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What's up, Languedoc?

Savvy travellers are swapping the gridlocked Côte d'Azur for a spicy mix of Gallic and Catalan culture on the edge of the Pyrenees. Long-time fan **Julian Allason** reveals the region's secrets. Photographs by **Martin Morrell**



IN THE DAYS BEFORE HIGH-SPEED TRAINS got you door-to-door faster than airlines, we used to drive down to Languedoc, the magical south-western corner of France. The instructions were straightforward: from Calais, head south until you hit Avignon and then turn right. Montpellier, Béziers, Narbonne, Perpignan – that coastal arc was the other South of France, the one that had not been ruined by publicity and overdevelopment. A generation on, and it still hasn't been spoiled, despite an occasional half-hearted attempt. Instead, the five departments that make up the region of Languedoc-Roussillon (natives call it Le Midi) have pursued an alternative path – and not for the first time in their impossibly complicated post-Roman history.

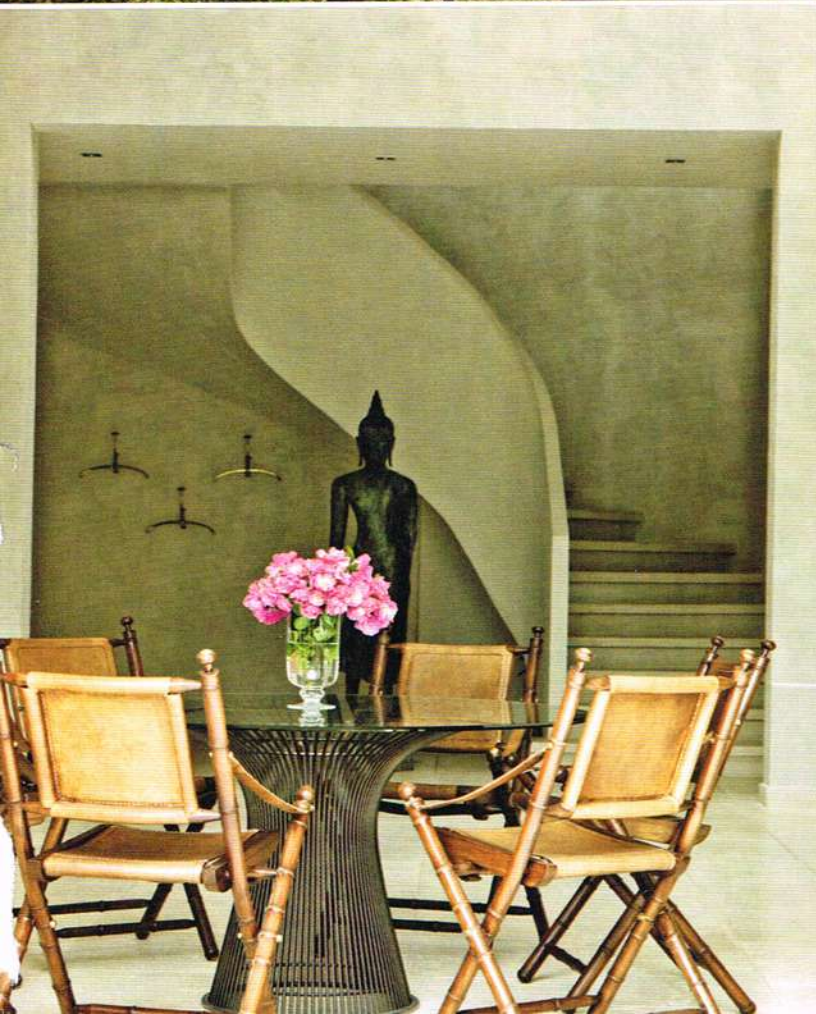
In place of the ritzy resorts and traffic queues of the Côte d'Azur, Languedoc has charming little hotels, long sandy beaches and Roman aqueducts. The Paris fashion world regards this as the Rive Gauche Sud (the Left Bank of the South): a writers' and painters' refuge more than a stage for actors and media types to declaim from. Given the cultural associations of the region, this is hardly surprising: Salvador Dalí held that quirky Perpignan, home to Surrealists and Fauvists, was 'the centre of the universe'. This suggests something of the eccentricity and self-absorption of a region unimpressed by the foreign. Spot a

second language on a notice and it will be Catalan, not Spanish, let alone English. Provence this is not.

The further south one ventures from Perpignan into the heart of the Pyrénées-Orientales, the less frequently the French *tricolore* is seen, and the more often it is the Catalan *Senyera* that flutters in the breeze. A growing independence campaign in Spanish Catalunya is causing a frisson in Paris, for this region has only been French for three-and-a-half centuries. To experience its distinct cultural identity, board the Petit Train Jaune at the fortified river town of **Villefranche-de-Conflent**. Painted in the Catalan national colours and heavily subsidised by the French government, ostensibly to encourage tourism, the antique train grinds its way up the Pyrenees over a switchback of passes. At one point the line bridges a ravine between two mountains before arriving at **Mont-Louis**, a bastion built by Louis XIV's military engineer Marshal Vauban to defend the border town. The Foreign Legion still uses it for training. On the walls, scientists may be glimpsed at work on an experiment in solar energy that Spanish conspiracy theorists insist is a secret weapon. The concentrated rays of the sun focus to create a temperature of 3,000°C, melting steel and even slate. (The scientists' next trick is to brew a solar espresso.)

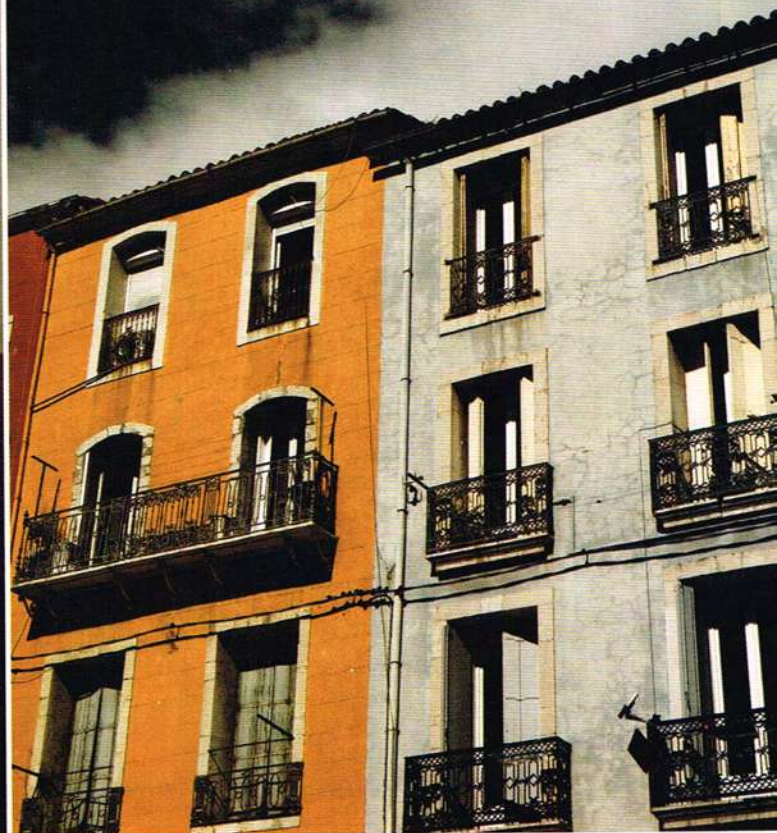
Walking **El Camí dels Bons Homes**, the escape route to Spain taken by 13th-century Cathars fleeing conversion by St Dominic,

Above, a view into the kitchen at La Fraissinède. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the grounds of Château Les Carrasses; dinner at Le Trésor guesthouse; vineyards in the Aude countryside; the dining room at La Fraissinède. Previous pages: a classic Citroën in Capestang; Château Les Carrasses



Passé devant « La Féria ». Je n'ai rien vu. Tout m'est refusé. A Recouvrance j'entr'aperçois, sur la cuisse d'un matekot – et de ce spectacle fréquent à bord pourtant je ne suis pas blasé – un accordéon se prier et se déplier.

Jean Genet



is rewarding if challenging. Little wonder Pyrenean ponies are hardy. Exploring with Josep Maria Boix, chef-proprietor of the acclaimed **Torre del Remei** (www.torredelremei.com; doubles from about £245) on the Spanish side of the border, I remark how handsome they are. 'Délicieux aussi!' comes the reply. The cuisine hereabouts is an exceptional mixture of mountain food – game especially – cooked in Roussillon wine grown in the foothills, and fish from the Mediterranean sparkling far below. The charming **Château de Riell** (www.chateauderiell.com; doubles from about £125) is hidden away in the spa village of **Molitg-les-Bains**, but the hotel's kitchen is famed throughout the region for its light, creative interpretation of a hardy alpine cuisine. The château also makes a comfortable touring base, being a 45-minute drive up from Perpignan, and a mere 20 minutes from Villefranche and that little yellow train.

Circling back towards **Carcassonne**, one passes through eerie rock formations like organ pipes that characterise the Cathar country in which the sect hid from the Albigensian crusaders. As you round a hairpin, the spectacle of Carcassonne's Cité, the largest medieval fortress in Europe, is revealed, towering above the *ville basse*. The brave may walk its ramparts, but the wise and the solvent relax in the romantic five-star **Hôtel de la Cité** (www.hoteldelacite.com; doubles from about £170) with

views over battlements to the mountains beyond. Not to be missed is its **La Barbacane** restaurant (dinner from about £110 for two; lunch about £50) for Michelin-starred spare ribs with pig's ears and trotters to get one in the medieval mood.



ARGESSE IS HARDLY REQUIRED for a stay at **Le Trésor** (www.le-tresor.com; doubles from about £65), a guesthouse of inimitable charm in a 200-year-old building on the village square of **Sonnac-sur-l'Hers**.

It has just five bedrooms and is run by a young British couple, William and Tilly Howard. Should you be travelling with your extended family, it is possible to take over Le Trésor in its entirety. Also within half an hour's drive of Carcassonne are glorious houses to rent such as the six-bedroom **La Fraissinède** (www.masonroseprivate.com; from £8,000 per week) near **Lagrasse**, one of Les Plus Beaux Villages de France.

But why stay put when the historic **Canal du Midi** is ready to dream you east in the shade of plane trees lining the towpath? The opportunity for families to make like Mr Toad on the most beautiful canal in France is provided by European Waterways on the handsome narrowboat **Enchanté** (www.gobarging.com; £25,380 for a six-night, six-person charter). Four can do it in style aboard Orient-Express's magnificently restored *péniche*-hotel,

Above, from left: chef Jean-Paul Boi at his restaurant, Le 9, in Nîmes; townhouses in the Mediterranean port town of Sète, at the end of the Canal du Midi. Opposite, an arcaded terrace overlooking the garden at the Jardins Secrets, a bed-and-breakfast in a tranquil corner of Nîmes



Alouette (www.afloatinfrance.com; £17,800 for six nights), with an equal number of crew to serve up foie gras picnics and candlelit dinners on the voyage from Carcassonne to Béziers, where there is a spectacular eight-lock staircase.

OVERLOOKING THE PLAIN of the Hérault from its rocky spur, **Béziers** is all about wine and bullfighting. A perfect time to visit is during the four-day *feria* in mid-August, when both passions can be exploited to the full. Softer emotions are catered for nearby at

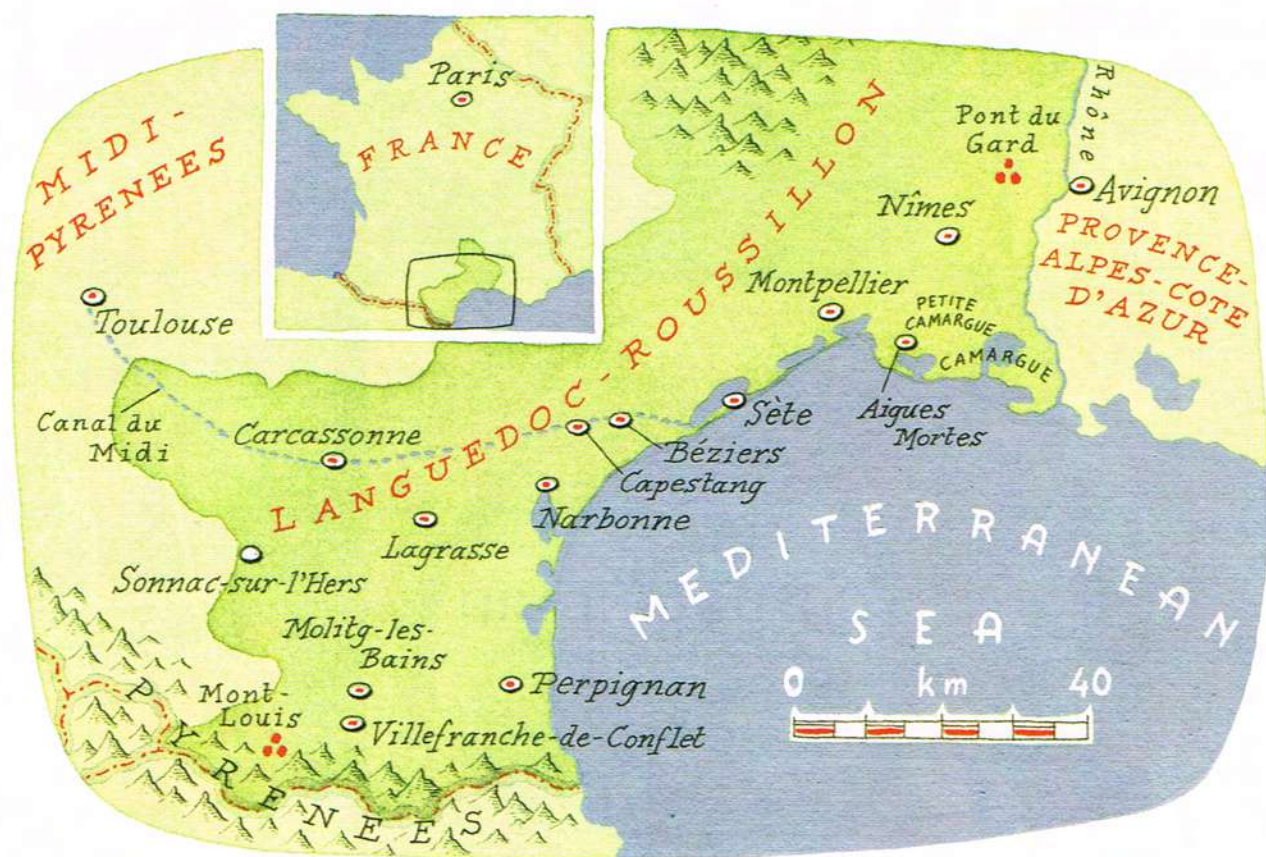
Le Couvent de d'Hérépian (www.mrandmrsmith.com; doubles from about £130), a restored 17th-century convent with 13 suites, which provides atmosphere, value and inspired cooking. For families with children under 10, **Country Kids** (www.country-kids.fr; from about £5,390 per week for four people), has half a dozen self-catering apartments on an old estate equipped with tree-houses, climbing frames and pools. Then there is **Château Les Carrasses** (www.lescarrasses.com; doubles from about £185), near **Capestang**. It's not a hotel but an assemblage: a blend of 28 luxurious self-catering suites, apartments and villas, like a laid-back country club that has collided with a winery.

Béziers is not the terminus of the **Canal du Midi**, for Louis XIV's grand plan was to link the Atlantic to the Mediterranean,

avoiding the need to sail goods around the Iberian peninsula with the delay and danger that entailed. Today the canal washes into **Sète**, a decidedly authentic fishing port blessed with 20km of sandy beach. Right on it are two spectacular villas, **Shell Beach** and **Villero** (www.sjvillas.co.uk; from £6,500 per week), which look as if Le Corbusier had been let loose in a glass foundry. For me, it was love at first sight and I rented one last summer, swimming in the pool, struggling with the infernally complicated *café automatique* and being pampered by a British staff of three. The villas have their own speedboat with which to explore the canals of Sète. The local sport is water-jousting, in which galleys bearing 'chevaliers' armed with lances are rowed at each other. The winner, being the driest knight, is kissed thrice by the mayor resplendent in his *tricolore* sash.

From Sète, the coast curves up towards the mysterious plain of the **Camargue**, formed by the Rhône delta. A few kilometres inland is the historic university city of **Montpellier**, now undergoing a gastronomic and cultural renaissance. There are plenty of charming places to stay, notably **Les 4 Etoiles** (www.les4etoiles.com; doubles from about £80), a central guesthouse with four beautifully decorated rooms on the top floor of a 1930s house. **Baudon de Mauny** (www.chicretreats.com; doubles from about £140) is a small hotel that feels more like a château than

Above, entrance to the Jardins Secrets, Nîmes. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Villa Sarnelly in the Domaine de Verchant; Celine Gauthier, owner of Après La Plage boutique in Aigues-Mortes; a square in the town; alfresco breakfast tables at Le Trésor. Next page, the kitchen at La Fraissinède



GETTING THERE British Airways (www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Toulouse, EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) from Luton and Gatwick to Montpellier. Eurostar (www.eurostar.com) goes direct from St Pancras International to Avignon on Saturdays in summer, and to Montpellier year round with a change to TGV at Lille Europe. The TGV also serves Sète, Béziers, Narbonne and Carcassonne; see www.raileurope.co.uk for details.

a townhouse, and has remained in the same family for seven generations. It is also one of those rare boutique hotels that work as well for families as for couples.

Outside Montpellier, just 15 minutes' drive from the beach, is the discreetly luxurious **Domaine de Verchant** (www.domaine.deverchant.com; doubles from about £300), a designer hotel and vineyard owned by the Schlumberger family and much influenced by contemporary Italian style. The application of modern design to the rural Midi has created something of a stir in France, and it is not hard to see why. Among the 26 bedrooms and apartments is Neige d'Avril, a suite dedicated to the pursuit of love, complete with round bed and hydromassage bath for two, yet without the slightest hint of tack. Also on the estate is **Villa Sarnelly**, an ultra-modern conversion of a traditional family mansion with three bedrooms and an apartment with service support from the hotel.

TO THE EAST, IN THE GARD DEPARTMENT, is the ancient city of **Nîmes**, settled by veterans of Julius Caesar's legions and still rich in Roman buildings such as the Maison Carrée and, 20km to the north, the astonishing, triple-decker **Pont du Gard**, built as an aqueduct serving the city. In a quiet quarter is the **Jardins Secrets** (www.jardins.secrets.net; doubles from about £165), a hidden domain in the tradition of Alain-Fournier's luminous novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, evoking the lost world of childhood: it's a magical

B&B with a spa, boutique, cloister and walled garden. In short, the Languedoc writ small.

What ties this diverse region together is not only its turbulent history, but a lingering tradition of chivalry and courtly love. This was once expressed in the lyric poetry and ballads of the troubadours who wandered from castle to castle in the Middle Ages, knitting into romance the mythology of a brutal age. Echoes of it are still to be heard in the oral tradition that clings on in the mountains, at the exuberant *ferias*, and in the aspirations of the Catalan people. To experience it in its purest form, head south to the waters of the **Petite Camargue**. These *étangs* – briny lakes, cut off from the sea by sandbars – echo with the lament of flamingos and the distant hoofbeat of wild grey horses. Sea lavender and tamarisk flourish under the flat, blue light of a landscape barely altered in a millennium.

As you scan the low horizon, the only sign of human habitation is the distant outline of the great citadel of **Aigues-Mortes** – the 'dead waters' – its medieval walls rising out of the *étangs*. From this fortified port, King Louis IX sent forth his crusaders in galleys. Today, even the sea has drawn back, leaving the citadel stranded in the marshlands. Today is Wednesday, and a lively open-air market is in progress, with everything from smoked hams to hosiery on sale. A small crowd gathers to watch a blacksmith burnishing a suit of armour. Behind him, a rack of swords glints in the unforgiving sun, as if ready to be drawn by a new detachment of crusaders.