

# TRAVEL

## TAKE SOME TIME OUT IN...

# SOUTHERN FRANCE



Visit stunning Avignon on the River Rhône

**S**outhern France may be most famous for the millionaire playgrounds of St Tropez and Cannes, but head inland from the glitzy coastal resorts and you'll find glorious countryside, stunning villages and towns, and a gentle pace of life that is refreshingly bling-free.

And, with a climate that knocks socks off our own, it's worth hopping over the English Channel and heading south to take in some late-season sun.

### FIRST STOP

Head for the little-known Black Mountains – or the Montagne Noire – in central southern France, where you'll find soaring, rugged scenery dotted with tranquil lakes and tiny hamlets. Be sure to check out

Mas-Cabardès, a gorgeous medieval village framed by a ruined castle you can explore – it's quite likely you'll have the place to yourself.

Nearby is the lovely village of Lautrec, classed as one of the most beautiful in all of France. Its maze of medieval streets has stayed unchanged for centuries, and it lies close to the birthplace of the iconic artist Toulouse-Lautrec. It's also well known for its aromatic pink garlic – a key ingredient in the local cuisine.

Travelling south, the old walled city of Carcassonne is a must-see. Founded in the fifth century, the ancient *cité* quarter is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the restored fortress and ramparts are so perfect they could be fresh out of a fairy tale – some even say the city was the inspiration for

the castle in Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. More recently, Kate Mosse wrote her novel *Labyrinth* about Carcassonne's colourful history. Try to get there early in the morning or late in the evening to avoid the thousands of tourists who clog the tiny winding streets every day.

### VENTURE EAST

No trip to southern France would be complete without heading east and dipping into Provence – long renowned for its picture-postcard setting and idyllic lifestyle. Provence is also home to Brad Pitt and

Brangelina have a Provence home

Angelina Jolie's palatial pad, Chateau Miraval, while the Beckhams and Johnny Depp are also fans of the area.

The gem of this region is Avignon, another walled city which is known as the 'second Rome' after a long succession of Popes located themselves here in the 14th century. There is a wealth of sights to take in – including the grand cathedral and the impressive Palais Des Papes, one of the world's largest Gothic palaces and former home to the Popes. Make sure you also take a look at the ruins of the fabled Pont D'Avignon – the medieval bridge washed away by the raging waters of the River Rhône in the mid-1600s. The old cobbled streets of Avignon are filled with cafés and bars, and foodies should make a beeline for the fantastic

covered market Les Halles, which has around 40 stalls selling delicious meats, fish, cheeses, vegetables and bread.

Another of the region's treasures is Arles, a Roman town flanked by the gorgeous River Rhône and the untamed region of the Camargue – worth a visit in itself to see flamingos and horses in the wild. In Arles, which was briefly home to artist Van Gogh, make sure you visit the well-preserved Roman amphitheatre, where 20,000 spectators would once gather to watch chariot races and bloody fights.

### SLEEPING AND EATING

On the fringes of the Black Mountains is Mazamet, a town which was of huge global importance in the 19th century for its wool production.

Here, elegant B&B La Villa De Mazamet is the perfect base. This beautifully refurbished building comprises five stylish suites which feel homely but also chic and stylish. The rooms offer comforts such as iPod docking stations and roll-top baths – as well as imposing views of the mountains. There is a pool and a little spa, while the friendly English owners also prepare delicious home-cooked meals, using fresh produce from the garden, on the pretty candlelit terrace in the evenings.

In nearby Castres, don't miss the Michelin-starred restaurant

Bistrot Des Saveurs, which is fronted by leading British chef Simon Scott who hails from The Ritz in London. His culinary creations are bold, playful and beautifully presented, and he sources his ingredients daily from the colourful local markets.

If you fancy a taste of life in an authentic 18th-century French mansion, spend a few nights at the pretty Chateau De Blomac, located in a tiny rural village near Carcassonne. Here, there are five tastefully renovated bedrooms and a charming gîte for rent, a large pool and spectacular grounds, which all make for a picturesque experience. The convivial owners also host communal evening meals at a large outdoor table – featuring superb home-cooked cuisine and wine from the chateau's very own vineyard. And, if you want to holiday with a large group of friends, all of the accommodation can be rented out together.

In Avignon, there are dozens of good hotel and restaurant options. Try the 16th-century Hôtel Cloître Saint Louis, which has smart bedrooms and a small outdoor pool.

And for a dining experience with a real difference, book a table on board Mireio, a floating restaurant which cruises up and down the River Rhône as you enjoy a candlelit meal. As the French say, bon appétit! ■

Enjoy a dip at the stunning Chateau De Blomac

Stop off at the beautiful village of Lautrec

Chill out in a deluxe room at La Villa De Mazamet

Take in the castle at Carcassonne

## BOOK IT!

### GETTING THERE

■ Take the Eurotunnel ([www.eurotunnel.com](http://www.eurotunnel.com)) and drive through France. Or flights from London Stansted or Liverpool to Carcassonne with Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) start at £28 one way.

### WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

- La Villa De Mazamet ([www.villademazamet.com](http://www.villademazamet.com)). Rates from £75 per night.
- Bistrot Des Saveurs ([www.bistrot-saveurs.com](http://www.bistrot-saveurs.com)).
- Chateau De Blomac (<http://hotel.chateau-blomac.com>). Rates from around £95 a night.
- Hotel Cloître Saint Louis ([www.cloitre-saint-louis.com](http://www.cloitre-saint-louis.com)). Rates from £165.
- Mireio restaurant ([www.mireio.net/english/](http://www.mireio.net/english/)).

### WHAT TO DO

- Mas-Cabardès ([www.france-voyage.com/towns](http://www.france-voyage.com/towns))
- Lautrec ([www.lautrec.fr/tourisme\\_en/index.php](http://www.lautrec.fr/tourisme_en/index.php)).
- Carcassonne ([www.carcassonne-tourisme.com](http://www.carcassonne-tourisme.com)).
- Avignon ([www.avignon-tourisme.com](http://www.avignon-tourisme.com)).
- Arles ([www.arles-tourisme.com](http://www.arles-tourisme.com)).