

Lagrasse and the Corbières

THE CORBIÈRES



Obviously, it would take me forever to detail all the sights and attractions of the vast Occitanie in one book and so I will be offering instead a more personal view of the places that I have come to know rather than force you to trawl through umpteen facts and figures that can, in any case, be found in many different guide books and websites. As I've already stated, we live in the Aude and, more precisely, the Corbières. The name Corbières comes from "cor" a pre-Celtic word meaning "rock" and "berre" from the River Berre which runs through the commune of Durban. The Corbières is the mountainous region located mainly in the Aude and partly in the Pyrénées-Orientales to the south. It is a place of outstanding natural

LAGRASSE AND THE CORBIÈRES

beauty and one of the wildest areas of France with a very low population density so its natives are generally less well-off financially here than in other more congested areas of France. The main industries are viticulture and tourism so life here is more gentle and laid back than its busier near-neighbours. It is extremely picturesque and bursting with field upon field of vines alternating with garrigue, gorges, ravines, valleys, rivers, lakes, hills and mountainous countryside. The River Aude borders the Corbières to the west and north; to the south is the River Agly and to the east the Mediterranean Sea.

The eastern part of the Corbières with its many pink flamingo festooned Étangs (basins or lagoons in English) borders the sea and is called the Corbières Maritimes. It has its own distinctive climate and characteristic vegetation, which I am reliably informed is known as ‘thermo-Mediterranean’ vegetation. Along the coast you can take your pick from rough and ready tourist beach resorts like Narbonne Plage and Port-la-Nouvelle, where in summer the tattoo to teeth ratio is just too close to call for me, or choose instead to visit the delightful, old-fashioned fishing villages and resorts of Gruissan, la Franqui, Leucate, Peyriac-de-Mer and Bages to name but a few.



View from the quaint fishing village of Bages

THE CORBIÈRES

Our “terroir” is dominated by the Montagne d'Alaric, along the Aude valley between Narbonne and Carcassonne. The mountain is named after the Visigoth King Alaric II who fought the Franks in the 5th century. On certain days, when a halo of cloud sits on top, the locals can be heard to expound that "Alaric porte son chapeau" (Alaric is wearing his hat). Local tradition has it that he left a great treasure buried in the caves beneath the mountain but unfortunately we haven't found it yet! One of our neighbouring villages, Saint-Laurent de la Cabrerisse, boasts Visigothic carvings in the entrance of the church and, in case you're visiting, the village is also home to the excellent winery 'Cellier des Desmoiselles' which produces one of the nicest rosé wines in the Corbières.



LAGRASSE AND THE CORBIÈRES

Many of our local villages conceal hidden gems, like quaint squares with fountains, sleepy cafés and art galleries, that are simply not visible from their main through-road and all the villages have their individual claims to fame which can only be discovered by taking a detour and making a closer inspection of the place. In fact, the best advice I can give you when visiting the Corbières, is not to make the mistake of simply driving straight through, but instead park the car and take the time to go for a tour of each village on foot. Just head for the main square, which may be tiny, but is usually the heart of the village, where you might find a small café at which to stop and quench your thirst; or a boulangerie for those irresistible cakes and fruit tarts that France is so rightly famous for. Perhaps you'll happen across a bench near a pretty fountain for you to rest a while and take in the ambience. In this way you'll get a real feel for the villages as they are all unique. I remember stopping a while in Camplong d'Aude and was not only rewarded with the sight of a gorgeous, spring-fed fountain (albeit painted a rather garish green!) in the middle of the little square but also the village's very own chateau with its stone clock tower over the gateway which I would have missed had I not made the effort to explore the village on foot.

Many of our local Corbières villages are also worthy of note as the birth places of French poets. For instance, Moux is the birthplace of the poet Henry Bataille (1872 -1922) where his tomb is topped by a weird but funky skeletal statue; Floure is the birthplace of the poet Gaston Bonheur (1923-1980) who founded a surrealist magazine called Choc and was also the director of Paris-Match; Villar-en-Val is the birthplace of the poet Joseph Delteil (1894 -1978) where the 11th-century church is home to an exhibition of his work during the summer. Fabrezan is the next village on from ours and has a museum dedicated to Charles Cros (christened somewhat extravagantly as Émile-Hortensius-Charles Cros!), yet another local poet and humorous writer, but also famous as the inventor of the phonograph (or Paleophone as he called it), later to evolve into the gramophone and then the turntable or record player. Cros' device could record sounds, but just to put the record

THE CORBIÈRES

straight (please excuse the pun), Thomas Edison was, in fact, the first person to invent a phonograph that was able to reproduce the recorded sound. Cros was also known for pioneering photographs in colour. Funnily enough, he bears a striking resemblance to my friend Gus (pronounced “goose” in French) who owns and chefs for the village’s excellent pizzeria – maybe they’re related? I shall have to ask him. For more details on this famous inventor, please visit the website: www.fabrezan.fr.



Émile-Hortensius-Charles Cros

The villages of the Corbières are inexorably linked to its Cathar history, especially when the pope’s crusade against the heretical Cathars was at its most despotic. The nearby village of Villerouge-Termenès, said to be the Mediterranean door to the High Corbières, is one such village. In the centre of the medieval settlement is an imposing castle with four towers where visitors can enjoy an audio-visual tour which focuses its narrative on its most famous occupant Guilhem Belibaste, the last Cathar Perfect (Perfect was the name given to ordained Cathars). The unfortunate Belibaste was burnt at

LAGRASSE AND THE CORBIÈRES

the stake here in 1321. Our family spent an afternoon here during one summer holiday as I thought it might be interesting for the children to learn something of the region's gruesome history. I knew they were big fans of the brilliant TV series "Horrible Histories" so presumed the gory details would be right up their street. Sure enough on our way round the castle on the audio-visual tour, equipped with headphones and English versions of the recorded history, my wife and I caught sight of our son, who was sixteen at the time, walking round nodding and smiling and seemingly enjoying the whole experience only to find his headphones were in fact plugged into his iPod and he had actually been listening to the Stone Roses instead. So much for trying to educate the youth of today then!

Strictly speaking, the famous 'Cathar castles' of the Aude, known as the five sons of Carcassonne (namely Peyrepertuse, Quéribus, Puivert, Aguilar and Termes) can't truly be called Cathar castles, as the tourist offices would have us believe, because they were in fact built by the French Kings to protect their interests in the south of the country. Nevertheless they certainly acted as strongholds during the campaign sheltering hundreds of innocent Cathars during this diabolical period in history. Many of the powerful lords of the castles were predisposed to the Cathars and sympathetic to their plight, and so numerous 'Good Christians' took refuge in these stone fortresses from the brutal inquisition being waged without mercy by the pope's relentless Crusaders. For instance, in 1210, during the Albigensian Crusade, as it became known, the fortress of Termes held out for four months against the Crusaders who were commanded by Simon de Montfort, the most vicious of all the pope's warlords. Termes is not far from our village and well worth a visit especially in summer when the local authorities put on a lively, medieval-themed pageant. At Termes, there's an incredible fresh water pool that mostly locals visit which has at least four jumping off places but be careful because it's pretty wild. I have heard the story of people jumping in to one of the many pools in the Corbières gorges and not being able to climb out again. No idea if that's true, but it would make for a great story!

THE CORBIÈRES



Waterfalls and natural pool at Termes