

TRAVEL | FOOD & WINE | CULTURE | LANGUAGE

FRANCE

NEW LOOK
+ brand new sections

Britain's best-selling magazine about France

January 2012 | £3.99

Interview

TOM CONTI

on good wine, designer food and French butlers

Peace & quiet

Enjoy a tranquil holiday in one of France's low-cost retreats

Tintin & friends

Visit the French capital of the comic strip

13 Amazing mountain holiday ideas

Joan of Arc

Follow the footsteps of the saint 600 years after her birth

+ YOUR 2012 CALENDAR OF FRENCH SPORTS EVENTS



MOTORING

Take the car to Marseille (without driving!)

BON APPÉTIT!

How to build the perfect French cheese plate

PROVENCE

Carol Drinkwater on life on her olive farm

The southwest of France has a spiritual history which stretches back to the last millennium and beyond, and today it is still very much a destination for those on a spiritual journey. Pilgrims pass through on the route to Santiago de Compostela, the ill seek miraculous healing at Lourdes and New Agers walk the ley lines around Rennes-le-Château.

The Midi-Pyrénées and Languedoc-Roussillon are home to the most stunningly dramatic scenery and some of the most beautiful abbeys in Christendom. True to the Christian tradition of hospitality, it is possible to stay overnight or a few days in these communities and to get a glimpse of a way of life which many of us hanker after – one based on simplicity, good food and beautiful surroundings, where the focus is on something bigger than our everyday concerns.

My journey started at Rocamadour, a place in an incredible setting but with an equally incredible history. It's where the preserved body of the hermit Amadour is said to have been discovered beneath a shrine dedicated to a Black Madonna whose miracles are believed to have saved mariners and prisoners throughout the centuries. Even if these days there are only about ten devotees a year who actually climb the 216 steps on their knees (saying a Hail Mary on each step) there is no shortage of religious tourism and interest; Rocamadour is on the popular *Chemin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*.

Lou Cantou is a *centre d'accueil* for pilgrims run by two nuns, Soeur Marie-Renée and Soeur Marie des Neiges (originally from Argentina), with help from a band of volunteers. It offers neat, tidy and modern accommodation to walkers on the pilgrim route and the house is very close to the sanctuaries. It has an amazing view across the valley and there is a choice of individual rooms or dormitories, with meals provided as well.

A warm welcome

Conques is one of the best known staging posts on the Compostela route and was my next destination. Most of the people whom I spotted as I drove into the village had backpacks, stout walking boots and sticks and there was a real buzz about the place. I arrived at the front door of the *hostellerie de l'abbaye* at the same time as a young Norwegian lady in bare feet. Feeling rather shamefaced with my car (the village is car-free) and my many bags, I was warmly welcomed by one of the *bénévoles* standing in the doorway expressly to greet pilgrims. And goodness knows if you have walked 20 kilometres in bare feet, what a difference a smile and a warm welcome makes! For atmosphere and sense or history, this *hostellerie* cannot be beaten. Ancient spiral stone staircases with close-up views of the abbey, proper tables in the refectory and the welcome of the brothers and

LEFT: Rocamadour RIGHT FROM TOP: Abbaye de Fontfroide; Carcassonne; The village of Conques



of the old walled city, it is an ideal base from which to explore the ancient city – and its secure car park (free to abbey guests) is an added bonus. A former seminary, it is now used mainly to host conferences and groups of young people. Here again the religious community is small but it would be difficult to find a more peaceful place; its interior courtyard garden is Italianate in feel and has the same sense of tranquillity, just a stone's throw from the busy life of the town.

Uplifting encounters

Venture out from Carcassonne and there is a plethora of abbeys to visit; Saint-Papoul, Lagrasse, Caunes-Minervois, Fontfroide, Villelongue, Saint-Hilaire to name but a few. So choose one or two to get a feel for the importance that spiritual life played in times gone by. All will be in magnificent natural settings – monks were very good at choosing their locations.

The last stop on my mini tour of monasteries had to be Lourdes. There are many, many stories of people who have uplifting experiences after bathing in the waters here (not to mention the 65 miracles officially recognised by the Catholic Church). The fact that this small town has the largest number of hotels after Paris is a testament to its role of hospitality. And all the pilgrim sites are free; the baths, the grotto, the churches and even the house where the famous Bernadette was born. I stayed at a Polish Mission house, perched on a hilltop overlooking Lourdes. The Maison Bellevue was once the home of a British lord, a spacious airy villa set in its own grounds. Built at the beginning of the 20th century, a community of Franciscan sisters lived here until 1986 at which time the sisters of the Polish Catholic Mission bought the house. The present community has strong links with its homeland but other nationalities were present too. The rooms were



comfortable and in the summer family accommodation is available in chalets.

All too soon my trip had come to an end. I had met some amazing people and visited some spectacular sites, some I would very much like to revisit and others I'm just glad that I have seen. The southwest of France offers many destinations for those on a spiritual journey, but those looking for some time away from the hustle and bustle of modern life will also find a warm welcome awaiting them in these ancient communities. ☺

FAR LEFT: Historic Rocamadour
ABOVE: Beautiful Conques is a staging post on the Chemin de Santiago de Compostelle

FRANCOFILE

Plan your own stay away from the modern world

HOW TO GET THERE

By road: Brittany Ferries sails from Portsmouth to Caen and Saint-Malo
Tel: 0871 244 0744
www.brittanyferries.com
The northern ferry ports are an 8-hour drive from Rocamadour.

By rail: Rocamadour is a five-hour train journey from Paris.

By air: Toulouse is the nearest international airport

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel du Château
Rue du Château
46500 Rocamadour
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 33 62 22
www.hotelchateau-rocamadour.com

Le Cantou Notre-Dame

Rue de la Mercerie
46500 Rocamadour
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 33 73 69

Prieuré Sainte-Foy

12320 Conques

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 69 85 12
www.mondaye.com

Notre-Dame de l'Abbaye

103 Rue Trivalle
11000 Carcassonne
www.abbaye-carcassonne.com
Tel: (Fr) 4 68 25 16 65
Dormitory
accommodation €16

Maison Bellevue

Route de Bartrès

65100 Lourdes

Tel: (Fr) 5 62 94 91 82
www.lourdes.mission-catholique-polonaise.net
Individual rooms €33

WHERE TO EAT

Domaine d'Auriac

Rte de St-Hilaire
11000
Carcassonne
Tel: (Fr) 4 68 25 72 22
www.domaine-d-auriac.com



TOURIST BOARDS

Languedoc-Roussillon
www.sunfrance.com

Midi-Pyrénées
www.tourism-midi-pyrenees.co.uk