

Ariege Overview

The department of Ariège nestles in the Pyrenees, next to Andorra, its highest peaks visible from Toulouse. It is one of the least populated, most unspoiled regions of France, whose inhabitants have held fast to their traditions. Numerous species of butterflies, orchids and raptors thrive here thanks to the endurance of ancient farming practices such as the transhumance.

Far from the centres of power, Ariège has always served as a refuge: for prehistoric man who sheltered in the many caves, for the Cathar heretics who defied the Church, and for resistance fighters, refugees and downed WWII pilots who eluded the Nazis to escape over the mountains into Spain. Commemorative hikes are organised each year over the mountains (4 day serious hike)

The countryside is wild but easily accessible. Top grade trout streams rush down forested mountainsides into rivers where kayakers paddle. Way marked walking trails lead to 3000 metres peaks where izzards (chamois), wild sheep and even bears roam. Cyclists can take in a stage of the Tour de France, mountain bike down tracks or gently pedal in the valleys.

And in winter, skiers enjoy the uncrowded pistes or strap on "raquettes" to hike the snow-covered mountain trails.

The Ariege attracts visitors from all over Europe as well as further afield, many come to Ariège in summer to enjoy walking, cycling, horse riding and fishing in unspoiled surroundings. The summer of the year, but it never feels crowded. For many people, September and October are the best months: warm and sunny, and you have the forest trails to yourself. In winter the ski stations are busy. March is the start of the fishing season, which runs until early September. In April the first kayaks and rafts appear on the rivers swollen with snowmelt, while May and early June are the best times to see wildflowers and orchids in bloom.

Summer: June is very warm, even hot depending on the climate you come from. July and August can get quite hot--hats and sunscreen are essential when hiking or cycling. Beware of violent thunderstorms when in the mountains. Try to go into towns in the morning when the heat is less intense.

Autumn: Generally beautiful, dry sunny weather until mid November, when the mornings can have a touch of frost. Often rainy in November with snow falling at the highest elevations. The autumn foliage is warm and bronzy.

Winter: This season used to have more consistent weather: cold and snowy. In the past decade snowfall has decreased and the Pyrenees regularly enjoy long stretches of very mild temperatures (10-20° C/ 60-75° F), especially in February and at medium elevations (500-1000 m). The ski stations are well-equipped with snow cannons and have been extended to higher altitudes. The sunny winter weather is wonderful for walking in the woods, where the leafless trees let through the warm rays. Middle elevations will feel warmer than the valleys. Be careful of black ice on roads in the river valleys. It's prudent to bring chains.

Spring is the season with the least predictable weather. April can see long stretches of cold, rainy days followed by glorious sun and mild temperatures. The sun is more reliable the second half of May but hikers may still encounter snow at high elevations.

Short walks from the Moulin

A recommended circuit walk from the Moulin starts from the back drive. Walk to the Aire de Segelas on the Main St Girons Foix road. Turn left and take the first left at a small house with netting fence and 2 barking dogs! This road leads you up a hill where you take a left turn towards a hamlet called Ordas. This quiet road takes you back towards Durban, the other side of the river from the Moulin. You will have views of Mont Vallier in the distance. Continue through Ordas and down the hill into Durban sur Arize, where you cross the river and turn left back to the Moulin by the front drive. Takes about 1.5 hours. A shorter walk, 30 minutes, is to proceed up the front drive towards Durban, turn left at the rubbish bin proceed back in the opposite direction and turn right to take the road through Segelas, A village 40 years behind the times, The road brings you back to our D15, proceed back to the Moulin down the back drive. This walk can be added to the one above.

There is also an excellent walk from **Durban sur Arize** to **Castelnaud Durban** where you can stop for a pastis or 2 or even lunch at Chez Victors and walk slowly back! Or get picked up. The walk starts on the track at the left hand side of the Chambres d'hôte in Durban. Probably best to drive down to Durban to avoid the road walk.

A good panoramic drive with spectacular views, vultures and 2 mountain lakes.

Choose a sunny morning and leave before 8.30 to get the best views. Take the D117 towards St Girons. Just before you get to Rimont turn left to **Col de la Cruzette**. After 100 yds turn right and continue up the valley to the **Col de Rhil**. There is a good view to the right towards St Girons. Turn left and continue to **Le Col de la Cruzette**. Where you turn left and enjoy the wonderful panorama of mountains to the right. Continue East along this road until you get to the highest point of the road, **Col de la Portet**, where you can see towards Toulouse to the left and the Pyrenees to the right. Continue along the road to the **Col de Peguere**, Here there is a viewing platform that locates all the mountain peaks you can see. Take note of Mont Valier, later on this drive you will pass over the Col de la Port, the saddle to the right of it. Just beyond the viewing position there is a steep road to the right that takes you down to **Massat**. Take this steep narrow road down and turn right at the bottom to Massat, arguably the marijuana capital of France. There is still gold panning in the Arac River north of Massat, probably hippies high on pot!

In **Massatt** turn left and meander up the long valley towards **Col de Lers** and **Col d'Agnes**. For climbers once you get to top of the valley you can turn left and do the **Trois Seigneurs Peak** walk (4 hr round trip) otherwise turn right and perhaps stop at the **Etang de Lers** for a coffee. Then continue along the road leading to **Le Col d'Agnes**, with splendid views of the lake behind you. At the Col, stop and walk up the path to the viewing peak, where there is another **viewing platform** pointing another series of peaks. By the time you have got to the top there will most likely be 6 -10 **Griffon Vultures** circling above and if you are lucky a **Lamagier** or 2 – these have a 10ft wing span, so don't lie down for too long!

The road continue down to **Aulus les Bains**. If you were on a day's outing you could turn left here towards **Guzet Nieve** (Local Ski Resort) on the first main right hand hairpin bend there is a path that leads to **Le Cascade d'Arse**. More scenic than its name suggests, but a good 45 minute walk to get to it, spectacular after heavy rain.

If you are on the 4-5 hr drive proceed through Aulus les Bains to **Oust** where you turn left for **Seix**. In the centre of Seix turn right over the river direction **Col de la Core**. There is a good cafe for a cup of coffee 20 yards past the bridge. This road takes you up to the Col de la Core, the tour de France usually takes this route each year. On the last bend before the top it is worth stopping to read about the "**Chemin de la Liberte**" - The high Pyrenean escape route the allied pilots, Jews and other French took to escape from the Nazis. Allied pilots were sold back to the allies, the Jews and French were put into Franco's concentration camps! (Better than dying in the work camps in the East.)

At the Col there are spectacular views of the Pyrenees to the right and the **Castillon** valley to the left. Proceed down the other side and about 2 miles down, at a wooded corner turn left to **Lac de Bethmale**, which is only 50 yards off the main road. Takes about half an hour to walk round, good place for a picnic.

Proceed down the **Bethmale Valley** and turn right at the bottom to **Castillon**. The road continues to **St Girons**. where you pick up the Foix road D117, to get back to the Moulin and enjoy the pool. There are many other excellent scenic drives that you can take but the above is a great introduction to the Ariège.

Shops:

Castelnau Duban. Small Boulangerie where you can buy baguettes, croissants and a limited range of other groceries

La Bastide de Serou. There is a good corner shop in la Bastide de Serou. You can get almost everything in this village, where the shops are also open on a Sunday morning. The Pharmacy is excellent and they speak English. Everywhere shuts between 12 and 2.00pm. All supermarkets are shut on Sunday.

Le Mas d'Azil. A good Casino Store, and other shops and pleasant places to take a coffee, particularly on Market Day.

Large Supermarket Shopping. You must go to either Foix or St Girons both approx 20 kms away.

Foix: Is a business and commercial centre. There are some lovely shops in the alley ways left off the busy main parking place in the centre. You can visit the Chateau and eat in numerous small cafes and restaurants at lunchtime. Avoid Friday market day if you are only sightseeing. The super markets are the other side of Foix South towards Tarascon.

St Girons: is a more laid back and slightly scruffy, but has the benefit of being the confluence of three rivers. It also has some nice shops. Attached to St Girons is the historic town of St Lizier, with its Cathedral, Bishops Palace & Apothecary's shop. Well worth a visit, was on the pilgrim's way to Santiago de Compostella.

Toulouse: the Rose city, named after the colour of the stone, is only 80 mins by car and is a very beautiful city of art and culture with wonderful shops etc. You can also let the train take the strain from Foix to avoid parking problems. Toulouse made its original fortune with the Woad that was grown all around. Also famous for the death of Simon de Montfort killed by a rock from a trebuchet when he was attacking the Cathars in Toulouse (Serves him right) Also an excellent aerospace museum at Toulouse

Carcassone: Well worth a visit to see the ancient Cite. Probably the most comprehensively restored ramparts in Europe. Best visited in the morning to avoid the crowds and summer heat 80 mins away

Markets:

Monday: Mirepoix: - 40 minutes away but highly recommended, full of artisan products. Enjoy the timbered cloisters around the market square and visit the church with its amazingly wide spanned aisles. It gets very full at lunch time, so we recommend you eat at the Poulet sur le Toit 3 minutes before you get to Mirepoix. We suggest you book into it on the way in to be sure of a table. On the way back it is worth visiting Eglise Rupestre at Vals - this is a medieval church built into the rock face.

Tuesday: Pamiers: - A large market – Pamier's heritage is its bell towers and canals, reminiscent of its former prosperity.

Wednesday: Mas d'Azil: - A small intimate market. Only one small bar on the edge of the road, but the hotel with lovely terrace opens at midday for food.

Thursday: La Bastide de Serou: - A very small market. A beer or coffee at the Cafe de la Marie perhaps a possibility.

Friday: Foix: - Very large busy market. OK. but not as artisanal as others. Look out for the vegetable market by the church as well as walk round the quaint narrow streets below the **Chateau de Foix** which is well worth a visit to learn the local **Cathar history**

Saturday: St Girons: - A very colourful market, full of hippies and alternative people (marginals). We recommend you sit outside the Hotel de la Union and watch the bizarre clientele, or have a coffee or beer at Le Bouchon or even cross the marble bridge and eat on the terrace of Le Café Gallopin on the other bank.

Restaurants:

Castelnau Durban - Chez Victor: Very French. Busy at lunch time but usually quiet in the evening, a very friendly welcome to all our guests is assured. Excellent value.

Mas d'Azil - Hotel Gardel: Very French, doesn't suit everyone, but we like it. Inexpensive as is **the Pizzeria** round the corner. **Jardin de Cadettou** - Excellent cuisine, but not cheap, excellent for a special occasion.

Rimont - Hotel le Post: French middle price range but good cuisine

Moulis - Le Moulin: Excellent Italian food incl. Pizzas, west from St Girons towards Castillon.

St Girons Hotel Echeynne: excellent gourmet cuisine, but not cheap by local standards. **Philippe Faur** – especially if you like ice creams. **Simonet** – (Chocolatier and Bakery) at lunch time. Many others.

Foix Restaurant Gaia: English run, moderate prices, good cuisine. A good **Moroccan** Restaurant, Inexpensive French restaurants **Chez Lons** - overlooking the river. **Le Jeu de l'Oie** & the more expensive gourmet restaurant - **Le Phoebus** the other side of the river. There are also a lot of other restaurants in Foix.

Please give us your feedback so that we can update our recommendations to others following you.

Grottos:

Mas d'Azil: Worth having a guided tour. Son et Lumière approx 2 hours. The ticket includes a visit to the museum in Mas d'Azil.

Niaux & Bedeillac. Both in the same area south of Foix near Tarascon. Very interesting, worth a visit on a rainy day, take anorak or jumper as the temperature remains constant all year. Also well worth a visit is the **Prehistoric Museum** near Tarascon, this includes some interactive demonstrations in the well laid out grounds

Labouiche: Very interesting underground river system that gives you the longest underground river trip in Europe. Stalagmites, Stalactites, Cascades, worth seeing, particularly since it is so close. Turn left off the D117 after **La Bastide de Serou**. Tour involves climbing 200 steps, so not suitable for the infirmed.

Other Attractions:

Forges de Pyrennes: Well organised working exhibition of old arts and crafts of the Ariège - Approx 2 hours to go round. There is a café. To find take the road south of Foix past the super markets and the forge is on the right before you get to Montgaillard. Can be linked with a visit to Chateau de Roquefixarde and/or Chateau de Montsegur

Eagles of Lordat: A must see demonstration of falconry, very interactive and spectacular in content and location. Located in an old Cathar castle on the top of a hill near Luzenac, between Tarascon & Ax les Thermes. About 1 hr away so best plan to leave Le Moulin by 1.15pm to be sure of getting to the afternoon demonstration in time. Alternatively plan to have lunch at Ax les Thermes, old spa town, where you can dangle your feet in a hot mineral bath. South of Ax there are the **Wolf Sanctuary**. Above Ax les Thermes is the leading Ariège ski resort of Bonascre. **Serious mountain bikers** take the ski lift to Bonascre and cycle down the steep mountain tracks at alarming speed. Even better facilities are at Bagniers de Luchon another ski resort SW. Of St Girons.

Carla Bayle: Hilltop artists town with Summer Exhibition July & August. Go through Mas d'Azil, then straight across the crossroads at Sabarat and you will see it signposted. Wonderful views of the Pyrenees.

Fetes: There are fetes happening all over the Ariège every week through the summer. Go to the tourist information centre at **Le Bastide de Serou** for details. This is one of the best information centre in the Ariège. Special fetes are **Transhumance** in early June and late September – take part in the ancient tradition of escorting the cattle, horses, sheep and goats to the Summer pastures in the mountains- this happens in several valleys over a 3 week stretch. **Fetes de Pommes** in Mirepoix, **Fetes de Figs** in Mas d'Azil, **Midsummer Music festival** in St Girons and many others

Cathar Castles: There are many around the Ariège, but those worth visiting close by are at **Foix**, which is in good repair and has a lot of historic information to reveal: **Roquefixade**, if you are passing, and **Montsegur** – the last bastion of the Cathars where 600 were burnt at the stake for heresy. A visit to Montsegur requires a 45 minute walk, at which point you then pay to enter the Chateau, not much left of it, but the atmosphere, location and history is worth the effort. We recommend you read **Kate Moss's Labyrinth** before you visit the Ariège in order to absorb the history that oozes from the region.

Also Available:

Various Theme and Adventure Parks for Children: Particularly recommended are – Climbing through the tree tops at The Eco Museum in Alzen, Dinosaur Park at Mas d'Azil.

White Water Rafting, Canoeing, Hang Gliding & Gliding.

Pony Trekking , Golf, Fishing, Mountain Biking

All information about the above is available at the Moulin (See practical guide 2010 to the Ariège) and more can be obtained from the Tourist Office in Le Bastide de Serou.