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Christopher Cohen/Hôtel Belle Plage

INSPIRATION

7 Cities and Towns for Discovering the Real South of France

From wine-soaked Languedoc to surf-haven Basque Country, le sud is filled to the brim with history, culture, and scenic outdoors that go well beyond the glitzy beach scenes.

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“Here, we’re all about the *l’art de vivre* of the South of France,” begins Alexandre Agop, Director of Wine Tourism at Gérard Bertrand, the world-renowned winemaker. “For us, that means sharing—wine, food, art, and music.” It’s late March and I’m strolling the grounds of Bertrand’s wine resort [Château de l’Hospitalet](#), in the rolling hills of Languedoc. In every direction, vineyards extend to the horizon. The air is crisp, but the sun pours down from the cloudless blue sky. Agop smiles as he opens the door to the tasting cellar, stocked with biodynamic wines from Bertrand’s 16 estates throughout the Occitanie region. Birds are chirping. We are all happy to be here.



The historical center of the town of Gruissan's Barberousse Tower in top seen from the opposite side of the pond. Occitanie, France Getty

Occitanie

On the very bottom of the hexagon that shapes France, you'll find Occitanie. From the Roman footprints in Nîmes to the festive spirit of Toulouse and the wine routes of Languedoc, L'Occitanie offers a unique perspective of the south. Languedoc is one of the fastest-growing wine regions in France. It's the biggest producer of AOC rosé wines—bottling even more rosé-all-day than its neighbor to the east, Provence.

In the heart of Languedoc, just outside the medieval city of **Narbonne**, **Château de l'Hospitalet** is an ideal home base for wine tourism. Opened in 2002 by winemaker Gérard Bertrand, the wine resort has perfected the art of hospitality. While the château features 13 rooms and 17 suites, all splashed in natural light, the newer Villa Soleilla suites are even more secluded. The Suite Soleilla is especially luxe—over 1,000 airy square feet, with a serene lounge area and a wine cave filled with Bertrand's choice bottles. From the soaking tub, you can look out the sliding glass doors, past the private terrace and over the rolling hills of vineyards. You can book tailored treatments at the Biologique Recherche, or a lunch or dinner rez at one of three onsite restaurants, including the just-opened Moon Room. In the summer, guests can dine *à la plage* at the resort's beach club. On a recent night at L'Art de Vivre, the resort's gastronomic restaurant, a late-night dinner started with a glass of the delightfully complex Clos du Temple (a biodynamic rosé that commands \$190 per bottle) and ended with a warm, molten-inside, crisp-outside chocolate soufflé, topped with flaky salt and vanilla bean ice cream. July guests have a first-row seat to the property's well-attended annual Jazz Festival.

Nearby, on a centuries-old wine estate, **Chateau Capitoul** is another option for laid-back luxury. The neo-gothic Château has eight hotel bedrooms, decorated in classic French style, with vintage chandeliers and art nouveau mirrors. Along the hillside, you'll find the estate's 44 spacious, self-catering villas, an infinity pool, tennis courts, and Mediterranean gardens designed by award-winning designer James Basson. Guests also have the spa, in partnership with French cult brand Cinq Mondes, at their fingertips. For an excursion, hop on a bike and cycle along the canal to the seaside town of **Gruissan** and stop to explore local artisan shops along the way.

For visitors to Narbonne, the historic food market, Les Halles, is a requisite stop. Here, locals shop for quality local ingredients and gather around tables for platters of *fruits des mer* and generous pours of wine. At Chez Bebelles, where the specialty is beef and horse tartare, diners get the best show in town—proprietor Bebelles uses a megaphone to shout to the neighboring butcher orders for fresh ground meat, which is then lobbed across the market and into the restaurant to adorn plates piled high with homemade frites.