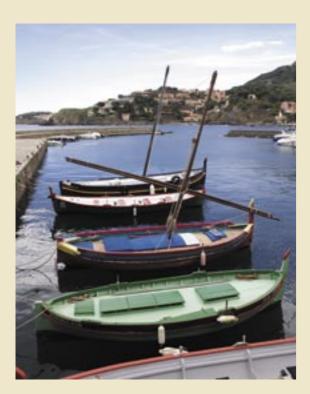
#### TOURING - FRANCE



The Côte Vermeille, from Narbonne south, almost to Spain, sparkles with new resorts, tapas bars and brightly-painted fishing boats. All tastes are catered for here

WORDS Val Chapman PHOTOGRAPHY John Chapman



















epitomise Port

magnificence you

expect at a Med

Vendres

**PORT VENDRES** ur tour had begun in Spain, at the port of 1 Brilliant flowers Santander. We'd crossed the French trim the town Pyrénées, arrived at the Mediterranean at 2 Fishing nets out to dry on the Narbonne – and now we were close to harbourside Spain again. This is a land of sangria and 3 Markets like this are a browser's tapas, sardines and paella. Yet the language and the magnet in many culture is all French. parts of France This stretch of coast, between Narbonne and the 4 Bright colours are everywhere - this restaurant's bright look seems to

Spanish border at Cerbère is in sharp contrast to anything else along the entire French Mediterranean shore. There are two large modern, recently-built resorts here, lots more little places springing up – and, as you drive further south towards Spain, you find some incredibly spectacular twisty road routes,



tour, Camping La Nautique at Narbonne took us through vine-terraced mountains; we pass Rivesaltes and other famous wine areas. The motorway skirts



You can sail to Morocco from Port Vendres and there's a mix of Moroccan and Spanish influence on the architecture here. It's a fishing port first and foremost and nets are out to dry all around the harbour.

Frondy palms, huge ocean-class vessels alongside inshore boats... We're lucky to park by the port; it's early Saturday and already busy. We find an elegant yacht registered at Poole in Dorset; it's called Sunshine Lifestyle and its name seems to encapsulate all that Port Vendres offers.

This is the Côte Vermeille, which translates as vermilion and the vivid red hues of that word are all around you in merchandise, table cloths, garments. It's market day. People are buying pretty clothes of fantastic colour and style, cooking pots – even baby pigs to keep as pets.

The thin, short road from Port Vendres winds spectacularly along the roast and in a few minutes we are at Collioure.

#### "WE GLANCE TO OUR LEFT AND CATCH OUR FIRST GLIMPSE OF A TOWN **CLINGING TO A HILLSIDE, ENMESHED IN ANCIENT FORTIFICATIONS"**

We find parking on the hill by the Chateau des Templiers, perched on the cliff and we walk the path that surrounds its now-dry moat. We glance to our left and catch our first glimpse of a town clinging to a hillside, enmeshed in ancient fortifications. We've found Chateau Royale and we are walking above the town bustling beneath us. The enticing aromas of paella and sausages waft upwards on the warm breeze.

We descend the steps to the harbour and cross a pretty arched bridge into the town.

Artists are at work on the quayside and you reach the beach quickly. Restaurants border. Families swim and paddle in the shadow of more fortifications and a bell clock tower that guards the harbour. The tapas and thirst-quenching agua limon (lemonade) that's on offer everywhere reminds you just how close you are to the border. Spain is 12 or so miles from here and that country's tradition of painting fishing boats in brilliant colours is here and the language of Catalan is heard as often as French

As we walk around the shoreline the sound of classical guitar comes into earshot, a jazz number that's at once lazy and energetic. More art is on display, this time sculptures in wood; a sailing ship is depicted in one of the most interesting examples.

It's a short hop to Argelès. This town is the best-

known resort along the coast and we are about to find out why. Before we reach Argelès we pause and take in the vista. Argelès, St Cyprien and the mountain peaks beyond are stretched out before you. Vineyards reach down to the sea and there's a campsite on the coast.

At Argelès we find a Carrefour supermarket and stock up, then find parking at the train station – even this building is spectacular in its architecture and floral trimmings.

Narrow streets of well-groomed houses take us to the port. It's a scene of red and terracotta hues that epitomise the region, oleanders and palms. Tropical Golf is the ultimate crazy golf challenge for all ages and suddenly the residential area gives way to the tourist quarter and bikinis and restaurants, pain bagnat and paella are everywhere. Pain bagnat is a huge sandwich containing tuna, salad, olives, egg – it's a speciality of the region and can sustain you all day.

We soon pop out on the beach and discover endless almost white

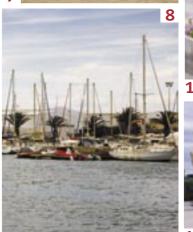
6 The magnificent sweeping bay that contains the port 7 Fortifications on hilltops as well as nearer to sea level 8 The Sunshine Lifestyle - the name of this boat seems to sum up the reasons for taking a holiday along this 9 Scores of restaurants and all of them busy with local families 10 Ancient fortifications arround the harbour



























1 The vine-clad hinterland of Collioure 2 The great baulk of Collioure's ancient fortifications reaches right down to the sea 3 Collioure's palmfringed promenade - there's colour on every building 4 Spanish style is evident in the architecture in Argelès 5 Local artists display their

work alongside

streets at Argelès

### "WE DISCOVER ENDLESS WHITE SAND, DEEPEST BLUE MED, A BACKCLOTH OF HIGH PEAKS AND DECIDE THIS IS PARADISE"

sand, deepest blue Mediterranean and a backcloth of high peaks and decide this is paradise; we know, now, why people tow all the way from Calais to holiday at Argelès. But we came here the easy way. We'd sailed to Santander, then towed across easy Pyrenean motorway routes to reach the Med.

A great wide promenade is ideal for cycling. It's bordered by lawn and shady pine trees. Restaurants and bars line the lawn; it's easy to

> imagine how this place buzzes in the evenings. But for now we're happy to immerse ourselves in the daytime Argelès character, chic, smart, everything you could want from

a quality holiday resort. Moroccan artistry, leather goods, clothing of style and brilliant colour are here but there's nothing brash.

It's a Saturday lunchtime in June and the restaurant patrons here are local families; Argelès is huge; so huge that in trying to find the train station where we'd parked we got lost and saw rather more of this resort than our time-allocation on our schedule allowed. In so doing, though, we discovered one of Argelès' bonuses, the road train. We hopped aboard. It was a circular tour and we figured it might take us to somewhere we recognised. Five euros and 10 minutes later we'd

found the trains – and our vehicle, and pointed it north; St Cyprien is a short motorway journey away.

St Cyprien is a new resort, built for the French; international trade hasn't reached here in any quantity

In less than six miles we are in a resort of a verv different character. St Cyprien is a ribbon of sand and restaurants. We park metres from the beach and find fine sand warm under our feet, bars, palms, tables set under rush parasols on the beach – and mountain views in the distance.

An amazing statue by Canet's quayside depicting the sun and



Canet is a lively resort with more beautiful expanses of white sand; this is a beach not even the August influx of families can fill. Diving, fishing, boating – it's all here. We take a stroll along the long curving harbour wall, grab an exotic ice cream concoction and resume our tour.

A little over a mile north of Canet is Sainte-Marie-Plage, a small, new resort of sparkling promenade bordered by rocks and a line of low dunes. Sand-coloured properties fringe the beach; this little place is an upcoming jewel in the crown of the western Med – and 10 miles north is another. We step out of the car onto a newly cobbled promenade, straight into more ice cream temptation. This time it's a speciality café amid the promenade of restaurants and flowers that is Le Barcares.

Le Barcares sits between the Med and a large lagoon, a quiet resort in sharp contrast to the buzz of Canet, St Cyprien and Argelés; whatever you seek – solitude or excitement – you will find it along this stretch of coast.

From Le Barcares we drive the D62 that sits

atop the edge of the lagoon that's popular with windsurfers, to Port Leucate. The cream and sand colours of the buildings here sparkle in the evening sun. A couple of islands dot the lagoon and, just inland and parallel to it is the A9 motorway, called La Catalane, that makes this line off sands and resorts so easily accessible. In 18 miles we are back at our campsite base beside the next lagoon north, Etang de Bages et de Sigean.

It's 10 days since we towed Bailey's Pageant Limousin off the ferry at Santander. In that time we've crossed the Pyrénées, (as we reported in the December issue) explored the Med shores eastwards as far as fishing port Sète (January) and, now, we've taken you on our final tour, south towards the Spanish border.

Today we're setting off for Spain, heading for the Atlantic and the cruise home – this time via a different route across the Pyrénées. Join us in next month's Go Caravan...

golf complex - one of Argelès most eyecatching attractions 7 St Cyprien's beautful heaches & Canet's marina. 9 Le Barcares 10 Smart restaurants at Le Barcares 11 Canet Plage-big umbrellas for shelter from the hot sun 12 A traditional round-about at Le Barcares 13 From Narbonne to Argeles - the winegrowing hinterland

6 A fantastic crazy



#### Next month

We take the A61 autoroute through winegrowing regions and into Gascony to discover amazing little villages, a delightfully quaint night market and the ancient home of Armagnac

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#### The route south

◆ From Narbonne your route to the resorts along the Côte Vermeille (Vermillion Coast) is easy. Take the A9 autoroute, called La Catalane. It skirts the big city of Perpignan, ensuring you don't get snared in city traffic jams, and you leave the A9 for the N144 to Argelès, Collioure and Port Vendres, which are all close together.

From Argelès you can take the D81 coast road to St Cyprien and Canet Plage, then follow the D81 north to the little ports of Le Barcares and Sainte Marie-Plage. Follow the D627 north from Le Barcares; spectacularly the road sits atop a narrow ribbon of land that encloses a lagoon. This road leads you back to the A9, to Narbonne

#### Travel tip

♦ If you site your caravan at Narbonne (we stayed at Camping La Nautique), the journey detailed on these pages can be achieved in one, long, wonderfully enjoyable day of discovery. But it's better to visit this coast twice during a stay at Narbonne; fascinating Collioure, on its own, will absorb most of a day on its own. And if you build in some beach time, half a day at Canet followed by half at St Cyprien will be an easy day out.

# OURTOUR

Our journey was arranged by Select Sites. The reservation agency booked our return cruise-ferry to the Atlantic coast of Spain and each of our campsites, plus vehicle assistance and repatriation insurance. You can also take out a range of personal insurance packages to include medical expense cover and equipment and money. Select Sites is at www. select-site.com and 0844 406 9876.

# THE SITES: The best places to stay

## THE SITE: Camping Les Criques de Porteils, Argeles

Two swimming pools, a restaurant, tennis courts, two shops and a bar—this big family site has much to offer. It's 5km from Collioure and half an hours' drive from the Spanish border. Pitches are on terraces and vary in size; some are suitable for large outfits. They are arranged in separate areas, some with mountain views, some with sea views.

From the campsite you can walk down to beach coves that no-one else can reach except by boat. The beaches are pebbled and suitable for swimming.

Criques offers art workshops, classical music sessions and organised sports activities.

**OPEN:** 2 April — 22 October



**♦ PRICES:** From 26€

**ONTACT:** www.select-sites.com or

www.lescriques.com



## THE SITE: Le Brasilia, Canet Plage

Situated right on the beach, this has to be among the best sites in France if beach is your family's priority. You can take a little foot-passenger ferry to Canet Plage from the

site. Brasilia buzzes with entertainment in the high season. There's a swimming pool complex and restaurant, bar and take-away. Pitches are level but access roads are narrow and so siting can be difficult unless you manhandle your caravan.

- **♦ OPEN: 16** April − 30 September
- **PRICES:** From 20€
- **CONTACT:** Eurocamp Independent www.eurocampindependent.co.uk or www.brasilia.fr

# THE SITE: Ma Prairie, Caneten-Rousillon

If you like plenty of shade, this might be your best choice. Ma Prairie sils under trees just five minutes' drive from Canet's beaches. There's a restaurant, shop, bar and swimming pool but only occasional entertainment, during busy times. Guided walks into the hills are arranged by the site

- **OPEN:** 5 May 25 September
- **PRICES:** From 17€

**ONTACT:** Select Sites or www.maprairie.com

## THE SITE: Camping Le Haras, Palau del Vidre

This site is 7km from Argelès. it's in the grounds of a one-time hunting lodge. Pitches have good shade from trees and shrubs. Flowers are a feature of this quiet site with a pool complex, bar and restaurant. Dance evenings and shows take place during the peak season. Scuba diving lessons are on offer in the site's pool. Volleyball and petanque competitions are held.

- OPEN: 20 March 20 October
- **PRICES:** From 19€
- **ONTACT:** Select Sites or www. camping-le-haras.com

### THE SITE: Camping La Nautique, Narbonne

Each pitch has its own little building containing a shower, toilet and washbasin. Washing-up facilities are at central points around the site. Most pitches are large and easy to manoeuvre into. The site has a pool overlooked by a bar; a restaurant is adjacent.

- **♦ OPEN:** 15 February − 15 November
- **PRICES:** From 19€50
- **ONTACT:** Select Sites or www. campinglanautique.eu