

# MEDITERRANEAN CANALS & BEACHES - 7 DAYS

## BY DIVERSE DIRECTIONS: SELF-GUIDED BICYCLE TOURS

### Tour Overview

**Tour Dates** See the Schedule page on our website.

**Location** The Languedoc Region of France. Near the border with Spain, this is coastal Mediterranean France at its best. This tour begins in Carcassonne, follows the Canal du Midi to Sète, and includes visits to at least 3 golden Mediterranean beaches. Other overnight destinations include Olonzac, Narbonne, and Béziers. From Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport, the train to Carcassonne takes about 6 hours. The return train trip to Charles de Gaulle Airport from Sète requires 5 - 6 hours.

**Type** Circuit Tour. This tour is available with standard support.

**Terrain** Easy, on bike paths with virtually no climbs; mostly off-road cycling on the shaded shore of the canal; some stretches of the path are rugged. Optional rides can add distance and challenge to the tour's itinerary.

**Length** 7 days / 8 nights.

**Distance** Total: 111 miles / 180 km. Average per day: 28 miles / 45 km. Optional day-trip rides provide an additional 86 miles / 138 km of cycling.

### Daily Itinerary

#### **Day 0: Arrival Day in Carcassonne.**

We ask that all tour participants arrive in Carcassonne no later than the evening before the first day of the tour. This reduces any stress associated with travel delays, as no activities are required until Day 1 of your tour.

#### **Day 1: Free Day in Carcassonne.**

During your first full day in Carcassonne, you'll pick-up your bicycle and have the opportunity to take it for a leisurely test ride. In addition, you'll have plenty of time to sight-see, shop, dine and prepare for your next day's departure.

The town of Carcassonne is actually comprised of two villages: La Bastide Saint-Louis, the newer and main part of town; and the Cité, the walled town that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Cité dates back to the Romans (200 BC) when it was incorporated into the Roman province of Narbonne. With its two sets of protective walls, 52 towers, sinuous medieval streets, and incredible views of the surrounding countryside the Cité is an unforgettable sight.

La Bastide Saint-Louis, also known as the Lower Town, retains its medieval character but is also a vibrant town full of treasures old and new. The center of activity, the Place Carnot, is a wonderful place to relax in a sidewalk cafe and enjoy the ever-changing scene.

#### **Day 2: Bike from Carcassonne to Homps / Olonzac - 40 km / 25 miles. Spend 1 night in Homps / Olonzac.**

Today you leave Carcassonne on the towpath of the Canal du Midi, just east of the canal's port. The highlights of today's ride include 8 single locks, 4 double locks, 2 triple locks, 2 canal bridges, and the beautiful spillway across the Argenteuil River. While the canal is no longer used for commercial traffic, it has become popular with pleasure craft. If you get an early start you'll see

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natives and tourists alike enjoying morning croissant and coffee on board a variety of vessels. Today's destination, Homps, is a tiny port village with a slow, relaxed pace. Should you need more stimulation however, you can explore the busy village of Olonzac, just 3 km away or head to the huge Lac de Jouarrès for a swim.

Following a dip in the pool of your B&B, we recommend hopping back on your bicycle for a visit to the ancient and beautiful village of Minerve, capital of the Cathars. On this optional circuit, you'll leave the level path of the Canal du Midi, climb into the mountains and make your way through the vineyards on a quiet winding road with fantastic vistas. In addition to seeing another side of this region's magnificent natural beauty, you'll have the opportunity to explore Minerve's narrow, winding streets and sites such as the village's Romanesque church containing an altar dating back to 465 AD. Following your easy and fun all-downhill ride back to Homps / Olonzac, you'll have plenty of time to enjoy a relaxing dinner.

### **Day 3: Bike from Homps / Olonzac to Narbonne - 38 km / 24 miles. Spend 2 nights in Narbonne.**

After passing through the lovely medieval villages of Roubia, Paraza, and Le Somail -- all ports along the canal -- you briefly leave the Canal du Midi to follow two other canals to the old Roman capital city of Narbonne. Set in the heart of a countryside rich in vineyards, Narbonne is a typical Mediterranean city with tiny streets, avenues bordered plane trees, and grand buildings the color of blond stone. The lovely Canal de la Robine running through the center of the city adds to the city's Eden-like feel. With its many flowers and flowering trees crowding the banks of the canals, Narbonne is an incredibly beautiful city. Principle sights include the Archbishop's Palace, a palace built in two parts and housing the Museum of Art and History and the Museum of Archeology, and the Cathédrale de St. Just. In the main square that borders the palace a portion of the Via Domitia, the ancient Roman road connecting Spain with the Alps, has been excavated.

### **Day 4: Day Trip from Narbonne to the Mediterranean wetlands or Narbonne's beaches.**

Today you may enjoy a free day in Narbonne, or you may cycle to the *étangs* (shallow, salt-water lagoons) just to the south. A bike path will take you the 20 km from Narbonne to Port-la-Nouvelle on the Mediterranean Sea. This is an area where sea and land, salt and freshwater mix freely creating a unique ecosystem constantly affected by wind and sea currents. This fragile wetland, which supports an incredible variety of flora and fauna, is a major stop for migratory birds and is home to large colonies of pink flamencos. In Port-la-Nouvelle you may take a train (with your bike) for the short return trip to Narbonne.

For riders seeking additional challenge, we recommend our optional circuit to Narbonne Plage. The ride to the beach is fairly easy with a good portion of it on off-road bicycle paths. On your return to Narbonne however, you'll cycle on-road through the Mountains of the Clape climbing to several magnificent vistas. Parts of this landscape are lush and pine-clad, others rugged and desolate, all reminiscent of a Greek island. On the lower slopes are vineyards, and everywhere there is the scent of Mediterranean sunshine. Your ride atop the mountains affords classic views of the sea; in the distance you can even see the Pyrenees as they tumble down to meet the deep blue of the Mediterranean. The area is crisscrossed by a series of hiking trails, temptation to linger even longer in this unique setting.

### **Day 5: Bike from Narbonne to Béziers - 55 km / 34 miles. Spend 2 nights in Béziers.**

Today you rejoin the course of the Canal du Midi for more serene cycling as well as more technological marvels. As you cycle today the surrounding hills encroach closer and closer until the canal is forced to tunnel beneath a mountain. And just before you reach Béziers you pass one

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of the monumental achievements of the canal: the Foncerannes Locks, a veritable ladder of water comprised of seven consecutive locks. Just beyond you cross the Pont-Canal sur l'Orb, a stunningly beautiful bridge by which the canal crosses the wide River Orb.

Béziers, today's destination, is a bustling city built on the hills overlooking the surrounding Mediterranean countryside. With Roman origins, Béziers features tiny medieval streets, fine monuments and museums, and grand boulevards. And should you need a break from your explorations, you can relax in the Allés Paul Riquet, a wide pedestrian boulevard lined with cafes, restaurants, and shops. The boulevard is so densely lined with trees that it feels dark and cool even in the hottest of afternoon suns. Paul Riquet, the creator of the Canal du Midi, was born in Béziers.

### **Day 6: Day Trip from Béziers to the region's most beautiful beach.**

Join the residents of Béziers, as well as sun-worshippers from across Europe, as they bike the designated (off-street) bike route to Valras Plage, a beautiful seaside resort with sweeping views from the Pyrenees to Sète. Valras Plage is a wide golden beach flanked by a boardwalk ideal for strolling, cycling and people watching. On your way to the beach you will have the opportunity to visit several lovely villages that dot the vineyards through which you will be riding.

### **Day 7: Bike from Béziers to Sète - 45 km / 28 miles. Spend 1 night in Sète.**

Your final day of cycling continues along the Canal du Midi to its terrestrial end at Agde, and then continues down the 25-km sandbar to the amazing port of Sète. At Agde, the canal crosses the *Etang de Thau* (a lake) to its terminus at Sète. Upon completion of the canal's construction, Sète was founded on, and around an ancient volcano that was once an island.

Known as the Venice of Languedoc, the city is crisscrossed by a series of canals that truly give the city a Venetian look and feel. Today Sète is the largest fishing port in France. Watch the fisherman arrive with their catches; climb to the top of Mont St-Clair (the extinct volcano) for incredible views of the city, the *Etang de Thau*, and the Mediterranean Sea; or enjoy a day on a pristine beach.