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FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART



The Heretics of
Languedoc:

Travelling in
Cathar Country

It isn't recorded what Guillaume Bélibaste, the last Cathar 'Perfect', thought as he slowly burned to death at the stake, but given his beliefs, it was probably something like, 'thank god!'. Now, this isn't because Bélibaste liked the idea of such a death, but rather because he, like the other Cathars, saw anything physical as associated with evil, even his own body. Your flesh was a prison for the perfect soul, stuck in a world created by an evil god and only released in death. If you'd lived a perfect life, your soul went straight to heaven. If you hadn't, you'd be reincarnated. It says a lot about life in the 14th century that to this Christian sect reincarnation was a worse threat than hell.

Intrigued by this unusual medieval religious movement, now wiped from existence, I'd travelled to the Pays Cathare, 'Cathar Country', as it's advertised by the French tourism authority, in the Aude Department of Languedoc-Roussillon, just north of the Spanish border. In the 12th century, when Cathar beliefs first became popular, this area hadn't yet fallen under the control of the French crown and remained divided up among the Count of Toulouse and his vassals, and the King of Aragon and his vassals. Even before the Cathars, this region, mainly left to its own devices, had a reputation for liberal sympathies. And it wasn't just among the common folk; the Count of Toulouse, Raymond VI, one of the most powerful men in the region, was twice excommunicated by the Pope. Towing the Catholic line wasn't the region's strong suit.

Today of course, 'Cathar Country' is very much a part of France, but over the past 25 years or so, the tourism department of Languedoc-Roussillon has realised the benefits of playing up this unusual and ultimately rather violent side of their local history. Despite the Cathars being wiped out, many during a bloody crusade and the rest during an equally bloody Inquisition, the recent resurgence of interest in Cathar history among tourists has put these persecuted heretics back on the cultural map. At first it seems an odd thing for a tourist authority to promote as the French crown, supported by the Pope, played a major role in murdering an estimated half a million people

(it's a bit like trying to sell a house on the basis that a murder happened there). But it's perhaps a reflection of the south's continuing separate identity, now channelled through the Cathars as the embodiment of resistance; a pious symbol of individuality for all of France and the world to see.

Carcassonne – A fairy tale city with a bloody past

With a small airport and well connected by modern highways, the world heritage site of Carcassonne is a convenient entry point into the Cathar world. The historic citadel – la cité, as it's known – with its double enclosure wall and 52 towers, many topped by witch-hat roofs, is endlessly described by travel writers as straight out of a fairy tale. And it's true, the witch-hat roofs are totally make-believe, they were invented during the 19th century restoration works by architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (the turrets originally had flat roofs). Nevertheless, la cité's silhouette is so mesmerizing that no one cares. By the time you've walked across the pretty stone bridge, penetrating its perfectly preserved double-enclosure walls, and joined its bustling medieval streets, you're hooked. Real? Fake? Who cares? Certainly not the thousands of tourists which descend on la cité each day. Street after street offers up souvenir stores, cafes, hotels, and restaurants with courtyards illuminated by gently twinkling fairy lights. Tourists from across the world mill around, licking ice creams, carrying plastic swords and browsing medieval-themed stores for equally plastic shields and helmets to complete their faux-medieval look. Nearly every restaurant offers cassoulet, the local stew, and one cavernous sweet store sells all kinds of chocolaty goods beneath its medieval arches. I wondered if this is how la cité felt in the Middle Ages: bustling, rumbling with chatter and filled with people either trying to make a living or just passing through.

I headed through la cité's narrow and crowded medieval streets for the 11th century Château Comtal. Surrounded by a dry ditch, this was the main noble residence in the castle at the time of the Cathars, and I'd hoped to learn more about them there. From the Chateau's courtyard

Previous page and right: Views of Carcassonne (All images © Garry Shaw)

I began my tour, passing through plain stone corridors and chambers with elaborate columned windows and information panels, each explaining in great detail the castle's architecture and reconstruction work. It's a delight to architects I'm sure (if you've never heard of Viollet-le-Duc, you won't be able to forget him afterwards), but I was surprised by how little information was dedicated to the castle's daily life; there was barely a mention of the Cathars and their association with Carcassonne – confusing, given the local tourist industry's interest in pushing this angle.

So let me fill in the blanks.

If you were to travel back in time to the early 13th century, whilst wandering the (no doubt dirtier and less ice cream dominated) streets, you'd find that Carcassonne's main tourist draws – Château Comtal and the Basilica of St Nazaire and St Celse – were already built and dominating the citadel. At some point, mingling amongst the crowds, you'd no doubt bump into men wearing black robes who called themselves bons hommes 'good men'. These are better known as 'Perfects', people who'd taken the sole Cathar sacrament: the Consolamentum. This could only be undergone once, and was believed to remove all sin from the person, allowing the soul to head for heaven rather than reincarnation at death. For this reason, most lay Cathars – people classed as 'ordinary believers' – normally underwent the ritual and became 'perfect' on their death beds, when no further sin could be committed (this had the unfortunate side effect that some were 'helped' along the way after the ritual was complete even if they were, like the old man in the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail, 'getting better'). But the most serious Cathars underwent the ritual much earlier, pledging to never sin for the rest of their lives and becoming teachers in the community. Carcassonne, like other places in the south of France, was a haven for these heretics as the local nobles refused to expel or punish them for their beliefs, despite frequent grumbings from the Catholic Church.

As well as believing in reincarnation and only having a single sacrament, the Cathars held many other beliefs that put them at odds with the





Catholics. For one, they treated women as equals and allowed them to be Perfects, because there was the possibility of reincarnating as a woman. They also refused to eat meat, again because of the possibility of reincarnation, but also because the physical world was imbued with sin. They rejected all oath-taking and tithe payments, both important to the Catholic Church, and hated symbols, including the sign of the cross, which they associated with torture. All procreation was frowned upon because the outcome was another poor soul trapped in a physical form in a sinful world, and they rejected wealth too, preferring to live a simple life of teaching and begging.

As you'd expect, the Catholic Church wasn't pleased with this growing movement of tithedodging Christians who campaigned against wealth, symbols and rituals, lacked a central leadership and believed in equality between men and women, so they did everything possible to try and dissuade people from joining its ranks. They had little success until a papal legate was murdered en route to Rome after excommunicating the Cathar sympathiser Raymond VI of Toulouse.

Raymond was blamed for the death, giving Pope Innocent III the excuse needed to launch a campaign against him, and by extension the Cathars; the ensuing crusade, known as the Albigensian Crusade (after the French city of Albi where many Cathars lived), lasted 20 years from 1208 to 1229 and was primarily led by knights from northern France. The Pope sweetened the deal by offering the crusaders the right to confiscate any lands conquered, turning this religious war into one of invasion; the result was that Languedoc's own Catholics ended up fighting side by side with the Cathars against the crusaders in a desperate bid to preserve their territory and identity.

The campaign's first atrocity happened at Béziers, about 80 km east of Carcassonne. On 22 July 1209, terrified Cathars and Catholics alike were hiding in the church of St Mary Magdalene, when crusaders broke down the doors and dragged them outside to be slaughtered; when asked how to distinguish Cathars from the Catholics, Arnaud-Amaury, commander of the crusaders, replied, 'Kill them all, the Lord will recognise His own'. Having massacred thousands, the crusaders then burnt

Above: Looking across the rooftops of Carcassonne

Right: Carcassonne at night

the city and continued towards Carcassonne, which at this time, like Béziers, was the property of Viscount Raymond-Roger de Trencavel, a vassal of Toulouse, whose family had earlier built many of the main tourist draws in la cité. In August 1209, the crusaders besieged Carcassonne and cut off its water supply, forcing Raymond to negotiate its surrender. Leaving the city's protective walls behind (and probably walking past the spot where the tourist information stand is today), Raymond believed himself to be under 'safe-conduct', but the crusaders took him prisoner and he died shortly afterwards. Over the next 20 years fighting continued and Languedoc fell under the authority of the French crown.

Expecting the French Inquisition

The Cathars were forced into hiding, leading to an inquisition being formed in 1234. Carcassonne, previously a haven for Cathars, now became

a place of torture (there's even an overpriced Inquisition museum there today, where you can see some of the torture instruments used and some mannequins in unfortunate situations). Many Cathars captured in the surrounding towns were brought to la cité and locked in 'The Wall', a prison with two sections: 'le mur large' for normal heretics, and 'le mur strict' for the more serious offenders like the Perfects. Placed in irons in a tiny space, with only stale bread and water, those in 'le mur strict' didn't survive long.

To gather up Cathars, Inquisitors regularly turned up in villages (after - surprisingly politely - giving advance notice) and expected people to make an oath to the Catholic Church or volunteer their heretical crimes (and while you're at it, why not volunteer the names of a few other local offenders too?). Naturally, if you failed to come forward or refused to pledge an oath, you were thought to be guilty and questioned further. And if





you did admit to being a Cathar and freely gave up your beliefs, you were forced to wear yellow crosses on your clothes for the rest of your life, which had to be visible whenever you went outside. Faced with such tactics, many Cathars took refuge in remote mountain fortresses, built earlier to defend the border zone between Aragon and France. Today, many of these castles still stand as ruins on the peaks of the rugged mountains southeast of Carcassonne, and provide the perfect setting to explore the story of the Cathars further.

The 'Mysteries' of Rennes-le-Château

The next day, leaving Carcassonne, I drove south, briefly stopping at Pieusse, a small and quiet village, where a squat castle, decorated with red Toulouse crosses, stood in its own square. Privately owned and closed to the public, it's apparently the only 'Cathar Castle' to have been relatively unmodified in the succeeding centuries and so provides an insight into the castles the Cathars themselves inhabited. Afterwards, continuing south, the road flanked by vineyards at impossible slopes, the tree-covered hills became steeper and taller as I entered the mountainous region. Near the town of Couiza, a large casino whizzed by, seeming rather out of place among all the rustic charm, and a definite no-no among the Cathars.

My next target was Rennes-le-Château where a medieval castle, now long since vanished, once stood. On the peak of a steep hill reached by a winding, narrow road the tiny village is best known because of its associations with all manner of conspiracy theories built around a (fictitious) treasure said to have been discovered by local priest Bérenger Saunière in the 19th century. Now it's true that Saunière had accumulated surprising wealth for a man in his position, and unsubtly used the money to expand his estate and renovate the local church, but his sudden influx of cash is most probably due to his illegally charging the faithful for masses (for which he was later suspended from the priesthood). Nevertheless, add a dash of Templars and the Holy Grail to the hidden treasure story, a pinch of the (fictitious) secret society known as the 'Priory of Sion', and a character named Saunière in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci*



Left, top: The view from Quéribus over Cathar country

Left, bottom: View towards Quéribus

Above: Rennes-le-Château with its amazing views

Code, and you're assured of a steady stream of package tourists whose coaches somehow manage to reach the dedicated visitor car park without careering down the sheer hillside.

Unsurprisingly, the locals have heartily embraced this esoteric connection. Every element of the small Church of Saint Mary Magdalene apparently has a 'secret meaning' (though the red devil supported font is rather unexpected). Bookshops selling New Age tomes stand near the Angel Art Gallery, Shop and Tea Room, while the house of Bérenger Saunière is now a museum with a gift shop selling all sorts of Rennes-le-Château-themed goods, including comics in various languages about Saunière and the village's supposed mysteries. Nearby, a large beige boulder lies on its side, surrounded by a wooden barrier and identified as a prehistoric monolith where human sacrifice 'likely' occurred. The entire village

economy seems built on things that might have happened, yet almost certainly didn't.

Naturally, the Cathars have become wrapped up in many of the conspiracy theories surrounding Rennes-le-Château. During the years of the inquisition, their mountain strongholds fell one by one. The fortress of Peyrepertuse, a long, thin castle perched atop a craggy hilltop, surrendered without a fight in 1240. And in 1244 one of the most important Cathar centres, Montségur, fell after a 10 month siege. Anyone unwilling to convert to Catholicism was burned to death, and records show that there were so many victims – more than 200 – that the knights had to build a communal pyre to accommodate them all. Before the castle fell, however, the story goes that a few Cathars escaped with a treasure and it is this, some argue, that Bérenger Saunière discovered, explaining his fabulous wealth. Just maybe it's true. But probably not!🍷

The final siege: Quéribus

As I followed the road past the village of Cucugnan, where a pretty windmill stood prominent above the village, the ruined fortress of Quéribus dominated the mountain skyline like a giant's fist resting on a distant peak. It drew closer as the kilometres fell away, and after another winding and nerve-wracking ascent, from the car park, a trail led vertically to the ruins, the wind whooshing around my head. It was here, to this isolated peak, which is the highest in the area, that the remaining Cathars fled after the fall of Montségur. It held strong through a siege in 1248, but finally submitted in 1255, becoming the last of the Cathar fortresses to fall. The fort's commander, Chabert de Barbeira, a Cathar sympathiser who'd lost all his land in Languedoc during the crusade, now had to resign his position in exchange for his freedom. Meanwhile, many of the Cathars once again fled rather than be taken prisoner, heading south into Aragon.

Divided into three enclosures, Quéribus' modern appearance owes much to modifications made after the time of the Cathars, but its most impressive chamber remains the 14th century Salle du Pilier within the well-preserved donjon. This tall and dark space, amplifying and echoing every footfall, was originally divided into two levels by a wooden floor and is dominated by a circular pillar reaching up to ribbed ceiling vaults. From this dramatic room, I ascended a stone staircase to the donjon's roof, over 700 m above sea level, and looked out across the hills. If the castle had changed, the view remained roughly the same as in Cathar times. The rocky peaks of the French-Pyrenees were in the misty, blue-tinged distance. The great plains below, stretching in all directions, were pierced by tiny roads, picking winding routes through the forests, occasionally darkened by the passing shadows of clouds. I tried to imagine hiding on this remote rock in the Middle Ages and the feelings of the Cathars as they stared into the distance, unsure of their future.

Visiting Bélibaste

Which brings us back to Bélibaste. From Quéribus I backtracked, joining a road heading north



Left, top: The red devil supporting the font at Rennes-le-Château

Left, bottom: Approaching Villerouge-Termenès

Overleaf: Inside Carcassonne

...over the past 25 years or so, the tourism department of Languedoc-Roussillon has realised the benefits of playing up this unusual and ultimately rather violent side of their local history

towards the castle at Villerouge-Termenès. This castle – square, with round towers at each corner, the type you might have built out of Lego as a child – has dominated the area since the 13th century and unlike all others in the region, had been partially restored and includes a multimedia experience. As a sucker for this type of thing, I knew I'd enjoy my time there.

The experience began in the car park, where the first of a series of information panels took me on a journey around a churchyard, past the beige and grey stone buildings of the village, and to a small cafe, directly in front of the castle. A dog followed me the entire way, hoping for food, but gave up as I entered the dark tunnel leading to the castle's sun-drenched courtyard. From here, one route led to the ticket office, shop and exhibition, the other into a medieval-themed rotisserie.

The now famous Guillaume Bélibaste grew up in Cubières as the son of a wealthy farming family. But his life changed forever sometime in 1305-1306, when he killed a farmer at Villerouge-Termenès after getting into a fight. The Archbishop of Narbonne, who also held jurisdiction over Cubières and Villerouge-Termenès, found Bélibaste guilty, but before he could be punished he fled, leaving his wife and child behind. In hiding, Bélibaste was convinced to become a Cathar Perfect, an audacious move for a man already on the run, and ended up being arrested by the Inquisition and imprisoned at Carcassonne. Soon after, showing an almost innate skill for saving his own skin, he escaped his prison and fled south to Catalonia, eventually finding his way to Morella and a community of Cathars in 1314.

There, behaving in a rather un-Perfect manner, he took a mistress and fathered a child, but continued to teach Cathar ways and administer the sacrament of consolamentum. This continued until Arnaud Sicre, a man professing to want to learn Cathar ways, convinced Bélibaste to return with him to Languedoc. In reality, Sicre was working for the Inquisition, and handed Bélibaste over to the authorities in either March or April 1321. There was no escape for Bélibaste this time and he was burned later that year at the place of his earlier crime, Villerouge-Termenès. He is the last known

Cathar Perfect.

The experience inside the castle reconstructs Bélibaste's trial and involves videos and mannequins dressed in period clothing, speaking through your audio guide. For the most part, this all works quite nicely, though one room, in which a mannequin in medieval clothing crouches watching a video of the trial on an old TV built into the floor is a little out of place. As a reconstructed castle much of the interior is bare, with only the wooden ceiling and the odd flourish of painted decoration on the beige walls to provide some colour; still, some painted scenes do date to the castle's early life, including one of nobles dining together, and others that simulate courses of stone blocks (apparently trendy at the time).

After recreating Bélibaste's story, the tour ends with a descent into a dark dungeon tower, where stone benches adjoin shield-shaped windows. Perhaps this is meant to give you an insight into Bélibaste's final days, longing for freedom, staring out at the green fields, but the audio guide dwells on the tasty food you can eat in the medieval rotisserie now that your tour's over, something certainly out of Bélibaste's reach.

Given his conduct in life and the strictness of Cathar beliefs, if reincarnation as punishment is possible, it surely happened to Bélibaste. And if not, and somehow his soul did become perfect and travelled directly to heaven, he'll nevertheless continue to exist on earth among the mannequins of Villerouge-Termenès as the least perfect Perfect to get his own two-floor multimedia experience. I'm unsure whether he'd have liked this fate. Certainly Cathars were expected to eschew the glitz and glamour of the sinful, physical world and would probably have regarded their modern reincarnation, aimed in part at generating tourist revenue, as dare I say, ungodly.

But for us imperfect souls, if the cheesy tourist shops of Carcassonne, the so-called 'mysteries' of Rennes-le-Château, and the picturesque ruins of the mountain fortresses help to shine a light on the horrors of a period long ignored, surely this can only be a good thing. For Cathar history, maybe reincarnation isn't so bad after all.●

Getting there

Flying

From the UK, with Ryanair, Carcassonne airport can be reached from London Stanstead, Liverpool, Glasgow Prestwick and the East Midlands airports. Carcassonne is also within easy reach of the airports at Toulouse, Montpellier and Beziers.

Visas

Members of the EU do not require a visa to visit France. Those from Canada, USA and Australia can also enter without a visa, as long as they stay for less than 90 days.

Getting around

Carcassonne's tourist sites within la cité can easily be navigated by foot, while those wanting to escape the crowds can take a short walk down the hill to the Ville Basse (Lower City). The city's train station, located in the Ville Basse is connected with Toulouse, Narbonne and Montpellier. Due to limited public transport, the easiest way to visit the fortresses of 'Cathar Country' is to rent a car, though tour companies do offer trips from Carcassonne.

Weather

With its Mediterranean climate, Languedoc-Roussillon is one of the warmest French regions. Most of the year is sunny, though rainfall can be torrential in Autumn and temperatures cold in Winter.

Holidays

(In 2016): January 1 (New Year's Day), March 28 (Easter Monday), May 1 (Labour Day), May 5 (Ascension Day), May 8 (VE Day), May 16 (Whit Monday), July 14 (Bastille Day), August 15 (Assumption), November 1 (All Saints' Day), November 11 (Armistice Day), December 25 (Christmas Day).

Essentials

Time difference: GMT + 1

Electrical current/ plugs: Plug sockets have two round pins and have a current of 120V AC, 60Hz.

Water: Tap water in France is safe to drink, and bottled water is widely available.

Politics: France is a democracy with a president as Head of State.

Religion: The vast majority of France's population are Christian.

Language: French is the official language of France, and English is also widely spoken. In Languedoc-Roussillon, Catalan and Occitan are also spoken.

Money

Currency: The currency in France is the Euro (EUR; symbol €) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents.

ATMs are widely available throughout France.

Credit cards: MasterCard, American Express, Cirrus, Maestro and Visa are widely accepted.

Traveller's cheques are widely accepted. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take traveller's cheques in Euro, Pounds Sterling or US Dollars.

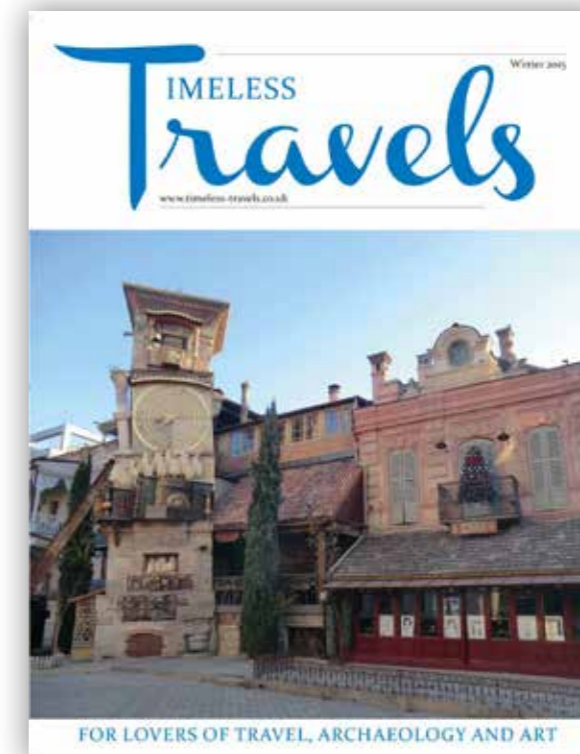


Short History

Traces of human habitation in the Languedoc-Roussillon region go back over ten thousand years, as shown through cave paintings found in the area. From around 600 BCE, the Phoenicians and Greeks arrived, followed in the 2nd century BCE by the Romans, who founded Narbonne, Nîmes and Béziers, and at Carcassonne built upon an earlier settlement, fortifying the top of the hill. In the first millennium CE, Carcassonne fell first into the hands of the Visigoths and then the Saracens. The Franks took the area in

759. During the Albigensian crusade against the Cathars, Carcassonne was ruled by the Trencavel family, and from 1247 by the King of France. The city continued to serve as a French border fortress until 1659, when Roussillon became part of France and the border with Spain moved south. Afterwards, and until its decline in the 18th century, though having lost its strategic function, the city became an important trade centre in the textile industry. The walled city was then revived by the reconstruction efforts of architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century, and is now a popular tourist destination.

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