

C265-ST Cathar castles



On this ramble, you will discover the fortified castles of the Cathar country. These veritable eagles' eyries built on the summits of rocky outcrops served as sentinels watching over the Kingdom of France. They were the final refuge of the Cathars before they were exterminated by the Inquisition, the Papacy and the King of France. After the Roussillon region was annexed to the Kingdom of France by the Pyrenees Treaty in 1659, these fortresses lost all their strategic relevance and were gradually abandoned. Some were even used as stone quarries by the villagers! Nevertheless, despite time and destruction, these ruined castles still exude a feeling of nobility and pride. You will conquer them by following some steep



rocky paths but your physical exertion will be amply rewarded. They will tell you their history and offer you grandiose and unrestricted views over the region and the Pyrenean mountain range.

Itinerary

Day 1 – Arrival at QUILLAN - Quillan is a small town in the Aude Valley. It owes its name to the backdrop of the three steep hills, known as the Trois Quilles (three skittles) against which it is built. For a long time it was a manufacturing centre with its river water being used to power numerous factories (flour mills, sawmills, forges...). The town was a hive of activity during the 20th century, with a flourishing hat industry. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel.*

Day 2 – Loop around TUCHAN via the Château d'Aguilar. The day starts with a taxi transfer from Quillan to Tuchan. Then a 16km stroll through the vines and the fragrant scrubland will bring you to the Château d'Aguilar dominating the Tuchan plain. The edifice has been built on a rounded hill with reasonably easy access. When it became a royal fortress in 1257, the castle's fortifications were strengthened by an exterior hexagonal curtain wall as it was intended to defend the Languedoc country against Aragon. Increasingly weakened by Spanish attacks, the fortress fell into disuse and was abandoned from 1569 onwards. *Lodging and breakfast in a guesthouse. Dinner not included.*

Day 3 – from PADERN to CUCUGNAN (13 km) - The day starts with a taxi transfer from Tuchan to Padern. From the village, you will climb up towards the Chapelle St Roch and then onto the Château de Padern, built on a cliff dominating the village and the steep Verdoube valley. Further on, you will pass by the ruins of the former Molhet Priory (Prieuré de Molhet) situated on top of the hillock, and now covered in vegetation. You will climb as far as the Abeilla Wood Pass (Col du Bois de l'Abeilla) and descend the other slope, before climbing as far as the Château de Quéribus perched on the summit of a rocky peak blended into the rock face. You will then walk down to the picturesque village of Cucugnan where you will spend two nights. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 2-star hotel.*



Day 4 – Loop around CUCUGNAN via Peyrepertuse castle (17 Km) - You will walk as far as the village of Duilhac sur Peyrepertuse built on a rocky outcrop overlooking a small amphitheatre covered in vines. You will then climb up to the castle perched on a limestone ridge. The site is grandiose and the final climb towards the St. Jordi Keep (Donjon St Jordi) via the Saint Louis steps will leave you with breath-taking memories! You will then walk down through the vines towards Rouffiac des Corbières and come across the ruins of a former sheepfold before climbing up to the Lower Cross Pass (Col de la Croix Dessus) and walking down into the Verdoube valley towards the ruins of the Ribaute Mill (Moulin de Ribaute). You will return to Duilhac along the banks of the small stream and then follow the Cathar Trail as far as Cucugnan. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in the same hotel.*



Day 5 – Round walk around CAUDIÉS DE FENOUILLEDES via Puilaurens castle (16 or 22 Km) – Transfer by taxi from Cucugnan to Caudiès in the morning. You are going to follow the Cathar Trail that passes by the Chapelle Notre Dame de Laval and then walk up the Gorges de Saint Jaume on a path overlooking the valley floor, and via a series of walkways. You will pass through a few hamlets and the Aigues Bonnes Forest before discovering the Château de Puilaurens, an eagle's eyrie perched on a rocky peak. This is a fine example of Middle Ages architecture. Then you will move on to Lapradelle and follow the course of the La Boulzane river as far as Caudiès. We also propose a shorter alternative route (16 km) for you that takes you directly to the hamlet of Aigues Bonnes. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse.*

Day 6 – From PUIVERT to QUILLAN (18 Km) Transfer by taxi from Caudiès to Puivert in the morning. From the village, you will climb towards the castle. Behind the current keep is the site of the original castle to which Simon de Montfort laid siege. The castle you see today is a residence rather than a defensive fortification, and illustrates the transition from the fortified castle of the Middle Ages to the Renaissance castle. Then you will follow the Cathar Trail through the forest as far as Nebias. You will walk through the village, leave this Trail and descend, via a series of plateaux, to the charming village of Brenac in the small Brezilhou valley. Finally, you will cross a rocky ridge before descending towards Quillan in the Aude valley. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel.*

Day 7 – From MONTSÉGUR to ROQUEFIXADE (17 Km) - The day starts by the walk up to the Château de Montségur and a visit to the site. It will take you at least an hour to reach the castle by climbing up a steep, rocky path. The fortress was rebuilt from 1204 onwards at the request of the Cathar church to be a safe haven for the last bishops and "perfect" heretics. Its construction marries perfectly with the rocky summit. After the visit, you will walk down this hillock and head towards Montferrier by more or less following the course of the La Bouche stream. Once you have passed through Montferrier, you will climb through the forest towards the hamlet of Peychou. You will continue on via the ridges and the forest until the hamlet of Coulzonne, before reaching the village of Roquefixade. From the village, you will climb up to the Château de Roquefixade which was once a Cathar refuge and the site of resistance during the Albigensian Crusade. Perched on the top of a steep rock, the castle blends into the cliff. It was rebuilt several times over the centuries before being finally destroyed in the 17th century. The village situated at the foot of the castle was pillaged and put to the torch by Simon de Montfort's troops. A few years later, the village was rebuilt under the name of Villeneuve (New Town) by order of the King and its layout is based on that of a fortified village (Bastide). Taxi transfer at the end of the day from Roquefixade to Foix.

Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel.

Day 8 – FOIX - The rambling tour ends after breakfast. Take advantage of this day to explore the town of Foix, dominated by the 3 towers of its castle perched on the summit of an enormous rock face. The town expanded from the 9th century onwards around activity at the Abbaye St Volusien, and then the castle was built around the year 1000. Stroll through the narrow streets of the ancient centre to explore the old town, its history and its monuments.



Season

From mid-April to end of October. Be careful this area is very crowded in summer time and we recommend you (if you can) to come outside this period. Nevertheless this area attracts a lot of tourists and you have to reserve earlier to get the best rooms.

What's included?

- 7 nights' accommodation in selected 2 and 3-star hotels or guesthouses
- 7 breakfasts – 6 dinners
- Hotel to hotel luggage transfer along the trail.
- Transfers by taxi
- A set of maps (1/25 000 scale) with the route marked on and detailed route notes describing the trail.
- A daily itinerary together with information about facilities and places of interest along the trail.
- 24/24 Emergency assistance.

Visa fees - transportation fees to and from the walk area – Entrance fees - Insurance (strongly recommended on all trips) - Transfers except those mentioned above – Drinks - Additional meals - Spending of personal nature e.g. laundry, souvenirs, phone calls,... are not included

Getting there and away

By rail – First you have to reach Carcassonne on the line Toulouse-Narbonne. Then bus or train to Quillan.

By car – Join A61 motorway (Toulouse –Narbonne) Exit 23 Carcassonne and continue to Quillan along the D118 road. Taxi from Foix to Quillan to get back your car (at your expense)

Where to park – free car park in Quillan by the rail station

Walk difficulty

Grade 2 - walks of 4 to 6 hours a day. Some stages could be more 20 km (13/15 miles) and rolling uplands, ascents mainly gradual than steep of up to 500 m. In some places terrain is hilly or mountainous. Access to chateaus could be steep and difficult. An average level of fitness or some experience with walking is recommended.

