

Heart of stone

Visitors can feel like king (or queen) of the castle in the fortified French city of Carcassonne, discovers **Tamara Hinson**

just an hour's drive from Toulouse and surrounded by one of southern France's top wine regions, historic Carcassonne has it all: fantastic food, a rich history and breathtaking backdrops, including the rugged peaks of Occitanie's Pyrenees mountains.

It's hard not to be impressed by the thick, double stone walls that encircle the Unesco-listed Historic Fortified Centre of Carcassonne, perched proudly

on a hilltop, its towers and turrets jutting skywards against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks. But getting an inside view of this iconic monument is now even easier. In 2025, France's National Monuments Centre completed a restoration of the ramparts, adding raised walkways around the ancient walled city, which dates back to 550BC. The views from these walls – of vineyards, mountains and rolling hills – are breathtaking. ➤

PICTURE: OLYMPIA CARCASSONNE

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Domaine du Grès Vaillant wine; Hôtel de la Cité Carcassonne MGallery; some Limoux vineyards use horses to turn the soil; Camp Médiéval **PICTURES:** Abacopress/Philippe Louzon; www.vincentphotographie.com; Tamara Hinson



ASK THE experts



Alexis Lingham, The Personal Travel Agents

"I always tell my clients that nothing in the UK compares with Carcassonne – it's like stepping into a fairytale. Walking inside the medieval walls is unforgettable, and one of the real joys is stopping at a quaint cafe to admire the views and soak up the atmosphere."



Mike Fleetwood, head of product for short-haul, Newmarket Holidays

"The Unesco-listed medieval city is well known but agents should also consider highlighting the lower town of Bastide Saint-Louis, as it provides an experience that is wonderfully local and intimate."



MEDIEVAL MAGIC

While there's no shortage of stores selling medieval merchandise inside the walled city (a Carcassonne version of Monopoly seems to be the must-have item), it's also a living, breathing town. One reminder of that comes with the traffic lights at either end of its cobbled streets; despite being barely 20m long, they're so narrow that traffic lights are needed to prevent cars from getting stuck.

At Carcassonne's heart is the Basilique Saint Nazaire, a Romanesque beauty with the most colourful stained glass I've ever seen. It dates back to the 11th century, when its popularity wasn't just down to locals' God-fearing natures. A guide points out that in the Middle Ages, the fortified city was crowded and dirty, and 90% of its population was made up of peasants who toiled all day, returning to sleep in cramped quarters, often alongside pigs and sheep. The basilica was one of the few places they could enjoy a sense of space.

Another reminder of Carcassonne's history is the riverside facade of a building that became the royal manufactory (a workshop with a special royal charter) in the late 1600s. Dozens of looms once rattled away here and the former French king's coat of arms, carved into the stone centuries ago and still visible today, is testimony to the structure's one-time importance. In the Middle Ages, Carcassonne and the wider Languedoc region was famous for its woollen cloth, which was shipped globally.

At Carcassonne's family-friendly Camp Médiéval,

There's no shortage of stores selling medieval merchandise – a Carcassonne version of Monopoly is the must-have item

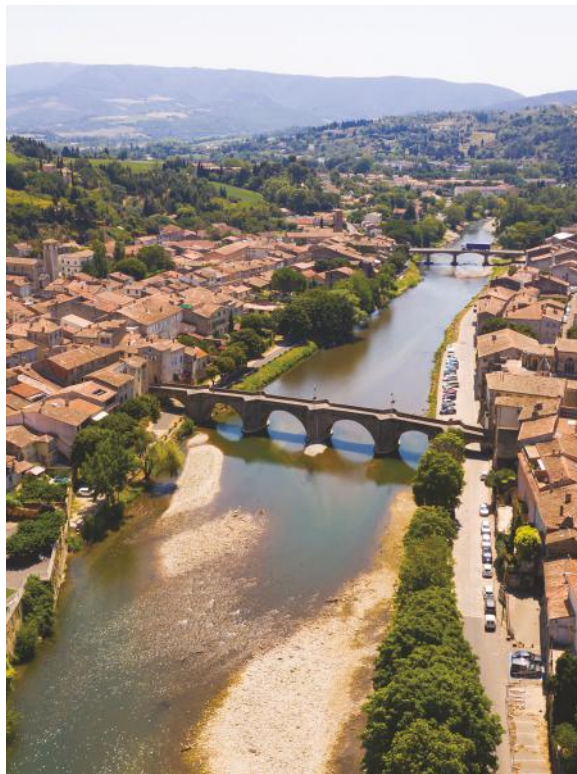
clients and their kids can learn about medieval life. Thankfully, this doesn't involve sleeping next to a pig, but rather chatting to people re-enacting the lives of peasants, knights and soldiers to learn about sword-making, leatherwork and weaving in one of the camp's large tents. It's wonderfully interactive – there's a throne to sit on and I even do my best impersonation of a troubadour (the musicians and poets once employed to entertain the royal family) by getting to grips with various medieval instruments.

CREMANT OF THE CROP

Carcassonne is also a paradise for foodies. At a boutique called Autrefois, I find a spectacular, rainbow-hued collection of tapenades. There are endless varieties, including ones made with goats' cheese, aioli and almonds. And at the 46-room Hôtel de la Cité Carcassonne MGallery, deep inside the walled city and tucked into a building that was once a bishop's palace, I feast on Michelin-starred Mediterranean ➤

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ABOVE: The town of Limoux is 20 minutes from Carcassonne

PICTURE: Shutterstock/BearFotos

cuisine at La Barbacane, where highlights of the £112 tasting menu include Seine scallops with Comté cheese. The wine menu is the fattest I've ever come across, and I opt for a delicious Crémant de Limoux – a sparkling wine made using the champagne method but produced in other areas of France.

The town of Limoux, just a 20-minute drive from Carcassonne, is an essential stop-off. The vineyards here are generally family-run and much smaller than the behemoths of the Champagne region, offering more opportunity to speak directly to the producers in question. Examples include Domaine du Grès Vaillant, which has been producing sparkling wine for hundreds of years, where current owners Aigline and Laurent rely on horses to pull machinery and turn the soil.

"Recently, there's been growing interest from China in our wines," says Aigline during a tasting of the vineyard's crisp, dry varieties. "But the problem is that you'll go to a trade show, chat to a Chinese buyer who says he loves your wine and would like to place an order, and he'll request 150,000 bottles, which isn't feasible for many [small-scale] Limoux vineyards."

But Aigline and Laurent shouldn't worry – there'll be no shortage of Occitanie-bound wine lovers who will be more than happy to pick up the slack. **TW**

BOOK IT

Osprey Holidays offers a three-night B&B stay in a Classic King Room at Hotel de la Cité Carcassonne, with flights from Stansted departing September 7, from £749.

ospreyholidays.com

Trafalgar's 10-day Highlights of France and Barcelona tour, which spends a night in Carcassonne, costs from £2,318 per person, based on two sharing, for a departure on August 28. The price includes accommodation, activities and the services of a Trafalgar tour director. Flights are extra.

trafalgar.com

Headwater's four-night self-guided Tour de France – Canal du Midi break costs from £1,389 per person, based on two sharing, for departures in July. The price includes B&B, bike hire, a navigation app and luggage transfers, but not flights.

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