

TREASURES OF CATHAR COUNTRY

ADVENTURES IN THE LANGUEDOC September 15th - 24th 2016

Tucked between the Massif Central and the mountains of the Pyrenees this corner of southwest France has long been known for its independence from the rest of the country. Many of the people who live here, however, consider themselves neither French nor Spanish.

Towards the Atlantic they are Basques, descendants of the ancient tribe of Vascones, who had inhabited the region for centuries by the time the Romans named them, while at the Mediterranean end is the autonomous community of Catalonia. They each have their own culture, their own language and strong aspirations towards self-government. The region has also been a focus of religious activity lying as it does on the Camino of St. James, the ancient pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. It was here that the heretical sect of the Albigensians (also known as the Cathars) came to a sticky end.

Into this cultural melting pot, we'll throw a mixture of incredible mountain scenery, and then garnish the whole thing with some of the most fascinating legends and stories that Europe can muster. From the origins of the mountains as a burial mound for princess Pirene, thrown up by Hercules, to the strange carvings and inscriptions in the church of Father Sauniere at Rennes le Chateau, that featured so prominently in the *Da Vinci Code*, these mountains are alive with stories.



THE CHATEAU DE FOIX

Join us this fall on a wonderful journey to a fascinating part of Europe that is too often neglected by modern tourists.



COLLIOURE

THE COST OF THIS ITINERARY, PER PERSON, DOUBLE OCCUPANCY IS:

LAND ONLY (NO AIRFARE INCLUDED):	\$3940
SINGLE SUPPLEMENT:	\$ 850

Airfares are available from many U.S. cities. Please call for details.

THE FOLLOWING SERVICES ARE INCLUDED:

HOTELS: 8 nights accommodation in first-class hotels.
All hotel taxes and service charges included.

COACHING: All ground transportation as detailed in the itinerary.

MEALS: Breakfast daily, 5 dinners.

GUIDES: Discover Europe tour director throughout.

EXPENSES: Portage of one large suitcase per person.

ENTRANCES: Entrance fees to all sites included in the itinerary.

*Please note that travel insurance is not included on this tour.
Insurance information will be mailed to each registration on receipt of deposit.*



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15TH - Departure from your chosen US gateway. **Overnight: Plane**

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 16TH - Morning arrival in Paris or London, where you transfer to the onward flight to Toulouse. On arrival at Toulouse Airport, you will be met for the short drive to our hotel, the fabulous Chateau de Camon. After time to unpack and rest up from the overnight flight, there will be an orientation meeting. This evening we'll enjoy a private welcome dinner in the abbey's Cloister dining-room. **(D) Overnight: Camon**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17TH - After a leisurely breakfast on the terrace, overlooking the lovely gardens set against the distant Pyrenean peaks, a short drive will bring us to Mirepoix. There will be time to explore one of France's most exquisite medieval squares, and enjoy a coffee at one of the many cafes. Weather permitting, we will have a picnic lunch at the nearby village of Roquefixade where we will be met by the local historian, Sebastian Hope. After lunch, Sebastian will lead us on a walk to the medieval castle. On returning to the hotel there will be time before dinner to relax by the pool, or enjoy a cocktail on the terrace. **(B, D) Overnight: Camon**

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 18TH - Today we get a serious dose of time travel! An 800 metre walk along a subterranean riverbed will take us back to the Magdalenian period (circa 11,000 BC) and to the vast chamber of the Grotte de Niaux. Leaping from the walls of the cave are the most beautiful images of horses, ibex, stags and bison, some still as fresh as the day they were painted. These are among the best prehistoric paintings you will see anywhere in Europe. This afternoon we will head for Montsegur. The ruined castle, set high on a rocky crag, was a final refuge of the persecuted Cathars. In 1244 the Catholic Church carried out one of its worst ever atrocities; 225 Cathars, who refused to recant, were burnt on a communal pyre. There will be time to make the ascent to the castle (30 minutes), for those who enjoy a hike, and for those with nothing to prove, a wonderful respite to take in the views and reflect on the horrors of the past! Before heading home, we'll stop at the village museum. Tonight a free evening to eat at the hotel or a local restaurant in Mirepoix. **(B) Overnight: Camon**



its 11th-century fresco of Christ in Judgement. This afternoon we wend our way back down, descending through Aix-les-Termes and back to Camon. Tonight, we'll dine at the Château, always delicious and beautifully presented by master chef Tom. **(B, D) Overnight: Camon**

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20TH - Leaving Camon this morning, our first stop will be at Limoux, a wine region famed for its Blanquette - similar to champagne but a lot cheaper! We'll stop at a local vineyard for a tasting this morning and continue to the mountain-top village of Rennes-le-Château. A visit to the parish church will either spark or rejuvenate your interest in Dan Brown's mysteries. The church is full of symbols and secret codes which may indicate that Abbé Saunière, the priest from 1885 to 1910, had discovered the lost treasure of Solomon, brought to the region by the Visigoths in the 5th century - or not. After time for lunch we continue on to the Chateau de Peyrepertuse, one of the ancient Cathar strongholds that once dotted the region. A short drive brings us to our hotel in Collioure, and dinner in the Michelin-starred restaurant. **(B, D) Overnight: Collioure**

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21ST - Collioure has always been a source of inspiration for artists. Writers, poets, singers and painters fell under Collioure's charm. That is also why Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Dufy, Chagall, Marquet, and many others set up their easels here and immortalized the small Catalan harbor in their works. With approximately thirty galleries and many artists from the entire world, Collioure still is the "City of Painters" and today is free to discover why. **(B) Overnight: Collioure**



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 22ND - Leaving Collioure this morning, we travel north up the Mediterranean coast to visit the Abbaye Sainte-Marie de Fontfroide, a former Cistercian monastery, founded in 1093. Then we turn inland, roughly following the course of the Canal du Midi. If you had to choose one medieval fortress town to visit before you die Carcassonne would be it. Restored to perfection, your imagination need only re-dress your fellow travelers, some in sackcloth, some in doublet and hose and you're back in the medieval world! We will visit the beautiful St Nazaire church with some of the loveliest stained glass in France. Next there will be time to visit the inner fortress, Chateau Comtal, and wander the narrow alleys. A short drive from here brings us to our hotel in the center of the regional capital of Toulouse. The evening is free to sample a local restaurant. **(B) Overnight: Toulouse**

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23RD - Heading north from Toulouse, our first stop today will be Albi, a classic red brick-and-tile Languedoc town where Cathars, 12th century Catholic heretics, were infamously burned at the stake. In Albi we'll visit the Musee Toulouse-Lautrec and one of the most startlingly original cathedrals of the Middle Ages. From our mid-afternoon return to Toulouse, time is your own for shopping or sightseeing—perhaps pay a visit to St Sernin, one of the most influential Romanesque abbeys in Europe—in this vibrant, Mediterranean-influenced city. We return to our hotel for a farewell dinner. **(B, D) Overnight: Toulouse**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24TH - Morning transfer to Toulouse Airport for returning flights to the U.S. **(B) Overnight: Home**

Key to included meals: **B** - breakfast, **D** - dinner