

CULTURE CULTURE

Ed Stiliard samples all that Aveyron has to offer

CULTURE, cuisine, art, weather – Aveyron could be the next tourism hot-spot in France.

Placed in the heart of the Midi-Pyrenees region it is a wonder the department isn't more widely known.

When you see that it is tucked away between Carcassone, Toulouse, and Clermont Ferrand, you realise why its prominence in French culture could be in the shade.

But that shouldn't be the case. Rolling green hills stretching as far as the eye can see reveal a land littered with pretty and quaint villages and towns.

Rivers such as the Tarn and the Aveyron flow through the area

carving up the countryside creating unforgettable, breathtaking landscapes and valleys.

Pretty and quaint are two words which spring to mind, perhaps too easily, when visiting a region rich in glorious food, supreme architecture and sublime art.

Like so many other parts of France the department suffered heavily at the hands of idolatrous revolutionaries who destroyed huge swathes of its heritage.

Thankfully a lot of it still remains.

In the medieval town of Conques, visitors rub shoulders with a fantastic Romanesque abbey with its twin towers standing over the village. Clustered on the side of a hill



Conques cathedral

winding, cobbled streets cut a path to the abbey, the central feature of the settlement, which has a population of just 91 residents.

Decorated with 104 translucent stained-glass windows decorated by local artist Pierre Soulaiges, the cathedral is more than just a place for reverential reflection.

Soulaiges spent three years trying to discover the right materials to make the windows which allows them to change colour throughout the day when the light shines through.

The added feature of summer concerts and evening concerts add to the sense of wonder in this exquisite cathedral.

Recently the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela is something that has become more widely known and visitors to this town can visit the abbey's reliquary to learn more about its importance to Christians.

Food lovers will delight in nearby Villefranche-sur-Rouergue which celebrates the best of French regional cuisine.

Delights of all sorts are available from the bustling morning market which stands in the town centre under the spires of the cathedral.

Place Notre Dame is the centre of the town life where morning shoppers will not only find the ingredients for tonight's dinner but also meet friends.

Visitors can sample the best cuisine from the area which includes Roquefort, the "King of Cheeses" and macaroons while other cheeses include Laguiole and Bleu des Causses as

well as many goats cheeses.

On Tuesday evenings during July and August producers and foodies flock to Place St Jeanne to savour some of the region's culinary delights.

The lively daytime market makes a stark contrast with the night when the square becomes as tranquil as any French town.

Dancing water fountains coloured by lights under the bell tower built in 1473 add a touch of class to the scene.

Despite the green surroundings there is plenty for people to appreciate in the town with fantastic restaurants while in the summer residents can enjoy street theatre.

A pleasant drive through the countryside leads to the tiny village of Belcastel with the Aveyron River dividing the village where campers can enjoy nights sleeping on the banks of the river opposite the castle.

After crossing the narrow stone bridge a day trip to the tower provides fantastic views across the river and is well worth the exhausting climb up the steep hill.

Crafted as a ninth century chapel, expanded into an 11th century fortress and made into a chateau 400 years later, the tower fell into ruin before it was refurbished in 1973.

French architect Fernand Pouillon restored it and American gallery owners Heidi Leigh and Nicholas Leone bought the tower in 2005 and it is an interesting historical monument.

But for truly great art head to Rodez, the capital of the French department.

The pink walls of the glorious cathedral dominate the city centre

which is a place to go if you're looking for art and history.

And then there's Pierre Soulaiges' new museum – the Musee Soulaiges – which is more than just a good cafe with an art gallery attached.

The food is exceptional but the art is just as captivating with his typical monochrome styles betraying more than just one colour.

Like the stained-glass windows in the cathedral at Conques a spectrum of colours is on show when you look at the paintings.

Art lovers will be amazed, but foodies will think they have died and gone to heaven when they go for lunch.

Wonderfully prepared by Michel Bras the food at the eatery is the height of French cuisine and if the art doesn't flick your switch then the food certainly will.

Unfortunately for me I will never be able to have *la tarte tout chocolat* again because it was that good.

For more information about Aveyron visit tourisme-aveyron.com.

Getting there:

Rodez is served by an international airport, "Aéroport de Rodez – Aveyron" located 12 km north of the city.

The only way to get in to town is by taxi and the journey takes about 20 minutes. The price is approximately €15 to €20. Cars and drivers are just at the exit and they all know the air carriers' schedules.

Ryanair flights to Aveyron flies several times a week with prices starting from €23.99.

For more information about flights visit ryanair.com.



Villefranche-sur-Rouergue

Bursledon
OPEN AIR MARKET & CAR BOOT SALE
 WE ARE OPEN EVERY SUNDAY AND ALL BANK HOLIDAY MONDAYS ALL YEAR ROUND 6am - 2pm
 Along the M27, off Jnct 8 top of Hamble Lane opp. Tesco, Bursledon SO31 8GN
 Car Boot Sellers/Market Traders Just turn up on the day
 For more information please call **01489 786653**
 or visit us at www.bursledoncarbootsale.co.uk
 TOILET AND PARKING FACILITIES
 No parking in Tesco Car Park. No dogs allowed

TABLE SALE & CAR BOOT
 at JUBILEE HALL, BISHOP'S WALTHAM SO32 1ED
 Sunday 7th December
 9.30am - 1.00pm
 • FREE ENTRY •
 Next Sale 1st February
 Bookings 01489 895545
 Public Parking Town Centre

TITCHFIELD AUCTION EVERY SUNDAY
 AUCTION STARTS 6.30pm
 TITCHFIELD COMMUNITY CENTRE, TITCHFIELD PO14 4AB
 (Off Junction 9, M27)
 • Viewing from 6.30pm
 Admission 50p each
 • Lots accepted from 1.00pm
 Antiques, collectables, household effects, furniture etc.
 07720 023950

FATHER CHRISTMAS IS COMING
 to Swaythling Neighbourhood Centre (Rear of McColls, Burgess Road)
 on Saturday, 6th December, 12.30pm - 3.00pm.
 Santa arrives at 1.00 pm.
 Admission to see Santa £1.50
 Entrance to Christmas Fayre Free,
 Kids, bring Mum and Dad along!
 • Jewellery • Eric-a-Brac • Tomboia • Cakes
 • Refreshments • Raffle etc.
 Cars use Hampton Park Way, Off Top of Broadlands Road.

ST FRANCIS ANIMAL WELFARE CHRISTMAS FAYRE & DOG SHOW
 Sunday 14th December 2014
 12.00 P.M. - 3.30 P.M.
 6 Class Dog Show & Kids Fancy Dress Competition, Raffle, Tombola, Homemade Goodies plus a Variety of Stalls.
 Entry £1 per adult & 50p per child or free with a donation of pet food.
 at St Francis Animal Shelter, Mortimers Lane, Fair Oak, SO50 7EA.
 TEL: 02380 693282

CHRISTMAS BAZAAR
 Saturday 6th December 2pm
 Father Christmas Christmas Draw
 Toys, gifts, refreshments & Many more stalls
 St Peter's Church Hall
 Luckley Crescent.

MINSTEAD AUCTION
 Minstead Village Hall
 Between Cadman/Lynchwood SO43 7FX
 (well signposted)
 Open as usual the BANK HOLIDAY MONDAY
 Viewing from 6.00pm
 Auction starts 7.00pm
 Lots accepted from 1.00pm
 Antiques, Collectables, Household Effects, Furniture etc.
 Admission 50p
 07720 023950