

Awesome AUDE

This wild and beautiful department in southern Languedoc-Roussillon is rich in history and ancient traditions, as *Solange Hando* discovers

In this sunny corner of Languedoc-Roussillon, Aude is a quiet department where summers are cooled by gentle sea breezes and villages nestle among sunflower fields and vineyards guarded by hilltop castles. Named after a river flowing between the Pyrénées and the Massif Central, it ends on the sandy shores of the Mediterranean to the east, but stops short of Toulouse to the west, claiming just two towns in these rural heartlands. Forget glitzy crowds and high prices, this is southern France at its most enticing.

The French have long known about Aude's 'Secret Riviera' where families return year after year, drawn by crystalline waters and broad, sweeping sands. Even in summer, there's plenty of space; just bring your parasol and pick your spot. Beaches stretch for 50km or so and beyond the holiday apartments, you soon get away from souvenir shops, though you may come across a naturist.

Gently shelving beaches provide plenty of safe swimming while riggings tinkle in the marinas and kite and windsurfers pirouette to their heart's content. Favourite resorts include Leucate-La Franqui and Gruissan with its beach chalets on stilts and old village coiled around a small hill. From pine-covered slopes to beaches, sand banks and lagoons, the coastal reaches of Aude are protected by the Parc Naturel Régional de la Narbonnaise en Méditerranée, a place to ramble along the footpaths, look out for rare plants and birds and explore the Massif de la Clape, a high rocky plateau carpeted in vineyards and fragrant Mediterranean scrub. There you will find the unique abyss of Le Gouffre de l'Oeil Doux where sheer limestone cliffs plunge down to a circular pool of emerald water.

Eight years ago, Jane Coombes and her brother bought a house on the edge of the Massif. "We did a lot of research," explains Jane, "and found that Aude had a really good choice of affordable properties and a diverse landscape: both mountains and sea. It's not as commercialised as other areas, yet there are plenty of natural wonders and, of course, we love the wine. Salles-d'Aude, our village, is surrounded by vineyards - we converted our own wine cellars into accommodation - and it feels really French. We like the beach too, especially Gruissan, the 'village escargot', and the oyster beds, and we're fascinated by the rich history of Aude. There are medieval castles everywhere and Roman remains on our doorstep."

In Narbonne, history goes back 2,500 years though the town really came into its own when the Romans arrived in 118 BC. At a crossroad of trading routes, the old Languedoc capital rivalled Marseille, blossoming as it did on the wine trade for centuries until the River Aude changed course and the port silted up.

It's a *Ville d'Art et d'Histoire*: proud of its museums, its Roman granary and remains of the Via Domitia - the first Roman road in Gaul - not to mention its medieval centre clustered around the former Archbishop's Palace and the Gothic cathedral, never completed, since the

These pages: Perched on a hilltop high up in the Pyrénées mountains above the village of Duilhac, the ruined fortress of Peyrepertuse is one of Aude's Cathar castles



Narbonne remains a leisurely place with colourful cafés and a century-old covered market

city defences could not be demolished, but sporting a high, vaulted choir and sweeping views from the tower. With its own beach some 20km out of town, Narbonne remains a leisurely place with colourful cafés along the Canal de la Robine, and a century-old covered market which opens its doors every morning, even on Christmas day.

Then, of course, there's the wine from the Corbières, mostly red and the largest AOC in Languedoc, covering 11 *terroirs* dotted in the hills south and west of the city. The Corbières are a must for wine experts, but these wild rugged lands are also a haven for nature lovers, who come to ramble along the trails scented with rosemary, lavender and thyme, or to climb the mystical Pic de Bugarach topping 1,200 metres. There's hardly a village in sight, yet those in the know make their way to Lagrasse, listed among the most beautiful villages in France for its ancient abbey, medieval lanes and humpback bridge, which have inspired myriad artists and *artisans*.

Like much of Languedoc-Roussillon, the darkest hour for the people of Corbières was in the Middle Ages when the religious sect of the Cathars rejected the Pope's authority and preached the return to simple Christian values. A crusade was launched, forcing them to take refuge in hilltop castles and besieged until surrender, they perished in the flames rather than betray their faith. In these near-deserted hills, the crumbling ruins of castles such as Quéribus and Peyreperthuse cling like eagles' nests to rocky outcrops, sending shivers down your spine as you gaze in wonder at the pristine landscape rolling across these lands below.

North of the River Aude, the Minervois has its own dramatic tales but from the plain to the hills, wine, heritage and art have pride of place, especially in the annual Grands Chemins festival. Nowadays, Minervois is all about smaller vineyards and quality yields, encouraging a growing number of innovative producers to develop organic wines and excellent *vins de pays*. Meanwhile, artists set up home here and there, drawn by unspoilt scenery and peaceful surroundings. There are wood carvers, potters, painters and sculptors, who shape the red marble of Caunes, once taken to Versailles by order of the Sun King.

The village of Caunes boasts some elegant facades and a Benedictine abbey, and uses the marble spoils for road

filling. Vineyards aside, this is a land of olive and almond groves, orchards and pretty villages such as Bize-Minervois in the valley of the River Cesse, Rieux and its seven-sided church, Villeneuve, the truffle 'capital' on the edge of Haute Languedoc, or the delightful village of Le Somail, known beyond the borders for its antique bookshop on the banks of the Canal du Midi.

The canal was designed in the 17th century by Pierre-Paul Riquet to link the Mediterranean to the Atlantic via the Garonne. It took 15 years and 12,000 men and women to complete, including the numerous locks, bridges, aqueducts and a tunnel. Sadly, having invested his personal fortune in the project, Riquet passed away shortly before its completion but the canal is now a World Heritage site. It is no longer used by commercial barges but pleasure boats have given it a new lease of life. Locals fish, cycle or walk along the towpath and little disturbs the peace apart from ducks and geese rustling in the reeds.

About halfway along its course in the Pays Cathare, the canal reaches Carcassonne, the department's capital, which, in the high season, is one of the most visited sites in France. Everyone comes to see the hilltop citadel rebuilt by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century and to enjoy the summer-long festivities: concerts, jousting, and fireworks on Bastille Day. Fanciful, awesome and listed by UNESCO, the medieval *cité* takes your breath away, from its drawbridge and windswept gates to the inner castle and the double line of fortifications topped by 52 towers.

There are buzzing restaurants and ice cream stalls, steep cobbled lanes, dungeons, horse-drawn carriages rattling along the dry moat; and all around, ceramics, linen, dried herbs, lavender soap, plastic swords and all things medieval. You can walk all around the ramparts and, in clear weather, you might see from the snowy peaks of the Pyrénées in the south to the Montagne Noire in the foothills of the Massif Central to the north.

Below the citadel, the so-called *ville neuve* is a 13th-

century bastide consisting of narrow streets on a grid pattern, vestiges of the city walls - mostly replaced by tree-lined boulevards - and a colourful market square where local producers invite you to taste before you buy and restaurants set up tables around the fountain of Neptune.

"I love this region," says Moira Martingale, from Worcestershire, who runs holiday company, French House Party, in her lovely villa near Carcassonne. "Not just the landscape - mountains, lakes, canal, sunflowers and the amazing medieval *cité* - but the huge selection of flavours to tantalise the senses. We offer a range of activities at FHP, but on the cookery course, we always visit a market. Everyone is knocked out by the sheer variety of fruit and veg, cheeses, cold meats, honey, bread - the colours, the scents, the tastes and the stimulating air of noisy bustle - and I never seem to tire of it either.

"We relax on the square then it's time for lunch, goat's cheese perhaps, or a *salade languedocienne* with olives and rice from Marseillette, fish from the Med flavoured with herbs, or lamb from the hills, but often we opt for cassoulet, a tasty bean and duck or goose stew, invented long ago to feed prisoners. Meanwhile, the river flows along the shaded promenade, babbles under the medieval bridge then turns sharply east as the Montagne Noire rises like a barrier against the blue sky."

Full of rural charm, the Montagne Noire is laced with forests and pastures, caves and lakes, and streams rich in trout. Buzzards hover high above, wild boar rummage in the undergrowth, and in the evening, crickets chirrup all around. Cowslip and heather bloom along the winding roads, red-roofed villages nestle on verdant slopes, and among the cypress trees, the forlorn towers of Lastours remember the Cathars. The Pic de Nore is the highest point, offering spectacular views from the mountains to the sea, and west of Carcassonne to the plain of Lauragais.

Spreading into neighbouring Haute-Garonne, the Lauragais is a dazzling land of sunflower fields and

Clockwise from top left: The stunning medieval *cité* in Carcassonne; the colourful market in Narbonne; Château de Quéribus is thought to be the last stronghold of the Cathar defence; Canal de la Robine in Narbonne



Top to bottom: Aude is home to eight AOC wine-producing areas; the Canal du Midi was designed in the 17th century to link the Mediterranean to the Atlantic; departmental capital Carcassonne

authentic villages where, after the afternoon siesta, men venture out for a game of boules under the trees. Bram has concentric streets and a fortified church, Castelnaudary boasts a finely restored windmill rising above the plain and the Grand Bassin is one of the most attractive marinas on the Canal du Midi. Not so far away, the Seuil de Naurouze marks the watershed between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and is the highest point on the canal, near the obelisk dedicated to Riquet. Up in the hills, at the meeting point of three departments - Haute-Garonne, Tarn and Aude - the reservoir of Saint-Ferréol continues to feed the canal but on a hot summer day it's a favourite spot for picnics and water sports.

The more adventurous head south to the upper valley of the Aude in search of white-water rafting and dramatic gorges: La Pierre-Lys and its towering cliffs or Galamus with its vertiginous road straddling two departments. From its source in the Pyrénées, the river tumbles down to a scenic land of forests and flower-strewn meadows, lush valleys and undiscovered gems, hot springs, nostalgic ruins, quaint bridges and castles caught in a time warp.

Just south of Carcassonne, Limoux has some surprising claims to fame, for long before champagne, this is where the monks of Saint-Hilaire discovered the first sparkling wine, the light golden Blanquette. Serve it chilled for dessert or as an apéritif when a little blackcurrant liqueur can turn it into a Kir Royal. Limoux boasts the world's longest carnival, held every weekend from January to March, a never-ending feast of parades and music steeped in the old traditions of l'Occitanie, as the south of France was called in medieval times. Today, the Occitan culture is enjoying a long-awaited revival and here and there across the Aude, the red flag with a golden cross flutters proudly in the breeze. **LF**

NEXT MONTH...
DESTINATION: TARN

Bountiful countryside, pretty characterful villages and historic treasures await in Midi-Pyrénées.

Fact file

i Tourist information

Aude Tourisme

Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 11 66 00
audetourisme.com/en

🏠 Where to stay

Hôtel des Trois Couronnes

2 Rue des Trois Couronnes
11000 Carcassonne
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 25 36 10
hotel-destroiscouronnes.com

Hôtellerie du Château de Floure

1 Allée Gaston Bonheur
11800 Floure
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 79 11 29
chateau-de-floure.com

🍽️ Where to eat

À la Table du Marché

8 Rue Émile Zola
11100 Narbonne
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 43 19 27

O'Vineyards

885 Avenue de la Montagne Noire
11620 Villemoustaussou
Tel: 00 33 (0)6 30 18 99 10
ovineyards.com

✈️ Getting there

Ryanair flies to Carcassonne from London Stansted, East Midlands, Liverpool and Glasgow.
ryanair.com