

C264-ST Cathar trail



The Cathar trail has little to do with an historical route. However this footpath, which starts on the Mediterranean bordure ending in Foix, sited in the Ariège Pyrenees, shall lead you onto the tracks of one of many historical dramas. There you shall discover many contrasted and breathtaking landscapes along with remains of fortified castles built on the frontier between French and Aragon Kingdoms. These fortresses, true eagle nests perched atop rocky outcrops were used by the Cathars, heretics to the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, and which persecuted and aimed at destroying them for nearly a century. The landscapes are magnificent and diversified, thus making you pass from ocean to mid-height mountain views with their rugged relief while enjoying the Pyrenees as background. The plain gives way to vineyard covered hillsides while forests and grasslands make



way for arid and semi barren causses (limestone plateau in south central France). You shall cross deep and narrowed gorges and climb few high pitches before reaching the remains of Cathar castles. Monségur, Quéribus, Puilaurens, Aguilar, Peyrepertuse...

Itinerary

Day 1 - Arrival at Port-La-Nouvelle. Port-La-Nouvelle is the Mecca of tourism on the Languedoc coast with its fishing and commercial port, its famous resort with its over 15-kilometer long beach - *Dinner, Lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel*

Day 2 - PORT-LA-NOUVELLE – DURBAN-CORBIÈRES (26 km, 7.30 hour-walk). This stage shall lead you from Mediterranean shores to the first hillsides covered by vineyards through scrubland. Past route RN9 and the highway, you shall pass through Roquefort-des-Corbières, the one and only village along the way, before moving on to semi-desert zones –such as the Grès-de-la-Ginestrelle’s plateau- or go round the “Estron-de-la-vieille” ’s peak. You shall finally reach Durban, a small typical village, overseen by remains of the castle. *Dinner, Lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse*

Day 3 - DURBAN – TUCHAN (26 km – 7.30 hour-walk).
A long walk through vineyards. After leaving Durban behind, you shall cross the ‘Col-de-Saint-Juste’ and pass below the remains of the ancient chapel ‘Sainte Raphine’ before climbing to the feet of the statue of this saint. Enjoy magnificent views of the oriental Corbières mountains. You shall go round the ‘Pic-de-miraille’, cross the “Pech-du-Bac” and Remouly to finally reach the quaint little village of “Nouvelle” and its severely damaged castle which outbuildings have been turned into wine cellars. Further down you shall discover, amongst the vineyards, the Castle of Domneuve or as we would rather say a fortified construction surrounded by hills. You shall also catch sight of the Castle of Aguilar, erected upon a hilltop overlooking the Tuchan plain. This quaint village is also a stopover for the day – *Lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse – Dinner not included*



Day 4 - TUCHAN - CUCUGNAN (18 km – 4.30 hour-walk). You shall stroll through vineyards on the slopes of “Montagne de Tauch” before continuing on a overhanging rocky path on the mountain side (Roc Fourcat), overlooking the narrow valley of the Verdoube. Some sections might be difficult but the breathtaking landscapes make it all worthwhile. You shall arrive in Padern, a terraced village set up along the riverbanks. The present castle was built on the foundations of the ancient one back in the 17th century. Past Padern, the path follows the remains of the ancient priory of Molhet before climbing up to the crest in the direction of the castle of Queribus atop a rocky peak hiding in the rocks. The fortress is composed of three successive fortifications, built on different levels and dominated by the donjon. After visiting the castle, you shall go down the mountain along a path which can sometimes be quite steep, towards the picturesque village of Cucugnan perched on hillside. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 2-star hotel*

Day 5 - CUCUGNAN –ST PAUL DE VERNOUILLET (20 km – 5.00 hour-walk) You shall reach Duilhac-Sous-Peyrepertuse, a quaint village in the middle of a corrie and overlooked by the imposing fortress perched atop the cliff. Famous for being impregnable, this fortress was built during the 11th century by the Aragon kings before being expanded by Saint Louis in 1240. The castle built along the Spain frontier harbored a small garrison up until the Revolution before being abandoned and forgotten. You shall go back down to the valley before following the path to the Gorges de Galamus, a true haven of coolness. Leave the Cathar path to reach the banks of the Agly river in order to fully enjoy the grandiose and impressive show. When exiting the Gorges you shall take an underground path in order to access the "Ermitage Saint Antoine" which is blended into the cliff. Follow the Agly river to arrive in Saint Paul de Fenouillet - *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 2-star hotel*

Day 6 - ST PAUL DE FENOUILLET – PUILAURENS (25 km – 7.30 hour-walk). You shall come across the Palnieres pass before arriving in the village of Prugnanes. You shall follow a few paths through the forest before continuing towards Caudies de Fenouilledes located in the Valley of Boulzane at the foot of the Corbières mountains. After the visit of the Fort district, the ancient village, you shall follow the direction of the "Bel Ermitage de Notre Dame de Laval" (15th century), before arriving in the Fenouillet village through the Gorges of St Jaume. At the intersection of several ancient roads, the village used to occupy a strategic position. It was defended by the Castle of Saint Pierce - which dominated it – and two other fortresses: Sabarda and Castel Fizel. Continuing through the forest you shall come across the quaint little village of Aygues Bonnes. You shall then follow the limestone cliffs of the Serre Alquera to reach Puilaurens located in the Lapradelle district. Transfer by taxi to Cingla. *Dinner, night and breakfast in a 3-star hotel*

Day 7 - PUILAURENS – QUILLAN (20 km – 5.30 hour-walk). The day starts off by the visit of the Castle of Puilaurens perched 700 meter high in the middle of a pine forest. Perfect illustration of the military style architecture from the Middle Age, the castle preserved its detailed inner wall with four towers and a donjon. It harbored the Cathars before being overtaken by the King of



France. This castle was modified and fortified like all Cathar castles before being abandoned after the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. Through the forest and few paths, you shall come to the Pass of Camperie before crossing the RD 117 route leading to the great domainial forest of the Fanges. You shall arrive in a small village named Cavirac near the Gorges of the Pune Lys. Follow the Aude river to go to Quillan spreading onto both banks of the river and dominated by the remains of its castle built on a hillside. This castle never was a seigniorial demeure but truly a fortress with a four-angle inner wall and a "porte tour" (fortified gate) as well as a donjon in its center. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel*

Day 8 - QUILLAN – PUIVERT (18 km – 5.30 hour-walk). You shall leave the vineyards and the olive groves behind to come across the plain with its pine and beech forests. Welcome to the Pyrenean zone! Go to Ginoles, a quaint little village with an ancient thermal spa, which used to be famous for its springs since earliest antiquity before being downgraded. Through the forest you shall arrive in Coudons before crossing the Col de Lafage (pass). You shall then go back down towards the Lafage and Nebias villages. You leave it by the Saint Claire chapel and after a few kilometer walk through the woods, you shall discover the Castle of Puivert overlooking the village. Behind the present donjon lies some traces of the primitive castle conquered in 1210 by Simon de Monfort. The castle you shall see today is a leisure one rather than built for defense purposes, a perfect illustration of the transition between the fortified castle from the Middle Age and the Renaissance era castle - *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse*

Day 9 - PUIVERT – BELCAIRE (22 km – 6.30 hour-walk). Transfer from Quillan to Puivert by taxi. You will cross the forests of Lescale and Picaussel through the passes of the Candelier and of the Sarrat de l'Ours. You are finally in the county of Sault (saltus = forest in latin) which is a vast plateau at the foot of the Pyrenees covered by green pastures and vast forests. Pass Montplaisir, you shall leave the forest to arrive in the village of Espezel through meadows and fields. You will walk across the small village of Roquefeuil before arriving in Belcaire, a quaint village which happens to be the capital of the Sault county - *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 2-star hotel*

Day 10 - BELCAIRE – MONTSEGUR (22 km – 7.00 hour-walk). After leaving Belcaire you will head to Camurac, quaint mountain village and small ski resort and continue on to the village of Comus. You will follow the path with goes deep into the Gorges de la Fau and along the brook. Over a century ago, this path was the only road between the counties of Sault and Olmes. Come to the hamlet of Petail where you shall bear left in the direction of the Castle of Montségur perched atop its rocky spur - *Dinner, night and breakfast in a 2-star hotel.*

Day 11 - MONTSEGUR – ROQUEFIXADE (15 km – 4.30 hour-walk). Start your day with the visit of the Castle of Montségur. You shall need a good hour to reach the fortress by climbing a steep and rocky path. The erection of the fortress started in 1204 at the request of the Cathar Church so as to be a haven for the last bishops and perfect heretics. It perfectly blends with the summit of the mountain. After the visit you shall go back down towards Montferrier by following the stream of La Bouche. Past Montferrier, you shall climb up towards the hamlet of Peychou through the forest. Continuing along the crests and the forest you shall reach the road D117 that you shall cross. Continuing the forests you shall come across the hamlet of Coulzonne before arriving in the village of Roquefixade – Transfer by taxi to Foix - *Dinner, night and breakfast in a 3-star hotel*

Day 12 - ROQUEFIXADE – FOIX (18 km – 6.30 hour-walk). From your hotel you shall go back to Roquefixade to visit the castle (about ½ hour walk from the village). Roquefixade used to be a Cathar haven and the castle resisted to the Albigensians crusades. The village, located at the foot of the castle was besieged, burnt and destroyed by the armies of Simon de Montfort. It was to be rebuilt few years later at the request of the King of France, according to the plans of a walled city and named Villeneuve (Newtown). Perched atop a steep rock, the castle blends with the cliff. It was rearranged several times during centuries before being destroyed during the 17th century. Today, there are not many remains of this fortress but the view from this lofty perch is magnificent. Follow the path back down which shall lead you to the hamlet of Leychert, Pic de l'Aspre and Roc de Cos. Cross the forest of Pradieres before going down to the valley of Ariege to reach Foix - *Dinner, night and breakfast in the same hotel.*

Day 13 - FOIX. End of the tour after breakfast. Enjoy the day while discovering the town of Foix dominated by the three towers of its castle erected atop an enormous rock. The town started to develop during the 9th century around the Abbey St Volusien, then around the castle built around the year one thousand. You have to stroll along the alleys of the town centre to discover the ancient town; its history and monuments.



Season

From mid April to end of October but be careful at the height of summer some stages could be hard because there is no shade

What's included?

- 12 nights' accommodation in selected 2 and 3-star hotels or charming guesthouses with breakfasts
- 11 dinners
- Hotel to hotel luggage transfer along the trail.
- Taxi transfers
- 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.
- Emergency assistance.

Visa fees - transportation fees to and from the walk area - 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 Plane: outward flight to Perpignan from Paris or from different UK towns by low-cost companies. Train to Port la Nouvelle. Return flight from Toulouse you reach by train.

By train: Go to Narbonne. Change to Port la Nouvelle.

To return, train to Toulouse and change to the different main french or european rail stations.

By car: A9 motorway towards Perpignan, Spain. Get off exit 39. N139 road towards Sigean and Port la Nouvelle.

To return from Foix to Port la Nouvelle is quite difficult and is a long journey. You have to go to Toulouse, changes to Narbonne and then Port la Nouvelle.

Where to park: free but unguarded carpark at Port la Nouvelle.

Walk difficulty

Grade 3 – day walks of between 5 and 8 hours a day. Some hiking experience is advisable. A reasonable level of fitness and some stamina are required for these walks. You may cover long distances in remote countryside and the terrain will be rough underfoot. In mountainous areas you will encounter some sustained ascents and descents