

Carcassonne & South to the Pyrenees



No one forgets their first, stunning sight of Carcassonne's La Cité from a distance. Its witch-hat turrets glinting in the sunlight, it seems to rise from the plain like some medieval mirage. Within its ramparts, as you walk the cobbled streets, it's easy to understand why the town consistently figures as France's third-most-visited venue after Paris and Mont St-Michel.

La Montagne Noire, a sparsely populated land of small villages, stripes the northern horizon. To the west is Castelnaudary, where pleasure boats jostle in Le Grand Bassin, the Canal du Midi's only significant harbour. Surrounded by the golden wheatfields of the Lauragais plain, the town contests with Carcassonne (while grudgingly admitting a claim from Toulouse) for the title of inventor of cassoulet. Hereabouts, the food, like the wine, is hearty.

To the south of Carcassonne, following the reaches of the upper Aude Valley, the self-confident provincial town of Limoux boasts Blanquette de Limoux, a scintillating sparkling wine, and a carnival that, though small in participants, is France's longest lasting.

Heading westwards, up and over the wild, lonely Pays de Sault, the tumbling waters of the Ariège River cry out to be canoed, while the soft flanks and offshoots of its valley are honeycombed with caves where underground rivers flow.

We've set the bounds of this chapter in defiance of regional administrative boundaries, choosing to graft on the stirring Ariège valley, in the Midi-Pyrénées region and precursor of the Pyrenees, plus a couple of its side shoots.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gasp at your first glimpse of the towers of **La Cité** (p176), Carcassonne
- Sip a drink beneath the arcades of Mirepoix's **place Maréchal Leclerc** (p208)
- Learn about the Ariège valley's earliest inhabitants at **Parc de la Préhistoire** (p203)
- Climb to the ruined castles of **Châteaux de Lastours** (p187), then lunch in style at **Le Puits du Trésor** (p187)
- From Homps, chug along the **Canal du Midi** aboard the *Saint Ferréol* (p189), a traditional canal barge
- Scramble up to **Château de Peyrepertuse** (p196), most impressive of the Cathar castles
- Quaff Blanquette de Limoux and dine at **La Maison de la Blanquette** (p191), Limoux



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