

# BEZIERS

Lauren Steventon discovers the quiet charms and fine wines of this serene city in the French region of Languedoc-Roussillon that is the birthplace of the Canal du Midi

**Why go?** This small, sleepy city in the heart of the Languedoc has a history that encompasses the ancient Greeks, Romans and Crusade slaughters. Today an annual celebration in April honours Béziers' patron saint Aphrodise's miracle-performing camel who stayed around long after his martyred master was beheaded by the Romans. Proud of its past and looking forward to its future, Béziers combines cobbled streets and canal towpaths with stylish boutiques and modern art galleries, while small-scale producers are breathing new life into the region's wine industry.

**What to do** Le Musée des Biterrois on Place des Casernes is the place to learn the ins and outs of the city's history, but to really get a sense of the place, take to its streets. Start by walking down Allées Paul Riquet towards the Théâtre Municipal. Head left down Rue de la République and into the winding streets of the Old Town, where past and present collide. At Espace Paul Riquet on Rue Massol modern art exhibitions are housed in a frescoed chapel, while Architruc & Balhaz'Art (archi-truc.com) sells unusual design furniture in a former *maison d'hôte*. A few steps further and the town's history takes over. The imposing Gothic structure of Cathédrale St Nazaire on Place de la Révolution tells a sad story, the old Romanesque church was destroyed when Béziers' Catholics and Cathars were burned to death fleeing the Crusaders. In summer, the surrounding squares bustle with a cheerier scene as locals enjoy the views. Of course, no trip down Béziers' memory lanes is complete without a visit to its favourite son's greatest achievement: so descend via the cathedral's peaceful cloisters to the Canal du Midi, designed by Béziers-born Pierre-Paul Riquet. The Nine Locks (Chemin des Ecluses) are a fantastic engineering endeavour, allowing boats to negotiate a 21-metre depth change. These days they are the domain of pleasure boaters, so head out on the water for a day trip (la-pescaluna.com) or hire a bicycle at Location des Velos and follow the boats along the towpath.

## Travel information

Currency is the euro. Béziers is one hour ahead of GMT and a 90-minute flight from London.

### Getting there

**Ryanair** (ryanair.com) flies to Béziers Cap d'Agde from Luton and from Bristol. A shuttle connects the airport to the city centre.

**Easyjet** (easyjet.com) flies daily from Gatwick to Montpellier, a 45 minute train journey from Béziers (tgv-europe.com).

**Where to stay** It doesn't get more central than the charming Hôtel des Poetes (00 33 4 67 76 38 66; hoteldespoetes.net) opposite Place des Poetes, or the Hôtel Imperator (00 33 4 67 49 02 25; hotel-imperator.fr), on Allées Paul Riquet, which has a pretty patio to retire to. About five kilometres along the canal in the peaceful town of Villeneuve Les Béziers, La Chamberte (00 33 4 67 39 84 83; lachamberte.com) is a stylish *chambre d'hôte* with a gorgeous restaurant, built in an old wine storehouse.

**Where to eat and drink** Find the perfect mid-morning treat in Pâtisserie Braillon on Place des Trois Six or La Symphonie des Douceurs on Rue de la République. The traditional cream-filled brioche, Coque de Saint Aphrodise, remembers the ill-fated saint, while Le Chameau Ivre (The Drunken Camel), a wine bar on Place Jean Jaurès, recalls his camel. Many of the 2,000 wines here hail from the region and owner Philippe Catusse will happily suggest a tasting selection to pair with tapas and the must-try local olives that are now grown in some of the old vineyards. People-watch on Place de la Madeleine from the cool interiors of Au Soleil par Accent d'Oc (accentdoc.fr), which specialises in local produce, including Languedoc olive oils and seafood. Two kilometres along the canal, La Raffinerie (00 33 4 67 76 07 12; la-raffinerie.com), in a former sulphur refinery, serves up a modern French menu. Back in town, locals congregate at Brasserie du Palais (00 33 4 67 28 29 20; brasserie-du-palais.fr) – simple food but fab atmosphere.

**Time running out?** Don't miss the covered market at Place Pierre Sépard to see the gamut of the region's gastronomy: fresh oysters from Bouzigues, local wines and olive oils. Take your purchases to Hélène at La Gargote des Halles (on the left as you pass the western entrance) who will cook them up for you.

**Trip tip** Jardin des Evêques in the cathedral's cloisters is the place for a contemplative rest. The terraced garden descends to the River Orb and the view stretches all the way to the Black Mountain in the foothills of the Massif Central.

### Resources

**Béziers Tourism Office** 29 Avenue Saint Saëns (beziers-tourisme.fr) has extensive resources for making the most of your visit to the city and surrounding region. The office is also the place to go should you want to book a guide.

**Languedoc-Roussillon** (sunfrance.com) has information on Béziers and the wider region, including details of festivals, seasonal events and gastronomy.

### AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Min °C	1	1	5	7	10	13	16	16	13	9	5	2
Max °C	10	12	15	17	21	25	28	27	24	20	15	11
mm	2	1	2	2	2	1	0	1	3	2	2	3

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