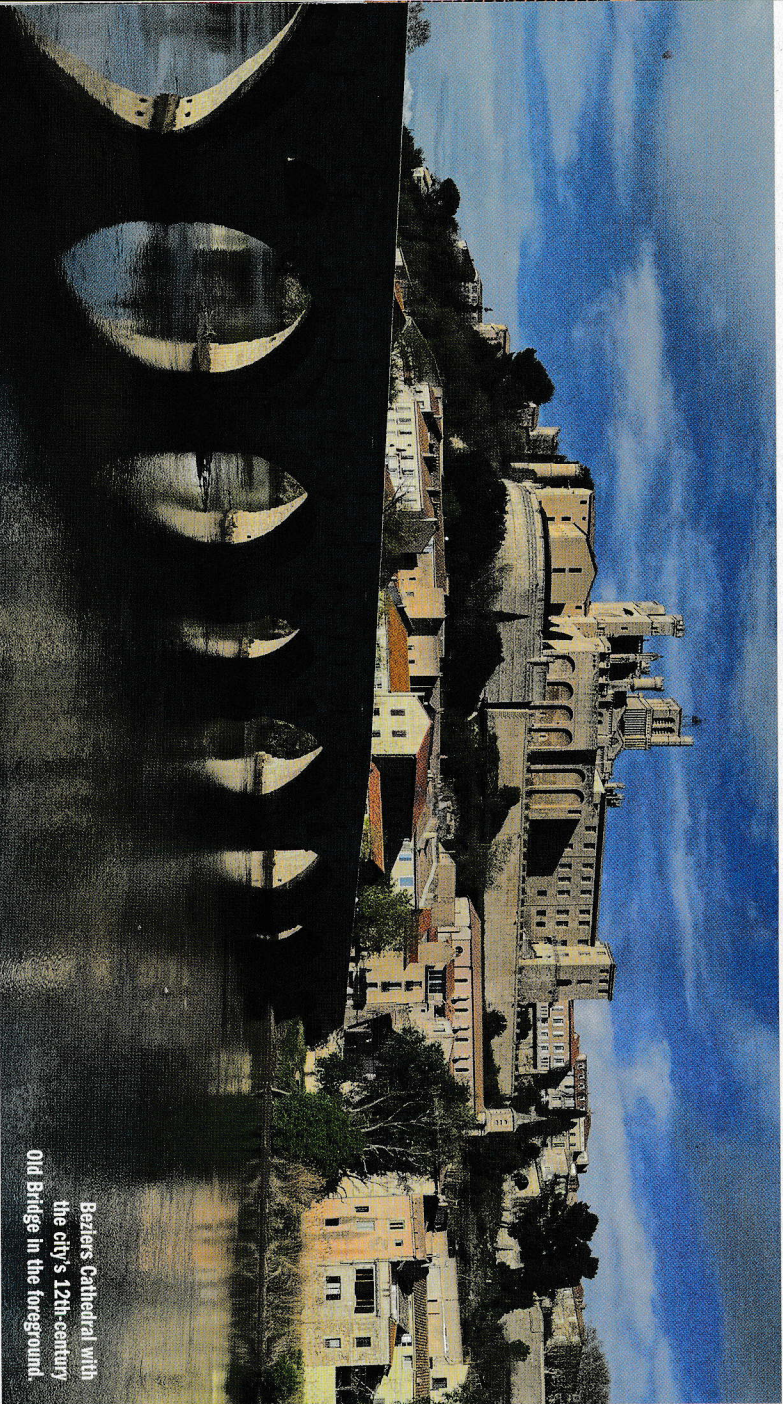


Pursuing history by rail in France's Occitanie region



Beziers Cathedral with the city's 12th-century Old Bridge in the foreground.

PHOTOS BY NADINE GODWIN

By Nadine Godwin

Clients don't have to be history buffs to visit Occitanie, a wine region in the south of France that is the birthplace of cassoulet and an area rich with outcroppings suited to picturesque hill-top villages — and hiking.

But history has influenced the touristic landscape here.

With support from Destination Occitanie and local tourism offices, I traveled the trails in pursuit of that history.

In the Middle Ages, the city of Beziers

a plaque honoring six medieval troubadours; they include a woman.

Troubadours originated in Languedoc, and the plaque recalls a time when they traveled to the area's courts to sing of love.

Then, everything fell apart. A religious heresy called Catharism had found a home in the region. Popes wanted to eradicate it, and French kings wanted the land. They got what they wanted. They launched the Albigensian Crusade in 1209.

Today a significant chunk of medieval Languedoc comprises Occitanie. Toulouse, a power center in Languedoc, is Occitanie's capital. Toulouse's St. Raymond Museum is sponsoring an exhibit devoted to the Cathars, on view through Jan. 5 at two sites: the museum itself and the city's Church of the Jacobins.

way company, provides the platform for booking the pass.

Prime historical spots on my itinerary follow:

- Cordes-sur-Ciel, a hilltop town of less than 1,000 residents, exists as a direct result of the Albigensian Crusade. Count Raymond VII of Toulouse founded it in 1222 to provide a place for those who had lost homes in the fighting.

Five town gates survive, as do 13th- and 14th-century buildings — the oldest is the city hall — and the historical outdoor market site. Today it looks like the ideal perched village, and it charms with small houses, unique shops and appealing dining options.

I arrived by car, but Cordes is also accessible using a train/bus combination.

• The centurylong project to build the Dominican Church of the Jacobins start-

table for a line of 95-foot columns dividing its cavernous sanctuary lengthwise. A single column supports 22 ribs that fan out like palm fronds over the apse. An attached cloister is idyllic.

- Albi Cathedral, where construction began in 1282, during the Inquisition that followed the Crusade, also presents a simple redbrick exterior in response to Catharism. One view holds that the Roman Catholic Church opted for a huge, plain building to demonstrate power, but an alternative view says the plainness was meant to draw Cathars in.

After there were no Cathars to impress, the cathedral gained an ornate entry canopy and 200,000 square feet of frescoes on ceiling and walls — an eye-popping sight.

Its evocative surroundings include a rich collection of medieval houses (the 12th-century Fenasse Hotel being the oldest) and the former bishops' palace, now accommodating the works of and named for native son Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

- Beziers was the first town on the crusaders' radar. To terrorize the region, they destroyed it in 1209, killing around 5,000, including those who were sheltering in the cathedral when it was burned down. Another church where citizens unsuccessfully sought refuge, St. Madeleine's Church, survives.

Construction of Beziers Cathedral started a few decades later. Sited atop a dramatic promontory with the Orp River and the city's 12th-century Old Bridge in the foreground, it's a dream for photographers that very much belies the horror that predated it.

- Carcassonne boasts some of Europe's best preserved city fortifications. The outer Carcassonne wall was added in the 13th century because of weaknesses in city defenses revealed during and after the crusaders' attacks.

The walls have the drama and grit to fulfill the tourist's visions for a medieval citadel. Visitors can walk on the city ramparts as well as those atop the former vis-

By Nadine Godwin

Clients don't have to be history buffs to visit Occitanie, a wine region in the south of France that is the birthplace of cassoulet and an area rich with outcroppings suited to picturesque hilltop villages — and hiking.

But history has influenced the touristic landscape here.

With support from Destination Occitanie and local tourism offices, I traveled the trails in pursuit of that history.

In the Middle Ages, the city of Beziers was part of a cultural area known as Languedoc, where local nobles governed, not French kings, and the language was Occitan, not French.

The local culture at the time fostered religious tolerance and gender parity. The cathedral cloister in Beziers features

a plaque honoring six medieval troubadours; they include a woman.

Troubadours originated in Languedoc, and the plaque recalls a time when they traveled to the area's courts to sing of love. Then, everything fell apart.

A religious heresy called Catharism had found a home in the region. Popes wanted to eradicate it, and French kings coveted the land. They got what they wanted. They launched the Albigensian Crusade in 1209.

Today a significant chunk of medieval Languedoc comprises Occitanie. Toulouse, a power center in Languedoc, is Occitanie's capital. Toulouse's St. Raymond Museum is sponsoring an exhibit devoted to the Cathars, on view through Jan. 5 at two sites: the museum itself and the city's Church of the Jacobins.

A pass for exploring the past

Clients can undertake their own itineraries with the Occitanie Rail Tour Pass, at about \$11 a day for unlimited Occitanie travel over two to six consecutive days. SNCF, France's national rail-

way company, provides the platform for booking the pass.

Prime historical spots on my itinerary follow:

- Cordes-sur-Ciel, a hilltop town of less than 1,000 residents, exists as a direct result of the Albigensian Crusade. Count Raymond VII of Toulouse founded it in 1222 to provide a place for those who had lost homes in the fighting.

Five town gates survive, as do 13th- and 14th-century buildings — the oldest is the city hall — and the historical outdoor market site. Today it looks like the ideal perched village, and it charms with small houses, unique shops and appealing dining options.

I arrived by car, but Cordes is also accessible using a train/bus combination.

- The centurylong project to build the Dominican Church of the Jacobins started in 1230, immediately after the Crusade ended. It is an austere brick structure, designed in part to attract Cathars, who viewed austerity in theology and in life as the ideal.

Now deconsecrated, the church is no-

way company, provides the platform for booking the pass.

Prime historical spots on my itinerary follow:

- Cordes-sur-Ciel, a hilltop town of less than 1,000 residents, exists as a direct result of the Albigensian Crusade. Count Raymond VII of Toulouse founded it in 1222 to provide a place for those who had lost homes in the fighting.

Five town gates survive, as do 13th- and 14th-century buildings — the oldest is the city hall — and the historical outdoor market site. Today it looks like the ideal perched village, and it charms with small houses, unique shops and appealing dining options.

I arrived by car, but Cordes is also accessible using a train/bus combination.

- The centurylong project to build the Dominican Church of the Jacobins started in 1230, immediately after the Crusade ended. It is an austere brick structure, designed in part to attract Cathars, who viewed austerity in theology and in life as the ideal.

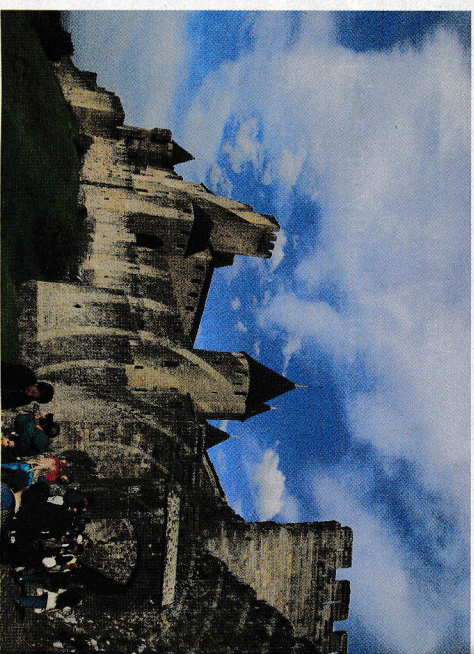
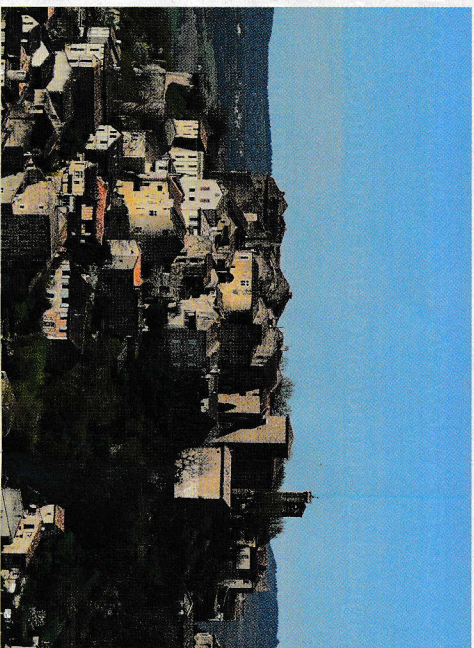
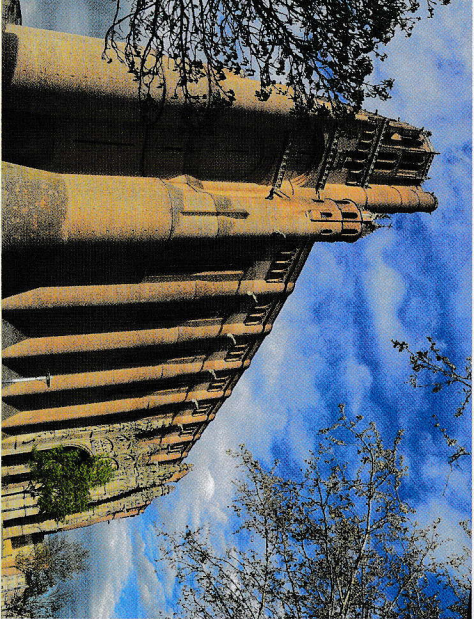
Now deconsecrated, the church is no-

way company, provides the platform for booking the pass.

Prime historical spots on my itinerary follow:

- Cordes-sur-Ciel, a hilltop town of less than 1,000 residents, exists as a direct result of the Albigensian Crusade. Count Raymond VII of Toulouse founded it in 1222 to provide a place for those who had lost homes in the fighting.

Five town gates survive, as do 13th- and 14th-century buildings — the oldest is the city hall — and the historical outdoor market site. Today it looks like the ideal perched village, and it charms with small houses, unique shops and appealing dining options.



Left, Albi Cathedral, a Unesco World Heritage Site, was built in the aftermath of the Albigensian Crusade. Center, the hilltop town of Cordes-sur-Ciel was founded to settle those displaced by the Crusade. Right, the walls of Carcassonne with the effects of the 2018 art installation "Eccentric, Concentric Circles" still visible.