



France je t'aime

Whatever your passion, prepare to fall for France all over again

WORDS NICOLA WILLIAMS PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP LEE HARVEY

The beautiful coastal town of Bandol is the place to go for wine and glorious landscapes
 Opposite: Dennis Maurin, owner of Maison Nivon in Valence – a food lover's dream town

To get to the heart of France, Lonely Planet guidebook author and Francophile Nicola Williams has persuaded in-the-know locals to reveal the places they love best, from isolated mountain trails to the finest chocolate shop in the land



MAP ILLUSTRATION: HELLO MARINE/AGENCYRUSH.COM



Fashion editor Geraldine Dormoy heads to the 9th arrondissement for vintage gems

Shopping lovers' Paris

As the fashion editor of *L'Express* online, Géraldine Dormoy is a regular at the Paris couture shows. She thinks little of spending 500 euros on a pair of shoes, and dresses only in navy-blue and black. 'My style is classic, elegant: very Paris,' says the smart urbanite, whose blog *Café Mode* was voted 2008's best by *Elle* magazine.

Her passion is for vintage, and the place to shop for it is a cluster of streets around the Notre-Dame de Lorette church, in the 9th arrondissement. It is in this quartier, where girls hide from the sun behind oversized sunglasses, that fashion artist Andrea Crews chose to open her first boutique.

Her inspiration was the heroine of Émile Zola's novel *Nana*, an impoverished but seductive beauty living in 1850s Paris. 'In the 19th century, lorettes, nicknamed after the nearby church, lived here. They were actresses and high-class prostitutes who had lots of high-paying lovers – men went bankrupt for these ladies,' says Géraldine. 'The area remains relaxed, faintly trendy, very bobo [bourgeois]; and to my mind is still very 19th century.'

The hillside rue des Martyrs is the main street in this non-touristy neighbourhood, where the florist, greengrocer and delicatessen greet the same faces each

week. Marble-clad walls keep hundreds of cheeses cool at the Maison du Fromage (No 48); kids spend pocket money on snooker-ball-sized bubble gum at sweet shop Karamell (No 15); and Anne and Emmanuel showcase upcoming designers in their home-interiors boutique workshop, 3 Par 5 (No 25).

And, of course, there's the vintage. 'Wochdom is among the oldest vintage boutiques. It's selective, has a lovely collection of clothes and it's not too expensive, either,' says Géraldine, omitting to mention just how shiny the shop's black interior walls are, or the glitzy double bed that serves as a display for stilettos.

A few doors down is Chezel, which whispers understated retro chic with its dulled pistachio front, simple wooden floor and glass chandelier. 'Chezel follows a similar model of carefully chosen, affordable vintage pieces from the 60s and 70s,' says Géraldine, 'and nearby there is a lovely jewellery shop.' Anna Rivka's window display is hard to miss – antique-inspired headpieces strung with semi-precious stones crown a row of glass busts.

Between boutiques Géraldine might flop for a drink at No Stress Café, a lime-and-violet canopied affair with wooden tables sat beneath trees on the quartier's

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

Eurostar travels from London St Pancras to Paris from £59 return (eurostar.com). BA, Air France, easyJet, Flybe and bmi baby fly from numerous UK cities (from £48; easyjet.com).

SHOP

Andrea Crews (10 rue Frochot; andreacrews.com). **Wochdom** (72 rue Condorcet). **Chezel** (59 rue Condorcet). **Anna Rivka** (57 rue Condorcet). **No Stress Café** (24 rue Clauzel; nostresscafe.com). **Rose Bakery** (46 rue des Martyrs). **Géraldine Dormoy's** blog is at blogs.lexpress.fr/cafe-mode.

SLEEP

On a street butting the rue des Martyrs, the **Hôtel Amour's** glossy, individually decorated rooms are adorned with flea market finds and artwork (from £118; hotelamourparis.fr).

prettiest square. Lunch is a chunk of quiche with lentil, roast carrot or other salads at Rose Bakery. She ends the day with an aperitif on Hôtel Amour's patio – the place to see Paris's best-dressed parade their most recent purchases. ▶



Above and below: the coastal resort of Bandol is the place to base yourself to explore the region's numerous vineyards. Opposite: oenologist Pascal Périer at Château de Pibarnon



Wine lovers' Bandol

Whites are said to seduce with sea-breeze freshness, and rosés enchant with delicate salmon hues, roundness and generosity. But it's the reds made from the king grape *mourvèdre* that are the real treat for wine lovers at the esteemed Bandol vineyards, first planted by Phocaean Greeks on the shore of the Med in Provence.

Gracefully covering 1,500 hectares of steeply terraced hillside tumbling down to the sea, these sun-baked, south-facing vines ensnare not one but a cluster of traditional wine-making villages. Touring them is an unparalleled pleasure for oenologist Pascal Périer.

'I fell in love with this magnificent area, the sumptuous landscapes, its grands vins [great wines] and its winemakers – truly extraordinary people,' says Pascal, an authority at the Maison des Vins du Bandol, a wine-tasting centre in the quiet resort of Bandol, from which the region gets its name.

Languishing on the coast between Marseille and Toulon, Bandol charmed early 20th-century literati such as Thomas Mann and Catherine Mansfield. From 1922 the luxurious Train Bleu transported the wealthy from Paris to the pretty seaside town, where they lapped up the sun, sea and exceedingly fine wine.

The wine trade has always been integral to the region's prosperity. 'Bandol has been a port since antiquity, when wine from surrounding villages was shipped from here and barrel-making was the livelihood of Bandolaise families,' says Pascal. 'When

people speak about the south of France, they think summer holidays by the sea, in the sun. Rosés really complement holiday gastronomy – grilled fish, barbecues, salads – but it is reds that are especially important in Bandol. Rosé represents 60 per cent of our total production, red 30 and white, five to 10 per cent.'

Bandol wine has had its own AOC (appellation d'origine contrôlée, or controlled term of origin) since 1941, making it one of France's oldest. 'Many estates have been run by the same family for several generations. Among the most historic are Château Pradeaux, Château Vannières, Domaine de Lafran Veyrolles, Domaine Ray Jane and Domaine Tempier,' says Pascal. 'There is no estate in Bandol itself – vineyards surround villages within a six- to nine-mile radius, so you need a car. Renting a bicycle or motorbike is also a very pleasant way to discover the vines!'

Many of the wineries offer a glimpse of a forgotten world. Château Vannières, in the quintessential hilltop village of Cadière d'Azur, is a fabulous 19th-century folly of a Tuscan-style chateau. The tasting room at Domaine Ray-Jane in Le Plan du Castellet also serves as a museum of rare viticulture tools. At neighbouring Domaine Tempier, vines have been their business since Louis XV's reign. Make an appointment before you visit, then drink it all in. ►

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

You can get the train to Bandol from London, changing at Paris and Marseilles (approx £370; 7 hours 40 mins; raileurope.co.uk). The nearest airport is Toulon-Hyères – Ryanair flies from Bristol and London Stansted (from £45; ryanair.com).

WINE TOURS

Château Vannières (chateauvannieres.com). **Domaine Ray-Jane** (ray-jane.com). **Domaine Tempier** (domainetempier.com). Pascal also recommends a visit, and a lazy lunch, at **Terrebrune** (terrebrune.fr).

Maison des Vins du Bandol (maisondesvins-bandol.com).

Bandol tourist office (bandol.fr).

SLEEP

In the village of Bandol, **Les Restanques** has views over the Med from its garden, pool and terrace. Its four light-filled rooms are decorated in classic French style, with heavy antique furniture and Provençal fabrics (from £84; bandol-lesrestanques.fr).



Mountain guide Michail Anthoine surveys the Chaîne des Puys volcanoes. Below: Puy de la Vache, Volcans National Park

Walking lovers' Chaîne des Puys

He might hail from the French Alps, but it is the voluptuous contours of the Chaîne des Puys mountain range in the Massif Central that inspire Michail Anthoine. This unfamiliar lunar landscape in the Auvergne region of central France was created between 38,000 BC and 4,000 BC, when eruptions sculpted its 80 aligned volcanoes. As a mountain guide, Michail shares his passion for this feisty land with visiting walkers. He tells them about a certain waterfall where a skinny dip will ensure eternal love and encourages them to try the regional speciality truffade, a gutsy portion of oven-baked potatoes and cheese.

'You can travel everywhere in the world but you'll never find a place like this,' says Michail. 'You can see volcanoes in North America, but you have to travel I don't know how far to get there. In the Chaîne des Puys they are all around you.' A stroll here offers time for contemplation, he says. 'People take time to see the varied landscapes, the flowers, the animals, the Romanesque churches. It is not hard walking, but it is rich.'

The tranquillity of the pea-green landscape of long-extinct volcanoes is celestial. Two circular hiking trails – the 65-mile Tour de la Chaîne des Puys and the 117-mile Tour des Lacs d'Auvergne – take in the best of its cinder cones, lava domes and lakes. There are also hundreds of easy half-day trails, for walkers who simply want to revel in a landscape so

fertile that forest would sprout if shepherds didn't let their flocks graze on its plains.

Puy Pariou is the crater that appears on Volvic mineral water bottles, Michail tells me. 'It's the most emblematic: a big perfect circle. It is also the deepest, about 90m, and anyone can walk up there – even kids.' From the car park on the Col des Goules mountain pass, a three-hour return trail along a protective wooden walkway leads to Pariou.

From the top of the highest peak, Puy de Dôme (1,465m), it is possible to see all the area has to offer – 'Even Mont Blanc, which is 450km [280 miles] away, on a clear day,' says Michail. 'It is beautiful but a victim of its own success.' He refers to the 50,000 cars that every year ascend the mountain by toll road to avoid the steep 45-minute walk from the Col de Ceysat.

There are quieter alternatives, accessible only by foot. 'Puy de la Vache and Puy Solasse are twin red craters whose lava flow cut a river below to make a lake,' says Michail. 'In sunny weather their beauty is arresting: you see all the different contours, the earth's colours changing from white, red, pink, violet and rust.' Good shoes are essential for walking the two to three-hour trail that loops the crater – the soil underfoot is volcanic ash.

The gateway to all this explosive grandeur is Clermont-Ferrand. This small, medieval-era French city, with a Gothic cathedral built from black volcanic rock, squats in – what else? – a volcanic crater. ►

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

You can get the train to Clermont-Ferrand from London via Paris (from £89; 7 hours; raileurope.co.uk) or fly via Paris with Air France (£155; airfrance.com).

GUIDE

For **Michail's tours**, see auvergnerando.com. For general info see auvergne-tourisme.info.

SLEEP

A few miles south of the Puy de Dôme in the resort of Le Mont-Dore, the **Hôtel de Russie** is a real treat, with comfortable rooms carefully modernised with designer touches such as flat-screen TVs (from £42; lerussie.com).



Food lovers' Valence

France's only female chef with three Michelin stars, Anne-Sophie Pic, makes no bones about it: her trump card is fresh, seasonal, regional produce. And there are few places better to find such ingredients than at the weekly market in Valence, in the Rhône Valley, southern France.

Early every Saturday morning local farmers, flower-growers, cheese-makers, bakers and nougat-producers from surrounding villages flock to the town. Their stalls make a still life of sun-glossed fruit and vegetables, Drôme pigeons, sweet Ardèche snails and creamy walnuts from Grenoble. Cheeses, too, are piled high – discs of Rigotte de Condrieu goat's cheese, blue-veined bleu de Vercors and gooey rounds of Saint Marcellin.

'The Rhône Valley is the fruit orchard of France,' says Anne-Sophie, as she looks over the tables laden with produce. 'Apricots, cherries, tomatoes, peaches – there are so many different fruits, and this is France's premier organic agricultural region.' It is for this reason that here in Valence the family restaurant, Maison Pic, first opened in 1936.

On Monday mornings you'll find Anne-Sophie shopping on a smaller scale. 'There's a tiny market next to our house on Place Danton and I often go with my son; it's a real pleasure,' she says. The bijoux square, on other days filled with children playing and a few parked cars, is one of a handful of intimate neighbourhood market squares in the bustling Roman town, with a maze of medieval streets to wander.

Anne-Sophie works with local organic producers who grow vegetables to order. 'At Les Délices du Potage, David Dard's taste dictates his planting and this completely corresponds with my philosophy,' she says. 'He tells me: "Listen, I have grown this new type of courgette – it is superb, you must taste it!" So I taste it, and perhaps change the variety I choose.' These creative partnerships help Anne-Sophie develop new recipes in her kitchen laboratory, where she also runs a cooking school, Scook.

She recommends that real foodies visit Alain Drogue's smallholding, nine miles northeast of Valence in Châteauneuf-sur-Isère. Here he grows more olive trees, herbs, jasmine and other edible plants and flowers than any market could ever



Opposite: Valence has a wealth of neighbourhood restaurants. Above: three Michelin-star chef Anne-Sophie Pic draws on quality local produce to make her stunning creations

support. Chocoholics will find ample reward by venturing three miles further north to Tain l'Hermitage, where Anne-Sophie's choice chocolate-maker, Valrhona, tempts with tasting workshops, cookery courses and a boutique selling its grand cru chocolate.

As well as these exalted ingredients, Anne-Sophie often works with produce traditionally deemed too gutsy for fine dining. 'As a child there was always kid on our family table. It's not served so often today, but it is a very original meat – so sweet, with a quite different perfume.' Tender rolls made with this young goat meat from the Drôme region are on the menu today at Maison Pic, and I end my culinary tour with a plate of them. Served with a silky-smooth kumquat fondant, they do not disappoint. ►

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

You can get the train to Valence from London via Paris and Lyon (approx £114; 5½ hours; raileurope.co.uk). EasyJet, Ryanair and bmibaby fly to Grenoble, 45 miles away, from main UK airports – check timetables as some only run Dec-Apr (from £30 from London; ryanair.com).

EAT

Maison Pic (pic-valence.fr). **Les Délices du Potage** (lesdelicesdupotager.fr). **Scook** (scook.fr). **Valrhona** (valrhona.com). **Valence tourist office** (valencetourisme.com).

SLEEP

Staggeringly beautiful rooms complete with wooden beams await at the 16th-century **La Maison de la Pra** in the heart of Valence. The rooms are great value given their location, décor and size (from £125; maisondelapra.com).

Despite its popularity, it is possible to find yourself alone in Île de Ré. Wander the salt pans at Loix (opposite far left) and pick up some souvenir sea salt (opposite middle) before choosing a great spot for lunch



Beach lovers' Île de Ré

Île de Ré is a rare sort of island. Undeniably chic, it is never flashy – guests in posh hotels dress for dinner in jeans and cashmere; wellies, cycling and rock-pooling are in; and scaling the lighthouse's 257 steps is de rigueur on rainy days.

Writer Fabienne Waks is not the only Parisian to have fallen for this Atlantic island, now joined to La Rochelle on France's western coast by a 1.8-mile-long toll bridge. She lives in the capital's Latin Quarter, but spends her weekends at an island house with a vast patio made for outside dining. 'Each time I cross the bridge I say to myself "mon petit paradis", and a sensation of calm and space sweeps over me,' says Fabienne. 'Even in the summer, away from the village squares it is possible to find yourself quite alone.'

Île de Ré has many fans, including Johnny Depp and wife Vanessa Paradis. 'Les Portes-en-Ré is the island's trendy village where most celebrities go,' Fabienne tells me, 'although Sonia Rykiel and many others prefer Ars-en-Ré, next door.' The island has a more traditional side too. 'On a Sunday, sit at one of the two cafés on Place de la Liberté, and at certain times both will empty for Mass.'

A perfect Île de Ré day begins with a cycle through the salt pans, says Fabienne. 'I enjoy the incredible light, I listen to birdsong and the sounds of people passing by on bike or on foot.' Then it's on to the market at Les Portes-en-Ré. 'First I buy the newspapers, then I queue for vegetables, fruit, fish, island salt, meat and olives. Market produce is excellent quality – tomatoes, potatoes, melons... they are no cheaper than in Paris but their taste and perfume are exceptional.'

After reading the papers over coffee, Fabienne heads to the beach. 'I love the silence of Plage de Gros Jonc at around 11am. Afterwards I might go for a drink with friends, then lunch on barbecued fish, tomato salad – simple cuisine – at home,' she says. Fabienne has fond memories of picnicking in the pine forests on the island's wilder northern coast, and Le Banc du Bûcheron is a magnificent nearby beach. 'It is a beautiful sand spit where you can walk for miles when the tide is out – it's like walking to the end of the sea.'

Uniquely, all the beaches on Île de Ré are wild. That means no ice-cream kiosks, no sun loungers for rent, no trampolines – just the odd shack on the sand. The beachside

moules frites are legendary at Aux Frères de la Côte, in Ars-en-Ré; or there's La Cabane du Fier, a former oyster farmer's house. Here you can gorge on sardines and watch the sun sink into the water. ►

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

Get to La Rochelle by train (approx £99; 6 hours 15 mins; raileurope.co.uk) or plane (easyJet, Flybe, Ryanair, Jet2; from £85). Travel to Île de Ré by bus or boat (inter-iles.com). Or drive on to the ferry from Portsmouth to St Malo (approx £100; brittanyferries.com) – it's then a 4-hour drive to Île de Ré.

EAT

Aux Frères de la Côte (00 33 54 629 0454). **La Cabane** (00 33 54 629 6484).

GUIDE

Île de Ré (holidays-iledere.co.uk).

SLEEP

La Maison des Algues has classically styled rooms a short hop from the beach, and there's a swimming pool on site (from £105; maison-des-algues.com).



Nature lovers' Parc Naturel Régional Du Haut-Jura

As he hikes from Chalet du Crozat to the twin peaks of Le Petit Montrond and Le Grand Montrond, Francis André is like a child uncovering sweets along a treasure trail. It is early summer and the first wild flowers are sprouting between the last slabs of stale snow. His delight is contagious.

'I always feel that this is home,' he confides, waving towards the pastures where sheep graze, and the south-facing crests with ethereal views of Lake Geneva, the French Alps and Mont Blanc. Beneath his feet is a carpet of wild flowers – violets, primroses, daffodils, lilies, buttercups and crocuses, plus the rare and ferociously blue spring gentians, and black vanilla orchids.

Francis is a mountain guide in the Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Jura in eastern France. It is a world away from the alpine France most people know, but Francis has walked here for over 25 years. His patch is the Réserve Naturelle de la Haute Chaîne du Jura on the park's southern fringe, where taiga-like forest marries Mediterranean flora in dramatic combs – long, narrow glacier-eroded valleys.

Jura's lower pastures border Switzerland, and the cows that inhabit them wear

Left: mountain guide Francis André can help you discover the delights of the Jura region, such as the beautiful falls, Le Saut Girard (opposite)

clanking bells. Their creamy milk makes comté, morbier and bleu du Haut-Jura cheese, and a myriad of walking trails take you past traditional farmsteads and dairies. Into this idyllic landscape cuts the Swallow Line train, which passes through pretty villages.

Francis points to a dark tongue of forest where Savoyards, people native to the Duchy of Savoy, were killed during fighting with France in 1535. 'The Fôret du Massacre is one of Europe's most beautiful fir, beech and spruce forests,' he says. 'Its thickets hide rare wood grouse and lynx. Three pairs of royal eagles stalk its skies.'

Every week Francis leads walkers from the Col de la Faucille mountain pass above Lake Geneva into the reserve to observe chamois – about 1,000 of these goat-like creatures inhabit the Jura's sunny, rocky slopes. 'From the chalet we climb up to these crests and quite often there will be the grandmother, mother and the young grazing a short distance from us,' says Francis. Courtship begins in October. 'The males approach groups of females and woo them with discourse – no fighting, just a strange cry,' he says, pursing his lips to produce a raspy whistling sound.

We return to the lone stone chalet, with its corrugated-iron roof and weathered turquoise wooden shutters. There's no electricity, but from his Thermos Francis pours me a homemade infusion of wild lavender, meadowsweet and Jurassien honey. He calls it 'the taste of the mountain', and its flavour, like life here, is sweet.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

Get to Geneva by train (via Paris, approx £112; 6½ hours; raileurope.co.uk) or plane (BA, easyJet, Jet2, bmibaby and Flybe fly from major UK cities) then hire a car (Avis, Budget, Hertz and Sixt operate in Geneva).

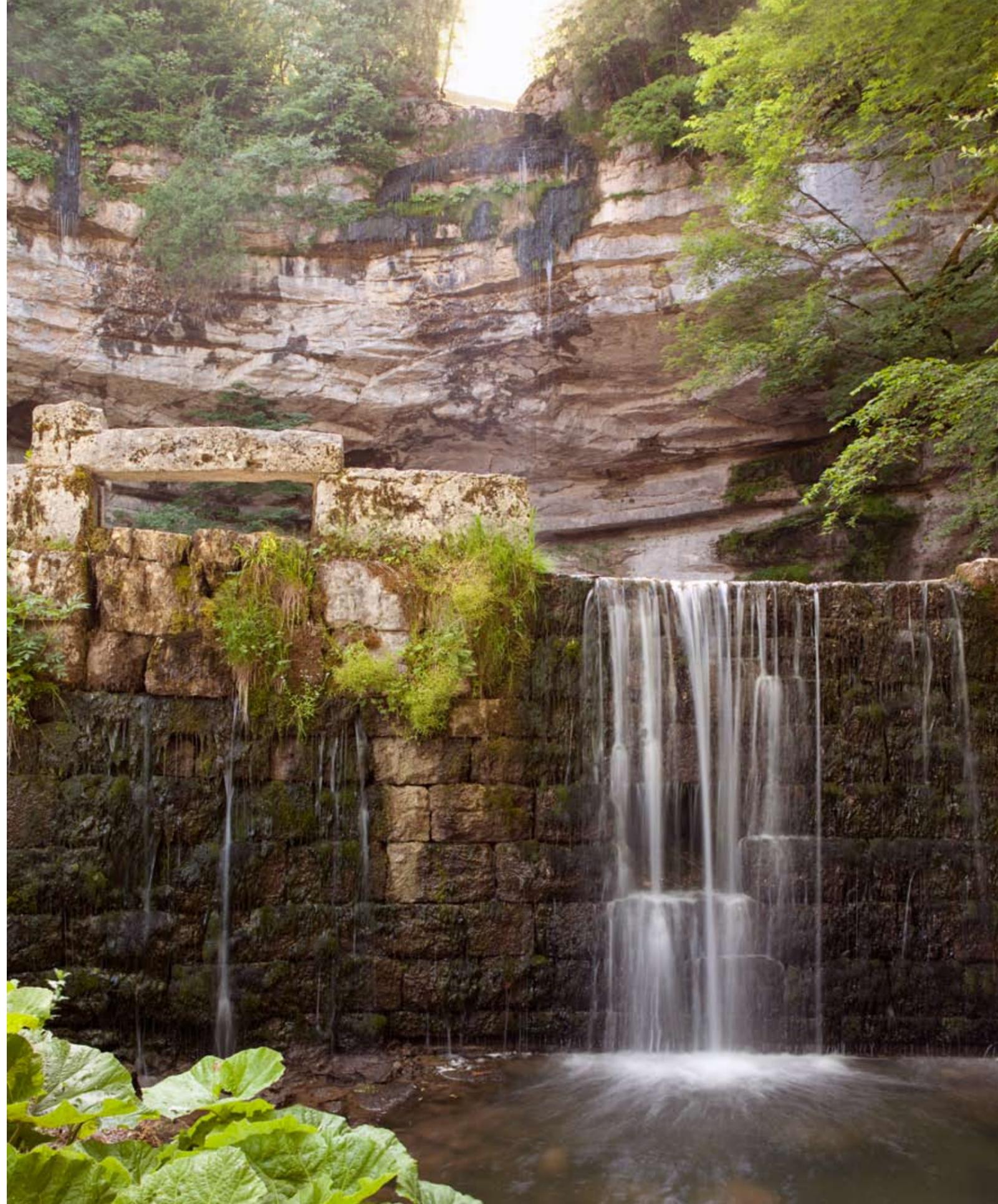
WALK

Francis André offers guided walks through the Jura. Contact him via rando-avec-francis.com.

Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Jura (parc-haut-jura.fr).

SLEEP

Fall asleep to absolute silence at **Le Clos d'Estelle**, four simple chambres d'hôtes run by Jura locals who'll enthusiastically share their knowledge of the region with you (from £54; leclosdestelle.com).



Art lovers' Nord-Pas-de-Calais

Whereas Matisse and Picasso once made southern France the hangout for artists, these days the focus for contemporary art is the industrial north. The canvas is the former coal-mining region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Artists have been quietly working here since well before the pits closed in the 1980s, but it is now, with a growing regionalism and interest in industrial tourism, that artists and audiences in the north are becoming more vocal.

Take Lab Labanque (above), an edgy art gallery in a century-old French bank that hasn't changed since the cashiers moved out. Exhibitions change twice a year and artists work in situ to weave the historic interior into their provocative creations. The gallery is in the small town of Béthune. Every hour, a bell peals across its main square, one of northern France's prettiest. 'We encourage visitors to let themselves be surprised by the subjects addressed and the techniques used by our artists,' says Fabienne Moison at Lab Labanque.

Eighteen miles southeast of Béthune is Lens, where Paris's Louvre gallery plans to open its first annexe in 2012 – on the site of an old coal mine, no less. Give this region a couple more years and it will attract art-lovers from far beyond France. ▶

MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

Drive 50 miles from Calais (Dover to Calais, £71; poferries.com) or get the train to Lens (£280; 3 hours; raileurope.co.uk).

GUIDE

Lab Labanque (lab-labanque.fr).

Northern France Tourism (northernfrance-tourism.com).

Louvre Lens (louvrelens.fr).

SLEEP

Château Philiomel sits within 15 acres of parkland and has four enormous rooms (from £67; lechateaudephiliomel.com).



Clockwise from left: Lastours Castle; Cathar fortress Montségur and a rather, erm, historic truck



History lovers' Languedoc

Spooky castle ruins staccato a series of rocky spurs near Carcassonne in southwest France. So high they rub shoulders with the gods, these sun-baked medieval stones evoke the bloodthirsty crusades blazed against the Cathars in the 13th century: 20,000 of these fundamentalist Christians were massacred in one fell swoop by Royalist troops as they huddled in the fortified cathedral in Béziers in 1209. Then the pretty Languedoc town was razed to the ground.

'As a child I remember seeing the beautiful Château de Puivert,' recalls Cathar historian, author and guide Jean-Louis Gasc. 'And I asked my parents "What is it? Who lives there?" They told me it was a Cathar castle, and I dreamt about the Cathars, imagining them as savage Moors bearing round shields, defending these high ramparts from attacking knights.' It was only later, while studying history and archaeology, that Jean-Louis understood their true significance. 'These chateaux were not Cathar as such, but rather places touched by their persecution,' he says. 'Most notably during the crusade of 1209-1229 and later in 1244, when 225 were burnt alive at the foot of Château de Montségur.'

Jean-Louis sees something special in Montségur. 'I like it best when no-one is there: in the morning at sunrise when the castle seems to belong to what's left of the night, and the fresh scent of dew-damp plants take you to a different time.' Teetering perilously on a rocky outcrop 1,208m above sea level, Château de Montségur is one of Languedoc's most



MAKE IT HAPPEN

TRAVEL

Ryanair flies to Carcassonne from UK cities (from £62 from London) – Montségur is a 1½ hours' drive. Or get the train to Ax les Thermes, an hour's drive (approx £110; via Paris; 12 hours; raileurope.co.uk).

SEE

Château de Montségur (montsegur.fr). **Maison des Memoires** (museum in Mazamet maison-memoires.com). **La Table des Troubadours** (00 33 04 68 91 27 61). **Musée Hurepel** (00 33 04 68 91 12 26). **Château de Quéribus** (00 33 04 68 45 03 69). **Château de Peyrepertuse** (chateau-peyrepertuse.com). **Jean-Louis Gasc** (compagnonsparatge.blogspot.com and almouni.blogzoom.fr). **Languedoc tourist office** (sunfrance.com).

SLEEP

Friendly and welcoming **Relais Chantovernt**, in the hilltop village of Minerve in Le Minervo, has six simple, whitewashed rooms and a restaurant with a lovely terrace with valley views (from £36; relaischantovernt-minerve.fr).

dramatically sited Cathar fortresses. The Field of Burnt Ones recalls those who sizzled at the stake for refusing to accept the Orthodox Catholic faith.

Deep in the heart of the Montagne Noir (Black Mountain) west of Carcassonne, the local museum in Mazamet provides the perfect introduction to the heresy of this wild Cathar country, where the burning sun allows little to grow bar herb-scented garrigue (scrub). After paying homage at Châteaux des Hautpoul, Carcassonne and Lastours, Jean-Louis heads east to Le Minervo, where he spends the night. 'The Minervo wines are as fine as the landscape, and one eats well here – I like La Table des Troubadours.' He urges people to visit the Musée Hurepel. 'One hundred and forty Cathars were burnt in Minerve. The museum tells the history of the crusade with terracotta figurines – it is very moving.'

As wild as the medieval crusaders who hounded out heretics, the untamed landscapes and ruined castles of the Languedoc are secret pleasures that can be savoured without crowds. 'I like to go to Gruissan, see the oyster farmers at the end of Plage des Chalets, and return past Château de Quéribus,' says Jean-Louis. 'This is the beautiful "fortress of the wind", where you can eat the best bread in the world in a windmill. Nearby, at Château de Peyrepertuse, camp in the wild garrigue and watch the summer night sky full of stars touch the magical ground.' 



Find out more

Pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's new *France* guide or, for more specialised information, *Provence & the Côte d'Azur* (for Bandol; £12.99), *Languedoc-Roussillon* (for Carcassonne; £13.99) and *Paris Encounter* (£6.99).