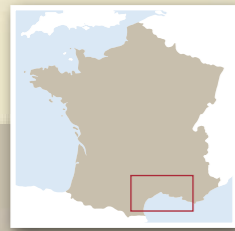




From Narbonne, on the Mediterranean coast, turn right and you'll soon be in Spain. Turn left and you're at the start of a coastal discovery that will take you to ancient fishing ports and magical coves

WORDS Val Chapman PHOTOGRAPHY John Chapman



The Med the easy way

PART 2

Yachts of all sizes gather at Gruissan Port

Above left: The streets of the old city of Agde >>



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- 1 Windsurfing at the Étang des Bages et Sigean
- 2 Gruissan Port - quiet and smart
- 3 Plage Plein Mer
- 4 Narbonne Plage
- 5 The fountain statue of Agathe
- 6 Gruissan Port

We're at Narbonne, where the mountains of the wine-growing Corbières region reach down and dip their foothills in the Mediterranean. We've towed across France on easy-driving autoroutes and our on-test Bailey is on a triangular pitch bordered by oleanders and olive trees. The Étang des Bages et Sigean laps the shores of the campsite, which is called La Nautique. It's an almost totally enclosed lagoon. Windsurfers catch the strong winds of the day and race over white-flecked water. This is the start of our tour. A little place called Gruissan intrigues us as we study the map. It's about five miles from the campsite and according to the map there's an old village and a beach...

We reach an ancient settlement, a cluster of houses, some new, some very old; a huddle of population close to the coast. Fish are landed here by devices called trabagues. It's a means of trapping eels, loup de bar, mullet and dourade. This method has been used for many centuries.

We drive a short distance from the old town and discover a small smart resort of a few restaurants; most have mussels as their speciality and all major on fish.

We discover the great expanse of sand that is Plage Plein Mer at Mateille (you can find it by taking the D332 from Gruissan but it's little-known – not even marked on our big-scale Michelin map). This beach is remote and enticing. A few houses are being built and

we think this is a resort of the future, though for now it's all ours. If you seek isolation you'll find it at Mateille. At Narbonne Plage pedal-carts are for hire on the promenade and pedalos on the sea. I'm tempted by both but John, my husband, dislikes anything that relies on pedal power (hard work, he says) and we settle for a walk across the vast strand of sand that's empty even in June.

We drive less than two miles along the D168 to our next stop, St-Pierre-sur-Mer. We find yet another fantastic, quiet beach and a square lined with restaurants, tables set under palm trees with a view of the sea. This is a microcosm of a resort, floral and smart and well worth more time than we could give it.

Our journey heads inland now, towards Fleury, to reach the D14 to take us around the Étang du Vendres, a collection of minuscule lakes, on our route to Valras Plage. We drive through the quaint old town of Vendres, and then Lespignan, and reach the coast at Valras Plage, a ribbon of a resort, buzzing, lively, chic and, above all, with an enormous beach. That's why this place is so popular with families; there's a good choice of campsites in this area.

Rocky breakwaters sculpt the beach and create sunbathing shelters from the warm breeze. It's 32 degrees this day and the clean fine sand is hot under our feet. Parking is plentiful by the port except in peak season. You can learn to sail here – get your Permis de Bateau in three days, take a pleasure-boat trip or go sea fishing.



“THE ATMOSPHERE IS ELECTRIC AND AT THE SAME TIME RELAXING; WE WISH WE COULD STAY FOR A FORTNIGHT.”

You can buy cocktails, exotic ice creams and fashion that's affordable. There are restaurants whose entire theme is moules (mussels) – we counted 13. You'll find churros here (the Spanish influence is here in the form of these delicious fried-dough pastry-based snacks). There are couscous dishes and gauffres (waffles) loaded with cream and a single strawberry just to make you think there is something healthy about this calorie mountain. Temptations come thick and fast here.

The atmosphere is electric and at the same time relaxing; we wish we could stay for a fortnight and we are finding out right now why so many people do.

Our next stop this day is the magical ancient inland city of Agde, just three miles from its more recently constructed resort, Cap d'Agde.

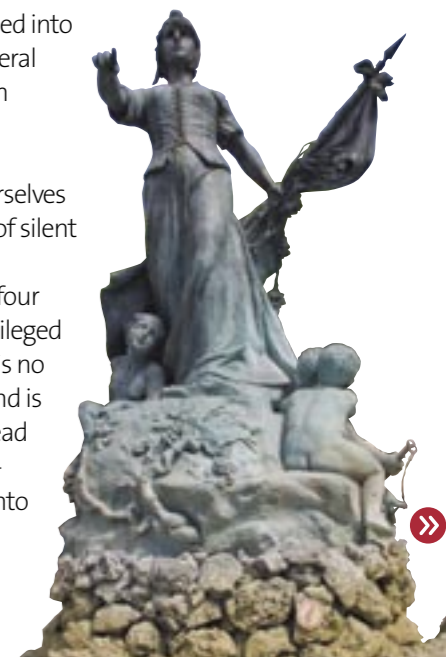
This is a gloriously quaint old town of magnificent sculptures. One is surrounded by water while another, at the opposite end of the main square, is a fantastic sculptural fountain of lions, alongside the great walls of the city. Cap d'Agde was visited by the Minoans, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians. The Greeks set up a

trading post here in 580BC and called it Agathe Tyche (good fortune); Agde is among France's oldest cities. The fountain is surmounted by a figure bearing an inscription in Greek, the letters of which I managed to translate as 'Agathe'. By chance, we had found what is rated as the most important symbolic piece of Agde's architecture.

When the city was built it was divided into three sections, with ramparts and several gates. The present ramparts date from medieval times and largely follow the original line.

We climb a set of steps and find ourselves above the traffic noise and in a maze of silent streets with washing hanging from balconies, and properties climbing to four storeys. We feel we are enjoying a privileged view of a way of life, for ancient Agde is no tourist showpiece; it exists for itself and is all the more enchanting for it. Steps lead up to the ramparts at various points – just walk along and then step down into the streets and then up again...

- 7 Cap D Agde
- 8 Houses adorned with fantastic murals in Agde
- 9 Speciality ice creams at Cap d'Agde
- 10 Shops spill out into streets under colourful umbrellas





1 Cap d'Agde - a port full of restaurants
2 Cap d'Agde
3 Glass-hulled boats leave from Cap d'Agde
4 Le Grau du Roi - fishing port
5 The fortified walls of Aigues Mortes
6 Grilled by means of a wood fire
7 A spectacular array of biscuits at Aigues Mortes

We find Hôtel Boissezoy, built in the 17th century by the family of the same name, constructed entirely of basalt, for Agde sits on volcanic rock of Mont St Loup. Unsurprisingly, basalt is a feature of Agde. All the old town steps are made from it and most of the buildings, many in Italian Renaissance style. Don't miss the Cathedral St Etienne, seat of the bishopric of Agde.

This may be a historic place but it's also a bit of unspoiled France, existing without the financial helping hand of tourism – in extreme contrast to its sea-bordered modern namesake that's our next stop...

At Cap D'Agde we manage to find tree-shade for the vehicle and follow a pedestrian way to the port. Restaurants line the harbour, which seems to have a million masts of yachts of all sizes. We stroll along the basalt promenade past smart shops and decide this is the St Tropez of the western Med. Attractions include a boat trip to Fort Brescou and around the port, conger eel fishing at night, an open-topped boat trip around the marina and the peninsula – or you can hire a motorboat and go it alone.

For us, though, that's for another time. In just one day we've explored a slice of coast from Narbonne to Cap d'Agde and right now the prospect of dinner in our on-



test Bailey Pageant back at Camping la Nautique is an appealing one. We pause for a speciality yogurt ice cream, the perfect cooling sustenance before a drive.

We've probably driven 70 miles in the course of this day – easy miles, as part of the journey to Cap d'Agde was on the autoroute A9. But tomorrow's drive will be further and the prospect of a day that will take us through ancient history, fascinating traditions – and oysters – makes route-planning over dinner as the sun sets on our pitch a pleasure, for we are heading for the fringes of the Camargue.

We make for the furthest point on our route first, Aigues Mortes. This is a fortified city built in 1240 on the edge of the marshland of the vast Rhône delta that forms the Camargue. We park easily in the tree-lined town square and quickly find the double-towered archway main entrance, the walls stretching out in both directions. We discover the best way to explore Aigues Mortes is to follow the walls. This place has changed little since the Middle Ages and tourism seems somehow incongruous here. We set out to explore Aigues Morte's tourist offerings: Provençal fabrics, biscuits displayed artistically and a huge shop specialising in art and glass.

All the colour of the Med is here in microcosm. A small square is filled with buzzing restaurants. It's lunchtime and a skilful guitarist is creating classical music that seems at one with the calming trickle of water from the fountains that surround the statue of St Louis commemorating the eighth crusade.

We're on the fringe of the Camargue here and Les Salins de Midi (the salt marshes) reach right up to the ramparts. We head out of the town on the D979 across the marshland, to le Grau du Roi and Port Camargue. This is where the Canal Rhône-Sète reaches the sea, alongside the vast delta of the Rhône.

The shops are awash with olive-patterned pottery, table cloths and 'savon' (soap) de Marseilles and a palm-fringed beach is close. This is le Grau du Roi and we quickly discover that pedalos are for hire in the sheltered bay. It's a quiet, subdued resort, with the character of the region emblazoned everywhere in the form of mosaics – some depict fishing vessels, while others show white horses, flamingoes and bulls, all symbols of the Camargue.

We find the old harbour. Fishing vessels chug in and out and a traditional, brightly-painted barque enhances the scene; little has changed here for many centuries, we decide.

It's a purposeful town where fishing and tourism marry happily. We watch a



stern trawler set out to sea and return to the car for a 40km drive west, skirting Montpellier on the autoroute. Our destination? A place far from the tourist spots, a place about which we'd not have known without a recommendation from my relatives who live in the south of France and know of my passion for oysters.

Behind the big fishing port of Sète lies a lagoon, the Basin de Thau and, at the eastern shore Balaruc-les-Bains. It's a sheltered beach of fine pale sand. Of the restaurants along the seafront, every one is offering oyster dishes. It's a noted place among local people, my relatives told us. But there's an even greater secret to uncover just around the bay.

Bouzigues (it's marked on Michelin maps but you have to look hard) is where to seek out oysters. This little lagoon village exists for one purpose only: oysters are raised here and you can buy direct from the producers, at about half the price you'd pay elsewhere. That's why today's trip was carefully mapped out over last night's dinner. Bouzigues is our last port of call today and the next stop is the caravan fridge, which was to be stashed with enough oysters for several days' starters.

Bouzigues spells out, more than any other place we visited on this section of the tour, that unchanged France is still out there to be explored – and it's only a stone's throw from fabulous and famous tourist regions.

8 Statue of St Louis
9 Balaruc Les Bains
10 Bouzigues **11** The river runs into the town at fishing port Sète **12** The unassuming little building offers the best-value oysters in southern France!
13 Huitres



Next month

We take you south from Narbonne, towards the Spanish border. It's a journey that further underlines that a lot can be seen in a short distance once you reach the Med.

“ALL THE COLOUR OF THE MED IS HERE IN MICROCOSM. A SMALL SQUARE IS FILLED WITH BUZZING RESTAURANTS...”

USEFUL STUFF

» What to take

- ➔ Complete set of spare light bulbs for both your car and caravan
- ➔ High visibility jackets for all occupants of the car
- ➔ A warning triangle
- ➔ A first aid kit
- ➔ A fire extinguisher
- ➔ Headlamp beam deflectors (The above are legal requirements)
- ➔ Sufficient Calor gas for your trip – Calor is not available outside the UK

» What to check

- ➔ Check your car/caravan insurance is valid for your trip
- ➔ Arrange repatriation insurance for both car and caravan in the event of a breakdown that can't be rectified abroad, or an accident
- ➔ Check your fuel level on Saturdays; many fuel stations in France are closed on Sundays

TRAVEL TIPS

- ➔ The easiest way to arrange your holiday is to book with one of the agencies such as Select Sites (which organised our tour), Eurocamp Independent, Caravan Club, Camping and Caravanning Club. They can organise your ferry crossing, insurance and site reservations.

» Driving tips

- ➔ Driving on the right is something most people get used to very quickly. Times when it's easy to forget to drive on the right are when turning out of entrances (campsites, fuel stations) or at junctions when there's no other traffic around to remind you!
- ➔ As in Britain, caravans are not allowed in the third lane of three-lane motorways.
- ➔ Outside built-up areas, outfits over 3500kg or 7m must leave 50 metres between themselves and the vehicle in front.



THE SITES: The best places to stay

» THE SITE: Camping la Nautique, Narbonne

Minutes from miles of quiet beaches, on the shores of a sheltered lagoon lies what must surely be one of France's best sites. That's because each pitch has its own shower and loo, in a little building. Its pitches, bordered by olive trees and oleanders, are large and easy to reverse into, and it's perfectly located for exploring the Med coast to the north and south. It's a family-oriented site with a lovely pool overlooked by a bar and restaurant. Shop, laundry and washing-up places are all here, too. In high season watersports are organised. Raft-building, discos and a children's club are on offer, too; La Nautique's appeal is comprehensive.

➔ **OPEN:** 15 February to 15 November

➔ **PRICES:** From €19.50

➔ **CONTACT:** www.select-sites.com or www.campinglanautique.eu



CAMPING LA NAUTIQUE



» THE SITE: Domaine La Yole, Valras Plage

Stage shows in the evenings, a water slides complex and lots of organised entertainment including open-air discos – this is as much a holiday village as a campsite. Most pitches have shade but when you want the sun the beach is a 15-minute walk away. There are several shops on the site, and you can buy wine produced at the adjacent Domaine de la Yole.

➔ **OPEN:** 25 April to 19 September

➔ **PRICES:** From €20.50

➔ **CONTACT:** Select Sites or www.campinglayole.com

» THE SITE: La Petite Camargue, Aigues-Mortes

Just over 3km from Aigues-Mortes in the heart of the Camargue region, the pitches here are mostly shaded. Sunbathing opportunities exist aplenty, though, on the large terrace surrounding the pool. There's a children's club and organised activities include aqua-gym and diving. There's a disco that goes on into the early hours of the morning but it won't disturb sleepers because it's underground. Restaurant, shop, even a hair salon is here. One to pick if you're looking for

a comprehensive holiday village.

➔ **OPEN:** 25 April to 19 September

➔ **PRICES:** From €19

➔ **CONTACT:** Select Sites or www.yellohvillage-petite-camargue.com

» THE SITE: Camping Les Sablons, Portiragnes-Plage

This site has both shaded and sunny pitches – and direct access to a beach. There are two pools, water slides, and plenty of space to sunbathe. Entertainment, including open-air discos, is organised in the busy season; there are sports competitions, too. There's a take-away, bar, restaurant and shop.

➔ **OPEN:** 1 April to 30 September

➔ **PRICES:** From €25

➔ **CONTACT:** Select Sites or www.les-sablons.com

» THE SITE: Domaine de Massereau, Sommières

There's an unspoilt charm here amid the woodland aspect of the tree-shaded pitches. Yet there's a very new semi-outdoor restaurant with patio heaters, and a pizzeria with traditional wood-burning oven. Most pitches are too small for large caravans.

➔ **OPEN:** 28 March to 5 November

➔ **PRICES:** From €20

➔ **CONTACT:** Select Sites or www.massereau.fr