

Roussillon



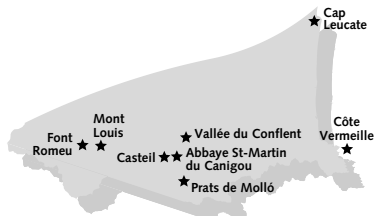
Often called French Catalonia, Roussillon sits on Spain's doorstep at the eastern end of the Pyrenees. It is an extreme land, kept in check by the Tramontana, a violent wind that howls down from the mountains, bone chilling in winter and strong enough to flip over a caravan and make kite-surfers fly in summer. Local lore says it only stays in three-day periods.

Indeed, there's endless lore in this impassioned, sun-blazed land that for centuries was part of Catalonia (officially only the semiautonomous region in northeast Spain now). French on paper, yes, but its soul remains staunchly Catalan: sangria-fuelled fiestas and flamboyant *corridas* (bullfights) are as common as muck in this earthy land where the highest mountain peak, Canigou (2784m), is religiously revered as king by Catalans on both sides of the border. *Sardanes* folk dances and the Catalan language thrive, nowhere more so than in Perpignan, the region's only city and capital of the Pyrénées-Orientales *département*, where university students can study in Catalan.

Roussillon's proximity to Spain makes it easy to reach, budget-airline travellers flying into the Spanish airport of Girona, 95km south, as well as Perpignan, Nîmes and Béziers Agde. Once you're in situ, the kaleidoscope of scapes is magnificent: be it uncovering exquisite Romanesque chapel art in the Tech (Vallespir, Conflent (Têt) and Agly Valleys that spill from the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean; tasting wine in vineyards propped up by drystone walls along the picturesque Côte Vermeille; hiking up north to 12th-century fortress ruins in cowboy Cathar country (p196); communing with nature in the Parc Naturel Régional des Pyrénées Catalanes; or simply playing bum in the beach resorts east of Perpignan, this region has it all.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wake up to birdsong and the call of the wild in a forest tree house near **Prats de Molló** (p228)
- Walk through chestnut and beech woods to Romanesque **Abbaye St-Martin du Canigou** (p233); lunch afterwards on the lawn in **Casteil** (p232)
- Watch mountain villages and mind-blowing scenery flash by aboard the canary-yellow **Train Jaune** (p232), Vallée du Conflent
- See the sun make fire and learn about solar energy in **Font Romeu** (p234) and **Mont Louis** (p233)
- Plummet from Banyuls vines up high down to Collioure to follow Fauvist footsteps along the **Côte Vermeille** (p231)
- Tuck into a polystyrene platter of shellfish in a fisherman's *mas* on **Cap Leucate** (p220)



PERPIGNAN & AROUND

In the 18th century traveller Henry Swinburne summarised the capital of Roussillon – an area of 4116 sq km populated by 422,000 today – as a ‘villainous ugly town’. Yet stroll its vibrant maze of old-town streets ablaze with the souls of silversmiths, soap makers, drapers and the myriad other traditional medieval trades evoked in the very street signs you see and you’ll be reluctant to agree.

There is ample to entertain around the city: a wealth of vineyards (west), a finely sculpted Romanesque cathedral in Elne (south) and, heading east to the sea, a nature trail around a lake. Or trip it north past magnificent fortresses and oyster beds to Cap Leucate (p220).

The Maître de Cabestany (p40) whose skilled hand sculpted some of Languedoc’s finest Romanesque works originated from **Cabestany**, 5km southeast of Perpignan. Learn more at its didactic **Centre de Sculpture Romane** (☎ 04 68 08 51 31; Parc Guilhem; adult/12-18yr €3/1; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, to 6pm Oct-Apr), which encourages sculpture lovers to have a good feel.

PERPIGNAN

pop 115,000

As much Catalan as it is French, Perpignan – *Perpinyà* in Catalan – is a vibrant city with bags of character. Fiestas are in its blood and its population is a mixed one: Iberia flows in the veins of the descendants of the thousands of refugees who fled over the mountains at the end of the Spanish Civil War, while many other families, Arabs and displaced French settlers alike, trace their recent origins to Algeria.

The TGV speeds into Perpignan in 2009, placing the city a mere 45-minute train ride from Barcelona. In 2011 the curtain opens on Jean Nouvel’s *Théâtre de l’Archipel*, a cutting-edge piece of urban architecture – in crude terms, imagine an amber-red bubble protruding from a concrete block – inspired by 17th-century garnets, dug from the nearby Pyrenees and crafted onto gold by Perpignan jewellers.

History

Perpignan’s relatively modern history was for a long time closely bound with events over the Pyrenees in present-day Spain. In 1172 it came under the control of the realm of Catalonia-Aragon. After flourishing in its own

right as the capital of the kingdom of Mallorca from 1278 to 1344, a Mediterranean force that stretched northwards as far as Montpellier and included the Balearic Islands, it again fell under alien Aragonese rule for much of the late Middle Ages.

In 1640 the 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 (until then the northern section of Catalonia) to the French, much to the indignation of the locals.

Orientation

Two rivers flow through Perpignan: the Têt and its tributary, the murky Basse, banked with trim gardens. Place de la Loge and place de la République, fringed by cafés, sit at the heart of the pedestrian old town.

Information

Comité Départemental du Tourisme (☎ 04 68 51 52 53; www.cdt-66.com; 16 av des Palmiers; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri) Tourist information on the *Pyénées-Orientales département*.

Espace Palmarium (☎ 04 68 86 08 51; place Arago; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Sat mid-Jun–mid-Sep, to 6pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep–mid-Jun) Tourist-office information point and *billetterie* (box office), open until 10pm Thursday during July and August’s *Les Jéudis d’Été* (see the boxed text p215).

Laverie Foch (23 rue du Maréchal Foch; 🕒 7am-8.30pm) Laundrette.

Librairie Chapitre (☎ 04 68 51 74 58; 10-12 rue du Docteur Pous) This bookshop stocks maps, and walking and cycling guides.

Net & Games (☎ 04 68 35 14 93; 45bis av du Général Lederc; per hr €3; 🕒 1pm-1am Mon-Sat, to 8pm Sun Jul & Aug, 8am-1am Mon-Fri, 1pm-1am Sat, 1-8pm Sun Sep-May) Internet access.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 66 30 30; www.perpignan-tourisme.com; place Armand Lanoux; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun mid-Jun–mid-Sep; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun mid-Sep–mid-Jun) In the Palais des Congrès, off promenade des Platanes.

Sights

PLACE DE LA LOGE

This old-town square abuzz with café terraces shelters three prized stone structures: 14th-century **Loge de Mer**, rebuilt during the

Renaissance, was Perpignan's stock exchange and later maritime tribunal. Between it and the **Palais de la Députation**, former local parliament seat, is the **Hôtel de Ville** (town hall) with its typical red-brick and smooth pebble facade. The three bronze arms that protrude from its upper facade represent the electoral classes in medieval Perpignan society – the bourgeoisie and traders; the merchants, drapers, doctors and lawyers; and the gardeners and artisans. Then of course there was the miserable rest, poor and with no voice.

LE CASTILLET

Once a prison, this 14th-century red-brick town gate – from which the yellow-and-red striped Roussillon flag always flies – is the only vestige of military engineer Vauban's fortified town walls. Beneath the arch there is a model of the city as it was in 1686, and on the opposite wall a plaque remembers Languedoc Protestants deported to Catholic Perpignan between 1703 and 1712 during the Camisard revolt (p94).

Inside is **Casa Païral** (☎ 04 68 35 42 05; place de Verdun; adult/under 18yr €4/free; ☎ 11am–6.30pm Wed–Mon May–Sep, 10.30am–5.30pm Wed–Mon Oct–Apr), a folklore museum housing bits and pieces of anything and everything Catalan: traditional bonnets, lace mantillas, an entire 17th-century kitchen...

PALAIS DES ROIS DE MAJORQUE

Sitting on a small hill, the **Palais des Rois de Majorque** (Palace of the Kings of Mallorca; ☎ 04 68 34 48 29; entrance on rue des Archers; adult/student/child €4/2/2; ☎ 10am–6pm Jun–Sep, 9am–5pm Oct–May) is a symbol of Perpignan's medieval splendour. The palace was built in 1276 for the ruler of the newly founded kingdom and was once surrounded by extensive fig and olive groves and a hunting reserve (both lost once Vauban's formidable citadel walls enclosed the palace).

CATHÉDRALE ST-JEAN

Topped by a wrought-iron bell cage, **Cathédrale St-Jean** (place Gambetta; admission free; ☎ 7.30am–7pm Tue–Sun, 7.30am–noon & 3–7pm Mon), begun in 1324 and completed in 1509, has a facade of red brick and smooth, zigzagging river stones. The cavernous single nave is marked by the fine carving and relative sobriety of its Catalan altarpiece (closed for restoration until 2010). For centuries, Perpignan believers have venerated the engagingly naive statue of the Virgin

and Child in the chapel of Nostra Senyora dels Correchs in the north aisle.

Sleeping

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 68 34 63 32; perpignan@fuaj.org; allée Marc Pierre; B&B €14.50; ☎ Mar–mid–Nov) Perpignan's HI-affiliated youth hostel, north of Parc de la Pépinière, is a welcoming place with a kitchen for self-caterers.

Hôtel Avenir (☎ 04 68 34 20 30; 11 rue de l'Avenir; s/d with shared bathroom from €18/20.50; d with shower €30, with toilet & shower €35) Several rooms have a small balcony and each is uniquely and charmingly decorated. There's also a delightful 2nd-floor terrace.

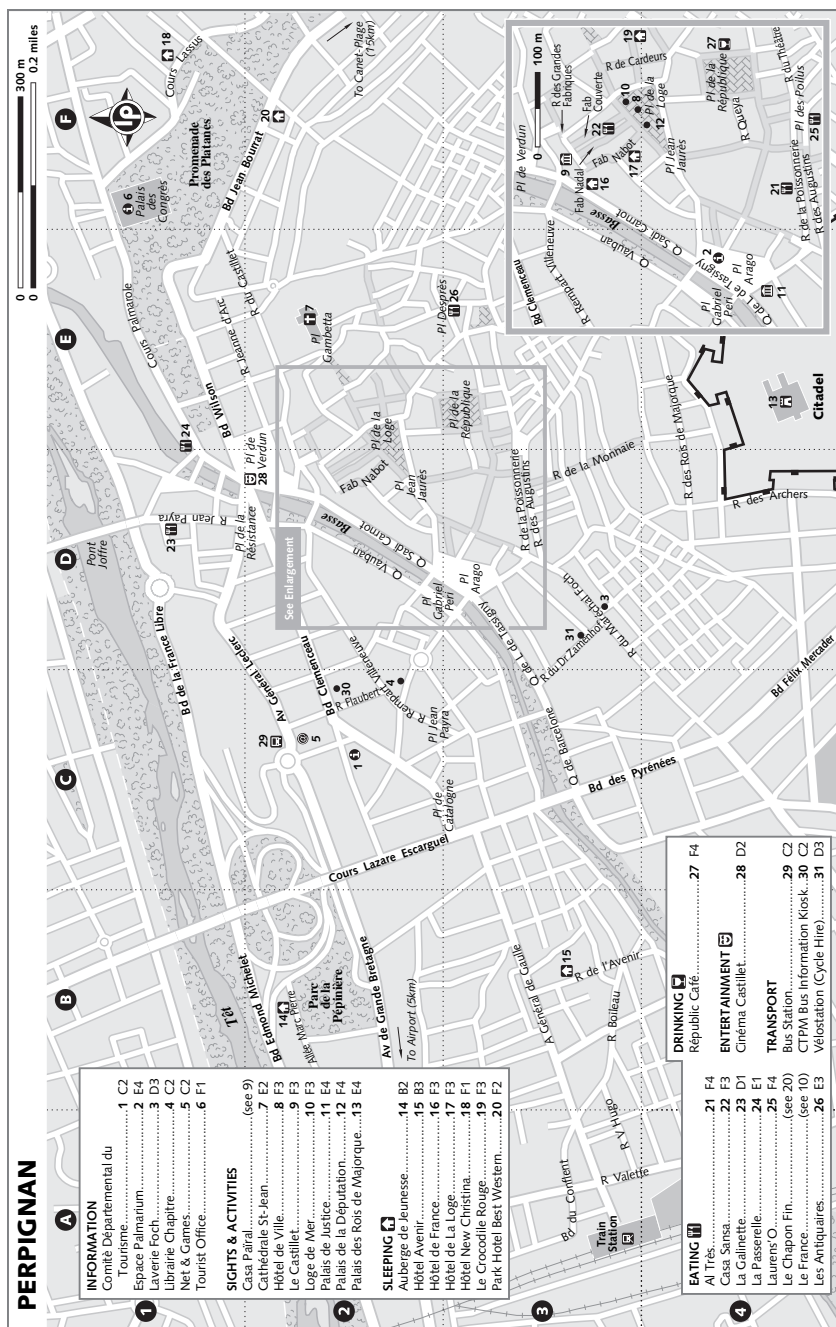
Hôtel de La Loge (☎ 04 68 34 41 02; www.hoteldelaloge.fr; 1 rue des Fabriques Nabot; s €44, d €48–62; ☎) Disregard the gruff owner; the bedrooms are rather more pleasant, though their furniture varies from attractive and antique to flea market. Of the more expensive air-con rooms, 106 and 206 overlook people-busy place de la Loge.

Hôtel de France (☎ 04 68 34 92 81; 26 quai Sadi Carnot; d €55–140, Dalí suite €200) Orson Welles, Edith Piaf, Antoine de St-Exupéry and Catalan painter Salvador Dalí (p216) were regulars at this riverside building dating to 1833. The decor is tired (understatement), but if you're keen to experience the same lurid pea-green floral carpet, unicorn bathroom tiles etc as Dalí, you can: ask for suite 218.

Le Crocodile Rouge (☎ 06 08 66 44 72, 09 71 29 77 59; lecrocodilerouge@hotmail.com; 14 impasse des Cardeurs; s/d incl breakfast €65/75) This three-room B&B at the end of an old-town alley has style. Turn a blind eye to the public areas yet to be renovated and admire instead the age-old red-brick arch preserved in the contemporary Japanese-styled courtyard garden, or the kitsch plastic red-crocodile carpet coating the steep, narrow staircase.

Park Hôtel Best Western (☎ 04 68 35 14 14; www.parkhotel-fr.com; 18 blvd Jean Bourrat; d from €80; ☎ ☎ ☎) Each of this pleasant hotel's rooms is engagingly furnished; the largest face a park. Well-reputed chef Alexander Klimenko cooks up wonders in the hotel restaurant, Le Chap' (otherwise known as Le Chapon Fin – The Fine Capon).

Hôtel New Christina (☎ 04 68 35 12 21; www.hotel-newchristina.com; 51 cours Lassus; d €103; ☎ ☎) Rooms wear blue and beige, and bathrooms sport tub and separate toilet cubicle. Those at the front overlook a public park, and the outdoor pool up on the roof allegedly boasts Perpignan's only jacuzzi. Off-season rates are a particular bargain.



FESTIVALS & EVENTS – ROUSSILLON

February

- **Fête de l'Ours** (<http://feteours.free.fr>) Centuries-old Festival of the Bear (see p55); Prats de Molló, Arles-sur-Tech and elsewhere in the Tech Valley, around 2 February.

March & April

- **Procession de la Sanch** On Good Friday barefoot penitents wearing *caperutxa* (traditional hooded robes) parade silently through the old city of Perpignan.

May

- **Fête de la Cerise and Céret de Bandas** A 200-piece brass band opens Céret's famous Cherry Festival, late May.

June

- **Fête de la St-Jean** Traditional folk dances and merrymaking mark the summer solstice on 23 June across the region; bonfires are lit in Perpignan and a 'sacred' flame is brought down from the Pic du Canigou.
- **Festival Nature** Green activities galore, including thematic walks (birds of prey, mountain flora etc), kids' insect-discovery outings, bird-watching workshops et al, in the region's many nature reserves (www.catalanes.reserves-naturelles.org), June to September.

July

- **Les Querencias** Two-day music festival with lots of flamenco and staunchly Catalan sounds, Céret, early July.
- **Elne Piano Fortissimo** (www.erne-piano-fortissimo.fr) Three-day festival showcasing some of the world's best young pianists in Elne cathedral.
- **Festival de Sardanes** Céret's four-day *sardane* festival is a prime chance to watch Catalan folk dance and lap up traditional folk music.
- **Féria Céret de Toros** (www.feriadeceret.com) A running of the bulls opens four days of *corridos* (bullfights) and *novilladas*, folk music, dance and fireworks in Céret.

July & August

- **Festival International des Arts** The old village of St-Cyprien enjoys an abundance of classical-music concerts during this summertime festival.
- **Festival International de Musiques et des Arts de la Rue** Free theatre, dance, music and other street entertainment every Thursday evening, Perpignan (also known as Les Jeudis d'Été, or the Thursdays of summer).
- **Le Babau de Rivesaltes** Carnival-like parade headed by a fierce, fanged monster (half dragon, half iguana) weaves through the streets of Rivesaltes, 1 August.

September

- **Fête de la Figue** Fig festival, Banyuls-sur-Mer, mid-September.
- **Marché Médiéval** Perpignan pulls on tights and wimples for the city's Medieval Market.
- **Musique en Catalogne Romane** (www.musiquecatalogneromane.fr) Month-long music concert bringing chamber-music concerts to and around Perpignan.

October

- **Fête du Vin** A barrel of the year's new wine is borne to Cathédrale St-Jean, Perpignan, to be blessed at this wine festival, third weekend of the month.

Eating

The old town is a warren of eating opportunities: stroll, get lost and follow your nose.

Laurens'O (☎ 04 68 34 66 66; 5 place des Poilus; mains €16-20; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This modern locale with striped tablecloths and orange and black decor offers innovative Mediterranean cooking. Its distinctly Italian flavour is garnished with a creative French twist and the odd spot of Thai.

Casa Sansa (☎ 04 68 34 21 84; <http://casa-sansa.fr>; entrées 2 rue Fabrique Nadal & rue Fabrique Couverte; menus €19-29, mains €16-23; ☺ lunch & dinner) Here's another highly popular spot – or rather two places stuck together. Choose the older, more southerly one, its walls dating to 1816, scarcely visible beneath photos of the famous who have savoured its fine Catalan cuisine.

Le France (☎ 04 68 51 61 71; 1 place de la Loge; pizzas €10-15, pasta €17, starters/mains €10/25; ☺ 10am-11pm) This people-busy venue awash with families, couples etc harmoniously inserts the ultramodern within the historical setting of Perpignan's old stock exchange. Tapas and pizza rule the culinary roost.

Les Antiquaires (☎ 04 68 34 06 58; place Desprès; menus €24-43, mains €16-25; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Cuisine is as traditional, reliable and mature as the clientele and splendid line of vintage bottles above the fireplace. Portions, from the 50g pack of butter placed before you to the three huge dollops of chocolate mousse for dessert, are mightily generous.

La Passerelle (☎ 04 68 51 30 65; 1 cours Palmarole; menus €30-60, mains €19-24; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Mon)

The attractive marine decor hints at the riches within the kitchen: La Passerelle is *the* restaurant in Perpignan for Mediterranean fish, fresh and without a hint of freezer or fish farm.

Al Très (☎ 04 68 34 88 39; 3 rue de la Poissonnerie; 2-course lunch menu €13, mains €20-26; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) At this stylish place with roughly plastered oxblood walls and vast, carved wooden bar that could double as an altar, you'll appreciate the freshness of the ingredients and innovative cuisine.

La Galinette (☎ 04 68 35 00 90; 23 rue Jean Payra; lunch menu €17, mains €28-30; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) In an elegant setting La Galinette serves refined cuisine, delicately confectioned desserts and an ample selection of regional wines. For a frisson of the unexpected, go for the *menu confiance* fish menu (€50) and let the chef select the best the sea washes up that day.

SELF-CATERING

A morning fruit and vegetable **market** (☺ Tue-Sun) fills place de la République; Saturday is organic day.

Short rue Paratilla is dubbed rue des Épices (Spice St) for its shops selling dried fruit, herbs, jams, hams, cheeses and more. **Epicerie Sala** (☺ Tue-Sat & morning Sun), run by the same family at No 1 since 1913, is famed.

Drinking

Most cafés are as hot for sinking sundowners and cocktails come dark as they are for breakfast or morning coffee; those on place Arago get jam-packed.

DALÍ'S TRAIN OF THOUGHT

You may choose to dissent from Salvador Dalí's no-doubt chemically induced claim that **Perpignan train station** (opposite) – a building the Catalan surrealist painter (1904–89) subsequently immortalized on canvas – is the centre of the universe. Dalí was visiting the capital of French Catalonia in 1965, so the story goes, when he experienced an epiphany. 'Suddenly before me, everything appeared with the clarity of lightning,' he wrote. 'I found myself in the centre of the universe.' Dalí went on to describe this nondescript place as '*la source d'illuminations*' and '*la cathédrale d'intuitions*' – no doubt putting a smile on the faces of local tourism authorities and most Perpignanais.

Dalí was a frequent visitor to Perpignan between 1950 and 1972. His chosen abode was **Hôtel de France** (p213) where, as the owner proudly explains, the artist would arrive from Spain laden with unsigned canvases. In the sanctuary of the hotel drawing room, free from the greedy tax-leaving eyes of customs officials, he signed his paintings before shipping them onwards with the SNCF. B&W photos in the hotel lobby show the eccentric artist with signature handlebar moustache lounging in the brown leather chair – still there – he always sat in. He slept in suite 218.

Dedicated Dalí fans note: the **Dalí Theatre Museum** (Teatra-Museum Dalí; www.salvador-dali.org) and jewel gallery (Dalí Joies) in Figueras, Spain, is an easy-peasy 60km drive from Perpignan.

ORGANIC SHOP, DRINK, EAT, SLEEP

Organic farming is a growing movement in green Roussillon. Track down *bio* (organic) viticulturists, cheese makers, fruit and vegetable farms, olive oils, restaurants, shops and even B&Bs on organic farms with **Bio 66** (www.bio66.com).

Républic Café (☎ 04 68 51 11 64; 2 place de la République; 8-2am Tue-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Its terrace on place de la République is the first to fill. But it is the wacky Gaudí-inspired interior, all sinuous shapes and white ceramic fragments, that really thrills. The bar, built from typical red brick, is easy to spot: its sun-faded wooden shutters are painted a heavenly kitsch violet.

Entertainment

The tourist office publishes the free monthly *L'Agenda* guide to exhibitions and cultural events. Monthly *So Aware* and *Le Bizz*, out every two months, are tap-ins to the club scene and nightlife – tame in town but sizzling hot on the coast in trendy Torreilles (p219).

Cinéma Castillet (☎ 08 92 68 01 29; 1 blvd Wilson) This magnificent movie palace (1911) with exuberant neobaroque facade and lateral walls punctuated with Art Nouveau stained glass and sculptured ceramic is a sight to behold.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Aéroport International Perpignan Rivesaltes (☎ 04 68 52 60 70) is 5km northwest of town in Rivesaltes.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 68 35 29 02; av du Général Lederc), **Les Courriers Catalans** (☎ 04 68 55 68 00) services the Côte Vermeille via Elne (20 minutes) and Argelès-sur-Mer (35 to 40 minutes), running at least seven buses Monday to Saturday (three Sunday) to/from Collioure (50 minutes), Port Vendres (one hour), Banyuls-sur-Mer (1¼ hours) and Cerbère (1¾ hours). For current timetables and fares, surf www.cg66.fr (in French) and follow the 'transports' links.

Of the eight daily buses along the Têt Valley to Prades (one hour) and Villefranche (1¼ hours), four continue to Vernet-les-Bains (1½ hours).

Frequent buses run up the Tech Valley to Céret (50 minutes).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Car-rental agencies at the airport:

Avis (☎ 04 68 61 58 97)

Budget (☎ 04 68 56 95 95)

TRAIN

From Perpignan **train station** (blvd du Conflent), trains cross the Pyrenees to Barcelona (€34 direct, twice daily; €18 changing at Cerbère, at least three daily). There are also frequent services to Montpellier (€21.60, 1¾ hours) via Narbonne (€9.90, 45 minutes) and Béziers (€13.10, one hour). For Carcassonne (€17.20, 1½ hours), change in Narbonne. Up to nine TGVs daily run to Paris' Gare de Lyon (€105, five hours).

Closer to home is Cerbère (€7.20, 40 minutes, around 15 daily) via Collioure (€5), Port Vendres (€5.50) and Banyuls (€6.30).

Getting Around**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

Navettes Aéroport (airport shuttles; ☎ 04 68 55 68 00; adult/student €4.50/3) runs to/from the airport and town, stopping at the train station and running via place Catalogne and the bus station. Timetables coincide with arrivals/departures; journey time is 15 minutes.

BICYCLE

Rent wheels from **Vélostation** (☎ 04 68 35 45 82; rue du Docteur Zamenhof; €1.50/3 per half-/full day; ☹ 24hr), on the 1st floor beneath street level of Parking Arago. Bring your passport.

Send an SMS to ☎ 41230 or connect to wap.bip-perpignan.fr and get a user code on the spot, valid for seven days, for the city's self-service bike-rental scheme **BIP!** (☎ 0800 200 307; www.bip-perpignan.fr; formule liberté first hr €1, then €2/hr). Some 150 bikes are stationed at 15 points in town.

BUS

Get schedules and tickets (single/return €1.10/2, one-day pass/10-ticket *carnet* €4.10/7.80) for city buses at **CTPM** (☎ 04 68 61 01 13; 27 blvd Clemenceau; ☹ 7.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2.30-5pm Sat).

Covered in cheerful popka dots, Le P'tit Bus is a free hop-on, hop-off minibus that plies a circular route around town; buses 1 and 2 serve the train station.

TAXI

Ring **Accueil Perpignan Taxis** (☎ 04 68 35 15 15).

ÉTANG DE CANET ET DE ST-NAZAIRE

Some 10km east of Perpignan lounges this **lake**, whose abundant bird life can be discovered along a 2km walking trail that passes reconstructed fishermen's huts at the **Village des Pecheurs** (☎ 04 68 52 36 78; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm daily Jun-Sep). Hire binoculars and buy tickets for two-hour **guided tours** (adult/under 7yr €3/free; ☎ 10am Tue & Thu) in the first hut. Other huts are used to store fishermen's funnel nets.

Opposite, there's not a tourist kiosk in sight – just loads of kites pirouetting in the sky – on the beautiful sandy beach that sits on the other side of the D81A. Dunes and a cycling path protect it from the road and winds rip across it most days, making it a local kite- and wind-surfing mecca. **Camping Mar Estang** (☎ 04 68 80 35 53; www.marestang.com; rte de St-Cyprien; 2 adults, tent & car low/high season €16/32; ☎ Apr–mid-Sep) is handy for those keen to pitch up here.

Avoid **Canet Plage**, Perpignan's nearest beach resort on the lake's northern shore, if you don't like concrete blocks or putrid-coloured ice cream. Brash, loud and hot with sweet kiosks, knock-off designer clothes shops and fast-food outlets, its only redeeming feature is its long, wide, sandy beach and an aquarium that younger children might like. The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 86 72 00; www.ot-canet.fr; place Méditerranée; ☎ 9am-7pm daily Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 3-5pm Sun Oct-May), just off the busy seafront, has all the bumf.

Inland snoozes **Canet-en-Roussillon**, a village with fenced-off chateau ruins and a red-brick church with turret clock tower and peaceful garden. **Restaurant Vigatane** (☎ 04 68 73 16 30; 2 rue des Remparts; starters/mains €13/25; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat, lunch & dinner Sun), next to the ruins, is a busy year-round venue with its decking terrace, interior strung with garlic, and tasty Catalan kitchen. (A *vigatane* is a Catalan espadrille.)

ST-CYPRIEN

This inland village, 20km southeast of Perpignan, is peaceful. Its flowery place de la République hosts a rainbow of sun-bleached wooden shutters and the **Centre d'Art Moderne** (☎ 04 68 21 06 96; www.collectionsdesaintcyprien.com; place de la République; adult/12-18yr/under 18yr €6/4/free, audioguide €2; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm daily Jul & Aug), tucked beneath a pergola of lilac blossoms in one corner. Afterwards, meander to **Église de St-Cyprien** (place de l'Église), a striking red-brick

and gold-stone affair with twin-belled turret and soulful classical-music concerts (p215).

St-Cyprien Plage (spot the brightly painted water tower neon-lit at night!), 3km east, is a family resort with its bouncy trampolines and funfair amusements on and around the sand. Boats bob in the marina and holiday homes squat on the quays at the port, where fishermen sell their catch at 8am. The **Compagne Maritime Roussillon Croisières** (☎ 04 68 21 44 91; www.roussillon-croisieres.com; quai Arthur Rimbaud) runs boat trips along the coast to the Côte Vermeille (p221), but what really rocks are its DJ-fuelled **boat parties** (per person €15-50; www.myspace.com/boatparties2008; ☎ 7pm-5am Sat Jul–mid-Sep).

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 21 01 33; www.tourisme-saint-cyprien.com; quai Arthur Rimbaud; ☎ 9am-8pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-noon & 3-5pm Sun Oct-Apr, 9am-noon & 2-6pm daily Jun & Sep) is at the port end of the prom.

Quai Arthur Rimbaud is lined with eating options, including contemporary **Bonafice Coquillage** (☎ 04 68 82 57 62; quai Arthur Rimbaud; ☎ lunch & dinner daily), which serves seafood platters sourced locally to eat in at bar stools or to take away.

In St-Cyprien village **La Cabana** (☎ 04 68 37 01 14; www.lacabana.fr; 37 av du Roussillon; starters €8-10, mains €13-18; ☎ dinner daily), near the art museum, is the spot to eat grilled fish, swirl sangria, munch tapas and jive to live bands.

ELNE

Some 3km west of St-Cyprien village is this 7th-century bishopric, capital of Roussillon from 568 until 1602, when ecclesiastical power shifted to Perpignan. Once fortified, its 12th-century walls were dismantled under Louis XIV in 1672, rendering the village the harmoniously quiet place it is today. In July and August *sardanes* (p39) spill across its squares.

Three itineraries guide visitors along the medieval ramparts, past Aristide Maillol's moving sculpture of Pomona (the Roman goddess of fruit) on the **Monument aux Morts**, to the **Cathédrale Ste-Eulalie et Ste-Julie** (place de la Cathédrale), consecrated in 1069. Its 12th- to 14th-century blue-veined marble **cloître** (cloister; ☎ 04 68 22 70 90; adult/12-18yr €5/2; ☎ 9.30am-6.45pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-noon & 2-4.45pm Nov-Mar, 9.30am-5.45pm Apr-May & Oct) is among Roussillon's finest examples of Romanesque and Gothic sculpture. Admission includes entry to the art museum opposite, **Musée Terrus** (3 rue Porte Balaguer; adult/

INSIDE INFORMATION

If you want to know *le people* places to eat, drink and party, head straight for the golden sands of Torréilles Plage, Perpignan's hottest address, 20km east of the city. Top dog is Plage Sud's **Zaza Club** (☎ 04 68 59 21 45; starters/mains €8-12/11-22; ☎ 11am-2am mid-Jun-mid-Sep), which, with its retro 1950s-style lighting and St-Tropezian sofas on the sand, is *the* place to dine'n'drink with the local jet set and bourgeoisie. Reservations are essential at weekends and it doesn't take credit cards. Entering Torréilles Plage, cross the roundabout and almost immediately turn right at the minigolf and follow the road – 700m surfaced, 1.3km dirt track through La Ribère nature reserve – to the sand.

A short walk north is Plage Centrale's **La Baraquette** (☎ 04 68 28 25 27; starters/mains €8-12/25), a hip 'driftwood' dining venue that serves chilled wine in trendy 'plastic bag' coolers and fabulous seafood spiced with a generous creative twist. *Parillade royale* (a platter of different grilled fish) is the dish to order. Again, cash only.

To sleep nearby, consider a mobile home or tent pitch at one of the many camp sites in Torréilles Plage, such as beachside **Cap-sur-les-Dunes** (☎ 04 68 28 38 29; www.lesdunes.net; 2 adults, tent & car €14.50-29; 📍 📞); or splurge at **La Vieille Demeure** (☎ 04 68 28 45 71; www.la-vieille-demeure.com; 4 rue de Llobet; d €75-180; ☎ Easter-Oct), a heavenly B&B in Torréilles village with an interior-courtyard citrus garden quite intoxicating in scent.

12-18yr €2.50/1.20; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Mar, to 6pm Apr-May & Oct), where works by local painter Étienne Terrus (1857–1922) and his Fauvist mates hang.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 22 05 07; www.ot-elne.fr; place St-Jordi; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-May plus 9.30am-noon Sat Jun & Sep) has information on guided tours and the summer piano festival (p215) that fills the cathedral to bursting.

Sleeping & Eating

Au Remp'Arts (☎ 04 68 22 31 95; www.remparts.fr; 3-5 place Colonel Roger; d €60/75) Free wi-fi. This *chambre d'hôte*, one of several in Elne, is known as much for its *table d'hôte* (menus €18 to €29) – think restaurant rather than someone's home – as for its comfortable rooms overlooking a quiet square. French speakers won't be able to resist ordering *un pipi d'ange* (we won't translate it!) as an aperitif.

Hôtel Cara-Sol (☎ 04 68 22 10 42; www.hotel-carasol.com; 10 blvd Illibéris; d €85-100; 📞) Free wi-fi. Elne's only hotel, part of the quality-guaranteed Logis de France umbrella, is a picture-postcard *maison de village* with a sweeping panorama from some rooms and its atmospheric terrace across the quiet street.

LES ASPRES

Inland from Perpignan, cork and fruit trees, scrubby *garrigue* and vines signal the lower reaches of the Massif du Canigou known as Les Aspres. **Thuir** (population 7430), its main

town, is known for byrrh, a sweet red-wine and quinine-water mix that originated as a medicinal drink and now serves as an aperitif.

Tasting completes cellar tours at **Caves Byrrh** (☎ 04 68 53 05 42; www.byrrh.com; 6 blvd Violet; adult/under 18yr €2/free; ☎ 10-11.45am & 2-6.45pm Jul & Aug, 9-11.45am & 2.30-5.45pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10.45am-3.30pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar), opposite the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 53 45 86; blvd Violet; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 3-6pm Sun). Taste local wine over very well-cooked cuisine at busy bistro **La Casa Dalie** (☎ 04 68 53 03 92; www.casa-dalie.fr; 21 blvd de la République; menus €21-43; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue).

For the full monty, motor 2km south to **Ste-Colombe de la Commanderie** (population 550), a bijou village of golden stone surrounded by vines. Delve into viticulture traditions practised by four generations of winemakers at the **Domaine des Trois Colombes** in its small **ecomusée** (place de la Majorque; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm May-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-Apr). In the village, **Peu del Causse** (☎ 04 68 53 42 47; 6 Carrer del Canigo; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast €58/68/83/98; ☎ Feb-Oct) is a beautiful five-room *chambre d'hôte* with an idyllic secret garden slumbering behind stone walls.

Yet more vineyards picturesquely unfold around **Castelnou** (population 330), a chateau-capped pile of golden-stone houses, flower-laced porches, cobbled lanes and summer craft markets, 6km west of Thuir. Munch spiced gingerbread warm from the oven at honey makers **Les Delices à la Ruche** (☎ 04 68 54 43 81; place au Village); visit the medieval **chateau**

HIGH-FLYER JOHN PENDRY

With two world-champion titles under his belt and a growing family under his wing, John Pendry stopped flying competitively in 1999 – although just how firmly his feet have been planted on the ground since is another matter altogether. As a mad-passionate, extraordinarily talented paraglider-turned-kite-surfer living a whisker away from one of the world's windiest spots, he can, should he want to, fly sky-high most days of the year.

'In La Franqui there are 250 days of the year with wind of at least force 4 – the minimum required for windsurfing. And for kite-surfing you can get on the water with just force 2 or 3...' explained the British ex-champ, who runs the Adrenaline kite-surfing and windsurfing school in La Franqui with his French wife, Dominique. When they met he was hang-gliding world champion (1985) and paragliding world champion (1997); she was the physiotherapist for the French hang-gliding team.

John grew up near Brighton, later lived on the Isle of Wight and has called this windy wedge of Roussillon home since 1994. Coincidentally, Dominique hails from near here, but what clinched it for the dynamic couple was the **Mondial du Vent** (www.mondial-du-vent.com).

'It's a huge event, it attracts 120,000 people or so and really puts the place on the map,' said John about France's biggest kite-surfing competition. Held over nine days in April, the prestigious competition dots La Franqui's sky with wind-whipped kites masterly kept in check by the world's best surfers. It is one of the few competitions to combine kite-surfing and windsurfing.

So what else makes La Franqui so great, and which wind is best? 'It's a village with a huge beach, relatively undeveloped, and with more wind than anywhere else in the world. The Marin is smoother and the Tramontana gustier, too gusty for many people, but living here you soon get used to it,' said La Franqui's highest flyer with mischievous glee.

(☎ 04 68 53 22 91; <http://chateau.castelnou.chez-alice.fr>; adult/10-18yr €4.50/3.20; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 11am-5pm or 6pm rest of yr); lunch on grilled snails and unparalleled vistas at **L'Hostal** (☎ 04 68 53 45 42; www.restaurant-roussillon.com); 13 Carrer Na Patora; menus €23-49.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun Apr-Aug, reservations required Sep-Mar); and sleep beneath a fig tree at *chambre d'hôte* **Le Figuera** (☎ 04 68 53 18 42; www.la-figuera.com); 3 Carrer de la Font d'Avall; s/d/tr incl breakfast €70/80/105).

NORTH TO CAP LEUCATE

Clear the built-up maze of dual carriageway and motorway that spaghetti around the airport north of Perpignan and you might just spot a vineyard...or a sign pointing to the forthcoming memorial museum (opening 2010) by à la mode French architect Rudy Ricciotti at **Camp de Rivesaltes**, northwest of exit 41 on the A9. Between 1939 and 1970 some 80,000 people passed through the internment camp – Spanish refugees fleeing the Franco dictatorship in 1940, Jews en route to Auschwitz during WWII, German soldiers and other prisoners of war in 1945, and thousands of Algerians seeking refuge from their war-torn country in the 1960s, the last of whom did not leave until the 1970s.

Miserably, part of the camp remains a detention centre for illegal immigrants.

Some 5km further north looms the imposing 15th-century **Forteresse de Salses** (☎ 04 68 38 60 13; adult/under 18yr €6.50/free; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Jun-Sep, 10am-12.15pm & 2-5pm Oct-May); contemporary art installations represent war.

Substantially sweeter is the syrupy Muscat that comes from vineyards around **Rivesaltes** (population 8500), 10km north of Perpignan. A generous sprinkling of cellars on av Ledru Rollin near the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 64 04 04; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) offers tastings, and **Domaine Cazes** (☎ 04 68 64 08 26; 4 rue Francisco Ferrer; www.cazes-rivesaltes.com; ☎ cellar 8am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, lunch Jul & Aug) is a great spot to taste organic wine over a tapas lunch platter (€25 to €38 including wine). Start with an amber-coloured AOC Rivesaltes Ambré as aperitif.

Afterwards, flop on the only stretch of natural beach at **Torreilles Plage** (p219), 15km east in the heart of nature reserve **La Ribère**.

Come dusk the edgiest spot on the coast bristles with business: on the northern shore of the **Étang de Leucate**, a lagoon straddling Roussillon and neighbouring Aude in Languedoc, is the **Centre Conchylicole**, a shanty town of 40 *mas* (fishermen shacks with corrugated-iron roofs) where shellfish producers sell their wares fresh from **Cap**

Leucate – myriad oysters, mussels, clams, sea urchins, pearly-pink *tellines* and other shellfish savouring their final moments in racks of bubbling sea water. *Rive gauche* huts have plastic tables in the evening sun; those on the right bank have seating inside. Count on €0.80/4.60 for a glass/bottle of local dry Muscat, €2.50 for six oysters and €13.20 for a 36-piece mixed platter served on a polystyrene plate. Most open 8.30am to 1pm and 4pm to 8pm daily.

To hit one of France's windiest coastal spots, continue a couple of kilometres north along the D627 and turn east along the D42 to **La Franqui**, an unspoilt hamlet with a vast sandy beach, a big cliff and mountains of space to sail and surf. The *char à voile* (sand yacht) **beach-sailing school** (<http://cerledevoile.free.fr> in French) is wedged on the sea next to **Camping des Coussoules** (☎ 04 68 45 74 93; chemin des Coussoules; 2 adults, tent & car €8.30-15.50; 🕒 8am-9pm mid-May–mid-Sep); and **Adreneline** (☎ 04 68 45 74 60; www.adreneline-kitesurf.com; 19 av de la Méditerranée; per 3/6/18hr ind equipment €140/250/590) is among the country's best kite-surfing schools. Along the prom, the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 40 91 31) can tell you about some wild walks on the windswept cape and its lagoons.

CÔTE VERMEILLE

Overwhelmingly picturesque and reasonably quiet compared to hot spots elsewhere on the Med, the Vermilion Coast is a gem. Stretching from Collioure to Cerbère on the Spanish border, it lurches perilously around rocky coves and small ports against a backdrop of pea-green vineyards and Pyrenees foothills diving into the sea.

Strolling along its coastal path on a sunny day is uplifting: the chunk from the Cap Béar lighthouse to Paulilles, where women made

dynamite in the 19th century, is stunning. For cyclists and motorists there is the coastal corniche (D914) or the nail-biting high road (p223) that careers mercilessly up to the medieval Tour Madeloc (652m), one of many warning towers built in the Catalonian hills in the 13th century. Views – if you dare take your eye off the road – are explosive.

Buses to/from Perpignan (p217) serve the length of the coast, and trains stop in Banyuls-sur-Mer and Cerbère, the changing point for trains to Spain.

COLLIOURE

pop 2750

Swamped in summer and dead in winter, Collioure lost its traditional village life years ago, but none of its natural charm. With its pink-domed church tower, this old fishing village, where boats bob against houses washed in soft pastel colours, is Languedoc-Roussillon's St-Tropez. It found fame in the early 20th century when Fauvist artists Henri Matisse and André Derain, and later Picasso and Braque, came here, drawn by its seductive landscape and matchless light.

An artistic reputation of sorts remains: over 30 galleries and workshops are packed into the old fishing quarter known as Le Moré and a generous dose of street artists paint tourist portraits on the quays. Dining is touristy – plenty of sausage and *pommes frites* – but the age-old Collioure culinary products of wine and anchovies (p222) remain first-class. Lunch done, a get-away-from-it-all coastal path (p222) beckons.

Information

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 82 15 47; place du 18 Juin; www.collioure.com; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat Apr-Jun & Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar)

THE FAUVISM TRAIL

'No sky in all France is bluer than that of Collioure. I only have to close the shutters of my room and there before me are all the colours of the Mediterranean.' So effused Henri Matisse (1869–1954), doyen of *les Fauves* (the Wild Animals), who worked with pure colour, filling their canvases with firm lines and stripes, rectangles and bright splashes.

The **Chemin du Fauvisme** (Fauvism Trail) is a walking trail around Collioure that takes you by 20 reproductions of works that Matisse and his younger colleague André Derain painted in 1905; in August of that year Derain left, but Matisse remained for a further 12-odd years. Buy the French-language guide booklet (€5.50) from the tourist office and DIY or sign up for a 1½-hour guided tour at the **Espace Fauve** (☎ 04 68 98 07 16; www.collioure.net; quai de l'Amirauté; adult/child €6/5).

Sights & Activities

Across the creek is **Château Royal** (☎ 04 68 82 06 43; adult/child €4/2; 🕒 10am-5.15pm Jun-Sep, 9am-4.15pm Oct-May), a waterfront fortress built between 1276 and 1344 as the summer residence of the kings of Mallorca. In the 17th century Vauban added its towering defensive walls and rebuilt the 14th-century **Fort Miradou** (closed).

At the northern end of the harbour, the medieval belfry of **Église Notre Dame des Anges** (🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm) once doubled as a lighthouse, although its pink dome – the signature feature of Collioure's skyline (view it from six gold picture frames dotted around the bay) – wasn't added until 1810. A stone walkway links the church with tiny **Chapelle St-Vincent** (1701), dedicated to the town's patron saint, celebrated each year on 17 August.

Away from the busy waterfront, dip into local viticulture at **Le Dominicain** (☎ 04 68 82 05 63; www.dominicain.com; place Orphila; 🕒 8am-noon & 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 3-7pm Sat, 10am-noon & 3-7pm Sun, shorter hr Mon-Sat off season), the place to taste and buy wine by 160 local *vignerons*. Twice-weekly guided tours (€1) shed light on the building's history – the 13th-century church of a Dominican convent until the Revolution and subsequently an artillery depot.

Uphill, the **Musée d'Art Moderne** (☎ 04 68 82 10 19; rte de Port Vendres; adult/12-18yr €2/1.50; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jun-Sep, closed Tue Oct-May) showcases a small collection of 20th-century and contemporary canvases, including some Collioure scenes by Jean Peské (1870–1949), the post-

impressionist Ukrainian painter who persuaded the town to create the museum in 1934. Its garden is perfect for picnicking, as is the olive grove that staggers uphill behind it to the **Moulin de la Cortina** (admission free; 🕒 10am-12.30pm Wed & Sun Apr-Sep). The restored 14th-century windmill is used in December to grind some of the black olives harvested from the village's 1500 olive trees; 8kg are needed for 1L of oil.

Paths run in both directions along the coast; the westbound one was closed in 2008. Yellow markers flag the eastbound **Sentier de la Mairesque** that twists past craggy coves to Port Vendres (2.5km). Pick it up 500m east of the village on the D14 next to the Centre Air Mer Soleil bus stop.

Collioure's bijou beaches suit all tastes: sandy **Plage du Boutique** with its kid-friendly shallows in the bay; pebbly, café-fronted **Plage Boromar** opposite the old town; and shingly **Plage St-Vincent** between Église Notre Dame des Anges and Chapelle St-Vincent. **CIP Collioure** (☎ 04 68 82 07 16; www.cip-collioure.com; rue de la Tour d'Auvergne), across from Plage du Boutique, organises snorkelling and diving.

Sleeping

Accommodation is seasonal, most places opening April to November.

Ermitage Notre Dame de Consolation (☎ 04 68 82 17 66; http://ermitage.consolation.free.fr; rte de Tour de Madeloc; d with shared/private bathroom €45/55; 🕒 Apr-Oct) Out of town on the high road (opposite), this leafy stone property with centuries of history and a 13th-century chapel is a gem. Its 10 rooms

SOMETHING FISHY

No Catalan kitchen cupboard is complete without a jar of Collioure anchovies. Canned, bottled, fresh, pickled, creamed, salted or marinated in oil, these tiny blue fish are something special. Their flesh is so delicate they can't be processed mechanically. So, even today, women still skilfully process anchovies by hand. First, these *anchoieuses* rub the anchovies with salt to maintain their sheen. Then, once the fish are degouted, they arrange them layer by layer like bicycle spokes, and sprinkle on mountains more salt, in plastic barrels. The barrels are then topped by a heavy stone so the fish *font le sang* (literally 'bleed', losing a lot of their liquid). After three months, each fillet is rinsed, dried on absorbent paper, then marinated in oil. Then, after another brief saline bath, they're packed into cans or jars.

Only two of some 30 salting plants remain. At the *atelier* (workshop) turned *eco-musée* (eco-museum) of **Anchois Desclaux** (☎ 04 68 82 05 25; www.anchoisdesclaux.com; 3 rte d'Argelès; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-7pm), taste, buy, watch a 15-minute video and gawk at the deft way the *anchoieuses* work. Nearby, **Anchois Roque** (☎ 04 68 82 04 99; www.anchois-roque.com; 17 rte d'Argelès; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-6.30pm) invites the curious to watch, sample and buy: Alphonse Roque started out as a *tonnelier-saleur* (wet cooper and salter) in Collioure five generations back, in 1870.

THE HIGH ROAD

One of Languedoc-Roussillon's most dramatic drives, the D86 links Collioure and Port Vendres with Banyuls-sur-Mer (18km and 16km respectively). Either approach – the roads from Collioure and Port Vendres meet on the Col de Molló (231m), just east of the medieval Tour Madeloc (652m) – is unforgettable, and it only gets better as the road, scarcely more than a single-lane track with the odd bay for cars to pass, climbs above vineyards, almond and fig groves, through scrub and past bare schist outcrops, to a top-of-the-world position way above the coastline. To see the gravity-defying drystone walls of the much-applauded Banyuls vineyards from a seagull's perspective, follow this road.

The D86 is well signposted and easy to pick up from the southern end of Collioure. In Port Vendres, head 500m south out of the village along the D914 and immediately after the Cave Tambour wine-producer's booth – easily spotted with its metres-high green wine bottle (don't call by; you'll need to keep your faculties sharp!) – turn right at a sharp bend onto the single-track D86, simply signed Madeloc and Circuit du Vignoble. In Banyuls-sur-Mer, head inland from the Hôtel de Ville roundabout on the seafront along av du Général de Gaulle and follow the Tour de Madeloc signs.

are faintly monastic but comfortable; walks through vines and olive groves abound; and anyone can picnic (€1 per person) in the hermitage's cool, shady courtyard or lunch lightly in its alfresco café. The open-air music concerts it hosts on Thursdays in summer are fabulous. Find it amid trees, 2.5km from Collioure; the last 800m off the D86 is a dirt track.

Hôtel Les Caranques (☎ 04 68 82 06 68; www.les-caranques.com; rte de Port Vendres; d with sink €45, with bathroom €71-80; ♿ Apr-mid-Oct) Perfectly set across the bay with chateau views, the outlook of this 20-room hotel, a 600m walk uphill from the village, is splendid. Every room has sea-facing balcony, furnishings are simple but stylish, and there are plenty of tree-shaded areas to lap up the swoon-worthy views. Unfortunately, the couple who've run Les Caranques since 1960 are retiring, meaning change is in the air.

Le Relais des Trois Mas (☎ 04 68 82 05 07; www.relais-detroismas.com; rte de Port Vendres; d €160-290; ♿ Feb-Nov; P ♿ ♿ ♿) This four-star choice shares the same gorgeous view as its more affordable neighbour. Think a collection of traditional painted cottages squatting between rocks and terraced garden – a viewpoint Scottish architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh, among others, caught on canvas. *Menus* at the hotel's restaurant are €37, €57 and €85.

Also recommended:

Hôtel Boramar (☎ 04 68 82 07 06; 19 rue Jean Bart; d €57-76, q €72; ♿ Apr-Nov) By the beach in the bay, with chateau and church view.

Hôtel Triton (☎ 04 68 98 39 39; 21 rue Jean Bart; d €55-90, tr/q €90/95; ♿) The Boramar's waterside neighbour, open year-round.

Eating

Eating opportunities jostle for space in the old-town maze and the length of blvd du Boramar, where a fishy lunch *menu* costs €15 to €20. A market fills the quays Wednesday and Sunday morning; and **La Cuisine** (rue de la Tour d'Auvergne; prepared dishes €12-28/kg), tucked down the lane opposite the round stone tower in the bay, cooks up fantastic homemade dishes – everything from fresh squid to lamb tagine – to take away. Luxury picnic fodder!

La Voile de Neptune (☎ 04 68 82 02 27; www.lenep-tune-collioure.com; rte de Port Vendres; starters/mains €10/25; ♿ Feb-Nov) Tuck into tasty salads (€13) and enjoy a perfect chateau view at Neptune's Sail, the affordable arm of chef Jean-Claude Mourlane's adjoining Michelin-starred restaurant, Le Neptune (*menus* €38 and €54). Look for the sails fluttering in the bay.

Getting Around

April to November, an **electric tourist train** (☎ 06 15 15 66 04; adult/under 12yr €6.50/4.50) yo-yoes between Collioure and Port Vendres, and **boat shuttles** (☎ 06 84 37 47 44; adult/child €8/5) run to/from Argelès-sur-Mer.

Trem Bike (☎ 04 68 82 59 77; 5 rue de la Tour d'Auvergne; ♿ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6 or 7pm) rents bicycles (€18 per day).

PORT VENDRES

pop 5900

Roussillon's only natural harbour and deep-water port has been exploited since Greek mariners roamed the rocky coastline. Until the independence of France's North African

territories in the 1960s, it was an important port linking them with the mainland and it remains a significant cargo and fishing harbour. From fishermen selling sardines at the **criée aux poissons** (fish market) to sky-high cranes shunting containers of fresh fruit – 220,000 tonnes in 2006 – from cargo vessels into cold storage at the state-of-the-art fruit terminal, partly powered by solar energy, Port Vendres is one busy place. From 2009 a new quay large enough for 155m-long vessels to dock will see yet more cargo pile into this port.

Among the various artists to paint here was Scottish architect and watercolourist Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928) – best known for his chair design – who wintered here in 1925 and 1926. Ask at the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 82 07 54; 1 quai François Joly; www.port-vendres.com; ☎ 9am–7.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am–12.30pm & 2–5.30pm or 6.30pm Mon–Sat Sep–Jun) for the brochure mapping a trail around town past 16 reproductions of his watercolours and the **Musée Charles Rennie Mackintosh** (☎ 04 68 82 22 26; Jardin du Dôme; admission free; ☎ 4–6pm Mon–Fri).

From Port Vendres a **coastal path** saunters 4km east past the commercial port and metal lighthouse (1848) on La Môle to **Cap Béar**, flagged with a brick lighthouse (1905). From here, it continues 4km south to Paulilles (see below).

PAULILLES

Brilliant vermilion rocks, terraced vines and the 35m-tall red-brick chimney of a 19th-century dynamite factory keep watch over the **Baie de Paulilles**, a gorgeous creek with shingle-sand beaches 4km north of Banyuls. Despite the obvious risks involved in making and handling high explosives, working at the Alfred Nobel-designed factory, operational from 1870 to 1984, was paradise (with a price). Its 800-odd workers got free housing, schooling for their kids and so on. Learn more about their perilous lives and the 30 explosions that left 50 dead in the course of a century through fascinating B&W photographs with detailed captions (in English) displayed in the factory director's old house at the **Site de Paulilles** (☎ 04 68 95 23 40; admission free; ☎ 9am–8pm Jun–Sep, shorter hours rest of yr, free 1½-hr guided tours 11am & 2pm Tue–Thu, Sat & Sun). A stroll between pines, banana trees and industrial remnants around the 32.5-hectare, carefully thought-out site to **Plage de l'Usine** is an emotive experience.

Equally unforgettable is the feast of local produce, red-pepper chutney, aubergine cavariar and chocolate ginger mousse, served al-fresco at **Les Clos de Paulilles** (☎ 04 68 98 07 58; www.clos-de-paulilles.com; menu incl wine & coffee €39; ☎ dinner Mon–Sat, lunch & dinner Sun late May–Sep), a drop-dead-gorgeous wine estate overlooking the Baie de Paulilles. The farm's one fixed menu includes coffee and its own wine, which you can taste and buy daily from 10am. Coming from Port Vendres, drive beneath the rail line and it's on the left.

Tumble out of bed, onto the beach, and believe you're in paradise at **Domaine de Valcros** (☎ 04 68 82 04 27, 06 85 87 14 23; www.domaineavalcros.com; d incl breakfast €80–85), a *chambre d'hôte* on the same estate as Les Clos de Paulilles.

BANYULS-SUR-MER

pop 5000

Pebby beach Banyuls, 6km south of Paulilles, is synonymous with wine, notably its dessert wine made from grapes grown in terraced vineyards propped up by drystone walls. Several wine producers in town offer *dégustation* (tasting), but most are a short drive from the seafront.

Domaine Cave Berta Maillol (☎ 04 68 88 36 96; www.berтамaillol.com; 17 av de la République), in an enchanting old villa opposite the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 88 31 58; www.banyuls-sur-mer.com; av de la République; ☎ 8.30am–8pm Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Sat Sep–Jun), is a waterfront cellar. Nearby, wine at **Domaine Le Casot des Mailloles** (☎ 04 68 88 52 52; 17 av du Puig del Mas) is 100% organic. The much-advertised **Cellier des Templiers** (☎ 04 68 98 36 92; www.banyuls.com; rte du Mas Reig), 1.75km inland, runs cellar tours preceded by a 15-minute video (you'll come to loathe its posturing chef).

At the seafront's southern end, by the pleasure port, is the **Laboratoire Arago** (☎ 04 68 88 73 39; adult/6–12yr €4.60/2.30; ☎ 10.30am–1pm & 2–9pm Jul & Aug, 10am–noon & 2–6.30pm Sep–Jun), the oceanographic research station of Paris' Université Pierre et Marie Curie, which has an aquarium displaying local marine life. Look for the world's first underwater photographs, taken at Banyuls in 1894 by French botanist Louis Bouton.

Nearby, **La Jeune Fille Allongées** (The Young Girl Lying Down; 1921), lounging in bronze between blossoms, is the work of Banyuls sculptor Aristide Maillol (p41), whose family home, 4km inland, houses the lovely **Musée Maillol** (☎ 04 68 88 57 11; rte des Mas;

THE LAST PORT OF CALL

Spain's Portbou, 1km from the Spanish–French border and 5km south of Cerbère, was the last port of call for exiled German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who overdosed on morphine in the pretty port in 1940 after fleeing German-occupied Paris, his home since 1933. His body was buried in a Catholic cemetery atop a cliff, marked today by **Passage** (1990–94), a memorial to the 20th-century philosopher in the dramatic form of a bronze-covered staircase plunging to the sea. Tel Aviv sculptor Dani Karavan is the artist.

From the waterfront El Passeig de la Sardana, turn right along Avinguda de Barcelona, then left following the Memorial W Benjamin sign. At the end of the street, hike up the steps, turn left at the top and follow the white wall uphill along Pujada del Mirador to the cemetery and memorial.

adult/7–14yr €3.50/2.50; ☎ 10am–noon & 2–7pm May–Sep, to 5pm Oct–Apr.

Water-sports enthusiasts can explore the big blue with diving school **Aqua Blue Plongée** (☎ 04 68 88 17 35; 5 quai Georges Petit). Snorkelling outings (€13 to €28) and dives involve marveling at aquatic flora and fauna in the **Reserve Marine de Cerbère-Banyuls**, a nearby marine reserve. Gen up with the 25-minute documentary shown at its **Point Information** (☎ 04 68 88 56 87; ☎ 10.30am–12.30pm & 4.30–6.30pm Jul & Aug), by the water opposite quay E at the pleasure port. Its neighbour, **Aleoutes Kayak Mer** (☎ 04 68 88 34 25; www.kayakmer.net), opposite quay C, arranges sea-kayaking outings – including at sunset and camping overnight – to explore this rocky coastline's enchanting nooks, coves and crannies.

Sleeping & Eating

Pedestrian rue St-Pierre, the main old-town artery, is prime terrain for simple dining à la Catalane: grab six oysters, a crab or anchovies and a glass of white (€10 to €12) standing up at local fishmonger **Poissonnerie Côte Vermeille** at No 6, or tapas at **Casa Miguel** (☎ 04 68 88 31 06; 3 rue St-Pierre; menus €22; ☎ lunch & dinner daily).

El Llagut (☎ 04 68 88 03 12; av du Fontaulé; d €62–72; ☎) Offering a place to eat (Al Fanal; lunch menu €18 to €21, dinner menu €28; open lunch and dinner April to mid-October, lunch and dinner Friday to Tuesday mid-October to March) as well as a nautical ambience, this sea-facing hotel with salmon-pink facade has been around since the 1950s – spot the B&W photo outside. Cuisine is wholly regional.

CERBÈRE

Hurling south towards Spain amid the same grandiose panorama of rocky coves and rampant vines is this small seaside village, 4km north of the border. Dominated by the

disproportionately large arches of its railway line and Gare Internationale that lurches high above the waterfront, Cerbère is nonetheless a pretty place, with its pastel-coloured houses clustered around a small pebbled cove.

About 2.5km north on the D914 is the turn-off for the **Sentier de Sous Marin** (admission free; ☎ noon–6pm Jul & Aug), a 500m underwater trail that takes snorkellers around five buoys bearing underwater information panels on aquatic marine flora and fauna in the **Reserve Marine de Cerbère-Banyuls**. Snorkel, mask and fins can be rented (until 5pm) for €5 (€7 with hi-tech underwater FM commentary!) from the kiosk on pebbly **Plage de Peyrefitte**. Addicted? Hook up for day dives with picnic lunch at **Plongée Cap Cerbère** (☎ 06 80 13 83 77; www.capcerbere.com), a school on the same beach.

In Cerbère **La Dorade** (☎ 04 68 88 41 93; www.hotel-ladorade.com; Front de Mer; d €49–59; ☎ Apr–Sep) cooks up simple rooms and some great fish, snails, codfish-stuffed peppers and other Catalan dishes (menus €19.50 and €23) in a series of terraced seafront houses.

MASSIF DES ALBÈRES

Snug against the Spanish border is this massif, a protected area where one of France's most rare and endangered species, the Hermann tortoise, defies extinction in thick cork oak forest. For eagle-eye views of his green habitat, head to **Fort de Bellegarde** (☎ 04 68 83 60 15; adult/6–12yr €3/2; ☎ 10.30am–6.30pm Jun–Sep), a fortress whose sheer size dwarfs you. The original 14th-century hilltop chateau was built on the southern fringe of **Le Perthus** (population 620), almost abutting the French–Spanish border (marked today by Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill's pyramid portraying the two Catalonias) and rebuilt by Vauban in 1679.

The fort's free summertime open-air jazz concerts and its mighty 360-degree outlook across the Spanish plains, the Massif du Canigou and the Albères crashing towards the sea are remarkable in equal measure.

In **Maureillas la Illas** (population 2280), 8km northwest, learn what happens to cork oak bark, harvested every 15 years, at the **Musée du Liège** (☎ 04 68 83 15 41; av Maréchal Joffre; free admission; ☞ 10.30am-noon & 3.30-7pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 2-5pm rest of yr). Or study cork oak trees in their natural environment, either along marked walking paths in the village of **Vivès** (population 130), home to the **Institut Méditerranéen du Liège** (Mediterranean Cork Institute; ☎ 04 68 83 39 83; www.institutduliege.com; 23 rte du Liège); or on an almond farm in **Laroque des Albères** (population 1940). Passion of Christine Llense, whose father planted 21 hectares of almond trees in 1982, the **Maison de l'Amande** (☎ 04 68 89 11 53; av des Mas Catalans; ☞ 10am-noon & 3-7pm May-Sep) is inspiring to visit any time of year. The trees, with delicate rose-white blossom in late February or early March, are ripe for harvesting fresh green almonds in July, and weighed down with dry almonds to harvest at the end of August or early September. Pick your own and buy almond oil, flour and other farm-made products in the farm shop.

Bijou chapels sprinkle the massif's heavily forested slopes, including **Église St-Martin de Fenollar** (☎ 04 68 87 73 82; adult/8-15yr €3/1; ☞ 10am-noon & 3-7pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 2-5pm Wed-Mon rest of yr), southwest of Le Boulou, signposted 300m off the D900, whose 12th-century frescos were much admired by Picasso and Braque in 1910. Others in **St-Genis des Fontaines** (www.ville-saint-genisdesfontaines.fr), **St-André** (www.saint-andre66.fr) and frescoed **Prieuré Santa Maria del Vilar** (www.prieuresantamaria.fr) near Villelongue dels Monts continue the *art roman* trail (p39).

The mad-busy beach resort of **Argelès Plage**, strewn with camp sites on every road leading into it, kisses the northeast fringe of the Massif des Albères.

SLEEPING & EATING

Les Palmiers (☎ 04 68 89 73 61; 33 rue Louis et Michel Solar, Laroque des Albères; d incl breakfast €95) Across from Laroque's quaint village square, this gourmet choice has a fantastic range of market-driven *menus* (€22 to €75; open lunch and dinner Tuesday to Friday and Sunday, dinner Saturday May to September, lunch and dinner Wednesday to Friday, dinner Saturday, lunch

Sunday October to April), a lovely wine list and stylish loft rooms up top.

L'Hostalet de Vivès (☎ 04 68 83 05 52; www.hostalet-vives.com; menus €21.50 & €33; ☞ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue mid-Jun-mid-Sep, lunch & dinner Thu-Mon rest of yr) A local institution packed at weekends, this old-fashioned inn in a 12th-century stone house in Vivès cooks up 100% Catalan cuisine. Its *boles de picolat* (spicy meatballs) and *crème Catalane* served in half a melon are famed. Warning: portions are mammoth – hence, perhaps, its B&B rooms (doubles low/high season €60/75) in the village!

VALLÉE DU TECH

France's southernmost valley, also called **Vallespir**, cruises towards the Med along the course of the River Tech, tracking in tandem the parallel Têt (north) and border with Spain (about 15km south as the crow flies). Somehow the rooftops in this steamy Catalan valley burn a fiercer red than elsewhere, its people needing no excuse to dance a spontaneous *sardane*. In February, as hibernating bears wake up, animal furs are pulled out and faces are painted black during the **Fête de l'Ours** (p55).

Up to 12 daily buses run the length of the valley to/from Perpignan.

CÉRET

pop 7600

Firmly Catalan and famous for its juicy cherries (the first pickings of the season are packed off to the French president), Céret doesn't feel French. In the town's snug setting in the Pyrenean foothills, caramel- and ochre-coloured stone buildings soak up the sun, while inhabitants discuss bullfighting over sangria and tapas. On the settlement's eastern fringe the medieval **Pont du Diable**, built by the devil, leaps across the Tech in one death-defying arch – the world's biggest when it was built in 1341.

Bevy of *corrida*-rich *férias* aside (p215), it is the outstanding **Musée d'Art Moderne** (☎ 04 68 87 27 76; www.musee-ceret.com; 8 blvd Maréchal Joffre; adult/12-18yr €8/6; ☞ 10am-7pm May-Sep, to 6pm Wed-Mon Oct-Apr) that draws visitors. Superbly endowed, its cutting-edge architecture showcases a collection that owes much to Picasso, Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Miró, Dalí and other artistic visitors, all of whom donated works: Picasso rented a house in Céret with Braque at 1 rue

des Évadés de France between 1910 and 1911, giving 53 pieces alone.

From the gallery, midway down the café-laden main street, topped along its whole length in summer with a green umbrella of plane-tree leaves, stroll east and bear right at the end along *blvd Jean Jaurès*. Duck under the **city wall** (place Picasso) and delve into local culture at the **Maison du Patrimoine** (☎ 04 68 87 31 59; www.maisondupatrimoine-ceret.fr; place Picasso; adult/12-18yr €2.50/1.50; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun). Next door, **Celier des Arcades** (3 rue Danton) is a wine shop crammed with wine to taste and buy.

Complete a perfect day with *un verre* (drink) beneath plane trees in the old town on **place des 9 Jets**, a lovely square where local students busk and the **Fontaine des 9 Jets** tinkles as it has always done since 1313.

Information

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 87 00 53; www.ot-ceret.fr; 1 av Clemenceau; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat Sep-Jun) Around the corner from main-street boulevard Maréchal Joffre; turn left at its eastern end.

Sleeping & Eating

Eating and drinking opportunities abound on *blvd Maréchal Joffre*, *blvd Jean Jaurès* and on stylish *place des 9 Jets*. Keen to feast solely on local farm produce? Breakfast or lunch on cheese, cold meats and salads at **La Praline** (☎ 04 68 87 71 21; 4 rue Pierre Rameil), off place Picasso.

ourpick Hôtel Vidal (☎ 04 68 87 00 85; 6 place Soutaine; d €40) Round the corner from *blvd Jean Jaurès* and *quelle surprise!* This arched bishop's palace with 19th-century palms, 18th-century forged-iron work, vine-covered terrace and old stone balustrade is plain gorgeous. Its Restaurant Del Bibe (starters/mains €16/19; open lunch and dinner Thursday to Monday) is the hottest address in town.

Hôtel des Arcades (☎ 04 68 87 12 30; www.hotel-arcades-ceret.com; d €42-57; ☎ ☎) Run with panache by a dynamic sibling duo, this 30-room hotel overlooking place Picasso is a gallery in its own right. Almost every square inch of wall displays a poster, photo or print to view.

ARLES-SUR-TECH

pop 2700

This small provincial town is 4km west of spa town **Amélie-les-Bains**, where elderly *curistes*

lounged around in pink dressing gowns and outmoded swimming hats. Arles grew up around the Carolingian **Abbaye Ste-Marie** (☎ 04 68 83 90 66; adult/12-18yr €3.50/2.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sep & Jun, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Oct-May), a fortified 10th-century church with beautiful Romanesque cloister. In the courtyard near the church entrance is **Sainte Tombe**, a 4th-century sarcophagus in which water has miraculously welled up since sheltering the relics of its patron saints, Abdon and Sennen. Each year on 30 July, the tomb is emptied of holy water during mass and shared among pilgrims.

Arles is the springboard for forays into the **Gorges de la Fou** (☎ 04 68 39 16 21; adult/5-12yr €6/3; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Nov), signposted 1.5km west on the D115. Despite the gaudy parade of inflatable castles and souvenir kiosks at the entrance, the 3km return hike along a metal walkway to *la fou* (Catalan for 'precipice') is worth it. Discovered in 1928, the rocky canyon served as a hideout for Catalan bandits in the 1830s and 1840s.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 39 11 99; www.tourisme-haut-vallespir.com; 2 La Place; ☎ 3-6pm Mon, 10am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-noon Sat) has information on summer festivities, including the traditional **Chants Catalans** that fill the square with folk music every Wednesday evening in July and August.

To really get away from it all, pitch up at the Dutch-run **Mas de la Fargassa** (☎ 04 68 39 01 15; www.fargassa.com), an organic fruit farm with chickens, donkeys, horses and a river for kids to muck around in. Track it down in Mas Pagris, about 8km south of Amélie-les-Bains on the over-wiggly D55.

Part of the Logis de France network, **Les Glycines** (☎ 04 68 39 10 09; hotellesglycines@orange.fr; rue du Jeu de Paume; d €52; ☎ mid-Feb-mid-Nov), a rust-coloured 15-room house in Arles, enjoys a spacious, well-shaded terrace restaurant (two-course *menu* €13, three-course *menu* €16 to €27) pierced by the trunk of an enormous pine.

Stock up on *pieds cuits vinaigrette* (piggy trotters in viniagrette), *fouet au Roquefort* (dried sausage flavoured with Roquefort), spicy chorizo and other picnic delicacies at **Boucherie La Place** (La Place).

For an evening of grilled sardines, squid, spice-hot chorizo and sangria cocktails, **Cave Les Voûtes** (☎ 04 68 87 80 71; 2 place de la République; 5 tapas €10), a wine cellar and tapas bar on a tiny

old-town square off the main street in Amélieles-Bains, is the most atmospheric address. Its organic fruit juices (kiwi, pear, strawberry, cherry...) are wild.

PRATS DE MOLLÓ

pop 1080

The Tech Valley's final curtain call before climbing three *cols* (mountain passes) above 1000m into Spain is this enchanting mountain village, 20km west of Arles. Cafés bathe in the shade behind medieval city walls and organ concerts breathe life into the **Église Stes-Juste-et-Ruffine** (admission free; ☎ 11am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Jul & Aug), the crowning glory within the ramparts.

But the *pièce de résistance* is **Fort Lagarde** (adult/12-18yr/under12yr €3.50/2.50/free; ☎ 11am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Apr, Jun & Sep–mid-Nov), a fort built above the fortified village in the 17th century to defend France's newly acquired frontier with Spain. Its original **Tour de la Guardia** (signal or warning tower), built by Aragonese rulers in 1307, communicated with others in the region using smoke signals by day, fire at night – a scenic drive west across that trio of *cols* (the D115) unveils several. Later, prisoners perished in the dungeon, constructed under Vauban with the rest of the fort from 1677 onwards. Walking around its 40 armoury rooms, powder magazines, kitchens, guardhouse and barracks for 100 soldiers, it is hard to believe that Vauban intended the star-shaped fort to be twice the size. Lit at night, it makes a dramatic picture.

Getting to the fort requires stamina. Hiking up, opt for the steep covered passageway (marked *chemin couvert*), dating to 1851, which has 142 slippery steps and plenty of arrow slits and the odd gunpowder reserve to distract; coming down, follow the *sentier* (trail) between trees. In July and August weekly guided tours (€4) include a shuttle bus, as does the flamboyant **Visite-Spectacle** (adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €9.50/6.50/free; ☎ 4pm Sun-Fri mid-Jul–late Aug), a spectacular 1½-hour performance led by knights in shining armour and cavaliers on horseback; contact the tourist office for both. Catch the same young actors in action minus the canons in the village during **La Relève de la Garde** (The Changing of the Guard; ☎ 11am-noon Mon, Wed & Fri mid-Jul–Aug).

Rock climbing, *via ferrata* (rock climbing along a fixed course with the aid of cables, harnesses etc), tree climbing, whizzing

Tarzan-style between trees 45m off the ground along a 400m-long zip-line or simply strolling between different tree types and picking wild strawberries in the **Arboretum** are highlights at **Monto Z'Arbres** (☎ 04 68 22 43 55; www.montozarbres.com; adult/3-18yr €22.50/7-20.50; ☎ 10.30am-7.30pm Jul-Aug, 2-7.30pm May, Jun, Sep & Oct), 1.5km west of Prats de Molló on the D115. Advance reservations are obligatory for all activities. You can also stay here; see below.

Northwest along the scenic D115A is **La Preste-les-Bains** (www.laprestelesbains.com), a mountain spa known for its curative waters since the 14th century. Its name became an official appendage of Prats de Molló in 1959.

Information

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 39 70 83; www.pratsdemollo.lapreste.com; place le Foiral; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat, from 10pm Sun) Outside the walls overlooking the large gravel market square where local Pratéens (no, people from Prats are not called prats) spin boules. Ask about its guided nature walks (€15).

Sleeping & Eating

ourpick **Monto Z'Arbres** (☎ 04 68 22 43 55; www.montozarbres.com; La Gallinée, rte d'Espagne; incl breakfast hammock €16, tree house s/d/tr/q €41/70/100/130; ☎ daily Jul-Aug, weekends May, Jun, Sep & Oct) Hidden in the nature-rich, thick *Fôret du Haut Vallespir* is this challenging tree-climbing centre with a host of activities, trails for kids and – very romantically – a tree house. The little wooden cabin has a table-clad terrace up high and is equipped inside with a white cotton-dressed double bed, two bunks, a mirror and not much else (no plugs). Guests get a torch to trog five minutes downhill to the loo and showers at base camp, where breakfast is also served. If roughing it in with mates in hammocks (some cocooned with mosquito nets) is more your style then opt to camp in trees by the river; dining is à la campfire and there's a toilet but no shower. Monto Z'Arbres is 1.5km west of Prats, signposted off the Spain-bound D115.

Hôtel Le Bellevue (☎ 04 68 39 72 48; www.hotel-le-bellevue.fr; place El Firal; s/d €53/64; ☎) Assuming pride of place on Prats' main square outside the walls, this 18-room hotel peeps at plane trees and boules players from its balcony-clad rooms. Its gourmet restaurant (*menus* €21, €36 and €42; open lunch and dinner daily) is highly regarded, and affordable salads are served in its terrace restaurant.

Ferme Auberge La Costa de Dalt (☎ 04 68 39 74 40; rte du Col d'Ares; menu incl wine €33; 🍷 lunch Sun Apr-Sep) A family affair, this secluded farm where 80-odd cows are bred for meat is the place to lunch on Sunday or, if you're lucky, another day of the week (call ahead). Everything served is its own produce, be it the tapas, *charcuterie* (cold meat), fresh herb sausages or the lamb or veal main course. Cheese is from the valley and dessert is a juicy fruit tart, with produce fresh from the farm orchard. Should you fall in love with the magnificent mountain views at this isolated farm, 10km west of Prats and 5km from the Spanish border off the D115, it has self-catering *gîtes* to rent.

our pick **L'Unique** (rue de la Porte de France; menus €17.50, mains €25-35; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Unique's unique chef was on his way to Portugal after 15 years at a Cap d'Agde restaurant when this kitchen beckoned. He only cooks fish – predominantly à la *plancha* (on a stone, slate or wooden slab) – in an open-plan kitchen, inviting diners to admire every move, spectacular plate design included, against a musical backdrop of 1950s pure jazz. His *mousse au turrone*, a top-secret variation of Spanish nougat, is sensational.

VALLÉE DU CNFLÉNT

West of Perpignan fruit orchards, vineyards and medieval villages carpet the gentle lower reaches of the Conflent (or **Têt Valley** as it's called in equal measure) as the river nears the end of its 120km-long journey from Lac des Bouillouses (2017m), on the doorstep of Spanish Catalonia and Andorra, to the Mediterranean. The area immediately south of this valley is known as Les Aspres; see p219.

As Roussillon's main valley it is appropriate for the Conflent to cradle the symbol of Catalonia at its heart, the sacred peak of **Pic du Canigou** (2784m), where summer-solstice bonfires are lit and magical herbs gathered. Hiking, biking and white-water sport opportunities on it know no limits.

For those who prefer less footwork, a train (see the boxed text p232) trundles along a healthy chunk of the valley, the dramatic **Gorges de Carança** being one of many mountain stops on its journey into the ancient Catalan county of **Cerdagne**, split since the 17th century between France and Spain.

PRADES

pop 5600

The main town, 44km west of Perpignan, Prades is an attractive place with houses of river stone and brick, liberally adorned with pink marble from nearby quarries. Internationally known for its annual classical-music festival (p215), it is also the main jumping-off point for the Massif du Canigou and the Parc Naturel Régional des Pyrénées Catalanes (p234), a nature park stretching west along the valley to the Spanish border.

Information

Laverie (138 av du Général de Gaulle; 🕒 8am-8pm) Laundrette.

Maison de la Presse (155 av du Général de Gaulle) Walking maps and guides.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 05 41 02; www.prades-tourisme.com; 4 rue des Marchands; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun) Just off place de la République.

Sights & Activities

Towering over central place de la République is **Église St-Pierre**, whose bell tower is the only remnant of the original Romanesque church, rebuilt in the 17th century. Within its dimly lit interior, the wonderfully expressive 17th-century *Entombment of Christ* is by Catalan sculptor Josep Sunyer, the creative talent behind the exuberant main altarpiece, a *chef-d'oeuvre* of Catalan baroque; the switch to illuminate the latter is to the left of the altar.

From the church a tourist itinerary traces the steps of Spanish cellist Pablo Casals, who settled in Prades in 1939 after fleeing Franco's Spain. The **Musée Pablo Casals** (☎ 04 68 96 28 55; 33 rue de l'Hospice; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue & Wed, 3-7pm Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Sep-Jun) commemorates his life and musical achievements, celebrated with gusto for two weeks in late July or early August during the **Festival Pablo Casals** (☎ 04 68 96 33 07; www.prades-festival-casals.com in French).

Rent wheels from **Cycles Flament** (☎ 04 68 96 07 62; 8 rue Arago; half/full day €10/13; 🕒 Tue-Sat), off the main square. At the tourist office *VTT en Conflent* (in French) details nine mountain-bike routes (easy to tough).

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Municipal La Plaine St-Martin (☎ 04 68 96 29 83; www.leconflent.net/camping; adult/tent/car €2.50/2.85/2; 🕒 yr-round) This small and well-run camp site,

GETTING UP THE PIC

Everyone's keen to summit this sacred mountain – call it the obligatory pilgrimage when in Roussillon.

Most don their walking boots at the **Chalet Refuge des Cortalets** (☎ 04 68 96 36 19, 04 68 05 63 57; dm €16, breakfast €5.50; 🗓 Jun-Oct), a hostel and mountain *refuge* at 2200m, from where it is a 1½-to-two-hour hike to the steep-sided summit (2784m). Depending on your car (the mountain road is unsurfaced and pot-holed) and the weather (avoid when wet), you can drive as far as Cortalets. Follow the N116 from Prades 2km east to Los Masos, turn right and take the D24 south for 4.5km through the hamlet of Villerach and beyond until the road becomes a dirt track – at which point it's 22km of rough pot-holed motoring at no more than 30km/h to Chalet Refuge des Cortalets.

Or bounce up to Cortalets in a 4WD (Prades ☎ 04 68 05 27 08; Villefranche de Conflent ☎ 04 68 05 89; Cornelia de Conflent ☎ 04 68 05 64 61); in Vernet-les-Bains, contact Garage Villaceque (p233). The return journey typically costs €25/12 per adult/child aged four to 10 and must be reserved in advance. Most 4WDs access Cortalets along a forest track (off-limits to private vehicles) from **Fillols**, just east of Cornelia de Conflent.

For mountain bikers and walkers, Vernet-les-Bains (p232) is a great base for attacking the Pic; trails wind up directly from the spa town. Many walkers also tackle the ascent from Fillols (six hours) or from **Chalet Refuge de Mariailles** (☎ 04 68 05 57 99, 04 68 96 22 90; dm €13, half-board €29; 🗓 yr-round), a stone chalet at 1730m, accessible by 4WD forest track or walking trail (three hours) from the **Col de Jou** just beyond Casteil (p232). The ascent from the *refuge* (four hours), the GR10, crosses the Cheminée rock face and is tougher.

Tourist offices in Prades (p229) and Vernet (p232) have comprehensive information on walking and biking in the Massif du Canigou, and sell maps and guides. Trails, tagged with yellow markers, are generally accessible June to October.

down the road from the municipal outdoor pool, has shaded pitches and a dozen-odd wooden chalets sleeping six (low/high season €30/52.85 per night or €210/370 per week).

Castell Rose (☎ 04 68 96 07 57; www.castellrose-prades.com; chemin de la Litera; incl breakfast d €69-105, q €109-129; 🍷 🍷) Predictably this family house with vast grounds, a pool, tennis courts and vintage petrol pump is in much demand. Book well in advance to snag one of its five rooms or self-catering *gîte*. Dinner costs €25/12 per adult/child.

Casa Nostra (☎ 04 68 05 62 66; 2 rue des Marchands; 5-/8-ingredient salad €7.50/11.50, lunch/dinner menu €13/18; 🗓 lunch & dinner daily) This simple but soulful Catalan bistro serves *gambas* (prawns) flambéed 18 ways (in whisky, pastis, Noilly Prat etc) and inspired pick-your-own-ingredients salads. Products are local and invariably organic. We highly recommend the *anchoïade Catalane* (anchovy dip) followed by prawns roasted in caramelised Banyuls vinegar.

A robust general market fills place de la République on Tuesday morning and there's a farmers market on Saturday.

Also recommended:

El Zocalo (☎ 04 68 96 19 85; www.elzocalo-prades.com; 13 rue des Oliviers; s/d incl breakfast €75/89-119; 🍷 🍷)

Design-driven with bold colour schemes, this appealing B&B cooks up Mexican cuisine in the evening (dinners €23).

Villa Lafabrégue (☎ 04 68 96 29 90; www.villafrenche.com; 15 av Louis Prat; d incl breakfast €65-90; 🍷 🍷)

English-run *chambre d'hôte* with mountain view, in a Florentine-styled villa built for a rich banking family in 1873.

AROUND PRADES

Two of the Pyrenees' most precious examples of Romanesque art and delightful strolling around hilltop villages make this area a must.

Abbaye St-Michel de Cuxa

This beautiful Romanesque **abbey** (☎ 04 68 96 15 35; www.cuxa.org; adult/12-18yr €4/2.50; 🗓 9.30am-11.50am & 2-6pm Tue-Sat May-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Apr), founded in 878, sits amid elegant gardens and vineyards a few kilometres south of Prades on the D27 to Fillols. Inside the pre-Romanesque church, France's largest, consecrated in 974, the altar stone is original. The lovely 12th-century cloister (1130) provoked a bevy of creative activity in Roussillon's famous marble sculpture workshops, but what you see today is a 1950s reconstruction of the original. Five monks live at the abbey today, making jam and turning pots to sell between prayers.

Eus

Heaped on a hillock between rocks and crablike cactus 5km east of Prades, Eus must surely have been custom-made by medieval workmen for 3rd-millennium meandering, enjoyed before or after a dip in **Lac de Vinça**, 8km east. Climb to the church at the top, past the odd artist's workshop, and revel in the sweeping panorama of the Pic du Canigou and valley below. The white patch of greenhouses is **Pepinière Bachès** (☎ 04 68 96 42 91; www.lesagrumesdumonde.fr; traverse Los Masos), an extraordinary citrus-fruit nursery. Buses to/from Eus stop below the village on the N116.

Prieuré de Serrabone & Beyond

Signposted 15km east of Prades off the N116, the D618 twists tirelessly through green oak and cork oak forest, tree trunks stripped brick-red and dark brown, to the **Prieuré de Serrabone** (☎ 04 68 84 09 30; adult/12-18yr €3/2; ☎ 10am-6pm daily), an 11th-century abbey with 18m-tall bell tower, single gallery cloister and Catalonia's most outstanding examples of Romanesque sculpture. In 1151 its church was enlarged and the altar separated from the congregation with a vaulted gallery, superbly sculpted with lions, eagles, monkeys and other bestial imagery in local pink marble. In the grounds a **vine collection** grows and a **botany trail** winds past *garrigue* rich in wild thyme, broom, juniper and fern to an **orchard** laden with almond, apple, lilac and mimosa trees.

Make a day of it by continuing south along the D618 to **Boule d'Amont** (population 75), a mountain village where *boules de picou-lats* (spicy meatballs in a tomato, olive and mushroom sauce), tarragon-scented lamb and other regional specialities bubbled in the pot at the **Auberge du Val d'Amont** (☎ 04 68 53 29 70; www.aubergebouledamont.com; menus €20), where you can also stay (singles/doubles €20/35).

Alternatively, overnight at **Domaine Les Aspres** (☎ 04 68 39 42 28; www.chambresdhotels-gites.fr; s/d/tr incl breakfast from €45/50/100), a farmhouse (dinners €25) off the D13 in La Bastide with no neighbour bar Pyrenean peaks; or at the **Auberge de St-Marsal** (☎ 04 68 39 42 68; www.saintmarsal.net; d €35-47, half-board per person €35), a stone inn with 12 rooms and a matchless panorama south of the Col Xatard in St-Marsal – no surprise that it runs painting courses! Carrying on south along the D618 you eventually hit the Vallée du Tech (p226) several dozen hairpins later.

Vallée de la Castellane

North of Prades the Castellane Valley climbs steadily up and over the **Col de Jau** (1506m) into Languedoc, snaked for its entire Roussillon length by the scenic D14. First stop is **Molities-Bains** (population 250, altitude 1314m), a mountain spa resort 8km north which, despite the pink bathrobes, is not quite as staid as others, thanks to two illustrious addresses: the **Grand Hôtel** (☎ 04 68 05 00 50; www.chainethermale.fr; d €125-195; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) in the spa grounds; and the **Château de Riell** (☎ 04 68 05 04 40; www.chateauriell.com; d low/high season from €340/380; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), a fairy-tale castle with a tasty restaurant (starters/mains €25/35), between rock and mountain.

In **Mosset** (population 295, altitude 715m), a chateau-topped village 4km further north, **La Tour des Parfums** (adult/12-18yr €3/2.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm mid-Jul-mid-Sep), inside the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 05 38 32; www.mosset.fr), is an interactive voyage into medieval scents and gardens, inspired by the profusion of typical wild mountain flowers that grow in its garden.

Local farm **Mas Lluganas** (☎ 04 68 05 00 37; www.maslugganas.com; d/tr incl breakfast €50/60, d with shared shower €33), 2km south on the D14, does B&B and cooks hearty meals with its produce – veal, duck, foie gras and so on (menus €14 and €20).

Three daily buses (☎ 04 68 35 29 02) link Prades with Molitg (35 minutes) and Mosset.

Ille-sur-Têt

Worth no more than a brief stop, this small town, 19km east of Prades, has a shabby and exhausting maze of dusty medieval streets and back alleys where old folk pull out their chairs and chat for hours. In the 13th-century, Hospitaller knights founded Hospici d'Illà, now a **Centre d'Art Sacré** (☎ 04 68 84 83 96; rue de l'Hôpital; adult/13-18yr €3.20/2.40; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 2-7pm Sat mid-Jun-Sep, 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct-mid-Jun).

More gasp-worthy is **Site des Orgues** (☎ 04 68 84 13 14; adult/10-13yr €3.50/2; ☎ 9.30am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Oct, 2-5pm Nov-Jan, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Feb & Mar), natural rock formations soaring sky-high like the pipes of a church organ about 2km north of town on the D2. Before leaving town, ask at the **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 84 02 64; sq de la Poste) about walking trails around the rocks.

VILLEFRANCHE DE CONFLENT

pop 225

Small, yes, but significant, hugely so. Hemmed in by tall cliffs, Villefranche sits at the strategic

THE CANARY

Carrying nearly half a million passengers during the three peak months of high summer, **Le Train Jaune** (The Yellow Train; ☎ 04 68 96 63 62; 4 daily Jun-Sep, 2 daily Oct-May), nicknamed The Canary since its grand opening in 1910, chugs 63km along the Conflent between Villefranche (427m) and Latour de Carol (1231m; adult/child aged 4 to 11 €18.10/9.05, three hours) through spectacular Pyrenean scenery. En route it goes through 17 tunnels, over numerous bridges including the magnificent 156m-long and 80m-high **Pont Gisclard** (1905–08), and around 390 bends; its maximum speed is 55km/h, though 30km/h is more the norm. In July and August a couple of carriages are open-top, and 14 of the 22 tiny mountain stops require passengers to flag the train down or seek out the conductor to alight, injecting the journey with a real dose of old-fashioned nostalgia.

A great day trip is by train from Villefranche de Conflent to **Thuès-Carèna** (adult/child aged four to 11 €6.80/3.40, 40 minutes), from where it's a five-minute walk downhill to the car park for the **Gorges de Carèna**. Death-defying is the only word fit for the incredible footpaths (1½ to three hours) that snake along metal walkways, across ridges and next to perilous cliff edges with sheer 400m drops. **Mont Louis** (opposite) is another good day trip from Villefranche (adult/child aged four to 11 €8.90/4.45, 1½ hours); its citadel is a 1km walk uphill from the train station.

confluence of the Rivers Têt, Cady and Rotja, hence its thick defensive fortifications, complete with arrow slits, dry moat and ramparts that can be walked. Built by Vauban in the 17th century to augment the original 11th-century defences, the fortified village became a Unesco World Heritage site in 2008.

Towering above the village is **Château-Fort Liberia** (☎ 04 68 96 34 01; www.fort-liberia.com; adult/child €6/2.80; ☞ 9am–8pm Jun-Sep, 10am–6pm Oct-May), a second mammoth Vauban stronghold born in 1681 and strengthened under Napoleon III. To visit it – views from the top are spectacular – hike up the 734-step covered staircase built in the 1850s (a theatrical experience), walk the longer but less vicious *sentier* (footpath) or hitch a ride in a 4WD (adult/child aged five to 11 €3/2). When crossing the railway line separating the village from the hill, beware the highly dangerous exposed third rail. Buy fort tickets in the village at the **Musée Plan en Relief de Villefranche** (☎ 04 68 05 74 29; 17 rue St-Jacques; adult/child €2.30/1.30; ☞ 9am–8pm Jun-Sep, 10am–6pm Oct-May).

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 96 22 96; www.villefranchedeconflent.fr; 32bis rue St-Jacques; ☞ 9am–noon & 2–5pm or 6pm Apr-Sep, 9am–noon Mon–Sat Sep-Mar), beside western Porte d'Espagne, abuts the entrance to Villefranche's spectacular **ramparts** (adult/child €4/1.50, audioguide €3; ☞ 10am–8pm Jul & Aug, to 7pm Jun & Sep, variable hr Oct-Dec & Feb-May).

Sleeping & Eating

Plenty of unexceptional eating options catering to the tourists that pour into the village line rue St-Jean, the souvenir-shop street parallel to rue St-Jacques.

Le Vauban (☎ 04 68 96 18 03; www.residence-le-vauban.com; 5 place de l'Église; d with kitchenette 1st/subsequent night €60/50; ☞ mid-Apr–mid-Oct) For very simple, no-frills lodgings above village bar Le Nation, Vauban is your man; add €5 per night to sleep a third person in its functional studios.

Auberge St-Paul (☎ 04 68 96 30 95; 7 place de l'Église; menus €19–100; ☞ lunch & dinner Tue–Sat, lunch Sun) The whole gamut of budgets is catered for at this gourmet inn with tree-shaded gravel terrace basking in the shade of Église St-Jacques. Kick off on a culinary high with pan-fried foie gras served with melon and red fruits in a caramelised soy sauce.

VERNET-LES-BAINS

pop 1450

Busy in summer and a ghost town the rest of the year, this charming spa 9km south of Villefranche was much frequented by the British aristocracy in the late 19th century: English writer Anthony Trollope set his short story *La Mère Bauche* here after visiting in 1859. Vernet's green status as a *village arborescent* exalts the 300 varieties of tree adorning its slopes, many brought in as seeds by overseas visitors.

Basking in the shade on a café terrace, browsing place de la République's Saturday-morning market, admiring summertime blossoms or moseying up to the church make for a handsome morning – or hit **Casteil**, 2.5km south, with its soul-stirring abbey and walking trail up the Pic du Canigou (see the boxed text p230).

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 05 55 35; www.ot-vernet-les-bains.fr; place de la République; ☞ 9am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon & 3–6pm Sat, 10am–12.30pm

Sun May-Sep, closed Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) has information on hiking and biking. The **Maison de la Presse** (5 place de la République) sells maps and **Garage Villaceque** (☎ 04 68 05 51 14; rues du Conflent & Colonel Nou) rents mountain bikes (€10/15/61 per half-day/day/week).

Abbaye St-Martin du Canigou

This spectacular eagle's-nest abbey, hidden between beech and chestnut trees, sits atop a rocky outcrop in splendid isolation. It was founded by Cerdagne-Conflent count Guifred II in 1008, shaken by an earth tremor in 1428 and shut in 1786, after which the ornate marble-sculpted capitals propping up the lovely cloister, unusual columned stonework in the crypt and Lombard bell-tower stonework were plundered. Painstakingly restored between 1902 and 1932, the former Benedictine **abbey** (☎ 04 68 05 50 03; www.stmartinducanigou.org; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €5/3/2; ☎ hourly guided tours 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am & 12.30pm Sun, to 4pm Tue-Sun Oct-Dec & Feb-May), a beautiful example of Romanesque architecture, has been tended since 1988 by Beatitude nuns and monks – 15 live here today.

Access is only by guided tour, and it's a 40-minute uphill walk through woods from Casteil; the footpath is next to the church (in June and early July stop en route to buy cherries and homemade apple juice!). Alternatively, hitch a one-way/return 4WD ride (€8/11) with Garage Villaceque (see above).

Sleeping & Eating

In the abbey grounds, walkers can kip in the seven-bunk, stone Refuge de Montagne, a stone hut with electricity and a toilet-and-shower block, but no drinking water. In Casteil, **Camping Domaine St-Martin** (☎ 04 68 05 52 09; www.domainestmartin.com; 6 blvd de la Cascade; 2 adults, tent & car low/mid-/high season €8/12/18; ☎ Mar-Nov; 🚰) is well equipped and has a pool.

Relais St-Martin (☎ 04 68 05 56 76; 1 chemin de St-Martin de Canigou, Casteil; d with shared bathroom €20, d/tr €35/38) Salads and light grills (two-/three-course lunch *menu* €12/14.50) are the mainstay of this mountain inn, set at the start of the footpath up to the abbey. Views are green and lovely.

Hôtel-Restaurant Le Molière (☎ 04 68 05 50 97; www.lemolier.com, Casteil; d €43-49; ☎ Apr-Oct) On the left as you arrive in the hamlet, this Casteil hotel is an institution thanks to the creative light lunches (tarts and salads €10 to €12) it serves English-style on its green lawn.

Les Deux Lions (☎ 04 68 05 55 42; www.les2lions.fr; 18 blvd Clémenceau, Vernet-les-Bains; d incl breakfast from €60; ☎ mid-Apr–mid-Oct; (P)) Sage-green shutters shield the mustard town house from the sun at this friendly five-room *chambre d'hôte*, at the foot of the village. To really relax, go for a room with bijou terrace and canvas deckchair overlooking the garden.

Le Mas Fleuri (☎ 04 68 05 51 94; www.hotellemasfleuri.fr; 25 blvd Clémenceau, Vernet-les-Bains; d/tr/q from €85/130/209; ☎ mid-Apr–mid-Oct; (P)) A South American doctor arrived in Vernet during WWI and had this wonderful house with tree-studded park built – the smell of lime-tree blossom in early July is intoxicating. Sadly, the salon is the only room still in use. Bar breakfast, the rest of the hotel action happens in the purpose-built 1970s block opposite. Low-season rates are substantially less.

MONT LOUIS

pop 270

Another Unesco-protected Vauban creation, this atmospheric walled town invariably sits in a cloud at its 1600m mountain perch. Built between 1669 and 1672 on the site of an abandoned 10th-century village, its lumbering walls defended the upper Conflent Valley and its crossroads with the River Aude (north) and the Massif du Carlit (west). Today special-unit French commando troops train in the **citadelle** and an old church, well and wash house create soul in the civilian old town.

Most remarkable is the **Four Solaire** (☎ 04 68 04 14 89; www.four-solaire.fr; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €6/4.50/free; ☎ guided tours half-hourly 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, hourly 10am-5pm Sep-Nov & Mar-Jun), the world's first solar-powered oven, built in 1947 and used as a model for 15 more subsequently built around the world. Reaching 3000°C at its hottest point, it's used today to fire ceramic pots – which you can buy – and forge train whistles for Le Train Jaune (opposite). Informative 45-minute guided visits include a demonstration of the sun setting a piece of wood alight and a tour around the 141-sq-metre heliostat, made up of 567 mirrors that automatically follow the course of the sun.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 04 21 97; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm), inside the walls, runs guided visits of the military citadel (adult/child €4.50/1.50) and has bags of information on summer and winter sports on the **Plateau de Capcir**, immediately north of Mont Louis along the D118. **Les Angles** (1650m; www.lesangles.com), **Formigüères** (1570m; www.formigueres.net) and **Puyvalador** (1700m;

DELIGHTFULLY GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

Following the more southern of the two roads to Spain from Mont Louis, the N116 cruises scenically 12km west to **Saillagouse** (population 820). Buy local cheese and *charcuterie* at butcher **Bonzom et Fils** (14 av des Comtes de Cerdagne) on the main street, then plunge 2km south along the D33 to the tiny mountain spa of **Llo** (1400m). Park in the field of a car park and follow the track five minutes to **Les Bains de Llo** (☎ 04 68 04 74 55; www.lesbainsdello.com; rte des Gorges; adult/3-11yr/family €9/7.50/29; ♿ 10am-7.30pm Jun-Apr), outdoor baths where you can get away from it all in warm natural waters, delightfully scenic when the ground is snow-covered. Alternatively, zip through trees like Tarzan at the **Via Ferrata Les Escaldilles** (☎ 06 85 02 23 84; www.viaferrata-de-llo.com; with instructor €39-45, without instructor €19-25; ♿ 9am-4pm Jul & Aug, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun Sep-May), next to the baths in Llo, or hike along the kid-friendly footpath to the beautiful **Gorges du Sègre**.

To really get away from it all, overnight in the village. Its name meaning *Chez Michel* in Catalan, **Cal Miquel** (☎ 04 68 04 13 68; www.calmiquel.com; d incl breakfast €52, half-board per person €44) is a ruin of an 18th-century farm stylishly restored and transformed into a rustic *maison d'hôtes* (dinners €17). With its terrace garden and breathtaking view, it's irresistible. But then so is its neighbour, 12-room boutique hotel **Auberge Atalaya** (☎ 04 68 04 70 04; www.atalaya66.com; d €98-160; ♿ Easter-mid-Oct; ♿), an elegant ode to the finest side of life with a grand piano in its dining room (*menu* €34) and the extraordinary panache of grand dame Mme Ghilaine Toussaint at its heart.

www.puyvalador.com), the main ski resorts, offer limited but scenic alpine skiing; Les Angles is a known mountain-biking base.

Mont Louis is also the main jumping-off point for green forays in the **Parc Naturel Régional des Pyrénées Catalanes**, a nature park protecting the upper Conflent Valley from Prades to the Spanish border. Get the full low-down on botanical walks, rare-flower discovery workshops and so on from the **park office** (☎ 04 68 04 97 60; www.parc-pyrenees-catalanes.fr; 1 rue Dagobert).

Aqua-blue shutters, flower boxes and an old stone facade inside the walls make B&B **La Volute** (☎ 04 68 04 27 21; http://lavolute.monsite.wanadoo.fr; place d'Armes; d incl breakfast €65) a lovely place to overnight in Mont Louis.

Or trek 5km south to trailside eco-lodge **L'Orri de Planès** (☎ 04 68 04 29 47, 06 22 32 25 32; www.orrideplanes.com; dm €15, d incl breakfast €60; ♿), an ecologically managed stone farmhouse and *refuge*, planted at 1550m on the GR10 in Planès. Walking distance from the village's treble-shaped Romanesque church, it is a place to wallow in nature.

LAC DES BOUILLOUSES & FONT ROMEU

This protected nature reserve sits in the heart of the harsh **Massif du Carlit** from where, at the foot of its highest granite peak, **Pic Carlit** (2912m), the region's longest river has its source. Almost immediately, the River Conflent (or Têt) is tamed by **Lac des Bouillouses** (2017m), the reserve's largest lake, dammed between 1903 and 1909 to power the first trains along the valley. Crowds flock here in July and August to walk around the lake and pick up other scenic walking trails into the massif.

The main access point is **Font Romeu** (population 2000), a ski resort with snow-kiting school and summer hiking and mountain-bike base, 10km west of Mont Louis. The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 30 68 30; www.font-romeu.fr; 82 av Emmanuel Brousse), next to the cable-car station on the main street, has maps and information on the two chairlifts and cable car (adult/child aged six to 16/family return €12.50/8.50/31) required to reach the lake. Shuttle buses (adult/child aged six to 16 return €5/2) also transport walkers to the lake from the Pla da

A SPANISH ISLAND IN FRANCE

...is precisely what small town **Llívia** (population 1400) is, 11km southwest of Font Romeu and some 4km east of Spain proper. The Spanish enclave was created in 1659 by the Treaty of the Pyrenees, which ended the 30-year war between France and Spain by ceding Roussillon and the northern half of the ancient Catalanian county of Cerdagne in the eastern Pyrenees to France. The deal, which saw 33 Cerdagne villages in all come under the French crown, excluded the county's ancient capital of Llívia thanks to its status since antiquity as a 'city'.

Barrès car park (1660m), a few kilometres north of Mont Louis on the D60; the sinuous road goes the whole way to the lake but is off-limits to normal cars between 7am and 7pm.

Outdoor action aside, Fort Romeu's biggest attraction is **Le Grand Four Solaire d'Odeillo** (☎ 04 68 30 77 86; www.promes.cnrs.fr; 7 rue du Four Solaire; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-6pm), a giant 1970s 1000-kilowatt solar furnace and scientific research centre in Odeillo, 1km south, where you can learn about solar energy. Further exhibitions at **Thémis** (☎ 04 68 04 14 25; ☞ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Jul-mid-Sep), a 1980s solar-powered tower 5km west, complete the lesson in renewable energy. For more, see p58.

Mont Louis train station is 1km downhill from the citadel.

VALLÉE DE L'AGLY

The most northern of the three valleys crossing Roussillon from east to west, the Agly ensnares the sunbaked vineyards and arid limestone mountains of **Le Fenouillèdes**. Not only does this wine country prop up big names like **Rivesaltes** and **Maury**, it is also spitting distance from the land of the Cathars, wild country dotted with 11th- to 13th-century cliff-top fortresses perched so high their very existence seems a minor miracle. See p196.

In summer a century-old narrow-gauge tourist train, the **Train du Pays Cathare et du Fenouillèdes** (☎ 04 68 59 99 02; www.tpcf.fr; adult/5-12yr return €18/12; ☞ daily Jul & Aug, 3 or 4 times weekly

May, Jun, Sep & Oct), chugs along the valley from Rivesaltes to Axat, 60km west.

TAUTAVEL

Observing (by camera) archaeologists in real time excavating the same cave where a human skull believed to be 450,000 years old was uncovered in 1971 is the highlight of the **Musée de la Préhistoire** (Prehistory Museum; ☎ 04 68 29 07 76; www.tautavel.com; av Léon-Jean Grégory; adult/7-14yr €7/3.50; ☞ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun), 27km northwest of Perpignan above Tautavel village. In addition to the seasonal live link-in with the Caune de l'Arago, the museum has a full-size reproduction of part of the cave, holograms, dioramas, fossilised bones and so on. Admission includes entry to the nearby **Musée des Premiers Habitants d'Europe** (Museum of Europe's First Inhabitants; rue Anatole France; adult/7-14yr €3.20/1.60; ☞ 11.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Sep-Jun, 11.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug), a 300m signposted walk away.

ST-PAUL DE FENOUILLET

The sleepy old medieval capital of Le Fenouillèdes is the launching pad for dramatic forays into the 500m-deep **Gorges de Galamus**, with its emerald-green waters, and spiritual **Ermitage de St-Antoine de Galamus** (☞ 10am-6pm or 7pm Apr-Oct), where 18th-century hermits spent a solitary existence devoted to God. A 10-minute walk along a rocky footpath from the car park at the southern end of the gorges on the D7 gets you to the hermitage. In season between 1pm and 7pm, lights regulate traffic

A DAY WINE TASTING

The perfect way to end a morning in Rivesaltes (p220), known for its sweet dessert wine, is with a long and lazy wine tasting over lunch at **Château de Jau** (☎ 04 68 38 90 10; lunch/dinner menu incl wine & coffee €29/39; ☞ lunch & dinner mid-Jun-Sep). At this creative venue, 15km west, countless visitors return year after year to dine on the same *menu*, served since 1978 on the terrace of this Tuscan-style 18th-century chateau hidden in a mass of vines planted by Cistercian monks in the 12th century. Each course is built solely from local produce and is accompanied by two different wines from the estate; detailed tasting notes (together with a warning to the driver to stay sober) add to the fun, and views over the fish-filled pond are idyllic. César, Tapiès and Ben (whose distinctive squiggly handwriting is the logo for the estate's table wine *Le Jaja de Jau*, *jaja* being slang for a simple wine jug) are among the artists to have featured in the **Espace d'Art Contemporain**, a contemporary art space hosting seasonal exhibitions which diners can freely peruse.

Post-lunch, drive west to **Maury** (population 900) and stock your cellar with *vin doux naturel* at the **Celier des Vignerons de Maury** (☎ 04 68 59 00 95; www.vigneronsdemaury.com; 128 av Jean Jaurès). For dinner, nip across the road to **Le Pichenouille** (☎ 04 68 59 02 18; www.restocave.com; 33 av Jean Jaurès; starters/mains €7/12; ☞ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, closed dinner Sun & all day Mon-Wed Nov-Mar), an inspired bistro-cum-wine cellar where you can eat and drink wine at cheaper, wine-producer prices.

on the terrifyingly sinuous, single-lane D7 overhung with rock; at other times cross your fingers and pray you don't meet an oncoming vehicle on the 1.4km stretch.

The **Tourist Office** (☎ 04 68 59 07 57; www.st-paul66.com; 26 blvd de l'Agly; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, shorter hours Sep-Jun) has plenty of information on gorge walking and canyoning – *the adrenelin-pumping thing to do!* On the 1st floor is

the office for the **Train du Pays Cathare et du Fenouillèdes** (☎ 04 68 59 99 02; www.tpcf.fr), which passes through St-Paul de Fenouillet.

Camping des Randonneurs (☎ 04 68 59 05 50; www.campingdesrandonneurs.com; 2 adults & tent/car €9.50/2, 4-/6-person tepee €79/95, 2-/4-person roulotte €69/89; ☎ mid-Apr–mid-Oct), 15km west in Fenouillet, oozes bohemian romance with its igloo tents, tepees and *roulottes* (gypsy caravans) between trees.