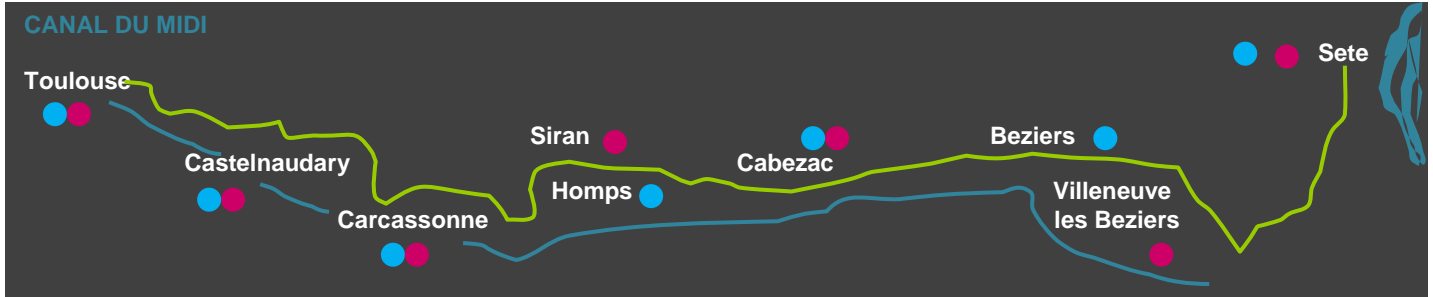


COLOURS OF FRANCE THE CANAL DU MIDI

8 NIGHTS / 9 DAYS
TOULOUSE TO THE MEDITERRANEAN



EXPLORE

CANAL DU MIDI AT YOUR OWN PACE



Day 1 : Arrival in Toulouse

Upon your arrival in Toulouse, settle in to your hotel and freshen up, and then take some time to explore this lovely city. The capital of both the French department, and the larger Midi-Pyrenees Region, Toulouse is also the heart of Europe's aerospace industry, home of France's Airbus Company, and also a great attraction park, the Cité de l'Espace. Its world renowned university is one of the oldest in Europe (founded in 1229), and it was already the capital of the Visigoth Kingdom in the (5th century! A city with unique architecture made of pinkish terracotta bricks, earning it the nickname la Ville Rose ("the Pink City"), Toulouse counts two UNESCO World Heritage sites, the Canal Du Midi, and the Basilica of St. Sernin, on the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route.

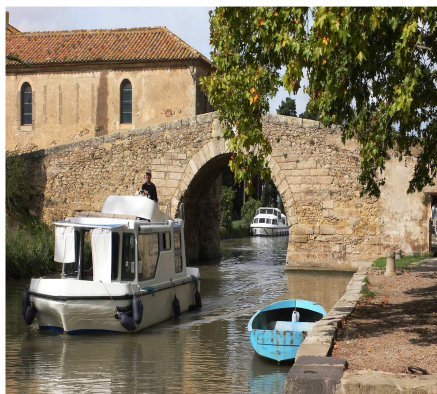
Day 2 : Toulouse to Castelnaudary 66 km

You have a long, but easygoing ride today, as it is very flat, and almost completely on lovely, paved bike path. Pass your first locks and canal projects on route to the small town of Castelnaudary, built on the foundations of the original Roman town. It is hard to imagine the centuries of warfare incurred here, as you wander the lovely small streets, eventually loved by Catherine de Medicis, when, as King Henri II's wife, she becomes Countess of the region. The port here is developed as one of the main stops for barges on the Canal du Midi's route, with a large (7 hectare) water basin. Castelnaudary is also the capital of one of the region's great specialties, the rich stew of beans, duck, and pork called cassoulet! (please note, the CLASSIC+ tour stays just north of Castelnaudary at the Chateau Lavail this evening).



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Day 3 : Arrival in Carcassonne 40 km

It is hard to believe that Carcassonne is real, when you first approach it from afar. The ancient city, or *Cité*, (a settlement here from as far back as 3500 BC), sits majestically high, and is ringed completely by its castle-like ramparts. The city and its fortifications was rated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997. You'll soak up the view from your hotel, located right by the medieval walls, before wandering in to explore the cobblestoned streets.

Day 4 : Carcassonne to Homs 45 km

You have a relaxing, easy ride today, as it leaves Carcassonne and follows the roads and bike paths along the Canal (flat!). Your route takes you through a mix of villages with odd names, stemming from the regional language, which for centuries was not French, but the local "Occitan": Marseillette, Puichéric (with its 13th century church and annual pig festival) and La Redorte. You pass another feat of canal engineering as well, the bridge of Orbiel, taking the canal over the Orbiel River! You also enter the wine region of the Canal du Midi today as you ride along the picturesque Minervois vineyards – perhaps stop for a wine tasting, near the end of the day, as your ride is almost finished... The charming port of Homs, where barrels of the local wines were loaded into boats for their journey to Bordeaux in the past, awaits you at your hotel at the end of the day. Dinner at your hotel this evening. (please note, the CLASSIC+ itinerary stays in beautiful Chateau de Siran, in the town of Siran in the vineyards, a little north of the canal).

Day 5 : Loop ride into the Minervois Vineyards 52 km

Your ride today leaves the Canal du Midi to take you into the lovely vineyards and villages of the Minervois. The scenery is really beautiful, and each of the towns you pass has its own unique personality. You'll arrive in Caunes Minervois in time to visit the stunning abbey there and to find some lunch. The abbey was originally founded in the year 780, though the buildings you see today are much more "modern" dating from the 11th to 14th centuries! The afternoon ride takes you past the site of the mysterious and surprisingly poignant dolmen of Saint Eugene, with its unusual covered passageways, thought to be a burial site. Near the end of the ride, your route brings you back once more to the canal for a last stretch back to your hotel in the small port of Homs.



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Day 6 : Homps to Cabezac 30 km

At the beginning of your day, detour into the small village of Olonzac to explore this typical Minervois village with its circular setup. You continue along the Canal bike path all the way to Le Somail, with its pretty bridges, at which point you leave the canal again to pedal through the olive groves, vineyards, and flowered fields of the scenic surrounding countryside. You are headed for the hamlet of Cabezac, sitting on the Cesse River, with its natural still pools. By the hotel, using the river for power, is a working olive mill, where you can stop for a taste of the production of the "eternal trees". Night in Cabezac itself, with dinner at the hotel's excellent restaurant.

Day 7 : Cabezac to Villeneuve-les-Beziers 48 km

The first half of today's ride is on small roads passing through several picturesque towns and villages such as Argeliers and Quarante, before returning to the canal path in Capestang. Be sure to stop and admire the "Tunnel de Malpas" which allowed barges to continue their route passing along its 165 metres of tunneled underground vaulting. No one believed that the canal's engineer, Pierre-Paul Riquet, could complete this feat, and in fact the King even ordered that he stop, and deviate the canal's route. He feigned obedience, but completed the tunnel in secrecy, unveiling it only after his project was done. Enjoy two other feats of canal engineering: the Fonserannes locks, and the Orb Aqueduct (in effect a bridge, carrying the waters - and traffic - of the Canal du Midi over the Orb River). Near the end of the day, you pass by Beziers. Detour in to the town if you like for a visit – we provide a small walking tour, or return tomorrow if you prefer; your charming hotel is in Villeneuve-les-Beziers, just 5 km further along the Canal. (please note the CLASSIC+ itinerary stays in Beziers itself this evening).

Day 8 : Villeneuve-les-Beziers to Sete 44 km

Before leaving town, be sure to visit the old town centre. You can buy fruit, bread, and cheese at the market for your picnic. You will ride right to the end of the Canal de Midi today, saying goodbye to it, as it empties in to the sea at Agde. From there, enjoy the luxury of the beautiful new bike path that follows the sandy beach for 12 kilometres before arriving in the lively port town of Sete itself. Be sure to pack your bathing suit today as you will want to jump into the waves! Final night and dinner in Sete.

Day 9 : Departure - Bon Voyage!

After a final breakfast, the trip is over. You can catch the train from the Sete for your further travels.



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THE CANAL DU MIDI



What's included in your package

- 8 nights' accommodation of the comfort level of your choice CLASSIC or CLASSIC+
- All hotel taxes
- All breakfasts, 5 dinners (drinks not included with dinners)
- Fully equipped quality hybrid bike
- Orientation with our Trip Manager at the beginning of the trip
- Step-by-Step route notes and detailed maps
- Regional information and advice
- Luggage transfers from hotel to hotel
- Emergency phone call support 7 days a week

