

Languedoc-Roussillon

Overview

It's not by chance that the Languedoc-Roussillon's tourism website goes by the confident and bold name of Sun France. With its sunshine hours and beaches, this southern region is a holidaymaker's heaven. It is a huge swathe of land formed for administrative purposes by the combining of three areas: Bas Languedoc, which eyes Provence and is home to the region's key towns, Roman amphitheatres, beaches and hearty red wines; Haut-Languedoc is all striking gorges and forests, a place to soak up the warm air in splendid surroundings; and Roussillon, which is the historic and proud area of French Catalonia that borders the Pyrenees. With such diversity of options, it has long been the destination of choice for those seeking the heat of the Riviera, but with lower price tags and more peacefulness.

Main cities and towns

The buzzing capital is Montpellier, a modern-thinking, culturally vibrant university town with tree-lined promenades and beautifully expansive squares. It's a great short break destination, now served by low-cost airlines. Nîmes, to the east, brings to mind extensive Roman artefacts and denim (de Nîmes), first created in its textile mills, but there is some serious architectural modernisation afoot as the town bids to keep pace with Montpellier. Sète is a key port whose water-jousting spectacle is a must-see, while Narbonne offers provincial charm. Béziers, also now welcoming UK visitors via its airport, is the capital of Languedoc wine country and centre of many Occitan celebrations.

Places to visit

Not only can Languedoc-Roussillon lay claim to some of France's finest Roman heritage, such as the Via Domitia road and Nîmes' Les Arènes amphitheatres, but it also boasts five unmissable UNESCO World Heritage sites: Carcassonne, with its 52 towers and medieval backstreets, is the fairy-tale citadel; the Pont du Gard is a breathtaking symbol of Roman ingenuity and France's most visited monument; the Canal du Midi links the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, in a display of engineering cunning that shows the countryside off beautifully; two Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage routes to explore; and two of Vauban's fortresses (Villefranche de Conflent and Mont Louis). Another site not to miss is the gorgeous abbey at St Guilhem-le-Désert.

Things to do and see

Not to everyone's taste, of course, but bullfighting is a great passion of the region – head to Nîmes for the biggest and best feria. In the great outdoors, there is much to see and do, be it taking a canoe, kayak or raft onto one of its countless rivers or lakes or strapping up for a spot of rock climbing in the Cévennes. For walkers, there are miles of marked GR (Grande Randonnée) trails, including some that allow you to follow in the footsteps of Santiago de Compostela (look out for the scallop shell motif) or recreate RL Stevenson's travels with a donkey. On the coast, choose from sailing and windsurfing, diving or kite surfing, while a boating break on the Canal du Midi offers real tranquillity and a reassuringly slow pace of life.

Food and drink

The Languedoc-Roussillon is the largest wine-growing area in the world, whose increasingly reputable wines are grouped together under the Sud de France banner. They come in bottlings as diverse in taste and appearance as the landscapes (wine tourism is increasingly popular), from the Carignan grapes of Corbières to the robust reds of Fitou, and even the white fizz of Limoux. As for regional cuisine, try the cassoulet from Castelnaudary and gardiane de taureau (rich beef stew) or head to the coast for some stunning seafood and shellfish – everything from oysters to sea bass makes the menu. Herbs and olive oil are culinary mainstays, as are fresh fruits like cherries (famous in Céret) and apricots, while up in the mountains the cuisine veers towards the more hearty – chestnuts and Lozère cheeses.

Family attractions

The coastal resorts and long, sandy beaches of the Mediterranean coast are a big draw for families seeking sun, relaxation or any water sport you can imagine, but the region offers some great days out too. For nature lovers, there is the Cité des Oiseaux bird centre near Carcassonne, the Les Aigles de Valmy bird of prey centre and the Du Haut des Arbres rope slide centre for treetop fun. And if the sun is shining – as it invariably does in Languedoc-Roussillon – then cool off at one of the region's many excellent water parks.