emerged the victor when his troops killed Montfort outside the city walls on 25 June 1218.

Cathar persecution continued until 1271, when Languedoc became part of the kingdom of France; the last Cathar *parfait* was burnt at the stake in 1321. King of France Louis VIII (r 1223–26) called a royal crusade in 1226, and in 1232 Pope Gregory IX created the Inquisition to purge the region of remaining heretics: heretics not prepared to be imprisoned in the Inquisition prison and wear a yellow cross as penance went up in flames on the pyre. From 1252 Pope Innocent IV allowed inquisitors to use torture in their trials.

AND IN THE HOUSE OF ARAGON

While religious persecution stained *le pays Cathare* (Cathar country) red, Roussillon was busy carving out its Catalan identity. With Charlemagne gone, in the 9th century it had been the counts of Roussillon who had picked up the power pieces in eastern Roussillon. At the same time, Cerdagne counts

THE PATH TO SPAIN

There were four in all, passing abbeys, churches, monasteries and fountains en route, for pilgrims to say a prayer and quench their thirst on the long journey southwest.

It is as much keen walkers as religious pilgrims these days that make the journey on foot, by bicycle or on horseback to Santiago de Compostela in Spain where, in AD 830, the tomb of James the apostle was found. And so began the pilgrimage along the Chemins de St Jacques (see p63). The Chemin d'Arles originates in St-Gilles (p85), 20km south of Nîmes, and meanders west into Languedoc through St-Guilhem-le-Désert (p110) and Toulouse (p239).

mid-14th century

Europe's first Black Death pandemic cripples the region; conservative estimates state that up to 40% of the population died.

1379

Peasants rebel in Montpellier, Béziers, Lodève and Alès against hearth taxes imposed to fund the Hundred Years' War.

1659

The Treaty of the Pyrenees defines the border between Spain and France once and for all, ceding Roussillon (the northern section of Catalonia) to the French.

THE LAND OF COCKAIGNE

Such wealth did merchants in Toulouse, Albi and Carcassonne garner from the woad trade in the 14th to 16th centuries that the triangle formed by the three cities quickly became known as *le pays de cocagne* (the land of cockaigne) – a mythical, marvellous, fabulously rich land of plenty.

Known as pastel or woad, the plant was cultivated for its blue pigment and was the only known alternative to the rare and pricey indigo. Its trade remained buoyant until the 17th century, when Portugal started importing indigo from China.

established themselves in the west and the counts of Barcelona on the Iberian Peninsula to the south.

From 987, with the coronation of Hugh Capet, these counts became vassals of the king of France. But those of Barcelona refused to recognise the French king and his new Capetian dynasty and in 1137, with the wedding of Ramon Berenguer IV to Petronila of Aragon, the counts of Barcelona married the House of Aragon. Such was the force of this dynastic union that the count of Roussillon had no choice but to swear allegiance to Aragon, and when the last count, Girard II, died heirless in 1172 he bequeathed the county of Roussillon to the Aragon crown.

James I of Aragon (1208–76) was born in Montpellier and was an avid patron of the city's university, which started to flourish at this time. Following his father's failed attempts to arrange a marriage between him and Simon de Montfort's daughter during the crusade against the Cathars (p27), the playboy king married three times and fathered 13 legitimate children and three out of wedlock with three different lovers. Following the premature death of his first son and heir Alonso (1229–60), he split his vast kingdom between his next two sons, creating the Kingdom of Mallorca in 1262 – a Mediterranean force that stretched northwards as far as Montpellier and included the Balearic Islands – for his third son, James II (1243–1311); the bulk of his lands including Aragon was bequeathed to his second son, Peter III (1240–85).

As capital of the kingdom of Mallorca from 1278 to 1344, the city of Perpignan blossomed, quickly becoming known for its skilled goldsmiths and other craftsmen. But Peter IV of Aragon invaded in 1344, deposing James III and crowning himself king of Mallorca, and Roussillon remained under alien Aragonese rule for much of the late Middle Ages. Montpellier meanwhile was sold to the French crown in 1349 for the sum of 120,000 *écus d'or* (gold coins).

In 1640 Catalans on both sides of the Pyrenees revolted against the Castilian kings in distant Madrid, who had engulfed Aragon. Perpignan endured a two-year siege, only relieved with the support of the French to the north. Peace came in 1659 with the Treaty of the Pyrenees, defining the border between Spain and France once and for all and ceding Roussillon (the

1667–81

The Canal Royal entre des Deux Mers (Royal Canal Between Two Sea) is built from Toulouse to Le Bassin de Thau and Mediterranean; the Revolution renames it the Canal du Midi.

1702–04

Protestants in the Cévennes are hounded out and 450 villages razed by royal troops during the Camisard War; hundreds are deported.

1790

Languedoc is divided into several administrative *départements* and Roussillon becomes the Pyrénées-Orientales.

northern section of Catalonia) and 33 villages in the Cerdagne to the French. In its wake the treaty created a Spanish island in France (p234).

TROUBLE & STRIFE

French and English kings fought like cat and dog during the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), which devastated much of the country, including Languedoc. The Black Prince – aka Edward, Prince of Wales – launched a particularly nasty attack on the Aude Valley in 1355, destroying dozens of villages and burning towns such as Castelnaudary to the ground. Between

A CANAL CALLED MIDI

It remains the engineering miracle of the 17th century and a mythical journey for anyone travelling along its soft green waters.

Plenty of people – the Romans, Charlemagne, Francis I and Henry IV included – had come up with the idea of linking the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. But it was only a tax collector from Béziers called Pierre-Paul Riquet (1604–80) who had the creative vision and nous to do it: water could be channelled from mountain springs in La Montagne Noire to Narouze Sill (190m), the highest point of the canal, from where it would flow onwards.

How the ambitious project would be financed was a different matter, but fortunately Riquet was a man of means happy to invest a fortune in his dream waterway in return for its lordship: as lord of the canal he would have the exclusive right to build on its banks, levy tolls and so on.

Digging started in 1667. Some 12,000 men in all toiled on the canal that was dug by hand and stretched 241km east from Toulouse into the salty lagoon of Le Bassin de Thau and finally the Mediterranean. The 19m-wide channel of water ducked and dived through 63 locks, 10 double locks, four triple locks and one quadruple one. It staggered gracefully down an eightfold 'staircase of water' at Béziers (p136); in Paraza, 13km east of Homps (p189), it sensationally zipped 135m along the top of a stone bridge; and near the pretty port of Colombiers it stunned the world by darting through a tunnel. Along its gentle banks 34,000 plane trees were planted.

Tragically, with just 4km left to dig, Riquet died physically and financially spent. His sons continued the masterpiece, now a Unesco World Heritage site, and seven months later, in May 1681, a celebratory fleet of 24 boats sailed from Castelnaudary to Béziers in four days. The Canal Royal entre des Deux Mers (Royal Canal Between Two Seas) was now open for business, and the local economy revelled in the new flow of trade in wine, wheat, oils, spices, textiles and so on – all aboard horse-drawn canal barges, 20m long, that would overnight at canalside inns.

Postal boats (again horse-powered), so much more modern and comfortable than stage coaches, became the new mode of passenger transport between Toulouse and Sète. Boats got faster – the 241km journey was reduced to 36 hours by 1845 – and tolls were scrapped in 1898 when the canal became state owned. Riquet's romantic dream of sailing from sea to sea was realised in 1856, when the Canal de la Garonne flowing westbound from Toulouse into the Atlantic became navigable.

It was all oh so modern. Yet by 1857, as the first trains sped from Toulouse to Sète, the canal suddenly seemed snail-slow and out of date. Trade and traffic rapidly declined.

1849

Levi Strauss, Bavarian-Jewish immigrant to the USA, starts importing *serge de Nîmes* from guess where? The tough, blue, hardwearing fabric quickly becomes known as denim.

1850s

Phylloxera decimates vineyards and a silkworm epidemic is the first nail in the coffin for the Cévennes silk industry.

1907

Hundreds of thousands of wine-growers in Narbonne protest at cheap foreign imports and rising prices; six are shot dead when the army breaks up the rioters.

1347 and 1351 Europe's first Black Death pandemic crippled the region. and persisted in returning with periodic attacks well into the 15th century.

War had its price and the upping by 400% of Languedoc's annual hearth tax by Charles V (1338–80) during the 1360s in order to raise funds for his military activities was the final nail in the coffin. By 1379 peasants in Montpellier, Béziers, Lodève and Alès could bear it no more and violent peasant rebellions erupted, perhaps persuading Charles V as he lay on his deathbed a year later to abolish the hated taxes that had accounted for a third of his royal revenues.

An early starlet of the Reformation that swept Europe in the 1530s and the consequent Wars of Religion (1562–98) was the Protestant stronghold of Nîmes, where, unusually, it was not Protestants who emerged the victims: on 30 September 1567 Protestant troops rounded up between 24 and 90 Catholic clergy, took them to the bishop palace courtyard, stabbed or shot them and left their corpses to rot in the bottom of the courtyard well. The massacre was dubbed La Michelade after the Michelmas fair celebrated two days later. The Edict of Nantes in 1598 guaranteed the Huguenots many civil and political rights, notably freedom of conscience, and brought an uneasy peace to the region – until its revocation by Louis XIV in 1685, when full-scale persecution of Protestants ensued. Visit Aigues-Mortes's Tour de Constance (p82) to see where Huguenots were killed or imprisoned.

For a blow-by-blow account of every last massacre, killing and slit throat during the Camisard revolt, read www.camisards.net.

There were few Protestants left in France by the start of the 18th century, most having converted or emigrated, with the exception of those who clung to their faith in *le désert* – the wild, sparsely populated Cévennes in Haut-Languedoc. Between 1702 and 1704 during the Camisard revolt (see the boxed text p94) several thousand Protestant Camisards – so named after the Occitan word *'camisade'* meaning 'night attack' or '*camise'*, referring to the linen shirts they wore – fought royal troops in vicious guerrilla warfare. Visit the Musée du Désert (p95) near St-Jean du Gard to learn the tragic story. Between 1703 and 1712 hundreds were deported to Catholic Perpignan (p213).

Religious freedom returned to France in 1787. The century closed with the French Revolution in 1789: at a patriotic gathering in Marseille a medical graduate and volunteer from Montpellier called François Miruer burst into song with 'Chant de Guerre de l'Armée du Rhin' (War Song of the Rhine Army), a merry tune composed in Strasbourg several months earlier for the war against Prussia. Subsequently sung by volunteers in Paris, the rallying cry of the Revolution and France's stirring national anthem, 'La Marseillaise', was born.

During the famine of winter 1709 the chestnut tree provided sufficient food for the inhabitants of the Cévennes.

OH SO MODERN

Languedoc lost its parliament in Toulouse in 1790 and gained several administrative *départements* (p258); Roussillon became the Pyrénées-Orientales *département*. With the Allied restoration of the House of Bourbon to the French throne at the Congress of Vienna (1814–15), Catholicism became the state religion and while religious freedom was guaranteed it did spark off the

1920s

Antoine de St-Exupéry, author of *Le Petit Prince* (The Little Prince), and other pilots pioneer mail flights to northwest Africa and South America, staying in Toulouse or Perpignan between sorties.

1962

Montpellier's population increases by 10% within days as thousands of Algerians seek refuge from their war-torn country.

1969

The world's first supersonic form of commercial transport, the Concorde 001, leaves the Toulouse factory where it has been built and takes off into the sky.

White Terror in 1815, which once more saw violent attacks on Protestants in Nîmes and the Cévennes. Throwbacks to the old days of religious persecution aside, the region was suddenly seeming modern: Alès became an important coal-mining town; thermal spas popped up in the Pyrenees as people realised the natural benefits of their mountain springs; the railway arrived in the Mediterranean port of Sète in 1839; and a decade and a half later Toulouse's Gare Matabiau was inaugurated with much pomp and ceremony.

Keep abreast of political, economic and social affairs in the region with the website of the Conseil Régional Languedoc-Roussillon, www.cr-languedocroussillon.fr (in French).

Yet in the harsh Languedoc outback of the Cévennes a sudden silkworm epidemic hit the region's treasure trove of silkworm farms in 1850, pretty much destroying overnight a successful industry since the mid-17th century. Learn about the fascinating industry – reason enough for Louis Pasteur to visit Alès in 1865 (to study the silkworm illness) – at the Musée de la Soie in St-Hippolyte du Fort; see p95 and the boxed text p96.

Two decades on not only were the Cevennes' chestnut groves attacked by ink illness but also the entire Languedoc vineyard, planted by the Greeks and the Romans, was plagued by phylloxera, a microscopic bug that munched through practically every vine root in France. The Hérault alone lost 173,000 out of 220,000 hectares within a decade. By the turn of the century vines, albeit substantially lower quality ones, had been enthusiastically replanted to carpet a similar area – precisely part of the troubles that prompted winegrowers region-wide to revolt en masse and with violence in 1907: see p121.

Spanish refugees flooded into Roussillon during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), many ending up in the internment camp at Rivesaltes (p220). With the onset of WWII, deeper depression set in and on 3 September 1939 France and Britain declared war on Germany. Southern France initially fell into the 'free' Vichy France zone, but in November 1942 Nazi Germany invaded Vichy France. The Resistance movement was particularly strong in Languedoc, Roussillon and neighbouring Provence, where it was called the *maquis* after the local Mediterranean scrub in which it hid.

After WWII, Toulouse became the nucleus of the country's aerospace industry and the epicentre of the Europe-wide EADS aircraft manufacturing consortium. In 1962 the French colony of Algeria negotiated its independence with President Charles de Gaulle and *pieds noirs* (literally 'black feet', as Algerian-born French people are known in France) arrived en masse in urban centres like Montpellier, Narbonne and Perpignan. Those with no shelter ended up in the camp at Rivesaltes (p220).

Economic discontent persisted throughout the 1970s and '80s in the wine industry as cheaper foreign imports, rising production costs and the steady drop in French wine consumption rattled impassioned *vignerons*. Clashes between winegrowers and police in Narbonne in 1976 were attributed to the Comité Régional d'Action Viticole (CRAV; Regional Committee of Viticultural Action), a militant splinter group of around 1000 members that has made headlines with its violent acts of 'wine terrorism' (p16).

2004

A 21st-century icon is born: the first vehicle drives across the Pont de Millau, the world's tallest road bridge, with the tallest mast (343m) topping the Eiffel Tower in height.

2005

CRAV hijacks a lorry delivering Spanish wine to a Clermont d'Hérault shop: masked commandos shoot its fuel tank, light it and force the driver to empty his 25,000L tanker of red wine into the street.

2009

The TGV speeds into Perpignan, placing the Roussillon capital 55 minutes from Barcelona.

The Culture

REGIONAL IDENTITY

Affinity to the region gets a look in, but in the face of a turbulent history chequered with religious persecution, shifting boundaries and peoples, it plays second fiddle to the *terroir* (land) that sits on one's immediate doorstep: it is the hamlet, village or town where they were born and live to which locals exhibit the staunchest loyalty.

Nothing demonstrates this more fiercely than the gusto with which local festivals are embraced. From the dance-mad carnival in Limoux, which keeps the town sizzling for months rather than days, to the monstrous Babau – half dragon, half iguana, with terrifying fangs and a penchant for little children – that stalks Rivesaltes, it is celebrations particular to one community that express and cement local identity.

In more rural pastures such as Haut-Languedoc where family trees go back several generations and occupations remain firmly planted in the soil, identity is deeply rooted in agricultural tradition. Take the transhumance in the Cévennes, one of the rare corners of Europe where, come the balmier days of May or June, shepherds still accompany their flocks on foot from the isolated hamlets in the harsh landscape their forefathers called home to richer green pastures up high. In October or November, as the first cold bites, the gaily decorated flocks – bells, flags, flowers, rosettes and all – return to lower pastures.

Affluent outsiders buying up the region is prompting some traditional communities to question their (shifting) identities. Property prices spiralling out of the reach of local salaries, farmers being deprived of livelihoods and another language being heard in equal measure to French are symptoms of the steady influx of foreigners in recent years. In the harsh Parc National des Cévennes, where ekeing out any sort of living is tough, entire hamlets are being abandoned and repopulated by wealthy Parisians and foreigners.

While the region is hardly saturated compared with other parts of southern France, the presence of Brits, Germans, Belgians and Swiss in particular is keenly felt: foreigners own 10% of *résidences secondaries* (holiday homes) in Languedoc-Roussillon – around 28,000 properties – although the proportion is far greater on the coast. That said, 60% of British-owned holiday homes (the figure hovers around 5000) here are in rural or mountain areas.

Then, of course, there is the increasing number of foreigners opting to live here year-round, hence the English Mums and Toddlers group in Vernet-les-Bains, the digestive biscuits on the shelf in Intermarché near Uzès, the English-speaking estate agents…

LIFESTYLE

Take the crinkly-faced Sète fisherman shucking oysters for lunchtime punters who rises with the seagulls each morning to cast his nets; the Roussillon farmer handpicking apricots and peaches in orchards groaning with fruit; Christine tending almond trees planted by her father in the Massif des Albères; Florac shepherds; *vignerons* for life cultivating family vineyards since 1947; the well-dressed crowd that sips champagne at the chichi art-gallery opening on rue de l'Ancien Courrier in Montpellier; 15 angry truckers blocking the road to Spain; the chap in front of the computer at Perpignan's Centre Cultural Català banging away at the keyboard in Catalan…

Lifestyles are dazzlingly different. Yet certain traits do seem to be upheld everywhere in this southern part of France, which produces more wine than any other part of the country – a passion for good food, wine, dining

Dip into Languedoc in 1861 and learn about its silk and silkworm industry in Alexandra Baricco's startlingly simple, almost poetic and very contemporary novella, *Silk*.

Penned in 1925, *Two Vagabonds in Languedoc: Classic Portrait of a French Village* by English couple Jan and Cora Gordon is crammed with observations on village life, gleaned during the summer of 1923 spent painting and drawing there.

alfresco and dining late (around 9pm) after several long and lazy aperitifs (p47). In Montpellier – the only city with a hint of the cosmopolitan – life is faintly fast-paced, urbanites getting the kids to school for 8.20am (no school Wednesday) and gulping back *un café* on place de la Comédie before the office beckons at 9am. Lunch out is a religion, as is the post-work drink, which packs out café terraces and bars everywhere. Smokers – dwindling since the nationwide ban on smoking in public places – puff on pavements outside. On Friday evening the coast, with its action-packed beaches, water sports and cycling paths, or the hiking trails and thermal spas of the inland hills beckon. Quality of life in this fortunate city is good.

In rural areas the daily pace is driven by close-knit ancient communities and their overriding quest to survive. For small family enterprises in tiny towns and villages the health of the vines, chestnut grove or sheepdog assumes far more importance than national or world affairs. Everyone knows everyone to the point of being clannish, and assimilation for outsiders is hard. Farming is the self-sufficient way of life and one that is increasingly tough: the Musée des Vallées Cévenoles in St-Jean du Gard (p93) is an emotive evocation of Haut-Languedoc's unforgiving landscape, where farmers stoically utilise every resource they have to make ends meet. Take organic farmer Jean-Christophe Barthes, who subsidises the paltry income he gets from his goats, pigs and cows with a successful *chambre d'hôte* business (p147).

One-third of all organic French fruit comes from Languedoc-Roussillon.

Some 300,000 more people are expected to jump on the Languedoc-Roussillon bandwagon by 2015, rendering the region one of France's most up-and-coming areas to live and work – even more so for French than for foreigner: €86,000 buys a ruin of a 19th-century *maison de village* near Uzès to renovate, with thick stone walls, 100 sq metres of living space and a bijou interior courtyard; a two-room apartment in a Collioure fisherman's cottage is €190,000; while the dreamy 240-sq-metre villa on the coast nearby with pool and soul-stirring sea, mountain and vineyard view to die for is a steal at €1.47 million. In Montpellier the real-estate arm of prestigious auction house Sotheby's deals exclusively in fabulous properties most people can only dream of owning elsewhere in the world: a loft apartment with five bedrooms and terrace in an *ancienne demeure* (old residence or manor) for

CATALAN CULTURE

Step into Roussillon – or rather Catalunya Nord (northern Catalonia) – and regional identity is a well-rounded, exuberant and spirited affair. Perpignan suddenly becomes Perpinyà, too, on bilingual road signs, on tourist-office pamphlets and indeed on the street where people chat in both French and Catalan, and bare a soul as Catalan as in neighbouring Spanish Catalonia.

From the ritual *soirée flamenco* or *soiree paëlla* that spills across the village square on hot summer evenings to the pair of life-sized *sardane* folk dancers printed on metal fly curtains that cover many doorways, this is a hot, passionate region whose people brandish their Catalan heritage as vehemently as they did the day Roussillon became part of France in 1659.

Around 25% of Roussillon's population speaks Catalan, a language that the Conseil Général des Pyrénées-Orientales finally recognised as an official language in their *département* alongside French in December 2007. Catalan and French are taught in schools; Perpignan University has run degree courses exclusively in Catalan since the 1980s; Barcelona's Universitat Catalana d'Estiu (www.uce.cat in Catalan) has had its summer university in Prades for decades; and the region's wholly Catalan-language radio station, Ràdio Arrels (www.arrels.net), has broadcast from its Perpignan studio since 1980.

For Catalonians both sides of the border, no mountain peak is more precious than the Pic du Canigou (p230), where on 23 June a bonfire of vine twigs blazes – the sacred source from which relay runners light beacons and bear flames down the mountain to light, on 24 June, all northern Catalonia's magical midsummer-night fires.

TALK OF THE TOWN

Dip into the local lifestyle and see the region from someone else's perspective with this blog roll:

- www.helenafrithpowell.com (yes, the top-selling author lived in Languedoc before Abu Dhabi)
- http://londonlanguedoc.blogspot.com
- http://sarahhague.blogspot.com
- http://245andcounting.blogspot.com
- http://quotidiennement.blogspot.com
- http://cafeandmarmite.blogspot.com
- http://languedoc-roussillon-travel.blogspot.com

€480,000, a golden-stone 900-sq-metre *bastide* (fortified village) in the Gard with 9800-sq-metre manicured grounds for €3.12 million…

ECONOMY

While old industries like silkworm breeding, tanning, woad-plant cultivation for pastel-blue dye, copper-pot making and Catalan forged iron have gone to seed, the traditional industries of viticulture, fishing and fruit farming are positively blooming in places: Port Vendres is the third-largest fruit terminal and second-largest sardine port on the Mediterranean, handling 295,000 tonnes of fruit and 2975 tonnes of sardines in 2007.

Indeed, Languedoc-Roussillon's privileged position on the sun-flooded coast ensures its standing as one of France's healthiest regions economically. It was ranked first for GDP growth in 2007 (up 10.2% between 2004 and 2007), job creation was twice that of the national average (up 2.7%, compared with 1.3% countrywide) and unemployment has fallen year on year to hover at 10.8% in 2008. Montpellier was ranked as the cheapest city in Europe to set up a company by a KPMG business report in 2006.

Tourism is big business: 10 million French visitors and another five million foreigners a year – 8% of all visitors to France – creating the equivalent of 46,000 full-time jobs annually (30,000 in January, 74,000 in July) and accounting for 15% (€7 million) of regional GDP (compared with 6.1% nationally).

Keep up to date with the economy, business happenings and the latest innovations in and around Montpellier with Montpellier Méditerranée Technopole (http://eco.montpellier-agglo.com) and its downloadable English-language newsletter *Éco Infos*.

POPULATION

Languedoc-Roussillon is not densely populated: 84 people per sq km (compared to 107 nationally, 240 in the UK and 116 in the EU), with areas like Haut-Languedoc being even less populated – just 14 people per sq km and no neighbour for miles in Lozère.

Montpellier is the largest city, followed by Nîmes, Perpignan, Béziers, Narbonne and Carcassonne. Since the early 1990s Languedoc-Roussillon has been one of France's most buoyant fast-growing regions: between 1990 and 2020 its population is estimated to increase by 37% (compared with 30% in neighbouring Provence-Côte d'Azur and 16% for the Paris-driven Île de France region).

Of its foreign population, comprising around 9% of the population, about half are European (30% Spanish), some 20% Moroccan and 8% Algerian and Tunisian.

American journalist Fernanda Eberstadt left New York in 1998 for Perpignan, where she penetrated the 5000-strong community of local Roma. Learn about their customs, tradition and music in *Little Money Street: In Search of Gypsies & Their Music in the South of France.*

SPORT

Be it bullfighting, boules, jousting from boats or beach-volley on the sand (p99), sport is dramatic, entertaining and a celebration of local culture in one of its purest forms.

Tauromachie

No season is more bullish than early summer, when the region's biggest bullfighting towns – Nîmes, Béziers and Céret – throw themselves into highly charged *férias* (bullfighting festivals) climaxing with a bloody bull. Plenty of pomp, ceremony, highly stylised choreography and extravagantly embroidered costumes create the theatrical backdrop for the *corrida,* the deathliest form of *tauromachie* (bull art) whereby the matador kills a grown bull. Despite a French law which bans matadors under the age of 16 from entering the ring, the occasional *novillada,* pitting a young matador against a young bull less than four years old, does happen.

Bloodless *courses Camarguaises,* also called *courses libres,* spill into Languedoc from the Camargue, where agile *raseteurs* in tight white shirts and trousers dare to remove rosettes and ribbons from the bull's horns with a *crochet* (a curved razor-sharp comb) clutched between their fingers. *Férias* often open with an *abrivado* (bull run) whereby *gardians* (cowboys) on horseback shepherd the bull from bull farm – or beach in the case of Palavas-les-Flots – to the arena and end with the bull being returned during a *bandido.*

The Féderation Française de la Course Camarguaise (French Federation of Camargue Bullfights) posts a calendar of *courses Camarguaises* online at www.ffcc.info.

For more detail on this tradition – dating to Roman times, when gladiators pitted a menagerie of animals including lions, bears and dogs against bulls – see p84 and visit Nîmes' Musée des Cultures Taurines (Museum of Bull Culture; p74). The bullfighting season runs Easter to November, but Ascension (May) and Pentecost (May or June) are the key dates. In July and August posters stuck to lamp posts in coastal resorts advertise *toro piscine* events whereby bulls are taunted into a pool of water in the arena – many detractors view this as being even more cruel than regular bullfights.

Nautical Jousting

On the coast, high-drama *joutes nautiques* sees participants (usually male and traditionally dressed in white) knock each other into the water from rival boats – one red, the other blue – with 2.8m-long iron-tipped wooden lances. The jouster, wooden shield tight against his chest, stands balanced at the tip of a *tintaine,* a wooden gangplank protruding from the wooden boat, where the rest of his team members spur him on together with a drummer and oboeist who perform the traditional Languedoc jousting song and other tunes aboard. The combat is watched by a captive audience, in turn roused by the fanfare of a brass band. Originating in the 17th century, jousts were

NOT A SPORT BUT A TRAGEDY

Is what Ernest Hemingway had to say on the matter, awarding the accolade of 'art' to bullfighting as he waxed lyrical about it being the only form of art where man was in danger of death. True.

A controversial issue that has never left the public arena since 1850, when France introduced its first law condemning the maltreatment of domestic animals, bullfighting sparks hot-blooded debate and protest. *'Non aux corridas!'* ('No to *corridas*!') is the thrust of the Nîmes-based **Alliance Anticorrida** (Anti-bullfighting Alliance; www.anticorrida.org), which greets each bullfighting season with a billboard campaign featuring a dead bull and often joins forces with **PETA** (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals; www.peta.co.uk), known for its 'running of the nudes', to make its voice heard. In July 2008 protestors wearing nothing bar black knickers or skin-tight shorts lay strewn in the Arènes de Nîmes, 'blood' seeping from their backs where *banderillas* (the barbed darts used in *corridas*) pierced their naked flesh.

The previous summer thousands of holidaymakers got their message loud and clear as planes flying banners reading *'Fuyons les corridas!'* ('Shoot bullfights!') flew along the French coast from Cerbère in Roussillon, then north along Languedoc, to the Côte d'Azur.

PÉTANQUE – THE RULES

Two to six people, split into two teams, can play. Each player has three solid metal *boules,* weighing 650g to 800g and stamped with the hallmark of a licensed *boule* maker. Initials, a name or a family coat of arms can be crafted onto made-to-measure *boules*. The earliest *boules,* scrapped in 1930, comprised a wooden ball studded with hundreds of hammered-in steel nails.

Each team takes it in turn to aim a *boule* at a tiny wooden ball called a *cochonnet* (jack), the idea being to land the *boule* as close as possible to it. The team with the closest *boule* wins the round; points are allocated by totting up how many *boules* the winner's team has closest to the marker (one point for each boule*).* The first to notch up 13 wins the match.

The team throwing the *cochonnet* (initially decided by a coin toss) has to throw it from a small circle, 30cm to 50cm in diameter, scratched in the gravel. It must be hurled 6m to 10m away. Each player aiming a *boule* must likewise stand in this circle, with both feet planted firmly on the ground. At the end of a round, a new circle is drawn around the *cochonnet,* determining the spot where the next round will start.

Underarm throwing is compulsory. Beyond that, players can dribble the *boule* along the ground (known as *pointer,* literally 'to point') or hurl it high in the air in the hope of it landing smack-bang on top of an opponent's *boule,* sending it flying out of position. This flamboyant tactic, called *tirer* (literally 'to shoot'), can turn an entire game around in seconds.

Throughout matches *boules* are polished with a soft white cloth. Players unable to stoop to pick up their *boules* can lift them up with a magnet attached to a piece of string.

fought first between a crew of married men (in the red boat) and bachelors (in the blue) and later between rival districts.

Nautical jousting is particular to Sète, Palavas-les-Flots, Agde and Aigues-Mortes. See p107 for festivals and clubs where you can watch the sport and have a stab at it yourself. Online, view images at www.lesjouteurs.com.

Tambourin

A descendant of *longue paume* (the outdoor version of the indoor *jeu de paume* that French kings played), this 12th-century ball game has changed little since 1870. Played inside or out, it involves two teams of five players (three indoors) hitting a red or white 78g rubber ball to each other across a halfway line using precisely what looks like a musical tambourine *(tambourin)*. Originally goat skin but today a synthetic fabric is stretched across a plastic circular frame (28cm in diameter) to which a leather handle is attached, allowing the player to get a grip when whacking the ball – which flies at speeds of up to 250km/h. The game is played almost exclusively in the Hérault.

Learn more about the region's most traditional ball game and follow the scores on the board of the regional league with the French Tambourin Federation at www.sport-tambourin-ffjbt.com.

Pétanque

Despite its quintessential image of a bunch of old men throwing balls on a dusty patch of gravel beneath trees, *pétanque* (boules) is a serious sport with its own national championships held each year in Lodève in July and world series a month later in Millau (p156). Should you fancy grabbing some balls and having a spin, beneath the age-old arches of Montpellier's Aqueduct St-Clément (p100) or on the gravel square outside the lumbering walls of Prats de Molló are grand spots.

Rugby

Rugby league (www.francerugby.fr in French) is a religion in these hot-blooded southern parts and has a strong following. The Perpignan-based Catalans Dragons (www.catalansdragons.com), a side as fiery and formidable as its name suggests, has qualified for the European Super League since 2006 and became the first non-English team to reach the final of the Challenge

Cup in 2007. To play Super League remains a pipe dream for Toulouse, the other big side, whose 2008 league bid failed.

Toulouse has the upper hand over Perpignan in rugby union: reigning French champion Stade Toulousain has clinched the title 17 times and won the Heineken Cup in 1996, 2003 and 2005.

Players' profiles, photos, match previews and reports, interviews, and podcasts: it's all there on the Catalans Dragons' English-language site at www.sang-et-or.net.

ARTS

Literature

Medieval literature was dominated by lyric poems of courtly love, written solely by troubadours in Occitan or *langue d'oc* (p26). But with the crusade against the Cathars in the 13th century the focus and form changed as troubadour poems like 'Canzo de la Crosada' (Song of the Crusade) told tales of persecution and honour in a more narrative fashion accessible to a wider audience outside the courts. Raimon de Miraval (c 1180–1215), an impoverished knight from Carcassonne, was a troubadour from this period who wrote some 48 known poems, 22 of which were put to music (below). Another prolific troubadour whose work survives intact is Guiraut Riquier (c 1230–92), often considered the last of the troubadours. He worked in Narbonne and Rodez.

In 1530 a young Rabelais arrived in Montpellier to study medicine at university. Here the French epic writer, a classmate of Provençal philosopher and visionary writer Nostradamus, dabbled in prose and acted in a theatre production of *La Femme Muette* (The Mute Woman). He described this event in his epic *Pantagruel* (1832), published the year he left Montpellier and peppered with *langue d'oc* expressions gleaned during his time in the region. In 1837 and 1838 Rabelais returned to Montpellier University to lecture on Hippocrates' *Prognostics*.

Around the same time, Stendhal visited Montpellier, describing the city's café life as provincial with 'barbaric service' in *Travels in the South of France*. Henry James was kinder on Languedoc in *A Little Tour of France* after visiting Carcassonne in 1882.

The Dickens of French literature, novelist Alphonse Daudet (1840–97), was born in Nîmes and briefly worked as a teacher in Alès. But he found his pupils intolerable and left for Paris in 1857, where he started writing. Among his best-known works is his Tartarin trilogy set in the Provençal town of Tarascon opposite Beaucaire (p78) on the Rhône. Daudet died of syphilis.

Jean-Jacques Beineix's cult French film *Betty Blue* (1986) was filmed on the beach in Gruissan, a stretch of sand candy-striped with rows of beach huts on stilts.

Stark raving bonkers was what most thought of neo-romantic Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94) when he set off in 1878 on foot with just a luggage-bearing donkey as companion through the Cévennes (p146). The account he penned of his 12-day journey, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), painted a haunting portrait of the harsh Haut-Languedoc landscape and pioneered outdoor literature.

Symbolism found expression with poet Paul Valéry (1871–1945), another Montpellier university student, born in Sète. Its *cimetière marin* (marine cemetery), the poet's burial place, inspired Valéry's best-known poem in 1920. Learn about it at the town's museum dedicated to the poet (p108). Sète later gave birth to poet and singer Georges Brassens (1921–81), who likewise has a space in Sète dedicated to him (p108).

Lawrence Durrell settled in Sommières (p79) from 1957 until his death, writing about his Languedoc life in *Cesar's Vast Ghost: Aspects of Provence* (1990).

Music & Dance

Excruciatingly beautiful (hear it on YouTube) is Raimon de Miraval's soul-piercing 'Chansonetta Farai Vencut', which has enjoyed a massive renaissance

since starring on the film soundtrack of Ridley Scott's box-office hit *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

French Catalan band Tekameli from Perpignan is one of Europe's best Roma bands, turning heads with its first album, *Ida y Vuelta* (1999), and stealing hearts worldwide with *Escolteu* (2008). The album fuses traditional religious songs from Tekameli's local Roma community in Perpignan with Catalan rumba flamenca – flamenco mixed with Latin American beats – and confirms what critics had already said: Tekameli is this century's Gypsy Kings (who, ironically, originate just down the road in the Camargue).

Unavoidable is folk music, the traditional partner to folk dances that frequently spill across village squares. *La treille* celebrates viticulture; it's danced in pairs in spring to ensure good health for the vines and in autumn in thanks for the grape harvest. *La farandole* sees men and women take their partner by the hand or remain linked with a cord or handkerchief as they briskly jig in a large circle, accompanied by a tambourine and *galoubet* (shrill flute with three holes). Hand billows provide the key percussion for *la buffetière* or *danse du soufflet,* a medieval carnival jig whereby men don ungainly white nightgowns and bonnets and dance round with billows in hand.

Then there is the *sardane,* the ultimate expression of Catalan culture in Roussillon. Danced in a circle of alternating men and women or boys and girls, the folk dance sees women don a red skirt, white blouse and black apron; men wear black trousers and waistcoat, white shirt and red sash. The *flaviol* (small flute played with one hand to open the dance), *tambori* (tiny drum), *tenora* and *tible* (types of oboes) are among the traditional Catalan instruments that form the 12-piece *cobla* (orchestra) accompanying a *sardane.* Ceret's Festival de Sardanes in July (p215) is a prime opportunity to see the very best *sardanes.* Men can't partake in a *contrapàs,* a similar but women-only circle dance.

Grab your partner by the hand and dance a Catalan *sardane* at an August workshop (€20) organised by the tourist office in Prats de Molló (p228).

Montpellier's annual Festival de Radio France et Montpellier (p99) in July showcases upcoming sounds in electronic music, rock and other modern genres.

Architecture

From the prehistoric megaliths at La Cham des Bondons (p149), second only to those at Carnac, to Vauban's gargantuan citadels built to defend France's 17th-century frontiers, architecture here is of magnificent proportions.

Gallo-Roman architecture bursts onto the scene in Nîmes with its amphitheatre, Maison Carrée (p71) and nearby Pont du Gard (p86).

Several centuries later, architects adopted architectural elements from Gallo-Roman buildings to create *roman* (Romanesque) masterpieces such as Toulouse's Basilique St-Sernin (p239), Elne cathedral (p218) with its lovely cloister, Roussillon's trio of abbeys (St-Michel de Cuxa, St-Martin de Canigou and Serrabone) and its stash of bijou chapels in the Massif des Albères (p225).

From the 13th century in rural areas *bastides* popped up like molehills, up being the operative word for these fortified villages usually built on a hill to afford maximum protection for previously scattered populations. Classic examples, now deemed France's *plus beaux villages* (most beautiful villages), include Cordes-sur-Ciel (p249), Eus (p231) and Castelnou (p219). The lower town of Carcassonne dating from this period is likewise a *bastide* with its strict grid street pattern and fortified structure.

Later military engineer Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban (1633–1707) thundered along France's frontiers with a network of immense star-shaped citadels and fortresses: the result dots Roussillon's border with Spain – Bellegarde

(p225), Prats de Molló (p228), Mont Louis p233) – Perpignan, Collioure and Villefranche de Conflent. The ancient mule tracks used to feed the fortresses with supplies, artillery and men meanwhile form the Chemin Vauban walking trail (95km).

Inland, on noble Languedoc lands the square-shaped or polygonal *pigeonnier* made its first appearance. Built from red brick and often timber-framed, these photogenic pigeon houses stood elegantly atop stone pillars and were crowned with pyramid-shaped roofs; a fine example squats in the grounds of Château de Mayragues (p250).

Painting & Sculpture

The menagerie of beasts painted between 13,900 BC and 12,900 BC inside the Grotte de Niaux in the Vallée de l'Ariège competes with those of Lascaux in the Dordogne or Altamira in northern Spain – except the real thing can be viewed here (p202). Nearby Palaeolithic paintings from the Magdalenian period (around 15,000 years ago) are showcased in the Grotte de Bédeilhac (p203). The Parc de la Préhistoire (p203) provides a captivating overview of prehistoric art techniques.

Medieval art reached a zenith with the anonymous Maître de Cabestany, who earned his pseudonym from a magnificent tympanum he masterminded in Cabestany's Église de Notre Dame des Anges, near Perpignan. Busy in the region from around 1130 to 1180, the Franco-Catalan sculptor – whose real name no one knows – travelled around Catalonia and Tuscany sculpting. At the Centre de Sculpture Roman (p211) in Cabestany a series of moulds allows you to have a gratifying feel of his signature chinless triangular faces, almond-shaped eyes and oversized hands with long fingers. View a magnificent sarcophagus of St Sernin sculpted by the Maître de Cabestany at the Abbaye de St-Hilaire (p192), near Limoux, and smaller fragments of his work in Lagrasse (p122), La Montagne Noir (p185) and Rieux-Minervois (p189).

Realism marked the work of Carcassonne painter and etcher Jacques Gamelin (1738–1803), whose trademark battle scenes are the focus of one gallery at Carcassonne's Musée des Beaux Arts (p177). In 1825 Montpellier painter François-Xavier Fabre (1766–1837) donated several works to the city to sow the seeds of Languedoc's premier art museum. Upon his death the heirless artist, who studied sculpture under Jacques Louis David and won the Prix de Rome in 1787, bequeathed his entire art collection to Montpellier. The donation included works by one of the 17th century's most creative and eclectic artists, Montpellier-born Sébastien Bourdon (1616–71), whose

GREEN ARCHITECTURE

Green architecture is increasingly à la mode these days as the region makes more efficient use of its natural resources. An army of cranes marks the spot in Montpellier's modern Port Marianne university district, predominantly glass and steel already, where Jean Nouvel's state-of-the-art **Hôtel de Ville** (town hall; rue du Chelia) will rise from the ashes. Due for completion in 2011, the €116 million project will include a photovoltaic power station comprising 1400 sq metres of solar panels on its roof and canopies.

In Perpignan the same French architectural god is creating a theatre set to rival Bilbao's Guggenheim. Resembling a red-amber bubble in crude terms, the Théâtre de l'Archipel's unique design draws on the region's natural resources – garnets dug from the nearby Pyrenees – for inspiration and will rely on a geothermic energy system.

Other fine examples of contemporary architecture, not necessarily green: Sir Norman Foster's Carrée d'Art (p71) in Nîmes and technologically miraculous, iconic Pont de Millau (p165); and Rudy Riciotti's Rivesaltes memorial (p220).

PAINTER, LITHOGRAPHER, POSTER DESIGNER

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), Albi's most famous son, was famously short. As a teenager he broke both legs in separate accidents, stunting his growth and leaving him unable to walk without his trademark canes.

He spent his early 20s studying painting in Paris, where he mixed with other artists including Van Gogh. In 1890, at the height of the belle époque, he abandoned impressionism and took to observing and sketching Paris' colourful nightlife. His favourite subjects included cabaret singer Aristide Bruant, cancan dancers from the Moulin Rouge and prostitutes from the rue des Moulins, sketched to capture movement and expression in a few simple lines.

With sure, fast strokes he would sketch on whatever was to hand – a scrap of paper or a tablecloth, tracing paper or buff-coloured cardboard. He also became a skilled and sought-after lithographer and poster designer until drinking and general overindulgence in the heady nightlife scene led to his premature death in 1901.

monumental and tumultuous masterpiece *The Crucifixion of St-Peter* (1643) hangs in Paris' Notre Dame.

A century later an artist from Banyuls-sur-Mer rewrote the style book: Aristide Maillol (1861–1944) spurned the symbolism of the day for a purer form that he expressed through tapestry and later sculpture. His curvaceous classical female nudes are displayed all over the world, including Paris, New York, St Petersburg and the family home (p224) where he grew up.

Inland in Béziers, Maillol's contemporary Jean-Antoine Injalbert (p129) was the master sculptor.

Twentieth-century French painting is characterised by a bewildering diversity of styles, including Fauvism – named after the slur of a critic who compared the exhibitors at the 1906 autumn salon in Paris with *fauves* (wild animals) because of their radical use of intensely bright colours – and cubism. Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was the man behind the former, and a Fauvist trail in Collioure takes you past scenes he captured on canvas in Roussillon's most picturesque port (p221) in 1905.

Roussillon seduced dozens of artists – Charles Rennie Mackintosh (p224), Juan Gris, Kisling, Manolo et al – over the next decades with its intoxicating light, landscape and lifestyle that cost a pittance compared to that of Paris. In 1911 Picasso and Braque rented a house in Céret where they experimented with cubism and contributed to Céret's Musée d'Art Moderne (p226). This is now one of France's best modern-art museums.

Since its fantastic new-millennium overhaul, contemporary art suddenly steals the show at Montpellier's Musée Fabre (p100) in the shape of monumental marble pavement art by Daniel Buren and 20 black canvases hung in a glass space by Rodez-born Pierre Soulages (b 1919). He works in Paris and Sète.

Food & Drink

No culinary dish better evokes the Languedoc kitchen than cassoulet, an earthy stew of white beans and meat that fires passionate debate: everyone knows best which type of bean and meat hunk should be thrown in the *cassole,* the traditional earthenware casserole dish it is cooked and brought to the table in; see opposite for more.

Yet there's far more to this wholesome *cuisine campagnarde* (country cooking) than bean-fuelled stews for warming cockles on wind-ripped days. Exciting regional differences rooted firmly in the land see fishermen tend lagoon oyster beds on the coast; olives pressed in gentle hills inland; Camargue bulls grazing between paddy fields and salt pans; blue-veined cheese ripening in caves in Roquefort; fattened geese and gaggles of ducks around Toulouse; sheep in salty marsh meadows around Montpellier; and mushrooms in Haut-Languedoc forests. Provençal influences sneak into Nîmes' kitchen, and a Spanish accent gives Roussillon cuisine a fiery twist of Catalan exuberance.

Then of course there is the region's extraordinary sweep of vines, the world's largest vineyards, which have dumped the plonk for profoundly modern and increasingly respected table wines.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

A real gastronomic voyage, *French Leave* sees Michelin-starred chef John Burton Race flee the rat race for the slow life in Languedoc with wife, six kids and puppy in tow. Insights into the life of local producers and plenty of seasonal recipes pepper this food-fuelled travelogue.

Languedoc and Roussillon share many common ingredients, but cooking styles vary: goose fat keeps most of Languedoc slick, while Roussillon uses olive oil as if in Spain. Meat is simmered for hours on Languedoc stoves, while Roussillon deems *à la plancha* and tapas more à la mode.

Meat & Poultry

Dining is meaty, but not one that embraces all carnivorous tastes: Languedoc is the land of fattened goose and duck whose soft, plump yellow livers (foie gras) are served *à poêlé* (pan fried) or in a butter-smooth block of pâté, sometimes spiced with ginger, peaches, garlic or even chocolate, as at the Domaine de Blancardy (p112).

Liver extracted, both birds are conserved as *confit:* it is rubbed with salt and seasonings, left overnight, then simmered softly in its own fat for several hours. *Confit de canard,* a countryside staple mass-produced and sold in glass jars in every supermarket these days, usually refers to conserved duck leg, but breast, wings and neck can get the same treatment. Around Toulouse *confit de canard* gets cooked up in cassoulet.

Sweet suckling lamb is a national-park delicacy (p149). Mutton, a cassoulet staple in both Toulouse and Carcassonne, comes from upland-grazing sheep whose meat gets mixed with beef and vegetables like carrots, onions, leeks and turnips to make *pot au feu* (beef stew). Beef also makes *macaronade,* the baked pasta, meat and tomato dish imported to the region in the 18th century by Italian fishermen working in Sète. *Pot au feu à la Languedocienne* includes salted pork, and stuffed goose neck makes *pot au feu à l'Abligeoise* from Albi unique. The region's best-known charcuterie is *saucisse de Toulouse,* a fatty pork sausage that becomes *à la Languedocienne* when sautéed in goose fat with tomato, parsley and capers.

It is a bullish affair in the Camargue, where bulls who have failed to prove their worth in the arena (p36) are slaughtered for their meat to make *guardianne de taureau* (bull-meat stew).

CASSOULET

You must allow yourself more than a bowlful of cassoulet during your stay. And you should treat it with the reverence it requires. What other dish of white beans with bits of meat and, usually, poultry could have led to the establishment of the resoundingly titled **Académie Universelle du Cassoulet** (www.routedescassoulets.com), the initiative of Jean-Claude Rodriguez, owner of Restaurant Château St-Martin Trencavel (p184) near Carcassonne? The goal of this august society is to promote cassoulet and its ingredients worldwide. Even more ambitiously, it aims 'to display the culinary creativity, traditions, language, human values and friendliness which are the prerogative and norm of those who live in the south of France'. All delivered with a twinkle and, as with their cassoulet, a generous pinch of salt…

At a more practical level, the academy has established a *route des cassoulets* of restaurants, guaranteed to serve the genuine product, that extends from Lézignan Corbières, east of Carcassonne, all the way to Toulouse.

With a more modest yet still grandiose remit, members of Castelnaudary's Grande Confrérie du Cassoulet swear to 'further the prestige and disseminate and defend the fame of the cassoulet of Castelnaudary'. They do it in grand style: the town's Fête du Cassoulet in August brings in more than 70,000 visitors over its three days.

We're loath to indulge in overstatement ourselves, but once you've been hooked (for many, after the first spoonful), you'll understand why cassoulet – which was and remains essentially a peasant, using-up-the-leftovers dish – can arouse such near-reverence.

Reverence is indeed the word. In the oft-quoted opinion of culinary author Prosper Montagné, writing in 1929, 'Cassoulet is the god of Occitan cuisine. The Castelnaudary version is God the Father, that of Carcassonne is God the Son, while Toulouse's is the Holy Spirit.'

It is of course hugely disparaging – bordering on blasphemy, its most extreme adherents might claim – to dismiss this divine dish as 'white beans with bits of meat and poultry'. You can't just knock off a cassoulet. The beans must be soaked so that they just start to germinate and begin to taste a tad sweet. And the cooking is a long, slow simmer so that all the flavours meld, blend and mix harmoniously.

The essence of any cassoulet, always served piping-hot, is *lingots,* the prized white beans that grow locally. With them come juicy pork cubes, even bigger cylinders of meaty sausage and, in most variants, a hunk of duck or, in season, partridge. But each region – and each chef who takes pride – will have its own variant. In Castelnaudary, it tends to be only pork. Carcassonne will add mutton. And the eclectic Toulouse variant will have both of these, plus a wedge of its own, very special *saucisse de Toulouse*. Many a discerning chef will slip in goose or goose fat, a pig's trotter, pork rind or a hock of ham. Whatever the ingredients, this lipsmacking dish is invariably served in a glazed earthenware bowl called a caçolet in Occitan – hence its name.

Sliced mushrooms, tomatoes, chilli and olives pepper the deep red tomato sauce in which *boles de picolat* (spicy pork meatballs) – one of Roussillon's most traditional dishes – pirouette. Then there are snails (see p48).

Fish & Shellfish

Montpellier's indoor market Les Halles Laissac (p104) is an uninspiring concrete block from the outside. But head inside to its fresh-fish counter and the choice is dazzling: mussels, oysters, razor clams, scallops, spiky sea snails, skate, mullet, merlot, anchovies, sardines, conger eels, octopus, *tellines* (tiny clams) by the fistful, and loads of squid, whole and chopped up in rings. On the coast, feast on *rouille à la Sètoise* (tomato, saffron and cuttlefish stew) and *bourride de Sète* (garlicky monkfish stew) in Sète; oysters and mussels fresh from coastal lagoon beds in Bouzigues and Cap Leucate; and *soupe de poisson* (fish soup; see p44) along its entire length.

Try to sample the iodine-infused yellow flesh of *violets* (sea squirts); stuffed baby squid *(encornets farcis);* and sea urchins *(oursins),* whose pale-orange

RED RICE

Gourmets rave about the red rice harvested in September in Europe's most northerly rice-growing region, the Camargue (p81). Nutty in taste and borne out of a cross-pollination of wild red and cultivated short-grain rice, the russet-coloured grains are best shown off in a salad or pilaf; are quite delicious simply served with olive oil, salt and herbs or almonds; and marry beautifully with bull.

roe, perfectly arranged by nature in six delicate sweet-salt strips, is a local delicacy. At the market there is no better picnic snack than *tielles,* tiny seafood pastry pies.

In Roussillon the fish dish is *parillada* – several types of Mediterranean fish filleted, grilled and served *à la plancha* (on a stone, slate or wooden slab). *Bullinada* is a fish and potato stew, and *morue Catalane* is salt cod laced with tomatoes and peppers. As in Spain, tapas is all the rage and tart, salty anchovies from Collioure, fresh or marinated, are perfect; for in situ anchovy visits and tastings see p222.

Garlic, Olive Oil & Vinegar

Around 16% of France's olive oil and 45% of its table olives come from Languedoc-Roussillon.

Garlic gives regional cuisine a kick, letting rip in a clutch of strong-tasting sauces, traditionally served to complement soups and fish dishes. *Anchoïade* is a strong anchovy paste laced with garlic and olive oil (try it in Collioure, where anchovies come from; p221); *brandade de morue* is a heady mix of crushed salt cod, garlic and olive oil from Nîmes (p76); and *tapenade* is a black-olive dip seasoned with garlic, capers, anchovies and olive oil. Garlic flavours *aligot de Lozère,* a cheesy dish of mashed potato.

On the coast, aioli (a potent garlic mayonnaise) is smeared over fish dishes and used as a dip for shellfish. Flaming pink *rouille* (a garlic mayonnaise with breadcrumbs and crushed chilli peppers) is best friend to *soupe de poisson* – fish soup always served with bite-sized toasts and a garlic clove: rub it over the toast, spread the *rouille* on top, bite it and breathe fire.

One of the finest ways to taste local olive oil is with springtime asparagus: steam the slender green tips, sprinkle with Camargue *fleur de sel* (salt crystals) and drizzle with oil. Look out for olive oil perfumed with mint, saffron, lemon, rose and so on by one of the region's most exceptional olive-oil producers, the family-driven **Domaine de l'Olivie** (www.olivie.eu), 15km north of Montpellier in Combaillaux.

On the Roussillon coast it is not just Banyuls wine but also vinegar that travellers taste and buy: the 100% organic vinegar made at *vinaigrerie artisanale* **Le Guinelle** (www.leguinelle.com) matures for 12 months beneath the fierce sun in oak casks.

Fruit, Veg & Herbal Scrub

As much cookbook as great beach read, *Goose Fat & Garlic* by Jeanne Strang combines dozens of recipes with insights into the gastronomy and culinary tradition of southwest France, where the author holidayed for more than 40 years.

The weekly market is a particularly succulent affair in spring and early summer, when the first tender shoots of green asparagus from the Hérault are picked (March), followed by strawberries (April), plump red and black cherries (June), then baby artichokes, red apricots, peaches, melons, fresh almonds and the first fleshy black figs of the year (July). Midautumn ushers in sweet onions *(oignons doux)* and chestnuts from the Cévennes (p151) and a profusion of wild mushrooms. In winter buy black turnips in Haut-Languedoc.

Any vegetable growing under the Languedoc sun can be thrown into a *tian* (vegetable and rice gratin) with some herbs – rosemary, thyme, sage, fennel and juniper – picked from the titillating *garrigue* (herbal scrub) that

grows with such vigour here. Anything *à la Languedocienne* usually involves garlic-seasoned tomatoes, aubergine and *cèpes* (boletus mushrooms).

In Roussillon seasonal veg makes *escalivada,* a medley of grilled or roasted vegetables. *Ouillada* is a vegetable and bean soup peppered with pork cubes.

Cheese & Dessert

Cheese comes first in the French order of things, and no board is complete without green-blue-veined Roquefort, one of France's priciest and most noble cheeses, ripened in caves in Roquefort-sur-Soulzon (p169). Other regional cheeses include two *fromages de brebis* (sheep-milk cheese), fédou (from the Lozère) and Le Pérail (from the Gard); and *pélardon*, a *fromage de chèvre* (goat cheese) that comes fresh or matured; see p46.

Crème Catalane – cinnamon-spiced crème brûlée – dominates dessert menus in Roussillon; try it in half a melon at the staunchly Catalan L'Hostalet de Vivès in the Massif des Albères (p226). *Berlingots* (a type of humbug) and Lord Clive's sweetly spiced mutton pies, *petits pâtés de Pézenas* (see p133 for the full story), are prized in Pézenas, while nearby Narbonne satisfies sugar cravings with *croquettes au miel* (honey tarts). Coastal Sète bakes *navettes cettoises* (crisp lemon, vanilla, orange or aniseed boat-shaped biscuits) and Mende goes for finger-shaped nut-studded *croquants de Mende* (p142).

Watch olives being harvested, sardines cooked in white wine, cheese ripened and much more at Fenêtre sur le Sud (Window on the South; www.fenetresurlesud.org), a fabulous video-driven website crammed with clips delving into the region's rich cuisine and gastronomic heritage.

WINE

The soul of the region, around which an entire trip can easily be built (see p23 for a recommended wine itinerary), winemaking in Languedoc-Roussillon is enjoying a renaissance. Following violent protests over Italian imports in the mid-1970s, farmers were subsidised to cut down their vines and replant with better-quality AOC grapes, hence Languedoc's splendid wine production today.

Of increasing interest are the thoroughly modern table wines made under the **Vin de Pays d'Oc** (www.vindepaysdoc.com) label. Free of AOC restriction (see p46), these wines fly in the face of viticulture tradition as they think outside the box and experiment with new grape blends. The result: creative, exciting, affordable wines, with funky names and designer etiquettes (and pink neo-corks in the case of rosés) to reflect contemporary lifestyles.

Languedoc's biggest name, the Mas de Daumas Gassac (p110), kick-started the revolution in 1978 when it proved to the wine world that a non-AOC red could give an AOC Bordeaux a run for its money. The same pioneering spirit is reflected in the 'chicken wines' of viticulturist **Sacha Lichine** (www.sachalichine.com), who blends grapes from Thézan, Corbières Maraussan, Minervois, Béziers and Puichéric to make Le Coq Rouge (The Red Rooster) and La Poule Blanche (The White Chicken); and mixes Grenache and Carignan grapes harvested in the Camargue for Le Poussin Rosé (The Pink Chick). As inventive are the *vins d'auteur* by experimental Côtes du Thongues winemakers on the banks of the Thongues River, west of Pézenas.

BLACK DIAMONDS

Gourmets rave even more about black truffles *(tuber melanosporum),* the region's most expensive, exquisite and elusive culinary product, which takes root underground, usually in symbiosis with the roots of an elm or oak tree. Dogs snout out the pig-ugly fungus in the Hérault, Gard and Aude *départements.* The season runs November to March. Prime opportunities to taste a scant shaving of truffle, neat or in an omelette, include *fêtes de la truffe* (truffle fairs) in Clermont l'Hérault (second Sunday in January), Uzès (third Sunday in January) and St-Jean de Buèges (second Sunday in February).

TASTY TRAVELS: ENDANGERED EDIBLES

For the ultimate authentic dining experience, sample products featured on Slow Food's Ark of Taste (www.slowfoodfoundation.com), a list of endangered world food products threatened with extinction by industrialisation, globalisation, hygiene laws and environmental dangers. Of the 20 indigenous edibles on the France list, four come from Languedoc-Roussillon.

Take the Barèges-Gavarnie sheep, bred on mountain pastures in the Midi-Pyrénées, whose red-coloured meat is increasingly scorned in favour of more youthful suckling lambs. Yet this mutton, taken from sheep grazing on Pyrenean pastures above 2000m for two summers, is succulent and flavoursome. The Bigorre black pig is another animal fast disappearing from the Pyrenean foothills where it was first bred. Taste it roasted or as cured ham (listed on menus as *noir de bigorre*).

Fresh *pélardon*, one of 13 French AOC goat cheeses, remains easy to find, but its more aged, mould-covered sibling known as *pélardon sec* or *affiné* is not. Ripened for one month, the older cheese assumes a strong goat taste. Both cheeses come in discs 6.7cm in diameter, and exude aromas of the Mediterranean scrub typical of the Cévennes and Montagne Noir.

In Roussillon track down the dry, oxidised wine rancios, of which Roussillon winemakers produce just 15,000L a year. Deemed too tricky a partner to pair with food, it is generally drunk as an aperitif with anchovies, or as a digestive. Its vanilla, liquorice and toasted-nuts overtones develop during the ageing process, which, unusually, happens in open barrels outside.

Languedoc sensations in the US market include **Red Bicyclette** (www.redbicyclette.com) and **Fat Bastard** (www.fatbastard.com), an anti-wine-snob label created by oenologist Thierry Boudinaud ('now zat iz what you call eh phet bast-ard', Thierry allegedly said to his English partner Guy Anderson upon tasting the wine, hence the ground-breaking, hip name). Both source grapes from Languedoc.

Among the plethora of books on wine in southern France, Paul Strang's *Languedoc: The Wines & Winemakers* stands out for its detailed look at the specific *terroir* (land), techniques, traditions and personalities of Languedoc viticulture.

Appellations

Rooted firmly in tradition and a rigorous set of rules determining geographic boundaries, grape varieties, soil types, minimum density of vines, harvesting methods and so on are the region's *appellation d'origine controlée* (AOC) wines – 15 in Languedoc and three in Roussillon.

Among the best known is Le Minervois (drink its white with sardines!), whose vineyards carpet 18,000 hectares between Carcassonne, Narbonne and Béziers; and Corbières, Languedoc's largest appellation, embracing 19,000 hectares south and west of Narbonne. Both have been AOC since 1985 and are known for their well-structured reds. An island of six villages in Le Minervois produces Minervois La Livinière, a red *vin de garde* par excellence. Fitou, the granddad of Languedoc appellations (1948) is another red easy to keep for four or five years.

White Clairette du Languedoc, with its dry peach and honey tones, marries perfectly with fish and shellfish, while Languedoc's fruity white Muscats – Frontignan, Mireval, Lunel and St-Jean de Minervois – love foie gras, Roquefort, melon and most desserts. The region's oldest wines (all four have been AOC since the 1930s, '40s and '50s), these Muscats are *vins doux naturels* (naturally sweet wines) – fortified wines to which a grape spirit is added before fermentation. The same goes for those produced in Roussillon, where the hot, ripening sun packs white Banyuls, Muscat de Rivesaltes and Maury wines with an equally intoxicating sweetness.

Delve into the world of winemaking, learn what the regional Languedoc AOC appellation means for the industry and follow its tourist wine routes at www.languedoc-wines.com.

Tasting & Buying Wine

Buy wine direct from the *producteur* (wine producer) or *vigneron* (winegrower) on a *domaine* (winegrowing estate), most of which offer free *dégustation* in their

cave (cellar), allowing you to sample two or three vintages with no obligation to buy. For table wine *(vin de table)* costing around €1.50 a litre, fill up your own container at the market or local wine cooperative; every wine-producing village and town has one. In Montpellier start your tasting odyssey with 1200 types at the Maison Régionale des Vins et des Produits du Terroir (p105).

Upmarket restaurants have a sommelier to help diners marry wine with food; several serve a fixed menu which includes a different glass of wine with each course. For *chambres d'hôtes* on wine estates – prime tasting opportunities – see p18.

Languedoc vineyards are a real fashion accessory these days: French stars Gérard Depardieu, Luc Besson and Johnny Hallyday all own vineyards in the region.

COURSES

Tourist offices and the **Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins du Languedoc** (☎ 04 68 90 38 30; www.languedoc-wines.com; 6 place des Jacobins, Narbonne) have lists of *écoles du vin* (wine schools), including:

École du Vin Wineware (☎ 03 20 09 43 11; www.edvwineware.com) Wine coaching (three hours, 1/2 people €150/180) and the art of *dégustation (*€45 per hour) at Montpellier's Château de Flaugergues (p105); courses in Béziers, Nîmes, Carcassonne, Narbonne and Toulouse too.

La Cité de la Vigne et du Vin (p125) If you haven't learnt enough already at this stunning interactive space devoted to the art of winemaking, its École du Vin offers two-hour tasting workshops (€9) and walks (€8).

Ludivinum (☎ 04 67 44 10 80; www.ludivinum.com) Montpellier-based school offering tasting evenings (€55), estate visits, and one-/two-day courses (€160/290) covering tasting, appreciation, conservation, oenology and so on.

CELEBRATIONS

Be it the grape, olive or almond harvest, a wedding, a birth or a village's patron saint's day, traditional celebrations are intrinsically woven into

TOP PICKS: APERITIFS & DIGESTIVES

Lounging over an *apéro* or after-dinner drink alfresco is one of those great sensual Languedoc-Roussillon delights.

- Blanquette and crémant de Limoux (p190) – Languedoc's only sparkling white wines, around well before champagne was even thought of
- Byrrh – sweet red-wine and quinine-water mix from Thuir (p219)
- Cartagène – traditional aperitif of Languedoc winemakers, made for their own consumption by soaking grapes in alcohol for a year before pressing and bottling
- Hypocras (p202) – the crusaders' tipple!
- Kir – the classic French mix of white wine and *crème de cassis* (blackcurrant cream liqueur) is given a fruity twist in Languedoc with raspberry, chestnut and other zesty liqueurs
- Muscat de Frontignan, Muscat de Rivesaltes, Banyuls and Maury – sweet fortified wines made from Muscat grapes; the perfect aperitif or dessert wine
- Noilly Prat (p137) – classic white wine–based French aperitif made on the shores of Le Bassin de Thau
- *Pipi d'ange* – Muscat and white wine is mixed to create this drier, charmingly named aperitif (its name translates as 'angel's pee-pee'); try it at Au'Remp'Arts in Elne (p219)
- Rivesaltes Ambré – another *vin doux naturel* (sweet natural wine), loaded with sweetness and a beautiful amber in colour
- Roussillon rancios (opposite) – dry oxidised Roussillon wine
- Sangria – Roussillon's Spanish-styled aperitif and late-night drink; red or white wine mixed with brandy, sugar, fruit juice and water

A GREEN FUTURE

Back to nature is the thrust of Languedoc winemakers, who are innovating in all areas. To lighten their carbon footprint they ship some of their production, as in the 19th century, by wooden schooner instead of plane. In 2008 a barge carried 60,000 bottles along the Canal du Midi and up the Canal du Garonne to Bordeaux, where they were loaded aboard the century-old triple-mast *Kathleen & May* bound for Dublin, Ireland. The journey took just a week longer than by air and saved 8350kg of carbon – 140g per bottle.

Arranged by Sud de France, a green brand launched to promote agricultural producers in Languedoc, the sustainable transport project is long-term. Three-mast *Bolem* subsequently sailed to Quebec, and more wine routes are in the pipeline for tall-ship operator **Compagne de Transport Maritime à la Voile** (CMTV; www.ctmv.eu). Returning ships will transport crushed glass for recycling into bottles at factories in Bordeaux and Béziers.

culinary culture. Not only that, most products grown under the Languedoc-Roussillon sun are honoured with their own special celebration: take Bouzigues' oyster festival (first weekend in August), Uzès' garlic fair (24 June), February's pig festival in St-Pons de Thomières in the Hérault, or Florac's November soup challenge (p140).

In Roussillon paella – saffron-scented rice topped with a couple of jumbo prawns – often feeds the festival masses in the company of a cauldron of sangria. Sugar-sprinkled *bunyettes* (wet batter fritters traditionally eaten at Easter) are another party staple increasingly eaten year-round, as is *cargolada* or *escargots à la Catalane* – snails grilled in their shells on an open fire. In Languedoc *la sardinade* sees fresh sardines thrown on the fire instead.

Buy regional produce online, digest background info on gastronomic tradition, and buy everything you need to create your own *moment gourmand* (tasty moment) – aperitifs beneath plane trees, winegrowers' snacks etc – at www.tablesud.fr.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Dining means spending anything from €10 in a village bistro to €75-plus in a Michelin-starred gastronomic temple. Irrespective of price, a *carte* (menu) is usually displayed outside, allowing for a price and dish check before committing.

The most authentic places to eat are often in hamlets off the beaten track touting just one *menu* (two- or three-course meal at a set price), occasionally with *vin compris* (wine included). Coffee, the usual way to end a meal, is served short, black and strong. Tea comes in the form of an empty cup and a tea bag (no milk).

Some restaurants in larger towns and illustrious addresses across the region get crowded, so it's best to book. A fair few in rural climes don't accept credit cards. Standard opening hours for eating places are listed on p254.

Fermes Auberges & Chateaux

Feasting on homemade food on a wine-producing estate or farm *(ferme auberge)* is a fabulous way to dine. Typical regional cuisine and pace is guaranteed, portions appease the feistiest of appetites, and dining can be around shared tables. Gîtes de France (p254) and Bienvenue à la Ferme (p253) have details of farms that serve lunch.

Cafés

The hub of village life, cafés inevitably double as bar and bistro too, serving croissant-and-coffee breakfasts and lunchtime baguettes (around €4) filled with cheese, ham, or cheese and ham. Dozens belong to the Bistrot de Pays network, meaning they serve local produce, advise on local walks and act as ambassadors of their *terroir* (land); download the listings guide, packed with authentic addresses, at www.bistrotdepays.com.

DINING DIARY

While *petit dejeuner* (breakfast) for urban folk in Montpellier and Nîmes entails a short, sharp black *café* (coffee) or milky *café au lait* and a croissant (no jam or butter) grabbed at a café on the way to work, *petit dej* in agricultural circles is a more imaginative affair. Never cooked, always cold and generally fresh from the farm, it can entail anything from a hunk of roughly cut bread and a pasting of goat cheese or *rillettes de canard* (coarse duck paste) to freshly picked apricots, peaches, a slice of melon, some *saucisson sec* or farm-cured ham.

While *dejeuner* (lunch) is the traditional main meal of the day, people who work dine lightly at midday and save the ritual feast of aperitif followed by hot meal with wine beneath trees for the evening, when it is cooler and the day's work is done.

The same pattern is echoed in towns, where restaurants are packed from noon with regulars lunching on a light(er) *plat du jour* (dish of the day), *formule menu* (fixed main course plus starter or dessert) or lunch *menu* (choice of two-course meal) – saving the full-monty three- or four-course *menu* for the evening, when up to several hours are devoted to appreciating an *entrée* (starter), *plat* (main course), *fromage* (cheese) and dessert – in that order. Many top-end restaurants serve an *amuse-bouche* (complimentary morsel of something very delicious) before or after the starter; some serve a sweet equivalent before dessert, plus petit fours (bite-sized biscuits) with coffee.

Self-Catering

Go local: buy fresh produce from the weekly market, always in the morning from around 7am to noon or 1pm and heaving with fruit, vegetables, olives, olive oil, bunches or woven plaits of *aïl* (garlic), sometimes bread, fish and so on. A *marché paysan* (farmers market) and *marché bio* (organic market) sells produce grown without the aid of pesticides and chemical fertilisers.

Markets aside, buying bread at the *boulangerie* (bakery), fruit tarts and cakes in the patisserie, cheese in the *fromagerie,* seafood at the *poissonnerie* (fishmongers) and so on can be more expensive but is far more satisfying than shopping *à la supermarché* (supermarket).

A former pastry chef and art historian living in Le Minervois blogs about food, wine, markets, restaurants and so on at Chez Loulou (http://chezloulou france.blogspot.com).

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarian restaurants are rare, as are vegetarian *menus,* but vegetables form the backbone of several regional dishes, meaning non-meat-eaters won't starve.

Strict vegetarians should note that most French cheeses are made with *lactosérum* (rennet), an enzyme derived from the stomach of a calf or young goat, and that some red wines are clarified with the albumin of egg whites. Vegetarian wine (clarified using a chemical substitute or not at all) is impossible to find in the region, but *vin bio* (organic wine) – made from grapes grown without the aid of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and often bottled in recycled glass – is increasingly popular.

EATING WITH KIDS

Children are welcomed, despite the lack of facilities that suggests otherwise. Highchairs are rare and the *menu enfant* (children's *menu*) that ventures away from the €5 to €8 realm of *boeuf haché* (minced beef), *frîtes* (fries)

PLAIN OLD WATER

Tap water is safe to drink, but the water spouting from fountains flagged *eau non potable* (non-drinking water) isn't; *eau potable* is.

When dining out save cents by ordering *une carafe d'eau* (a jug of tap water) instead of bottled water. If *eau minérale gazeuse* (sparkling mineral water) is your style, go for local fizz Perrier, whose state-of-the-art bottling plant near Nîmes can be visited (p81).

DOS & DON'TS

The local book of culinary etiquette:

- Cardinal sins: skipping lunch or turning down a *dégustation* (wine-tasting) session.
- Don't even try to balance your bread on your main-course plate (side plates are only provided in formal, multistarred, gastronomic restaurants); crumbs on the table are fine.
- Using the same knife and fork for your starter and main course is common in many *fermes auberges* and bistros. Don't be surprised if the waiter adds up your *addition* (bill) on the paper tablecloth.
- Feel free to order *une carafe d'eau* (a jug of tap water) in any type of restaurant, formal or otherwise, rather than a €5 to €10 bottle of *plate* (still) or *gazeuse* (fizzy) mineral water.
- *Santé* (cheers!) is the toast used for alcoholic drinks; raise a full glass and chink it lightly against those of fellow drinkers before taking a sip. *Bon appetite* (or simply *'Bon app'* between families and very good friends) is the thing to say before eating.
- End your meal with *un café* (espresso); ordering anything else is not on.

and *glace* (ice cream) is an exception. That said, *menus* geared to smaller appetites are increasing, with several upmarket places touting *menus* in the €15 range for pint-sized gourmets. For parents with kids who can't sit still, *fermes auberges* (p48) are a great option.

Breastfeeding in public is not frowned upon. The choice of baby food, infant formula, soy and cows' milk and the like is as great in French supermarkets as it is elsewhere; pharmacies also sell these products. For grizzly babies cutting teeth, there's nothing better to shut them up than the knobbly end of a baguette!

COOKING COURSES

Tourist offices have lists and many take bookings for *cours de cuisine*; to learn how to make cassoulet in four hours contact the Castelnaudary office (p183).

Ateliers de Cuisine Catalane (☎ 04 68 55 36 49; www.cuisine-catalane.com; 10 rue de l'Hôpital, Ille sur Têt) Catalan cooking workshops with Roussillon chef, food writer and journalist Eliane Thibaut Comelade; one/six two-hour sessions €16/80.

La Cité de la Vigne et du Vin (p125) Top up viticulture knowledge gleaned at this interactive wine centre with a wine-tasting course.

Le Jardin des Sens (p103) Learn Michelin-starred kitchen art with the two brothers behind Montpellier's extraordinary Garden of Senses.

Le Manoir de Raynaudes (☎ 05 63 36 91 90; www.raynaudes.com; Monestiès) Five-day cooking courses in a dreamy manor house in the hamlet of Monestiès, 22km north of Albi; €1530 per person including luxurious *maison d'hôtes* boutique accommodation and gourmet dining with stylish British hosts Orlando and Peter.

L'Office (☎ 05 61 47 71 23; www.loffice-cuisine.com; 5 rue Idrac, Toulouse) One-hour courses for kids (€10), kids and parents (€25), 40-minute lunchtime workshops (€14 including lunch), thematic two-hour sessions (€50) and so on.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For pronunciation guidelines see p272.

Useful Phrases

I'd like to reserve a table.

J'aimerais réserver une table. zhay·mer·ray ray·zair·vay ewn ta·bler

A table for two, please.

Une table pour deux, s'il vous plaît. ewn ta·bler poor der seel voo play

Do you have a menu in English?
Est-ce que vous avez une carte en anglais? es·ker voo a·vay ewn kart on ong·glay
I'd like a local speciality.
J'aimerais une spécialité régionale. zhay·mer·ray ewn spay·sya·lee·tay ray·zhyo·nal
I'd like the set menu.
Je prends le menu. zher pron ler mer·new
I'd like today's special.
Je voudrais avoir le plat du jour. zher voo·dray a·vwar ler pla doo zhoor
I'm a vegetarian.
Je suis végétarien/végétarienne. (m/f) zher swee vay·zhay·ta·ryun/ vay·zhay·ta·ryen
I don't eat meat/fish/seafood.
Je ne mange pas de viande/poisson/ fruits de mer. je ne monzh pa de vee·and/pwa·so/ fwee·de·mair

I'd like to order the…
Je voudrais commander… zher voo·dray ko·mon·day
The bill, please.
L'addition, s'il vous plaît. la dish·on seel voo play

Food Glossary

STARTERS

anchoïade	on·sho·yad	anchovy dip
brandade de morue	bron·dad der mo·rew	crushed salt-cod paste
brebis	brer·bee	sheep's milk
escalivada	es·ka·lee·va·da	grilled or roasted Roussillon vegetables
foie gras frais	fwa gra fray	fattened duck or goose liver, fresh
foie gras mi-cuit	fwa gra mee·kwee	fattened duck or goose liver, semi-cooked
fromage de chèvre	fro·mazh der shev·rer	goat cheese
ouillada	wee·ya·da	Roussillon vegetable, pork and bean soup
tapenade	ta·per·nad	olive-based dip

MEAT, CHICKEN & POULTRY

à la plancha	a la plan·cha	grilled meat or fish served on a platter
agneau	a·nyo	lamb
bœuf	berf	beef
boles de picolat	bo·lez der pee·ko·la	Roussillon spicy meatballs
canard	ka·nar	duck
cassoulet	ka·soo·lay	Languedoc bean and meat stew
chèvre	shev·rer	goat
confit de canard	kon·fee der ka·nar	conserved duck, usually leg
entrecôte	on·trer·cot	rib steak
estouffade de bœuf	es·too·fad der berf	Carmargais beef stew with tomatoes and olives
fuet	fwet	dried Catalan sausage
guardianne de taureau	gar·dyan der to·ro	bull-meat stew
jambon	zham·bon	ham
lardon	lar·don	pieces of chopped bacon
macaronade	ma·ka·ro·naad	baked pasta, meat and tomato
magret de canard	ma·gray der ka·nar	duck breast
mouton	moo·ton	mutton
pot au feu	po·to fer	beef stew
pot au feu à la Languedocienne	po·to fer a·long·do·syen	beef and salted-pork stew
pot au feu à l'Abligeoise	po·to fer a·lab·leezh·waz	beef and goose-neck stew from Albi

poulet	poo·lay	chicken
taureau de Camargue	to·ro der ka·marg	Camargais beef

FISH & SEAFOOD

anchois de Collioure	on·shwa der kol·yoor	Collioure anchovy
anguille congre	ong·gee·yer kong·grer	conger eel
anguille sauvage	ong·gee·yer so·vazh	wild eel
bourridede Sète	boo·reed der set	garlicky monkfish stew
bullinada	boo·lee·na·da	Roussillon fish and potato stew
congre	kong·grer	conger eel
coquillages	ko·kee·lazh	shellfish
coquille St Jacques	ko·keel san zhak	scallop
crevette grise	kre·vet grees	shrimp
crevette rose	kre·vet ros	prawn
encornets	on·kor·net	squid
encornets farcies	on·kor·net far·see	stuffed squid
escargot de mer	es·ka·go der mair	sea snail
fruits de mer	frwee der mair	seafood
gambas	gom·ba	king prawns
homard	o·mar	lobster
huîtres	wee·trer	oysters
langouste	lang·goost	crayfish
langouste à la Sètoise	lang·goost a la set·waaz	spicy lobster stew originating in Sète
langoustine	lang·goos·teen	small saltwater 'lobster'
morue Catalane	mo·rew ka·ta·laan	salt cod with tomatoes and peppers
moules	mool	mussels
muge	moozh	grey mullet
oursin	oor·san	sea urchin
paella	pa·ay·a	rice dish with saffron, vegetables and shellfish
palourde	pa·lord	clam
parillada	pa·reel·ya·da	Roussillon mixed fish platter
poulpe	poolp	octopus
rouget	roo·zhay	red mullet
rouille à la Sètoise	roo·yer a la set·waaz	tomato, saffron and cuttlefish stew
soupe de poisson	soop der pwa·son	fish soup
tielle	tyel	seafood pastry pie
violets	vyo·lay	sea squirts

FRUIT, VEGETABLES, HERBS & SPICES

abricot	ab·ree·ko	apricot
aïl	ai	garlic
aligot de Lozère	a·lee·go der lo·zair	cheesy garlicky mashed potato
amande frais	a·mond fray	fresh almond
artichaut	ar·tee·sho	artichoke
asperge	a·spairzh	asparagus
cèpe	sep	cepe (boletus mushroom)
cerise	se·reez	cherry
chataîgne de Cévennes	sha·tayn·yer der say·ven	sweet chestnut from Cévennes
figue	feeg	fig
fleur de sel de Camargue	fler der sel der ka·marg	Camargue salt crystals
fraise	frez	strawberry
maron	ma·ron	sweet chestnut
navet noir	na·vay	black turnip
oignons doux des Cévennes	wan·yon doo day say·ven	Cévennes sweet onions
peche	pesh	peach

riz de Camargue	reez der ka·marg	Camargais rice
romarin	ro·ma·ran	rosemary
thym	teem	thyme
tian	tyan	vegetable and rice gratin served in a dish called a *tian*
truffe	troof	black truffle

SAUCES

aïoli	ay·o·lee	garlic mayonnaise
huile d'olive	weel do·leev	olive oil
pistou	pees·too	pesto (pounded mix of basil, hard cheese, olive oil and garlic)
rouille	roo·yer	*aïoli*-based sauce spiced with chilli pepper
vinaigrette	vun·ay·gret	salad dressing made with oil, vinegar, mustard and garlic
vinaigre de Banyuls	vun·ay·gre de ban·yool	Banyuls vinegar

DRINKS

un café	un ka·fay	small black espresso
un grand café	un gron ka·fay	double espresso
café crème	ka·fay krem	espresso with steamed milk or cream
café au lait	ka·fay o lay	lots of hot milk with a little coffee served in a large cup
un petit crème	un pay·tee krem	small *café crème*
noisette (literally 'hazelnut')	nwa·zet	espresso with just a dash of milk
café décaféiné	ka·fay day·ka·fee·nay	decaffeinated coffee
un thé	un tay	tea, never served with milk
une tisane	oon tee·zan	herbal tea
chocolat chaud	sho·ko·la sho	hot chocolate
sirop	see·rop	fruit syrup or cordial
citron pressé	see·tron pray·say	glass of iced water with freshly squeezed lemon juice and sugar

Environment

For some pointers on responsible travel see p17.

THE LAND

Beaches and lagoons, salt pans and vineyards, canals and caves, Mediterranean scrub and Pyrenean peaks: the lie of the land in this twinset region is inspiringly varied.

Roussillon, the southern part embracing 15% of the entire geographic area, shares borders with Spain (south), Andorra (west), Languedoc (north) and the Mediterranean Sea (east). The eastern Pyrenees crash across at majestic heights, climaxing with Languedoc-Roussillon's highest peaks – Pic Carlit (2921m) and Pic du Canigou (2784m) – but consenting to more gentle altitudes, just short of their final descent to the sea, around the Chaîne des Albères. Rocky coves and inlets stud the rugged, almost Cornish-styled coastline, wrapped in pebble beaches and terraced Banyuls vineyards.

Languedoc historically stretched as far west as Toulouse and is wedged today between three French regions: Midi-Pyrénées (west), Auvergne (north) and Provence-Côte d'Azur (east). Its coastline sweeps north from Cap Leucate (Roussillon), past a string of sandy spits and lagoons *(étangs)* to the River Rhône and alluvial plain of the Camargue. Mountains stampede across its vast interior: the Cévennes, Montagne Noire and dramatic limestone plateau of the Grands Causses – all southerly expressions of the ancient Massif Central – and the Massif des Corbières. Gorges and underground sink-hills, caves and streams riddle the unique lunar landscape of the Grands Causses.

Rivers include the Rhône (east), Gard, Hérault and Aude. Europe's longest navigable subterranean river flows beneath Labouiche near Foix (p201). Then of course there is the Canal du Midi (p30) that mooches in the most Zenlike of fashions across the region from Toulouse to Narbonne and the Med.

WILDLIFE

Animals

Mammals romp like mad in the Parc National des Cévennes (p145), home to 89 species including red deer, beavers, wild boar, otters and 45% of France's vertebrates. Couple this with 208 bird species, 18 types of amphibian, 17 reptile varieties, 1824 insect types and 53 spider species underfoot, and wildlife watchers are in heaven.

Swooping above clifftops are tawny and black vultures, birds of prey which had all but disappeared when reintroduced in the 1970s. Their aerial mates are the golden and Bonnelli eagles, buzzardlike short-toed eagle and peregrine falcon. In central Languedoc the austere plateau of Le Pays de Sault harbours the golden eagle and Egyptian vulture.

TOP PICKS: NATURAL WONDERS

- Cirque de Navacelles (p112)
- Gorges du Tarn (p153)
- Grotte de Clamouse (p110)
- Pic du Canigou (p230)
- Causse Noir (p155)

LOVE SONG

The frenzied buzz that serenades sunny days is cicadas *(cigales)* – transparent-winged insects, most common in tropical or temperate climes – on the pull. The male cicada only courts when the temperature is above 25°C in the shade. Its shrill love song is produced with tymbals, vibrating music-making plates attached to the abdomen. Female cicadas don't sing.

The lifespan of a cicada is three to 17 years, all but four to six weeks of which is spent underground. Upon emerging from the soil to embark on its adult life, the cicada attaches itself to a tree, where it immediately begins its mating rituals. It dies weeks later.

Mouflons, introduced in the 1950s, clamber over sunlit slopes. The sheep-like animals with curly horns to die for feast on the Cevennes' rich chestnut crop (p57), while the pack of 1500 to 2000 heads roaming Haut-Languedoc is Europe's most important Mediterranean mouflon population; the gentle winter snowfalls and dry, sun-baked summers suit the hardy animal perfectly.

Bird life is a different kettle of fish around the marshy wetlands and lagoons on the coast, where 400 land- and waterbirds flutter, including the kingfisher, bee-eater, stork, moustached warbler, white egret and purple heron. Among the 200-odd migratory species – spot them February to May and August to October – is the squacco heron, wood sandpiper and elegant pink flamingo: 10% of the world's greater flamingos call the Camargue home, alongside native horse and bull populations. The mussels, oysters and clams that breed like billy-o in beds in Le Bassin de Thau and other coastal lagoons were introduced in the early 20th century.

Endangered species include the Hermann's tortoise, a yellow-and-black creature once indigenous to Mediterranean Europe but now only surviving in Roussillon's Massif des Albères, the Massif des Maures in neighbouring Provence, and Corsica. The Przewalski horse, a native of Mongolia considered to be the world's last remaining truly wild horse, canters on the Causse Méjean.

BROWN BEAR LOVE FEST

Ever since 2004 when a boar hunter shot Cannelle (Cinnamon), the one animal that might (with a great deal of luck) have ensured the genetic survival of the Pyrenean bear ('in self-defence', the hunter claimed, maintaining that the bear charged him), Roussillon has had a love fest with its brown bear. 'Les Pyrenees avec l'Ours' (The Pyrenees with Bears) is the slogan splashed across lamp posts and free information leaflets distributed with gusto in the mountainous region where walkers and hikers are quite likely, as the brochure points out, 'to discover signs which indicate the bear's presence: traces, hairs, droppings…'

The *ours brun* (brown bear) is a solitary animal that lives alone, is most active at night, and stands 1.7m to 2.2m tall on its hind legs and around 1.1m on all fours. Since 1940 in France it has only lived in the Pyrenees, its population tumbling from 70 in 1954 to 8 in 1990. But over the past decade and a half, as part of a government-funded Pyrenean bear revival and conservation project, bears have been imported from Slovenia, released, and bred successfully. The result in 2008: two bears meandering in the eastern Pyrenean forests of Roussillon, Haute-Ariège, Aude and neighbouring Andorra; and another eight to 11 in the central Pyrenees, including the Ariège area around Foix.

While the reintroduction of bears might not be welcomed in the western Pyrenees, where free-roaming sheep are bred for meat (as opposed to fenced sheep producing cheese as in the east), for people in Roussillon in the eastern Pyrenees their loyalty to the brown bear is sacred. For them the brown bear is a ancient symbol of fertility and a spring rite, powerfully expressed each February during the extremely evocative and downright wild Fête de l'Ours (http://feteours.free.fr; p215), when grown men parade along the street dressed in bear skins.

TOP PICKS: NATURE WATCH

Precious opportunities to peer close up at Mediterranean wildlife:

- **Loups du Gévaudan** (p143) Learn all about this indigenous Lozère forest animal at this wolf reserve near Mende, Haut-Languedoc.
- **Maison des Loups and Observatoire de Montagne** (p206) Wolves and Pyrenean mountain fauna in one fell swoop.
- **Réserve de Bisons d'Europe** (p143) Watch bisons wander freely at this Haut-Languedoc reserve.
- **Belvédère des Vautours** (p156) See vultures wheel and plane in the Causses skies, peer into their clifftop nests with live video transmission, and sign up for a half-day birding walk.
- **Walking and donkey trekking in the Parc National des Cévennes** (p145) Flora and fauna beg to be discovered during 20-odd short walking trails mapped out in France's largest national park.
- **Tracking dinosaur footprints** (p146) For real!
- **Micropolis** (p171) Insect watching at insect city.
- **Village des Pecheurs, Canet** (p218) Discover typical lagoon wildlife with this trail along the shore of Roussillon's Étang de Canet et de St-Nazaire.

Plants

Walk the Sentier Cathare or another hiking trail in Le Pays de Sault and you'll spot plants galore, including 50 varieties of orchid and vast swaths of natural beech and fir forest. Limoniums bloom around the sandy lagoons on the Narbonne coast and in the Pyrenees peatbogs nurture rare carnivorous flowers, including several types of the insect-gobbling Drosera and the more rare *Ligularia sibirica,* whose leggy wine-red stalks topped with sunflower-yellow flowers grow 1.5m tall at altitudes of 900m to 1400m.

Maquis is a wild scrub whose low, dense, fragrant shrubs spice up local cuisine. *Garrigue* is typified by aromatic Mediterranean plants such as juniper, broom and fern, and grows on chalkier soil.

Forest carpets 37% of Languedoc-Roussillon; the most heavily forested areas (predominantly oak and pine) are Lozère and the Gard. Cork oak (see below), green oak and chestnut trees dominate the interior, where wild blueberry and strawberry bushes thrive. Maritime, Aleppo and umbrella pines provide coastal shade, while the fat rubber-smooth trunks of plane trees stud village squares.

Cork oak trees have grown in the western Mediterranean basin for 60 million years, but it was not until the 17th century when a Benedictine monk

Park	Website	Features
Parc National des Cévennes (1970; 910 sq km)	www.pnc.fr	majestic mountain peaks, surreal moonscape plateau riddled with caves; mouflon, wolves, eagles & vultures
Parc Naturel Régional de la Narbonnaise en Méditerranée (2003; 800 sq km)	www.parc-naturel-narbonnaise.fr	Cathar country inland & 30km of beaches split from the sea by lagoons and salt pans; limonium paradise, nesting ground for sterns & plovers; migratory birds
Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Languedoc (1973; 2600 sq km)	www.parc-haut-languedoc.fr	Montagne Noire, Minervois vineyards; 70% of territory forested; wild goats & boar, birds of prey
Parc Naturel Régional des Pyrénées Catalanes (2004; 1380 sq km)	www.parc-pyrenees-catalanes.fr	sacred mountain peaks, hilltop villages & Le Train Jaune mountain train; eagles, vultures, peatbogs & rare carnivorous flora

GARDENS

Given the extraordinary variety of landscape in this often-overlooked region, Languedoc-Roussillon's exotic range of gardens is predictable perhaps. From the secret garden of a boutique B&B in a coaching inn (p75) to the flax and medicinal plants of a medieval garden (p88), the 2500 fragrances of Limoux' Jardin aux Plantes Parfumées (p191), 200 camellia types (p91), a citrus-fruit nursery (p231) or France's oldest botanical garden (p100), there is no end of *jardins* for green-fingered enthusiasts to dig into and get their hands dirty.

Plenty of gardens are listed in the destination chapters of this guide. **Le Temps des Jardins** (www.jardinslanguedoc.com) is a region-wide initiative that sees 75 mainly privately owned gardens welcome visitors from May to October. Most of them run extra guided tours, horticultural workshops and so on during the region's annual Rendez Vous aux Jardins, held for three days in late May or early June.

South of Minerve, **Hidden Gardens** (☎ 04 68 91 36 96; www.hiddengardensfrance.com; La Grande Maison, rue des Caves Hautes, 34210 Cesseras) is the local specialist in garden tours. Even if you don't read French, a lounge in a Languedoc hammock with a copy of Louisa Jones' beautifully illustrated *Almanach des Paysages et Jardins du Sud* (2008) and *Nouvelles Natures: Jardins d'Aujourd'hui en Languedoc Roussillon* (2009) makes for a dreamy afternoon.

For those longing to wake up each morning in a 100% natural, horticultural garden of Eden, **Le Jardin des Sambucs** (☎ 04 67 82 46 47; www.jardinsambucs.com; Le Villaret, 30570 St-André de Majencoules; adult/under 10yr €5/free; gardens 🕑 10am-7pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct) is *the* address. Even if you don't snag its *chambre d'hôte* or self-catering *gîte,* its terraced gardens and the horticultural-cultural happenings it hosts are probably the region's most prized.

started bottling fizzy wine in glass that cylindrical wedges from the tree's honeycomb-textured bark – cork – were cut out and stuffed into bottles. Harvested every 15 years, the tree trunk is a gentle ginger colour, wet, warm and wrinkly when first stripped. Within a couple of months it turns brick-red and after 12 months, dark brown. Cork oak cultivation is studied, researched and developed at the Institut Méditerranéen du Liège (Mediterranean Institute of Cork) in the Roussillon village of Vivès in the Massif des Albères.

More than 120 varieties of *chataigniers* (chestnut trees) grow in the sweet chestnut groves of the Cèvennes alongside the odd mulberry tree, first cultivated in the 16th century to feed silkworms; see p151 and p96, respectively, for more on each.

NATIONAL PARKS

Languedoc-Roussillon's only national park, France's largest, protects mountain and moonscape *causses* (plateaus) in the north. Another big chunk is

Activities	Best time to visit	Page
walking, mountain biking, caving, canyoning, donkey trekking, limited downhill & cross-country skiing	spring, summer & winter	p145
bird watching, walking, swimming & sunbathing	summer (water activities) & autumn (bird watching)	p253
walking, cycling, horse riding, wine tasting	spring & summer	p183 (La Montagne Noir) & p187 (Le Minervois)
walking, mountain biking, kayaking & canoeing, canyoning, limited downhill & cross-country skiing, paragliding	spring & summer	p234

WIND POWER

The Tramontana is one of those stir-crazy winds that, like the Mistral in neighbouring Provence, can drive you to distraction. It only blows in three-day stints. It blows in from the northwest, meaning it's viciously cold, dry and biting. And it makes surfers on Cap Leucate (p220) go bananas.

If the Tramontana is not letting off steam, one of its siblings is instead. Brilliant red sunsets are said to preempt the arrival of the equally nasty Cers, another northerly wind felt most keenly around Narbonne. Its coastal counterpart, the Marin, is a warm, humid southeasterly chap, while the southwesterly Autan expresses itself in sudden gusts which can be twice its mean speed.

The upside of all this wind is the region's wealth of *énergie éolienne* generated by 17 wind farms (64 turbines) in Languedoc-Roussillon: this is France's biggest wind-power provider. Perpignan alone has committed to upping its renewable-energy output to more than its current energy needs – 436,000 megawatts a year – by 2015. Forty new wind turbines, three solar farms and the installation of solar panels on public buildings will help it achieve this goal. Montpellier's future Hôtel de Ville (p40), complete with 1400 sq metres of solar panels, is a classic example of this new type of eco-architecture.

protected to a lesser degree by four *parcs naturals régionaux,* 28 nature reserves, a Unesco-backed biosphere reserve and dozens of coastal sites under the wing of the Conservatoire du Littoral.

For Unesco World Heritage sites, see p22.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

'Non à la THT', painted in bold white letters on roads and *cols* (mountain passes) makes itself heard loud and clear in Roussillon, where the entire population is up in arms about *la ligne THT (tres haute tension;* the high-tension line) planned for their neck of the woods. Street demonstrations, meetings, anti-THT film screenings and so on have been a constant since the late 1990s, when the high-voltage line crossing overhead from west of Perpignan along the Vallée du Tech into Spain was proposed. Not until 2008 was the issue resolved…sort of: the double 400,000-volt electric cables would be buried underground, much to the equal horror of environmentalists.

Forest fires destroy vast tracts of land every summer: 423 fires ripped across 1608 hectares of vegetation in 2007, destroying green oak, pine forests and maquis in the main. Banning barbecues and camp fires within 200m of any wooded area is one seasonal measure in place between 1 June and 30 September to help prevent forest fire; to report one call ☎ 18 or ☎ 112. Starting a forest fire, accidentally or otherwise, can mean a €3750 fine and six months in prison.

Solar energy has been hot in Roussillon since 1947, when construction started in Mont Louis on the world's first solar-powered oven (p233). It went on to serve as a prototype for 15 more such furnaces around the world, including the more powerful 1000-kilowatt Grand Four Solaire d'Odeillo at nearby Font Romeu (p234) in 1970. During the oil crisis in the 1970s the massive hillside site, privy to 3000 hours of sunshine a year, was used to produce highly concentrated solar energy. But by the 1980s, as oil prices dropped, interest in solar power waned and the site turned to research instead. This fate was shared by the Themis solar-power tower, built in 1983 in nearby Targasonne. It produced electricity for just three years, until 1986, when it was shut down and abandoned – until the new millennium. Now, as oil prices soar, all eyes are on Roussillon to see how it might recycle its solar heritage. Themis produced its first sun-fuelled kilowatt of energy again in October 2007.

Languedoc-Roussillon Outdoors

WATER ACTIVITIES

Long beaches of fine sand stretch for miles along most of Languedoc's coastline, frequently in the form of thin spits of sand that divide sea from saltwater lagoons. These shallower *étangs* are safe for the children to paddle and splash in – warmer, too, if you're seeking the sun outside summertime. In high season there's scarcely room to sling a towel in resorts such as La Grande Motte, Le Grau du Roi (p83), Palavas-les-Flots (p106) and Le Cap d'Agde (p134). But jump in the car or onto your bike and retreat for a kilometre or two – say along one of those sandy spits with water to left and right – and you'll find quiet dunes and space aplenty.

Resorts such as Canet Plages and straggling Argelès-sur-Mer along the northern reaches of Roussillon's coast have equally broad, sandy beaches. Further south, the Côte Vermeille (p221), where the last of the Pyrenees tumble down to the Mediterranean, has small, rocky coves and a pebbly shoreline.

WINDSURFING & KITE-SURFING

Even the smaller coastal resorts will normally have a windsurfing school that also hires out boards and sails. Larger holiday centres such as Le Grau du Roi and Le Cap d'Agde will even offer you a choice of places to develop your skills atop a *planche à voile*. Most will have one or more monitors who speak English, and windsurfing skills, like those of sailing or canoeing, are eminently demonstrable. For your first attempts, the lake-smooth waters of lagoons such as Étang de Canet et de St-Nazaire and Le Bassin de Thau can be less daunting. It's also easier to clamber back onto your board from their shallow depths when you take an inevitable dunking. For more experienced windsurfers and those who get their thrills and spills from funboards, the open sea will be more challenging. For special thrills and worthwhile wind that blows for at least 300 days each year, make for Cap Leucate in Roussillon (p221), the venue each year for the Mondial du Vent (the World Wind Championships).

'gradually becoming more popular is the exhilarating sport of kite-surfing'

The waves of the Mediterranean are altogether too gentle and inconsistent to make for worthwhile surfing. What's gradually becoming more popular is the exhilarating sport of kite-surfing, of which Languedoc-Roussillon has produced more than its share of world champions. Sign on at one of the expanding number of schools along the coast such as **Kithau** (☎ 06 87 07 11 93; www.kithau.com in French; rue Abbe Gregoire, 34340 Marseillan), from where you can scud across the waters of Le Bassin de Thau; **Pure Kite** (☎ 04 67 65 47 35; www.purekite.com in French), which operates from the beach at Palavas-les-Flots; or **Adreneline** (☎ 04 68 45 74 60; www.adrenaline-kitesurf.com), run by former world champion John Pendry and based at La Franqui, near Perpignan (see p220).

SAILING

If you have your own craft, the numerous marinas along the coast, whether a giant floating village such as La Grande Motte or Port Camargue within Le Grau du Roi or a small harbour with just a few berths, between them offer you more than 100,000 moorings.

The **Fédération Française de Voile** (☎ 01 40 60 37 00; www.ffvoile.org in French; 17 rue Henri Bocquillon, 75015 Paris) is a useful body at national level for sailing information, both general and particular. For region-specific information, contact the **Ligue de Voile du Languedoc Roussillon** (☎ 04 67 50 48 30; www.ffvoilelr.net in French; Patio Santa Monica, 1815, av Marcel Pagnol, 34470 Perols).

Wherever a resort has a windsurfing school, you'll probably find a sailing school too. Here, you can hone your sailing skills and also hire craft, ranging from simple dinghies to lasers and catamarans. The smaller resorts of the relatively underpopulated Roussillon coast alone can offer a choice of 13 sailing schools, while holiday meccas such as Le Cap d'Agde and Le Grau du Roi each have more than one from which you can select.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

A wreck or two near the coast adds piquancy to a scuba dive off the sandy shores that fringe the sea along most of Languedoc. Exceptions to this relative uniformity are the spiky volcanic promontory that extends into the sea beyond Le Cap d'Agde (which alone has eight diving schools) and also the rocky folds, crevices and ravines between La Grande Motte and Palavas-les-Flots. These apart, the rockier underwater terrain off Roussillon's shores – and in particular the Réserve Naturelle Marine protected area south of Banyuls – has more variety and harbours more types of marine life. Count on around €40 for a dive and €50 for an introductory 'baptism'.

For diving information, contact the Fédération Française d'Études et de Sports Sous Marins (www.ffessmpm.fr in French); the website has links to provincial diving organisations.

You don't have to don the gear and put yourself through a diver's training to appreciate what's beneath the sea. Granted, they're two-dimensional rather than the total wraparound experience of the scuba diver, but the region's two underwater trails, staked out and signed, are for anyone who's comfortable with a facemask and snorkel. They give a glimpse of the wonderful underwater world where fish glide freely instead of staring glassily from an aquarium.

Off Le Cap d'Agde, the Sentier Sous-Marin (p135) leads you through five distinct marine environments, each with its characteristic plants and other marine life. Further south, between Banyuls and Cerbère near the frontier with Spain, there's a similar underwater trail (p225).

KAYAKING, CANOEING & WHITE-WATER RAFTING

The Coast

You can rent a canoe or sea kayak at all major resorts along the Languedoc-Roussillon littoral. One particularly attractive option is Le Grau du Roi, where you can paddle around the port or, more ambitiously, browse the canals and inlets of nearby stretches of La Petite Camargue. From Le Cap d'Agde there's exciting coastal canoeing, while at Gruissan (p123) you can choose between the sea or the more gentle and protected lagoon. In Roussillon you can explore the rocky coastline's coves and inlets. For an extra touch, sign on with **Aleoutes Kayak Mer** (www.kayakmer.net in French), based in Banyuls, which can lay on sea kayaking at sunset and overnight camping trips.

Inland

Four of the rivers that give their names to the *département* through which they flow offer exciting and extensive canoeing opportunities. The Ariège, Aude, Gard and Hérault are indeed much more than administrative labels on a map of France, originally stuck there by Napoleon in his huge postrevolutionary shake-up of France.

Canoe a stretch of the River Gard, embarking at the riverside hamlet of Collias and drifting downstream and under the Pont du Gard (p86), the

département's most iconic landmark. The dramatic Gorges de l'Hérault are best seen from the seat of a canoe, while the upper Aude offers tranquil scenery punctuated by deep gorges all the way south from Limoux. In summer, when watercourses can be sluggish, the Ariège, tumbling down from the Pyrenees, is the most exciting of the quartet.

But it's not only on these higher-profile rivers that you can enjoy satisfying yet not necessarily strenuous canoeing and kayaking. The Tech and Têt in Roussillon, and the Orb, flowing gently down from the Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Languedoc, will satisfy both beginners and more experienced paddlers. If you enjoy dramatic scenery with your exercise, head deeper into the hinterland of Haut-Languedoc and spend a day or half a day stroking your way downstream through the Gorge de la Dourbie, squeezed between the sheer walls of the Gorges du Tarn, or along the Gorge de la Jonte, the most varied of Haut-Languedoc's deeply incised gulches.

As a general resource for canoeing, check out www.canoe-france.com, which lists 14 enterprises that operate on the rivers of Languedoc-Roussillon and elsewhere in southern France.

The rivers of Languedoc-Roussillon aren't really swift or deep enough to make for adrenalin-surging, white-knuckle rafting. Exceptions are a stretch of the River Aude between Axat and Quillan, where several outfits lay on descents; plus the Dourbie near Millau; and faster stretches of the River Lot.

BOATING

From coastal resorts and along some of the inland waterways and rivers, there are opportunities for boat trips, with or without commentary, where others do the hard work. At the Canal du Midi's western limit, in Toulouse, you can sign on for a guided cruise along its early stretches or up a length of the River Garonne. Other ports along the Canal du Midi where you can jump aboard are Agde, Carcassonne and Homps.

There are plenty of other scenically tempting options. From the quayside in Sète (p107), you can cruise around the bustling commercial and fishing harbours or, in lighter mode, sign on for a evening beach barbecue and sardine sizzle. From Aigues-Mortes (p82), several boats – including a converted working barge – chug along the canals of La Petite Camargue. In Roussillon you'll enjoy some staggering coastal panoramas from the summertime boat shuttle (more ferry service than leisure cruise) that plies between Argelès-sur-Mer and Collioure.

A little inland, you can explore the Canal de la Robine from Narbonne aboard a working barge or glide the waters more silently in an electric boat. You can travel history too, on a *gabarre,* a flat-bottomed sailing barge (of the kind used to haul goods down the River Garonne to Bordeaux) that does half-hour trips from Albi. And for an original perspective of the strictly contemporary, 21st-century wonder that is the Pont de Millau, sign on for a one- to 1½-hour boat trip with Bateliers du Viaduc (p166).

Boat Hire

There's no more leisurely way to explore the flatter parts of Languedoc than aboard a rented boat, where you dictate the pace, mooring when and where the mood takes you. Rental boats sleep between four and eight passengers and don't require a special licence. Prices vary hugely according to season. Spring and autumn are both less expensive and cooler than high summer, and the locks are less crowded then, too.

The most popular waterway is, of course, the Canal du Midi, of which 175km is within Languedoc, plus a further navigable 65km in the Midi-Pyrénées region that takes you onwards to Toulouse. Its 48 locks aren't all operable at the press of a button, so be prepared to put your shoulder

to the wheel every so often. For boat-rental companies, see the boxed texts, p136, p188 and p242.

The Canal du Midi isn't the only navigable stretch of manmade water. Its offshoot, the Canal de la Robine, runs from Sallèles d'Aude right through the town of Narbonne and on to the sea at Port-la-Nouvelle. It too has 48 locks, ideal for improving those biceps, along its relatively short 33km length. Smacking more of the sea, the Canal du Rhône à Sète, gouged between the port of Sète and Beaucaire, beside the River Rhône, enables water traffic to journey from the Atlantic via the Canals de la Garonne and du Midi, across Le Bassin de Thau to Sète, then up the River Rhône into central and northern France. Also maritime in mood is the Petit Rhône, partly navigable and smaller sister of the major River Rhône, which splits into myriad loose ends as it runs through the delta of the Camargue.

LAND ACTIVITIES

WALKING & HIKING

You could spend a couple of lifetimes walking around Languedoc-Roussillon. In the late 20th century, well before the contemporary obsession with flab and obesity, France's central government decreed that every *commune* must mark out a footpath or two. So it is that Languedoc-Roussillon has some 12,000km of waymarked paths and tracks, mostly maintained by public-spirited volunteers from the local chapters of the Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre, roughly speaking the French equivalent of Britain's Ramblers Association.

Centuries-old *drailles,* or drovers' routes, and ancient *chemins* and *sentiers,* footpaths from hamlet to hamlet and village to village, need no signalling. Other longer routes that hundreds of thousands of feet have trodden over centuries include the classic Chemins de St Jacques pilgrim routes and still extant sections of the Roman Via Domitia (see the boxed text opposite). Marked trails come in three categories.

'ancient *chemins* and *sentiers*, footpaths from hamlet to hamlet and village to village, need no signalling'

Sentiers de Grande Randonnée (GR)

Generally linear and, by definition, long, usually embracing several day stages, they're signalled in red and white. Some cross Languedoc-Roussillon coming from and heading to more distant destinations. The GR10, for example, bucks and snakes along the length of the Pyrenees from Hendaye in the Basque country, enters Roussillon, passes over Pic du Canigou (p230) and drops to Banyuls (p224) on the Mediterranean's shore. The GR7, by contrast, starts out in distant Alsace, close to the frontier with Germany, enters Languedoc by La Montagne Noire and then threads towards the Pyrenees and its ultimate destination nestled within them, Andorra.

Other long-distance trails, such as the GR70 – the 12-stage Chemin de Stevenson or Robert Louis Stevenson trail (p146) – the six-day GR66 Tour du Mont Aigoual and the shorter GR68 Tour du Mont Lozère, fall mainly or entirely within Languedoc-Roussillon.

Sentiers de Grande Randonnée de Pays (GPR)

Look for the red and yellow blazes of these shorter routes, circular – and therefore easier to plan a drop-off or pickup – and lasting a few days at the most.

CHEMINS DE ST JACQUES & VIA DOMITIA

We deliberately use the plural form for the Chemins de St Jacques, the classic pilgrimage that ever since early medieval times has taken walkers over the frontier into Spain and on to Santiago de Compostela. Not far from the Atlantic seaboard, this town rivalled in pilgrim popularity both Rome and Jerusalem for more than half a millennium. Nowadays, devout Catholic believers mix it with walkers and bikers of every possible conviction who simply enjoy the sense of treading history and the charming wayside chapels, hostels and hospices that punctuate their journey.

In fact, only two of the four major French arteries, each recognised as a Unesco World Heritage site and fed by numerous secondary veins, pass through the area covered by this book. All the same, we briefly paint the full picture for completeness.

From the steps of Vézelay's Basilique Ste-Madeleine in Burgundy, pilgrims set out, sporting the characteristic wooden staff and *coquille St Jacques* (scallop shell – Chaucer's 'cockle hat') for St-Jean Pied de Port and the crossing into Spain, following what's nowadays the GR654. The second option, much of it included within the GR6552, sets out from Tours in the Loire Valley, passes through Bordeaux and joins the Vézelay route to make the same frontier crossing – as does the third major route, today's GR65. This leaves Le Puy in the Massif Central and dips a blistered toe into Haut-Languedoc, crossing La Margeride and L'Aubrac (p144), and passing through the way stages of St-Alban-sur-Limagnole and Aumont-Aubrac. Ploughing its own furrow is the Chemin d'Arles, setting out from Arles, just over the border in Provence, to pass through St-Gilles and La Petite Camargue (p81), call by Toulouse, and then cross into Spain via the more daunting Col du Somport. All four options are scenically stunning and particularly convivial as you share the trail with like-minded fellow travellers.

You can even walk sections of the Via Domitia, the highway first forged by the Romans to connect their capital with their possessions in Spain. Entering Languedoc across the River Rhône at Beaucaire, much of it is nowadays smothered under tarmac and beneath busy traffic. But you can still walk stretches, your feet treading the same route that soldiers, merchants and adventurers followed nearly 2000 years ago. For more information, take a look at www.viaeromanae.org/france or contact the **Association Régionale Via Domitia** (☎ 04 67 22 81 00; c/o La Comité Régional de Tourisme, 20 rue de la République, Montpellier Cedex 2).

Sentiers de Promenade et Randonnée (PR)

Most modest and therefore most accessible of all are the myriad local PRs, frequently indicated with yellow dots or slashes, though you may well encounter a veritable rainbow of variants. Altogether shorter walks and strolls, they range from an outing of a couple of hours up to a maximum of a full day. Just about any tourist office you call by can offer a free brochure describing PRs that take you through the most scenic local areas, and – assuming those local volunteers with their paint pots have been doing their job – there's little scope for going astray. You'll find plenty of suggestions for such shorter strolls in each destination chapter.

Serious hikers who would like to get in touch with their booted brothers and sisters in Languedoc-Roussillon can contact the **Comité Régional de la Fédération Française de la Randonnée Pédestre Languedoc-Roussillon** (☎ 04 67 82 16 73; www.ffrandonnee-lr.fr in French; Maison Régionale des Sports, Parc Club du Millénaire Bat, 311025 av Henri Becquerel, 34000 Montpellier).

Elsewhere, the Parc National des Cévennes is criss-crossed by a dozen GR trails, and there are over 20 shorter signposted walks lasting between two and seven hours.

CYCLING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

Planning

The Association Française de Développement des Véloroutes et Voies Vertes is a splendid not-for-profit organisation that lobbies for and establishes cycle

routes all over France – check its website at www.af3v.org; if you read French, consult too http://toulousevelo.free.fr (in French), site of Association Vélo Toulouse, its local affiliate for both Languedoc-Roussillon and the Midi-Pyrénées regions. Also for readers of French, www.ffr.fr, website (in French) of the Fédération Française de Cyclisme, the body responsible, among much else, for waymarking mountain-bike trails around France, is another useful planning resource.

Wherever, an hour or so of poring over a map will help you to plan a route that takes you along minor roads, avoiding main highways altogether. The ideal scale for cycling is 1:150,000 or 1:200,000. Michelin map *Languedoc-Roussillon No 526,* at 1:200,000, is tearproof and explicit. However, printed on both sides, it does tend to flap and billow like a spinnaker in the wind. More manageable in a breeze or on the ground are the Michelin maps at 1:150,000 or 1:175,000, each normally covering a pair of *départements*. No 339, for example, will take you the length and breadth of Hérault and the Gard. No 344 covers all of Aude and Roussillon, while, armed with No 343, you can cycle all of the Ariège.

For information about traffic-free, dedicated cycle routes through pleasant scenery, check out www.af3v.org, website of the Association Française de Développement des Véloroutes et Voies Vertes.

When to pedal? Bas-Languedoc is ideal for a good three-quarters of the year. Avoid if you can July and August, when the temperature on the plains may be pleasant for more sedentary pleasures but is something of a sweat for cyclists. If you've no alternative, be sure to pack at least a couple of litres of water. Haut-Languedoc is exhilarating year-round, though one or two roads leading over the higher *cols* may be temporarily closed after heavy snowfall.

Touring

There's plenty of scope for easy, undemanding pedalling. The ultimate in cycling for softies is the Canal du Midi, every inch of its 240km bikeable, though some stretches are a little rutted and pocky. It's guaranteed pancake-flat except for the occasional (brief) rise at a bridge. If you plan to cycle its length, you'll always find a bed at the end of the day (though do reserve, especially in summer) and will rarely require a detour of more than 5km from the towpath.

One excellent resource that fits neatly into your handlebar bag is *Biking the Canal du Midi,* its English version published in 2008. This practical guide is written and researched by school headmaster, passionate cyclist and canal lover Philippe Calas, who also finds time in his life to maintain the equally impressive and informative general website about the canal, www.midicanal.fr.

An alternative guide for readers of French is *À Vélo le Long du Canal du Midi,* published by Association Vélo Toulouse. Now in its 13th edition, it covers the canal and on over Le Bassin de Thau to Sète. It also has chapters on riding the 42km-long Canal de la Robine and exploring the feeder channels of La Montagne Noire. Having reached Toulouse, should you want to keep right on pedalling to the ocean, pick up the association's equally detailed *Bordeaux-Toulouse à Vélo le Long du Canal de la Garonne,* describing the 280km route between these two cities, 193km of which is on towpath.

There are plenty of alternatives to towpaths for gentle off-road cycling. The *département* of Herault, for example, has more than 250km of cycling paths, destined to increase to 500km by 2012. And Languedoc-Roussillon currently has 12 *voies vertes,* green, signed scenic routes, shared with walkers and varying in length between 4km and 43km. These include:

- Sommières to Caveirac (p80), near Nîmes (22km)
- Perpignan to Thuir (15km)
- the Canal de la Robine between Narbonne and Port-la-Nouvelle (22km)

- the Canal du Midi from Carcassonne to Trèbes (14km)
- the Canal du Midi from Béziers to Portiragnes-Plage (15km)
- Palavas-les-Flots to Lattes (6km)

Should you prefer to meander independently, a bike is the best way to explore the dikes, salt pans and marshes of La Petite Camargue, taking you far from the crowds where no car can get.

Mountain bikers will probably prefer the more undulating and challenging hills of the Grands Causses and Cévennes in Haut-Languedoc, where the Parc National des Cévennes alone has more than 200km of signed trails. Elsewhere in the region there are, for example, 270km of trails, ranging from green to black, around Clermont-l'Hérault, and 240km splayed around the Pic du Canigou and the Têt valley.

TOUR COMPANIES

Two UK outdoor travel bodies that offer organised cycle tours of Languedoc-Roussillon are the **Cyclists Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 844 736 8450; www.cyclingholidays.org; Parklands, Railton Rd, Guildford, Surrey GU2 9JX), Britain's principal organisation for cyclists, and **French Cycling Holidays Ltd** (☎ 0208 861 5888; www.frenchcyclingholidays.com; 73 High Rd, Leavesden, Watford, Hertfordshire WD25 7AL).

Bike Hire & Transport

If you're reluctant to bring your favourite steed with you, you'll find plenty of possibilities for bike hire listed in the destination chapters. If you find it painful to be separated from your cycle, check your airline's restrictions and what it will charge (Ryanair, for example, will hit you for €30 to €40 per journey and require you to twist your handlebars and pedals and bag your bike). Rental rates vary, but typical prices on the ground are around €10/15/35 per half-/full day/week (an exception to such prices, if you simply want to trundle around town, are the admirable, subsidised, dirt-cheap, hop-on, hop-off cycle-rental schemes run by cities such as Montpellier, Toulouse, Perpignan and Narbonne).

HORSE RIDING & DONKEY TREKKING

You don't have to be a skilled horse rider to enjoy a tour in the saddle, from a one-hour jaunt to a trek of several days. Two areas in particular, one coastal, the other deep inland, lend themselves to equestrian fun and so have the most riding outfits offering both instruction and guided outings.

You can enjoy sea breezes and play the cowboy with a gallop along the sands or a splashy plod through the marshes and shallow ponds of La Petite Camargue. Several stables operate around both Le Grau du Roi and Aigues-Mortes. Expect to pay roughly €18/28/50 per hour/two hours/half-day.

In the hills, the Parc National des Cévennes has 600km of trails suitable for donkeys and horse riding. On horseback, the horse does the hard work of both locomotion and bearing its rider. A donkey will carry your pack, but don't expect it to provide a ride (most outfits specify that only children under 12 should hop up). This said, donkey-accompanied hiking in the Cévennes becomes more popular by the year, stimulated by, but by no means confined to, the Robert Louis Stevenson trail (p146). Several outfits within striking distance of Florac (p146) and Meyrueis (p151) hire donkeys. Typical prices are €45 per day and €210 to €275 per week. Many find that a donkey contributes to the pleasure of the journey, especially if there are children. Others – especially hikers wanting to sustain a swift pace – find them simply trouble.

'Many find that a donkey contributes to the pleasure of the journey. Others find them simply trouble'

For general information about horse riding in France, contact the **Comité National du Tourisme Équestre** (☎ 02 54 94 46 80; www.tourisme-equestre.fr; Parc Equestre

Fédéral, 41600 Lamotte-Beuvron) or its regional equivalent, the **Comité Régional du Tourisme Équestre Languedoc Roussillon** (☎ 04 67 43 82 50; www.telr.net in French; 14 rue des Logis, 34140 Loupian, Meze), whose website has plenty of links.

BIRD WATCHING

Flocks of pink flamingos strut and snuffle the shallow depths of La Petite Camargue, where more than 400 bird varieties have been spotted, and the saltwater lagoons that dimple the length of the Languedoc coastline. Their reed-fringed waters offer a relatively safe haven for myriad aquatic birds, both year-round nesters and others that drop by during their annual migrations. Particular hot spots for twitchers include the Salins du Midi salt pans south of Aigues-Mortes, the marshy Étang de Perois, Étang de l'Arnel and Étang du Prévost near Palavas, and the Étang de Canet et de St-Nazaire east of Perpignan.

Find out what to spot, where and when with the Ligue de Protection des Oiseaux (LPO; League for the Protection of Birds; www.lpo.fr, in French) and its regional *délégations* (on the website under 'Nos sites web').

In the wild Cévennes (particularly the heights of the Grands Causses and Mont Aigoual, and above the Gorges du Tarn, Gorges de la Jonte and Gorges de la Dourbie), raptors plane, ride the thermals and sweep with the gusts. For guaranteed vulture viewing (there are even minicameras transmitting from within their nests), visit the Belvédère des Vautours (p156) in the Gorges de la Jonte. Golden eagles, Egyptian vultures and other birds of prey also favour the austere, remote Pays de Sault, between the Aude and Ariège valleys.

Let purists sniff; the aerial acrobatics of the trained eagles and other birds of prey at Les Aigles de Beaucaire (p79) and the romantically sited Les Aigles du Château de Lordat (p204) delight children and adults alike.

Keen bird watchers may like to make contact with fellow spotters in the local offshoots of France's **Ligue Pour la Protection des Oiseaux** (Bird Protection League; ☎ 05 46 82 12 34; www.lpo.fr in French; La Corderie Royale, BP 90263, 17305 Rochefort). There are branches in the *départements* of **Aude** (☎ 04 68 49 12 12; Écluse Mandirac, 11100 Narbonne), **Aveyron and Lozère** (☎ 05 65 42 94 48; 10 rue des Coquelicots, 12850 Onet le Château) and **Hérault** (☎ 06 29 81 66 31; Les Lierles No 60, 3 Impasse St Exupéry, 34110 Frontignan). You can contact each by email at (name of *département*)@lpo.fr.

SKIING

You have to head for the extremities of Languedoc-Roussillon – the region's mountainous southern and western limits – if you're to ski, or even see snow for more than a couple of days at a stretch. And, frankly, the options aren't great. If you're in Haut-Languedoc, you'll find more satisfying skiing further north in the Massif Central. If you're based in Roussillon, heading further up the Têt valley beyond St-Romeu brings you to the ministate of Andorra, tucked between France and Spain, where the skiing's by far the best in the Pyrenees.

Of the small Roussillon winter resorts, Font Romeu is the largest, while Les Angles, Formiguères and Puyvalador offer limited but scenic downhill skiing. Further west, in the upper Ariège valley, the slopes above the spa town and small ski resort of Ax-les-Thermes, while fine for beginners and families with young children, are quickly exhausted by more experienced skiers.

Haut-Languedoc has reasonable cross-country skiing around Mont Lozère and on the south-facing slopes of Mont Aigoual, where the tiny ski station of Prat Peyrot has a dozen or so downhill runs.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Millau, in a bowl beneath rearing *causses,* is one of France's main centres for hang-gliding and *parapente* (paragliding). Among several set-ups that exploit the uplifting thermals for which the basin is famous are **Horizon** (☎ 05 65 59 78 60; www.horizon-millau.com in French) and **Roc et Canyon** (☎ 05 65 61 17 77; www.roc-et-canyon.com in French). An introductory course costs around €325 for five days, and a tandem flight with an experienced instructor at the controls is between €55

and €70. Still high in the sky, the Centre Régional de Vol à Voile (p112), near the village of St-Martin de Londres north of Montpellier, offers a similar initiation tandem glider flight for €60. For general information about such aerial activities, get in touch with the **Fédération Française de Vol Libre** (☎ 04 97 03 82 82; www.ffvl.fr in French; 4 rue de Suisse, 06000 Nice) or the local **Ligue de Vol Libre Languedoc Roussillon** (☎ 04 67 55 75 74; www.lvllr.net in French).

Back in Haut-Languedoc, the tight Gorges de la Jonte are an internationally renowned venue for rock climbing. Both Horizon and Roc et Canyon lay on monitored climbs of the cliffs that flank them and also arrange caving and canyon clambering (*le canyoning,* as they say in France), a sport that's popular wherever streams rush and tumble steeply.

Other outfits that offer a similar trio of rock-based activity:

Aventure 34 Near Olargues (p130).
Cévennes Évasion In Florac (p146).
Fremyc In Meyrueis (p151).
Horizon Vertical In St-Girons (p207).