

Around the world, when you mention the south of France, people think of Provence: a place redolent with the fragrance of lavender and the sound of cicadas as you sit in a postcard-worthy village square sipping a pastis. Or they think of the crystalline waters of the Côte d'Azur, dotted with yachts, where the world's rich and famous drive up the prices of a coffee on La Croisette in Cannes.

However, that south of France is not the *real* south of France. The Languedoc (now Occitanie) region enjoys comparable rates of sunshine to Provence, and both the Hérault capital Montpellier and Pyrénées-Orientales capital Perpignan regularly rank among the top 10 sunniest towns in the country, with over 300 days a year.

For the last few years now, editorial pieces have claimed the Languedoc to be the new Provence. That may be because, as rock stars and artists quit Provence, and head further south into the Languedoc in search of better privacy and a territory rich in history and dramatic landscapes, there seems to be a bit of an exodus taking place.

Provence, so beloved by tourists for its super-neat villages and expensive boutiques, has perhaps got some people thinking 'been there, done that' so they are starting to look elsewhere. In the meantime, the Languedoc, once one of the poorest and least populated areas of France, is investing heavily in regenerating its towns, villages and infrastructure as well as safeguarding its areas

A TASTE OF THE AREA

- Catalan snails
- Cassoulet
- Duck confit
- Oysters
- Anchovies from Collioure



Collioure in Pyrénées-Orientales

FPN

True south

Skip the crowds and price tags of Provence and buy in Languedoc for maximum sunshine with value for money, advises **Daniela Harris**



of outstanding natural and historical beauty.

There is a sense of humility that is part and parcel of the character of the people of the Languedoc. As a relative newcomer, I see the Languedoc region not as a new Provence but a much richer, older, more appealing place in so many ways. Here are six reasons why.

1. THE CLIMATE

The Languedoc sits at the very bottom of France and meets the Spanish border to one side and Provence to the other. It has a naturally Mediterranean warm climate with hot and dry summers, warm autumns and quite cold winters, sometimes even with snow. The climate

is not boring though; it varies constantly and no two years are ever the same, with the region being midway between the Atlantic and Mediterranean. It also doesn't suffer the Mistral winds of Provence that are said to drive people stir crazy.

2. THE LANDSCAPE

It is one of the most dramatic and interesting landscapes in the world. The Pyrénées dominate one side of the region and serve as a backdrop to many of the villages here. It is a land of gorges such as the Gorge de Galamus, interesting mountains such as Bugarach, ancient forests such as those that surround

Puivert and plains like those above Limoux. A network of waterways such as the Aude, the Canal du Midi, the Tech and Maury snake across the landscape on which impossibly beautiful medieval villages including Lagrasse, Rivel, Mirepoix, Rennes-les-Bains and Axat sit.

The overriding comment I hear from visitors is about the variety - you can travel 10 minutes in any direction and find yourself in a totally different landscape, as if travelling through Tuscany, via the Alps, Yosemite and then along beautiful and wild coastlines. While other areas of the French coastline are gridlocked with incredibly long tourist seasons,



€579,000

GINESTAS, AUDE

Surrounded by beautiful countryside and vineyards, yet only two minutes from amenities, this 18th-century five-bedroom home comes with a separate apartment, a pretty swimming pool and plenty of character and is set in a hectare of land.



€150,000

BUGARACH, AUDE

Close to the dramatic Gorge de Galamus and sitting on the edge of a delightful village with a restaurant/café is this single-storey house with four bedrooms, a large garage and a fabulous garden with lovely views and space for a pool.



€2.85M

PERPIGNAN, PYRÉNÉES-ORIENTALES

This stunning medieval château sits on top of a hill with uninterrupted views all the way to the mountains and the Mediterranean. It has been totally renovated with numerous grand reception rooms, eight bedrooms and a separate cottage.



€248,240

LIMOUX, AUDE

This well presented three-bedroom villa is only five minutes from the buzzing town of Limoux with its popular food market. It has a lovely garden with views over the surrounding vineyards. It also has separate guest accommodation.

you will find beautiful beaches deserted in the Languedoc for most of the year.

3. THE INDUSTRY

Winemaking dominates the region. It can trace its history in the region back to the 5th century BC and today represents the largest ‘vineyard’ in the world, with production exceeding that of Australia, Bordeaux or South Africa. Vines are an essential feature of the land. During the summer, the hills are covered in the intense greens of the vines, which take on breathtaking gold and red colours during the autumn.

Limoux was producing its famous sparkling Blanquette de Limoux a good 150 years before Dom Perignon is said to have ‘invented’ champagne. The town celebrates with

a month-long festival in February. Towards the sea, the Corbières produce some of the best reds in the country and the Minervois is known for its rosés. Farming as a whole is big business in France, but not here in the Languedoc, where smallholdings dominate and increasingly farmers are embracing organic sustainable farming in ways other regions in France have not. You will not find bland, endless fields of flat farmland here; rather local livestock grazing in the landscape and thriving markets brimming with organic foods at prices competitive to those in supermarkets.

4. THE FOOD

Like its people, the food in this part of the world is honest, generous and rich with flavour, but that is

INFRASTRUCTURE

- The Corbières-Fenouilledes has been classified as a protected regional park (*parc naturel régional*) in 2021, over an area of 1,800km including 99 communes across the Aude and Pyrénées-Orientales joining only 56 that exist across France.
- In 2021, the roll-out of high-speed fibre optic broadband across the whole region, is scheduled to be

- completed by the end of the year.
- The Languedoc region is easily accessible from both Paris and Barcelona by train.
- There are four local airports with international flights: Béziers, Carcassonne, Perpignan and Toulouse, and a further two nearby airports in Spain: Girona and Barcelona.

not to say that pockets of sophistication don’t exist, with Michelin-star restaurants springing up in towns such as Narbonne, Carcassonne and Perpignan. People in this part of the world still buy local and fresh produce while catching

up with acquaintances at the weekly markets, and new organic supermarkets are now in every town of the region. Good market towns include Esperaza, Limoux, Caunes-Minervoises, Narbonne (famous for its *Halles*), Collioure (try



€505,320

PÉZENAS, HÉRAULT

Set in a lively village 10 minutes from Pezenas, this picturesque four-bedroom house comes with a pretty courtyard garden and pool. It has some lovely original features and is only 30 minutes from some of the best beaches in France.



€155,000

NÉBIAS, AUDE

Midway between the Mediterranean and the Pyrénées, this four-bedroom renovated village house would be ideal for holidays. It has a large roof terrace with stunning views and is only 10 minutes from Quillan with its annual food festival.



€235,400

MAURY, PYRÉNÉES-ORIENTALES

Fabulous views of the Pyrénées! Set on the edge of a peaceful winemaking village with an idyllic garden to while away the days, this four-bedroom home has been tastefully renovated with bright and spacious accommodation throughout.



€2.45M

CARCASSONNE, AUDE

This exceptionally elegant property close to Carcassonne and Toulouse airports was built as a hunting lodge and sits in 32 hectares of land. It has seven bedrooms and has been beautifully restored and modernised, with plenty of luxury features.

their anchovies) and Quillan, known for its annual Taste festival in September.

The cuisine is varied. There are Spanish influenced-dishes such as Catalan snails, as well as the oyster bays down at the coast and the pink salt flats at Gruissan. Then there's the famous *cassoulet*, a slow-cooked meat and bean stew that is still hotly debated by Carcassonne, Toulouse and Castelnau, all of whom claim ownership.

5. THE HISTORY

The French are known for their good taste and that is why they have been holidaying in the Languedoc for years, exploring the well-trodden Cathar trail and castles, and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Carcassonne's citadel. The

history of the place is one of change, a cultural melting pot, a constant battleground for the Romans, Moors, Cathars and Catholics throughout the ages, with each leaving their own unique stamp on the landscape. With 300 castles in the region, picking a few favourites is hard but Montségur, Queribus and Lapradelle are surely not to be missed.

6. ACTIVITIES

The Languedoc is an outdoor lover's paradise, with white water rafting, hiking and skiing on the doorstep, the world windsurfing championships down at La Franqui beach, gliding and horse riding all representing some of the best things to tick off your bucket list. If you enjoy swimming but not crowds then head to

the beaches of the Languedoc, or visit one of the many rivers, waterfalls and lakes in the region for some wild swimming. No other region in France plays as much rugby as the Languedoc and important historical rugby towns include Quillan, Narbonne and Perpignan.

This is where Spain meets France and a melting pot of cultures is cooked up. It's where the mountains meet the sea.

So, this is why the Languedoc region of France really shouldn't be described as the new Provence; it has too big a personality as one of the last great wildernesses in France, a place where the castles and mountains aren't inspired by Disney but rather by the drama of the Middle Ages and where the real stars are the rocks. ■

TOP DAYS OUT

- Get on the trail of the Cathar castles – visit Lapradelle, Queribus and Peyrepertuse castles
- Try oysters on the beach at Leucate
- Explore Collioure on the trail of the Fauvists
- Enjoy a day's shopping in Carcassonne
- Visit Les Halles de Narbonne
- Surf down the beach at Gruissan or La Franqui
- Go to the weekly market at Esperaza
- Get lost in the Labyrinth at Nebias
- Follow the trail of Matisse through Collioure
- Watch the Tour de France arrive in Quillan, via the Col de St-Louis
- Swim in the Cascades at Duilhac
- Go gliding at Puivert for less than €70
- Watch the vultures above Bugarach mountain
- Try canyoning at the Gorge de Galamus
- Visit the Abbey of Fontfroide
- Get a ringside seat for a top-level artist such as Elton John or Sting at the Festival of Carcassonne in the cité itself
- Join in wine tasting, music and art at the Toques et Cloches Festival in Limoux

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