

ARIÈGE – the land that time forgot



Mirepoix © Stéphane Meurisse, Tourisme Ariège Pyrenees

Nestled beneath the snow-covered peaks of the Pyrenees, Ariège is a department relatively unknown even by the French says Gillian Thornton as she explores its many treasures...



Peintures Niaux © Stéphane Meurisse, Ariège Pyrenees Tourisme

Standing in pitch darkness deep inside a mountain, I'm not sure what to expect next.

A few minutes before I was in the bright sunshine of the Ariège valley, now I'm inside a cave with only a hand-held lamp to light the way through a gloomy cavern. There are no stalagmites, no stalactites, in fact not very much of anything as we walk along the dry riverbed. And the guide has told our small group to turn off the flashlights. The blackness is absolute and it's strangely disorienting.

'Can you hear how the acoustics have

changed,' she asks, upping her volume so we can hear the echo. 'Our ancestors couldn't see very far with their flaming torches, but they would have sensed that they'd come to a high cavern. Now ... keep your lights off, but look towards me.'

Suddenly she turns her own lamp back on, the beam pointed at the floor, and I blink in the brightness. But as the light moves up the wall, my eyes open wide. Galloping across the rocky contours are horses bison, and ibex, each one so skilfully outlined that I half expect them to canter off into the darkness with a snort and a shake of the head. No wonder we've been told not to touch the walls.

For these are not replicas, but the real deal, painted 14,000 years ago by Cro-Magnon man here in the 'Salon Noir' of the Grotte de Niaux. The cave is open throughout the year, but numbers are closely regulated to preserve the environment, so pre-booking is essential at sites-touristiques-ariege.fr.

The Grotte de Niaux is a highlight of any visit to the department of Ariège in the Occitanie region. Today it is one of the most rural departments in France with a population of barely 153,000. But whilst Ariège may not

seem crowded now, in prehistoric times the limestone cliffs near the river were positively buzzing. Along with Lot and Dordogne, Ariège is one of the three most important departments in France for prehistoric sites. Not just Niaux but a number of sites including the Mas d'Azil, today a drive-through cave but once a refuge for rhinoceros, mammoths and men, although not, one assumes, at the same time.

Foix, the county town of Ariège, is less than 100km from Toulouse airport and just 80 from Carcassonne, and yet many Francophiles have never heard of it. But if you like stunning landscapes and ancient history, character small towns and time-honoured traditions, put Ariège high on your To Do list.

My face-to-face with the region's extinct wildlife took place just outside the small town of Tarascon-sur-Ariège. Here the Parc de la Préhistoire is the perfect complement to the cave at Niaux with its interactive exhibits and demonstrations. And for anyone who doesn't do dark caves, a replica of the paintings at Niaux brings that Magdalanian magic vividly to life, with the added bonus of artwork found in galleries not often on show to the general public.



Tarascon-sur-Ariège

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Chateau Montsegur © Oscar Rodbag, Ariege Pyrenees Tourisme

Just 20 km away in the centre of the department, Foix oozes atmosphere, dominated by a medieval hilltop castle owned by the powerful Counts of Foix. In the early 16th century, they became kings of Navarre, the last of whom – Henri III – went on to scoop the top job as Henri IV of France. Tour the restored rooms, visit the interactive museum, and walk the ramparts for a taste of medieval power and politics.

If you're feeling adventurous, experience power struggles of a different kind at Montségur, 35 minutes' drive from Foix. This hilltop castle was the last outpost of the Cathars, a strict religious movement which gathered much support in south-west France during the early 13th century amongst people weary of the corrupt Catholic Church. The Cathars shunned material possessions but took refuge from the Papal armies led by Simon de Montfort in strongholds such as Montségur and nearby Roquefixade.

The Cathars last stand came in 1244 after a 10-month siege at Montségur. The occupants were given two weeks to renounce their faith, but more than 200 refused and were burnt alive at the foot of the hill. The steep 150-metre climb is not for the faint-hearted but offers spectacular views across peaks and valleys to the plains beyond.



Mirepoix market

North of Montségur, the bastide town of Mirepoix is a must-see for its central square surrounded by open wooden galleries or *couverts*. Soak up the colourful half-timbered facades and explore the straight streets radiating out from the square. Don't miss the carved wooden heads on La Maison des Consuls, once the council chamber and now a stylish hotel. tourisme-mirepoix.com. Nor St Maurice Cathedral behind the 19th century covered market which boasts the widest nave in France and the second widest in Europe after Gerona in Spain – a graphic illustration of how new Catholic churches were built to accommodate the maximum number of souls in a vigorous recruiting drive after the fall of the Cathars.



Camon © Stéphane Meurisse, Tourisme Ariège Pyrenees



Voie verte Camon © Charles Ripon, Ariège Pyrenees Tourisme

Mirepoix and the fortified community of Camon – listed amongst Les Plus Beaux Villages – stand on the flat land in the eastern part of the department, but head west and the landscape soon becomes increasingly craggy. For dramatic views and deep gorges, take the scenic route from Tarascon-sur-Ariège to the market town of Saint-Girons and neighbouring Saint-Lizier with its Romanesque cloister and narrow cobbled lanes, a stop-off on the Santiago de Compostela routes.



Merens horses at Haras Picard du Saint

Here in the heart of the Regional Natural Park of the Ariège Pyrenees, you can see black Mérens horses, a small sure-footed local breed ideally suited to the mountain terrain. Once close to extinction, the Mérens has been saved in recent years, largely thanks to enthusiasts like Jean-Louis Savignol at the Haras Picard du Saint in Lasserre, which offers both riding excursions and accommodation merens-ariège.com

Cro-Magnon man was moved to paint the forbears of today's Mérens horses on the walls at Niaux. See them for yourself and you could find yourself reaching for a paint brush too. ariegepyrenees.com



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