

Advertisement promotion

FRANCE, COME AND PLAY Midi-Pyrénées

Midi-Pyrénées visitors include adventurers looking for dramatic landscapes, as well as seekers of spectacular historical sites

France's largest region, Midi-Pyrénées, combines magnificent natural wonders with some audacious manmade creations. Historic hill-top villages, serene riverside towns are set among dramatic landscapes.

A ferry across the Channel with DFDS Seaways or a CityJet flight can start your journey, to connect with sea, air and road routes to a region that draws gourmets for its Roquefort cheese, Quercy black truffles, duck dishes such as cassoulet, and its heady Cahors wines and Armagnac spirits.

Vibrant Toulouse is the largest city, home to a major university and centre of France's aerospace industry. Its rose-coloured city centre is filled with bustling cafés and Renaissance mansions, while cyclists and walkers enjoy paths along the Garonne river and the Canal du Midi.

Some of France's most picturesque rivers wind through the lush valleys, deep gorges and limestone cliffs of the Midi-Pyrénées - the Dordogne, Lot, Garonne and the Tarn, which is spanned by Norman Foster's elegant Millau viaduct.

Nearby, the Knights Hospitaller and Templar villages of the Larzac, such as La Couvertourade and Ste Eulalie de Cernon, stand proudly and peacefully, reminding visitors



of the history of these places. Appealing towns and villages dot the way, many of which are fortified bastides with arcaded squares and centuries of history. Cahors straddles the Lot with the arches of its 14th-century bridge, the Pont Valentré. Albi, the newly Unesco-listed birthplace of the artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, is visible for miles around thanks to its enormous Gothic cathedral of Ste-Cécile, perched at the top of the town. Next to the cathedral is the equally impressive Palais de la Berbie, where a collection of Toulouse-Lautrec's works reopens in April. Along the banks of the Canal des Deux Mers is the little town of Moissac, where pilgrims on the Santiago de Compostela route head for the 11th-century abbey of St-Pierre.



Albi's enormous cathedral is just one of the many breathtaking works of religious architecture that draw visitors to the Midi-Pyrénées

"The region draws gourmets with its Roquefort cheese and its Quercy black truffles"

High in the Lot valley, the Aveyron village of Conques is another point for pilgrims, as they take in Ste-Foy abbey, an Unesco World Heritage site. But the biggest centre of pilgrimage is Lourdes, which receives millions of people each year.

Pilgrims of a different sort head to the Pyrénées to explore the national and four regional nature parks. Hikers have trails through meadows, forests and challenging mountaintops while skiers and snowboard-

ers find a warm welcome in the 20 resorts dotted around the area, some of which reach 2,500m. There are also many springs, which have been turned into relaxing thermal leisure centres to soothe the tired. One of the region's most distinctive sights is the Pic du Midi observatory (see box).

The Pyrénées are rich in natural wonders too, including cirques, amphitheatres carved into the mountains by glaciers over millions of years. One of the most breathtaking is the cirque de Gavarnie, a wall 1,700 metres high and 14 kilometres in circumference, scored by waterfalls.

Between the cultural and historical sights, ravishing scenery and mouthwatering cuisine, there is something to tempt everyone.

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WHAT YOU MUST SEE...

- ▶ **Toulouse** The Midi-Pyrénées capital is a lively city with a ravishing, rose-coloured historic centre
- ▶ **Millau viaduct** Norman Foster's bridge across the Tarn valley is a marvel of engineering and the gateway to the south
- ▶ **Jazz in Marciac** This music festival has been going for 35 years, welcoming artists like Wynton Marsalis and Dee Dee Bridgewater
- ▶ **Albi** Explore the art of Toulouse-Lautrec and the unique architecture in the town of his birth
- ▶ **Pic du Midi** The beauty of the Pyrénées landscape is at your feet when you take the cable car to the 2,877m summit of the Pic du Midi astronomical observatory.

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Midi-Pyrénées

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FRANCE come and play

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