



Let's go to France!

September 1-15, 2012

Itinerary

Lovely Overlook of Agel



From Paris, we will make our way to Narbonne in first class seats on France's fast train, the TGV, arriving in Narbonne in the early afternoon, dining near the train station and picking up our van at the train station. We will then drive the approximate 45 minutes to our Chateau in Agel. That first evening and next day will be spent settling in, relaxing, and exploring our little village of Agel. During the next two weeks we will discover the beautiful Minervois villages and the Languedoc region of Southern France. The following itinerary has been developed, keeping in mind a balance of relaxation and discovery. This region is rich in history (primarily Roman Colonization, and the Cathar movement, which provoked the Albigensian Crusade) and wine production. This itinerary will continue to be refined, but follows what has been done on previous *Let's Go to France* tours. It may change for the better as it evolves, in that there are other attractions being considered, and the daily order of events may be moved around. Remember, you will not be forced to go out every day, either. You may wish to 'chill' at the Chateau.

10 Mid-Day Meals will be Provided

We will eat the French way. Light breakfasts, leisurely, 3-course, traditional meals in the middle of the day while out and about, including table wine and coffee, and in the evening we will enjoy wine, bread, cheese, and light snacks.

The meals to be furnished are highlighted in this burgundy type.

SATURDAY

- Take train to Narbonne
- **Lunch near train Station**
- Pick up vans
- Arrive Chateau
- **Snacks at Chateau**
- Early to bed



Chateau d'Agel

SUNDAY- Recovery & Orientation Day

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- **Lunch at Farmhouse**
- Visit to Olive Grove
- **Evening Snacks**



Agel

MONDAY - Local Area

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit L'Oulibo (olive co-op) including tour
- **Lunch at Minerve**
- Visit Minerve (Nearby hill town)
- **Evening Snacks**



Minerve

TUESDAY- Guilhem

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit to cave
- Visit St Guilhem
- Lunch on your own
- **Evening Snacks**



Guilhem

WEDNESDAY - Narbonne Discovery Day

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit central Narbonne, museums, Roman sites, market
- **Lunch in Narbonne**
- **Evening Snacks**



Narbonne

THURSDAY - History

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit Albi
- Lunch on your own
- **Cook at Chateau**



Albi

FRIDAY- History (Sightseeing Highlight)

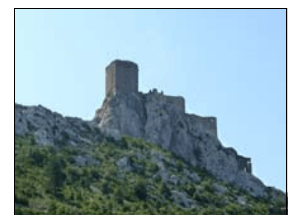
- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit Carcassonne
- Lunch on your own in Carcassonne
- **Evening Reception with Chateau Owners**



Carcassonne

SATURDAY - Cathar Day

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit Cathar Castles
- **Lunch in Cucugnan**
- **Evening Snacks**



Cathar Castle

SUNDAY - Day of Relaxation and Leisure

- St Chinian Sunday market, or find local attic sales
- **Lunch at La Sollette or Cessanon**
- Relax in Agel, hike along river or to nearby town of Bize or walk to Cazelles
- **Evening Snacks**

MONDAY- Day by the Sea

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit Ceret (art town)
- **Lunch in Ceret**
- Visit Coullioure (beach town)
- **Evening Snacks**



Coullioure

TUESDAY - Canal & Village

Market Day

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit Olonzac Market
- **Lunch Provided**
- Afternoon Boat Ride
- **Evening Dinner at Home**



Canal du Midi

WEDNESDAY

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Montpellier w/guided city walking tour
- **Lunch Provided**
- **Evening Snacks**



Montpellier

THURSDAY- - History & Sightseeing Highlight

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit Chateau de Salses (fortress)
- **Lunch in Fitou**
- **Evening Snacks**



Chateau de Salses

FRIDAY - Local Area

- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Visit winery (Domaine de Blayac)
- **Lunch in Aigne or Cessanon**
- Prepare for departure
- **Evening Snacks**



Le Somail

Aigne

SATURDAY - Travel Day

- Up very early
- **Bkfst at Chateau**
- Drive to Narbonne, drop off van, catch train to Paris and fly home

Here's a little info about some of the attractions we will have the opportunity to visit, all within a few minute's to an hour's drive from our Chateau.

Minerve is a fortified medieval village, with many of the fortifications still in place, perched high above a canyon in the barren Languedoc landscape

Its moment of infamy was in the early 13th century, when a group of cathars, during the Albigensian crusade, found refuge in the heavily fortified village. It took the brutal Simon de Montfort six weeks of siege before the village gave in. Following the town's surrender 140 cathars were burned at the stake.

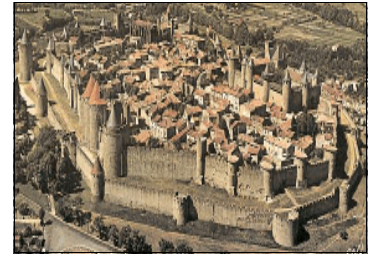
Things are slightly more tranquil nowadays, and Minerve is an attractive town to visit. The village is a hodgepodge of narrow alleys, topped by a simple 12th century church.

Narbonne. In 118 B.C., Narbonne was the first Roman colony established outside of Italy. It was located on the Via Domitia, the first Roman road in Gaul, connecting Italy to Spain. Remnants of the Via Domitia are evident in the city's historical center, as well as an impressive cathedral.



Carcassone. One of the best preserved Medieval villages in the world. Rich in local history,

the first signs of settlement in this region have been dated to about 3500 B.C., but the hill site of Carsac became an important trading place in the 6th century B.C., and it became strategically identified when Romans fortified the hilltop around 100 B.C. Occupation by the Visigoths and Saracens from Spain followed. By the 12th century, it became famous by playing a major role in the Albigensian Crusades, when the city was a stronghold of the occitan cathars. In August 1209 the crusading army of Simon de Montfort forced its citizens to surrender. Simon de Montfort made himself the new viscount and added to the fortifications, and Carcassone became a border citadel between France and the Kingdom of Aragon (Spain).



Carcossone

Aigne. Less than 10 minutes from Agel lies this sweet village with streets arranged in a spiral like a snail. Here we will have lunch and proceed under an archway to enter into streets shaped like a snail, highlighted by a similarly snail-shaped garden.

Chateau de Salses. This fortress is half buried in the ground. Built between 1497 and 1504, it was originally a Spanish castle for King Ferdinand of Aragon, King of Spain during the discovery of the New World. The Salses Castle is built on a narrow flat streak of land along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is through this passage that the army of Hannibal made its passage going to Italy in 218 BC. The name of the castle – Salses, comes from salinas fons, salt water discovered during its construction.

Besieged it could house for months a garrison of 1500 men and 300 horses. Its walls are low and up to 9 meters thick. Taken by the French in 1642 and left by its Spanish garrison, the castle has been in the years after rebuilt by the famous French military architect Vauban. It is an example of the transition between medieval fortified château and the modern bastioned fortifications, revolutionary at the time. The fortress is built from pale red brick and natural stone. It is very well preserved.

Today it is a French National Monument, called officially La Forteresse de Salses, and the fortress is now a museum housing a collection of modern, avanguard sculpture.

Coullioure & Ceret.

Céret is famous for its Musée d'Art Moderne (Museum of Modern Art), which has numerous Picasso paintings, sculptures and ceramics, including the famous bull fighting bowl series. The museum also features paintings by Chagall, Matisse, Herbin, Soutine, lots of Fauves and a few Impressionists. The top floor of the Museum hosts touring exhibitions. The museum is open 364 days of the year.

Céret has a continued tradition of being a home for artists, especially painters and poets. Pablo Picasso lived in Céret in the early part of the 20th century and Café Pablo in the town is dedicated to him. The Grand Café, still operating today, was a meeting place for many famous artists in the early part of the last century. Henri Matisse and Amadeo Modigliani, amongst other artists, visited at this time

Coullioure is a lovely seaside village. In the early 20th century it became a center of artistic activity, with several Fauve artists making it their meeting place. André Derain, Georges Braque, Othon Friesz, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Tsuguharu Fujita have all been inspired by Coullioure's royal castle, medieval streets, its lighthouse converted into the church of Notre-Dame-des-Anges and its typical Mediterranean bay.

The British historical novelist Patrick O'Brian lived in the town from 1949 until his death in 2000, and his novel *The Catalans* graphically describes Coullioure life before major changes took place. He also wrote a biography of Picasso, who was an acquaintance. O'Brian and his wife Mary are also buried in the town cemetery.

We will visit Ceret and have lunch, then visit Coullioure and enjoy an ice cream or café on the waterfront.

Canal du Midi. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is a 240 km long canal in the south of France, beginning in the city of Toulouse down to the Mediterranean

The original purpose of the Canal was to be a shortcut between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, avoiding the long sea voyage around hostile Spain, Barbary pirates, and a trip that in the 17th century required a full month of sailing.

The canal was built on a grand scale, and many of the original structures were ornate and survive to this day. The Canal du Midi was opened officially as the Canal Royal de Languedoc on May 15, 1681.

The Canal has 91 locks which serve to climb and descend a total of 190 meters. It has 328 structures, including not only the locks but also bridges, dams and a tunnel.

The construction of the Canal du Midi was considered by people in the 17th century as the biggest project of the day. Even today, it is seen as a marvelous engineering accomplishment and is the most popular pleasure waterway in Europe.

Commercial traffic continued until 1980 when it began to decline rapidly, ultimately ceasing altogether during the drought closure of 1989.



Albi

The pretty village of Albi France, with its old building facades and its quaint old town, was the first city to provide refuge to the Cathars, and is the origin of a later name that was bestowed on the religious sect, the Albigensians.

This is the birthplace of the famous artist, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec. A visit to the city's museum of the artist's work is time well spent.

No trip to Albi would be complete without honoring its most famous son with a visit to Le Musée Toulouse-Lautrec. It not only provides a chance to see the famous artist's work, but to also gaze on the Bishop's Palace in which it is housed.

Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert

The town Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert lies in the Gellon valley just North of Gignac, east of the new A75 motorway, about 30 kilometres Northwest of Montpellier. It is really more of a village with a population of around 250.

The village has retained its medieval personality with old houses in amber stone, an ancient tower, and a shady square with a fountain and traditional plain trees. It sprawls organically along the Verdus stream, surrounded by cliffs, verdant with thyme, oak and pine trees. The prison tower is a vestige of the medieval village and still dominates it. It is a simple square crenelated tower, pierced by a simple window.

Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert is counted among the Plus Beaux Villages (most beautiful villages) of France, classed, since 1999 a National Site. It is home to numerous artists, many of whom may be found in their studios around the square.

Overlooking the village, on the side of the cliff, is a castle of Visigoth origin. It was only ever a modest fortress but has attracted colourful stories involving Visigoths, Saracens and troubadours. According to legend this castle was once the abode of a Saracen giant, called Don Juan, who was defeated in improbable circumstances by the eponymous Guilhem in single combat.

Along the gorges of the Hérault river, between the plateaux of the Cévennes and Larzac and the rich vineyard plains of the Languedoc, the towns of Aniane, Montpeyroux, Puechabon, Saint-Jean-de-Fos and Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert, are collectively known as the 'Grand Site de Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert'. A bridge known as the Pont du Diable has connected these five villages since the eleventh century.

Wines. Last, but not least, **let's talk about the importance of wine in this area.** The Minervois area in the Languedoc Region of Southern France is famous for its wine, warranting an entire chapter of its own in Mitchell Beazley's *South of France* volume of his *Discovering Wine Country* series. An excerpt from this chapter, titled "Wines of Wisdom" explains it best:

"Minervois takes its name from the isolated medieval village of Minerve, ... which in turn takes its name from the Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva. The Romans were the first to cultivate vines here, mainly on the plain. The upper Minervois was cultivated later with the establishment of monasteries. Minervois suffered more than most in the crusades against the Cathars, but by the 18th century, with the opening of the Canal du Midi, the area's fortunes picked up again, and wine has been increasingly important ever since. In 1985, Minervois wines in all three colors gained AC status."

We will have opportunity to visit a winery and taste the wines of this region.