

Forget the French Riviera, head south-west for a stunning villa break and soak up the culture and fantastic food and drink this area is renowned for

KATIE WOOD

Laidback Languedoc

The Cote d'Azur is lovely, but for me the heart and soul of the South of France is the Languedoc.

This region in the south-west is truly special – full of history, with exceptional food and wine, and it's a lot less touristy than the Riviera.

Some friends and I rented a villa and spent a week exploring. As they were all first-time visitors to the area, and I'm a bit of an old hand at the Languedoc, I was appointed team leader to set the agenda.

The six Scots among us flew from Edinburgh to Beziers with Ryanair.

We picked up our hire car and headed for Pézenas – a beautiful small Renaissance town, located between the sea and the mountains.

Oozing with history and charm, it's a riot of winding cobbled streets, great restaurants and lovely little shops selling artefacts made by local craftsmen. It really is one of the most beautiful little towns in France and well worth a visit.

In summer, Friday nights there are great fun – all the shops stay open late and local vineyards sell their wine on the streets.

Just as Salzburg uses local lad Mozart to sell its attractions, Pézenas uses Molière.

I don't think anyone really knows how long the famous playwright and actor spent in the town (it varies from a few weeks to four years), but it's fair to say that Pézenas did inspire some of his most famous plays.

At the tourist office you can see

Scenovision Molière – a 3D show telling the story of his life.

Our base for this trip was a villa was just outside the town, on the outskirts of Castelnaud de Guers – a picturesque medieval hilltop village dating back to the 11th century.

The house Les Trois Oliviers was a comfortable base at an economical price. It sleeps six (two doubles, one twin) and has its own pool, hot tub, BBQ and outdoor dining facilities.

Around here is La Circuit St Antoine – a 10km walk which explores the village and surroundings and offers stunning views of vineyards and mountains. You're not far from the beach here and the mountains are within easy striking distance too.

While our lot like a good hike, it was the culture and great French food and wine that we mainly came for, so most of our time was spent in Montpellier and Pézenas.

Montpellier is very much a city of two tales – the beautiful medieval Old Town and the cutting-edge new town. Predictably the old district is the most impressive by far.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Mediterranean climate attracted many noble families who built stately city mansions and dozens of these impressive buildings remain today.

From Place de la Comédie, the main square, it's an easy walk to the broad tree-lined Esplanade Charles de Gaulle and Quartier de l'Ancien Courier – a maze of narrow medieval streets that makes up the oldest part of the city centre.

I couldn't take my little group to

Montpellier without treating them to one of my favourite restaurants in France – the fabulous Chez Boris on the city's esplanade. Seriously the best steak and chips you'll ever eat.

On another day we drove to the village of Marseillan, the heart of the oyster production region and also home to the Maison Noilly Prat – the famous vermouth drink.

Made only in this beautiful spot, you can take a tasting tour to learn about this delicious blend of wines, herbs and spices dating back to 1855.

We chose their special private tour followed by lunch on a riverboat during which you sail round the oyster farms and sample the best of produce from this region – foie gras, cheese, wine, oysters and Noilly Prat. An excellent excursion all round.

On the last day we went to nearby Château St Pierre de Serjac – a beautiful 19th century wine domaine, now restored as a luxury self-catering estate and boutique winery.

The accommodation is really impressive and I'd happily base myself here but for this trip I had to make do with a day visit.

Occupying a beautiful 200-acre site with uninterrupted views of rolling vines, olive groves and woodland, the Chateau has been converted into an eight-room hotel. Dotted throughout the grounds are original outbuildings which have been converted into 36 self-catering properties.

We loved our time there, enjoying tennis, treatments in the spa and the beautiful heated infinity pool before dinner in the restaurant.

Travel info

- destination sudefrance.com
- Les Trois Oliviers, ref 254320, at www.cheznous.com. Costs £795 to £1250 per week. See also www.lestroisoliviers.com
- Chez Boris restaurant – www.chezboris.com
- Car hire – www.car-rentals.co.uk
- www.serjac.com



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