

# Languedoc



A pretty cove at Collioure, along Languedoc's "Vermillion coast," not far from Spain.

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*Think of Languedoc as the "other" south of France, the antidote to the crowds and commercialism of the French Riviera.*

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Stretching from the Rhone River on the east to the Pyrenees on the Spanish border on the southwest, this arc of the Mediterranean coast enjoys 300 days of sunshine a year, miles of beaches, clusters of medieval villages and treasured remnants of

Roman civilization. What it lacks is the fame of Provence and the Côte d'Azur—and the hordes of tourists and high prices that go along with international notoriety.

Though it is not well known in North America, Languedoc is quite popular among the French. Mont-

pellier, the capital of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, consistently ranks high in nationwide polls as a desirable place to live. Proof lies in statistics. The fastest growing city in France, it draws 4,000 new residents a year, many of them retirees from the north. But this city of 250,000 is hardly a geriatric haven; students count for a third of the population.

Antigone, a mixed-used neighborhood designed in the 1980s by Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill, is much touted, but we found the neoclassical style false and the surroundings sterile. The Odysseum entertainment area in the new Port Marianne neighborhood reminded us of a gaudy U.S. shopping mall. We much prefer the old city section of Montpellier, where 17th- and 18th-century mansions line meandering pedestrian-friendly streets.

One such mansion is the boutique hotel Baudon de Mauny, built in 1777 as the private house of one of the king's regional directors ([www.baudondemauny.com](http://www.baudondemauny.com), \$248-\$375). English-speaking proprietor Alain de Bordas, whose family has owned the house since 1829, has been careful to preserve its architectural integrity while adding modern amenities, such as air conditioning, Internet and cable TV. Floors of local stone show the outlines of fossilized shells; ceilings tower 14 feet. One of five guest rooms served as the mansion's music room, as evidenced by the plaster relief of musical instru-

ments above windows and doors.

Less than 10 percent of guests are from the U.S. because Languedoc is not on their radar, says Bordas. For day trips he suggests his guests pack a picnic lunch and spend the afternoon on the Mediterranean, 15 minutes away by car, or carve out a few hours for the Musée Fabre, a short walk away.

After a four-year renovation, the Musée Fabre ranks as one of the best fine art museums outside Paris, with European works from the Renaissance to the present. Among the contemporary paintings is the world's largest collection of Pierre Soulages, who continues to create in his studio secreted away along the coast. For dining, the museum houses L'Insensé (<http://www.jardindessens.com>, \$31-\$41), the creation of Jacques and Laurent Pourcel, brother chefs behind the cuisine at the Michelin two-star Jardin des Sens. For lunch, we chose a starter of thin slices of Iberian ham and fresh pear and a main course of classic beef tartar served with Domaine de Silène, a Les Coteaux du Languedoc vintage that took the top red winemaker award in an international challenge in 2009.

For dinner, our top choices in Montpellier were Le Carre ([www.lecarreresto.com](http://www.lecarreresto.com), \$13-\$37), a bistro housed in a 17th-century spice vault, and Le Volodia ([www.volodia-restaurant.com](http://www.volodia-restaurant.com), \$15-\$58), where modern décor contrasts with the

historic setting in the old city. We particularly enjoyed Le Carre's plat du jour, a tasty veal stew, and a glass of Pic Saint Loup, another Les Coteaux AOC from vineyards on a mountain slope north of the city.

Languedoc-Roussillon is the second largest *appellation d'origine contrôlée* region in France with nearly 40 AOCs. Among the other noteworthy appellations I sipped on my journey were Faugères, an excellent choice with meat; the fruity St-Chinian; and Languedoc's oldest AOC, La Clairette, which has been produced since the 15th century and pairs well with seafood.

Not surprisingly, fish and seafood are found in abundance on menus in Languedoc. Sète is the largest fishing port on the French Mediterranean with trawlers heading out to sea each morning and shellfish farms scattered across the lagoon separating its island location from the mainland. At Sète's bistro Paris Méditerranée, (\$35-\$43) we relished a starter of clams and mussels in a lemon bouillon with fresh peas and asparagus. Dinner at Quai 17 ([www.legrand-hotelsete.com](http://www.legrand-hotelsete.com), \$13-\$58) featured an excellent main course of turbot ravioli with mushrooms and spin-

ach in a meurette sauce.

Quieter than St. Tropez, Sète is more fishing village than resort, though it boasts 12 kilometers of beach and 300 yacht moorings. The



Hillside vineyards in the Languedoc region.

population of 43,000 doubles in summer, especially during mid-August jousting tournaments on the canal, a tradition dating from the 17th century. Contestants perched on boats wield lances to knock opponents into the water as crowds cheer for the red and blue teams.

For Languedoc stays of a week or more, a good base of operations near the medieval village of Béziers is Chateau Hermitage de Combas, a castle built on a 14th-century fortress. English-speaking owner Alexandre Rech, a former ELF oil company executive, converted the property to lodgings in 2009 ([www.charming-chateau.com](http://www.charming-chateau.com), \$836-\$1,955 per week). My

apartment with kitchen in the main house was comfortable, but more homey than luxurious.

A drive into the countryside led to a fine dinner at Le Domaine Pradines le Haut (<http://ledo-mainie1.free.fr>, \$27-\$52), beloved by locals, but little known to tourists. Chef Francis Santure created a starter of salmon, tomato carpaccio with wild asparagus harvested from the vineyards and a main course of beef tournedos in a wine and mushroom sauce. Dessert was a decadent combination of crowned cherry, kiwi, pear, pineapple and a chocolate soufflé with chocolate fondue.

In the nearby Gallo-Roman town of Serignan, chef Bruno Cappellari oversees fine cuisine at L'Harmonie ([www.lharmonie.fr](http://www.lharmonie.fr), \$26-\$86), a Michelin Bib Gourmand designee. Our leisurely lunch began with poached eggs and parsley crème followed by poultry with rice pilaf and then a parfait of pineapple salad, coconut mousse, passion fruit sorbet and coriander jelly.

Though this area of Languedoc dates from the Roman era, the region's most significant Roman ruins lie northeast in Nîmes. "Little Rome," a city built on seven hills. It also is known as the hottest city in France, and best avoided during peak summer months when temperatures hit 100 degrees or more.

The Pont du Gard, 30 minutes from central Nîmes, is France's most-visited ancient structure and

a UNESCO World Heritage site. Built around A.D. 50, this highest bridge and aqueduct in the Roman world transported water to Nîmes for 500 years. In Nîmes, an elliptical amphitheater, a version of Rome's Colosseum, seated 24,000 people for gladiator contests in the first century and seats 17,000 now for bullfights, sporting events and theatrical performances. Maison Carrée, or Square House, dates from the same era and is considered the best preserved Roman temple in the world. When Thomas Jefferson, a lover of classical architecture, saw it during his visit as U.S. Ambassador to France, he described himself as "lovesick." He would be even more impressed today. After years of cleaning, scaffolds were removed earlier this year (2011) revealed blindingly white limestone columns that look as though they were erected yesterday.

The best view of the temple is across the street from the Carre d'Art, a modern art museum designed by British architect Lord Norman Foster as a contemporary interpretation of the temple's design. The terrace of the museum restaurant, Ciel ([www.lecieldenimes.fr](http://www.lecieldenimes.fr), \$22.50 for three-course lunch), overlooks the temple square and is a good place to order the Nîmes specialty, *brandade*, a puree of poached codfish and cream. We enjoyed it in the chef's codfish pie topped with salad greens. 