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Why Languedoc Is Like Nowhere Else in France

by Katherine Wheelock • Photography by Oddur Thorisson • June 9, 2017

My family and I came to the Languedoc on a daydream of sitting cross-legged in the sand by the sea, the woodsy foothills of the Pyrenees at our backs, eating mussels steamed under flaming pine boughs and drinking chilled white wine from plastic cups. As it happened, fires for *l'éclade de moules* weren't yet burning on the late-spring beaches. But the spirit of the dream—the forest and the sea, the briny food and wine against an earthy backdrop—was everywhere. The topography in southern France, and the Languedoc in particular, changes so quickly, you might miss the sea if you are busy looking things up on your phone. A green, mountainous interior cut through with rivers and gorges flanks a coastline that begins at the border of Spain and runs east to Marseille and the start of the [French Riviera](#). Last year, a law passed by Parliament aimed at shrinking the number of regions combined the Languedoc, or Languedoc-Roussillon, as it was officially known, with the Midi-Pyrénées to its west and christened it Occitanie. The redrawing of the map makes little difference. The Languedoc—ruggedly beautiful, less-traveled sister to pinup-next-door [Provence](#)—is still the Languedoc. Just compact enough for a satisfying long weekend, you could also spend two summer weeks drifting from the shore to the countryside and back again, and be left wanting more. The key is to adopt the locals' pace, avoiding the urge to pack your schedule with a historical hit list and instead making one or maybe two stops between breakfast and a long seafood lunch.



Photo by Oddur Thorisson
Vineyards near the commune of Roquebrun.

A good place to start is Carcassonne, a medieval hilltop town in the western corner of the Languedoc, overlooking the river Aude. The lure is La Cité, a 10th-century citadel both fairy-tale and foreboding. The ramparts, drawbridge, and witch-hat turrets are restored remnants of Cathar history. More than 800 years ago, defectors from the Catholic Church established themselves in this corner of southwest France to hide from persecution. The slaughter of the Cathars is a brutal piece of history that still hangs in the atmosphere “quite heavily,” one local tells me. South and east of Carcassonne, ruins of Cathar castles dot the limestone hills, enhancing the vista of distant snow-dusted Pyrenees and brilliant blue sky the way a chin scar does a beauty.

Twenty minutes from La Cité is the town of Montréal de l’Aude, a tiny snarl of one-way streets and hardly any traffic at all. Behind heavy pine doors set in local stone is the guesthouse [Camellas-Lloret](#), where in the courtyard a fire has just been lit. Annie Moore emerges from the kitchen with a vase of wildflowers. “He’s South African,” she says dryly of her husband and coproprietor, Colin. “His things are bare feet and fires.” Colin and New Jersey-born Annie met on a train leaving Paris 35 years ago, moved to the Languedoc, and raised three children. They dabbled in real estate and restoration, eventually finding an 18th-century house and converting it into a five-room inn five years ago. Walls are cool pewter gray and linens are crisp; on the landing overlooking the courtyard, hanging chairs swing in the late-day breeze.



Photo by Oddur Thorisson
Catching the sea breeze at the beach in Gruissan.

Aperitifs of cold sparkling wine mixed with a splash of Suze, an herby liqueur, are served in bistro glasses. Annie, warm but wry, often cooks for guests, but tonight she’s ordered in cassoulet, a Languedoc classic, from her preferred Carcassonne butcher. Creamy white beans, pork belly, and peppery Toulouse sausage fill an earthenware bowl. There is a simple salad, carafes of Languedoc wine, and finally an array of cheese that steals the show. Colin is the garrulous front man, pouring wine and ribbing guests. In the morning, he’ll introduce me to his longtime neighbor across the street, who shows off her broom-tidy home, pointing to the leftovers of rabbit stew in a pot on the stove and gesturing at black-and-white photos on the wall of her as a girl the better part of a century ago.

Driving on holiday is either something to be endured or something you wish would never end. In the Languedoc, it's the latter. We slip through allées of ash-colored plane trees, past phalanxes of carignane and grenache and scrubland strewn with Day-Glo orange poppies, suddenly winding up at the sea. On the road from Cathar country to the coast is a scattering of pretty villages and independent winemakers nestled in an area called Corbières. If the signature flora of Provence is lavender, in the Languedoc it is garigue, a mix of thyme, juniper, rosemary, and other low-lying vegetation that clings to the limestone hills. Vintners talk about its infusive powers. Tourists struggle to define it. In Corbières it is everywhere. The villages here, Limoux and Mirepoix among them, each have their charms. Lagrasse, one of the prettiest, hugs a bend in the river Orbieu, bridged by a squat 900-year-old stone arch. At night, frogs and nightingales warble from the riverbanks. The 14th-century covered market, a transporting specimen of medieval architecture, is packed with stalls on a Saturday. In the Languedoc, as in so much of bucolic France, the farmers' market lunch is a given. We build ours from baguettes and shrug off the cliché.

First-timers often describe the Languedoc as French [Tuscany](#), and at times there is that feel—cypress trees dark against tawny hillsides, acres of spindly grapevines—but here it's threaded through with the presence of the sea. Nearer the Mediterranean shore, the scrubland becomes rockier and the land flattens out. The Languedoc coast stretches from the westernmost seaside towns of Banyuls-sur-Mer and Collioure by the Spanish border, where things are more Catalan than Gallic, northeast to Montpellier, the gastronomically up-and-coming city 170 miles from the start of the Côte d'Azur. Biquet Plage, the best of a string of similarly shabby-yet-seductive beach spots, is an hour's drive northeast of those Catalan-accented parts, and its vibe is decidedly French. The beach it sits on, Leucate, is generous and soft, crowded in the summer but not with the grid of rented chaises like you'd find east of here on the French Riviera.



Photo by Oddur Thorisson
The Pezenas Farmers' Market.

A short drive east of Leucate, in the tiny town of Peyriac-de-Mer, Paul Old pulls the cork from a bottle of white. Australian-born Old and his business partner, Ben Adams, a Brit, run a modest winery called [Les Clos Perdus](#) that has a culty far-flung fan base. Not much more than a decade ago, most of the grapes in the Languedoc—carignane, grenache, grenache blanc—were grown to feed a huge table-wine cooperative. The scene was the opposite of Burgundy or Bordeaux; it was mass. The space to innovate and the intersection of mountain and sea are what drew Old. “It’s all rugged Southerners here,” he says. “Nothing about hot-air balloons and hunting trips.” In the years since Les Clos Perdus began recultivating 100-year-old varietals, other winemakers, many with a biodynamic bent, have set up here. “It’s become quite hip, Languedoc wine,” Old says. “If you’re a young kid and you want to make wine, there’s potential here.”

From the door of Old’s place, a few minutes’ walk past the silver-haired men playing *pétanque* and the sandstone buildings draped in purple bougainvillea, is the edge of an *étang*, or salt pond. The boundaries of the Regional Natural Park of Narbonne encompass Leucate, Peyriac-de-Mer, and the nearby town of Bages, the gateway to the area’s best nature show. In Peyriac and Bages, boardwalks lead out over a network of lagoons that are favored hangouts of pink flamingos—the stars—and less renowned but equally handsome egrets and herons that nest here, too. Something about the quietude of these wetland-edge villages leaves us feeling like we alone have discovered something—a rare feeling while exploring pretty Mediterranean towns on the cusp of summer.

Across the wetlands from Peyriac-de-Mer, 25 minutes south of bustling Narbonne, lies the Salin de Gruissan, where seawater slowly evaporates and from which salt is harvested. Depending on the time of year and the biochemistry, the saltern might be a swath of salmon-pink stripes. The Mediterranean is just beyond it, as are the foothills of La Clape, a compact mountain range, and Gruissan, a friendly fishing village coiled around the ruins of a 12th-century tower. But we’ve come for a long lunch at La Cambuse du Saunier, just a few steps from the saltern. A plate of razor clams showered with garlicky bread crumbs and glasses of cold muscat land on the table before the menu even arrives. Oysters, plucked from beds a few hundred yards away, follow, as does salt-baked *loup de mer* next to a Proustian ratatouille that, like the cheese finale at Camellas, continues to haunt months later.



Photo by Oddur Thorisson

Lunch at Fleur d’Olargues in the village of Olargues.

Driving northeast along the coast from here brings you to Sète, a busy port town on the biggest of the Languedoc's *étangs*, the Thau Lagoon, a haven for flamingos and mussels, where the local specialty is *tielle sétoise*, or cuttlefish pie. It is a worthy detour, but we drift northward instead and cross over into the Hérault, a microregion in the foothills of the Black Mountains. We pass acres of bright-green vines, olive groves, and every so often the glinting water of the Canal du Midi. The 17th-century feat of architecture runs 141 miles from Toulouse in the west to Sète, where it washes into the Mediterranean. What was formerly a wheat-trade workhorse is now a meandering waterway, offering itself up for lazy boat rides and strolls along leafy banks. Not far from a bend in the canal, we see [Château Les Carrasses](#) rising up out of the fields of grenache noir and cabernet franc, a 19th-century wine-making mirage with gabled roofs and pointy turrets. Les Carrasses and its newly opened sister, [Château St. Pierre de Serjac](#), 40 minutes to the northeast, are collections of guesthouses surrounded by vineyards, manicured gardens, clay tennis courts, and infinity pools. From this plush camp, the Languedoc's pretty market towns, beaches and lagoons, oyster shacks and canal boats are all within short, glorious drives. But for a moment, it's enough to stay suspended in the swimming pool's turquoise waters, young grapevines and cottony clouds in a bright-blue sky the only things in sight.



Photo by Oddur Thorisson
[Château St. Pierre de Serjac](#).

Where to Stay

The hosts at [Camellas-Lloret](#), a serene guesthouse near Carcassonne, can arrange winery visits and direct you to local spots like [Bousquet](#), a spectacular fromagerie. [Château Les Carrasses](#) and [Château St. Pierre de Serjac](#) are sister estates in the Hérault surrounded by vineyards, olive groves, and private gardens for strolling. [House La France](#) in Lagrasse has spacious apartments with high ceilings, terra-cotta floors, and terraces overlooking the Orbieu River.

Where to Eat

[Biquet Plage](#) and Les Pilotis are two of the best beach spots in Leucate for extralong lunches of oysters, prawns, fish, summer vegetables, *frites*, and more rosés than you could sample in a sitting. Beautifully unfussy [La Cambuse du Saunier](#), just feet from the salt flats in Gruissan, has a similar menu. For an alternative to seafood, Carcassonne's [La Table de Norbert](#) does some of the region's best steak frites. (Their bone marrow starter is also outstanding.) You'll find farmers' markets where you can assemble your own pâté-and-baguette lunch in the towns of Lagrasse, Limoux, Pézenas, Revel, and Saint-Chinian.
