

This French region is warm well into October – and offers vintage vineyard chateau breaks

# Last of the summer vines

**Y**OU won't find a gym at Chateau Capitoul. In its place is a fleet of bikes designed so guests can explore this corner of the untamed Languedoc region on France's lesser-known Mediterranean coast.

Just over the road, the Clape Massif rises as a mass of sheer limestone. The strip of flatland separating it from the sea is a watery wilderness of lagoons surrounded by shrubland which the French call *garrigue*.

You could drink in the view all day, looking down over the vines to the Etang de Bages from Capitoul's terrace restaurant, the pool and its 44 villas, as well as from some of the eight rooms within the chateau.

But that would be missing the point – because it's here that the cycleway links the Med with Narbonne and beyond.

So, I set off on the 30-minute ride to Gruissan on the coast, hugging lagoon banks frequented by more mozzies than tourists.

The quaint seaside town, which attained cult status in France after appearing in the movie *Betty Blue*, has just enough buzz about it to feel lively. At the restaurant Les Vieilles Nouvelles, my lunchtime sole couldn't be fresher, having been landed at the little harbour a few hundred metres away just hours earlier.

Back on the bike, I follow the coastal road edged with vines on one side and hills of salt on the other. Salt at Le Salin de Gruissan was first produced in Roman times.

Today, trade is brisk in the shop as well as at the restaurant, where locals meet to devour huge

platters of seafood. I stop for a salted caramel ice cream, gazing out at salt pans with water the colour of the flamingos it provides a haven for. It's the perfect pitstop before my onward journey to the huge, wave-lashed beach before circling back to the chateau via some quaint fishermen's cabins.

Back at Capitoul, a Cinq Mondes spa awaits tired muscles, as well as a tub with a view in my room, which, with its high ceilings, wooden floor and chandelier, is

the epitome of modern elegance. There's feasting, too, at the gourmet restaurant or on the terrace. Though there's neither a Burgundy nor a Bordeaux on the wine list, you won't go thirsty.

Chateau Capitoul is partly owned by Bonfils vineyards, which produces 14 wines under the Capitoul label, including the superb Maelma, which I enjoy during a tasting.

It shares its appellation with La Clape Massif, which is where I hike the next day to enjoy a picnic

outside the chapel of Notre Dame des Auzils, where local fishing folk prayed for loved ones at sea.

Views stretch to Gruissan and across to the Costa Brava. It rarely rains at La Clape, but plants and trees still manage to thrive across slopes criss-crossed with walking trails. Seeds from the area have been cultivated for use in Capitoul's garden, which has 65,000 plants from more than 100 Mediterranean species.

Each villa is contemporary chic



Delightful: Chateau Capitoul is surrounded by vineyards and, inset, enjoying a wine tasting

Inset picture: GETTY

in design, offering visitors their own space on an estate with restaurant, pool and tennis. It has the feel of a laid-back upmarket club.

Back in the saddle the next day, I pedal the 45 minutes to Narbonne with its magnificent cathedral, remnants of a Roman road, and archbishop's palace. It's a pleasant ride along the Canal de la Robine past the Norman Foster-designed Roman antiquities museum, Narbo Via, with its wall of 1,000 ancient stone relief funerary blocks.

Narbonne offers a welcome spot of culture. But only a spot, mind – this is a place for the big outdoors and it's all the better for that.

**JANE KNIGHT**

## TRAVEL FACTS

B&B DOUBLES from £215 a night ([chateaucapitoul.com](http://chateaucapitoul.com)). Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) has returns from Luton to Beziers from £38. Beziers is 20 miles from Narbonne.

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