



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

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The Med

the easy way

PART 3



The palm-trimmed beautiful beaches of St Cyprien – quiet even in mid-summer >>



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PORT VENDRES

- 1 Brilliant flowers trim the town
- 2 Fishing nets out to dry on the harbourside
- 3 Markets like this are a browser's magnet in many parts of France
- 4 Bright colours are everywhere - this restaurant's bright look seems to epitomise Port Vendres
- 5 All the magnificence you expect at a Med tourist port

Our tour had begun in Spain, at the port of Santander. We'd crossed the French Pyrénées, arrived at the Mediterranean at Narbonne - and now we were close to Spain again. This is a land of sangria and tapas, sardines and paella. Yet the language and the culture is all French.

This stretch of coast, between Narbonne and the 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, where vines cling to shaley soil on steep slopes...

Our motorway route from our base for this

tour, Camping La Nautique at Narbonne took us through vine-terraced mountains; we pass Rivesaltes and other famous wine areas. The motorway skirts the large city of Perpignan and brings you to the coast close to three unmissable places, all close together Argelès, Collioure and Port Vendres.

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 coast 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

COLLIOURE

- 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 coast
- 9 Scores of restaurants and all of them busy with local families
- 10 Ancient fortifications around the harbour





1 The vine-clad hinterland of Collioure **2** The great bulk of Collioure's ancient fortifications reaches right down to the sea **3** Collioure's palm-fringed 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.

In less than six miles we are in a resort of a very 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.

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



yet. The same goes for its neighbour, Canet-en-Rousillon. Canet, reached from St Cyprien via five miles of road that's bordered by the sea to the east and a lagoon (Etang de Canet) to the west.

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 Argelès; 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...

6 A fantastic crazy golf complex - one of Argelès most eye-catching attractions **7** St Cyprien's beautiful beaches **8** 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 Argelès – the wine-growing hinterland



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



Next month

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

USEFUL STUFF

» 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.

OUR TOUR

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 hour's 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

CAMPING LES CRIQUES DES PORTEILS



➔ PRICES: From 26€

➔ CONTACT: 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, Canet-en-Rousillon

If you like plenty of shade, this might be your best choice. Ma Prairie sits 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€

➔ CONTACT: 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€

➔ CONTACT: 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

➔ CONTACT: Select Sites or www.campinglanautique.eu