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France's secret wild west

This area of stunning castles and pretty villages now has some seriously chic places to stay, says **Jane Knight**

This is a castle that commands serious adjectives: imposing, impregnable, impossible. Extending almost seamlessly out of the sheer ridge of rock rising from the hills — you have to look hard to see where rock ends and castle begins — Peyrepertuse seems all the more amazing once you have scrambled up the 800m limestone hill that supports the double fortification and are looking down on its elongated triangle of a keep.

Once part of France's defence against Aragon, this astounding construction with a sheer drop of several hundred metres on all sides, is less than two hours from the Disney-esque castle of Carcassonne. Like Carcassonne, it became a stronghold of the Cathars, a Christian sect who abhorred Church corruption, longed for a more simplistic religion, and against whom Pope Innocent III preached the Albigensian crusade. Like Carcassonne, it was surrendered as the 13th-century crusade ravaged the surrounding countryside.

Yet while Carcassonne is consistently one of France's most visited sites — and on a sweltering hot day in July, swarms of tourists in the fabled cité are supporting a fast trade in plastic swords and armour — in Peyrepertuse, the only trade for the smattering of visitors is in ice cream. It's a similar story in the nearby castle of Quéribus, with its polygonal keep and distant views across to the Pyrenees.

This is back-country France, little more than an arrow's flight from the well-trodden tourist trail, but full of car-stopping scenery: forgotten villages plastered along rocky outcrops in the middle of wild, herb-scented hills; an 11km-long beach; and some seriously good vine-

“This is back-country France, full of car-stopping scenery; where everything is quiet, even in peak season”

yards. Everything is quiet, even in peak season; in a week criss-crossing the wild terrain of Languedoc-Roussillon, we didn't come across a traffic jam outside of Carcassonne and rarely bumped into any fellow Brits. What we did find were some unexpectedly chic places to stay (see box) ranging from a former vineyard, complete with château, to an old convent.

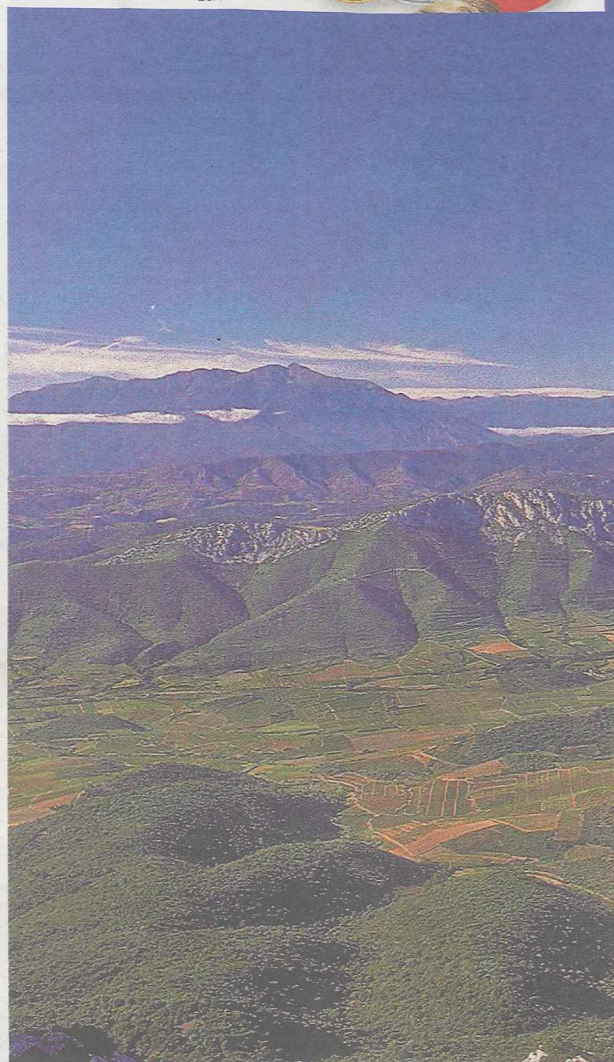
That's not to say that this almost tourist-free paradise comes without disadvantages, as my son and I find when we alight from our pleasant four-hour train journey from Paris to Béziers. With no car-hire office open at the train station on a Sunday in July, we take a €36 taxi ride to the airport, where their office opens, very reluctantly, at 1.30pm. “Madame, we are open every day of the week so it's not too much to have a Sunday morning off” is the angry response when I query why they were not open earlier in peak season.

Yes, Languedoc-Roussillon isn't your normal holiday destination, but car-hire glitch aside, that's what makes it so special. Take Pézenas, the pretty village where we head upon leaving the airport. The maze of quaint streets in this former regional centre where the playwright Molière took his troupe is almost deserted despite some intriguing artisan shops, including one selling only products made from cork (cork handbag anyone?). Following the winding route up to the château, with its sign proclaiming that Julius Caesar made his fortress here, we stop to try the famous Pâté de Pézenas, a drum-shaped mince pie, and another local speciality, *berlingots*, or humpbugs.

While Pézenas is a long way from the Versailles of the South that some guidebooks claim, its 17th-century dwellings have lovely details, including turrets, vaulted roofs or vine-clad exteriors. It's quaint and it's quirky — looking up to one of the balconies, we spot three pet baskets, each with an umbrella for a sunshade.

In nearby Limoux, it's just as sleepy, despite a justifiable claim to fame as the place where a second fermentation — the action that makes champagne bubbly — was discovered. Local lore has it that the monk Dom Pérignon, of champagne fame, spent some time at the Abbaye de Saint-Hilaire, where the pleasant local fizz *Blanquette de Limoux* was first made (some accounts even hold that he was expelled for embezzlement). Whether he took the idea with him or not, *Blanquette* was produced at Saint-Hilaire in 1531, centuries before its more famous fizzy counterpart.

Yet inside, while a lot is made of a curious reading pulpit halfway up the wall in the refectory, there is almost nothing referring to the abbey's alcoholic past; the cellar is



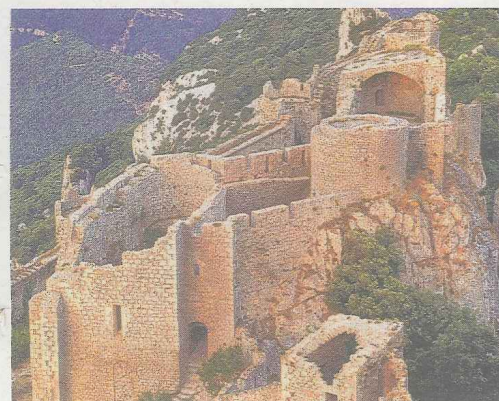
dark and empty, and there is certainly no explanation of how a second fermentation works, something that's standard in every champagne cellar in Reims. Want to taste some Limoux? You'll have to go to the shop over the road.

You can pick up a decent Limoux for €5 but there is a lot more to taste of in this region. Local wine expert Matthew Stubbs terms the area the most “exciting in the world, with everything from a sparkling wine to a fortified red within an hour's drive”. Where once the majority of the grape harvest used to go into making brandy for Napoleon's army, it is now being channelled into some decent wines, from the rare *Picpoul white* to the earthier *Corbières red*, whose flavour comes from the wild rosemary and thyme-filled garrigues.

And then there's Noilly Prat, the vermouth made in the small harbour town of Marseillan since 1813. Like all good recipes, this one is secret, but it involves taking *blanc de blanc* wine, adding about 20 different plants and spices, including iris roots, coriander and orange peel, and leaving it in barrels for a year under both the region's baking summer sun and winter frost. Only the original dry Noilly Prat is exported, but in the factory you can buy

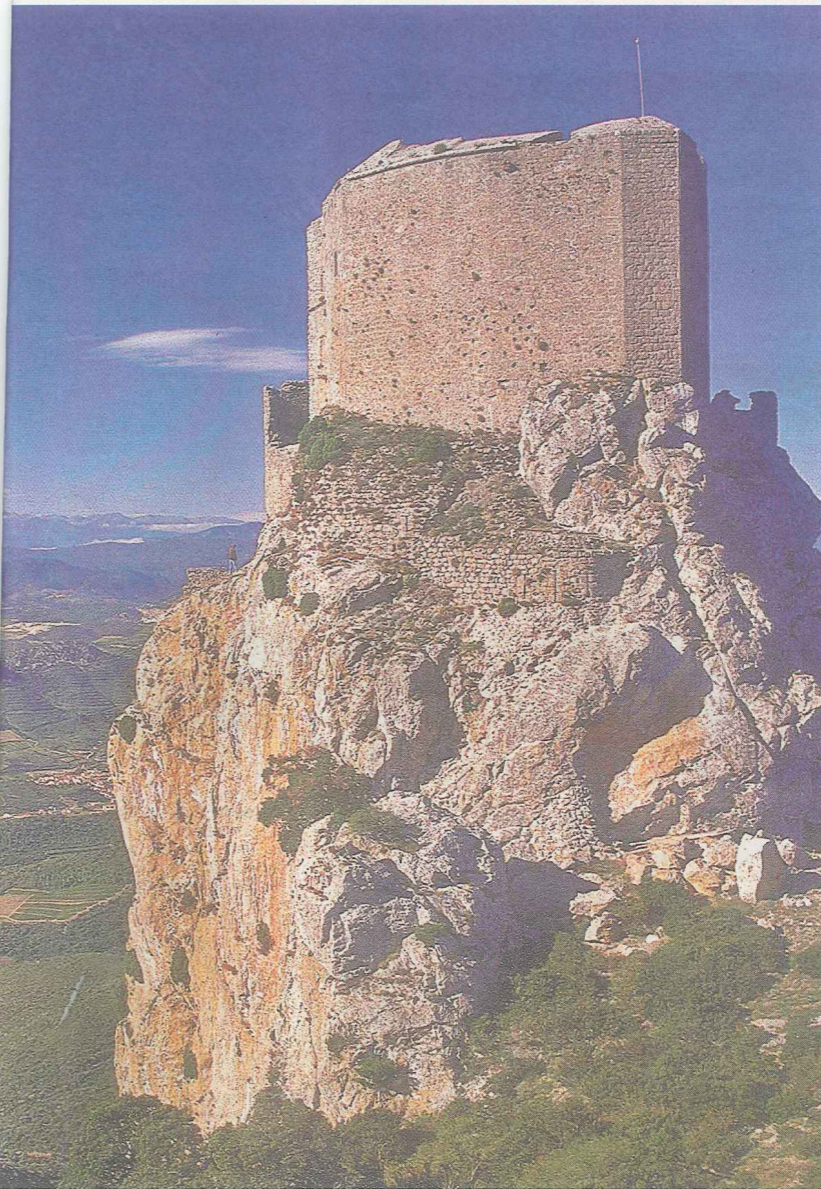


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restaurants doing a busy trade line a harbour where halyards clang in the breeze. We climb aboard one of the yachts owned by a wizened local named Albert to tour the impressive Étang de Thau, a lagoon some 19km by 4.5km, in whose shallow, warm waters both fish and shellfish flourish — about 10 per cent of France's oysters are produced here.

As a summer storm rages, we sip rosé and look at the monstrosity that is the commercial port of Sète. It's not the only blot on the landscape; there are some modern, characterless beach resorts in both Cap d'Agde and Marseillan Plage. But there's no need to bother with them when along the eastern shore of the lagoon is an 11km-long bar of sand, enough room to give space for most beach-goers.

In any case, we don't linger too long on the coast, preferring to head inland to grasp what this little slice of France is all about. Eschewing Béziers with its fortified cathedral where thousands of citizens were massacred in the Albigensian crusade, we make for the quiet, scenic valley of the Orb. On the drive from Capestang to Hérépian, I lose count of the number of times I stop at the sheer heart-stopping beauty of it all.

Peyrepertuse Castle, far left; Quéribus Castle, above, and Roquebrun on the Orb river

Need to know

Jane Knight was a guest of Rail Europe (08448 484070, rail europe.co.uk), which has returns from London to Béziers for £115pp. The entire journey takes 7 hours 30 minutes, but there is no extra charge to break your journey in Paris. The journey from Paris to Béziers takes 4 hours 15 minutes. Carrentals.co.uk, a price comparison site which gives car rental deals, has a week's rental from Béziers Airport for £98.

Best places to stay

Château Les Carrasses, Capestang

You don't expect to find château chic like this in the backroads of France. Not only does Château Les Carrasses, bottom, provide luxury self-catering akin to what you would expect from a boutique hotel, it is also incredibly family friendly, and has the kind of kids' club you rarely find in Europe. The Irish owners, Karl and Anita O'Hanlon, who are parents of three children themselves, have created somewhere they would want to stay as a family. “It's the best part of a hotel and the best of self-catering,” Karl says.

He's spot on. The old 19th-century wine estate, complete with turreted château, has 28 self-catering apartments dotted around its grounds, some with private gardens and terraces, others with pools. We stayed in the old refectory for wine pickers, which, with its two bedrooms and well-equipped kitchen, was decorated in perfect shabby chic French style, with stone floors and lots of light, white furnishings.

There's a pool and tennis courts but the best bit for families is the kids' club, which Anita, a child psychologist, developed as the antithesis to the kind of clubs that make children sit down “for two hours of enforced beading”. My son, who is normally allergic to kids' clubs, loved the outdoorsy, flexible approach here.

Although the château is self-catering, there's a good on-site restaurant with incredibly tasty tapas dishes from €2-€9 and three-course Mediterranean meals if you feel like it (mains about €18-€20). You can also get breakfast at €12 or have everything from a pizza to a barbecue pack delivered to your apartment.

Details Seven nights for a family of four staying in July or August is from £1,630 (lescarrasses.com). The kids' club costs €200 per child for a week or €50 a day.



with lime-washed walls, natural stone, linens and Blanc d'Ivoire furniture. The pick of them is the large two-bedroom suite at the top with its own terrace and kitchen, although somewhat surprisingly, the bathroom doesn't have a stand-alone shower. Meals are served table d'hôte style in the large kitchen around the wooden table, and they are worth having. Our dinner included scallops, a hare and vegetable tatin, chocolate pudding and cheese. There's a small outdoor pool and another inside as part of the spa.

Details Peak-season prices €189-€299 a night per room (garrigae-resorts.com/en/Couvent-d-Herepian). Dinner costs €29 for adults, €12 for children, and breakfast is €16 for adults, €8 for children.



Port Rive Gauche, Marseillan

There's a great laid-back beach feel to this converted 19th-century wine storehouse, left, which now houses 11 self-catering apartments just around the corner from Marseillan's pretty harbour. With wooden floors and artificially distressed furniture, the two-bedroom apartments done out in white and beige have balconies overlooking the Étang de Thau with its oyster beds — the perfect place to sip a Noilly Prat Marseillan cocktail, available from the local factory. There is a small kitchenette and technical touches, from a flatscreen television to an iPod with docking station. Hire bicycles to explore or have a massage in the small spa. Although the apartments are self-catering, you can have breakfast served in your apartment for €12.50pp.

Details Peak-season prices from €275-€285 per apartment per night, with weekly rates from €1,701-€1,820 (garrigae-resorts.com).

Le Couvent d'Hérépian

From the outside, this hotel doesn't look particularly promising, lying in the middle of the village with an unprepossessing sign. Yet inside, this romantic little bolthole, top, in a former 17th-century convent, and it is full of beams, tiled floors and a line of candles leading up the stone stairs. The 13 suites are in greys and white

