



# NO STONE UNTURNED

Rich in wineries and rugged natural splendour, the Massif de la Clape between Narbonne and Gruissan is an unsung area of France, writes **Abigail Blasi**

**W**hen I told people I was going to visit the Massif de la Clape in Occitanie, even Francophiles looked confused. The 'Pile of Stones' or 'cairn' (in Occitan) is a long, limestone mesa covering 15,000 hectares. It was once an island, a haven for sailors off the coast of Narbo (Roman Narbonne). Joined to the

mainland via alluvium drift, it's now surrounded by an ocean of vineyards, which slope down to the flamingo-dotted waters of the Étang (lagoon) de Mateille.

This is an unsung corner of France, a place to escape the crowds in the deep south. You can see the Pyrenees in the distance; there is a Spanish slant to local menus. The Languedoc used to supply cheap *vin de table*

to the workers of France, and the 19th-century châteaux that dot the region date from this boomtime. The quality of its wines has changed, but this still feels a rustic region, with none of the glitz of the Côte d'Azur.

## Heaven scent

I checked into the newly opened Château Capitoul on a hilltop beneath the Massif, the creation





**Above:** A view of Gruissan and the Barberousse Tower

**Top right:** Views across vineyards en route to the Massif de la Clape

**Below:** Chandelier inside the Chapelle Notre Dame des Auzils



of Karl and Anita O’Hanlon, Irish hoteliers whose other châteaux hotels, Les Carrasses and St Pierre de Serjac, have changed the way visitors look at Languedoc. It’s a place of laidback luxury that also encourages the local economy, employing local workers and businesses. There are 44 villas (26 with pools) that hug the hillside, and eight rooms in the château itself. Views unfurl in all directions: down over the valley and lagoon, over to Narbonne, Roman city, with its medieval cathedral spire, and across to the Massif, a table top thick with dark green Aleppo pines, holm oak, field maple and judas trees. The rooms are the epitome of elegant French style, in soft chalky colours, with antique manuscripts on the walls, huge showers lined in an otherworldly blue marble (it’s a Portuguese ceramic) and some freestanding baths. In every room and hallway there are vintage chandeliers, restored by the O’Hanlons’ fashion student daughter over lockdown.

It’s between Narbonne (with its new Norman Foster-designed Roman museum) and the small town of Gruissan, which is a 15-minute cycle away. The nearest coast is the huge, windy beach of Gruissan Plage, where

kitesurfers scud across the nearby lagoon, sailing boats dot the horizon like crescent moons, and there’s a windswept village of chalets built on stilts – protection from high tide flooding. *Betty Blue* was filmed here, and the strangely beautiful, yet desolate houses are instantly recognisable if you’ve seen this doomed-love 1980s classic. Raised on stilts to avoid flooding, the houses look more like something you might find on Bermuda than in the Midi. There is sand blown across the roads, as if you’ve arrived at the desert.

Euphorbia, lavender, rosemary, sage, and filmy grasses: the hardly botanicals that are beginning to flourish around Château Capitoul have all been selected from the Massif. The gardens are designed by Riviera-based James Basson, who has won best in show at the Chelsea Flower Show for his textured, soft and spiky fabulations that can survive without watering.

His work is inspired by local botanical rock star Olivier Filippi, who has a nursery near Montpellier and puts the plants through botanical boot camps involving entirely organic propagation and hot and cold temperatures. Following this survival of the fittest approach, ▶



seedlings are planted in long pots so that the roots hang down, 'like the tentacles of an octopus', so that they're ready to reach deep into the stony earth in search of moisture.

### In the saddle

Guided by local bike company, Languedoc VTT Evasion, we set off on electric bikes for the Massif. Sunlight sparked across the field and the sky was watercolour blue, strung with wispy late-summer cloud. The vines were weighed down with black grapes, and we could see the copper-shadowed cliffs up ahead. The Massif is criss-crossed by walking trails, some with rope handles to guide you along. Further along the Massif, towards the beach town of Saint-Pierre-la-Mer, there's a sinkhole, Gouffre de L'Oeil Doux (the soft-eyed sinkhole) filled with clear green-blue water and surrounded by 40m-high cliffs. The story goes that boats that have tried to find the source of the water, by exploring the caves in the cliffs, have never been seen again.

It was easy going on the e-bikes, along the dirt tracks, the incline gentle at first. Where it started to get steeper, we stopped for a moment to take photographs and drink water. Here we could see a path that takes a more direct route upwards, with shrines on either side. It's a pilgrimage route to the top, with memorials to those lost at sea. Cenotaphs (tombs without bodies) mark the way, a practise that began in the 19th century. One more recent tombstone reads: *'A la mémoire des milliers de migrants hommes, femmes, enfants, disparus en Méditerranée au cours du XXe siècle.'* (To the memory of the thousands of migrant men, women, and children, disappeared in the Mediterranean in the course of the 21st century).

We didn't cycle up the steeper

pilgrimage path, but took the longer, more bike-friendly way around, which still climbed steeply, yet was joyously effortless. Barely having broken a sweat, we rounded a corner and found ourselves in a little clearing outside the Massif church. This is Le Chapelle de Notre Dame des Auzils, also dedicated to those lost at sea, forming a direct link to the island that Phoenician and Roman sailors would use as a haven.

First mention of the church was in 1080, when monks would gather to pray, but this building dates from 1635, long the favoured pilgrimage place for fishermen on Pentecost Monday. From the tree-shaped chapel, we overlooked a swooping view over fragrant trees, bluey-green and clustered with pine cones. Beyond there was a broad hem of bright-blue sea, lake calm. Close to the coast, we could see a darkened crater amid the trees. Our guide, Hugo Blanquier, told me this was the result of a summer fire across 200 hectares: "It took three days and four planes to get it under control." They close the Massif if there is any risk of fire, and sometimes over the summer it closes for several days. A rocky path led down from the nearest side of the church, passing a small cave, close to which a series of hermits lived from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

The chapel looked unassuming from outside, but inside the walls are hung with paintings of ships, and in the spaces between, trompe-l'oeil pictures adorn the walls, each commemorating a shipwreck. There are model boats in glass cabinets, and a ship-shaped chandelier dangles overhead, its glass beading catching the sunlight.

### Raise a toast

The nautical theme continues back downhill in the Château Capitoul winery, which the previous owner styled to look like the bridge of a ship. The



**Main:** Vineyard views from the infinity pool at Château Capitoul

**Above:** Abigail on her e-bike

area around the Massif is a particularly rich wine-producing area, with the Romans first to plant vines here. I talked to Thomas Bonfils, and he told me his family had been in the wine business for six generations, originating with the 'Pied Noir'.

His great-great grandfather, a communard, had fled to Algeria, where he married Honorine Doveaux, who was the driving force in developing the vineyards. The family was forced to flee back to France in 1962 and start again, at the end of





Algeria's War of Independence. He told me that when his uncle went to Algeria around 40 years after the family had left, he found the family cellar untouched, having no appeal to the Muslim population.

Back in Languedoc, among the Bonfils' many wine estates (nearly 20 at the last count), La Clape has some of the region's best wines, with its own *appellation*. It is 80% red wine, full bodied and cultivated in the limestone scree, 13 maritime winds, and the unusually warm

**Top right:** Looking towards Château Capitoul

**Above left:** Photographs inside the Chapelle Notre Dame des Auzils

**Above middle:** A street in Gruissan

**Above right:** The pink lagoon

Mediterranean climate. Thomas' personal favourite was a wine they called 'Les Oubliés': the winemaker had forgotten it and left it to mature far longer than intended, creating an almost sherry-like, nutty flavour.

Later, I found more local history of another sort in Gruissan, where the streets were busy with the local arts and crafts market. Elderly people sat outside their houses chatting, chairs drawn up in a circle. Fire-red bougainvillea cascaded down the wall of a shuttered

house. Locals sat outside at rickety tables drinking *demis* (half beers). It was almost comically French, with not a foreign voice to be heard.

There was a small exhibition of historic photographs of the area next to the central square and I stopped my bike to have a look. There were pictures of the salt mines, a major industry here in the first half of the 20th century. The photographs showed drifts of salt and behatted workers scowling in the hot sun. ▶



## MASSIF DE LA CLAPE

An elderly man, peering at the photographs with avid interest, told me he used to work there, loading the wagons with salt around 60 years ago. "It was hard work," he told me, laughing at the memory, so he had ended up leaving and joined the army.

I had toured around the salinas of which the man spoke just a few days before, on a motorised scooter. We had stopped at La Cambuse du Saunier, a restaurant overlooking salt flats turned pearly pink from the local algae, and I had eaten some of the best razor clams I had ever had, buttery, almost caramelised, washed down with chilled white wine. Today it's a place of beauty, and – largely – leisure.

Among Gruissan's other



vintage photos, I spotted a portrait of the last hermit on the Massif de la Clape, a diminutive bearded figure in a long gown, his eyes lowered: Michel Cyprien, who died in 1888. It seems an appropriate final discovery, the face of the last man to live on the millefeuille of this mysterious land-locked island, a secret-feeling corner of France. ❤️

**Above:**  
Razor clams at La Cambuse du Saunier

**Right:**  
A monument to refugees lost at sea on the Massif de la Clape



PHOTOS: ABIGAIL BLASI

# Francofile



### GETTING THERE

The nearest airports are Béziers, Montpellier and Perpignan. By train from Paris, it's a four-hour journey to Béziers and then 30 minutes from there to Narbonne.



### GETTING AROUND

Bike or e-bike is a great way to explore the area, but there are also lots of walking routes. Ask the Narbonne or Gruissan tourist office for details.



### WHERE TO STAY

**Château Capitoul**  
Tel: (FR) 4 67 93 91 27  
[chateaucapitoul.com](http://chateaucapitoul.com)  
Perched on a hilltop, this château and winery has been converted into

a buzzing yet tranquil luxurious escape, with glorious soft-hued rooms with views. There's a spa, two restaurants, bar and infinity pools. Rooms from €196 per night in low season, including breakfast for two people, from €370 in high season.



### WHERE TO EAT

**La Cambuse du Saunier**  
Tel: (FR) 4 84 25 13 24  
On a bamboo-shaded terrace at the edge of a pink lagoon, this restaurant serves wonderful fresh seafood, including oysters and razor clams, and salt-baked fish. Finish with their signature salted caramel ice cream. Dishes from €10-34, open for lunch daily.



### WHERE TO VISIT

**Narbo Via**  
[narbovia.fr](http://narbovia.fr)  
A building designed by Foster+Partners houses the artefacts from the ancient Roman port of Narbo-Martius, with a wall embedded with 1,000 funerary blocks as a centrepiece. The Horreum is a collection of subterranean chambers, and Amphoralis, an excavation of ancient pottery workshops. Open Tuesday-Sunday. Adults €8, €12 for entry to all three sites, free for children.



### WHAT TO DO

**Languedoc VTT Evasion**  
Tel: (FR) 6 74 89 75 98  
[languedocvtt evasion.over-blog.com](http://languedocvtt evasion.over-blog.com)

### TOURIST INFORMATION:

[visit-lanarbonnaise.com](http://visit-lanarbonnaise.com)

Département: Aude (11)

Take a guided tour of the Massif on mountain bikes or e-bikes. Mountain bike one day child/adult €11/20, e-bike one day €40.

### Trotti'lib

Tel: (FR) 9 87 11 57 95  
Explore the salinas on a rugged e-scooter, spotting birds and passing small fishing villages. €12 for one hour.

