

Take it slow in HAUTE-GARONNE



In the latest of his guides to gentle nature and culture breaks in Occitanie, **Justin Postlethwaite** heads to Revel and the Canal du Midi heartland



Few French summertime experiences are quite so exhilarating as the moment one emerges from a tranquil, shaded side-street of a *bastide* town into the sun-kissed buzz and beauty of a Saturday morning market in full flow.

In the gorgeous main square at Revel, named Place Philippe VI de Valois after the king who founded the village back in 1342, so begins my 'slow tourism' weekend jaunt taking in Haute-Garonne's superb range of easy-paced tourism gems and back-to-nature offerings.

The market at Revel, which sits at the foot of the Montagne Noire (Black Mountain) about an hour southeast of Toulouse, counts among the 100 most beautiful in France. As if browsing its fine array of fruit and vegetable stands, charcuterie, bread and cheese purveyors – all framed by shaded arcades with cafés, restaurants and boutiques – were not enough, more magic (and respite from the late-morning sun) awaits within the iconic covered Les Halles at its epicentre.

This beautiful wooden construction, measuring 39m on each side, and supported by 79 oak pillars, is topped by a fine (and rare for this part of France) Neo-Classical belfry from 1834, whose 83 steps I climb in the company of an excellent guide called Marie – be sure to book her insightful services in advance via the tourist office, housed within the belfry building itself (tours depart at 11am every Saturday).

The 360-degree views from atop are sublime: first, there are the red canvas stalls directly below, a snake of eager shoppers queuing alongside each; then, beyond, the neatly divergent grid of streets so familiar in *bastide* towns; and finally the sprawling countryside of the Pays de Lauragais beyond the town limits. But equally impressive up here are the smells. »



Left and above: The splendid market in the heart of Revel; the town was once home to Pierre-Paul Riquet, mastermind of the Canal du Midi

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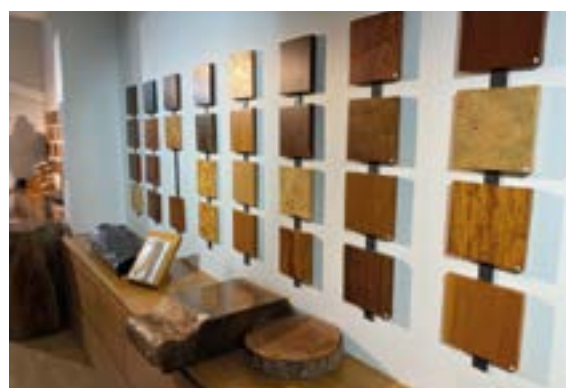
“CUTE OLD STONE BRIDGES AND PERFECTLY STILL GOLDEN WHEAT FIELDS PROVIDE MORE EYE-PLEASING DISTRACTION”

Wafting up from *traiteur* trucks below come whiffs of cassoulet (we are in the heartland of this iconic meaty, beany speciality), roasting meats and other ready-to-eat hot goodies. An on-high treat for all the senses, indeed.

Pointed out to me is the house at Number 5, where a certain Pierre-Paul Riquet lived from 1648. The driving force behind that monumental feat of engineering, the Canal du Midi, was based here as he ventured out into the Montagne Noire Massif and the Lauragais Plain to develop an innovative hydraulic network consisting of two *rigoles* (diversionary water channels) and reservoirs. Today these water resources serve as idyllic slow tourism hotspots for outdoors lovers (more of which later).

STAY COOL AND CULTURED

Cultural institutions serve two purposes on a hot summer's day in southern France: to enrich the mind, and to provide solace from the scorching heat. So after a hearty and traditional Occitan lunch (yes, the duck *gésier* salad was delicious) at BistrOnome on nearby boulevard de la République, I head to the MUB (Musée du bois et la Marqueterie), a very elegantly presented celebration of not only Revel's grand tradition of woodworking, but also the town's continued role as a hub of artisanal excellence and student skills development. In broad terms, the museum's several floors invite visitors along on a piece of wood's journey, from tree to furniture. Along the way, a 'wood library' showcases 200 species of wood, while the trades area features a large



Clockwise from top left: Watersports on Saint-Ferréol lake; a rainbow is formed at Saint-Ferréol lake; stroll through history at Saint-Félix-Lauragais; the hilltop majesty of Saint-Félix-Lauragais; the Musée du bois et la Marqueterie; *magret de canard* at the Auberge du Poids Public



collection of craftsmen's tools. There are videos and models to inspire and educate and I found the museum informative and restful – what could be more 'slow' and measured than a tree's growth or a woodworker's meticulous artisanship? Add to this an insightful delve into the painstaking wonders of *marqueterie* – decorative veneer patterns – and you have the perfect way to spend a couple of hours in the cool.

Late in the afternoon I head to another one of the vital pieces in Riquet's magnificent puzzle: the Saint-Ferreol lake, which was dammed and built over four years from 1667 to provide water power for the Canal du Midi's locks during the dry season. Today it's a leisure and outdoor pursuits magnet, with small sandy beach areas and all manner of activities, from pedalos and bathing to family orienteering fun (pick up the

Koh Ferréol game pack from the Revel tourist office). The cool waters are most welcome, even for a dip-your-toes moment.

LAC TO THE FUTURE

That evening, after driving ten minutes west of Revel, I wind my way up to edge of the hilltop beauty, Saint-Félix-Lauragais, where I revel in a sublime dining experience at the *très chic* hotel-restaurant, Auberge du Poids Public. Not only is the cuisine exceptional (the tempura sardines with green bean salad are a marvel; the just-pink *magret de canard* with cherry *jus* reduction all one could hope for), but the rear terrace views and impeccable service combine to make for a memorable meal. I promise to return, perhaps in a cooler season, to sample their very highly rated cassoulet.

Next morning, a remnant of Monsieur Riquet's project presents me with a truly delightful Sunday escapade: one of his two aforementioned little *rigoles*, the Rigole de la Plaine, is perfect for following on foot or bike, along a well-maintained pathway that ribbons through a canopy of trees. It may be man-made but for the outdoors lover, the delights of this gentle babbling waterway are Mother Nature's own: the tweeting of birds and chirrup of insects; ducks pootling along *en famille*; and the occasional dog on a walk, bounding into the water for a refreshing dip. Cute



old stone bridges, perfectly still golden wheat fields and more than one dreamy stream-side property provide more eye-pleasing distraction.

My starting point is Lac de Lenclas, from where I follow the watery trail all the way over to Saint-Ferreol and back again, a round-trip of about two hours and 15 minutes.

It's largely flat, of course, but the option of an electric bike hire from the good people at Station Bee (www.stationsbees.com) was irresistible. They drop off the bike before and then collect it again after the ride, where they find me happily nursing a pre-lunch *pression* at the splendid *guinguette* nearby (www.facebook.com/LaCompagnieSaintFelixEnclas). Had I engaged my bike's electric battery turbo at any point to rest my wearying limbs? That's between me and the ducks, I'm afraid... After lunch, there's time >>

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“THE VILLAGE’S SHOW-PIECE BUILDING, THE CHÂTEAU HAS STOOD SENTRY OVER THE LAURAGAIS PLATEAU FOR SEVEN CENTURIES”

for one final shot of chilled-out culture, so it's back up the hill to Saint-Félix-Lauragais. Once you enter the pristine village square of this medieval charmer, its *colombage* (wooden) houses, elegant restaurant *terrasses* and spectacular wooden market hall will have you wondering if the modern world really exists at all.

I head for the panoramic viewing post to take in wide-reaching vistas of the Montagne Noire and, on a clear day like this, the Pyrenees, before heading to the village's show-piece building, the château. It has stood sentry over the Lauragais plateau for more than seven centuries and is home to a dynamic array of contemporary art exhibitions. And who should be there to offer historic tidbits on the castle? Marie the guide, of course. It dates from 1035 but was largely razed by Simon de Montfort during the Albigensian Crusade, before medieval reconstruction. Further enhancements by private owners reveal themselves like time travel as you move through the handful of rooms open to the public – don't miss the Florentine mosaic room. The commune finally purchased the château to ensure its future as a public building at a cost of around €3m.

In today's hectic times, slow tourism – the gentle art of French living combined with the seductive power of nature with a focus on sustainability – really is something to be embraced. If you want off-the-beaten-track escapism and the very best of French hospitality, culture and outdoor pleasures, Pays de Lauragais in the south-eastern tip of Haute-Garonne comes with a five-star recommendation. **FT**



From top: The stunning wooden market hall at Saint-Félix-Lauragais; Saint-Ferréol lake is a charming spot for a walk, bike ride, swimming or orienteering

HAUTE-GARONNE ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Fly to Toulouse airport from a range of UK airports or Paris. Revel is about an hour away, taking the A61-D38- D2.

WHERE TO STAY

The 17-room **Logis Hôtel-Restaurant du Midi** in central Revel offers comfortable rooms and a shaded garden, ideal for an outdoor *petit déjeuner*. www.hotelrestaurantdumidi.com

CONTACTS

Haute-Garonne Tourism: www.hautegaronnetourism.com

Revel Tourist Office: tourism.auxsourcesducanaldumidi.com