

Languedoc-Roussillon



Languedoc-Roussillon is a three-eyed hybrid, cobbled together in the 1980s by the merging of two historic regions. Bas-Languedoc (Lower Languedoc), land of bullfighting, rugby and robust red wines, looks towards the more sedate Provence. On the plain are the major towns: Montpellier, the vibrant capital; sun-baked Nîmes with its fine Roman amphitheatre; and fairy-tale Carcassonne, with its witches'-hat turrets. On the coast, old Agde lies somnolent beside the Hérault River, and Sète, a thriving port, adds commercial vigour.

Deeper inland, Haut-Languedoc (Upper Languedoc) is quite distinct from the sunny lowlands. A continuation of the Massif Central, this sparsely populated mountainous terrain shares trekking, mountain pasture, forests and hearty cuisine with Auvergne, to its north. Within the greater wilderness, the small towns of Mende, Florac, Alès and Millau are oases. The Parc National des Cévennes has long been the refuge of exiles and is criss-crossed by ancient trails. Trekking country too are the bare limestone plateaux of the Grands Causses, sliced through by deep canyons such as the Gorges du Tarn, perfect for a day's canoeing.

Roussillon, abutting the Pyrenees, gives more than a glance over the frontier to Spanish Catalonia, with which it shares a common language and culture. Alongside the rocky coastline lies pretty Collioure, which drew the likes of Matisse and Picasso, while the gentle Têt and Tech Valleys stretch away inland. To their south, the Mont Canigou, the highest summit in the eastern Pyrenees and symbol of Catalan identity, pokes its nose to the clouds while, further east, the foothills are capped by stark, lonely Cathar fortresses.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gasp at your first glimpse of La Cité's witches'-hat turrets above **Carcassonne** (p779)
- Spend a morning and more exploring the delights of Montpellier's freshly renovated **Musée Fabre** (p771)
- Spot vultures looping and swooping high above **Gorges de la Jonte** (p789)
- Swim under the bridge for an original perspective of the **Pont du Gard** (p766)
- Drift lazily down the **Gorges du Tarn** (p788) in a canoe
- Walk a stage or two of Robert Louis Stevenson's **donkey trek** (p786) in Parc National des Cévennes
- Enjoy spectacular Pyrenean scenery from the trundling **Train Jaune** (Yellow Train; p800), near Villefranche de Conflent
- Take a slow boat along the **Canal du Midi** from Agde (p779)



■ POPULATION: 2,295,000

■ AREA: 27,375 SQ KM

BAS-LANQUEDOC

Languedoc takes its name from *langue d'oc*, a language closely related to Catalan and quite distinct from *langue d'oïl*, the forerunner of modern French, spoken to the north (the words *oc* and *oïl* meant 'yes'). The plains of Bas-Languedoc boast all Languedoc's towns of consequence, its beaches, rich Roman heritage and France's largest wine-producing area.

History

Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Visigoths and Moors all passed through Languedoc before it came under Frankish control in the 8th century. The Franks were generally happy to leave affairs in the hands of local rulers and around the 12th century Occitania (today's Languedoc) reached its zenith. At the time, Occitan was the language of the troubadours and the cultured speech of southern France. However, the Albigensian Crusade, launched in 1208 to suppress the 'heresy' of Catharism, led to Languedoc's annexation by the French kingdom. The treaty of Villers-Cotterêts (1539), which made *langue d'oïl* the realm's official language, downgraded Occitan. Continuing to be spoken in the south, it enjoyed a literary revival in the 19th century, spearheaded by the poet Frédéric Mistral, and is nowadays more often called Provençal.

NÎMES

pop 145,000

Plough your way through the bleak, traffic-clogged outskirts of Nîmes to reach its true heart, still beating where the Romans established their town more than two millennia ago. Here, you'll find some of France's best-preserved classical buildings, together with some stunning modern constructions as the city continues its centuries-old rivalry with Montpellier, just down the autoroute.

The city's other, less obvious claim to fame is sartorial. During the 1849 Californian gold rush, one Levi Strauss was making trousers for miners. Looking for a tough, hard-wearing fabric, he began importing the traditionally blue *serge de Nîmes*, nowadays known as denim.

Orientation

Almost everything, including traffic, revolves around Les Arènes, the Roman amphitheatre. North of here, the fan-shaped, largely pedestri-

anised old city is bounded by bd Victor Hugo, bd Amiral Courbet and bd Gambetta. The main squares are place de la Maison Carrée, place du Marché and place aux Herbes.

Information

Avenue PC Gamer (2 rue Nationale; per hr €2;

☎ 10.30am-11.30pm) Internet access.

Laundrette (14 rue Nationale; ☎ 7am-9pm)

Main Post Office (bd de Bruxelles)

Net@Games (place de la Maison Carrée; per hr €2.50, wi-fi per hr €2; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Sat, noon-1am Sun) Internet access.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 58 38 00; www.ot-nimes.fr; 6 rue Auguste; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug; core hr 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6.30pm Sat, 10am-5pm Sun Sep-Jun) Rents out audioguides to central Nîmes (one/two terminals €8/10).

Sights

Nîmes has recently added a high-tech, 21st-century dimension to its two major classical sights.

LES ARÈNES





Nîmes' magnificent **Roman Amphitheatre** (adult/7-17yr/under 7yr incl audioguide €7.70/5.90/free; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm or 6.30pm Mar-May, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov-Feb), the best preserved in the whole of the Roman Empire, was built around AD 100 to seat 24,000 spectators. It's easy to forget, as one marvels at the architectural accomplishments of the Romans, what a nasty streak they had too. The amphitheatre hosted animal fights to the death, stag hunts, man against lion or bear confrontations and, of course, gladiatorial combats. In the contemporary arena, it's only the bulls that get killed. An advance of a kind, you might say.

There's a mock-up of the gladiators' quarters and, if you time it right, you'll see a couple of actors in full combat gear slugging it out in the arena.

Buy your ticket at the reception point, tucked into the northern walls.

MAISON CARRÉE & CARRÉ D'ART

The **Maison Carrée** (Square House; place de la Maison Carrée; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €4.50/3.70/free; ☎ 10am-7pm or 7.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-6.30pm Mar & Oct, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Nov-Feb) is a remarkably preserved rectangular Roman temple, constructed around AD 5 to honour Emperor Augustus' two adopted sons. Within, a 22-minute 3D film, **Héros de Nîmes**, is screened every

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Musée d'Archéologie.....10 C2	Musée d'Art Contemporain.....(see 7)	Kyriad.....19 D2	Hôtel La Baume.....20 C2
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a small museum that, in addition to the usual period costumes and furniture, has a whole room showcasing denim, with smiling pin-ups of Elvis, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe.

Musée d'Archéologie (Archeological Museum; 13 bd Amiral Courbet; admission free) brings together Roman and pre-Roman tombs, mosaics, inscriptions and artefacts unearthed in and around Nîmes. It also houses a hotchpotch of artefacts from Africa, piled high and tagged with yellowing captions such as 'Abyssinia' and 'Dahomey'. In the same building, **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** (Natural History Museum; admission free) has a musty collection of stuffed animals gazing bleakly out. Only the custodians, protected from visitors inside their own glass case, have life.


Musée des Beaux-Arts (Fine Arts Museum; rue de la Cité Foulc; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €5.10/3.70/free) has a wonderfully preserved Roman mosaic (look down upon it from the 1st floor). This apart, it houses a fairly pedestrian collection of Flemish, Italian and French works.

The refreshing **Musée d'Art Contemporain** (Contemporary Art Museum; place de la Maison Carrée; adult/7-17yr/under 7yr €5.10/3.70/free) in the Carré d'Art makes a welcome contrast. Housing both permanent and rotating exhibitions of

modern art, it merits a visit, if only to prowl the innards of this striking building.

Tours


The tourist office runs 1½- to two-hour French-language city tours (€5.50), both general and themed, year-round. Its pamphlet *Laissez-Vous Conter Nîmes* has full details.

Taxis TRAN ( 04 66 29 40 11) offer a 30- to 40-minute tour of the city (around €30 for up to six people) with a cassette commentary in English. Reserve by phone or in person at the tourist office.

Festivals & Events

In July and August there's an abundance of dance, theatre, rock, pop and jazz events. Year-round, the tourist office regularly updates its list of events, *Les Rendez-Vous de Nîmes*.

FÉRIAS & BULLFIGHTS

Nîmes becomes more Spanish than French during its two *férias* (bullfighting festivals): the five-day **Féria de Pentecôte** (Whitsuntide Festival) in June, and the three-day **Féria des Vendanges** celebrating the grape harvest on the third weekend in September. Each is marked by daily *corridas* (bullfights). The **Billetterie des Arènes** ( 04 66 02 80 90; www.arenedenimes.com, in French; 2 rue de la Violette) sells tickets both to callers-in and via its website.

JEUDIS DE NÎMES

Between 6pm and 10.30pm every Thursday in July and August, artists, artisans and vendors of local food specialities take over the main squares of central Nîmes, where

THE CROCODILE OF NÎMES

Around town and in tourist literature, you'll see the city's shield: a crocodile chained to a palm tree. It recalls the city's foundation, when retiring Roman legionnaires who had sweated with Caesar during his River Nile campaign, were granted land to cultivate hereabouts.

BILLET NÎMES ROMAINE

You can make something of a saving by purchasing a **combination ticket** (adult/child €9.80/7.50). This admits you to Les Arènes, Maison Carrée and Tour Magne and is valid for three days. Pick one up at the first site you visit.

there are also free concerts of music in all its many genres.

Sleeping

During Nîmes' *férias*, many hotels raise their prices significantly and accommodation is hard to find.

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 66 68 03 20; www.hinimes.com; 257 chemin de l'Auberge de Jeunesse, la Cigale; dm/d/q €12.75/32/51; ☹ Feb-Dec) This sterling, well-equipped youth hostel with self-catering facilities has everything from dorms to cute houses for two to six in its extensive grounds, 3.5km northwest of the train station. It rents out bikes (per day €14) and there's limited camping (per person €6.35). Take bus I, direction Alès or Villeverte, and get off at the Stade stop.

Camping Domaine de la Bastide (☎ 04 66 62 05 82; www.camping-nimes.com; route de Générac; site & 2 persons €13.90; ☹ year-round) This campsite is 4km south of town on the D13. Take bus D and get off at La Bastide, the terminus.

Hôtel Central (☎ 04 66 67 27 75; www.hotel-central.org; 2 place du Château; s/d/tr/q €43/48/58/68, s/d with shared bathroom €35/40) With its creaky floorboards and bunches of wild flowers painted on each bedroom door, this friendly hotel is full of character. Room 20, on the 5th floor, has great rooftop views. Free wi-fi.

Hôtel Amphithéâtre (☎ 04 66 67 28 51; http://pages.perso-orange.fr/hotel-amphitheatre; rue des Arènes; s €41-45, d €53-70; ☹ Feb-Dec; ☹ ☹) The welcoming, family-run Amphithéâtre is just up the road from its namesake. Once a pair of 18th-century mansions, it has 15 rooms decorated in warm, woody colours, each named after a writer or painter. We suggest dipping into Montesquieu or Arrabal, both large and with a balcony overlooking pedestrian place du Marché. Rooms on the 3rd floor enjoy air-conditioning.

Hôtel Acanthe du Temple (☎ 04 66 67 54 61; www.hotel-temple.com; 1 rue Charles Babut; s €42-50, d €52-60, tr/q €70/80; ☹) Just opposite the Central, this jolly

place has spick-and-span rooms with wallpaper that differs in each one. Five rooms have air-con, the rest come with fans, some have separate toilets and around 40% are nonsmoking.

MIDRANGE

Royal Hôtel (☎ 04 66 58 28 27; www.royalhotel-nimes.com, in French; 3 bd Alphonse Daudet; s €60-65, d €75-85) You can't squeeze this hotel, popular with visiting artists and raffishly bohemian, into a standard mould. Rooms, all with ceiling fans and nearly all with bathtubs, are furnished with flair. Some overlook pedestrian place d'Assas, a work of modern art in its own right – fine for the view, though the noise might be intrusive on summer nights. Free wi-fi.

Maison de l'Octroi (☎ 04 66 27 15 95; www.bed-breakfast-nimes.com; 209 chemin de Russan; r incl breakfast €65-75; ☹) Host Nicole Crès keeps her two *chambre d'hôte* rooms spick and span and serves delicious breakfasts. Rooms overlook a 5000-sq-metre garden shaded by oak and lime trees. Her house is 1.5km north of the city centre; parking is free.

Kyriad (☎ 04 66 76 16 20; www.hotel-kyriad-nimes.com; 10 rue Roussy; r €69-75; ☹ ☹) On a quiet street, the Kyriad's decor follows a bullfighting theme. Its 28 rooms are smallish but satisfyingly furnished and have complimentary tea and coffee. Head up high to the top floor for the two best rooms (€80), each with a terrace and views over the city. Free wi-fi.

New Hôtel La Baume (☎ 04 66 76 28 42; www.new-hotel.com; 21 rue Nationale; s/d €110/140; ☹ ☹ ☹) In an unfashionable part of town and in fact far from new, this 34-room hotel occupies an attractive 17th-century town mansion with a glorious interior courtyard and twisting stairway. The bedrooms, decorated in sensuous ochre, beige and cream, blend the traditional and strictly contemporary. Wi-fi available.

TOP END

Hôtel Imperator Concorde (☎ 04 66 21 90 30; www.hotel-imperator.com; quai de la Fontaine; r incl breakfast Apr-Oct €190-255, Nov-Mar €165-225; ☹) This *grande dame* of Nîmes hotels is a favourite of visiting matadors. Its bar, the 'Hemingway', commemorates the swaggering author's brief presence here in room 310. The 62 rooms are richly draped and furnished and there's a large garden with a playing fountain. Its highly regarded restaurant, L'Enclos de la Fontaine, is equally grand and distinguished. Free wi-fi.

Eating

Nîmes' gastronomy owes as much to Provence as to Languedoc. Spicy southern delights, such as *aïoli* and *rouille* (spicy mayonnaise of olive oil, garlic and chilli peppers), are as abundant as cassoulet. Sample the Costières de Nîmes wines from the pebbly vineyards to the south.

Haddock Café (☎ 04 66 67 86 57; www.haddock-café.fr, in French; 13 rue de l'Agau; daily special €8, menus €15-20, mains €10-14.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, 7pm-2am Sat) This cheerful, welcoming place to eat, drink and, at least twice weekly, enjoy live music began life as a convent. Its great selection of local wines, by the glass and bottle, rotates regularly and meals are especially good value.

Au Plaisir des Halles (☎ 04 66 36 01 02; 4 rue Littré; menus €21.50-44, mains €10; ☎ Tue-Sat) Just around the corner from the covered market, ingredients here are the freshest and the lunchtime three-course *menu* is excellent value. The photo portraits around the walls are of the winegrowers whose products feature on its impressive list of Languedoc vintages.

Les Olivades (☎ 04 66 21 71 78; 18 rue Jean Reboul; 3-course lunch menu €12, dinner menu €22, mains around €12; ☎ Tue-Fri & dinner Sat) To the rear of this excellent wine shop, which merits a visit in its own right, there's an intimate dining area, where Madame in the kitchen and her husband as maître will treat you royally. Their tempting dinner *menu* offers plenty of choice within each of its three courses.

Le Marché sur la Table (☎ 04 66 67 22 50; 10 rue Littré; mains €15-18; ☎ Tue-Sun) You *could* just pop in for a glass of wine at this friendly spot, run by up-and-coming young chef Éric Vidal (see his impressive culinary credentials on the toilet wall, no less) and his partner, Caroline. But you'd be missing a lot. Éric buys everything fresh from the food market just down the road and his fish is never farmed. Eat in the attractively furnished interior or quiet, green rear courtyard.

Le 9 (☎ 04 66 21 80 77; 9 rue de l'Étoile; lunch menu €15, mains €15-18; ☎ Mon-Sat & lunch Sun May-Sep, dinner Fri & Sat only Oct-Apr) Have a meal or simply drop in for a drink at this mildly eccentric place, tucked away behind high green doors with just a sign swinging outside. Eat in the vast, arched former stables or in the leafy, vine-clad courtyard. Everything except the lunch *menu* is à la carte.

SELF-CATERING

There are colourful Thursday markets in the old city in July and August.

Maison Villaret (☎ 04 66 67 41 79; 13 rue de la Madeleine) This family bakery makes 25 different kinds of bread, cakes, biscuits and local specialities such as *caladons* (honey and almond-studded biscuits).

L'Oustaù Nadal (place aux Herbes) is packed with goodies such as brandade, tapenade, honey from the hills and olive oil, including a couple of kinds on draught.

Other options:

Covered food market (rue Général Perrier) Large and particularly rich.

Monoprix (3 bd Amiral Courbet) Supermarket.

Drinking

Place aux Herbes is one communal outside café in summer. Place du Marché beneath the huge palm tree that flops its fronds over the centre, is equally bustling.

Le Ciel de Nîmes (place de la Maison Carrée; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun year-round, to 10.30pm Fri & Sat May-Sep) On the rooftop terrace of the Carré d'Art, this is the perfect place for a relaxing drink, lording it over the hubbub in the square below.

Grand Café de la Bourse (bd des Arènes) This vast, flamboyant café right opposite Les Arènes, is a great spot for breakfast, a quick coffee or a sundowner, either on the terrace or inside.

La Bodeguita (place d'Assas; ☎ 6pm-late Mon-Sat) With a Spanish click of the heels and attached to the Royal Hôtel, this is a popular venue for the local intelligentsia. On summer evenings, there's often live music.

Entertainment

Les Arènes is a major venue for theatre performances and concerts.

Ciné Sémaphore (☎ 04 66 67 83 11; www.semaphore.fr; 25 rue Porte de France) has five screens and shows nondubbed films.

Théâtre de Nîmes (☎ 04 66 36 02 04; place de la Galade) is the major venue for drama and music performances.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Nîmes' **airport** (☎ 04 66 70 49 49), 10km south-east of the city on the A54, is served only by Ryanair, which flies to/from London (Luton), Liverpool and Nottingham East Midlands in the UK.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 66 38 59 43; rue Ste-Félicité) connects with the train station. International

operators **Eurolines** (☎ 04 66 29 49 02) and **Line Bus** (☎ 04 66 29 50 62) both have kiosks there.

Regional destinations include Pont du Gard (€6.50, 30 minutes, five daily), Uzès (€5.30, 45 minutes, at least five daily) and Alès (€8, 1¼ hours, five daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Europcar has kiosks at the airport (☎ 04 66 70 49 22) and train station (☎ 04 66 29 07 94).

TRAIN

In town, there's a convenient **SNCF sales office** (11 rue de l'Aspic).

More than 12 TGVs daily run to/from Paris' Gare de Lyon (€68.50 to €96, three hours). There are frequent services to/from Alès (€8.10, 40 minutes), Arles (€7.20, 30 minutes), Avignon (€8.10, 30 minutes), Marseille (€17.90, 1¼ hours), Sète (€11.60, one hour) and Montpellier (€8.20, 30 minutes).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

An airport bus (€5, 30 minutes) meets and greets Ryanair flights, leaving from the train station. To confirm times, ring ☎ 04 66 29 27 29.

BICYCLE

Commavelo (☎ 04 66 29 19 68; www.commavelo.com; 28 rue Émile Jamais; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-7pm) rents out town bikes (per half-day/full day/three days €7/12/30) and mountain bikes (per half-day/full day/three days €9/15/37.50).

Drivers who leave their vehicles in the car parks of Les Arènes, Porte Auguste or place d'Assas can borrow a town bike for free. Present your parking ticket at the pay desk.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Local buses are run by **TANGO** (☎ 08 20 22 30 30), which has an information kiosk in the north-east corner of esplanade Charles de Gaulle. A single ticket/five-ticket carnet costs €1/4.

TAXI

Ring ☎ 04 66 29 40 11 for a taxi.

AROUND NÎMES

Perrier Plant

Ever wondered how they get the bubbles into a bottle of Perrier water? Or why it's that stubby shape? Take the one-hour tour in French of **Perrier's bottling plant** (☎ 04 66 87 61 01; adult/child

€5/2; ☎ tours approx hourly 10am or 10.30am-4pm). It's in Vergèze, on the RN113, 13km southwest of Nîmes. We trust their tongue is firmly in their cheek when they advertise *dégustation gratuite* (free tasting)! Ring to reserve – recommended in high summer and required for the rest of the year.

Pont du Gard

The **Pont du Gard**, a Unesco World Heritage Site, is an exceptionally well-preserved, three-tiered Roman aqueduct, once part of a 50km-long system of canals built around 19 BC to bring water from nearby Uzès to Nîmes. The scale is huge: the 35 arches of its 275m-long upper tier, running 50m above the River Gard, contain a watercourse designed to carry 20,000 cu metres of water per day. Its largest construction blocks weigh more than five tonnes.

It's about a 400m walk with excellent wheelchair access from car parks on both left and right banks of the River Gard to the bridge itself. The road bridge, built in 1743, runs parallel with the aqueduct's lower tier. The best view is from upstream, where you can swim on hot days.

At the **visitors centre** (☎ 08 20 90 33 30; www.pontdugard.fr; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Tue-Sun, 1-7pm Mon May-Sep; to 5pm or 6pm Oct-Apr) on the left, northern bank, there's an impressive, high-tech **museum** (admission €7), a 25-minute large-screen **film** (admission €4) showing the bridge from land and air and **Ludo** (per hr €5), a children's activity play area. A **combination ticket** (adult/6-17yr/under 6yr €12/9/€6) gives access to all three activities. A **family ticket** (€24) gives the same access to two adults and up to four children. The Richesses du Gard information office rents audioguides (€6) to the site.

You can walk, for free, **Mémoires de Garrigue**, a 1.4km trail with interpretive signs that winds through this typical Mediterranean bush and scrubland – though you'll need the explanatory booklet in English (€4) to get the most out of it.

In July and August, for an extra €2 on top of your museum entry or combination ticket, it's possible to walk the bridge's topmost tier. A guide leads groups every half-hour between 10am and 11.30am and from 2pm to 5.30pm.

If you simply want to enjoy the bridge, just head on down. You can walk about for free around the clock, though the car parks close between 1am and 6am.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The Pont du Gard is 21km northeast of Nîmes and 26km west of Avignon. Buses normally stop on the D981, 500m north of the visitors centre. In summer, some make a diversion to the Pont du Gard car park.

Lignes du Gard (☎ 04 66 29 27 29; www.stdgard.fr) bus 168 runs five times daily to/from Nîmes, while bus 205 leaves Avignon three times daily, at 7.40am, 12.15pm and 6.08pm.

The extensive car parks on each bank of the river cost €5.

River Gard

The wild, unpredictable River Gard descends from the Cévennes mountains. Torrential rains can raise the water level by as much as 5m in a flash. During long dry spells, by contrast, sections may disappear completely, as the water continues to trickle through an underground channel.

The river has sliced itself a meandering 22km gorge (Les Gorges du Gardon) through the hills from **Russan** to the village of **Collias**, about 6km upstream from the Pont du Gard. The GR6 hiking trail runs beside it most of the way.

In Collias, 4km west of the D981, **Le Tourbillon** (☎ 04 66 22 85 54; www.canoe-le-tourbillon), **Kayak Vert** (☎ 04 66 22 80 76; www.canoe-france.com/gardon) and **Canoe Collias** (☎ 04 66 22 87 20; www.canoe-collias.com, in French) rent out kayaks and canoes. Kayak Vert also offers mountain-bike hire.

You can paddle 8km down to the Pont du Gard (€19.50 per person, two hours), or arrange to be dropped upstream at Russan, from where a great descent leads back to Collias through Gorges du Gardon (€33, full day), usually possible only between March and mid-June, when the river is high enough.

Uzès

pop 7860

Uzès, 25km northeast of Nîmes, once derived wealth from silk, linen and, bizarrely, liquorice. When all three industries collapsed it went through hard times, but it's again on the upsurge thanks to tourism, as visitors come to enjoy its faithfully restored Renaissance facades, impressive Duché (Ducal Palace) and splendid place aux Herbes, the shady, arcaded central square, all odd angles and off kilter.

Farmers from all around sell their produce at the market, held each Wednesday and Saturday on place aux Herbes.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 66 22 68 88; www.uzes-tourisme.com; ☎ 9am-6pm or 7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Oct-May) is on place Albert I, just outside the old quarter. It rents out audioguides (€5) for a self-guided walking tour.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The tourist office's free multilingual pamphlet, *Uzès: Premier Duché de France*, presents a walking tour of the historic centre's highlights.

The **Duché** (☎ 04 66 22 18 96; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Jul-mid-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm mid-Sep-Jun) is a fortified château that belonged to the Dukes of Uzès for more than 1000 years. Altered almost continuously from the 11th to 18th century, it has fine period furniture, tapestries and paintings. You can take the French-language one-hour **guided tour** (adult/12-16yr/7-11yr/under 7yr €13/8/4/free) or wander at will around the **keep** (admission €8).

The **Jardin Médiéval** (Medieval Garden; admission €4; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep, 2-5pm daily Oct), in the shadow of the Duché's keep and set back from rue Port Royal, is a delightful garden of medieval plants and flowers, impressively researched and documented (with English translation too).

Musée du Bonbon (☎ 04 66 22 74 39; Pont des Charrettes; adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Dec & Feb-Jun) is the place for a little indulgence. A plaque at the entrance declares 'This museum is dedicated to all who have devoted their lives to a slightly guilty passion – greed'. All signs at this candy museum belonging to manufacturers Haribo are multilingual, and parents will be pestered to go away with kilos of goodies at wholesale prices.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Uzès positively reeks on 24 June, the date of the **Foire à l'Ail** (Garlic Fair), while the third Sunday in January sees a full-blown **Foire aux Truffes** (Truffle Fair). The town is also renowned for its **Nuits Musicales d'Uzès**, an international festival of baroque music held in the second half of July.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hôtel La Taverne (☎ 04 66 22 13 10; www.lataverne-uzes.com, in French; 4 rue Xavier Sigalon; d/tr €64/76) Up a pedestrianised side street beside the tourist office, this Logis de France hotel has nine

simply furnished rooms, all with air-con and tiled floors. Its restaurant (*menus* €24 to €28), just along the street, has a pretty internal patio and serves classic French cuisine. Free wi-fi.

our pick **Terroirs** (☎ 0466034190; www.enviedeterroirs.com; 5 place aux Herbes; tapas around €4.50, mixed platters €10-13; 🕒 9am-10.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-6pm Wed-Sun Oct-Mar) Snack copiously under the deep arcades or on the cobbled square at this restaurant and delicatessen where Tom and Corinne Graisse source nearly all their goods locally. Their mixed platters and toasted open sandwiches are filled with delights, described explicitly in the English version of the menu.

SHOPPING

At the splendid **Maison de la Truffe** (27 place aux Herbes), it's truffles with everything – adding aroma to chocolate, steeped in oil, bagged with rice and much more.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus station – grandly named and in fact merely a bus stop – is on av de la Libération, beside Banque Populaire. Buses running between Avignon (€8.70, one hour) and Alès (€7.30, 40 minutes) call by two to five times daily. There are also at least five daily services to/from Nîmes (€5.30, 45 minutes).

ALÈS & AROUND

pop 39,300

Alès, 45km from Nîmes and 70km from Montpellier, snuggles against the River Gard. Gateway to the Cévennes, it's the Gard *département's* second-largest town. Coal was mined here from the 13th century, when monks first dug into the surrounding hills, until the last pit closed in 1986.

The pedestrianised heart of town, having long ago shed its sooty past, is pleasant, if unexciting. Fountains play in public places and it's bright with flowers in summer.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 66 52 32 15; www.ville-ales.fr, in French; place Hôtel de Ville; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) occupies a modern building set into the shell of a baroque chapel.

Sights & Activities

From April to October the **Train à Vapeur des Cévennes** (Cévennes Steam Train; ☎ 04 66 60 59 00; adult/child one-way €9/6, return €12/7; 🕒 Apr–mid-Sep, Tue–Sun mid-Sep–Oct) takes 40 minutes to chug the 13km

between St-Jean du Gard and Anduze via the Bambouseraie (below), making three to four return trips each day.

MINE TÉMOIN

At **Mine Témoin** (☎ 04 66 30 45 15; chemin de la Cité Ste-Marie; adult/child €6/4; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Jun, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mar-May & Sep–mid-Nov) in Alès, don a safety helmet, arm yourself with the guide booklet in English and take the cage down to explore an actual mine that was used to train apprentice colliers. Preceded by a 20-minute video (in French), the one-hour **guided tour** (also in French) leads you along 700m of underground galleries.

BAMBOUSERAIE DE PRAFRANCE

It's over 150 years since the first shoots of this huge, mature **bamboo grove** (☎ 04 66 61 70 47; adult/child €7.50/4.50; 🕒 9.30am-dusk Mar–mid-Nov) were planted by a spice merchant returning from the tropics. Here in Générargues, 12km southwest of Alès, 150 bamboo species sprout amid aquatic gardens, a Laotian village and a Japanese garden. The Cévennes steam train (left) stops right beside the reception.

MUSÉE DU DÉSERT

The **Musée du Désert** (Museum of the Wilderness; ☎ 04 66 85 02 72; www.museedudesert.com; adult/10-18yr/under 10yr €4.50/3.50/free; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-Nov) portrays the way of life of the Huguenots (see boxed text, opposite), their persecution, clandestine resistance for more than a century and emigration of up to half a million to more tolerant lands. It's in the charming hamlet of Le Mas Soubeyran, 5.5km north of the Bambouseraie.

LA CARACOLE

Here's one to make the kids squirm. **La Caracole** (☎ 04 66 25 65 70; www.lacaracole.fr; St-Florent sur Auzonnet; adult/child €5/3.50; 🕒 tours 10.30am, 3pm, 4.30pm & 6pm Jul & Aug, 3pm & 4.30pm Wed & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep), with a cast of over 250,000, presents 'the astonishing, exciting world of the snail'. In this snail farm's appropriately small museum, there's information on – oh yes – the snail in religion, the snail in art and the snail through the centuries. After the 1½ hour tour (in English and French), there's free sampling and the chance to buy a tin of two of former farm members embalmed in a variety of tempting sauces. It's 12km from Alès. Take the D904 northwards (towards Aubenas), then turn left onto the D59.

THE CAMISARD REVOLT

Early in the 18th century, a guerrilla war raged through the Cévennes as Protestants took on Louis XIV's army. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 removed rights that the Protestant Huguenots had enjoyed since 1598. Many emigrated, while others fled deep into the wild Cévennes, from where a local leader, Roland Laporte, only 22 at the time, led the resistance against the French army sent to crush them.

Poorly equipped, the outlaws resisted for two years. They fought in their shirts (*camiso* in *langue d'oc*); hence their popular name, Camisards. Once the royal army gained the upper hand, the local population was either massacred or forced to flee. Their leader was killed and most villages were destroyed.

On the first Sunday of September, thousands of French Protestants meet at Roland's birthplace in Le Mas Soubeyran. It's now the Musée du Désert (opposite), which details the persecution of Protestants in the Cévennes between 1685 and the 1787 Edict of Tolerance, which marked the reintroduction of religious freedom.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping la Croix Clémentine (☎ 04 66 86 52 69; www.clementine.fr, in French; site & 2 people according to season €13-24; ☎ Apr-Sep; 🏠) This four-star campsite is in Cendras, 5km northwest of Alès. Sites, within or on the fringes of an oak wood, are shady and there are plenty of activities to keep the children occupied.

Hôtel Durand (☎ 04 66 86 28 94; www.hotel-durand.fr, in French; 3 bd Anatole France; s/d/tr €32/38/46; 🏠) This modest choice, down a side street 100m east of Hôtel Le Riche, is spruce and well maintained. Bathrooms have recently been overhauled, each of its 17 rooms has air-con, and there's a small rear garden.

Hôtel Le Riche (☎ 04 66 86 00 33; www.leriche.fr, in French; 42 place Pierre Sépard; s/d/tr €48/59/70; ☎ Sep-Jul; 🏠) Opposite the train station, this great-value hotel is highly recommended as much for its 19 pleasant, modern rooms as for the fine cuisine of the restaurant (*menus* €18 to €48) with its wonderful stucco mouldings.

Mas de Rochebelle (☎ 04 66 30 57 03; www.masde-rochebelle.fr; 44 chemin Ste Marie; r €60-80; 🏠) Near the Mine Témoin, this welcoming *chambre d'hôte* was once the mine director's residence. It has five attractive rooms and a vast garden, where you can wander, swim or simply relax under its magnificent yew tree.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From the **Gare Routière** (place Pierre Sépard), immediately south of the train station, one bus heads into the Cévennes to Florac (€13.50, 1½ hours, daily except Sunday), and two to five serve Uzès (€7.30, 40 minutes), two continu-

ing to Avignon (€14.60, 1¾ hours). Five buses daily link Alès and Nîmes (€8.30, 1¾ hours).

TRAIN

There are up to 10 trains daily to/from Montpellier (€14.30, 1½ hours), some requiring a change in Nîmes (€8.10, 40 minutes). Three trains daily run between Alès and Mende (€16.20, 2½ hours).

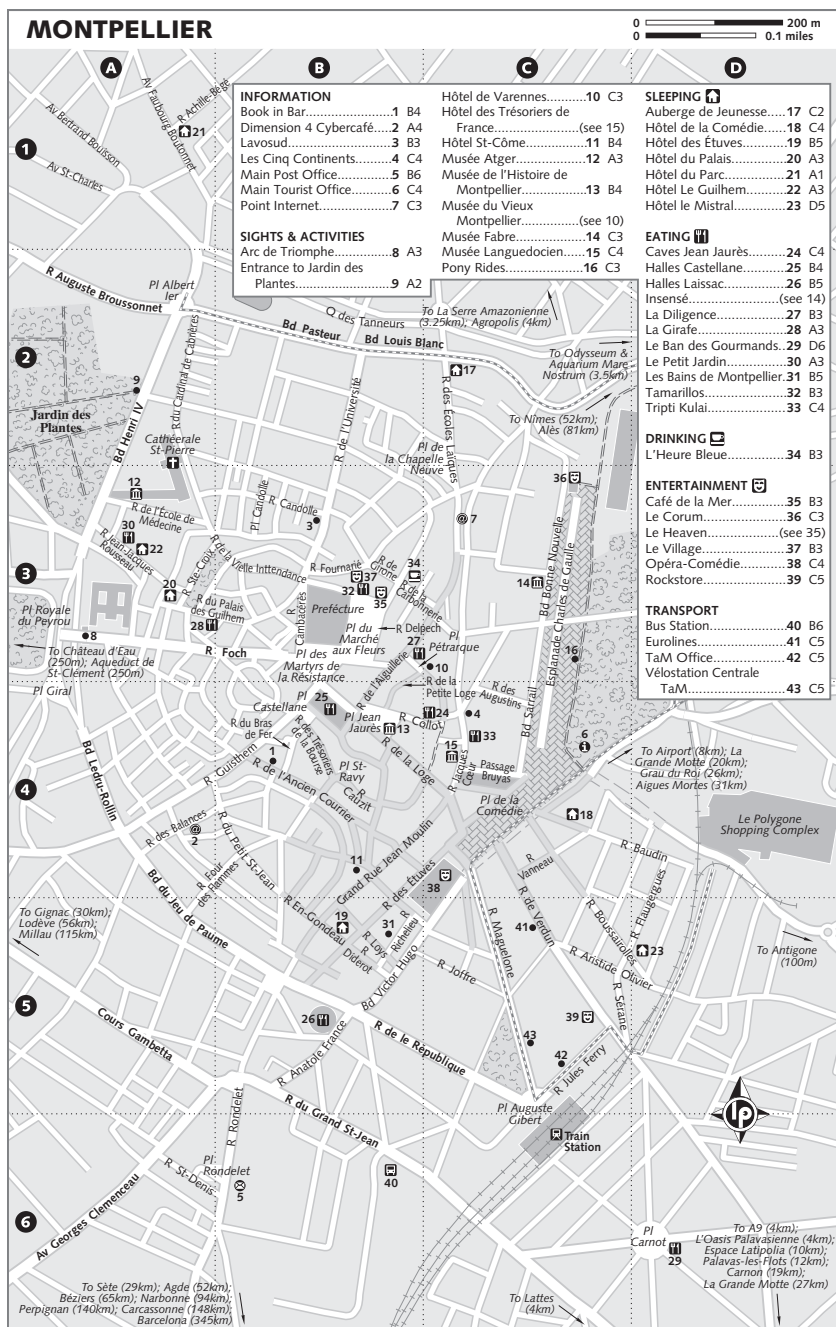
MONTPELLIER

pop 244,300

The 17th-century philosopher John Locke may have had one glass of Minervois wine too many when he wrote: 'I find it much better to go twice (sic) to Montpellier than once to the other world'. Paradise it ain't, but Montpellier, where students make up around a third of the population, is innovative, fast-growing, self-confident and a worthy rival to Toulouse for the title of southern France's most vital city. Two high-speed tram routes cut across this most pedestrian-friendly of cities, where more than 12,000 parking spaces, over 1000 bikes for borrowing and around 150km of cycling paths encourage motorists to leave their cars behind.

History

Montpellier, one of the few cities in southern France without a Roman heritage, started lateish. Founded by the Counts of Toulouse, it's first mentioned in a written document in 985. By medieval times, it had become a prosperous city with trading links all over the Mediterranean. Its scholastic tradition is a long one: Europe's first medical school was founded here in the 12th century. The



population swelled dramatically in the 1960s when many French settlers left independent Algeria and settled here.

Orientation

Montpellier's mostly pedestrianised historic centre, girdled by wide boulevards, has at its heart place de la Comédie, known to locals as *l'œuf* (the egg), because of its ovoid shape. To its east is Le Polygone, a vast shopping complex, and Antigone, a mammoth 1980s neoclassical housing project.

Westwards, between rue de la Loge and Grand Rue Jean Moulin, sprawls the city's oldest quarter, a web of narrow alleys and fine *hôtels particuliers* (private mansions).

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Book in Bar (☎ 04 67 66 22 90; 8 rue du Bras de Fer) Large stock of new and second-hand books in English. Runs conversation exchanges and cultural events. Browse the British press for free.

Les Cinq Continents (☎ 04 67 66 46 70; 20 rue Jacques Cœur) Specialist travel bookshop with an excellent selection of maps and travel literature.

INTERNET ACCESS

Dimension 4 Cybercafé (11 rue des Balances; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-midnight)

Point Internet (54 rue de l'Aiguillerie; per hr €1.40; ☎ 9.30am-midnight Mon-Sat, 10.30am-midnight Sun)

LAUNDRY

Lavosud (19 rue de l'Université; ☎ 7am-9pm)

POST

Main Post Office (13 place Rondelet)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Main Tourist Office (☎ 04 67 60 60 60; www.ot-montpellier.fr; esplanade Charles de Gaulle; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun Jul-Sep; 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun Oct-Jun).

Sights

MUSEUMS

Musée Fabre (☎ 04 67 14 83 00; 39 bd Bonne Nouvelle; adult/child €6/4; ☎ core hr 10am-6pm Tue & Thu-Sun, 1-9pm Wed) is a delightfully spacious, superbly lit venue, with one of France's richest collections of European works from the 16th century onwards and seven galleries of bright, dynamic 20th-century art.

CITY CARD

The **Montpellier City Card** (per 1/2/3 days €14/20/26, children half-price), sold at the tourist office, allows free or reduced admission to several sites and spectacles, plus unlimited bus and tram travel and a place on a guided walking tour (ask at the tourist office for the current timetable).

Musée Languedocien (☎ 04 67 52 93 03; 7 rue Jacques Cœur; adult/student €6/3; ☎ 3-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat rest of year) displays the area's rich archeological finds as well as objets d'art from the 16th to 19th centuries.

Musée du Vieux Montpellier (☎ 04 67 66 02 94; 2 place Pétrarque; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sat) is a storehouse of the city's memorabilia from the Middle Ages to the Revolution.

Musée de l'Histoire de Montpellier (☎ 04 67 54 33 16; place Jean Jaurès; admission €1.50; ☎ 10.30-11.45am & 1.30-5.15pm Mon-Sat) in the crypt of the church of Notre Dame des Tables presents the city's history in high-tech mode.

Musée Atger (☎ 04 67 41 76 30; 2 rue de l'École de Médecine; admission free; ☎ 1.30-5.45pm Mon, Wed & Fri Sep-Jul), housed within the medical faculty, displays a striking collection of French, Italian and Flemish drawings.

HÔTELS PARTICULIERS

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Montpellier's wealthier merchants built grand private mansions, often externally quite sober but with resplendent inner courtyards (mostly, alas, closed to the public). Fine examples are **Hôtel de Varennes** (2 place Pétrarque), a harmonious blend of Romanesque and Gothic style, and **Hôtel St-Côme** (Grand Rue Jean Moulin), nowadays the city's Chamber of Commerce. The 17th-century **Hôtel des Trésoriers de France** (7 rue Jacques Cœur) today houses the Musée Languedocien (above). Within the old quarter are several other such mansions, each marked by a descriptive plaque in French.

AROUND PLACE ROYALE DU PEYROU

At the eastern end of this wide, tree-lined esplanade is the **Arc de Triomphe** (1692). From the **Château d'Eau**, an elaborate hexagonal water tower at its western limit, stretches the **Aqueduc de St-Clément**, spectacularly illuminated at night. North of the esplanade is

the **Jardin des Plantes** (entry on bd Henri IV), France's oldest botanical garden, laid out in 1593 and still used as a research resource by the University of Montpellier.

OTHER SIGHTS

Agropolis (☎ 04 67 04 75 00; www.museum.agropolis.fr, in French; 951 av Agropolis; adult/11-18yr/child €5/2.50/free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Agropolis is all about food and how people around the world grow it. Historically, it follows our progression from hunter-gatherer to supermarket shopper. Fascinating stuff, it's at once didactic, enjoyable and pitched at both children and adults. The museum is located 4km north of the centre.

La Serre Amazonienne (☎ 04 67 54 45 23; 50 av Agropolis; adult/student/child €5/3/2.50, audioguide €2; ☎ 9am-5pm or 6pm), a 10-minute walk from Agropolis, is a spectacular recent addition to Montpellier's zoo. This humid hothouse replicates the Amazonian rainforest. Piranha and alligators swim in the first two tanks but it gets friendlier as you progress. Stars include a pair of bright-eyed young leopards, a family of Bolivian squirrel monkeys and flitting bats. Afterwards, you can explore the rest of the zoo, France's second-largest, for free.

For both venues, take tram 1 to the St-Eloi stop, from where a regular shuttle bus does a circular route.

Aquarium Mare Nostrum (☎ 04 67 13 05 50; adult/student/child €12.50/10/8.50; ☎ 10am-10pm Jul & Aug, 10am-7pm, 8pm or 10pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun) takes you through 15 different aquatic environments, from polar waters to tropical forests. Montpellier's most recent attraction, it's part of **Odysseum**. At the end of tram line 1, 3.5km east of the centre, this expanding leisure complex also has an ice rink, planetarium and multiscreen cinema.

On esplanade Charles de Gaulle, children can enjoy a **pony ride** (per 1/5/10 circuits €4/15/20; ☎ 2-6pm or 8pm daily school holidays, Wed, Sat & Sun rest of year) on mounts ranging in size from little mannequin Shetlands to sturdy mules.

Festivals & Events

In June, Montpellier hosts **Printemps des Comédiens** (☎ 04 67 63 66 67; www.printempsdescomediens.com, in French), a popular theatre festival.

Montpellier Danse (☎ 08 00 60 07 40; www.montpellierdanse.com, in French) is a two-week international dance festival held in June or July. The **Festival de Radio France et Montpellier** (☎ 04 67 02

02 01; www.festivalradiofrancemontpellier.com, in French) in the second half of July brings in top-notch classical music and jazz.

Sleeping

The closest campsites are around the suburb of Lattes, around 4km south of the city centre.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 67 60 32 22; montpellier@fuaj.org; 2 impasse de la Petite Corratérie; B&B €15.20; ☎ mid-Jan-mid-Dec) Montpellier's HI-affiliated youth hostel is just off rue des Écoles Laïques. Rooms sleep two to 10 and there's a small, shaded garden. Take the tram to the Louis Blanc stop.

L'Oasis Palavasienne (☎ 04 67 15 11 61; www.oasis-palavasienne.com; rte de Palavas; site according to season €16-29; ☎ Apr-mid-Oct; ☎) This shady campsite has a large heated pool and sauna. Take bus 17 from the bus station.

Hôtel des Étuves (☎ 04 67 60 78 19; www.hoteldesetuves.fr; 24 rue des Étuves; s €33-45, d €39-45; ☎) This welcoming, 13-room family hotel, creeping around a spiral staircase like a vine, offers exceptional value. Room two, one of six overlooking the quiet pedestrian street, has a bath while the rest are equipped with showers. Does not take credit cards.

Hôtel le Mistral (☎ 04 67 58 45 25; www.hotel-le-mistral.com, in French; 25 rue Boussairolles; s €42-44, d €43-51) Behind its 19th-century facade, this spruce 20-room place is conveniently central. Spacious triples occupy the angle of the street. Other rooms are of ample size though bathrooms are cramped. Parking costs €10.

Hôtel de la Comédie (☎ 04 67 58 43 64; hotelde.lacomédie@cegetel.net; 1bis rue Baudin; s €42-47, d €52-69; ☎) This friendly, family-run place, just off place de la Comédie, is a favourite with visiting musicians and theatre troupes. All 20 rooms have air-con and heating and are double-glazed.

Hôtel du Parc (☎ 04 67 41 16 49; www.hotelduparc-montpellier.com; 8 rue Achille-Bégé; s €63-72, d €72-83, s/d with shower €45/50; ☎ ☎) At this 18th-century former *hôtel particulier* with its grand curling wrought-iron staircase, bibelots and knick-knacks add an at-home touch to each of the 19 individually decorated rooms (ask for room seven, bedchamber of the previous owner, Comte Vivier de Châtellard). Those on the ground floor have a small balcony. Wi-fi and parking available.

Hôtel du Palais (☎ 04 67 60 47 38; www.hoteldu.palais-montpellier.fr; 3 rue du Palais des Guilhem; s €62, d €67-79; ☎) All 26 rooms of this delightful hotel overlooking a quiet square are decorated by

a local artist and tastefully and individually furnished.

ourpick Hôtel Le Guilhem (☎ 04 67 52 90 90; www.hotel-le-guilhem.com; 18 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; s €81-93, d €91-172; 🍷 📺 🚰) Occupying a couple of interconnecting 16th-century buildings, Hôtel Le Guilhem's 35 rooms are exquisitely and individually furnished. Nearly all overlook the tranquil garden of nearby Restaurant Le Petit Jardin. Room 100 (€158) has its own little terrace and garden. It's wise to reserve at any time of year; Le Guilhem has its faithful clientele who return again and again. Free wi-fi.

Eating

You'll find plenty of cheap and cheerful eateries on rue de l'Université, rue des Écoles Laiques and the streets interlinking them.

Tripti Kulai (☎ 04 67 66 30 51; 20 rue Jacques Cœur; salads €9.50, menus €12-16.50; 🕒 noon-9.30pm Mon-Sat) Barrel-vaulted and cosy, this popular vegetarian place stands out for the originality of many of its dishes.

Caves Jean Jaurès (☎ 04 67 60 27 33; 3 rue Collot; menu €18, mains €12-16; 🕒 Tue-Sat, dinner Sun & Mon) Scan the range of tasty dishes on the chalkboard at this attractive restaurant with its mosaic-topped tables and polished wooden floor. A glass of wine? Select from the bottles of the day on the bar counter. Rather more? Pick from the shelves; every bottle has its price marked and the range is superlative.

Le Petit Jardin (☎ 04 67 60 78 78; 20 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; lunch menu €14, dinner menus €22-48, mains €22-28; 🕒 Tue-Sun Feb-Dec) The Little Garden is just that: a restaurant offering imaginative cuisine, its big bay windows overlooking a shady, fairy-tale greenness at the rear, where you could be miles from Montpellier's bustle. The lunch menu (€14) is excellent value.

La Girafe (☎ 04 67 54 48 89; 14 rue du Palais des Guilhem; mains around €15; 🕒 Tue-Sat) You're indeed greeted by a tall model giraffe as you enter. Dine in the intimate downstairs area with its ox-blood-red decor and original artwork or upstairs, beneath the cross arches of this former chapel. Chef Pascale Schmitt gets his ingredients fresh from the market and nothing's from the freezer, except the frogs' legs, which come simmered with snails and baby mushrooms in a creamy, peppery sauce. Other dishes are similarly creative.

Insensé (☎ 04 67 58 97 78; Musée Fabre; 2-/3-course lunch €19/26, mains around €15; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Wed, Fri & Sat) Restaurant of Musée Fabre (p771),

Insensé is just as contemporary and tasteful as you'd expect from such a venue. The dominant shade is black: tables, chairs, floor tiles – even the pepper pots. The innovative cuisine is altogether more colourful.

Le Ban des Gourmands (☎ 04 67 65 00 85; 5 place Carnot; menu €28, mains €16-25; 🕒 Tue-Sat) South of the train station and a favourite of locals in the know, this appealing restaurant, run by a young family team, serves delicious local cuisine.

Les Bains de Montpellier (☎ 04 67 60 70 87; 6 rue Richelieu; 3-course menu €22, mains €17-21; 🕒 Tue-Fri, lunch Sat & Mon) This former public bath is now a highly recommended restaurant. Tables are set around the old perimeter bathrooms where you can almost hear the gurgle and slurp of long-emptied tubs. For something light, try the *assiette des Bains*, a platter with salads, pasta, garnishes, vegetables and a hint of meat. If you're hungrier, enjoy a substantial hunk of *rôti de porc* (roast pork), succulent and still on the bone.

La Diligence (☎ 04 67 66 12 21; 2 place Pétrarque; lunch menu €20, dinner menus €26-66; 🕒 Tue-Fri, dinner Sat & Mon) Dine beneath attractive vaults and arches at this former cloth warehouse. Savour the creative cuisine, impressive wine cellar and elegant rear patio overlooked by a gallery of the Hôtel de Varennes.

ourpick Tamarillos (☎ 04 67 60 06 00; www.tamarillos.biz; 2 place du Marché aux Fleurs; lunch menus €25-38, menus €55-90; 🕒 Tue-Sat & dinner Mon) 'A cuisine of fruit and flowers' is Tamarillos' motto, and indeed all dishes, sweet or savoury, have fruit as an ingredient or main element. Pace yourself; chef Philippe Chapon is *double champion de France de dessert* and taught a young Gordon Ramsay his pastry cooking.

SELF-CATERING

The city's food markets include **Halles Castellane** (rue de la Loge), the biggest, and **Halles Laissac** (rue Anatole France). There's a Saturday organic food market under the arches of Aqueduc de St-Clément (p771), and a farmers market every Sunday morning on av Samuel de Champlain in the Antigone complex.

Drinking

Place de la Comédie is alive with cafés where you can drink, grab a quick bite and watch street entertainers strut their stuff. Other popular venues are place Jean Jaurès and smaller, more intimate place St-Ravy.

L'Heure Bleue (1 rue de la Carbonnerie; ☎ Tue-Sun) At this tea salon, you can sip Earl Grey to a background of classical music. It also does light lunches (around €12) with plenty of choice for vegetarians.

With nearly 80,000 students, Montpellier has a multitude of places to drink and dance. You'll find dense concentrations around rue En-Gondeau, off Grand Rue Jean Moulin, around place Jean Jaurès, and around the intersection of rue de l'Université and rue Candolle.

Entertainment

To find out what's on where, pick up the free weekly *Sortir à Montpellier*, available around town and at the tourist office.

Tickets for Montpellier's numerous theatres are sold at the box office of the **Opéra-Comédie** (☎ 04 67 60 19 80; place de la Comédie). **Le Corum** (☎ 04 67 61 67 61; esplanade Charles de Gaulle) is the city's prime concert venue.

Rockstore (☎ 04 67 06 80 00; www.rockstore.fr, in French; 20 rue de Verdun) In the heart of town, you'll recognise this long-standing discotheque and club by the rear of a classic American '70s car jutting out above the entrance. Opening days and times vary.

There's a critical mass of discos outside town in Espace Latipolia, about 10km from Montpellier on route de Palavas heading towards the coast. Major players include:

La Nitro (☎ 04 67 22 45 82) Thumps out techno and house.

Le Matchico (☎ 04 67 64 19 20) For retro music.

L'Amigo (€2.40), a night bus, does a circuit of Espace Latipolia and other dance venues on the periphery of town, leaving the train station at midnight and 1am, returning at 2.30am, 3.30am and (yawn!) 5am, Thursday to Saturday.

To tune into the active gay scene, call by:

Café de la Mer (5 place du Marché aux Fleurs) The friendly staff will arm you with a map of gay venues.

Le Heaven (1 rue Delpech; www.leheaven.fr, in French) Just around the corner from Café de la Mer, this bar for gay guys and gals gets busy from 8pm.

Le Village (3 rue Fourmaré) A shop specialising in queer gear.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Montpellier's **airport** (☎ 04 67 20 85 00; www.montpellier.aeroport.fr) is 8km southeast of town. EasyJet flies to/from London (Gatwick) and Ryanair to/from London (Stansted).

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 67 92 01 43; rue du Grand St-Jean) is an easy walk from the train station.

Hérault Transport (☎ 08 25 34 01 34) runs buses approximately hourly to La Grande Motte (bus 106, €3.90, 35 minutes) via Carnon from Odysseum at the end of the tram line. Up to four daily services continue to Aigues Mortes (€5.90, 1¼ hours).

Eurolines (☎ 04 67 58 57 59; 8 rue de Verdun) has buses to Barcelona (€18, five hours) and most European destinations. **Linebus** (☎ 04 67 58 95 00) mainly operates services to destinations in Spain.

TRAIN

Major destinations from Montpellier's two-storey train station include Paris' Gare de Lyon (€96.50 to €112, 3½ hours, up to 10 daily), Carcassonne (€21.20, 1½ hours, nine daily), Millau (€24.30, 1¼ hours, one daily) and Perpignan (€21.60, 1¼ hours, frequent).

More than 20 trains daily go northwards to Nîmes (€8.20, 30 minutes) and southwards to Narbonne (€14, one hour).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A frequent **shuttle bus** (☎ 08 25 34 01 34; tickets €4.90; ☎ every 15 min) runs between the airport and the Place de l'Europe tram station.

BICYCLE

Montpellier is hugely bicycle-friendly. **Vélo-Magg**, an admirable urban initiative, has more than 1000 rental bikes, parked at 50 *vélostations* around town. To pick up a pass (€5 for 20 one-hour units), call by **Vélostation Centrale Tam** (☎ 04 67 22 87 82; 27 rue Maguelone; ☎ 8am-8pm) with your passport or identity card.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The best and most eco-friendly option is to leave your vehicle in one of the vast car parks beside major tram stops. Just €4 gets you all-day parking and return tram tickets to the heart of town for up to five people.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Savour Montpellier's high-tech, high-speed, leave-your-car-at-home trams. Like city buses, they're run by **Tam** (☎ 04 67 22 87 87; www.tam-way.com, in French; 6 rue Jules Ferry).

Single-journey bus and tram tickets cost €1.30. A one-day pass/10-ticket carnet cost €3.20/10.80. Pick them up from newsagents or any tram station.

TAXI

Ring **Taxis Bleu** (☎ 04 67 03 20 00) or **Taxis Tram** (☎ 04 67 58 10 10).

AROUND MONTPELLIER

The closest beaches are at **Palavas-les-Flots**, 12km south of the city, and Montpellier-on-Sea in summer. Take TaM bus 131 from the Port Marianne tram stop. Heading north on the coastal road towards Carnon, you stand a chance of seeing flamingos hovering the shallows of the lagoons either side of the D21.

Carnon itself comes out fairly low in the charm stakes despite its huge marina. Better to continue hugging the coast along the D59 (Le Petit Travers) alongside several kilometres of white sand beach, uncrowded and without a kiosk or café in sight.

Further northwards and 25km from Montpellier is **La Grande Motte**, purpose-built on the grand scale back in the 1960s to plug the tourist drain southwards into Spain. Its architecture, considered revolutionary at the time, now comes over as fairly heavy and leaden, contrasting with the more organic growth of adjacent **Grau du Roi**, deeper rooted and a still active fishing port.

Aigues Mortes, on the western edge of the Camargue, is another 11km eastwards.

SÈTE

pop 48,300

Sète is France's largest Mediterranean fishing port and biggest commercial entrepôt after Marseille. Established by Louis XIV in the 17th century, it prospered as the harbours of Aigues Mortes and Narbonne, to north and south respectively, were cut off from the sea by silt deposits.

Huddled beneath Mont St-Clair, Sète has lots in its favour: waterways and canals, beaches and shoals of fish and seafood restaurants.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 67 74 71 71; www.ot-sete.fr; 60 Grand' Rue Mario Roustan; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-Jun, 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Sat & Sun Sep-Mar) rents out **audioguides** (per route €5) covering six walks (two with English commentary) in and around town.

Sète was the birthplace of the symbolist poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945), whose remains lie in the **Cimetière Marin** (Marine Cemetery), the inspiration for his most famous poem. The town was also the childhood home of singer and infinitely more accessible poet Georges Brassens (1921-81), whose mellow voice still speaks at multimedia **Espace Georges Brassens** (☎ 04 67 53 32 77; 67 bd Camille Blanc; adult/student/child €5/2/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Jun-Sep, Tue-Sun Oct-May).

From mid-February to mid-October, **Azur Croisières** (☎ 06 10 65 40 22) does a one-hour **harbour tour** (adult/child €10/5), leaving from Pont de la Savonnerie. In July and August, **Sète Croisières** (☎ 04 67 46 00 46; quai Général Durand) does a similar tour. Both also do fishing trips.

Over a long weekend in the first half of July, Sète celebrates **La Fête de la St-Pierre**, or Fête des Pêcheurs (Fisherfolk's Festival). The **Fête de la St-Louis** fills six frantic days around 25 August with *joutes nautiques*, where participants in competing boats try to knock each other into the water.

Sleeping & Eating

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 67 53 46 68; sete@fuj.org; rue Général Revest; B&B €15.50; ☎ mid-Jan-mid-Dec) Scarcely a kilometre northwest of the tourist office, it enjoys a lovely wooded site with great views over town and harbour.

L'Orque Bleue (☎ 04 67 74 72 13; www.hotel-orque-bleue-sete.com; 10 quai Aspirant Herber; interior r €72-82, canalside r €105-110; ☎ Feb-Dec; ☎ ☎) Right on the quayside and prominent among its dowdier neighbours, this hotel occupies a former shipping magnate's mansion, clad everywhere in marble. To truly sense Sète as a living port, go for one of the more expensive nine rooms overlooking the canal, unless you're a light sleeper. Parking is available.

Tempting fish restaurants line quai Durand and quai Maximin Licciardi all the way from Pont de la Savonnerie to the wholesale fish market.

La Péniche (☎ 04 67 48 64 13; 1 quai des Moulins; menus €15-19.50, mains €11-13; ☎ Mon-Fri, dinner Sat & lunch Sun) The service is brisk and friendly and the clientele a mix of local workers, suits and sweaters on this converted barge. For the *menu du matelot* (sailor's menu; €15), two pots of pâté, into which you dig at will, are slapped before you, followed by a significant dollop of Russian salad and half a lettuce. For the main course, it has to be the house speciality, *rouille sétoise* –

whole baby octopuses smothered in a peppery rouille sauce. Then comes dessert...

Au Bord du Canal (☎ 04 67 51 98 39; 9 quai Maximin Licciardi; menu €32; ☎ Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) The fish could almost flop from the wholesale market opposite straight into this pleasantly furnished restaurant where not even the smallest sardine is frozen. It does a splendid midday grill (€15) of anything with fins that takes the chef's fancy that day.

AGDE

pop 20,000

There are three Agdes these days: the original settlement beside the River Hérault; Grau d'Agde, a small, modern fishing port; and Le Cap d'Agde, a vast summertime playground.

Of these, old Agde was originally a Phoenician then a Greek settlement, named after Agatha Tyche, the Greek goddess (its inhabitants are still called Agathois).

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 67 94 29 68; www.agde-herault.com, in French; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is at 1 place Molière. Ask for the English version of its walking-tour leaflet. It sells tickets for three companies that run short boat trips along the Canal du Midi, which joins the River Hérault just upstream from old Agde.

The dark grey basalt of the imposing *hotels particuliers* (private mansions) and the fortress-like, mainly 12th-century **Cathédrale St-Étienne** motivated Marco Polo to describe the town as the 'black pearl of the Mediterranean'.

The 26 well-displayed rooms of the **Musée Agathois** (☎ 04 67 94 82 51; 5 rue de la Fraternité; adult/child €4.50/1.80; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Sep-Jun), within an attractive 17th-century mansion, take you through Agde's long maritime and wine-producing history.

Hôtel le Donjon (☎ 04 67 94 12 32; www.hotelle-donjon.com; place Jean Jaurès; r €42-79; ☎) Once a convent then a coaching inn, this hotel is full of character. Each of its 20 rooms is large and attractively decorated in typical Midi blues and yellows. Parking is free.

A battery of restaurants with terraces splay along the quayside.

Lou Pescadou (☎ 04 67 21 17 10; 18 rue Chassefière; menu €15) has been serving the same take-it-or-leave-it five-course *menu* since 1965. First, a rich, fishy broth. After a steaming plate of mussels, piled high, comes a big bowl of *pâté* to dig into. Then it's a giant grilled fish or slab

of steak followed by an equally gut-busting dessert. Come back tomorrow, next week, next year and repeat the experience; Lou Pescadou is one of life's few constants.

Buses (€2; at least hourly) ply the 6km route to the modern tourist resort of **Le Cap d'Agde**, famed for its long beaches and large nudist colony.

BÉZIERS

pop 71,600

Béziers, first settled by the Phoenicians, became an important military post in Roman times. It was almost completely destroyed in 1209 during the Albigensian Crusade, when some 20,000 'heretics', many seeking refuge in the cathedral, were slaughtered. In happier times, the local tax collector Paul Riquet (1604-80) moved heaven and earth to build the Unesco World Heritage-listed **Canal du Midi**, a 240km-long marvel of engineering with its aqueducts and more than 100 locks, enabling cargo vessels to sail from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean without having to circumnavigate Spain. There's a fine statue to Béziers' most famous son on allée Paul Riquet, a wide, leafy esplanade at the heart of the town.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 67 76 84 00; www.beziers-tourisme.fr; 29 av St-Saens; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is in the Palais des Congrès.

Fortified **Cathédrale St-Nazaire** (☎ 9.30am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm), surrounded by narrow alleys, is typical of the area, with massive towers, an imposing facade and a huge 14th-century rose window.

Musée du Biterrois (☎ 04 67 36 81 61; place des Casernes; adult/child €2.60/1.80; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun) is a well-displayed museum of the town's history, its largest sections devoted to Roman artefacts and winemaking.

Popular annual events include the week-long **Festa d'Oc**, a celebration of Mediterranean music and dance, in late July, and the **féria**, a five-day celebration with bullfights when the town's more Spanish than Languedocien, held around 15 August.

NARBONNE

pop 51,300

Once a coastal port but now a whole 13km inland because of silting up, Narbonne in its time was capital of Gallia Narbonensis and one of the principal Roman cities in Gaul.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 68 65 15 60; www.narbonne-tourisme.com; 31 rue Jean Jaurès; ☹ 9am–7pm Apr–mid-Sep, 9am–12.30pm & 1.30–6pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun mid-Sep–Mar) occupies smart new premises beside Canal de la Robine.

The splendid **Cathédrale St-Just** (entry on rue Armand Gauthier; ☹ 10am–7pm Jul–Sep, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Oct–Jun) is, in fact, no more than its towers and a soaring choir, construction having stopped in the early 14th century. The ambulatory chapel directly behind the main altar has a haunting alabaster *Virgin and Child* and fine, much knocked-about polychrome stone carving. The **treasury** (admission €2.20; ☹ 11am–6pm Jul–Sep, 2–5pm or 6pm Oct–Jun) has a beautiful Flemish tapestry of the Creation, while grotesque gargoyles peer down upon the 16th-century **cloister**.

Adjoining the cathedral to the south and facing place de l'Hôtel de Ville, the fortified **Palais des Archevêques** (Archbishops' Palace; ☹ 9.30am–12.15pm & 2–6pm Jul–Sep, 10am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Sat Oct–Jun) houses Narbonne's **Musée d'Art et d'Histoire** and **Musée Archéologique**, the latter with an impressive collection of Roman mosaics and paintings on stucco. Nearby is the **Horreum** (☹ same as Palais des Archevêques), an underground gallery of Gallo-Roman shops. A combined ticket (adult/child €5.20/3.70), valid for three days, gives access to all three sites.

The elaborate mock-Renaissance 19th-century facade of the **Hôtel de Ville** was designed by Viollet-le-Duc. Go inside for access to the **Donjon Gilles Aycelin** (adult/child €2.20/free; ☹ 10am–6pm Jul–Sep, 10am–noon & 2–5pm or 6pm Oct–Jun), a large, square 13th-century keep.

Take in also **Les Halles**, Narbonne's imposing art nouveau covered market, a colourful place to stock up on food and itself an architectural jewel.

Just off the A9, 15km south of Narbonne, is the **Réserve Africaine de Sigean** (☎ 04 68 48 20 20; www.reserveafricainesigean.fr; adult/child €24/19; ☹ 9am–4pm or 6.30pm), where lions, tigers and other 'safari' animals live in semiliberty. If you arrive by bike or on foot, there's free transport around the reserve.

CARCASSONNE

pop 45,500

From afar, Carcassonne looks like some fairytale medieval city. Bathed in late-afternoon sunshine and highlighted by dark clouds, La Cité, as the old walled city is known, is truly breathtaking. But once you're inside, La Cité

loses its magic and mystery. Luring an estimated four million visitors annually, it can be a tourist hell in high summer. This said, you'll have to be fairly stone-hearted not to be moved.

But Carcassonne is more than La Cité. The Ville Basse (Lower Town), altogether more tranquil and established in the 13th century, is a more modest stepsister to camp Cinderella up the hill and also merits more than a browse.

History

The hill on which La Cité stands has been fortified across the centuries – by Gauls, Romans, Visigoths, Moors and Franks. In the 13th century, the walls protected one of the major Cathar strongholds (see boxed text, p799). Once Roussillon was annexed to France in 1659, Carcassonne, no longer a frontier town, sank into slow decline. By the 19th century La Cité was simply crumbling away. It was rescued by the elaborate intervention of Viollet-le-Duc, who also set his controversial stamp upon, for example, the cathedrals of Notre Dame in Paris and Vézelay in Burgundy.

Orientation

The River Aude separates the Ville Basse from La Cité, up on a hill 500m to the southeast. Pedestrianised rue Georges Clemenceau leads from the train station and Canal du Midi southwards through the heart of the lower town.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Alerte Rouge (73 rue de Verdun; per hr €3; ☹ 10am–10pm Mon–Thu, 10am–11pm Fri & Sat) Buy a drink and you can wi-fi for free for an hour. And here's a rare internet café that actually does great coffee.

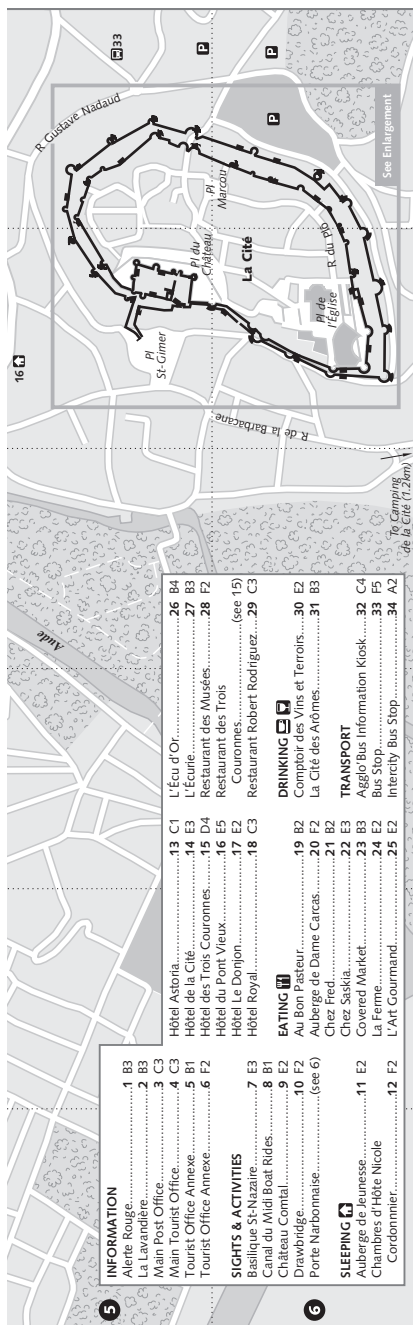
LAUNDRY

La Lavandière (31 rue Aimé Ramond; ☹ 8am–7pm Mon–Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Main Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 10 24 30; www.carcassonne-tourisme.com; 28 rue de Verdun; ☹ 9am–7pm Jul & Aug, 9am–6pm Mon–Sat, 9am–1pm Sun Sep–Jun) Borrow an audioguide to the Ville Basse (€3 for two hours).

Tourist Office Annexes La Cité (Porte Narbonnaise; ☹ year-round); Ville Basse (av Joffre; ☹ mid-Apr–Oct)



Sights & Activities

LA CITÉ

La Cité, dramatically illuminated at night and enclosed by two rampart walls punctuated by 52 stone towers, is one of Europe's largest city fortifications. But only the lower sections of the walls are original; the rest, including the anachronistic witches'-hat roofs (the originals were altogether flatter and weren't covered with slate), were stuck on by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century.

From square Gambetta, it's an attractive walk to La Cité across Pont Vieux, along rue de la Barbacane, then up and in through Porte d'Aude. Catching a bus to the main entrance is also an option.

If you pass over the **drawbridge** to enter via the main entrance, you're faced with a massive bastion, the **Porte Narbonnaise** and, just inside, the tourist office annexe. Rue Cros Mayrevieille, suffocating in kitschy souvenir shops, leads up to place du Château, heart of La Cité.

Through another archway and across a second dry moat is the 12th-century **Château Comtal** (adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €7.50/4.80/free; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Mar). The entrance fee lets you look around the castle itself, enjoy an 11-minute film and join an optional 30- to 40-minute guided tour of the ramparts (tours in English, July and August). Descriptive panels around the castle, in both French and English, are explicit. For more detail, invest in an **audioguide** (1/2 persons €4/6).

South of place du Château is **Basilique St-Nazaire** (☎ 9am-11.45am & 1.45-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9-10.45am & 2-6pm Sun). Highlights are the graceful Gothic transept arms with a pair of superb 13th- and 14th-century rose windows at each end.

The **Petit Train de la Cité** (20 min for adult/student/3-11yr/under 3yr €7/6/3/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm May-Sep) with multilingual commentary beats the bounds of the ramparts. Alternatively, a horse-drawn **carriage** (adult/child €7/4; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-mid-Nov), hauled by a pair of magnificent dray horses, does a shorter 20-minute trip.

If possible, linger after the crowds have left, when La Cité belongs only to its 100 or so inhabitants and the few visitors staying at the hotels within its ramparts.

BOAT RIDES

Lou Gabaret (☎ 04 68 71 61 26) and **Solal** (☎ 06 07 74 04 57) both chug along the Canal du Midi,

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departing from the bridge just south of the train station. **Sailings** (adult €8-10, child €6.50-7.50; ☎ 4 daily Jul & Aug, 1 or 2 daily Tue-Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) with commentary last around 1¼ or 2½ hours and prices vary accordingly.

SIMPLY STROLLING

Leave the crowds up high, cut loose and walk the landscaped banks of the River Aude.

Festivals & Events

Carcassonne knows how to party. On 14 July at 10.30pm, **L'Embrasement de la Cité** (Setting La Cité Ablaze) celebrates Bastille Day with a fireworks display rivalled only by Paris' pyrotechnics.

The **Festival de la Cité** (☎ 04 68 11 59 15; www.festivaldecarcassonne.com) brings music, dance and theatre to town for three weeks in July. During the same period, the **Festival de la Bastide** serves up around 70 free spectacles in the squares and public spaces.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Camping de la Cité (☎ 04 68 25 11 77; www.campeole.com; site €16-22.80, for hikers €9-12; ☎ mid-Mar-mid-Oct; 🚲) A walking and cycling trail leads from the site to both La Cité and the Ville Basse. From mid-June to mid-September, a shuttle bus connects the campsite with La Cité and the train station every 20 minutes.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 68 25 23 16; carcassonne@fua.j.org; rue Vicome Trencavel; B&B €16.90; ☎ Feb-mid-Dec) Carcassonne's cheery, welcoming, HI-affiliated youth hostel, in the heart of La Cité, has rooms sleeping four to six. It has a members' kitchen, a summertime snack bar, great outside terrace and one internet station. It rents out bikes (€8 per day) to hostellers. Although it has 120 beds, it's smart to reserve year-round.

Sidsums (☎ 04 68 26 94 49; www.sidsums.com; 11 chemin de la Croix d'Achille; dm €21, d with corridor bathroom €42-47.50) In Preixan, 10km south of Carcassonne, this is a splendid budget option. You can hire a bike, take a guided walk with George the dog, and cook for yourself in the self-contained kitchen. In the garden are four chalets (€46 to €51.50), each sleeping up to three. Lifts are possible by prior arrangement from Carcassonne town or airport. Otherwise, take the Quillan bus (four daily).

Hôtel Astoria (☎ 04 68 25 31 38; www.astoriacarcassonne.com, in French; 18 rue Tourtel; d/tr/q €49/59/72, r with shared bathroom €32; ☎ Mar-Jan) Rooms are fresh and

pleasant, each with tiles or parquet, at this hotel and its equally agreeable annexe. Bathrooms are a bit poky but all in all it's a welcoming place that offers very good value. Free parking.

Hôtel Royal (☎ 04 68 25 19 12; http://monsieur.wanadoo.fr/royal_hotel; 22 bd Jean Jaurès; r €45-50; ☎ mid-Jan-mid-Dec; 🚲) Don't be deceived by the dowdy exterior. This attractive, great-value budget option has 24 comfortable, well-appointed rooms with ceiling fans. Those facing the busy street all have double glazing.

Hôtel du Pont Vieux (☎ 04 68 25 24 99; www.lacitedecarcassonne.fr; 32 rue Trivalle; s from €50, d from €60; 🚲 🚰 🚲) Bedrooms, most with a bathtub, have attractively rough-hewn walls. On the 3rd floor, rooms 18 and 19 have unsurpassed views of the Cité. The buffet breakfast (€7) is truly gargantuan, and there's a large garden with olive and fig trees and flowering shrubs. Wi-fi available.

Chambres d'Hôte Nicole Cordonnier (☎ 04 68 25 16 67; http://legrandpuits.free.fr; 8 place du Grand Puits; d incl breakfast €52-65) In the heart of La Cité, two of Madame Cordonnier's warmly recommended three rooms are particularly large, have a kitchenette for self-caterers, private terrace and can accommodate up to six (€10 per extra person).

MIDRANGE

Hôtel des Trois Couronnes (☎ 04 68 25 36 10; www.hotel-destroiscouronnes.com; 2 rue des Trois Couronnes; r from €83; 🚲 🚰 🚲) Set back from the River Aude, this attractive modern hotel has uninterrupted views of La Cité from east-facing rooms (€17 extra). On the 4th floor (which has a heated indoor pool) there's a particularly good restaurant (see opposite). Wi-fi available.

Hôtel Le Donjon (☎ 04 68 11 23 00; www.hotel-donjon.fr; 2 rue du Comte Roger; d €105-158, tr €135-178; 🚲 🚰 🚲) Low-beamed, thick-walled, venerable and cosy, 15th-century Le Donjon was originally an orphanage. Rooms overlook either its shady garden or the ramparts. Of its two equally comfortable annexes, Les Remparts is more contemporary, if shorter on period charm, while Maison du Comte Roger, with its striking medieval staircase, has superior standard rooms. Wi-fi available.

TOP END

Hôtel de la Cité (☎ 04 68 71 98 71; www.hoteldelacite.orient-express.com; place Auguste Pont; r from €400; 🚲 🚰 🚲) Neo-Gothic Hôtel de la Cité has rooms fit for royalty (literally so: 'A favourite hideaway

for Europe's crowned heads, film stars, writers and intellectuals,' proclaims its glossy brochure), should you fancy a retreat in such august company. Parking is €16.

Eating

Even if it's a boiling summer's day, don't leave town without trying the cassoulet, a piping-hot dish blending white beans, juicy pork cubes, even bigger cylinders of meaty sausage and, in the most popular local variant, a hunk of duck.

VILLE BASSE

Restaurant des Trois Couronnes (☎ 04 68 25 36 10; menus €21-29.50, mains €14-17) A particular bargain of this fine restaurant, on the 4th floor of Hôtel des Trois Couronnes (opposite) is its *le tout compris* ('everything included'; €21): three courses, a couple of glasses of wine, coffee and a magnificent panorama of La Cité thrown in.

Au Bon Pasteur (☎ 04 68 25 49 63; 29 rue Armagnac; menus €15-28; ☹ closed Sun & Mon Jul & Aug, Sun & Wed Sep-Jun) At this welcoming, intimate family restaurant, the simple wooden furniture belies the sophistication of the cooking. Warm yourself in winter with the yummy cassoulet or *choucroute* (sauerkraut), 100% authentic since the chef hails from the Vosges. Year-round, its *formule touristique* (a three-course special; €16.50), and *formules de midi* (lunch specials; €12.50 to €15.50) both represent excellent value.

L'Écurie (☎ 04 68 72 04 04; www.restaurant-lecurie.fr; 43 bd Barbès; menus €23.50-30; ☹ Mon-Sat & lunch Sun) Enjoy fine fare either within this attractively renovated 18th-century stable, all polished woodwork, brass and leather, or in the large, shaded garden. Pick from its long and choice selection of local wines.

Chez Fred (☎ 04 68 72 02 23; www.chez-fred.fr; 31 bd Omer Sarraut; menus €24-28; ☹ daily Jul-Sep, Mon-Fri & dinner Sat Oct-Jun) With a large window pierced in one of the walls of the ox-blood-red interior,

you can peek at what Fred's chefs are rustling up; it's sure to be something creative. Alternatively, dine on its shaded tunnel of a terrace. The weekday *menu bistro* (lunch €16.50, dinner €20) is superb value.

LA CITÉ

Place Marcou is hemmed in on three sides by eateries and throughout La Cité every second building seems to be a café or restaurant. For those recommended here, it's wise to reserve, particularly for lunch.

Restaurant des Musées (☎ 06 17 05 24 90; 17 rue du Grand Puits; menus €9.50-18) This unpretentious place has three rear terraces with views of the ramparts. It bakes its own organic bread and offers excellent-value meals, including a vegetarian *menu* (€10.50). It doesn't take credit cards.

Auberge de Dame Carcas (☎ 04 68 71 23 23; 3 place du Château; menus €14.50-20.50; ☹ Thu-Tue) This casual restaurant specialises in suckling pig (model piggies displayed around the restaurant, give you a clue) and carries a fine selection of well-priced local wines. The ground floor is cosy and agreeably rustic, and you can see the chefs at work. The larger upstairs room offers more light, and there's a summer terrace too.

L'Écu d'Or (☎ 04 68 25 49 03; www.restaurant-ecudor.fr; in French; 7-9 rue Porte d'Aude; lunch menu €18, menus €25-33, mains €18-20) Step down to semi-basement level to dine in style within the thick stone walls of this friendly spot. It serves, among many other delightful dishes, five varieties of cassoulet and a delicious range of creative desserts.

Chez Saskia (☎ 04 68 71 98 71; place Auguste Pont; menus €26-45, mains around €25; ☹ Mar-Jan) This brasserie, where chef Jérôme Ryon creates tasty, great-value dishes and a particularly rich range of desserts, belongs to Hôtel de la Cité. All around its walls are photos of the great and good who have stayed at the hotel: Jacques Chirac, Winston Churchill, Yves Montand and many more, recognisable and less so.

RESTAURANT ROBERT RODRIGUEZ

Behind his bushy, curling Hercule Poirot moustache, Robert Rodriguez is as much culinary philosopher as chef. Indeed, describing himself as an artisan who works with raw, exclusively organic materials, he'd probably balk at the very word 'chef'. Beaming with bonhomie, he calls his intimate **restaurant** (☎ 04 68 47 37 80; www.restaurantrobertrodriguez.com; 39 rue Coste Reboulh; 3-course lunch menu €20; menus €40-63, mains €28-38; ☹ Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat) his *atelier du goût* (a workshop creating tastes). *Fraicheur, saison, tradition, créativité* (fresh, seasonal, traditional, creative) is the leitmotif at this original and warmly recommended spot with its hugely innovative take on traditional Languedoc cuisine.

SELF-CATERING

La Ferme (☎ 04 68 25 02 15; 26 rue Chartran) A particularly well-stocked delicatessen, piled high with vintage cheeses, wines, sausages and lots of other *gourmandises*, including homemade crème Chantilly.

L'Art Gourmand (13 rue St-Louis) Chocolate fiends should descend upon this place, which sells a huge range of goodies. The ice cream is pretty great too – all 33 varieties of it.

Markets:

Covered market (rue Aimé Ramond; ☎ Mon-Sat)

Open-air market (place Carnot; ☎ Tue, Thu & Sat)

Drinking

Cafés overlooking place Carnot in the Ville Basse spill onto the square in summer. In La Cité, place Marcou is one big outside café.

La Cité des Arômes (14 place Carnot) In the north-western corner of place Carnot, this café wafts out scents of rich arabica and carries a huge selection of coffees.

Comptoir des Vins et Terroirs (☎ 04 68 26 44 76; 3 rue du Comte Roger; mains €11-13) This recently opened place in La Cité, affiliated to Hôtel le Donjon does tasty snacks and has plenty of wines by the glass on offer.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Ryanair is the only airline to fly in and out of Carcassonne's **airport** (☎ 04 68 71 96 46), 5.5km from town. It flies to/from London (Stansted), Liverpool and East Midlands in the UK, and Cork, Dublin and Shannon in Ireland.

BUS

We can only reiterate the advice of the tourist office: take the train. Eurolines and intercity buses stop on bd de Varsovie, 500m southwest of the train station.

TRAIN

Carcassonne is on the main line linking Toulouse (€13.30, 50 minutes, frequent) with Narbonne (€9.40, 30 minutes) and Montpellier (€21.20, 1½ hours). For Perpignan (€17.20, 1½ hours), change in Narbonne.

Getting Around**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

Agglo'Bus's Navette Aéroport runs to and from the airport (€5, 25 minutes), leaving the train station approximately two hours

before each Ryanair departure. By car, take the Carcassonne Ouest A61 motorway exit.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Several operators including **Europcar** (☎ 04 68 72 23 69), **Ada** (☎ 04 68 11 71 92) and **Hertz** (☎ 04 68 25 41 26) have booths at the airport.

For La Cité, leave your vehicle in the huge car park (€4.50 for three to six hours) just east of the main entrance.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

At the time of writing, **Agglo'Bus** (☎ 04 68 47 82 22), the city bus company, had a temporary information kiosk beside a large tiled concrete dome on bd Camille Pelletan.

Buses run until about 7pm, Monday to Saturday. A single ticket/10-ticket carnet costs €1.10/7.80.

Bus 2 runs roughly hourly from the Ville Basse to La Cité's main entrance. From mid-June to mid-September, a **navette** (shuttle service; ☎ 10am-12.45pm & 2.15-7.30pm Mon-Sat) links La Cité, the town centre and the train station every 20 minutes.

TAXI

Ring ☎ 04 68 71 50 50 for a taxi.

HAUT-LANQUÉDOC

Haut-Languedoc is a world away from the towns, vineyards and beaches of the broad coastal plain. More sparsely populated, it's a land of deeply incised gorges, high windswept plateaux and dense forest, ideal for those who love the open air.

MENDE

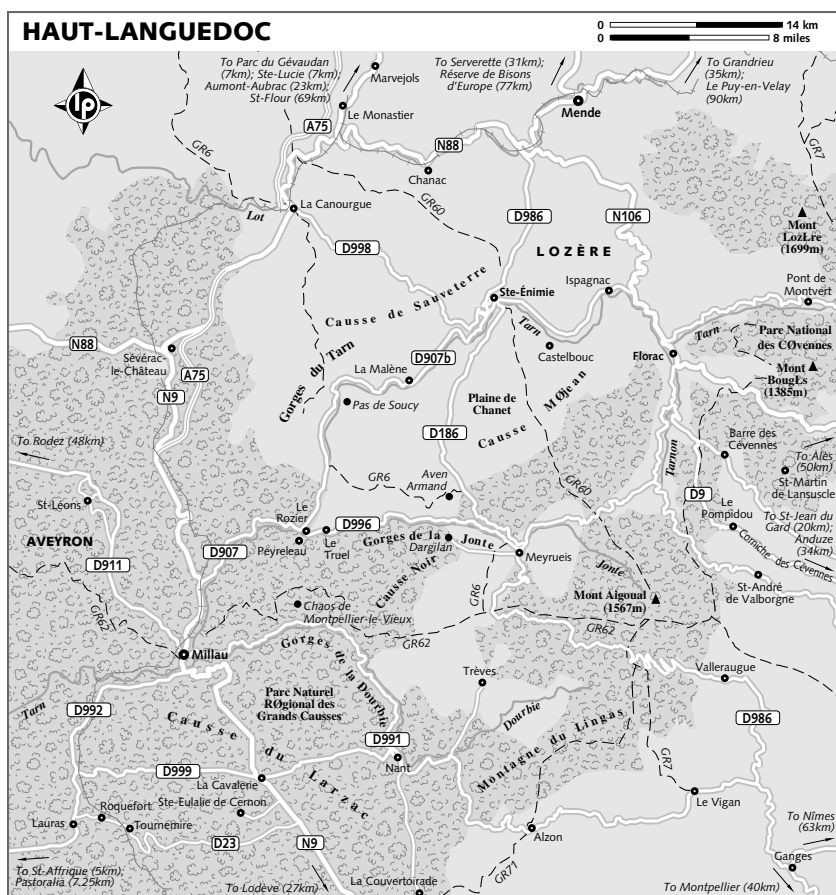
pop 12,600

Mende, a quiet little place straddling the River Lot, is the capital of Lozère, France's least populous *département*. Its oval-shaped centre is ringed by a one-way road that acts as something of a *cordon sanitaire*, leaving the old quarter almost traffic-free.

Information

Salle Antirouille (place du Foirail; per hr €1.60; ☎ 2pm or 3-8pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sat) Internet access; free wi-fi.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 94 00 23; www.ot-mende.fr; place du Foirail; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat,



10am-noon & 2-4pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat Sep-Jun) Free wi-fi, which extends to the café terrace nearby.

Sights

The tourist office's brochure, *Discover Mende's Heritage*, highlights the town's main historical features. The dark interior of the 14th-century, twin-towered **Cathédrale Notre Dame** (place Urbain V) makes the pincushion panes of the 17th-century rose window at the west end positively glow, but you'll have to peer hard to make out detail on the eight 18th-century Aubusson tapestries, hung high above the nave, illustrating the life of the Virgin.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel le Commerce (☎ 04 66 65 13 73; www.lecommerce-mende.com, in French; 2 bd Henri Bourrillon; s/d/tr €41/51/55; ☎ closed 2 weeks in Apr & 2 in Oct; ☒) Opposite place du Foirail on the busy ring road, this agreeably labyrinthine hotel, run by the same family for three generations, has 10 impeccable rooms. The owner is an ale fanatic and his popular bar carries a great range of beers.

Hôtel de France (☎ 04 66 65 00 04; www.hotelde-france-mende.com, in French; 9 bd Lucien Arnault; d €58-75; ☎ mid-Jan-Dec; ☒) Most rooms at this one-time coaching inn (whose owner speaks excellent English) have sweeping views over the valley and gardens below. Rooms one to three, eight and 10 are large, with separate toilet and

gleaming bathroom. For families, a duplex (€93 to €123) stretches beneath the eaves. Also on the inner ring road, it runs a first-class restaurant (*menus* €28 to €31).

Restaurant Les Voûtes (☎ 04 66 49 00 05; 13 rue d'Aigues-Passes; menu €21; ☞ daily Jun-Aug, Mon-Sat Sep-May, closed 15-30 Sep) This restaurant has a splendid setting, deep in the vaults of an ex-convent. Run by three brothers, it offers salads big enough to fill a fruit bowl (€8.60 to €9.70), pizzas (€8 to €10) and grills (€12.50 to €14), all to eat in or for takeaway. It also does a great all-on-one-plate lunchtime special (€12.50).

Le Mazel (☎ 04 66 65 05 33; 25 rue du Collège; menus €15.50-28, mains €9-17; ☞ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun, lunch Mon mid-Mar-mid-Nov) This restaurant with its stylish decor – don't be deterred by the bleakly modern surroundings – offers mainly local cuisine, imaginatively prepared. A recognised gourmet venue, it provides exceptional value.

SELF-CATERING

Saturday is market day, when a farmers market takes over place Urbain V. **La Fromagerie** (30bis rue Soubeyran), overlooked by the buttresses of the cathedral's east end, has an impressive range of cheeses, regional meats and pâtés. There's a **Petit Casino** supermarket on rue d'Angiran.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the train station, most passing by place du Foirail, beside the tourist office. On weekdays, there's one bus daily to Rodez (€13.20, 3½ hours) and at least two to Le Puy-en-Velay (€17, two hours). Northbound, two SNCF buses run daily to/from Clermont-Ferrand in the Massif Central (€28.80, three hours).

The train station is 1km north of town across the River Lot. There are three trains daily to Alès (€16.20, 2½ hours).

AROUND MENDE

Wolves once prowled freely through the Lozère forests but today you'll see them only in the **Parc du Gévaudan** (☎ 04 66 32 09 22; www.loupsdugevaudan.com, in French; adult/child €6.50/3.50; ☞ 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm or 6pm Feb-May & Sep-Dec) in Ste-Lucie, 7km north of Marvejols. The park sustains around 100 Mongolian, Canadian, Siberian and Polish wolves living in semifreedom.

Réserve de Bisons d'Europe

At the **Réserve de Bisons d'Europe** (Bison Reserve; ☎ 04 66 31 40 40; www.bisoneurope.com, in French; ☞ 10am-6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-5pm or 6pm rest of year) near the small village of Ste-Eulalie-en-Margeride, around 40 bison roam freely. Visitors, by contrast, must follow a 50-minute guided tour, either by horse-drawn carriage (adult/three- to 11-year-old costs €12/6.50) or, in winter, by sledge (€14.50/8). From mid-June to September, you can follow a self-guided 1km walking path (adult/five- to 11-year-old/under five years costs €6/4/free) around the periphery.

PARC NATIONAL DES CÉVENNES

Drier, hotter and in general leafier than the Auvergne to its north, the Cévennes have more in common with Mediterranean lands. Dotted with isolated hamlets, the park harbours a huge diversity of fauna and flora (an astounding 2250 plant species have been logged). Animals such as red deer, beavers and vultures, long gone from the park, have been successfully reintroduced. The park covers four main areas: Mont Lozère, much of the Causse Méjean, the Vallées Cévenoles (Cévennes Valleys) and Mont Aigoual.

History

The 910-sq-km park was created in 1970 to bring ecological stability to an area that, because of religious and later economic upheavals, has long had a destabilising human presence. Population influxes, which saw the destruction of forests for logging and pasture, were followed by mass desertions as people gave up the fight against the inhospitable climate and terrain. Emigration led to the abandonment of hamlets and farms, many of which have been snapped up by wealthy Parisians and foreigners.

Maps

The best map of the park is the IGN's *Parc National des Cévennes* (€6.20) at 1:100,000.

Mont Lozère

This 1699m-high lump of granite in the north of the park is shrouded in cloud and ice in winter and covered with heather and blueberries, peat bogs and flowing streams in summer. The **Musée du Mont Lozère** (☎ 04 66 45 80 73; adult/6-18yr/under 6yr incl audioguide €3.50/2.50/free;

CHESTNUT: THE ALL-PURPOSE TREE

In the Cévennes, the chestnut tree (known as *l'arbre à pain*, or bread tree) was the staple food of many Auvergnat families. The nuts were eaten raw, roasted and dried, or ground into flour. Blended with milk or wine, chestnuts were the essence of *bajanat*, a nourishing soup. Part of the harvest would feed the pigs while the leaves of pruned twigs and branches provided fodder for sheep and goats.

Harvested at ground level with small forks – of chestnut wood, of course – the prickly husks (called *hèrissos*, or hedgehogs) were removed by being trampled upon in spiky boots. Nowadays, they're the favourite food of the Cévennes' wild boars and still feature in a number of local sauces and desserts.

Nothing was wasted. Sections of hollowed-out trunk would serve as beehives, smaller branches would be woven into baskets while larger ones were whittled into stakes for fencing or used to build trellises. The wood, hard and resistant to parasites, was used for rafters, rakes and household furniture – everything from, quite literally, the cradle to the coffin.

📞 10.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Easter-Sep), within a hideous concrete hulk at Pont de Montvert, 20km northeast of Florac, is a fascinating introduction to the region and its traditional rural crafts. Unfortunately, the English audio commentary is a disaster; you're better off reading the French text.

Vallées Cévenoles

First planted back in the Middle Ages, *châtaigniers* (sweet-chestnut trees) carpet the Vallées Cévenoles, the park's central area of plunging ravines and jagged ridges, along one of which runs the breathtaking Corniche des Cévennes.

Mont Aigoual

Mont Aigoual (1567m) and neighbouring Montagne du Lingas are renowned for their searing winds and heavy snowfall. The area is dense with beech trees, thanks to a reforestation program that counteracts years of uncontrolled logging. The observatory atop the summit has an **exhibition** (☎ 04 67 82 60 01; www.aigoual.asso.fr; admission free; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm May, Jun & Sep) where you can learn about cloud formation, weather prediction, and much more. Captions are in French but much of the exhibition is highly visual.

Activities

In winter there's **cross-country skiing** (more than 100km of marked trails) on Mont Aigoual and Mont Lozère, while **donkey treks** are popular in the park in warmer months. There are 600km of donkey- and horse-riding trails and 200km marked out for mountain-bike enthusiasts.

An equally well-developed network of trails makes the park a **walking** paradise year-round. It's criss-crossed by a dozen GR (*grande randonnée*) trails and there are over 20 shorter signposted walks lasting between two and seven hours.

Florac's Maison du Parc (p786) has more than 11 excellent information kits (€5 each) describing circular walks from various starting points within the park. Ask about the **Festival Nature**, a summertime mix of outdoor activities, lectures and field trips.

Getting There & Away

By car, the most spectacular route is the Corniche des Cévennes, a ridge road that winds along the mountain crests of the Cévennes for 56km from St-Jean du Gard to Florac.

FLORAC

pop 2000

Florac, 79km northwest of Alès and 38km southeast of Mende, makes a great base for exploring the Parc National des Cévennes and the upper reaches of the Gorges du Tarn. Lively in summer and moribund for most of the rest of the year, it's draped along the west bank of River Tarnon, one of the tributaries of the Tarn, while the sheer cliffs of the Causse Méjean loom 1000m overhead.

Information

Florac Cyber Café (12 rue Armand Jullié; per 30min/1hr €3/4; 🕒 10am-8.30pm Jul & Aug, 2.30-8.30pm Sun & Mon, 10am-noon & 2.30-8.30pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jun) Internet access.
Laundrette (11 rue du Pècher; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm)

TRAVELS WITH A DONKEY

The Cévennes were even wilder and more untamed back in October 1878, when Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson crossed them with only a donkey, Modestine, for company.

'I was looked upon with contempt, like a man who should project a journey to the moon, but yet with a respectful interest, like one setting forth for the inclement Pole,' Stevenson wrote in his *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

Accompanied by the wayward Modestine, bought for 65 francs and a glass of brandy, Stevenson took a respectable 12 days to travel the 232km on foot (Modestine carried his gear) from Le Monastier-sur-Gazelle, southeast of Le Puy-en-Velay, to St-Jean du Gard, west of Alès. Afterwards, he sold his ass – and wept.

The Stevenson trail, first retraced and marked with the cross of St Andrew by a Scottish woman in 1978, is nowadays designated the GR70 and extends from Le Puy to Alès.

Whether you're swaying on a donkey or simply walking, you'll find *The Robert Louis Stevenson Trail* by Alan Castle an excellent, practical, well-informed companion. Consult also www.chemin-stevenson.org and www.gr70-stevenson.com, and pick up the free pamphlet *Sur Le Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson* (On The Robert Louis Stevenson Trail), stocked by tourist offices, which has a comprehensive list of accommodation en route.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 66 45 01 14; www.mescévennes.com; 33 av Jean Monestier; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun)

Activities

The tourist office has details of a whole summer's worth of outdoor activities. For information on the park's rich walking potential, contact **Maison du Parc National des Cévennes** (☎ 04 66 49 53 01; www.cevennes-parcnational.fr; ☹ 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.30pm Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri Nov-Easter). It occupies the handsome, restored 17th-century Château de Florac, stocks an English version of the guidebook *Parc National des Cévennes* (€15) and has a splendidly informative **interactive exhibition** (admission free), *Passagers du Paysage*, with captions, a recorded commentary in English (delivered, alas, by a couple of glum, monotone native speakers) and a 15-minute slide show.

DONKEY TREKS

Why not follow the lead of Robert Louis Stevenson and hire a pack animal? Several companies are in the donkey business. They include **Gentiâne** (☎ 04 66 41 04 16; anegenti@free.fr) in Castagnols and **Tramontane** (☎ 04 66 45 92 44; chantal.tramontane@nomade.fr) in St-Martin de Lansuscle. Typical prices are €45 per day and €210 to €275 per week, and both outfits can reserve accommodation along the route. Though each is outside Florac, they'll transport the donkeys to town or a place of your choosing for a fee (around €1 per kilometre).

OTHER ACTIVITIES

CévennesÉvasion (☎ 0466451831; www.cevennes-evasion.com, in French; 5 place Boyer) rents out mountain bikes for €13/19 per half-/full day and furnishes riders with handy colour route maps. In summer Cévennes Évasion will take you for free (minimum five persons) up to the Causse Méjean, from where you can whiz effortlessly back down. It also arranges caving, rock-climbing and canyon-clambering expeditions (trust these guys; they hung the fireworks up high for the spectacular opening and closing ceremony pyrotechnics at the Athens Olympics). It also runs guided and independent walking holidays, where your accommodation is booked ahead and your luggage transported onwards daily.

Sleeping

Camping Le Pont du Tarn (☎ 04 66 45 18 26; www.campingpontdutarn.com; site & 2 persons €14; ☹ Apr-mid-Oct; 📶) At this large, attractive, shaded campsite, 2km from Florac beside the D998, you can swim either in the pool or river Tarn, which runs right by.

our pick **La Ferme de la Borie** (☎ 04 66 45 10 90; www.encevennes.com, in French; s incl breakfast €22-29, d €35-44; ☹ Mar-Nov) You'll be bowled over by the sheer enthusiasm and joie de vivre of host Jean-Christophe Barthes. And you'll groan contentedly as you head to bed after a blow-out dinner of produce from this organic farm, accompanied by as much wine as you wish. Be sure to reserve – by phone since there's no email link from the website.

Hôtel Les Gorges du Tarn (☎ 04 66 45 00 63; www.hotel-gorgesdutarn.com; 48 rue du Pêcher; d €45-60; tr/q €70/80; ☹ Easter-Oct) Most rooms in both the main building and annexe of this 26-room Logis de France have been recently renovated and are bright as a new pin. Studios sleep up to four and have cooking facilities. Free parking and wi-fi.

Grand Hôtel du Parc (☎ 04 66 45 03 05; www.grandhotelduparc.fr; 47 av Jean Monestier; r €50-70; ☹ mid-Mar–mid-Nov; ♿) This venerable building has 55 spacious rooms. It sits on its own extensive grounds with a pool, terrace and delightful, well-tended gardens shaded by mature cedars.

Eating

In summer L'Esplanade, a shady, pedestrianised avenue, becomes one long dining area where you can eat both well and economically.

Chez les Paysans (☎ 04 66 31 22 07; square Maury; menus €12-16, mains around €10) At this restaurant you can sample fresh, very reasonably priced local fare either inside or on its vine-shaded terrace. Its shop has a great selection of produce from small farmers in the area.

La Source du Pêcher (☎ 04 66 45 03 01; 1 rue de Remuret; menus €18-38; ☹ Apr-Oct) With a wonderful open-air terrace, perched above the little River Pêcher, it's very good and oh, they know it and show it (just

look at the ostentatious display of medallions and shields from gastronomic bodies – most of them none too fresh, it must be said – that fringe the door). This said, you'll eat very well indeed, if you can stomach the prickly owner. They don't take reservations, so arrive early.

Maison du Pays Cévenol (3 rue du Pêcher) This gastronomic treasure trove sells local specialities – liqueurs, jams, Pélardon cheese and chestnuts in all their guises.

Florac has, in addition, two impressive hotel restaurants:

Grand Hôtel du Parc restaurant (☎ 04 66 45 03 05; 47 av Jean Monestier; menus €19-28, mains €9-14.50)

Adonis (☎ 04 66 45 00 63; 48 rue du Pêcher; menus €17-44, mains €17-20; ☹ Thu-Tue & lunch Wed) At Hôtel Les Gorges du Tarn.

Getting There & Away

It's a pain without your own vehicle. One **Transports Reilhes** (☎ 04 66 45 00 18, 06 60 58 58 10) minibus runs to/from Alès (€13.50, 1¼ hours), Monday to Saturday, leaving from the old railway station at 9am.

GORGES DU TARN

From the village of Ispagnac, 9km northwest of Florac, the deep, spectacular Gorges du Tarn wind southwest for about 50km, mark-

BIOMAN

In the 1990s, Jean-Christophe Barthes left his native Montpellier and bought himself 70 hectares of hillside and a seriously ruined farm whose buildings had languished unused since WWII.

After 10 years' hard labour, he now runs a successful organic farm that's all but self-sufficient. He gestures to the dinner table, groaning with sausages, fat and thin, cylindrical Tomme cheeses, tiny Pélardons and stout nameless ones furry with mould, pâtés, honey, jams and a wonderful concoction of beans, chestnuts and yet more sausages. 'Only the wine isn't mine,' he grins.

He shrugs off all the reconstruction. 'Yes, there are the buildings,' he says. 'But what makes me even prouder is the way I've given new life to the land' – it had deteriorated into scrub and wilderness without the presence of animals and regular cropping for hay. 'And the return of the swallows too', he muses. 'At first just one or two and now a colony of annual nesters.' No animals means no flies and no dinner for the swallows. 'The more the flies, the more these graceful swallows', he grins.

His goats give the milk that makes the cheese. He feeds the litres of whey run-off from the cheese-making to his pigs, who finish up as truncheons of sausage hanging like stalactites in his cavernous storeroom. The cows? 'I have the space so why not?', he shrugs. And his bees busy themselves all alone and independently.

Nowadays it's not enough to be simply a farmer. With his boundless energy and infectious ready smile, Jean-Christophe runs a splendid *chambre d'hôte* (opposite) together with a *gîte d'étape* (walkers' guesthouse) for hikers walking the GR70 trail that passes nearby. He sells his produce in nearby markets, is a leading light in the local farmers' association and, in summer, arranges group visits to watch the milking of the goats, then follow them to pasture. On summer evenings, he puts on dinners of goat kid, roasted on a spit in the huge hearth of his equally grandly proportioned dining room. And somehow, some time, he manages to sleep, though you wonder how...

ing the boundary between the Causse Méjean to its south and the Causse de Sauveterre to the north. Until the construction of the riverside road in 1905, the only way to move through the gorges was by boat. Nowadays, this road (the D907bis) is often jammed with traffic: every summer's day, well over 2500 vehicles grind through Ste-Énimie.

Activities

CANOEOING

Riding the River Tarn is at its best in high summer, when the river is usually low and the descent a lazy trip over mostly calm water. You can get as far as the impassable Pas de Soucy, a barrier of boulders about 9km downriver from La Malène. Downstream from here, there are further canoeing possibilities.

The Ste-Énimie tourist office carries information on the veritable flotilla of companies offering canoe and kayak descents. These include:

ADN La Cazelle (☎ 04 66 48 46 05; www.lacazelle.com, in French) In Ste-Énimie. Also rents out mountain bikes (per half-/full day €20/30).

Au Moulin de la Malène (☎ 04 66 48 51 14; www.canoeblanc.com) In La Malène.

Canoe 2000 (☎ 04 66 48 57 71; www.canoe2000.fr) In Ste-Énimie and La Malène.

Locanoë (☎ 04 66 48 55 57; www.gorges-du-tarn.fr, in French) In Castelbouc and Ste-Énimie.

Typical trips and tariffs for canoe and kayak descents are:

Trip	Cost (€)	Distance (km)	Duration
Castelbouc-Ste-Énimie	14	7	2hr
Ste-Énimie-La Malène	19	13	3½hr
Castelbouc-La Malène	22	20	1 day
Ste-Énimie-Les Baumes Basses	23	22	1 day

If you'd rather someone else did the hard work, spend a lazy, effortless hour with **Les Bateliers de la Malène** (☎ 04 66 48 51 10; ☹ Apr-Oct), who, for €19.50/9.75 per adult/child under 10, will punt you down an 8km stretch of the gorge, leaving from La Malène, then drive you back.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Les Gorges du Tarn (☎ 04 66 48 59 38; fax 04 66 48 59 37; 2 people tent & car €8.20; ☹ Easter-mid-Nov; ☎) About 800m upstream from Ste-Énimie, this is the cheapest of the several riverside campsites, and it also hires out canoes and kayaks.

Two splendid *chambres d'hôtes* lie at each end of the Gorges du Tarn.

La Pause (☎ 05 65 62 63 06; www.hebergement-gorges.dutarn.com; rte de Caplac; d/tr/ste incl breakfast €46/63/90; ☎) At the southern end, in the village of Le Rozier, La Pause has three tastefully furnished rooms decorated in attractive colours, plus a couple of suites. At breakfast, jams – fig, quince, cherry and more – are all made by your hostess, Pierrette Espinasse. To get there, turn left (signed Capluc), after the village church.

La Maison de Marius (☎ 04 66 44 25 05; www.maison.demarius.info; 8 rue Pontet, Quézac; r incl breakfast €50-80; ☹ Mar-Oct) At the gorges' northern limit, near Espagnac, each of Dany Méjean's delightful rooms has its own character, and you've never tasted sweeter water, drawn from the nearby mineral springs. To get there, skirt the village (its main street is unidirectional against you) and follow signs from the church.

Ste-Énimie

pop 500

Ste-Énimie, 27km from Florac and 56km from Millau, tumbles like an avalanche of grey-brown stone, blending into the steep, once terraced slope behind it. Long isolated, it's now a popular destination for day visitors from Millau, Mende and Florac and a popular starting or finishing point for canoe or kayak descents of the Tarn.

Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 66 48 53 44; www.gorgesdu-tarn.net, in French; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm or 6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Easter, also Sat Easter-Jun & Sep) stocks maps and walking guides, including IGN Top 25 map No 2640OT *Gorges du Tarn*. There's also a small seasonal **annexe** in La Malène.

Highlights of the small, cobbled old quarter, where most houses have been repainted and restored, are the 12th-century Romanesque **Église de Ste-Énimie**, and the **Halle aux Blés**, where cereal crops from the high Causses were bartered for wine, fresh fruit and walnut oil.

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DES GRANDS CAUSSES

The Grands Causses, the Massif Central's most southerly expression, are mainly harsh

limestone plateau. Scorched in summer and windswept in winter, the stony surface holds little moisture as water filters through the limestone to form an underground world, ideal for cavers.

The Rivers Tarn, Jonte and Dourbie have sliced deep gorges through the 5000-sq-km plateau, creating four *causses* ('plateaux' in the local patois): Sauveterre, Méjean, Noir and Larzac, each different in its delicate geological forms. One resembles a dark lunar surface, another's like a Scottish moor covered with the thinnest layer of grass, while the next is gentler and more fertile. But all are eerie and empty except for the occasional shepherd and his flock – and all offer magnificent walking and mountain biking.

Millau, at the heart of the park, is a good base for venturing into this wild area. The Gorges de la Jonte, where birds of prey wheel and swoop, skim the park's eastern boundary, rivalling in beauty the neighbouring, more famous Gorges du Tarn.

Information

Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses office (☎ 05 65 61 35 50; www.parc-grands-causses.fr, in French; 71 bd de l'Ayrolle, Millau; ☎ 9am-noon or 12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Fri)

Causse de Sauveterre

The northernmost of the *causses* is a gentle, hilly plateau dotted with a few compact and isolated farms resembling fortified villages. Every possible patch of fertile earth is cultivated, creating irregular, intricately patterned wheat fields.

Causse Méjean

Causse Méjean, the highest, is also the most barren and isolated. Defined to the north by the Gorges du Tarn and, southwards, by the Gorges de la Jonte, it looms over Florac on its eastern flank. It's a land of poor pasture enriched by occasional fertile depressions, where streams gurgle down into the limestone through sinkholes, funnels and fissures.

This combination of water and limestone has created some spectacular underground scenery. Within the cavern of **Aven Armand** (☎ 04 66 45 61 31; www.aven-armand.com; adult/16-20yr/5-15yr/under 5yr €8.50/7/5.80/free; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am or 10am-noon & 1.30-5pm or 6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov), reached by a funicular railway that drops 60 vertical metres, bristles the world's

greatest concentration of stalagmites. Guided visits, lasting about 45 minutes (there's an accompanying information sheet in English) head underground about every 20 minutes. A **combination ticket** (adult/16-20yr/5-15yr/under 5yr €11.80/9.30/7.80/free) also includes admission to the Chaos de Montpelier-le-Vieux.

Causse Noir

Rising immediately east of Millau, the 'Black Causse' is best known for the **Chaos de Montpelier-le-Vieux** (☎ 05 65 60 66 30; adult/5-15yr/under 5yr €5.30/3.80/free; ☎ 9.30am-6pm or 7pm Apr-mid-Nov), 18km northeast of Millau overlooking the Gorges de la Dourbie. Water erosion has created more than 120 hectares of tortured limestone formations with fanciful names such as the Sphinx and the Elephant. Three trails, lasting one to three hours, cover the site, as does a **tourist train** (adult/5-15yr/under 5yr €3.40/2.40/free).

If you're here outside official opening times, there's nothing to stop you wandering around freely.

Causse du Larzac

The Causse du Larzac (800m to 1000m) is the largest of the four *causses*. An endless sweep of distant horizons and rocky steppes broken by medieval villages, it's known as the 'French Desert'.

You'll stumble across old, fortified villages such as **Ste-Eulalie de Cernon**, long the capital of the Larzac region, and **La Cavalerie**, both built by the Knights Templar, a religious military order that distinguished itself during the Crusades.

Gorges de la Jonte

The Gorges de la Jonte, 15km long, cleave east-west from Meyrueis to Le Rozier, separating in dramatic fashion the Causse Noir from Causse Méjean.

Just south of the gorge, **Dargilan** (☎ 04 66 45 60 20; www.grotte-dargilan.com; adult/6-18yr/under 6yr €8.50/5.80/free; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-4.30pm or 5.30pm Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct) is known as La Grotte Rose (the pink cave) for its dominant natural colouring. The culminating point of the one-hour, 1km tour through this vast chasm is a sudden, dazzling exit onto a ledge with a dizzying view of the Gorges de la Jonte way below.

Belvédère des Vautours (Vulture Viewing Point; ☎ 05 65 62 69 69; www.vautours-lozere.com, in French;

adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €6.50/3/free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) is just west of Le Truel on the D996. Reintroduced after having all but disappeared locally, the vultures now freely wheel and plane in the Causse skies and nest high in the sheer cliffs on the opposite side of the valley.

The viewing point has an impressive multimedia exhibition, including live video transmission from the nesting sites. It also organises half-day **birding walks** (adult/5-12yr/under 5yr €7/3.50/free; reservation essential) to the surrounding gorges.

MILLAU

pop 21,900

Millau (pronounced mee-yo) squeezes between the Causse Noir and Causse du Larzac at the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie. Though falling just over the border into the Midi-Pyrénées *département* of Aveyron, it's tied to Languedoc historically and culturally. Famous within France for glove-making, it's also the main centre for the Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causse, a take-off point for hiking and other outdoor activities – particularly hang-gliding and paragliding, exploiting the uplifting thermals.

Information

ABCD PC (cnr rue Droite & rue Solignac; per hr €3;

☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-12.15pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 1-7pm Sat Sep-Jun) Internet access.

Laundrette (14 av Gambetta; ☎ 7am-9pm)

Main Post Office (12 av Alfred Merle)

Tourist Office (☎ 05 65 60 02 42; www.ot-millau.fr; 1 place du Beffroi; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Easter-Jun & Sep; closed Sun Oct-Easter)

Sights

The 42m-tall **beffroi** (belfry; rue Droite; adult/under 16yr €3/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm mid-Jun-Sep) has a square base dating from the 12th century and tapers into a 17th-century octagonal tower, from where there's a great overview of town.

Musée de Millau (☎ 05 65 59 01 08; place Maréchal Foch; adult/19-25yr/under 19yr €5/3.70/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-Jun, closed Sat Oct-Apr) has a rich collection of fossils, including a 4m-long, almost intact skeleton of a prehistoric marine reptile from the Causse du Larzac. In the basement is a huge array of plates and vases from **La Graufesenque**, in its time the largest pottery workshop in the western Roman Empire. The 1st-floor leather and glove

section illustrates Millau's tanneries and their products through the ages. A combined ticket, which costs €7, includes admission to La Graufesenque archaeological site, at the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie.

Causse Gantier (☎ 05 65 60 03 05; bd des Gantières; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat) Causse Gantier is one of only two companies that still make gloves in Millau (all the rest import their leather goods and trade on their past reputations). Within this architecturally pleasing new building, both workshop and display, you can watch craftspeople at work. Buy here and you can be certain your gloves were made on the spot.

Activities

HANG-GLIDING & PARAGLIDING

Several outfits run introductory courses (around €325 for five days) and beginner flights with an instructor (€55 to €70). Two long-established players are:

Horizon (☎ 05 65 59 78 60; www.horizon-millau.com, in French; 6 place Lucien Grégoire) Also offers caving, canyon descents, rock climbing and Naturaventure, a multiadventure trail.

Roc et Canyon (☎ 05 65 61 17 77; www.roc-et-canyon.com, in French; 55 av Jean Jaures) In summer it's based beside Pont de Cureplat. Also offers caving, rock climbing, canyon descents, rafting and bungee jumping.

ROCK CLIMBING

The high cliffs of the Gorges de la Jonte are an internationally renowned venue for climbers. Both Horizon and Roc et Canyon offer monitored climbs and can put you in touch with local climbers.

WALKING & CYCLING

Pick up a copy of *Les Belles Balades de l'Aveyron* (€8), on sale at the tourist office. You can navigate by the explicit maps even if you don't read French. It describes 22 walks in the area and also details 10 mountain-bike and 10 tourer routes.

Festivals & Events

During mid-August, the four-day **pétanque world series** is held in Millau. Its 16 competitions (including just two for women in this male-dominated sport) attract more than 10,000 players and over twice as many spectators.

Millau hosts a week-long **jazz festival** in mid-July.



PONT DE MILLAU

This toll bridge, slung across the wide Tarn Valley, takes the breath away. Designed by the British architect Sir Norman Foster, it carries more than 4.5 million vehicles each year. It's a true work of industrial art and an amazing feat of engineering. Only seven pylons, hollow and seemingly slim as needles, support 2.5km of four-lane motorway. Rising to 343m above the valley bottom, it ranks among the tallest road bridges in the world.

Construction gobbled up 127,000 cu metres of concrete, 19,000 tonnes of reinforcing steel and 5000 tonnes of cables and stays. Yet despite these heavyweight superlatives, it still looks like a gossamer thread. Far from detracting from the charms of the hitherto unspoilt countryside around the town of Millau, this vital link in the A75 motorway is a true 21st-century icon.

Viaduc Espace Info (☎ 05 65 58 80 65; admission free; 🕒 10am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar), at ground level beneath the viaduct, tells the story of its construction through a variety of media.

You don't have to have a vehicle to visit the Pont de Millau. Between 9am and 5pm, an open-top, bright yellow **bus** (☎ 05 65 61 20 77; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €10/6/free) with a guide leaves place de la Capelle at least hourly for a 1¼ hour tour. For a leisurely glide along the Tarn Valley and an original, crane-your-neck perspective of the bridge from below, take a 1½ hour boat trip with **Bateliers du Viaduc** (☎ 05 65 60 17 91; Creissels; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €19.50/12.50/9.50; 🕒 hourly from 9am, Apr-Oct).

Sleeping

Camping des Deux Rivières (☎ 05 65 60 00 27; camping .deux-rivieres@wanadoo.fr; 61 av de l'Aigoual; site & two persons €14; 🕒 Apr-Oct) Just over Pont de Cureplat, this is the closest of several huge riverside campsites beside the east bank of the River Tarn.

Hôtel La Capelle (☎ 05 65 60 14 72; www.hotel-millau-capelle.com; 7 place de la Capelle; r €45-48, with shared bathroom €30; 🍷 🍷) In the converted wing of a one-time leather factory, La Capelle is a great budget choice. The hotel's large terrace with views towards the Causse Noir makes for a perfect breakfast spot. Some rooms have air-con (€5 supplement). Free wi-fi.

Château de Creissels (☎ 05 65 60 16 59; www.chateau-de-creissels.com; r new wing €63-72, old wing €79-97; 🕒 Apr-Oct) In the village of Creissels, 2km southwest of Millau on the D992 and well signed, this castle has a split personality. Rooms in the old 12th-century tower breathe history while those in the larger, more modern 20th-century wings have balconies overlooking the large garden. There's an excellent restaurant (right) and a terrace offering great views.

Eating

La Mangeoire (☎ 05 65 60 13 16; 8 bd de la Capelle; menus €19.50-46; 🕒 Tue-Sun, closed dinner Sun Nov-Apr) Millau's oldest restaurant, in the vaults beneath the former city walls, serves delightful, mainly regional dishes. Its pride is the open wood-fire barbecue. In winter, spits pierce wild game such as hare and partridge. Year-round, meat and fish (€13 to €18) are sizzled to perfection.

Le Capion (☎ 05 65 60 00 91; 3 rue J-F Alméras; lunch menu €13.50, menus €19-38, mains €14-18; 🕒 Thu-Mon & lunch Tue, closed 1-21 Jul) Peer into the kitchen to see the young team at work as you walk past on the way to the freshly decorated main dining room. Portions are tasty and plentiful – none more so than the trolley of tempting homemade desserts and rich cheese platter (where, of course, Roquefort stars).

La Marmite du Pêcheur (☎ 05 65 61 20 44; 14-16 bd de la Capelle; lunch menu €14.50, menus €19.50-55, mains around €20; 🕒 Wed-Mon Jul-Sep, Thu-Mon Oct-Jun) A few doors from La Mangeoire and run by an engaging young couple, it too is attractively vaulted and has hearty regional *menus* within much the same price range. Try the chef's *marmite du pêcheur à ma façon*, of salmon, perch and red mullet, gambas and scallops gratin.

Château de Creissels restaurant (☎ 05 65 60 16 59; menus €24-50, mains €16-20) The castle's (left) restaurant offers classic French cuisine, where meat lovers will savour the *menu autour de l'agneau des Grands Causses* (€32) with its two main courses of tender local lamb and ewe's-milk cheese, and, for dessert, *panna cotta*, also made from ewe's milk.

SELF-CATERING

There are markets each Wednesday and Friday morning in place Maréchal Foch, place Emma Calvé and the covered market at place des Halles.

There's a Spar supermarket on bd de l'Ayrolle.

Shopping

L'Atelier du Gantier (21 rue Droite) A wonderful little shop that sells gloves and only gloves of the softest leather. Hit the right moment and you can see staff sewing away at a trio of vintage Singer machines.

Les Vitrines du Terroir (17 bd de l'Ayrolle) and **Le Buron** (18 rue Droite) are delightfully rich and pungent cheese shops selling local specialities including Roquefort and Perail du Larzac cheeses.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (www.garieroutieredemillau.com, in French) is beside the train station; its **information office** (☎ 05 65 59 89 33) is inside. There are two buses daily to Albi (€17, 2¾ hours), one continuing to Toulouse (€26, four hours) and up to eight daily services to/from Montpellier (€17.70, 1¾ hours).

Train connections from Millau include Montpellier (€24.30, 1¾ hours, one daily) and Rodez (€11.30, 1½ hours, five daily).

Getting Around

Cycles Arturi (☎ 05 65 60 28 23; 2 rue du Barry; ☎ Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, Tue-Sat Sep-Jun) rents out city bikes for €9/12 per half-/full day and mountain bikes for €11/15.

AROUND MILLAU

Roquefort

pop 700

In the heart of Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses and 25km southwest of Millau, the village of Roquefort (or, to give its full name, Roquefort-sur-Soulzon) turns ewe's milk into France's most famous blue cheese. Its steep, narrow streets lead to the cool natural caves, where seven producers ripen 22,000 tonnes of Roquefort cheese every year.

La Sociéte (☎ 05 65 58 54 38; www.roquefort-societe.com) has one-hour **guided tours** (adult/under 16yr €3/free; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm mid-Jul & Aug, core hr 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm rest of year) of the caves, which include a fairly feeble sound-and-light show and sampling of the three varieties the company makes. Established in 1842, it's the largest Roquefort producer, churning out 70% of the world's supply, over 30% of which is exported.

Tours of the equally pungent caves of **Le Papillon** (☎ 05 65 58 50 08; www.roquefort-papillon.com, in French; 8 rue de la Fontaine; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm or 5.30pm Sep-Jun) are free,

last 45 minutes to one hour and include a 15-minute film.

For a more rapid appreciation of the Roquefort making process, call by the showroom and sales outlet of **Gabriel Coulet** (☎ 05 65 59 90 21; www.gabriel-coulet.fr; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-6pm or 7pm Jun-Aug, 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Sep-May) where you can descend into the vaulted, penicillin-streaked caves below the shop, wander at your own pace and take in the 10-minute video.

Roquefort's **tourist office** (☎ 05 65 58 56 00; www.roquefort.com; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar) is at the western entry to the village.

Micropolis

'La Cité des Insectes' (Insect City), **Micropolis** (☎ 05 65 58 50 50; www.micropolis.biz; adult/5-14yr/under 5yr €11.10/7.45/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-4pm or 5pm daily Apr-Jun, Tue-Sun Sep-mid-Nov, Wed-Sun mid-Feb-Mar) is outside the village of St-Léons, off the D911 19km northwest of Millau.

Ever felt small? This mind-boggling high-tech experience happens in a building where grass grows 6m high. The swarms of facts about insect life, all compellingly presented, seem equally tall but all are true. Broadening its remit, Micropolis' newest gallery illustrates the theme of biodiversity. Captions are in French and English. Allow a good 1½ hours, perhaps rounding off with a meal at its pleasant, reasonably priced restaurant.

THE KING OF CHEESES

The mouldy blue-green veins that run through Roquefort are, in fact, the spores of microscopic mushrooms, cultivated on leavened bread.

As the cheeses are ripened in natural caves, enlarged and gouged from the mountainside, draughts of air called *fleurines* flow through, encouraging the blue *Penicillium roqueforti* to eat its way through the white cheese curds.

Roquefort is one of France's priciest and most noble cheeses. In 1407 Charles VI granted exclusive Roquefort cheese-making rights to the villagers, while in the 17th century the Sovereign Court of the Parliament of Toulouse imposed severe penalties against fraudulent cheesemakers trading under the Roquefort name.

Pastoralia

Pastoralia (☎ 05 65 98 10 23; www.pastoralia.com, in French; adult/6-12yr/under 6yr €4.50/3.20/free, 2 adults & 2 children €15; 🕒 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm daily Jun, Mon-Fri Sep & Oct), 3km west of St-Affrique, tells the story of the 800,000 ewes who graze the high plateaux, producing nearly 200 million litres of milk annually, over half of which is turned into Roquefort and other regional cheeses. There are interactive panels with English translation, a 10-minute film, and in summer you can feed the sheep.

ROUSSILLON

Roussillon, sometimes known as French Catalonia, sits on Spain's doorstep at the eastern end of the Pyrenees. It's the land of the Tramontane, a violent wind that howls down from the mountains, chilling to the bone in winter and in summer strong enough to overturn a caravan. Its only city is Perpignan, capital of the Pyrénées-Orientales *département*.

Long part of Catalonia (the name which nowadays officially designates only the semi-autonomous region over the border in north-east Spain), Roussillon retains many symbols of Catalan identity. The *sardane* folk dance is still performed, and the Catalan language, closely related to Provençal, is fairly widely spoken.

History

People have lived here since prehistoric times, and one of Europe's oldest skulls was found in a cave near Tautavel (p799).

Roussillon'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 Catalonia-Aragon. After flourishing for a time in its own right as the capital of the kingdom of Mallorca, it again fell under 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.

PERPIGNAN

pop 115,000

As much Catalan as French, Perpignan (Perpinyà in Catalan) is far from the 'villainous ugly town', as sourly summarised by traveller Henry Swinburne in 1775. Its modern population is a mixed one. Iberian blood 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. Many other families, Arab and displaced French settlers alike, have their recent origins in Algeria.

At the foothills of the Pyrenees and with the Côte Vermeille to its southeast, Perpignan is a good base for day trips along the coast or to the mountains and Cathar castles of the interior. It's commendably well documented; outside every major historical building is a free-standing sign with information in French, Catalan and English.

History

From 1278 to 1344 Perpignan was the capital of the kingdom of Mallorca, a Mediterranean force that stretched northwards as far as Montpellier and included the Balearic Islands. The town later became an important commercial centre and remains the third-largest Catalan city, after Barcelona and Lleida (Lérida) in Spain.

Orientation

Two rivers flow through the city: the Têt and its trickle of a tributary, the Basse, banked with trim gardens. Place de la Loge and place de la République are at the heart of the mostly pedestrianised old town.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Net & Games (45bis av Général Leclerc; per hr €3;

🕒 8am-1am Mon-Sat, 1-8pm Sun)

LAUNDRY

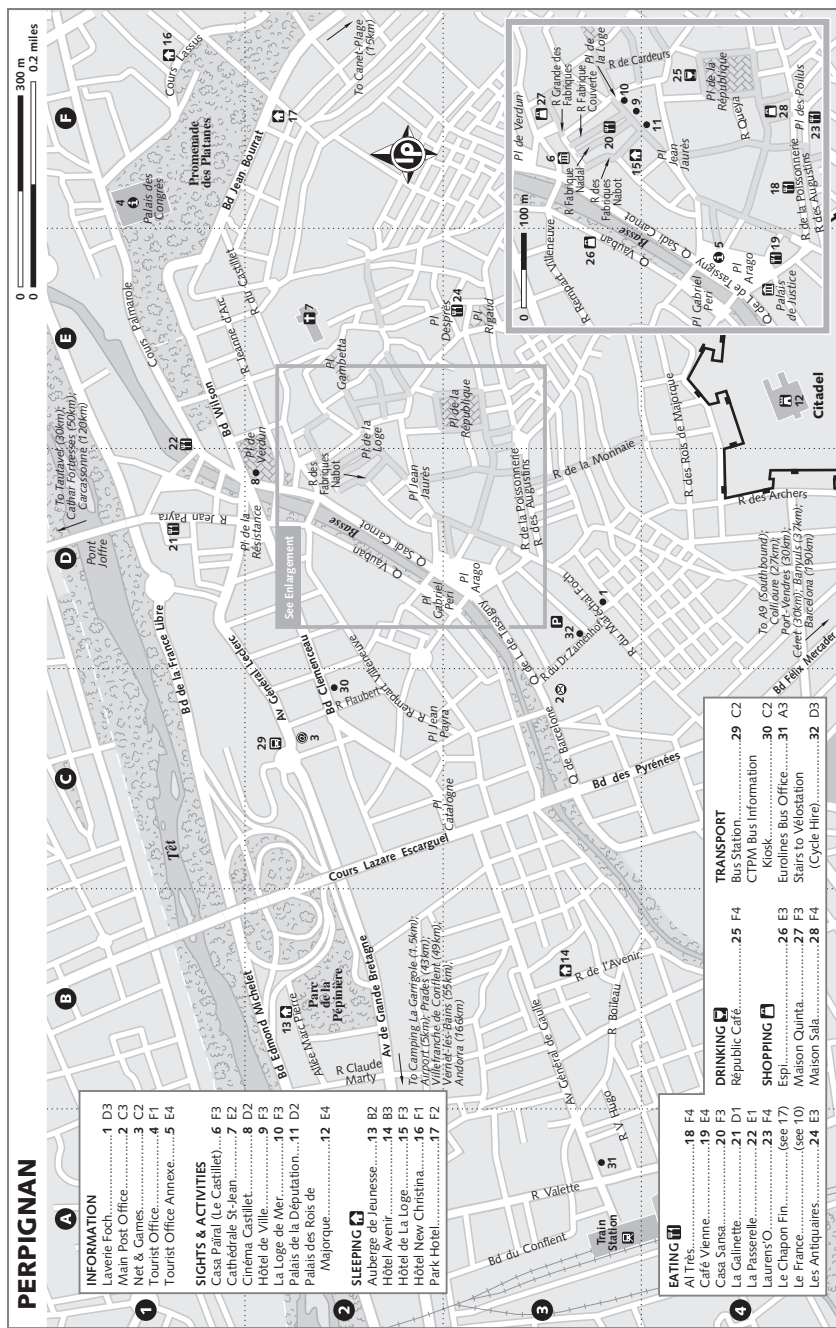
Laverie Foch (23 rue du Maréchal Foch; 🕒 7am-8.30pm)

POST

Main Post Office (quai de Barcelone)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 68 66 30 30; www.perpignan-tourisme.com; 🕒 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.



PERPIGNAN

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Tourist Office Annexe (Espace Palmarium, place Arago; ☎ 10am-6pm or 7pm; closed Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep)

Sights

PLACE DE LA LOGE

Place de la Loge has three fine stone structures. **La Loge de Mer**, constructed in the 14th century and rebuilt during the Renaissance, was once Perpignan's stock exchange, then maritime tribunal. Its ground floor is now occupied by the stylish café-restaurant **Le France** (opposite). Sandwiched between it and the **Palais de la Députation**, formerly seat of the local parliament, is the **Hôtel de Ville** with its typically Roussillon brick-and-pebble facade.

LE CASTILLET & CASA PAÏRAL

Casa Païral (☎ 04 68 35 42 05; place de Verdun; adult/student/child €4/2/free; ☎ 11am-6.30pm Wed-Mon May-Sep, 10.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-Apr), the museum of Roussillon and Catalan folklore, occupies **Le Castillet**, a 14th-century red-brick town gate. Once a prison, it's the only vestige of Vauban's fortified town walls. The museum houses bits and pieces of everything Catalan – from traditional bonnets and lace mantillas to an entire 17th-century kitchen.

PALAIS DES ROIS DE MAJORQUE

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/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-May) sits on a small hill. Symbol of Perpignan's late-medieval splendour, the palace was built in 1276 for the ruler of the newly founded kingdom. It 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 typically Provençal wrought-iron bell cage, **Cathédrale St-Jean** (place Gambetta; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Tue-Sun, 7.30am-noon & 3-7pm Mon), begun in 1324 and not completed until 1509, has a flat 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 off 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.

CINÉMA CASTILLET

Soon to celebrate its centenary, the **Cinéma Castillet** (place de Verdun), a magnificent movie palace whose exuberant neobaroque facade and lateral walls are punctuated with art nouveau stained glass and sculptured ceramic, is a sight in its own right.

PLACE DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE

Until recently the site of an ugly multistorey car park, place de la République, freshly pedestrianised and fringed by cafés, is destined to become the city's new focal point.

Festivals & Events

As befits a town so close to the Spanish border, Perpignan is strong on fiestas.

Every Thursday evening between mid-July and mid-August, the streets come alive with stalls, theatre and music of all genres for the **Festival International des Arts de la Rue**.

For the Good Friday **Procession de la Sanch**, barefoot penitents wearing the *capertxa* (traditional hooded robes) parade silently through the old city.

A 'sacred' flame is brought down from Mont Canigou during week-long **Fête de la Sant Joan**, marking midsummer, while in September the town pulls on tights and wimples for the **Marché Médiéval** (Medieval Market). During the **wine festival**, the third weekend in October, a barrel of the year's new wine is ceremonially borne to Cathédrale St-Jean to be blessed.

Sleeping

Camping La Garrigole (☎ 04 68 54 66 10; 2 rue Maurice Lévy; site & 2 persons €13; ☎ year-round) Take bus 2 and get off at the Garrigole stop to reach this small campsite, 1.5km west of the train station.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 68 34 63 32; perpignan@fujaj.org; allée Marc Pierre; B&B €14.50; ☎ Mar-mid-Nov) Perpignan's HI-affiliated youth hostel, just 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, r with shower €30, r with bathroom €35) At the Avenir, several rooms have a small balcony and each is uniquely and charmingly decorated. There's also a delightful 2nd-floor terrace, open to all.

Hôtel de La Loge (☎ 04 68 34 41 02; www.hotel delaloge.fr; 1 rue des Fabriques Nabet; s €44, d €48-62; ☎) Disregard the gruff owner; the bedrooms themselves are rather more pleasant though

their furniture varies from attractive and antique to flea market. Of the more expensive rooms, which have air-con, 106 and 206 overlook place de la Loge.

Park Hotel (☎ 04 68 35 14 14; www.parkhotel-fr.com; 18 bd Jean Bourrat; r from €80; ♿ ♻️ ♻️) Each of this pleasant hotel's soundproofed rooms is individually and engagingly furnished and decorated. The *supérieure* rooms (from €110), with separate bathroom, shower cubicle and toilet, are a cut above the already attractive rest. The largest (ending in 04 and 05) overlook the park. Reputed chef Alexander Klimenko runs the hotel's impressive Le Chapon Fin restaurant. Wi-fi is available; parking costs €11.

Hôtel New Christina (☎ 04 68 35 12 21; www.hotel-newchristina.com; 51 cours Lassus; r €103; ♿ ♻️) Rooms are attractively decorated in blue and beige and bathrooms, all with bathtubs, are separate from toilets. Those at the front overlook a public park. The open-air pool, up on the roof, has Perpignan's only jacuzzi. Outside high season, rates (single/double €67/73) are a particular bargain. Wi-fi available.

Eating

Le France (☎ 04 68 51 61 71; place de la Loge; pizzas €10-15, mains €16-28; ☎ noon-10pm) Le France manages to insert harmoniously the ultra-modern – right down to the all-glass hand-basins in the toilets – within the historical setting of what was once Perpignan's stock exchange. Mains are smallish but attractively presented and there's a good selection of tapas and pizzas.

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

Café Vienne (☎ 04 68 34 80 00; 3 place Arago; 2-course lunch menu €17.50, mains €15-22; ☎ 10am-11pm) You're here for the ambience as much as the food. Dine on the terrace overlooking busy place Arago or inside in a recreation of a pre-WWII brasserie.

Laurens'O (☎ 04 68 34 66 66; 5 place des Poilus; mains €16-20; ☎ Tue-Sat) This cheerful modern locale with its striped tablecloths and orange and black decor offers innovative Mediterranean cooking. Its distinctly Italian flavour is gar-

nished with a creative French twist and a little Thai touch here and there.

Casa Sansa (☎ 04 68 34 21 84; entrées 2 rue Fabrique Nadal & rue Fabrique Couverte; menus €19-29, mains €16-23) Here's another highly popular spot – or rather two adjacent places. Choose the older, more southerly one, its walls scarcely visible beneath photos of the famous and less famous who have enjoyed its fine Catalan cuisine.

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

La Galinette (☎ 04 68 35 00 90; 23 rue Jean Payra; lunch menu €17, mains €28-30; ☎ Tue-Sat) In an elegant setting, La Galinette offers 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 that the sea can offer that day.

La Passerelle (☎ 04 68 51 30 65; 1 cours Palmarole; menus €30-60, mains €19-24; ☎ 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, guaranteed fresh and without a hint of freezer or fish farm.

SELF-CATERING

There's a morning fresh fruit and vegetable market on place de la République daily except Monday. Saturday is organic day.

See also Espi and Maison Sala (p798).

Drinking

Républic Café (2 place de la République) Down your first coffee of the day on its busy terrace and return later to sip an aperitif and linger in its Gaudi-inspired interior, all sinuous shapes and white ceramic fragments.

Entertainment

The tourist office publishes **L'Agenda**, a comprehensive, free monthly guide to exhibitions and cultural events. **So Aware**, published monthly, and **Le Bizz**, out every two months, are what's-on tap-ins to the club scene and nightlife.

Shopping

Maison Quinta (3 rue Grande des Fabriques; ☎ Tue-Sat) Take time to browse this Aladdin's cave of wares, tasteful, kitsch, utilitarian or unashamedly frivolous. They're piled high and higgledy-piggledy on three floors of this former noble palace.

Espi (43bis quai Vauban) Gorge yourself on Espi's homemade chocolates, multicoloured macaroons and tempting ice creams. They'll even, given notice, knock you up a multistoreyed birthday cake.

Along short, scented rue Paratilla, known popularly to locals as rue des Épices (Spice St), shops sell dried fruits, herbs, jams, hams, cheeses and more. Most famous is **Maison Sala** (☎ Tue-Sat & Sun morning) at No 1, run by the same family for nearly a century.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Perpignan's **airport** (☎ 04 68 52 60 70) is 5km northwest of the town centre. Flybe serves Southampton, BMI Baby flies to/from Manchester, and Ryanair runs flights to/from London (Stansted) and Birmingham.

The Navette Aéroport bus runs from the train station via place de Catalogne and the bus station.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 68 35 29 02; av Général Lederc), **Courriers Catalans** (☎ 04 68 55 68 00) services coastal resorts, with seven buses daily to/from Collioure and Port-Vendres, most continuing to Banyuls (1¼ hours from Perpignan).

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

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

The **Eurolines office** (☎ 04 68 34 11 46; 10 av Général de Gaulle) is just east of the train station.

CAR

Rental companies include **Avis** (☎ airport 04 68 61 58 97) and **Budget** (☎ airport 04 68 56 95 95).

TRAIN

The train station is served by buses 1 and 2.

Trains cross the Pyrenees to Barcelona (€34 direct, twice daily; €18 changing at Cerbère/Portbou, at least three daily). There are

frequent services to Montpellier (€21.60, 1¼ 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/Portbou on the Spanish border (€7.20, 40 minutes, around 15 daily) via Collioure (€5), Port-Vendres (€5.50) and Banyuls (€6.30).

Getting Around

The local bus company, CTPM, has an **information kiosk** (☎ 04 68 61 01 13; 27 bd Clemenceau). A ticket costs €1.10, a one-day pass is €4.10 and a 10-ticket carnet, €7.80. Spattered in cheerful polka dots, **Le P'tit Bus** is a free hop-on, hop-off minibus that plies a circular route around the town centre.

At **Vélostation** (☎ 04 68 35 45 82), on the 1st floor beneath street level of Parking Arago, you can hire a bike at the rock-bottom rate of €1.50/3 per half-/full day.

For a taxi, call **Accueil Perpignan Taxis** (☎ 04 68 35 15 15).

AROUND PERPIGNAN

Céret

pop 7600

It's mainly the **Musée d'Art Moderne** (☎ 04 68 87 27 76; www.musee-ceret.com, in French; 8 bd Maréchal Joffre; adult/student/child €8/6/free; ☎ 10am-6pm daily May-Sep, Wed-Mon Oct-Apr) that draws visitors to Céret, settled snugly in the Pyrenean foothills just off the Tech Valley. Superbly endowed, the gallery's collection owes much to an earlier generation of visitors and residents, including Picasso, Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Miró and Dalí, all of whom donated their works (53 from Picasso alone).

Céret's **tourist office** (☎ 04 68 87 00 53; www.ot-ceret.fr, in French; 1 av Clemenceau; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Jul & Aug, core hr 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm Sat rest of year) is just around the corner from the gallery.

Firmly Catalan and famous for its juicy cherries (the first pickings of the season are packed off to the French president), Céret is also a party town. First comes the **Fête de la Cerise** (Cherry Festival) in late May. Summer sees the **féria** with bullfights and general fun and **La Fête de la Sardane**, celebrating the *sardane*, Catalan folk dance par excellence. More sedately, **Les Méennes** is primarily a festival of classical music.

THE CATHARS

The term *le Pays Cathare* (Cathar Land) recalls the cruel Albigensian Crusade – the hounding and extermination of a religious sect called the Cathars.

The Cathars were the fundamentalists of their day: people of extreme beliefs, warily regarded by the mainstream yet convinced that they alone knew the one true way to salvation. Cathars (from the Greek word *katharos* meaning 'pure') believed that God's kingdom was locked in battle with Satan's evil world and that humans were base at heart. But, they reckoned, a pure life followed by several reincarnations could free the spirit. Reacting against worldly Rome and preaching in *langue d'oc*, the local tongue, the sect gained many followers. Their most extreme followers were the ascetic *parfaits* (perfects), who followed strict vegetarian diets and abstained from sex.

In 1208 Pope Innocent III preached a crusade against the Cathars. The Albigensian Crusade had a political as much as spiritual dimension, giving northern rulers the chance to expand their domains by ingesting Languedoc.

After long sieges, the major Cathar centres in Béziers, Carcassonne, Minerve and the dramatically sited fortresses of Montségur, Quéribus and Peyrepertuse were taken and hundreds of 'perfects' were burned as heretics. In Béziers as many as 20,000 faithful were slaughtered. Montségur witnessed another cruel massacre in 1244, when 200 Cathars, refusing to renounce their faith, were burned alive in a mass funerary pyre. In 1321 the burning of the last 'perfect', Guillaume Bélibaste, marked the end of Catharism in Languedoc.

our pick **Hôtel des Arcades** (☎ 04 68 87 12 30; www.hotel-arcades-ceret.com; r €42-57; ♿) This friendly hotel overlooks place Picasso with its monumental plane trees and a sizeable hunk of the old town ramparts. Run with panache by a dynamic brother and sister duo, it's a gallery in its own right, where just about every square centimetre of wall space has its poster, photo or print. Parking is available.

Up to 12 daily buses run to/from Perpignan (50 minutes). If you're driving, head for the well-signed Musée d'Art Moderne car park.

Tautavel

The Arago Cave, on the slopes above the village of Tautavel, 27km northwest of Perpignan along the D117, has yielded a human skull, estimated to be 450,000 years old, along with a host of other prehistoric finds. The **Musée de Préhistoire** (Prehistory Museum; ☎ 04 68 29 07 76; www.tautavel.com; av Jean Jaurès; adult/child incl audioguide €7/3.50; ♿) 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Sep-Jun) has a full-size reproduction of the cave (in season, cameras show in real time archeologists excavating the real cave), together with holograms, dioramas, TVs dispensing knowledge from every corner and lots of fossilised bones and stone tools. The ticket includes entry to a secondary exhibition, at **Musée des Premiers Habitants d'Europe** (rue Anatole France; 11.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 11.30am-1.30pm & 2.30pm-5.30pm or 6.30pm Sep-Jun), 300m away in the Palais

des Congrès. Ask for its English-language sheet 'The First Inhabitants of Europe' and allow a good 1½ hours to take in both venues.

Cathar Fortresses

When the Albigensian Crusade forced the Cathars into the mountains that once marked the frontier between France and Aragon, they sought refuge in these inaccessible fortresses that had long protected the border. In a long but fulfilling 195km day of driving between Carcassonne and Perpignan you can take in the four major sites of **Puilaurens** (☎ 04 68 20 65 26; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ♿) 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm or 6pm Sep-mid-Nov & Feb-Jun), which later functioned as a prison; **Peyrepertuse** (☎ 04 68 45 40 55; adult/child €5/3, audioguide €4; ♿) 9am-8.30pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm or 7pm Sep-May), the largest with a drop of several hundred metres on all sides; **Quéribus** (☎ 04 68 45 03 69; adult/child €5/3, audioguide €2; ♿) 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-7pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-5pm or 6.30pm Oct-Mar), which marked the Cathars' last stand in 1255; and **Aguilar** (☎ 04 68 45 51 00; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ♿) 10am-7pm mid-Jun-Sep, 10.30am-5.30pm Apr-mid-Jun, 11am-5pm Oct-mid-Nov), the smallest and sadly in need of care and attention. Each clings to a cliff-top, offers a dramatic wraparound panorama and requires a short, stiff climb from its car park. This is wild country, hot as hell in summer, so be sure to pack extra water.

Those deeply into Catharism might want to invest €3 in a *Passeport des Sites du Pays*

Cathare, which gives reductions to 20 sites, major and minor.

TÊT VALLEY

Fruit orchards carpet the lower reaches of the Têt Valley. Beyond the strategic fortress town of Villefranche de Conflent, the scenery becomes wilder, more open and undulating as the valley climbs towards Spanish Catalonia and Andorra.

Le Train Jaune

Carrying nearly half a million passengers during the three peak months of high summer, **Le Train Jaune** (Yellow Train; ☎ 04 68 96 63 62; 4 daily Jun-Sep, 2 daily Oct-May), also affectionately known as The Canary, runs from Villefranche to Latour de Carol (return €35.40) through spectacular Pyrenean scenery. You can't make reservations, and it's wise to arrive a good hour before departure in high summer.

Prades

pop 5600

Prades, at the heart of the Têt Valley and 44km from Perpignan, is internationally famed for its annual classical music festival. It's an attractive town with houses of river stone and brick, liberally adorned with pink marble from nearby quarries.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 68 05 41 02; www.prades-tourisme.com; 4 rue des Marchands; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun) is just off place de la République, the main square.

The bell tower of **Église St-Pierre** (☎ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm) is all that remains of the original Romanesque church, rebuilt in the 17th century. The wonderfully expressive, ill-lit

17th-century *Entombment of Christ* at its western end is by the Catalan sculptor Josep Sunyer, who also carved the exuberant main altarpiece, a chef-d'oeuvre of Catalan baroque.

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 the world-renowned Spanish cellist, who settled in Prades after fleeing Franco's Spain.

Hiking & Walking Around Prades details 20 easy-to-moderate walks lasting from 1¼ to 3½ hours. *Six Grandes Randonnées en Conflent* (in French) describes six more challenging day walks, including the classic ascent of Mont Canigou (2786m), an emotive symbol for Catalans on both sides of the border. The tourist office sells both (€3 each).

VTT en Conflent, also in French, details nine mountain-bike routes varying from easy to seriously tough. **Cycles Flament** (☎ 04 68 96 07 62; 8 rue Arago; ☎ Tue-Sat), off the main square, rents out bikes (half-/full day €10/13).

The **Festival Pablo Casals** (☎ 04 68 96 33 07; www.prades-festival-casals.com, in French), held over two weeks in late July or early August, brings top-flight classical musicians to this small town.

There's a robust general market on place de la République every Tuesday and a farmers market each Saturday.

Villefranche de Conflent

pop 225

Villefranche, hemmed in by tall cliffs, sits at the strategic confluence of the valley of the Rivers Têt and Cady (hence the 'de Conflent' in its name). It's encircled by thick fortifications built by Vauban in the 17th century to

BEST OF LANGUEDOC FOOD MARKETS *Miles Roddis*

Narbonne Jostle and pick within Narbonne's art nouveau covered market, an architectural jewel in its own right.

Nîmes It's so vast, it could be a cathedral, and the restaurants that hang around its skirts wouldn't buy their produce anywhere else.

Mende Beneath the benign gaze of a statue of Pope Urban V, the stalls of a farmers market take over Mende's cathedral square each Saturday.

Montpellier Locals who like their food fresh and real, pick and choose beneath the giant arches of Aqueudoc de St-Clément at the city's Saturday organic food market.

Sète Watch and wonder at the riches from the deep, sold by the crate at the wholesale fish market of France's largest Mediterranean fishing port.

Uzès Farmers bring their fresh produce not once but twice a week, each Wednesday and Saturday, to colonnaded and cobbled place aux Herbes, one of the prettiest market-places in all France.

augment the original 11th-century defences, which have survived intact.

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

The stronghold high above town, built by Vauban and strengthened under Napoléon III, is the heavily promoted **Château-Fort Liberia** (☎ 04 68 96 34 01; admission €5.50; ☹ 9am-8pm Jun-Sep, 10am-6pm Oct-May), offering spectacular views.

Leave your vehicle in one of the car parks outside each of the two town gates.

Vernet-les-Bains

pop 1450

Busy in summer and a ghost town for the rest of the year, this charming little spa was much frequented by the British aristocracy in the late 19th century. Vernet has the status of *village arboretum* in recognition of more than 300 varieties of trees that flourish on its slopes, many brought in as seeds by overseas visitors.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 68 05 55 35; www.ot-vernet-les-bains.fr; ☹ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, closed Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) is on place de la République, the main square. Upstairs, there's a well-mounted free exhibition recounting Vernet's past.

Vernet is a great base for mountain biking and hiking – particularly for attacking **Mont Canigou**. Two tracks wind up from the village. To bag the summit an easier way, bounce up in a 4WD (€25 per person return) with **Garage Villacèque** (☎ 04 68 05 51 14; rue du Conflent) or **Jeeps de Canigou** (☎ 04 68 05 99 89; 17 bd des Pyrénées) as far as Les Cortalets (2175m), from where the summit is a three-hour return hike.

Randonnées dans la Vallée de Cady et le Massif du Canigou (€5), in French and with detailed maps, describes a holiday's worth of less demanding treks. A free tourist office pamphlet describes 12 signed mountain-bike trails that snake out from the village.

CÔTE VERMEILLE

The Côte Vermeille (Vermilion Coast) runs south from Collioure to Cerbère on the Spanish border, where the Pyrenees foothills dip to the sea. Against a backdrop of vineyards and pinched between the Mediterranean and

the mountains, it's riddled with small, rocky bays and little ports.

If you're driving from Perpignan, leave the N114 at exit 13 and follow the lovely coastal corniche all the way to Banyuls.

Collioure

pop 2750

Collioure, where boats bob against a backdrop of houses washed in soft pastel colours, is the smallest and most picturesque of the Côte Vermeille resorts. Once Perpignan's port, it found fame in the early 20th century when it inspired the fauvist artists Henri Matisse and André Derain (see boxed text, below) and later both Picasso and Braque.

In summer Collioure is almost overwhelmed by visitors, drawn by its artistic reputation (there are over 30 galleries and workshops), its wine and the chance to buy the famed Collioure anchovies at source.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 68 82 15 47; www.collioure.com; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is on place 18 Juin.

Across the creek is the **Château Royal** (☎ 04 68 82 06 43; adult/child €4/2; ☹ 10am-5.30pm or 6.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-4.30pm Oct-May), which enjoyed its greatest splendour as the summer residence of the kings of Mallorca. Vauban added its towering defensive walls in the 17th century.

The medieval church tower of **Notre Dame des Anges** at the northern end of the harbour once doubled as a lighthouse (the pink dome resembling a rampant penis was added in

THE FAUVISTES & COLLIOURE

'No sky in all France is more blue 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 splashes of bright colour.

The **Chemin du Fauvisme** (Fauvism Trail) is a walking route around Collioure that takes you by 20 reproductions of works that Matisse and his younger colleague André Derain painted while living here. The tourist office carries a French-language guide booklet (€5.50).

1810). Inside is a superb altarpiece, crafted by the Catalan master Josep Sunyer.

The **Musée d'Art Moderne** (☎ 04 68 82 10 19; Villa Pams, rte de Port-Vendres; adult/child €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Jun-Sep, closed Tue Oct-May) has a good collection of 20th-century and contemporary canvases.

Just beside the museum's entrance gate, the **Celier des Dominicains** (☎ 04 68 82 05 63; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 3-7pm Sat & Sun) is the place to sample and pick up some of the best local wine.

Le Trémaïl (☎ 04 68 82 16 10; 1 rue Arago; menus €23-35, mains €14.50-28; ☎ daily Mar-Nov, Tue-Sat & lunch Sun Dec-Feb) It's primarily fresh fish at this engaging little restaurant that cures and cans its own anchovies. For local cuisine from starter to dessert, go for the *menu catalan* (€23).

Between May and September, leave your car in Parking Cap Dourats, at the top of the hill that plunges down to the village, and take the shuttle bus that runs to the village every 10 minutes. Year-round, there's a large car park behind the castle.

Port-Vendres

pop 5900

Three kilometres south of Collioure, Port-Vendres, Roussillon's only natural harbour and deep-water port, has been exploited ever 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. It's still a significant cargo and fishing harbour with everything from small coastal chuggers to giant deep-sea vessels bristling with radar. There's also a large leisure marina.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 68 82 07 54; www.port-vendres.com; 1 quai François Joly; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm or 6.30pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is in the port's northwest corner.

Banyuls

pop 4500

Banyuls, 7km south of Port-Vendres, has a pebbly beach, overlooked by 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 or 7pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun).

At the promenade's southern limit is the **Aquarium du Laboratoire Arago** (☎ 04 68 88 73 39; adult/child €4.60/2.30; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-9pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6.30pm Sep-Jun). More than yet another com-

THE HIGH ROAD

The 15km alternative drive between Port-Vendres and Banyuls is a wonderful way to escape the summer coastal crawl and get the wind whistling through your hair. On the D914 near Port-Vendres, turn right at a sharp bend, just beyond the Cave Tambour wine producer's booth (don't call by; you'll need to keep your faculties sharp!). Signed Medaloc, the D86 winds inland, tight and single lane for most of its length. Views are breathtaking as, scarcely more than a track, it climbs above vineyards, almond and fig groves, through scrub and past bare schist outcrops.

mercial enterprise with smiling dolphins, this aquarium, which displays local Mediterranean marine life (and a collection of more than 250 stuffed sea and mountain birds), is also the oceanographic research station of Paris' Université Pierre et Marie Curie. It has recently acquired its first baby shark and constructed a small simulated rock pool, where children can dabble their fingers (the shark's elsewhere).

More strenuously aquatic but well worth the effort is snorkelling for free around a 500m **underwater trail**. Just off Plage de Peyrefite, midway between Banyuls and Cerbère and within a protected marine area, it has five underwater information points. You can hire fins and masks (€7; from noon to 6pm in July and August). If you have your own gear, you can swim the trail at any time.

To taste the robust red and rosé wines of Banyuls and Collioure, visit the **Celier des Tempeliers** (☎ 04 68 98 36 92; www.banyuls.com; rte du Mas Reig; admission free; ☎ 10am-7.30pm Apr-Oct, 10am-1pm & 2.30pm-6.30pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar), 1.75km inland. Tours are preceded by a 15-minute video (you'll probably loathe its posturing chef), subtitled in English, and followed by a tasting.

Restaurant Al Fanal (☎ 04 68 88 03 12; av Fontaulé; menu €28; ☎ daily Easter-mid-Oct, Fri-Tue rest of year) with its appropriately nautical ambience overlooks the port. There's no à la carte selection, but there's an ample range of dishes, many with a regional flavour, within the three-course *menu*. Al Fanal also keeps an impressive cellar of local wines and has a few rooms (overlooking the garden, €60; with harbour views, €70).

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