

Ducking indoors in Languedoc

Published On Wed May 11 2011



In Nîmes, the architecture of Carre d'Art is a modern interpretation of the 1st century Roman temple in the square opposite it.

KATHERINE RODEGHIER/FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Star

MONTPELLIER, FRANCE — As the drumbeat on my umbrella picked up tempo, I complained it was raining like cats and dogs. “Il pleut comme vache-qui-pisse,” I was corrected by a local resident. “It’s raining like cow piss.”

Welcome to the sunny south of France, with skies of robin’s-egg blue, warm breezes, shirt-sleeve temperatures and fields ablaze with the nodding heads of yellow sunflowers.

But not today.

The usually balmy Languedoc, which claims 300 sun-kissed days a year, turned into a chilly, gray lady when I had the bad luck to visit during a week of wet weather. But I turned my back on the gloom and headed indoors to take advantage of two of France’s greatest pleasures: food and art. Dodging the puddles, I passed delightful days strolling through museums and lingering over meals that were works of art on the plate and for the palate. The wine was good, too.

The overlooked stepsister of Provence and the French Riviera to the east, the Languedoc-Roussillon region hugs the Mediterranean from the Rhone River to the Pyrenees on the Spanish border. The Spanish kingdom of Aragon occupied it at the time of the Crusades and its people spoke Occitan, a cousin of the Catalan dialect.

Montpellier, Languedoc’s capital, is the fastest-growing city in France with 250,000 residents, a third of them students. About 4,000 new arrivals settle here each year, most coming from northern regions to take in the Mediterranean sunshine—though not today.

I shook out my umbrella and ventured into the oldest part of the city where structures dating centuries line a maze of narrow streets off the main square. Spices often were kept in first-floor rooms with vaulted ceilings, and today many of these spice vaults house the shops and studios of artisans. I ducked inside Zoid & Co. to dry off and chat with Chiarelli Vanince as she worked on her hammered aluminum jewellery studded with lobes of resin in tomato red and pumpkin orange. At Le Carré, a cozy bistro tucked into another high-ceilinged vault, I ordered the plat du jour, a tasty veal stew, and a glass of blood-red Pic Saint Loup, a full-bodied wine grown on this mountain slope north of the city. It's among nearly 40 appellations in Languedoc-Roussillon, the second-largest appellation d'origine contrôlée region in France.

The cow was still doing its thing the next day, so I spent a pleasant morning browsing the galleries of the Musée Fabre. The crown jewel among provincial museums in France, its collection ranges from classics by European masters to contemporary works, including more than 30 by Pierre Soulages who lives in Languedoc. His huge canvases of coal black with subtle shadings of whites and grays beg viewers to approach for a closer look. In a gallery of European sculpture, I admired Jean-Antoine Houdon's burnt orange work of Voltaire, and empathized with his subject in "L'Hiver," an ice-blue marble sculpture of a partially robed girl, shivering as I was on my walk here. In a gallery of Flemish paintings, museum guide Anna Phillippe paused at Cornelis de Heem's "Nature morte de fruits et de fruits de mer," a still life of fruit and seafood shimmering in light. She explained that these "dying" foods are meant to remind us of our own mortality.

They reminded me it was time for lunch.

Housed in a wing of the museum, L'Insensé is the creation of Michelin-starred chefs Jacques and Laurent Pourcel and known for its Mediterranean-style cuisine. Thin slices of Iberian ham and fresh pear were a perfect starter followed by classic boeuf tartare and pommes frites. A Languedoc wine, Domaine de Silène, took the top red winemaker award in an international challenge in 2009.

Food was still on my mind as I rode south toward the sea, passing marshes where flamingos, as pink as a Mediterranean sunset, poked black beaks into murky water. In Sète, the No. 1 fishing port on the French Med, trawlers set out every morning in search of red tuna, and boats tend shellfish farms in the lagoon separating the city from the mainland. I strolled through town, gazing at the reflections of pastel buildings in the canal, their mustard yellows and plum purples rippled by passing boats. I poked into the tiny Regional Museum of Contemporary Art to take in one of its temporary exhibitions, and stopped at a food stall selling tielles, tomato and octopus pies. This local delicacy originated with the wives of fishermen, who put together a few cheap and handy ingredients for a hot snack handed to their men as they headed out to sea.

Sète is what St. Tropez used to be before Bridget Bardot and Mick Jagger made it famous. While Sète's population of 43,000 doubles with summer tourists, it remains more fishing village than resort in spite of its access to 12 kilometres of sandy beach. Thanks to gray skies, no one was getting a tan today, topless or otherwise.

The rain began to pour again, but lucky for me it was Wednesday, market day in Sète. Inside the covered market house, counters of ice held mounds of bright orange shrimp, rosy scallop shells and heaps of fish, their scales glistening silver. The noise level rose as shoppers crowded around, calling out orders. The array of seafood whetted my appetite, so I ordered clams and mussels in a lemon bouillon with fresh peas and asparagus at the bistro Paris Méditerranée. There was no mistaking the fresh taste of the sea. Dessert, a whole banana, peeled on one side and topped with crème brûlée was served with a side of sorbet. It was as much sculpture as culinary decadence.

The sun finally came out en route to Nîmes, but the weather posed another problem: high winds. "Vent violent. Soyez prudent," read the electronic sign on the motorway en route to the Pont du Gard, a Roman bridge and aqueduct that is the most visited ancient site in France. Nîmes is known for its Roman ruins, including the best preserved amphitheatre and temple from the Roman world, but I put off being buffeted about on a walking tour by taking refuge inside the Carré d'Art.

The museum focuses on contemporary art from 1960 to the present, with nearly 400 works and a solid line-up of temporary exhibitions. While I found the collection impressive, I was blown away by the building itself, a functional sculpture of glass, metal, concrete and steel.

British architect Lord Norman Foster triumphed over some of the biggest names in architecture with his design for the museum, a modern interpretation of Roman architecture. Built on the site of a Roman forum, the interior layout mimics that of a Roman villa with galleries built around a central light court. The exterior, a wall of glass, reflects the blazing white Corinthian columns of Nîmes' Roman temple across the street. The exteriors of the two structures play off each other, one from the first century B.C., the other 1993.

The best view of the temple is from the rooftop terrace of the museum where the restaurant Ciel draws a lunch crowd. Too cold and windy for outdoor dining, I sat at a table behind Foster's floor-to-ceiling windows and ordered a Nîmes specialty: brandade. This codfish pie, made from salted cod poached in milk and whipped into a purée, originated through trade with Newfoundland. Ships from Canada brought cod and returned with salt harvested from the Mediterranean's coastal marshes.

I thought of those Newfoundland fishermen, no strangers to rain and wind, and imagined they would have felt right at home this week in Languedoc.

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING: Air France flies from Toronto to Montpellier with a connection in Paris, www.airfrance.com.

SLEEPING: **Hotel Mercure Centre**, Montpellier, modern three-star hotel, walking distance to the old city, www.mercure.com/gb/hotel-3043-mercure-montpellier/index.shtml. \$122-\$206

Baudon de Mauny, Montpellier, boutique hotel in an 18th-century mansion in the old city, www.baudondemauny.com. \$240-\$364

Hotel de Paris, Sète, artsy hotel on the canal and near the market, www.hoteldeparis-sete.com. \$131-\$371

Chateau Hermitage de Combas, castle built on a 14th-century fortress in vineyards outside the village of Servian, apartments with kitchens, www.charming-chateau.com. \$811-\$1,898 per week

Royal Hotel, Nîmes, three-star hotel in the heart of town, www.royalhotel-nimes.com. \$69-\$220

DINING: Le Carré, 3 place Saint Ravy, Montpellier, www.lecarreresto.com. \$13-\$36

L'Insensé, at Musée Fabre, Montpellier, www.jardinessens.com/fr/insense-montpellier-e18.html. \$30-\$40

Paris Méditerranée, 47 rue Pierre Semard, Sète \$34-\$41

Ciel, at Carré d'Art, Nîmes, www.lecieldenimes.fr. \$22 for three-course lunch.

WEB SURFING: France Tourism Development Agency, Atout France, www.franceguide.com

Languedoc Regional Tourist Office, www.sunfrance.com

AVOIDING: Don't sound like a tourist by calling Sète the "Venice of France" or Nîmes "Little Rome." Stay away from the Odysseum in Montpellier, a garish, Disney-esque entertainment center.

GOING: The rainiest month is September, followed by March.

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Sète is the biggest fishing port on the French Mediterranean.
