

22 THE HERCULEAN WAY

FOLLOW THE OLD ROMAN WINE ROUTE TO
MILLENNIA-OLD AQUEDUCTS & THE IMPOSING
HILLTOP CATHEDRAL OF SAINT-NAZAIRE.



WHERE Béziers, Languedoc (Occitanie)
STATS 6km return 🚣🗺️🚶🏠
START/FINISH Ancien Moulin de Bagnols, 37 route de Murviel, 34500 Béziers
 /// vegans.human.searches

Research shows that Béziers dates from 575bc, making it one of the oldest cities in the country. It looks old, too. A vast stone aqueduct is one of several bridges that link the old town, perched on top of a hill as if in a kingdom from a fantasy novel, with the outside world. The bridge is so worn and pockmarked that you can practically sense the millions of feet, hooves and wheels that have traversed it over the centuries. As you climb the hill to the Cathedral of Saint-Nazaire, which is situated squarely in the centre of the old town and dominates the skyline (the cathedral took almost 200 years to build and has a 48m-high tower), steep staircases and higgledy-piggledy cobbles create the layered effect of a city that has been added to bit by bit over the ages, like a patchwork quilt.

The city really rose to importance under the Romans, when wine was transported all the way from Béziers to Rome along a route which has become known as the Herculean Way. Archaeologists found earthenware *dolias* (pots used for storing wine) near Rome that were inscribed with texts such as 'white wine from Baeterrae' or 'I am from Baeterrae and I am 5 years old'. Baeterrae was the Roman name for the city. Béziers and the surrounding area is

still excellent for wine, and is best known for reds and rosés. Coteaux de Béziers, the local speciality, is made from blended Carignan, Grenache and Syrah grapes.

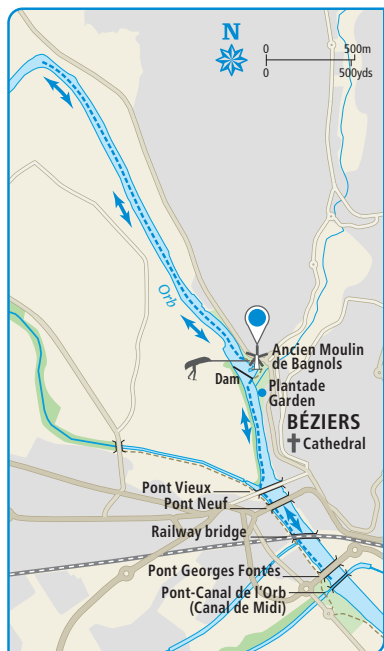
Some of the traditions in Béziers feel distinctly Spanish. A lively little city of some 80,000 people, it really comes alive during the annual Féria de Béziers. Spanish-style bullfighting still takes place during this festival, flamenco, salsa and local folk music reverberate through the streets, and food stands serving Occitan and Spanish delicacies are on every corner. Despite this, Béziers is a good 100km north of where the border used to sit between France and Catalonia, and 150km from the present-day border between France and Spain. But it's just a stone's throw (15km) from the Mediterranean, between Montpellier and Perpignan.

This there-and-back route has almost continual views of the Cathedral of Saint-Nazaire and passes under Béziers' old and new bridges. Although you wouldn't know from the water, one of the bridges, Pont-Canal de l'Orb, carries a waterway, the Canal du Midi, that passes over your head as you paddle down the Orb River. The river itself is slow moving, so it's not difficult to paddle upstream.

PADDLE THIS WAY

Launch your board just north of the dam by the Ancien Moulin de Bagnols (/// vegans.human.searches), an old mill and hydraulic plant that supplied clean drinking water to the citizens of Béziers in the early 19th century, making it one of the most sophisticated drinking-water systems in France at the time.

↑ Béziers is one of the oldest cities in France (LianeM/A)



From here, paddle northnorthwest 2.5km to the first major river meander (/// restrict.sweetly.renting), which turns to your left. The paddle upstream is verdant and leafy, a contrast to the urbanism of Béziers; the river is sheltered by numerous trees and the current is slow-moving against you. Try to resist the urge to admire the view behind you as you head up – the idea is that you get your first view of the Cathedral of Saint-Nazaire from a distance.

At the meander, turn your board around and begin your descent down the river. There are a couple of small pontoons and private boat houses that you'll pass. It won't be long before you see the tip of the spires of the Cathedral of Saint-Nazaire up above you to your left, silhouetted against the sky.

Once you reach the dam that you started from, it's safest to paddle to the bank on your left-hand side, get off the water and take your paddleboard on foot along the bank – only for about 15m or so – to avoid the dam, after which point you can launch safely again. From here it's only half a kilometre to Béziers' old bridge, aptly named Pont Vieux (/// deflate.nibbled.painter). This bridge was originally built in the 12th century, but the present structure is a mishmash of stones placed in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. The 15 arches are all quite clearly different sizes, creating an effect a bit like bubbles when they reflect on the water.

Just after is the next bridge, named, very originally, Pont Neuf or New Bridge (/// dragons.golf.touched), which is where the D11, one of the main roads from the west, crosses to Béziers. The water is much shallower here and your fin may run aground on the stones. If water levels allow, continue paddling under the railway line (/// book.marriage.boomers), another road bridge (Pont Georges Fontès; /// bluffs.jeep.funds) and finally the Pont-Canal de l'Orb (/// object.swells.fills), where the Canal du Midi crosses the river. The Orb is extremely shallow here, so you may find it's not possible to descend this far.

Turn around and paddle back to Jardin de la Plantade (/// chats.glorious.dusted), a pretty waterside park just before the dam, to disembark thus avoiding crossing the dam again.

ESSENTIALS

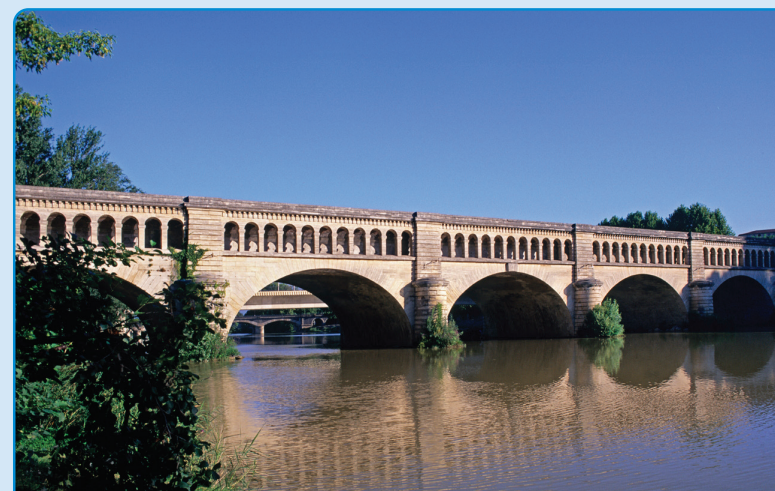
GETTING THERE Béziers Airport (20km from the city centre) is served by international flights, and its train station has direct services from Paris (4 hours).

HIRE & LESSONS **Smile Kayak** (📍 smilekayak.com 🕒 Jun–Aug) hires stand-up paddleboards, but is highly seasonal.

WHEN TO GO Unless you've got your own boat, you'll need to visit during the summer. With your own board, you could in theory paddle at any time of year, as winter temperatures are fairly mild here, but it's most pleasant between April and October.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT **Hôtel des Poètes** (📍 hoteldespoetes.fr) is in the heart of Béziers, with small but comfortable rooms. **Le Cèdre du Liban** (📍 lecedreduliban.fr) does excellent Lebanese food and portions are hearty, with plenty for vegetarians. The covered market, **Les Halles**, is great for picking up a picnic lunch.

TITBITS Whatever else you do in Béziers, don't miss the enormous Gothic **cathedral of Saint-Nazaire** that dominates the skyline for the majority of your paddle, and is visible from its hilltop location for miles around. Particularly impressive are the six enormous iron bells kept in the bell tower. Also worth a visit is the **Maison Natale de Jean Moulin**, France's most famous World War II Resistance fighter. He was born in Béziers in 1899 and led much of the French Resistance under the Vichy regime, before being captured in Lyon in June 1943. Upon capture, he was tortured by the notorious SS officer Klaus Barbie (who was so brutal he became known as the 'butcher' of Lyon) and died just days later.



↑ The Orb passes beneath five bridges in Béziers (ss)