

Map of the Pyrénées-Orientales





Introduction

Welcome to the *Pyrénées-Orientales*! The most southerly département of France, it is comparatively unknown, often rushed through on the way to Spain. Les Pyrénées-Orientales, the Eastern Pyrénées. Rich in history, geographically gifted, the département of the P.-O. runs from the high mountains and ski slopes of the *Cerdagne* and *Capcir* to the sandy *Mediterranean Coast* and rocky coves of the *Côte Vermeille*. The towering and rugged range of the Pyrénées to the south separate it from Spain, while the almost lunar landscape of the Corbières in the north, divides it from the département of the *Aude*. It is frontier country. Scattered over its deep valleys, fertile plains and arid hillsides, a multitude of castles, fortified towns and monasteries, signal and look out towers, chapels and hermitages, bear witness to its turbulent past. Massive, magical and sacred to all Catalans, *Mount Canigou* dominates the landscape and can be seen from almost everywhere.

This guide is called ‘almost all’ because to tell ‘all’ would take a large encyclopedia and would not fit in your holiday luggage. It is designed to wet your appetite, to point you in the right direction, to open the door and allow you to discover for yourself some of the magic of this land of ‘*art and history*’.

Sprinkled through it will be language quizzes, snippets of history, information on local customs and traditions. And, on the basis that a picture can speak a thousand words, many photographs...

The département divides naturally into three valleys: the *Tech*, the *Têt* and the *Agly* accessed by three main roads, the D115, N116 and D117, and that is how the guide is divided. It starts with the *Têt* (N116), the middle river and the longest. *Perpignan*, the capital city of the P.-O. and where you are most likely to arrive by plane, bus or train, is in this section.

Next the *Tech* (D115), slipping into *Spain* for a few pages *South of the Border*; and then the *Agly* (D117) which will slide north into the Aude from time to time to take in the *Cathar Castles*.



A very brief history...

In 218 BC *Hannibal* was the first named visitor to the Pyrénées-Orientales. Not exactly a tourist, more a man with a mission, he marched through with an army of 7,300 men, 900 horses and 37 elephants on his way to Rome, stopping briefly in *Illibris* (Elne) to parley with the Volques who lived in the P.-O. at the time. However, *Tautavel* man, discovered in a cave near Estagel, predates Hannibal by 450,000 years. A skeleton/statue of the man himself and a fine collection of evidence of human habitation from the Stone, Bronze and Iron ages can be found in the excellent Museum of Prehistory near the original cave.

More recently, in the sixth century BC, Etruscans, Phoenicians and Greeks were trading with an Iberian race known as the Sordes who had settled at *Ruscino* and *Illibris*, and, by 121 BC the Romans had absorbed the whole area into their province of Gallia Narbonensis. The little hill fort town of Ruscino had a theatre, amphitheatre and baths, the remains of which can still be seen. The *Via Domitia* (now the A 9), swept through Illibris and Ruscino on its way to Spain. The Romans stayed a long while. In the IV century Illibris's name was changed to Elne in honour of Emperor Constantine's mother Helenae and became the seat of the Bishop.

Visigoths, Franks and Moors came and went.

In 760 the Franks were back in charge and great religious



▲ Collioure in Spring

houses surrounded by small villages began to be built. Perpignan, first mentioned in 927 overtook Elne to become the capital in 1025.

Towards the end of the X century the Counts of Barcelona had the whole area under their control.

The *Catholic Church* had not been idle. The building of St Michel de Cuxa had started in 878, St Martin de Canigou in 1081 and Monastir del Camp in 1080. Much of the best Romanesque carving dates from this period... See Serrabonne and Corneilla de Conflent for example, as well as many a small chapel and out of the way hermitage.

In the XII and XIII centuries the *Cathar religion* had taken hold on the French border with Aragon. The increasing popularity of the new faith posed a threat to the Catholic Church and the Pope was having none of it. He called for a *Crusade* against the 'Albigensian Heresy'. The lands and properties of defeated 'heretics' went to the victors and those killed in the cause would be guaranteed a place in Heaven, all earthly sins forgiven. Needless to say there was much enthusiasm for the project. The Crusade was long and bloody and the last strongholds of the Cathars are still strung out along the present border between the Aude and the P.-O., perched on vertiginous rocky outcrops, their ruined keeps, turrets, towers and fortifications rising out of the sheer cliffs on which they were built.

By the middle of the XIII century, *Jaume* (also known as Jaime, Jacques or James) *the Conqueror* had inherited the throne of Aragon. He fixed the border with France as the Agly (Treaty of Corbeil 1258), drove the Moors out of the Balearic Islands and Valencia and acquired Montpellier. On his death his kingdom was



divided between his two sons. Jaume, who got the Islands, Montpellier, Roussillon and the Cerdagne became **Jaume II of Mallorca**. He wasted no time in building the **Palace of the Kings** in Perpignan, his capital, and the **Summer Palace**, known as the Château Royal in his port of Collioure.

Years of shenanigans involving Italian politics as well as French brought the Kingdom of Mallorca to an end in 1344. Under the new Aragonese rulers the region and its inhabitants prospered.

By 1493, under Ferdinand and Isabella, 'Spain' stretched from Gibraltar to the Agly. **Château de Salses** was built, incorporating the very latest designs in military architecture and fending off France. Roussillon, sitting as it did, on the border between two European super powers, was in for a rough time.

Eventually, in the **1659 Treaty of the Pyrénées**, Roussillon, the Vallespir, the Conflent, Capcir and part of Cerdagne were ceded to France and **Louis XIV** was not about to have the border change again. **Vauban**, his military architect and a bit of a multi-talented French version of Leonardo da Vinci, threw up huge defenses around Perpignan, up the Têt Valley notably in Villefranche and Mont Louis, and in Collioure. (Villefranche and Mont Louis became **World Heritage Sites** in 2008) Northern Catalonia became the French province of **Roussillon**. It was after the French Revolution in 1790 that it eventually became the département of the **Pyrénées-Orientales**, the southernmost département of France. In the XX century, thousands of refugees escaped back and forth across the border, fleeing from the **Spanish Civil War** in one direction and from German persecution in the other. Now the torturous paths they took are used by walkers, enjoying the spectacular scenery and sunshine with which the P.-O. is blessed. Most of the forts and castles are in ruins, concerts and art exhibitions are held in those still standing. It is indeed a land of 'Art and History'. It is also a land of sport and culture, of wine and olive, of eating, drinking, relaxing and generally enjoying life.

Welcome to the **Pyrénées
Orientales**

Emergency Numbers

SAMU (medical emergency): 15

Police emergency: 17

Fire Service emergency: 18

European emergency line: 112

Directory Enquiries: 118 008

International Directory enquiries: 118 700

Local weather forecast: 08 36 68 02 66

GDF (gas problems): 08 10 43 30 66

EDF (electricity problems): 05 62 16 49 08

SOS Doctor 24 / 24: 08 20 20 41 42

Emergency vet: 04 68 55 55 83

Anti-poison centre: 04 91 75 25 25

Perpignan hospital: 04 68 61 66 33

CPAM (English language service): 08 11 36 36 46



You can use the The European emergency number 112 in any EU country from any telephone. You do not need a card or money to ring this number from a pay phone.

112 may also be used from a mobile to connect you with all emergency services.

Useful phrases in Catalan

Good evening - Bon vesper (Bon bes-pra)

Do you speak English? - Parla anglès? (Par-la an-gles)

I (don't) understand - (No) Ho entenc ((no) oo an-teng)

How do you say? - Com es diu? (kom az dee-oo)

No problem - Això rail (a-sho ra-ee)

What a laugh! - Quin tip de riure! (Kin tip da ri-a-oo-ra)

More Catalan

Cheers (lit: peace and health) - Pau I salud! (paoo ee saloot)

Would you like to dance with me? - Vols ballar amb mi? (bolz beuya um mee?)

What would you like to drink? - Què voldrien beure vostre? (keh vuldree-en bayoor, boostess?)

The bill please - El compte si us plau (ell conte see ousse plow)

I love you - T'estimo (tesstimoo)

Did you know?

Barcelona got its name from Hannibal's father Hamilcar Barca when he and his Carthaginians settled themselves in Catalonia South.

Catalan Food

Catalan Food, found to a greater or lesser extent in most local restaurants, is basically Mediterranean. It relies heavily on local fresh ingredients and long tradition. For example, from the Roman soldiers have come the dried beans and pulses, from the Jews and Arabs delicious cakes and pastries. Olive oil, fish, meat and a wide variety of vegetables feature in many simple but imaginatively prepared dishes. Sometimes seafood and meat appear in the same plate '**mar i muntanya**', sometimes '**sucrées-salées**' as in salt cod with raisins and pine nuts.

Here are a few of the more popular ones:

Boules de Piccolat: meat balls in slightly spicy tomato sauce

Escalivada: various grilled Mediterranean vegetables

Ollada or 'Putxero': Meat and vegetable stew

Esqueixada or 'esgarrat': salted cod with tomato and onion

Mongetes amb botifarra: beans and pork sausage

Pa amb tomàquet: bread smeared with olive oil, garlic and fresh tomato

Suquet de peix: a sea-food casserole

Embotits: a generic name for different kinds of cured pork meat, including Fuet (a characteristic type of dried sausage) and Salchichón or Llonganissa (salami).

Calçots: specially cultivated onions, grilled and served as a 'Calçotada'

Cargols à la llauna: cooked snails

Allioli: a thick sauce made of garlic and olive oil.

Crema Catalana: The famous custard cream made with egg yolks, milk and sugar, much like crème brûlée, served in a small flat pottery plate.

Sometimes it Rains!

Here are some ideas of where to go and what to do on rainy days:

On the coast you could visit:

- *The Aquarium at Banyuls-sur-Mer* p.156.
- *The church and cloisters of St Genis des Fontaines* p. 168
- *The church and cloisters of Elne* p.168
- *The Tropic of Butterflies at Elne* p.168

Up the Tech Valley, you could visit:

- *The Modern Art Museum in Céret.* p.194
- *Les Thermes d'Amélie les Bains.* 04 68 39 01 98 p.196
- *Saint Laurent de Cerdans Museum of Traditional Crafts* 04 68 39 55 75 p.206.

The Têt Valley:

- *The Byrrh factory in Thuir, with the largest oak barrel in the world offers a tour of the production and a tasting of the distinctive aperitif created at the end of the 19th century* p.43
- *The Museum of Catalan Agriculture in St Michel de Llotes.* p.51
- *The Hospici d'Ille, centre of Sacred Art in Ille sur Têt.* p.50
- *Museum of Prehistory at Belésta* p.56
- *The Tower of Perfume at Mosset* p.75
- *Villefranche de Conflent. The Caves : Grottes des Grandes Canalettes et des Canalettes.* p.82

• **Beyond the Agly** is the Museum of Prehistory at Tautavel. p.248

In and around Perpignan: p.26

- *The Palace of the Kings of Mallorca*
- *Buy a Passport card to visit all the Museums and Art Galleries: La Casa Pairal in Le Castillet*
- *Le Musée Rigaud: paintings from the 17th to 20th Century.*
- *Le Musée of Natural History.*
- *The Art Centre of St Vicens on the south west of Perpignan*
- *Pop down to Spain and visit the Dali Theatre Museum in Figueres.*
- *Buy a local paper and see what events are advertised, visit the Tourist Office for lists of local festivals and happenings.*

The rainy days are few and far between, make the most of them...

On windy days all the rainy day suggestions apply plus:

Along the coast

- From Banyuls-sur-Mer drive like the Route des Vins to Madeloc taking in the Cave du Cellier des Templiers for a tasting and tour. p.155
- Or over the Col de Banyuls and a visit to the Spanish Abbey of St Cyr (Sant Quirze) p. 157
- A wander round Collioure (plenty of bars and restaurants and art galleries to pop into if the wind gets too strong.) p.137
- Port Vendres fish market (la Criée) is fascinating and the oyster bar an easy place to while away an hour choosing your fish for supper. p.146
- The church and and priory of Villelongue dels Monts, a jewel of Romanesque Art set in the forests above the village. p.175
- Shopping in Le Perthus, a street full of cheap booze and souvenirs and ceramics but also an interesting Fort designed by Vauban and archaeological remains of the Roman route from France into Spain. p. 182

In the valley of the Tech:

- At Arles sur Tech a wonderful visit to the 13th century Abbey. p.200.
- Gorges de la Fou. One metre wide, a world record. p.202
- Prats de Mollo-La Preste, cavalry spectacle every afternoon. p. 209

In the Têt valley:

- Castelnou, a perfect medieval walled village topped by a castle. p.46
- The Priory of Serrabonne is austere and beautiful. p.60
- Les Orgues of Ille sur Têt are fascinating. p.50
- The drive from Ille sur Têt to Prades via Montalba le Chateau, Marcevol with its beautiful Priory, through Abroussols, down into Eus is full of stopping off places of interest. p.52
- St Michel de Cuxa, home of the Pablo Casals festival (and its famous iris garden in flower in April/May) p. 72 and the Abbey of St Martin de Canigou p.90 are both magic outings.
- The Little Yellow Train from Villefrance de Conflent to Latour de Carol is a must. Go at least as far as Font Romeu and visit the Four Solaire at Mont Louis/Odeilla. p.86
- At Fontpedrouse the natural hot baths of St Thomas le Bains are fun and relaxing. p.102
- Up at Les Angles the Parc Animalier is a delight p.110.

The valley of the Agly:

- A wine journey through the Cotes de Roussillon villages p.258
- The Gorges of Galamus. Dramatic and fascinating p.264.
- A wine tasting lunch at Ch de Fau, Cases de Penne. p.249
- In Leucate go oyster tasting at the 30 odd oyster catchers cabins along the canal between the lagoon and the sea, p.238. Not far from there to Chateau de Salses, p.240.
- Wander round Perpignan itself, good shopping, beautiful and interesting churches and historic monuments, from p.26...



▲ *Marquixanes peach blossom*

TÊT VALLEY

- **Perpignan and the sandy coast** p. 25
- **Les Aspres and the Middle Têt** p. 38
- **Upper Têt / Conflent** p. 68
- **Capcir / Cerdagne** p. 104



Têt Valley

From its source high above *Lake Bouillouses* till it spills into the sea at Canet, the Têt river valley is rich in stunning scenery, history, wildlife, mountains, plains, vineyards and orchards. Sometimes mean and arid, at others lush and magnificent, it moves from glacial snow-covered mountains to rocky Mediterranean garrigue. Despite being used and controlled by man, the Têt can flood and cause havoc at any time. Provider of water and electricity, the Têt is the river of life for those who have lived along its banks since time immemorial. This has been a deeply religious area. Clinging to rocky outcrops and remote hillsides are small chapels and hermitages, ancient convents and medieval monasteries. Gems of

Local traditions

Castells (Catalan for castles) originated at the end of the 18th century in Valls, Tarragona, when rival 'colles' (groups) began to compete in constructing human towers. These castellers (castle-makers), wear traditional Catalan costume and climb on to each others shoulders to create a human pyramid, sometimes up to eight or nine storeys high and often topped off with a brave child, a bit like a cherry on a cake!

Baroque Art glitter and gleam in village churches, fortified towns guard mountain passes. It has been much fought over, sometimes the frontier with Spain, at others, peaceful farmland. In the **Cerdagne** and **Capcir** stout horses are raised and cattle and sheep graze in the high pastures. In winter the snow covers the land and **ski stations** offer down hill and cross-country skiing, boarding, snow shoe walking, kite skiing, husky sledging and tobogganing. **Natural hot springs** fill outdoor pools, the Roman ones of Dorres and modern ones at Llo and St Thomas.

The lower Têt valley is full of orchards, a pink mist of blossom in spring.

'LEGS, FRUITS!' announce the signs all along its length.

Peaches, grapes, apricots, walnuts, chestnuts, almonds, and cherries flood towards the Grand St Charles Market on the outskirts of Perpignan. Vegetables as well. Winter salads, pumpkins, beans, potatoes and tomatoes follow the same route and arrive in supermarkets all over Europe...

Perpignan, the capital, sits in the centre of the coastal plain with Ruscino, the original hill fort town, now Château Roussillon, lying between it and the sea at Canet.

And this, the sandy coast, is where the river waters meet the Mediterranean.

▼ Dolmen

