

La Languedocienne

In the summer of 2005, I continued to explore my favorite region in France, the Languedoc, as well as venturing into Roussillon (sometimes known as French Catalonia), with whom Languedoc is linked. The region of Languedoc-Roussillon, formed in the 1960's from two historic provinces, is a vast area located in the southwest between Toulouse, the Massif Central, the Pyrénées and the Mediterranean. Languedoc-Roussillon is sparsely populated, but contains a wide variety of landscape: rocky slopes, whitewater gorges, alpine meadows and forests, ski resorts in rugged peaks, stretches of vineyards, broad plains, thermal springs and spas, and the beaches of the Mediterranean. One of the least industrialized regions in France, Languedoc-Roussillon is not nearly as fashionable as its neighbor Provence. Sturdy stone villages, unassuming churches, sun-splashed fountains and dappled courtyards are never far from ruined abbeys, monasteries, castles and the aqueducts and other remnants of ancient Roman civilization. Quiet and rural, the benevolent climate ensures that life is unhurried, casual and oriented toward the outdoors. Scents of yellow broom, wild thyme, and lavender fill the evening air along with the sounds of the cicada, and those who take pleasure in solitude will find much to enjoy.

The first part of my trip was spent in Montréal de l'Aude, a hilltop village west of Carcassonne, where I spent time with a British family making a go of living in France by offering artistic residencies in their home. Montréal is situated in a part of Languedoc known as the Lauragais, an immense plain lying between the Pyrénées to the south and the Montagne Noire to the north. This sun-dried plain produces an enormous bulk of France's wheat, which seemed to whisper in the slightest breeze and caused the landscape to appear blonde. When I arrived in mid-June, the wheat was being harvested, a dusty job, leaving stubbly fields to be ploughed under to support another planting. Temperatures soared into the high 90's each day without a hint of rain in an endlessly blue sky, and dust settled over everything.

The Lauragais is divided in half by the beautiful, placid, murky green *Canal du Midi*, which links the Mediterranean with the Atlantic and there, the torrid heat of the plain was tempered by ancient plane trees which line its entire length (providing shade and controlling evaporation). This was a popular spot with farmhands, walkers, and groups of bicyclists, all of whom rested on the towpath for a nap, the noonday meal or a sip of water. A steady stream of boat traffic (speed limit: 4 miles per hour) kept lock keepers busy with an international array of captains. I met an American family from Chicago on their second trip down the canal and overheard many conversations in languages other than French. By the end of my first week, I was beginning to think of myself as a *Languedocienne*.

My mornings were spent in a cool corner of the garden working on new drawings, while in the afternoons I ventured out into the heat in my rented Citroën. Being so close to Carcassonne, I felt compelled to check it out and began by stopping at the Arab market on the outskirts of the new city, followed by the Saturday market in the city square. A mix of cultures abounds here and I found items of interest me at both markets. The old part of Carcassonne looks like a fairy-tale city, built on a hill and visible from the Lauragais plain in every direction. Considered the greatest fortress and medieval monument of its kind in Europe, it was by far the largest tourist site I visited on the entire trip. Satisfied to have seen it, I was relieved to leave it behind. Enchanting, numerous canal villages, where much of the commerce is located along the towpaths, were more to my taste and easy to explore on foot. The Montagne Noire (or Black Mountain, the southernmost point of the Massif Central) provided a different form of relief from the heat, with lakes and forested areas open to the public, and walking trails that inevitably led into small, delightful villages.

After staying in Montréal for 10 days, I begin my travels in earnest. The River Aude forms a spectacular canyon in an area known as Razès, somewhat defining the western edge of the Corbières region, with canyons and prehistoric caves, including the painted caves at Niaux. Equally stunning were the beautifully preserved medieval villages I visited: Alet-les-Bains, Mirepoix, Fanjeux, St. Hilaire, Rennes-le-Château and Limoux (where the Benedictine monks invented France's oldest sparkling wine, Blanquette de Limoux, the forerunner of champagne). Next, I drove into the Corbières, the scrubby, mountainous area known as the badlands of France. Dry, arid and lightly populated, it has found a vocation thanks to wine. An influx of new viticulture came here drawn by the untapped potential of the land and the opportunity to succeed at a cost far below what it would be in more established regions, and miles of vineyards added some color to the parched landscape.

The Corbières was also a stronghold of Catharism, a religion that had spread to France from the Balkans. Reformists, the Cathars tried to rein in the corruption and decadence of the Catholic Church, but were hunted down and brutally suppressed. Aware of the perils of their faith relative to the rest of Catholic France, they began to build fortresses atop unreachable mountaintops (which have managed to survive centuries of attack, ravage and neglect), but their refusal to deny their faith ultimately led to their martyrdom by burning at the stake as

heretics. By the end of the 13th century, the Cathars were extinct. What's left to visit of their ruined fortresses is not for the faint of heart or those who fear heights. The drive to each site is scary, with most precipitously perched high on a peak, reached only by a single car track, which plunges off dizzily below. Scariest still is to make the final ascent to the stronghold on foot, and then back down again to the car park. I stopped after visiting two, not wanting to risk a fall, deciding they were just as interesting to view from a distance while marveling that they had been built in the first place.

Although tied with Languedoc, Roussillon is distinctly linked with Catalan civilization and this was my first foray into French Catalonia and the Pyrénées-Orientales. Extensive, well-organized walking and hiking trails, known as GRs (*grande randonnées*), are documented on the Michelin area maps and, in theory, make it possible to walk from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. The *Petite Train jaune* (Little Yellow Train) is a good alternative, carrying travelers up into the Pyrénées, although I found myself stranded in a tiny farming village at high altitude, surrounded by nothing but alpine meadows, when the railway system shut down for their 2 1/2 hour lunch! I drove through many small towns, looked at abbeys and churches and had a fabulous (but chilly) walk through the narrowest gorge in France.

My favorite town was Céret, the Catalan hub of a major fruit-growing region close to Spain. When I arrived, the Saturday market was in full swing under huge, majestic plane trees lining the main boulevard and vendors were selling espadrilles, herbs, fruit, hand-made cheese and paella. Piped-in market music (with a decidedly Spanish feel) and numerous fountains in this large town provided an audible and visual treat for body and soul in the unrelenting heat. Céret exhibits work by artists from all over the south of France (particularly Catalonia) at its excellent Museum of Contemporary Art, and among the collections are a wonderful series of bowls with bullfighting scenes painted by Picasso. I was fortunate to view a temporary exhibit by Matisse and Derain, whose work defined color at its most heightened sense, and whose paintings oriented me for my next destination, the Côte Vermeille.

So-called because of the deep red color of the soil and rocks, the Côte Vermeille, begins where the Pyrénées foothills reach the Mediterranean just before Spain. The coastal town of Collioure inspired Matisse and Derain with its brightly colored Catalan fishing fleet and flower-bedecked, terraced homes. Form became less important than color, and this was taken to an extreme by a group of artists nicknamed the Fauves (or Wild Beasts), of which Matisse and Derain were members. Their vivid and sometimes violent use of color was meant to interpret, rather than describe, subject matter and the resulting work of the Fauves paved the eventual way for Expressionism, Cubism, and Abstractionism. Nearing the frontier with Spain, I also visited the home/studio of Aristide Maillol, whose sculptures graced several squares in his hometown of Banyuls-sur-Mer.

Turning north once again for the final leg of my journey, I navigated the winding coastal road on the edge of a plummeting drop into the sea, finding it difficult to keep my eyes on the road with the dazzling blue Mediterranean competing for my attention! I've never liked the monstrous beach resorts the French have allowed to devour much of their coastline, and the coasts of both Languedoc and Roussillon are no exception. But I discovered one nature preserve, very difficult to find, wedged in between two over-built resort areas and it provided a view of what it must have looked like in the early part of the last century—wild and rugged, with a backdrop of the Pyrénées plunging into the sea.

I spent an enjoyable day in Narbonne (one of the main centers of Roman rule in France) admiring the numerous architectural, artistic and cultural exhibitions, and re-visited the Canal du Midi, winding through the center of town. A visit to one of the most important Cistercian abbeys in the south, Abbaye de Fontfroide, was inspiring. In the restored dormitory were four windows created by an artist who had collected fragments of glass from the shattered cathedrals of northern France and collaged extraordinary, abstract stained glass mosaics. I was moved by the creative way in which the artist had been able to come to terms with the same grief that gripped much of France after all the destruction of WW I. Two more abbeys, one in ruins overlooking the sea, the other, open to the public but now used as an enormous wine cellar by a wine producing family, allowed a bit more time for contemplation before leaving France. As I headed for the airport in Montpellier, it seemed auspicious to be driving the section of national auto-route named *la Languedocienne*, as by then, I felt like one.