

Montpellier Area



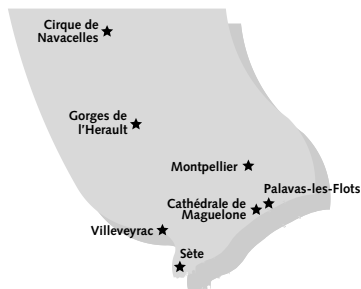
Be it the palm trees in terracotta pots, the orgy of beachwear boutiques or the mythical central square that gets a tonne of sand dumped on it each summer for beach-volley championships, Montpellier – regional capital and Languedoc-Roussillon's only real city – screams the hot south. From the dusty old-town warren awash with secret squares, footstep-polished alleys and shaded church steps to the profusion of 18th-century *hôtels particuliers* (private mansions), caramel- and honey-hued facades washed out by the fierce sun, there is no mistaking where this sultry city is: spitting distance from the sparkling-blue Mediterranean, split from the sea by a few soggy lagoons, which flamingos love.

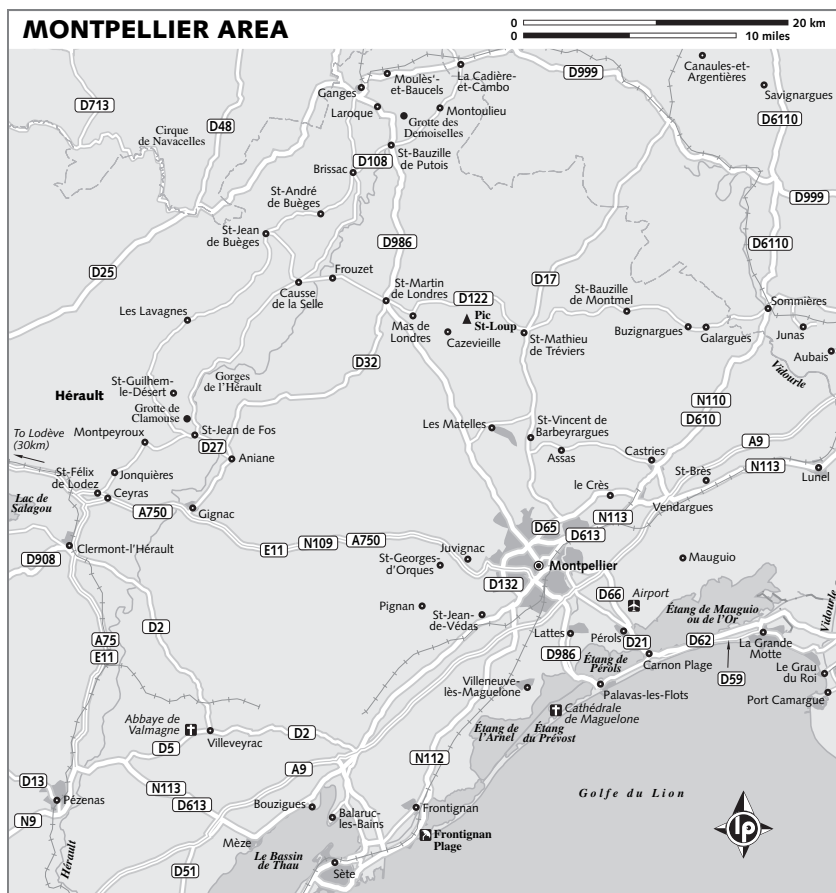
Exploring the short Montpellier coastline is a joy. It is built-up and busy – no resort is more in your face than La Grande Motte with its purpose-built 1960s architecture abutting La Petite Camargue (p81) on its eastern fringe. But there's ample tradition left: take the nautical jousters in Palavas-les-Flots and Sète, 6th-century Cathédrale de Maguelone, the fishing boats that dock each day beneath clouds of screeching seagulls...

Inland is a green world much loved by canoeists and vino buffs. The velvety, emerald River Hérault, after which this Hérault *département* is named, slices deftly through rock past the dramatic Gorges de l'Hérault and caves of gigantic proportions. To the east rises the Pic St-Loup, a lumpy mountain range spotted with tiny rural villages below and a sensual patchwork of plump green vines and rosemary-scented *garrigue* (scrub). For aficionados of raw natural landscape, the Cirque de Navacelles is a hop north from here.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up sun-baked ambience and hidden squares in old-town **Montpellier** (p102)
- Bike it to the sea and have a stab at **water-jousting** (p107) in Palavas-les-Flots or Sète
- Join flocks of seagulls around Sète fishermen as they dock; follow them into the *criée* (market) on a **guided tour** (p108)
- Find serenity along the sand in 6th-century **Cathédrale de Maguelone** (p106), marooned on an island amid salt marshes
- Paddle along green water in a canoe through the dramatic **Gorges de l'Hérault** (p111)
- Stroll medieval gardens and taste wine at 12th-century **Abbaye de Valmagne** (p110), in Villeveyrac
- Drop into the deep bowl of the **Cirque de Navacelles** (p112)





MONTPELLIER TO SÈTE

This buzzing stretch ensnares the regional capital and its dynamic coastal quarters, wedged between La Petite Carmague (p81) to the north and the beaches of Le Cap d'Agde and Narbonne in central Languedoc (p114) to the south.

MONTPELLIER

pop 244,300

As France's eighth-largest city, Languedoc's largest urban centre and the hub of regional government, Montpellier is naturally self-confident. Its soul is a student (60,000 study here), its spirit is innovative and its inhabitants (43% of which are under 30) don't need

to go to Paris to see the Arc de Triomphe. Two wheels are the à la mode way to get around, tram lines spin a kaleidoscope of flowers and swallows on the streets, and works by the region's best contemporary artists fill old-town art galleries.

'I find it much better to go twice (sic) to Montpellier than once to the other world', wrote 17th-century philosopher John Locke. Paradise, no, but an enchanting place to play Eve for a few days (seaside frolic included), yes indeed!

History

Montpellier, one of southern France's few cities without a Roman heritage, started late. Founded by the Counts of Toulouse, it was

first mentioned in 985 and had become a prosperous city with trading links all over the Mediterranean by medieval times. Its scholastic tradition is a long one: Europe's first medical school was founded here in the 12th century and its university is the country's oldest. The population swelled dramatically in the 1960s when many French settlers left independent Algeria and settled here.

Orientation

Montpellier's historic centre, mostly pedestrian, is girdled by wide boulevards and pierced at the heart by place de la Comédie. West is the Vieille Ville (Old Town).

The leggy promenade of Esplanade Charles de Gaulle strides north from place de la Comédie to the granite and concrete Le Corum (p105). Eastwards sprawls 1970s shopping complex Le Polygone, and the

Antigone, a surreal 1980s neoclassical housing project designed by Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Book in Bar (☎ 04 67 66 22 90; 8 rue du Bras de Fer)

New and secondhand English books.

Les Cinq Continents (☎ 04 67 66 46 70; 20 rue Jacques Cœur) Travel bookshop.

INTERNET ACCESS

Dimension 4 Cybercafé (11 rue des Balances; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-midnight)

Point Internet (54 rue de l'Aiguillerie; per hr €1.40; ☎ 9.30am-midnight Mon-Sat, 10.30am-midnight Sun)

LAUNDRY

Lavosud (19 rue de l'Université; ☎ 7am-9pm)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS – MONTPELLIER AREA

May

- **Montpellier Beach Master** The atmosphere is electric during this 10-day beach-volley tournament, held in the place de la Comédie, Montpellier.
- **Féria de la Mer** (Festival of the Sea) Traditional *abrivados* (bull runs) in Palavas-les-Flots see cowboys on horseback usher the bulls into the ring for *corridas* (bullfights).

June

- **Printemps des Comédiens** (www.printempsdescomediens.com) Theatre festival in Montpellier.
- **Montpellier Danse** (www.montpellierdanse.com) Montpellier's two-week international dance festival.

July

- **Fête de la St-Pierre** Nautical jousting (p36) is the main lure of this weekend festival, celebrated in Sète and Palavas-les-Flots, to honour St Peter, patron saint of fishermen.
- **Festival de Radio France et Montpellier** (www.festivalradiofrancemontpellier.com) Top-notch classical, rock, opera, electronic, jazz and so on at this contemporary-music festival in Montpellier.
- **Festival de Jazz** Seven jazz-mad days in Sète.
- **Festival de Musique** The acoustics at this classical-music fest, held in the cloister and church of Villeveyrac's Abbaye de Valmagne, are stunning.

August

- **Fiest' A Sète** (www.fiestasete.com) World music for six days in Sète.
- **Fête de la St-Louis** Sète hosts six days of nautical jousting around 25 August.

September

- **Féria d'Automne** Bulls are chaperoned to/from the beach by mounted cowboys during Palavas-les-Flots' exuberant festival in the second weekend of the month.

CITY CARD

The **Montpellier City Card** (per 1/2/3 days €14/20/26, children half-price), sold at the tourist office, gives free or reduced admission to several sites and cultural events, unlimited bus and metro travel and a spot on a guided walking tour; for details, contact the tourist office (below).

POST

Post Office (13 place Rondelet)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 67 60 60 60; www.ot-montpellier.fr; place de la Comédie; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun Jul-Sep, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun Oct-Jun)

Sights

Montpellier life revolves around the 19th-century Hausmannian mansions of vibrant **place de la Comédie**, dubbed *l'oeuf* (the egg) because of its ovoid shape. The flower kiosks beneath plane trees, the merry-go-round, the tram stops, the cafés and the graceful, moss-covered **Fontaine des Trois Graces** (1796) with its pigeon-pecked cherubs make the square a prime people-watching spot.

MUSEUMS

Musée Fabre (☎ 04 67 14 83 00; 39 blvd Bonne Nouvelle; adult/child €6/4; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue & Thu-Sun, 1-9pm Wed) is a superbly lit venue with one of France's richest collections of French, Italian, Flemish and Dutch works from the 16th century on. Allow plenty of time for the galleries of dynamic 20th-century art.

Musée Languedocien (☎ 04 67 52 93 03; 7 rue Jacques Cœur; adult/student €6/3; ☎ 3-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) displays the area's rich archaeological finds as well as objets d'art from the 16th to 19th centuries.

Musée du Vieux Montpellier (☎ 04 67 66 02 94; 2 place Pétrarque; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sat) is a storehouse of the city's memorabilia, Middle Ages to Revolution.

In the crypt of the church of Notre Dame des Tables, **Musée de l'Histoire de Montpellier** (☎ 04 67 54 33 16; place Jean Jaurès; admission €1.50; ☎ 10.30-11.45am & 1.30-5.15pm Mon-Sat) presents city history in high-tech mode.

Musée Atger (☎ 04 67 41 76 30; 2 rue de l'École de Médecine; admission free; ☎ 1.30-5.45pm Mon, Wed & Fri

Sep-Jul), housed within the medical faculty, displays a striking collection of French, Italian and Flemish drawings.

HÔTELS PARTICULIERS

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Montpellier's wealthier merchants built grand mansions, externally sober but with resplendent inner courtyards. Examples are **Hôtel de Varennes** (2 place Pétrarque), a harmonious blend of Romanesque and Gothic, and **Hôtel St-Côme** (Grand Rue Jean Moulin), the city's first anatomy theatre for medical students and now its Chamber of Commerce.

AROUND PLACE ROYALE DU PEYROU

At the eastern end of this tree-lined esplanade is the **Arc de Triomphe** (1692). The **Château d'Eau**, a hexagonal water tower at its western limit, leads to the **Aqueduc de St-Clément** (blvd des Arceaux), spectacularly illuminated at night. North is the **Jardin des Plantes** (☎ noon-8pm Mon-Sat Jun-Sep, to 6pm Mon-Sat Oct-May), France's oldest botanic garden, created in 1593. Opposite towers the disproportionately tall 15th-century porch of **Cathédrale St-Pierre**.

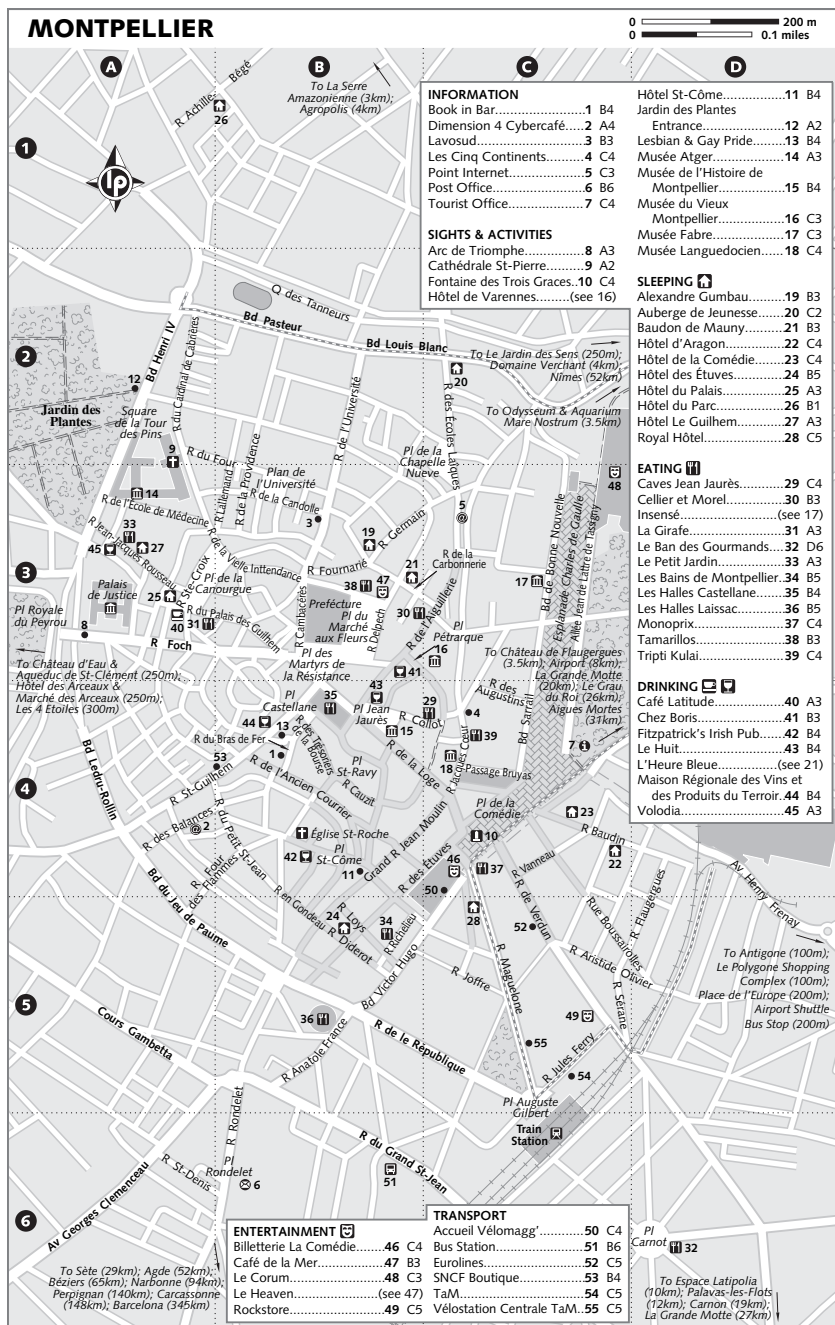
OTHER SIGHTS

Agropolis (☎ 04 67 04 75 00; www.museum.agropolis.fr in French; 951 av Agropolis; adult/11-18yr/under 11yr €5/2.50/free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) is all about food, how people grow it and our progression from hunter-gatherer to supermarket shopper. Didactic, enjoyable and pitched at all ages.

A 10-minute walk from Agropolis, **La Serre Amazonienne** (☎ 04 67 54 45 23; 50 av Agropolis; adult/child/student €5/2.50/3, audioguide €2; ☎ 9am-5pm or 6pm) is a hothouse replicating the Amazonian rainforest. It's a spectacular addition to Montpellier's zoo, which is France's second largest.

For both sights, take tram 1 to the St Eloi stop, from where a shuttle bus passes by each.

Aquarium Mare Nostrum (☎ 04 67 13 05 50; www.aquarium-mare-nostrum.com; adult/child/student €12.50/8.50/10; ☎ 10am-10pm Jul & Aug, to 8pm or 10pm Tue-Sun May, Jun & Sep, to 7pm or 8pm Oct-Apr), inside the **Odysseum** leisure complex at the end of tram line 1, takes you through 15 aquatic environments, from polar waters to tropical forests.



SECRET SQUARES

Wooden shutters with peeling paint wink at washing hung out to dry and forgotten statues on less-trodden squares in Montpellier's quiet backstreets.

- **Plan de l'Université** A deathly-romantic statue of a man and a woman with two babes entwined at their feet pierces the centre of this shabby-chic square, scattered with crumpled leaves, topped by a sky-high tree and scented in May with the intoxicating fragrance of sweet lilac. Lunch at the Bulgarian-French fusion bistro on the corner of rue Fontanon and rue du Four.
- **Square de la Tour des Pins** This grassy green square exudes an academic air with its collection of towering trees, wooden benches and handsome outlook on the medicine faculty.
- **Place de la Canourgue** Two unicorns honour those who died in the Battle of Clostercamp (1760) at one end of this well-tended square, more a city garden with its ornamental rose bushes, plane trees and cobbled café terraces.
- **Place St-Ravy** End an old-town stroll past the chichi art galleries and boutiques of rue de l'Ancien Courrier in this bijou square, facing an art gallery and fountain-filled. What space is left is occupied by the trendy bar stools of Le Carré at No 3. Lap up atmosphere with a drink.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 67 60 32 22; montpellier@fuaj.org; 2 Impasse de la Petite Corratierie; dm incl sheets & breakfast €15.20; ☒ closed 1st 3 weeks of Jan) From the rose-shaped stained glass to the church windows painted psychedelic violet, there is no escaping this hostel's past as a 19th-century Catholic boys school. Beds are split across doubles (get in quick), triples, quads and six-to-10-bedded dorms, and a summer garden basks beneath trees.

Hôtel des Étuves (☎ 04 67 60 78 19; www.hoteldesetuves.fr; 24 rue des Étuves; s €33-45, d €39-45) His grandmother bought the 19th-century inn in 1920 and Monsieur Majourlet, the hard-working owner of this exceptionally good-value hotel, has run it for the past 20-odd years. Its 13 simple but functional rooms creep around a steep, narrow spiral staircase like a vine (leave the kitchen sink at home) and those facing the pedestrian street are beautifully sunlit. No credit cards.

Hôtel de la Comédie (☎ 04 67 58 43 64; hoteldela.comedie@cegetel.net; 1bis rue Baudin; s €42-47, d €52-69; ☒) Free wi-fi. This basic but spotless family-run place, just off place de la Comédie, is a favourite with visiting musicians and theatre troupes. Its 20 rooms lack decorative features but have what counts – air con, heating and quality double-glazing.

MIDRANGE

our pick **Hôtel des Arceaux** (☎ 04 67 92 03 03; hoteldesarceaux@wanadoo.fr; 33-35 blvd des Arceaux; s/d/tr from

€52/63/73; ☒) This peachy town house with garden in which to breakfast, brunch or dine at dusk – the hotel serves all three meals – is a sheer joy. Find it in a village-like quarter of Montpellier, a 10-minute walk from the centre, with its own market and *pétanque* pitch tucked beneath an aqueduct (p100).

Hôtel du Palais (☎ 04 67 60 47 38; www.hoteldupalais-montpellier.fr; 3 rue du Palais des Guilhem; s/d/tr €62/67-79/90; ☒) Wrought-iron balconies, oyster-grey shutters and flower boxes create instant appeal for this 18th-century house. Wrapped in a warren of old-town streets blessed with art galleries, its setting is picture-postcard. Place de la Canourgue (above) is its lovely neighbour.

Royal Hôtel (☎ 04 67 92 13 36; www.royalhotel-montpellier.com; 8 rue Maguelone; s €65-85, d €67-90; ☒) Free wi-fi. A reliable young auntie, this 46-room hotel, a hop from place de la Comédie, is always busy. Contrary to outward appearances, few rooms face the palm trees and blue trams of rue Maguelone, but rather a quiet interior courtyard. Superior rooms on the ground floor are perfect for families. Cheaper rates for online bookings.

Hôtel du Parc (☎ 04 67 41 16 49; www.hotelduparc-montpellier.com; 8 rue Achille-Bégé; s/d with shower €45/50, with bathroom s €63-72, d €72-83, tr €92; ☐ ☒ ☒) Free wi-fi and parking in the gravel courtyard. Françoise makes guests feel immediately welcome at this 18th-century *hôtel particulier* – room 7 is the bedchamber of previous owner Comte Vivier de Châtelard. Several rooms face the perfect blue sky of a *trompe-l'oeil* painting on the wall of the adjacent building,

and those opening onto a stone-framed breakfast balcony on the ground floor are particularly delicious.

TOP END

Hôtel d'Aragon (☎ 04 67 10 70 00; www.hotel-aragon.fr; 10 rue Baudin; s/d from €72/89; ☹ closed 1st 3 weeks of Jan; 📶 📺) Free wi-fi. A 12-room gem in a city with too few boutique hotels, the Aragon – a creation of the adorable Philippe and Thierry – turns to French literature for inspiration. Rooms are spacious and feature an extract from the work of the writer they celebrate (Molière, Chateaubriand, Rabelais and Petrarch are all here). Bathrooms throughout the stylish 18th-century house are particularly handsome, especially those with luxury jacuzzi-style bubble bath or power shower with jets in all directions.

Hôtel Le Guilhem (☎ 04 67 52 90 90; www.leguilhem.com; 18 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; s €85-96, d €96-158; 📶 📺 ☒) Free wi-fi. Sitting snug in two interconnecting 16th-century buildings, Le Guilhem's 35 rooms enjoy cathedral or tranquil garden view; room 100 has its own terrace and garden. Book well in advance to beat the faithful clientele.

Le Jardin des Sens (☎ 04 99 58 38 38; www.jardindesens.com; 11 av St-Lazare; d low/high season from €170/210; 📶 📺) The height of style, this mythic boutique hotel is powered by the extraordinary

Michelin-starred gastronomy of the Pourcel brothers, served with panache in its restaurant of the same name (lunch *menus* €50 to €80; dinner *menus* €125 to €190). Contemporary art and sculptures by young artists make the hotel and its 15 rooms an art gallery, and the best room in the house – a suite with its own rooftop pool – is a honeymooner paradise. Don't leave without smelling the grapefruit tree in the Zen garden; the fragrance is intoxicating.

Eating

Cheap, cheerful eateries abound on rue de l'Université, rue des Écoles Laïques and the streets interlinking them. Old-town alleys hide a bevy of atmospheric bistros and bars: leafy place de Côme, dominated by the domed Hôtel St-Côme (p100) is as pretty as a picture with its packed restaurant terraces and glowing lanterns after dark.

For very special upmarket dining, consider Le Jardin des Sens (see left), whose lunchtime *menus* are affordable and unforgettable.

Tripti Kulai (☎ 04 67 66 30 51; 20 rue Jacques Cœur; salads €9.50, menus €12-16.50; ☹ noon-9.30pm Mon-Sat; 🍴) Barrel-vaulted and cosy, this popular vegetarian place stands out for the inventiveness of its dishes.

Caves Jean Jaurès (☎ 04 67 60 27 33; 3 rue Collot; menu €18, mains €12-16; ☹ lunch & dinner Tue & Thu-Sat, dinner Mon & Wed) Scan the tasty dishes on

REAL GEMS

Small, exclusive, with only a handful of rooms and dressed in the very best, these are the real gems of Montpellier accommodation.

- **Les 4 Etoiles** (☎ 04 67 02 47 69; www.les4etoiles.com; 4 rue Delmas; s/d incl breakfast from €72/94) Contemporary design in a 1930s-styled mansion (in the same family for five generations) makes the Four Stars – a *maison d'hôte* with four rooms named after constellations – a beautiful choice. Cold/hot dinner costs €15/25. No credit cards.
- **Alexandre Gumbau** (☎ 04 34 50 33 51; www.alexandre-gumbau.fr; 1 rue Germain; d incl breakfast €95) Alexandre's eclectic jumble of antiques and *brocante* treasures create intimacy at this light and airy, artsy apartment in a historic *hôtel particulier*. Look for the profusion of potted green plants flowing from the 1st-floor balconies. Dinner costs €25.
- **Baudon de Mauny** (☎ 04 67 02 21 77; www.baudondemauny.com; 1 rue de la Carbonnerie; d €175-235; 📺) Cosseted in a *hôtel particulier* wrapped around a cobbled courtyard, Baudon de Mauny has been in the family since 1829. The interior perfectly marries original centuries-old features with 21st-century design, thanks to the extraordinary creative talents of Nathalie de Bordas, who, together with husband Alain, runs this very special place. All five rooms are vaster than vast.
- **Domaine Verchant** (☎ 04 67 07 26 00; www.verchant.com; 1 blvd Philippe Landar, Castelnaud-le-Nez; d €250-500; ☹ closed 3 weeks in Jan; 📶 📺 📷 🅑) This extraordinary hotel bathed in a sea of vines on Montpellier's northern fringe transcends the term 'deluxe'. But no wonder: this is the creation of the man behind Paris' mythical Kube and Murano hotels. Find it 4km from the centre.

the chalkboard at this attractive restaurant with its mosaic-topped tables and polished wooden floor. A glass of wine? Select from the bottles of the day on the bar counter. Rather more? Pick from the shelves; the range is superlative.

our pick La Girafe (☎ 04 67 54 48 89; 14 rue du Palais des Guilhem; mains around €15; ☎ Tue-Sat) Nod to the tall giraffe as you enter and choose from an intimate downstairs area with blood-red decor and original artwork, or upstairs beneath the cross arches of this former chapel. Chef Pascale Schmitt's cuisine is wholly creative: try the chicken breast wrapped around prawns with fresh coriander and satay sauce.

Insensé (☎ 04 67 58 97 78; 39 blvd Bonne Nouvelle; 2-/3-course lunch €19/26, mains around €15; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Wed, Fri & Sat) Insensé is as contemporary and tasteful as you'd expect from such a venue – Montpellier's Musée Fabre. Black dominates the decor – the tables, the chairs, the floor tiles, even the pepper pots – but not the innovative cuisine, altogether more colourful. Daniel Buren is the fabulous contemporary artist behind the garden.

Les Bains de Montpellier (☎ 04 67 60 70 87; 6 rue Richelieu; 3-course menu €22, mains €17-21; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, lunch Sat & Mon) Once a public bathhouse, here tables squat around the old perimeter bathrooms, where you can almost hear the gurgle and slurp of long-emptied tubs. Dining outside in the spacious interior courtyard is equally atmospheric.

Le Ban des Gourmands (☎ 04 67 65 00 85; 5 place Carnot; menu €28, mains €16-25; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) South of the train station and a favourite of locals in the know, this appealing restaurant run by a young family team serves delicious local cuisine.

Le Petit Jardin (☎ 04 67 60 78 78; 20 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; lunch/dinner menus €14/22-48; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun Feb-Dec) The Little Garden is just that: a restaurant cooking up imaginative cuisine with a shady, fairy-tale greenness out back, seemingly 100km from Montpellier's bustle.

our pick Cellier et Morel (☎ 04 67 66 46 36; www.celliermorel.com; 27 rue de l'Aiguillerie; menus lunch €28 & €37, dinner €49 & €63; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue, Thu & Fri, dinner Mon, Wed & Sat) Eric Cellier and Pierre Morel have stamped their personalities on this delightful top-end choice, rated by most as Montpellier's best. Think subtle French cuisine with, as a gesture towards central Languedoc (they're

housed within the Maison du Lozère), *aligot*, a stretchy confection of potato, cheese, garlic and cream.

Tamarillos (☎ 04 67 60 06 00; www.tamarillos.biz; 2 place du Marché aux Fleurs; menus lunch €25-38, dinner €55-90; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Mon) 'A cuisine of fruit and flowers' is the motto of this gourmet address where every dish, sweet and savoury, has fruit as an ingredient. Dine outside or in, where the flowery decor is very much part of the experience. Chef Philippe Chapon is 'double champion de France de dessert' and taught a young Gordon Ramsay his pastry cooking.

SELF-CATERING

Food markets include **Les Halles Castellane** (rue de la Loge) and **Les Halles Laissac** (rue Anatole France) – both indoor with particularly fantastic fresh-fish counters – and the bijou **Marché des Arceaux** (blvd des Arceaux; ☎ 5.30am-1.30pm Mon-Sat) beneath the arches of Aqueduc de St-Clément (p100). A central supermarket is **Monoprix** (place de la Comédie; ☎ 8.30am-9.45pm Mon-Sat).

Drinking

Place de la Comédie buzzes with cafés to drink, grab a bite and watch street entertainers. Place Jean Jaurès and more intimate place St-Ravy are also popular.

Find dense concentrations of student drinking venues around rue en Gondeau, off Grand Rue Jean Moulin, around place Jean Jaurès and near the intersection of rue de l'Université and rue de la Candolle.

L'Heure Bleue (☎ 04 67 66 41 05; 1 rue de la Carbonnerie; ☎ Tue-Sun) This tearoom evokes the 18th-century spirit of historic hotel Baudon de Mauny (p103), in which it lives. Sip Earl Grey to a background of classical music, indulge in a light lunch platter (€14) or enjoy a serene hour over an aperitif.

Café Latitude (1 rue Ste-Croix; ☎ 7.30am-8pm Tue-Sat) This relaxed café with faintly colonial decor sits firmly on Montpellier's most elegant, peaceful square, place de la Canourgue (p102). It serves no food, just drinks, but the place is so Zen it lets you enjoy sandwiches bought from the *boulangerie* around the corner on its gorgeous cobble-paved terrace.

Chez Boris (☎ 04 67 02 13 22; www.chezboris.com; 20 rue de l'Aiguillerie) A chilled wine bar with plenty of vintages to taste, Chez Boris is an address that changes tempo day and date depending.

WINE TASTING

Sample six Languedoc wines (€15) at the **Maison Régionale des Vins et des Produits du Terroir** (☎ 04 67 60 40 41; 34 rue St-Guilhem; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat), a wine shop in a 19th-century *hôtel particulier*. Ask too about the tastings with local producers it arranges on Saturday and its lengthier introductory wine-tasting courses.

To taste (and buy) wine at a 17th-century castle, visit the *cave* of **Château de Flaugergues** (☎ 04 99 52 66 37; www.flaugergues.com; 1744 av Albert Einstein; chateau/gardens €8/free; 🕒 wine cellars & gardens 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat yr-round plus Sun Jun, Jul & Sep, guided visits of chateau 2.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun Jun, Jul & Sep), the wine-producing family home of Brigitte and Henri de Colbert with 19th-century botanical gardens to visit, an olive-tree alley and bags of vines to stroll between.

Inside is pub style, though the action invariably spills onto the pavement outside.

Le Huit (☎ 04 67 66 14 18; 8 rue de l'Aiguillerie) Local bands play at this trendy hideout, which lures punters with a €10 bottle of wine and complimentary tapas as aperitif (6pm to 9pm). Indie rock is Wednesday's sound.

Fitzpatrick's Irish Pub (☎ 04 67 60 58 30; www.go-montpellier.fr/fitzpatrick; 5 place St-Côme; 🕒 noon-1am daily) What must be France's most attractive Irish pub squats on one of Montpellier's prettiest old-town squares. Admire the exquisite stone-sculpted doorway and weathered 17th-century facade with faded 'Maison Justin Boch' logo.

Volodia (☎ 04 99 61 09 17; 29 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; 🕒 7.30pm-1am Wed-Sat) City slicker rather than student grunge, this chic *bar à champagne* sports sultry black facade and design-driven interior. A restaurant too (*menus* €23 and €29), Volodia is a weekend venue to dance electric tango, catch a cultural happening etc.

Entertainment

Keep up with the scene with the free weekly *Sortir à Montpellier*, available at the tourist office.

Theatre tickets are sold at the **Billetterie La Comédie** (☎ 04 67 60 19 99; place de la Comédie; 🕒 2-6pm Mon, noon-6pm Tue-Sat), inside the original opera house (rebuilt in 1888). The city's opera and national orchestra calls **Le Corum** (☎ 04 67 61 67 61; www.opera-montpellier.com; Esplanade Charles de Gaulle) home.

Rockstore (☎ 04 67 06 80 00; www.rockstore.fr; 20 rue de Verdun) This long-standing discotheque and club in the heart of town is easy to spot – the rear of a classic American '70s car sticks out above its entrance.

There's a critical mass of discos outside town in Espace Latipolia, about 10km from

Montpellier on rte de Palavas. Try **La Nitro** (☎ 04 67 22 45 82) for techno and house, and **Le Matchico** (☎ 04 67 64 19 20) for retro sounds. The Amigo night bus (€2.40) does a circuit of Espace Latipolia and other dance venues on the periphery of town, leaving the train station at midnight and 1am, returning at 2.30am, 3.30am and 5am, Thursday to Saturday.

Montpellier is gay-friendly:

Café de la Mer (☎ 04 67 60 79 65; 5 place du Marché aux Fleurs) Friendly staff can arm you with a map of gay venues.

Le Heaven (www.leheaven.fr; 1 rue Delpèch) Just around the corner, Heaven gets gal-and-guy busy from 8pm.

Getting There & Away

AIR

From Montpellier **airport** (☎ 04 67 20 85 00; www.montpellier.aeroport.fr), 8km southeast of the city, Air France flies up to seven times daily to Paris (Orly and Charles de Gaulle airports), and easyJet goes to/from London Gatwick, Ryanair to/from London Stansted.

BUS

At the **bus station** (☎ 04 67 92 01 43; rue du Grand St-Jean), **Hérault Transport** (☎ 08 25 34 01 34; www.herault.fr/herault-transport) runs hourly buses to/from La Grande Motte (bus 106; €3.90, 35 minutes) via Carnon from Odysseum at the end of the tram line. Up to four daily services continue to Aigues-Mortes (€5.90, 1¼ hours).

Eurolines (☎ 04 67 58 57 59; 8 rue de Verdun) runs buses to Barcelona (€18, five hours) and most European destinations. **Linebus** (☎ 04 67 58 95 00) mainly operates services to destinations in Spain.

TRAIN

Buy tickets at the **SNCF Boutique** (18 rue St-Guilhem; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) or the **train station** (place

August Gilbert). Destinations include Paris' Gare de Lyon by TGV (€96.50 to €112, 3½ hours, up to 10 daily), Carcassonne (€21.20, 1½ hours, nine daily), Millau (€24.30, 1½ hours, three daily) and Perpignan (€21.60, 1¾ hours, frequent).

More than 20 trains daily travel north to Nîmes (€10.40, 25 minutes) and south to Narbonne (€14, 65 minutes) via Sète (€5.10 to €7.10, 20 minutes), Agde (€8.20) and Béziers (€10.90).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A **shuttle bus** (☎ 08 25 34 01 34) linking the airport with the place de l'Europe tram stop (at the eastern end of the Antigone complex) runs up to 12 times a day. Fares are €4.90, and the trip takes 15 minutes.

BICYCLE

Montpellier has 150km of cycling paths and the self-service bike-rental scheme **Vélomagg'** (www.velomag.com), which allows pick-up at one *vélostation* and drop-off at another. To rent either a city bike or a mountain bike for beach terrain, pick up a free pass from **Vélostation Centrale TaM** (☎ 04 67 22 87 82; 27 rue Maguelone; ☹ 8am-8pm) in front of the train station, then charge it in situ or online with 20/50 one-hour units (€5/10).

Alternatively, **Accueil Vélomagg'** (blvd Victor Hugo; ☹ 10am-10pm daily Jun-Oct, to 7pm daily Nov-Apr), inside the public toilets next to the Opéra Comédie bike station off the southern end of place de la Comédie, rents the same bikes for €1/2 per four hours/one day – no free pass is required, simply your passport or ID card, but you must return the bike here.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Dump your vehicle in one of the vast car parks beside major tram stops and pay €4 for all-day parking and return tickets into town for up to five people.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Take a ride on Montpellier's high-tech tram. Line 1 trams are blue with white swallows; line 2's trams are decorated with multicoloured flowers. Like city buses, the trams are managed by **TaM** (☎ 04 67 22 87 87; www.tam-way.com in French; 6 rue Jules Ferry), and they run until midnight. Regular buses run until about 8.30pm daily.

Single-journey tickets, valid for bus or tram, cost €1.30, and a one-day pass/10-ticket *carnet* is €3.20/10.80; buy them at newsagents or any tram stop.

PALAVAS-LES-FLOTS

pop 5420

At weekends urbanites grab a bike or bus and head 12km south to this Montpellier-on-Sea, a small beach resort with a kite-surfing school on the sand and an old-fashioned chairlift transporting pedestrians across one of its two canals.

Teetering on a narrow thread of land between the sea and the marshy lakes of **Étang de Perols**, and **Étang de l'Arnel** and **Étang du Prévost**, Palavas is paradise for birders. A sandy causeway links it with a tiny island 4km south, deserted bar the hauntingly beautiful and perfect Romanesque **Cathédrale de Maguelone** (☎ 04 67 50 63 63; www.espace-maguelone.com; admission free; ☹ 9am-7pm), built on the site of a 6th-century chapel. Vines surround it and a hot, sunbaked, 2km-long footpath leads to the islet from its car park. Or simply walk or cycle 4km west along the sand from Palavas.

A wonderful panorama of the coastline, the marshy lagoons and the salt pans beyond impresses everyone who rides the lift up to the 37m-high top of the **Phare de la Méditerranée**, a disused water tower with panoramic rotating restaurant renovated to resemble a bright white lighthouse. On its ground floor, the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 07 73 34; www.palavaslesflots

BEACH BIKING

Cycling paths weave in and around Palavas-les-Flots, where wheels can be rented from **Cycloloc** (☎ 04 67 68 55 84; 49 rue Sire de Joinville; half-/full day €10/15; ☹ Tue-Sun). Look for the pea-green facade and the 'Vélo & Oxygen' sign.

The silky-smooth, two-lane **Chemin de la Plage** cycling track covers the entire 10km stretch along the D21 from Montpellier to **Carnon Plage** via **Pérois**; in Montpellier pick it up next to the river in the Port Marianne university district (signposted 'Les Plages'). An alternative cycling route, direct to Palavas, is along the D58 that starts immediately south of **Lattes**. By 2010 cycling paths from Palavas will extend north along the coast to La Grande Motte and south to Sète and Agde.

WATCH & TRY WATER JOUSTING

Sète's Fête de la St-Pierre, celebrated over a long weekend in July to honour its patron saint, wins hands down the regional award of top nautical-jousting event of the year. Second up is its Fête de la St-Louis that fills six frantic days around 25 August. Should you not be around for either of these, catch a glimpse of the highly entertaining floating combats upon arrival at Sète train station, where a wall fresco of the fishing port's *joutes nautiques* looms large.

In Palavas-les-Flots, local club **La Lance Sportive Palavasienne** (☎ 06 61 47 88 70) practises every Wednesday from 6.30pm, June to September, on the Grand Canal. Better still, aspiring jousters can have a stab at the traditional sport with the **École de Joutes Languedociennes** (☎ 04 67 07 33 33; per person €3; 🕒 5.30-7.30pm Tue & Thu mid-Jun–mid-Sep), open to anyone aged seven or more who can swim.

.com; 🕒 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Apr-Jun & Sep, closed Sun Oct-Mar) organises nature activities in the *étangs*, including kid-orientated **flamingo-watching** (child/adult €3/free) and **kayaking** (€20) in July and August. As in nearby Sète, **nautical jousting** (p36) is a serious sport here. Then, of course, there are the **corridas** and other bullish games (p36) during its May and September **férias** (p99).

Sleeping & Eating

Palavas has several camp sites along the road from the beach, shaded beneath trees, with the exception of **Palavas Camping** (☎ 04 67 68 01 28; www.palavas-camping.fr; rte de Maguelone; 2 adults, tent & car €16-32; 🕒 Apr-Sep), a sun-parched site slap on the sand where kite-surfing school **Pure Kite** (☎ 04 67 65 47 35; www.purekite.com) is based.

Hôtel Brasilia (☎ 04 67 68 00 68; www.brasilia-palavas.com; 9 blvd Maréchal Joffre; d from €88; 🍴) Rooms are not as striking as the design-driven lobby and breakfast room (a revamp is in the wings). But with the sparkling-blue Med across the street, there's little reason to complain.

Le Banane (☎ 04 67 50 73 93; 37 blvd Sarraill; mains €19-34; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Grilled fish and meats à la *plancha* are the mainstay of this hip, design-driven lounge on the sand, a cut above the rest of the crowd.

Rôtisserie Palavasienne (☎ 04 67 68 52 12; rue de l'Église; menus €25; 🍴 lunch & dinner) At the opposite end of the attitude spectrum is this unpretentious eating place, which invariably displays a 'complet' (full) sign. Cuisine is local and hearty – fish soup or garlicky nail-sized *tellines* (tiny clams) followed by a black-iron *marmite* (stockpot) of oven-baked stew perhaps?

Getting There & Away

TaM bus 131 links Palavas-les-Flots with the Port Marianne tram stop in Montpellier.

NORTH TO THE CAMARGUE

North from Palavas along the coastal D21 towards Carnon, you stand a good chance of seeing flamingos hovering the shallows of the lagoons either side of the road. **Carnon Plage** itself comes out fairly low in the charm stakes, despite its huge marina. Better to continue hugging the coast along the D59 alongside several kilometres of pure white-sand beach, uncrowded and without a kiosk or café in sight.

About 10km east of Carnon is **La Grande Motte** (population 6500), purpose-built on the grand scale back in the 1960s to plug the tourist drain southwards into Spain. Its architecture, revolutionary at the time, now seems heavy and leaden, contrasting with the more organic growth of deeper-rooted **Le Grau du Roi**, on the fringes of the flamingo-pretty **Camargue** (p81).

TaM bus 106 links Montpellier with Carnon and La Grande Motte.

SÈTE

pop 48,300

Huddled at the northern end of **Le Bassin de Thau** (p135), France's largest Mediterranean fishing port sports waterways and canals, beaches and a lighthouse, an old fishermen's quarter on a cliff, and restaurants galore cooking up sea urchins and lobster, sardines, paella and shoals of *coquillages* (shellfish). There are so many small boats moored beside its pretty network of canals you'd think every second citizen was a weekend sailor.

Established by Louis XIV in the 17th century, Sète, 26km southwest of Montpellier, prospered as the harbours of Aigues-Mortes and Narbonne were cut off from the sea by silt deposits. It is best known today perhaps for its centuries-old tradition of water jousting (p36), a deadly-serious contest whereby

participants in competing boats try to knock each other into the water.

Frontignan (population 23,000), 7.5km north-east along the coast, is known for its sweet Muscat wine.

Information

Tourist Office (☎ 04 67 74 71 71; www.ot-sete.fr; 60 Grand Rue Mario Rouston; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, core hr 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun) Sells city maps (€1); organises fascinating guided tours (see right).

Sights & Activities

From the industrial cranes and warehouses jostling for sky space near the train station to the **Crée aux Poissons** (fish market; quai de la Marine) by the water at the picture-postcard **Vieux Port** (old harbour), this is a real port with a thriving fishing industry and plenty of weathered old fishermen hanging out their nets to dry. Should you be in doubt, sign up at the tourist office for a one-hour guided tour of the **whole-sale fish market** (adult/3-12yr €5/2.50; ☎ 3.30pm Mon-Fri Feb-Nov) or a **Bassin de Thau shellfish farm** (adult/under 12yr €6/free; ☎ 4pm Tue & Thu Apr-Oct), where mussels and oysters are bred.

Strolling along the restaurant-lined quays of the **Canal Royal** at the Vieux Port is the quintessential Sèteois experience. From the fish market, continue south along quai de la Consigne, past the boat sheds where jousters meet (p107), to rock-clad **Mole St-Louis** and its **lighthouse** – great sea and harbour views! On the opposite side of the canal, contemporary art fills the **Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain** (☎ 04 67 74 94 37; www.cracl.fr.free.fr; 26 quai Aspirant Herber; admission free; ☎ 12.30-7pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 2-7pm Sat & Sun).

Graffiti adorns the facade of the **Musée International des Arts Modestes** (MAM; ☎ 04 67 18 64 00; www.miam.org; 23 quai Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny; adult/under 18yr €5/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun), another waterside art museum with fantastic exhibitions on experimental *art brut* (outsider art) and surf culture.

View other art forms Sète inspires with **Créa 7** (www.crea7.org), a grouping of artist workshops open the first Sunday of the month. Several are in the **Quarter Haut**, perched above the Vieux Port. From the tourist office, cut left (west) along rue Rapide, left again past **Église St-Louis** (rue des 3 Journées), and at the road fork bear left along rue Villaret Joyeuse to the main square in this old fishermen's quarter,

where young plane trees cast shadow dapples across the voluptuous curves of sculptor Richard Di Rosa's blue-eyed and buxom **La Mama** (place de l'Hospitalet). A wall mural at 3 rue Jean Robert Pinet celebrates Sète's most famous nautical joust.

Sète was the birthplace of symbolist poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945), whose remains lie in the **Cimetière Marin**. Overlooking this cemetery is the **Musée Paul Valéry** (☎ 04 67 46 20 98; rue François Desnoyer; adult/12-18yr €4/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm daily Jul & Aug, Wed-Mon Sep-Jun).

The town was also the childhood home of singer and poet Georges Brassens (1921-81), whose mellow voice speaks at multimedia **Espace Georges Brassens** (☎ 04 67 53 32 77; 67 blvd Camille Blanc; adult/student/child €5/2/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm daily Jun-Sep, Tue-Sun Oct-May).

Tours

The tourist office rents **audioguides** (€5-8; 1½ hr) detailing seven thematic walks around Sète. In addition to its market and farm tours (see left), it runs guided tours of **Château de Villeroy** (admission free; ☎ 10am Fri Apr-Aug), Sète's only wine estate, comprising 300 hectares of vines wedged between the Med and Le Bassin de Thau.

Tired and/or tiny feet can tour the canals aboard **Le Petit Train de Sète** (☎ 04 67 46 00 10; quai Général Durand; adult/2-13yr €5/3; 30 min; ☎ every 45min 11am-6.30pm Jun & Sep, to 9.30pm Jul & Aug, to 5.30pm Wed, Sat & Sun Apr, May, Oct & Nov).

Azur Croisières (☎ 06 10 65 40 22; ☎ Feb-mid-Oct) runs a one-hour **harbour tour** (adult/child €10/5) from Pont de la Savonnerie. In July and August, **Sète Croisières** (☎ 04 67 46 00 46; www.sete-croisieres.com in French; quai Général Durand) organises boat and fishing trips, including Sardinade en Fête evenings – sail to a beach and barbecue sardines!

Sleeping

Several options face the Med from the *cor-niche* (coastal road) running alongside the beaches west of the port.

Auberge de Jeunesse Villa Salis (☎ 04 67 53 46 68; sete@fuaj.org; rue du Général Revest; camping incl breakfast €10, dm incl sheets & breakfast €15.50; ☎ reception 8am-noon & 6-10pm Feb-mid-Dec) Sweeping views of Sèteois canals feeding into the harbour is the reward for hiking 1km to this hilltop hostel, a villa with bunk rooms in concrete bungalows and ample space to pitch tents between pine trees. Each room has its own patch of scrub garden, and the dining room (dinner costs

(€9.50) enjoys arresting views from its terrace, a peaceful spot bar the noisy squawks of the hostel's resident parrot. Claude, ex-Les Deux Alpes hostel, is the man in charge.

Hôtel La Conga (☎ 04 67 53 02 57; www.conga.fr; plage de la Corniche; d €32-47, with seaweed d €45-59, tr €55-67; ♿) This typical seaside hotel, a sunny, white-concrete affair, sits on the coastal road 2.5km west of the Vieux Port opposite Plage de la Corniche. Come lunch, beach punters flood into its popular restaurant, La Table de Jean (menus €12 to €27), famous for its fish dishes.

ourpick L'Orque Bleue (☎ 04 67 74 72 13; www.hotel-orquebleue-sete.com; 10 quai Aspirant Herber; d patio €67-78, port €95-98, tr/q €102/115; ☞ Feb-Dec; P ☒ ♿) Free wi-fi. To sense Sète as a living port this shipping magnate's mansion, a marble-clad 1880s *hôtel particulier*, is the place to sleep. If you're a light sleeper go for a room overlooking the interior patio; otherwise, those with watery canal and port outlook are the prime real estate.

Le Grand Hôtel (☎ 04 67 74 71 77; www.legrandhotel-sete.com; 17 quai Marechal de Lattre de Tassigny; low/high season d from €75/102, ste €200/220; ♿) Grand indeed sums up the marvellous old dame of Sète's sleeping scene, which (providing you're not scared of heights) is a heady delight. The place dates to 1883, but modern rooms mix styles: 'classic' have forged-iron furnishings, and aqua-blue 'fantasy' are adorned with frescoed beach scenes, dried starfish and seashell-framed mirrors.

Eating

Cuisine des pêcheurs (fishermen's cuisine) is what Sèteois dining is about. Look for '*dégustation à toutes heures*' (tasting all hours) signs studding the tempting line-up of fish restaurants between Pont de la Savonnerie and the fish market on quai Durand and quai Maximin Licciardi.

Les Demoiselles Dupuy (☎ 04 67 74 03 46; 4 quai Maximin Licciardi; mains €10-18.50; ☞ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) This tiny, vital place serves up the catch of the day *à la plancha*. Sit on the waterside terrace, with plastic tables and chairs snug beside a seagull-busy fishing boat. Or opt for a table facing the punnets of oysters – plucked from its own offshore beds – begging to be shucked. Weathered fishermen with blue plastic aprons and grubby fingernails double as waiters.

ourpick La Péniche (☎ 04 67 48 64 13; 1 quai des Moulins; menus €15-19.50, mains €11-13; ☞ lunch & dinner

Mon-Fri, dinner Sat, lunch Sun) The service is brisk and friendly at this converted barge, where the clientele's a mix of local workers, suits and sweaters. *Rouille à la Sèteoise* (octopus simmered with tomato and garlic and smothered in a peppery sauce) is the house speciality.

Ameriklub (☎ 04 67 53 02 37; promenade Maréchal Lederc; menus €21, €28 & €34; ☞ lunch & dinner daily Jun-Sep) Drink or dine St-Tropez-style on a sun lounger looking out to sea at this beach club on the rocks. Creamy risotto and fish fried in dry Muscat and peppered with orange are among the elaborate dishes on the Mediterranean menu. DJ Chocolate spins salsa some evenings.

Au Bord du Canal (☎ 04 67 51 98 39; 9 quai Maximin Licciardi; menus €32; ☞ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) The fish practically flop from the market straight into this pleasantly furnished restaurant, which does a splendid midday grill (€15) of whatever fins take the chef's fancy that day.

Drinking

Handwritten notes stuck on the window advertise the latest vintage in stock, many organic, at **Terroirs d'Occitane: Vins du Languedoc-Roussillon** (6 rue Lazare Carnot), a down-to-earth wine shop that really knows its business.

Le Flo des Mots (☎ 04 67 51 31 83; www.leflodesmots.com; 4 quai Leopold Suquet; ☞ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm Sun) What an ingenious idea this is: a food-and-wine bookshop with wine-tasting counter and *cave à vins* (wine cellar) with plenty of regional wines to buy!

Le Cottage (☎ 04 67 74 35 99; 4 quai Leopold Suquet; ☞ 11am-2am daily) Double-sized white-canvas deckchairs planted an inch from the water's edge make this friendly café – one of a line-up on canalside quai Leopold Suquet – stand out.

Getting There & Around

SNCM (☎ 04 67 46 68 00; 4 quai d'Alger; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9-11.30am Sat) and **Comarit** (☎ 04 67 80 75 44) have offices at the port and run ferries to Morocco from quai d'Alger about every four days year-round.

Services from Sète's **train station** (place André Cambon) include Montpellier (€5.10 to €7.10, 20 minutes), Béziers (€7.40, 25 minutes), Narbonne (€12.90, 45 minutes), Nîmes (€13.70, 45 minutes), Perpignan (€21.70, 1½ hours) and Toulouse (€30.10, two hours).

To get to town, exit the station, turn left and board Totem bus 2, 3 or 6 (€1) to 'centre

WINE TASTING WITH A VITICULTURE GOD

God is, in this case, the **Mas de Daumas Gassac** (☎ 04 67 57 88 45; www.daumas-gassac.com; Aniane; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-Jun), an estate 8km south of St-Guilhem-le-Désert in Aniane, which made the wine world sit up in 1978 with its full-bodied red, sufficiently age-worthy to rival the best of Bordeaux yet astonishingly bottled with a bog-standard *vin de pays* (table wine) etiquette. Selling the first batch was tough, but by the early 1980s the reputation of Languedoc winemakers and their *terroir* (land) was sealed.

The *mas* (farmhouse) remains the family home of Véronique and Aimé Guibert, who planted the first vines and olive trees in the 1970s and run the estate today with three of their five sons. Don't be surprised if Aimé Guibert seems familiar when you pass by to taste and buy his wine and olive oil: he starred in Jonathan Nossiter's 2005 *Mondovino* documentary (www.mondovino.com) about the globalisation of France's wine industry.

ville' – or walk south along blvd Victor Hugo, take the fourth right along rue Longuyon across the Canal Royal and continue south to the Vieux Port.

Midi Sport (☎ 04 67 74 93 52, 06 43 20 97 37; http://scooter.site.voila.fr; 3 av Victor Hugo; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat) rents bicycles (€12 per day), 50cc scooters (€29 per day) and 125cc Vespa scooters (€59 per day), and can meet you at the train station with your vehicle.

ALONG THE HÉRAULT

Le Bassin de Thau (p135) is the final port of call for the Hérault on its 160km-long journey from its source in the Cévennes. To follow the river's course inland, swoop past oyster beds around the northern end of the lagoon from Sète and pick up the N113, a road that snakes along the lagoon's northern end within a whisker of historic Pézenas (p131).

Not far away in Villeveyrac the **Abbaye de Valmagne** (☎ 04 67 78 06 09; www.valmagne.com; ☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm mid-Jun-Sep, 2-6pm rest of yr, closed Tue mid-Dec-mid-Feb), with its lovely medieval gardens and flowery fountain-clad cloister, was one of southern France's richest abbeys from the 12th to 15th centuries. It was founded in 1139 (when monks planted its extensive vineyards), and in 1257 its 6th-century Romanesque chapel was transformed into a classical Gothic church, inspired by northern France's great cathedrals, to serve Valmagne's blooming gaggle of Cistercian monks. Since 1789, when the last monks fled, the abbey has been used purely to make wine – which you can taste in situ.

ST-GUILHEM-LE-DÉSERT

Its very name evokes the ecclesiastical spirit of this picturesque village that has 11th-century **Abbaye de Gellone** (☎ 7.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, to 6pm rest of yr, organ concerts 7.15pm Wed Jul & Aug), improbably clinging to a rocky ravine, as its heart. Walkers heading south to Santiago de Compostela in Spain fill their water bottles at old stone fountains and linger over lunch on the polished flagstones of the abbey square, while traditional troubadour chants elevate music lovers to another plane during July's Saison Musicale. But then, St-Guilhem-le-Désert is a Unesco World Heritage site.

Drop by the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 67 57 44 33; www.saintguilhem-valleherault.fr; 2 rue du Font du Portal; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2-6pm Sat & Sun) on the main pedestrian street to buy maps (€1) detailing family walks in the area, including the lovely **Cirque du Bout du Monde** (one hour return) to the 'end of the world' and the circular pilgrimage **Sur le Chemin de St-Jacques de Compostelle** (three hours).

Immediately south is the **Pont du Diable** (1030), a bridge built by the devil to mark the southern entrance into the stunning **Gorges de l'Hérault**. Crossing the river at its narrowest point, there is no better way to revel in both bridge and rocky gorge than aboard a canoe or kayak (to set sail, see opposite). Or take a dip in the river from the beach here, accessible from the D27. In 2009 a new Maison du Site information centre will open.

Some galleries in the nearby **Grotte de Clamouse** (☎ 04 67 57 71 05; www.clamouse.com; adult/4-11yr €8.50/5; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, to 6pm Jun & Sep, to 5pm Feb-May & Oct, noon-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Jan), uncovered in 1945, still get flooded five or six times a year when waters rise. Cave tours

(50 minutes) take in three vast chambers more than 50m high, one serving as a stage for a dramatic five-minute *son et lumière* (sound-and-light show). Particularly impressive is the Couloir Blanc (White Corridor), crammed with stalactites, stalagmites, columns where the two meet and a mirage of sparkling white crystals formed more than 20,000 years ago. Throughout the tour, look for puffs of white on the cave floor where new stalagmites are starting to grow...at the lightning speed of 1cm per century.

Sleeping & Eating

Le Guilhaume d'Orange (☎ 04 67 57 24 53; www.guilhaumedorange.com; 2 av Guillaume d'Orange, d €62-92) With a leafy restaurant terrace peering down on the river and sweet golden-stone walls, this hotel-restaurant *de charme* predictably fills up fast. Cuisine is market-driven. *Menus* are €19; it's open for lunch and dinner.

Château de Jonquières (☎ 0467966258; www.chateau-jonquieres.com; d incl breakfast €85; (P) (B)) To sleep amid vines look no further than this 17th-century chateau and wine-growing estate, 12km southwest in the village of Jonquières. Taste wine in its cellar, sleep in one of four classically decorated rooms and laze the day away in its marvellous grounds.

Le Fermier dans son Pré (20 rue du Font du Portal; lunch/afternoon tea €9.50/4.50; ☎ 11am-8pm Jul & Aug, Sat & Sun only low season) Everything is farm-made and free of colourings/additives at this lovely little tearoom, which cooks up salad platters for

lunch and farm-produced ice cream all day – flavours include violet, chestnut, liquorice, coconut and caramel.

VALLÉE DE LA BUÈGES TO GANGES

Dramatically bare of human life is the **Vallée de la Buèges**, a sun-blazed valley of rock and scrub that runs parallel with the Hérault Valley to its north. Four hamlets with unsurpassable views break up the 45km drive from **Montpeyroux** (south) to **Brissac** (north). Along the way, the **Auberge des Lavagnes** (☎ 04 67 73 12 79; www.leslavagnes.com; dm €15), an isolated *gîte d'étape* in Les Lavagnes, provides meals (breakfast/lunch/dinner €6.50/9/15) and beds to the walkers (2½ hours along the GR74 from St-Guilhem-le-Désert) and horse riders who make their way here.

In Brissac follow the D108 east and turn left where it meets the larger D986 to reach **Grotte des Demoiselles** (☎ 04 67 73 70 02; www.demoiselles.fr; adult/12-17yr/5-11yr/3-5yr €8.70/6.50/5/1; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, to 5.30pm Apr-May & Sep, 10am-noon & 2-4.30/5.30pm Feb, Mar, Oct & Nov), a cave of gargantuan proportions accessed via an open-carriage funicular. Once in, one-hour guided tours take you through several galleries and past dozens of fantastic rock formations (a marmot, a swan, a bobsled piste, Pisa's Leaning Tower etc) via several wet and slippery passageways (leave the flip-flops at home) and 561 steps (be warned). Towering 60m high and 120m long, the subterranean cathedral dwarfs you as you stand in front of it.

PADDLING ALONG THE HÉRAULT

There is nothing so serene or racy as paddling along the Hérault, the rich green of its waters alone making it quite an experience. Midway between Laroque and St-Bauzille de Putois on the D986 is **Canoë Le Moulin** (☎ 04 67 73 30 73; www.canoemoulin.fr), a roadside hut that runs 3/9/12/14km canoeing trips downstream typically taking 1/2/3/4 hours (€15/20/22/24); adventurous overnight trips (26km, two days, €49) – bring your own camping gear; and romantic 9km sunset paddles with aperitif and barbecue (three hours, €39). **Les Lutins Cevenols** (☎ 04 67 73 70 30; www.centre-pleinenature.fr) is another outlet.

Downstream in Causse de la Selle pick up some oars at **Canoë Rapido** (☎ 04 67 55 75 75; www.st-guilhem-le-desert.com/canoë-rapido.html), immediately east of the village on the D122, from where it is a 12km descent to the Gorges de l'Hérault (€29/44/54/65 for a 1-/2-/3-/4-place canoe; three to four hours). At the 11th kilometre, near St-Guilhem-le-Désert, quench your thirst and lap up some shade at the **Canobar** (☎ Jul & Aug), a floating bar set up in the river by an enterprising student. Look for the umbrellas planted in the water.

Across the board kids aged six to 10 can hop into a parent's canoe for an additional €5, or go solo providing they can swim. Under sixes are not allowed aboard, even as a passenger, with the exception of **Canoë Kayapuna** (☎ 04 67 57 30 25) in St-Guilhem-le-Désert, which has a 4km 'cliff' trail open to kids from the age of four (€43 for four people).

Lap up lovely river views along the short stretch of D986 from the cave to **Laroque** (population 1120), a medieval village with a riverside camp site, **Le Tivoli** (☎ 04 67 73 97 28; av de l'Europe; adults, tent & car €13; ☹ mid-Jun-Aug), perfect for swimming and fishing. The riverbanks here are hot with canoeists and kayakers (p111).

Arriving in **Ganges** (population 3350), spurn the town's scant eating and sleeping options and drive east along the D999 to the **Domaine de Blancardy** (☎ 04 67 73 94 94; www.blancardy.com; d €55-95; ☹ closed Jan & Feb; 🚗), a beautiful farm and winery signposted 2km east of Moulès et Baucels, then 2.7km uphill through vines. Run by two sisters and their husbands, including the thoroughly charming Spanish Pedro, its 13 rooms are spacious and well-suited for families, and many have a terrace with table and chairs. But the real attraction (with the exception of the to-die-for mountain views from the infinity pool) is the farm restaurant (*menus* €13 to €42; open for lunch and dinner Friday to Tuesday, and dinner Thursday). Every last ingredient is sourced from neighbouring farms in the valley and the foie gras – unusually flavoured with ginger, pear and spices, peach, garlic and so on – is Blancardy's own. In July and August don't miss its Saturday and Monday-morning hikes (guests/others €8/10) through vineyards and *garrigue*, which end in *dégustation* (wine tasting).

Further east in Montoulieu, the **Domaine de la Devèze** (☎ 04 67 73 70 21; www.deveze.com) is another lovely wine property that welcomes campers, has self-catering *gîtes* and does wine tasting.

CIRQUE DE NAVACELLES

It's difficult to imagine how a meander of today's thin, relatively languid River Vis could ever have scoured this breathtakingly deep bowl, for all the world like some giant lunar crater, all the way from the Causse du Larzac to its south to the Causse de Blandas on its northern side.

There's an **information office** (☎ 04 67 44 63 10), staffed between Easter and early November, at the Belvédère de la Baume Auriol viewpoint on the south side of the cirque. From here, the route descends vertiginously until, near the bottom a side road drops to the hamlet of Navacelles. Surrounded by green meadow, it sits at the base of a mere knob of a hill that

somehow survived the erosion. Climbing equally steeply, the road bears you up and out of the bowl, passing by the Belvédère de Blandas, with its equally spectacular plunging views.

At the Moulins de la Foux (*foux* meaning large hole in Occitan), the Vis gushes powerfully from the hillside after having sluiced underground through the *cause* (high limestone plateau) for several kilometres. To this spot, four villages would bring their grain until the water mills were abandoned after a disastrous flood in 1907. A three-hour blazed circular walking trail starts in Navacelles and passes by the mill. Alternatively, leave your vehicle at a green sign on a bend in the D713 as it climbs towards the Belvédère de Blandas and walk to the now-restored mill buildings. Allow about one hour for the return trip.

ST-MARTIN DE LONDRES & PIC ST-LOUP

Vineyards and plenty of signs advertising '*vente au caveau*' (cellar wine sales) carpet the lower reaches of the **Pic St-Loup** (658m), the mountain dominating the Hérault plain with its distinctive elongated pyramid shape.

The **Maison de Pays** (☎ 04 67 55 09 59; www.touris-med.com; ☹ 9.15am-12.45pm & 2.30-7pm) in **St-Martin de Londres**, across from its small café-clad central square, has information on walking trails up the Pic and elsewhere in the valley. Its village camp site **Le Pic St-Loup** (☎ 04 67 55 00 53; rte du Pic St-Loup; 2 adults, tent & car €13.70-15.20; ☹ Apr-Sep; 🚗) stares right at the mountain, though the best views are unquestionably aboard a glider from the **Centre Régional de Vol à Voile** (☎ 04 67 55 01 42; http://cvvm.free.fr; initiation tandem flight €60) in Mas de Londres, 2km east along the D122. As hot as hell in summer, made all the more dramatic by the relentless chant of the surrounding cicada-infested *garrigue*, a half-day spent watching gliders swooping overhead gives a true taste of what this region is about. Aspiring pilots must be at least 55kg, but there are the **Pégase** (☎ 06 64 31 30 98; Trucq de Guiraud, Mas de Londres; ☹ mid-Mar-early Dec) stables next door for younger kids to explore on horseback.

To continue the scenic drive through this parched, rocky and heavily scented landscape, follow the D122 west to **Causse de la Selle**, a popular base for canoeing along the velvety waters of the River Hérault. See p111 for details.

Bus 108 (☎ 08 25 34 01 34) links St-Martin de Londres with Montpellier (five or six daily, 35 minutes).

SOUTH TO MONTPELLIER

From St-Martin de Londres, the D986 flits south to Montpellier. For more scenic motor-ing, get off this road and delve east into the scented *garrigue*, where cicadas buzz (p55) and a rash of medieval villages – **Cazevieille, Les Matelles, St-Vincent de Barbeyrargues, Assas** et al – have made their wealth from wine.

In **Castries** (population 5000), skip the Renaissance chateau (under renovation until

2010) and head to the **aqueduct** on the town's northern edge, built between 1670 and 1676 to feed the chateau water. To end your trip on a high, duck under the giant arches and drive north along the N110 for 1km to **Disini** (☎ 04 67 41 97 86; www.disini-hotel.com; 1 rue des Carrières; d €150-290; ♿ ♿), a boutique hotel with an exotic interior shipped from Bali and a spa specialising in tasty massages. Try a rub-down in Russian caviar, or chocolate, acacia and chestnut honey, or basil, or yoghurt and salt perhaps?

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