

# Exploring the French Pyrenees

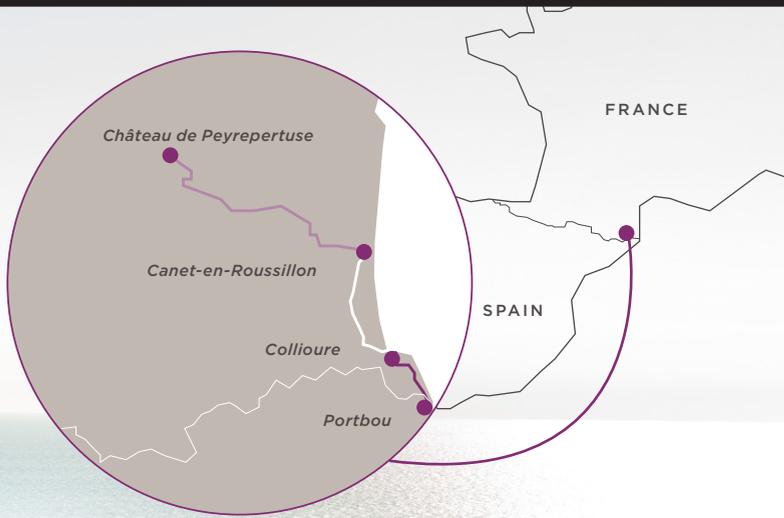
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*Set out on one of these drives through French Catalonia in search of crumbling castles, sunsets that inspired famous artists and charming villages that time seems to have forgotten.*



The road D914 winds along the French Mediterranean coast toward the Spanish border town of Portbou.



**T**he mighty Pyrenees mountain range stretches 270 miles from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, straddling the border between France and Spain (and engulfing the Principality of Andorra). In France the mountains are divided into three départements, Hautes-Pyrénées, Pyrénées-Atlantiques and the farthest east, Pyrénées-Orientales, which includes France's southernmost Mediterranean coast.

Overshadowed by France's Côte d'Azur and Spain's Costa Brava, this stretch of the sun-kissed French Mediterranean offers turquoise waters, bold wines, hearty seafood dishes and fortified towns, like Collioure, once frequented by the likes of Henri Matisse and Picasso. And just a short drive from the coast, the scrubby Pyrenees foothills open up to a world of crumbling Cathar fortresses, ancient caves and a wild landscape that begs you to slow down and savor the moment. Here are three distinctly different drives all of which serve up hearty tastes of this part of France.

#### DRIVE 1

##### Canet-en-Roussillon to Château Peyrepertuse

From the picturesque center of **Canet-en-Roussillon**, the scenic and serpentine D12 road to Tautavel winds around and climbs over arid foothills, offering vast panoramas of Pyrenees wilderness for 25 miles before encountering the Aragonian mountain village of **Vingrau**. Mountain villages don't get much sweeter, smaller or slower than this, so park yourself at a patio table at **Lou Barral** (2 Rue du Maréchal Joffre, Vingrau; 011-33-4-68-38-07-65; lunch for two, \$30\*) and enjoy the snail's pace over a plate of serrano ham, local *mancheugo* and marinated anchovies. Listen carefully for a bit of Catalan (the local language) being spoken, or try a few phrases yourself: *bon dia* ("hello"); *txin txin* (pronounced "chin-chin," meaning "cheers").

Next stop: **Tautavel**, five miles west and home to Tautavel Man, the 450,000-year-old fossilized remains of a hominid discovered in the nearby **Arago Cave**. Tautavel Man is on display with a variety of other archeological relics at the **Musée de Préhistoire de Tautavel** (Avenue Léon Jean Grégory, Tautavel; 011-33-4-68-29-07-76; 45000oans.com; admission, \$11). For those seeking a more intimate look into the past, private hikes and opportunities to volunteer for archeological cave digs can be arranged through the museum. In 2015 volunteers discovered a 550,000-year-old hominid tooth.

Push west another 15 miles, past fragrant juniper and cedar, and you'll reach **Cathar country**, whose mountain castle ruins tower dramatically over the weathered landscape.



Above from left: Château Peyrepertuse, one of many castles left behind by the Cathars; Le Trémail, a restaurant in Collioure; bottles of wine at Domaine St Sébastien, in Banyuls-sur-Mer; a road sign points the way to Canet-en-Roussillon. Opposite from left: Overlooking the sea; the waterfront promenade in Collioure; tapas at El Cailu, in Portbou, Spain.

The extinct Christian sect of Cathars flourished in southern France between the 12th and 14th centuries and left behind dozens of castles and historic sites across the Pyrenees. If you have time to see only two, visit **Château de Quéribus** (1350 Cucugnan; 011-33-4-68-45-03-69; [cucugnan.fr](http://cucugnan.fr); admission, \$10) and **Château Peyrepertuse** (1350 Duilhac-sous-Peyrepertuse; 011-33-4-82-53-24-07; [chateau-peyrepertuse.com](http://chateau-peyrepertuse.com); admission, \$10), a half hour drive apart. The former is known as the last Cathar stronghold; its intricate vaulted pillar room dates from A.D. 1020. Peyrepertuse is bigger, older and more dramatic, and it dates from the 1st century B.C., when the Romans occupied it. Like most Cathar châteaux, these two teeter atop the rocky summits they were built into. Each requires a 25-minute hike to reach, so don't attempt to visit in flip-flops, as many day-trippers from the beaches mistakenly do.

A few good restaurants line the road to Peyrepertuse. Built in a grove of lanky pine trees, **L'Aouzine** (*Rue du Chateau, Duilhac-sous-Peyrepertuse*; 011-33-6-10-62-24-79; lunch for two, \$25) is a relaxed terrace bistro serving tapas that emphasize organic and local ingredients, like chicken satay and spiced duck. For more-standard fare, pop over to **Le Don Jon** (*6 Route du Chateau, Duilhac-sous-Peyrepertuse*; 011-33-6-44-01-40-02; [ledonjon.fr](http://ledonjon.fr); lunch for two, \$25), next door, for a *croque monsieur*, a glass of the local Rosée d'Octobre or a scoop of homemade violet ice cream, a well-deserved way to cool down after the steep ascent.

## DRIVE 2

### Canet-en-Roussillon to Collioure

Breakfast is no big deal in this part of France, but don't dream of leaving **Canet-en-Roussillon** without a proper lunch.

**L'atelier Cuisine** (*2 Avenue de Catalogne; [lateliercuisine-canet.com](http://lateliercuisine-canet.com); 011-33-4-68-62-87-93; lunch for two, \$20*) may not have the sea views of the neighboring promenade restaurants, but chef Bernard Dijoux's delicious and generously portioned Catalan tapas (calamari balls, crispy onion rings, pear-spiked aioli) are excellent.

The 25-mile coastal drive south on D81A from Canet-en-Roussillon to Collioure starts off on a road wedged between the Mediterranean to the east and brackish wetlands to the west. It's flat and sandy, but the mountains loom in the distance as you approach Collioure. You'll drive alongside a spacious beach strewn with driftwood. Sand dunes here are sculpted by the howling northwest wind, which whips the landscape but makes the beach a popular surfing and kite-surfing destination. The road also passes Etang de Canet-St Nazaire, a salt lake that's a haunt of migratory pink flamingos.

Continuing south, the roads leave behind oat-colored plains and enter the lush green hills and vineyards that surround Collioure, a picturesque port town that once drew Picasso, Matisse and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Collioure at sunset is a sight to behold: When the sun is just right, about to be gobbled up by the Pyrenees, the town's magnificent 7th-century **Château Royal de Collioure** (*Quai de l'Amirauté; 011-33-4-68-85-85-85; admission, \$7*) and 17th-century **Notre Dame des Anges**

Clockwise from below: The windmill in Cucugnan, home to the Château de Quéribus; the port in Collioure; taking a break at Collioure's Chez Simone; tapas at Chez Simone.



(*Place de l'Eglise*; 011-33-4-68-82-05-66; free) become electrified in pink and copper. The town's light is precisely what drew artists in the past, and they haven't stopped coming. Collioure's waterfront promenade, **Boulevard du Boramar**, is a popular gathering place for painters and musicians during impromptu evening concerts. Running along it is the **Plage Boramar**.

Follow Boulevard du Boramar to **Place de l'Eglise**, where gelato shops and bars overlook the seawalls. Grab a table at **Chez Simone** (7 Rue Mailly; 011-33-4-68-82-12-56; drinks for two, \$10), where you can listen to the crashing waves while nibbling on tapas. For dinner, try a warm bowl of fish soup with saffron-scented rouille and croutons, a hearty cassoulet or a plate of briny oysters at **Le Trémaïl** (1 Rue Arago; 011-33-4-68-82-16-10; dinner for two, \$40). It's situated in a small plaza and has always been a great place to people watch while lingering over a rich *crema catalana* (crème brûlée). The promenade along Boulevard du Boramar turns into a jetty where Chapelle St-Vincent sits on a pile of sea-swept rocks at the town's north end. Bring some local flavor back with you from **Les Anchois Desclaux** (3 Route Nationale; 011-33-4-68-82-05-25; anchoisdesclaux.com), a century-old gourmet shop that sells pots of salted anchovies, gingham-topped jars of rouille and bottles of local wine.

### DRIVE 3 Collioure to Portbou, Spain

The coast from Collioure to the Spanish border town of Portbou is called the Côte Vermeille (Vermillion Coast), and its roller-coaster D914 road is spectacular. The road hugs the water's edge so closely, you'll be swerving under seagulls and intermittent gusts of salt air while gravity pulls you closer and closer to Spain.

Fortunately, there are many pull-offs where you can stop to admire the views of the jagged cliffs plunging to the bays

below and vineyards rolling up to the west. Some of the rest areas even have wine-tasting kiosks where you can sample local varietals. **Cave Tambour Winery** (136 Avenue du Puig del Mas, Banyuls-sur-Mer; 011-33-4-68-88-12-48; cave-tambour.com) is one such cliff-top stand hawking sweet AOP Banyuls and drier AOP Collioure, wines that dominate in the area. Or for a proper tasting, stop at **Domaine St Sébastien** (Avenue du Fontaulé; 011-33-4-68-88-30-14; domaine-st-sebastien.com), on the main strip in Banyuls-sur-Mer. The winemaker, Romuald Peronne, and his friendly wife, Céline, who runs the tasting room, turn out excellent expressions of the region's time-honored wines. Their Inspiration Minérale 2013 is an elegant blend of 90 percent gray grenache and 10 percent white grenache that both ferments and matures in the barrel.

If you feel like taking a dip, check out the **Sentier Sous-Marin** (Plage de Peyrefite; 011-33-04-68-88-56-87; ledepartement66.fr; rentals, from \$5), an underwater trail off Banyuls-sur-Mer's Plage Peyrefite. Here you can spot Posidonia grass, red coral, bonito, amberjack and white skate in a roped-off protected area where boats and fishermen are forbidden. Snorkel gear is available for rent, but those with their own goggles can do it free. For lunch it's scorpion fish or roast local lamb with creamy chèvre gratin at **La Littorine** (Plage des Elmes; 011-33-4-68-88-03-12; restaurant-la-littorine.fr; lunch for two, \$70), inside the Hôtel Les Elmes.

Finish the journey by following the last stretch of road to Portbou, Spain, whose narrow streets are worth exploring for an afternoon, especially for their distinctive Catalan culture and cuisine. For a taste of local life, pop into **Bar El Caliu** (2 Frederic Marès; 011-34-972-39-03-99) for a glass of *rosado* and a plate of tapas. As with all things in this part of the Pyrenees, don't expect speedy service. Instead, do as locals do and savor every Catalan moment. 🇪🇵



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Avenue de la Côte Vermeille, Banyuls-sur-Mer  
MEMBER REVIEW: "The saltwater pool is a joy."

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### NON-RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS

**Le Frégate Hotel** 24 Av. Camille Pelletan, Collioure; 011-33-4-68-82-06-05; fregate-collioure.com; doubles from \$75 a night

**Hôtel Les Elmes** Plage des Elmes, Banyuls-sur-Mer; 011-33-4-68-88-03-12; hotel-des-elmes.com; doubles from \$100 a night