

NEXT BIG TRIP

The secret stretch of coastal France that's nicer than Nice

Terry Ward, CNN • Updated 7th July 2022

(CNN) — Think of the south of France and postcard images of the lavender fields of Provence and tony spots with yachts -- Nice, Cannes and St. Tropez -- likely spring to mind.

But look at a map of France and trace a finger down from Paris to the Mediterranean Sea and you'll land in the region of Occitanie, where the department of Aude and the coastal city of Narbonne and surrounds offer up a very different, more relaxed view of the country's south.

Here, along a coastal plain that's part of France's largest wine-producing and vineyard region when it comes to surface area (Languedoc-Roussillon, which became part of the recently created Occitanie region in 2016), the diverse landscapes range from beaches and shallow lagoons to wooded limestone plateaus pocketed with lakes.

Crumbling castles and majestic citadels crown hilltops in what was once Cathar country. This dissident and ascetic religious group, then considered heretics, gathered in this part of Europe during the 12th century.

Visitors come to the region today for an ambiance steeped in lore and full of surprises, where you can dine on hyperlocal seafood right from the lagoons where it's harvested and sip Languedoc's varied wines with a backdrop of the Pyrenees mountains stretching toward Spain. The laid-back seaside villages you'll visit here feel worlds away -- attitude-wise and geographically, too -- from the more pretentious and crowded Côte d'Azur, roughly 225 miles east.

A city with a Roman heart -- and one of France's finest markets

Less than an hour inland from Narbonne on the River Aude, the impressive hilltop fortress town of Carcassonne is what initially brings most tourists to the region. An outstanding example of a medieval fortified town, this UNESCO World Heritage has pre-Roman roots.

But history also runs deep in and around the often overlooked town of Narbonne, an ancient port city which dates back to 118 BCE and was the first Roman colony established in Gaul.

Gallo-Roman antiquities from the town's original city walls and structures, many of which were collecting dust in storage for decades, are on display in the new Narbo Via Museum, which opened in May 2021.

The spectacular museum designed by Foster+Partners (of Norman Foster fame) has an industrial-style stacker crane that uses a robot mechanism to continuously change a towering display of more than 700 ancient carved stone blocks within its centerpiece "Lapidary Wall."

The Canal du Midi -- a 17th-century canal linking the Mediterranean and the Atlantic -- flows through the heart of Narbonne, transporting thousands of barge cruise passengers each year on journeys between Sète and Toulouse.

But few disembark to explore beyond the canal's boundaries and Carcassonne. They're missing out.

At the canal's edge in Narbonne is the city's famous covered market, Les Halles, where the morning bustle fades away at lunchtime when vendors selling local seafood, produce and Languedoc's famous goat cheeses begin to shutter their stalls and restaurants fill up with diners sipping wine with their midday meal.

"The market is a place where the people of Narbonne like to develop their social lives over a glass of wine," winemaker Gerard Bertrand, whose white, red and rose wines are a benchmark of Languedoc's sustainable biodynamic and organic winemaking heritage, tells CNN Travel.

An evolving history of winemaking

While vines have been rooted in the Languedoc region for thousands of years, Narbonne was the first port through which wine was routed throughout the Roman Empire. Bertrand says the region eventually "lost its nobility, often favoring volume rather than quality."

Regions like Champagne, Burgundy and Bordeaux emerged into the spotlight.

But since the 1970s, says Bordeaux-based oenologist Sera Goto, great care has been taken to replant varietals adapted to the particular microclimates and soils of Languedoc-Roussillon's vineyards that "maintain a great respect for the natural lieu and environment."

The region is a "multi-colored, textured, dynamic area with a dizzying diversity of soils, varietals and wine styles," she says, and one of France's most important organic wine-producing areas.

"Once solely a source for mass-produced wines for the tables of the ancient Greeks, Romans and then later the Gauls, the Languedoc Roussillon of today is in many ways a firebrand for organic, artisanal wine," Goto says.

That's thanks in large part to the practices of visionary winemakers like Bertrand, a former professional rugby player who took over his father's business in 1987 and incorporates entirely biodynamic farming practices into his 16 vineyards across the region.

His Château l'Hospitalet Grand Vin Rouge 2017 was named the best red wine in the world in a blind tasting of 6,000 wines during the International Wine Challenge in 2019.

"The future of our region looks bright," Bertrand says. "The shift has been made towards new generations of winemakers who are fully dedicated to valuing the wonderful nature that we have here."

When it comes to human nature, you can develop your own social life alongside the region's wines with lunch right in Les Halles in Narbonne at Chez Bebelles, where tables are set up within the market itself.

It's often standing room only as locals, toting shopping bags laden with fresh produce, chin-chin glasses and order specialties like steak tartare and duck breast to debrief over the latest rugby match and other important town goings-on.

Vineyards and lagoons where you can stay, sip and slurp

For a stay among the biodynamic vines near Narbonne, Bertrand's Château l'Hospitalet is a quiet retreat within the vines of the La Clape appellation.

Housed in a former 11th-century hospital, the coastal winery and boutique hotel has a new gastronomic restaurant, L'Art de Vivre, that features seasonal and organic produce as well as Aubrac beef and eel from nearby Étang de l'Ayrolle in Gruissan.

In addition to rooms in the chateau, Villa Soleilla has 11 suites and a new spa in its collection of contemporary styled buildings refurbished from the original walls of an ancient winery. Rooms with private patios and terraces open to views of the surrounding vineyards and dazzling Mediterranean Sea beyond.

During the warmer months, the hotel's seasonal beach club and seaside restaurant, a few minutes drive away in nearby Gruissan, conjure something of the Côte d'Azur's belle vie sun-and-sea vibe -- without any of its ostentatious bling.

Year round in the region, you can stroll along the uncrowded sands of Gruissan, walk through vines to vistas overlooking a coastline billowing with more sails than super yachts and hike to unexpected views at the Gouffre de l'Oeil Doux, an emerald-colored pool in the karst massif that looks remarkably like a Mexican cenote.

At Salin de Gruissan near the fishing village of Gruissan, lagoons where sea salt is cultivated take on a pinkish hue due to the presence of an algae that reacts to the sunlight. Flamingos stalk the shallow pools closest to the sea and fleur de sel is gathered by hand and sold in a small boutique on-site.

At the lagoon's edge, massages and salt soak treatments are offered inside a humble roulotte -- a small wooden stagecoach-like cart that looks like a portable sauna and overlooks the salt production basins. A set-up with a no-frills, what-more-do-you-really-need wellness vibe.

Also bordering the lagoon, at La Cambuse du Saunier, platters of oysters, whelks, shrimp and couteaux -- razor clams spooned with a thick garlic and parsley sauce -- are dished up at rustic driftwood tables at a restaurant with zero pretension and what's surely some of France's freshest seafood.

Nearby, in the medieval village of Bages on the Étang de Bages, kitesurfers skip across the choppy surface of a windy lagoon famous for harvesting silver eels. They can be sampled in various preparations at the former fisherman's abode-turned-restaurant, Le Portanel.

Fans of oysters make the pilgrimage northeast of Narbonne along the coast to the neighboring department of Hérault and the seaside village of Marseillan.

Special Tarbouriech (or "pink oysters") are cultivated there on ropes lifted in and out of the water of France's largest lagoon, the Étang de Thau. The process allows growers to adjust the oysters' salinity level in an area with salty waters and almost no tidal variation.

A platter of the bivalves served alfresco alongside a crisp glass of rosé, overlooking the lagoon at Tarbouriech Le St. Barth distills the region's mouthfeel to its essence.

And the best part? That "no pretension" thing.

You can come as you are to any of these spots, dressed in whatever you put on that morning for a day of sightseeing.

A region of discovery -- that's being discovered

"You just have to push open one door in this region, and after that there's another one," says Gilles Sansa, whose private chauffeur company, Quadriges, guides tourists, Hollywood crews (scenes from

"The Last Duel" were recently filmed at the 11th-century Abbaye de Fontfroid) and anyone else keen to get to know the area's back roads and secrets.

"When Americans come here, they have a purpose, a target," Sansa says. "They know there's good wine and food, firstly. But after that they really discover the essence of the place and something different."

For many Europeans, the region's allure is less of a secret -- and both foreign and French interest in real estate has boomed during the pandemic, says Nathalie Van Veenendaal, regional manager for French real estate agency, Selection Habitat-Hamilton.

She described the housing market as having a "return-to-the-countryside vibe" that's drawing more interest from the French and residents of other parts of Europe to an area that's traditionally attracted a lot of Brits.

"It's this combination of sea, mountains and countryside together with the quality of life that draws people here," Van Veenendaal says.

"It's less about showing off your big property here than in the Côte d'Azur and more about these other things."