



# In the footsteps of the martyrs

Grant Dean visits the Languedoc Roussillon in the south of France, once a stronghold of the Cathars, heretics who so enraged the Pope that he unleashed the military might of the established Church on the religious rebels. He also took the pictures.

**"Kill them all, God will know his own." These words, said to have been uttered by Arnold Amaury, leader of the Albigensian Crusade as his army stood before the town of Beziers, signalled the most brutal single act in 100 years of campaigning by the Roman Catholic Church against the Cathar heretics of south-west France.**

Amaury's words came in answer to one of his knights who, just before the attack, asked how they should distinguish between heretic and true believer.

Amaury, the head of the Cistercian order of monks,

didn't care, and with his pitiless answer, his horde of mounted knights, mercenaries and villainous hanger-on thugs, surged through the gate and in just one day of truly medieval horror, slaughtered some 20,000 people, believer and unbeliever alike.

At least 1,000, mainly women and children, died in a cathedral where they had sought sanctuary. Their bones were discovered during excavations in 1840. After the looting, the soldiers of God torched the tinder-dry buildings, reducing the city to a reeking funeral pyre. It was the single biggest massacre of the Albigensian Crusade, launched by the Pope against

the heretics in 1209. Today, Beziers is a picturesque, stone-built town, typical of this part of France - one of several places besieged during the repression of the heretics.

Our base for following in some of the footsteps of the Cathars was the next heretic hellhole on the Crusaders' list, Carcassonne. Lying between the Pyrenees and the Montagne Noire, and between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, this is the capital of the Aude departement. The modern town itself is nondescript, but the ancient fortress within it, known as La Cité, is the centrepiece. It is the largest fortress in Europe with

a double wall so long and winding that lookouts would send smoke signals to each other from the 38 towers which dot the battlements. La Cité has a turreted, fairytale look as you approach it from the bridge over the Aude. This is the place where the film *Robin Hood*, starring Kevin Costner, was made, and where today thousands of tourists wander, often aimlessly, through the cobbled streets, their children waving plastic swords or other trinkets bought from



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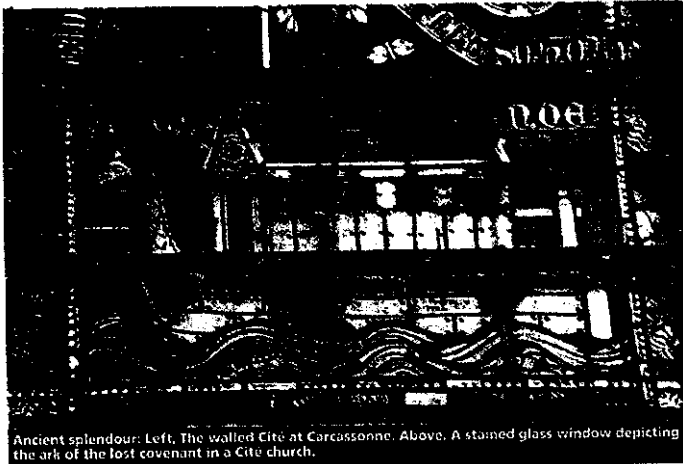
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Ancient splendour: Left, The walled Cité at Carcassonne. Above, A stained glass window depicting the ark of the lost covenant in a Cité church.

one of the myriad of curio shops. In truth, La Cité is a massively restored, heavyweight piece of heritage industry which brings in the tourist megabuck so central to the French economy. But if you look closely, and do a bit of reading, there is plenty in the ancient edifice to fire the imagination. As we walked round the outside of the towering walls in the noonday heat, it was easy to reconstruct in the mind's eye the nightmarish siege the Crusaders inflicted on Carcassonne.

It was the height of summer when the Amaury's religious bandits set up camp just out of crossbow range. Their siege engines, *trebuchets*, which launched boulders and burning brands, and *mangonels*, which fired shrapnel-like bombs of metals and stones, were brought into action. Inside the walls, an estimated 40,000 people were crammed and when the crusaders struck a critical blow, cutting off the fortress's water supply, the heat was on in more ways than one. As Stephen O'Shea describes in his book, *The Perfect Heresy*: "The cisterns were befoiled, and as August wore on the torrid heat did its awful work. Infants started dying, then the children, the old and the infirm. Sickness spread. The animals lay down in misery. Soon there was rotting carrion in the streets. A blanket of flies settled over the city; the ground was alive with maggots." In the event, through some horsetrading between the crusaders and Raymond Roger Trencavel, the Count of Carcassonne, the massacre of Beziers was not repeated. But the citizens of the unfortunate city, be they Catholic, Cathar or Jew, were forced to leave, one by one through a narrow



Turret town: La Cité.

entrance, the crusaders checking they had literally just the clothes in which they stood. They left behind a rich, virtually untouched city ripe for plunder. This was ethnic cleansing at its most efficient.

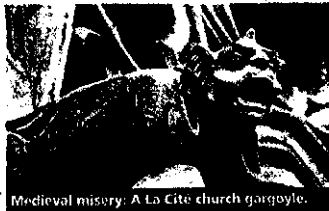
The fortress village of Minerve was our next port of call. We drove high into the limestone scrubland which characterises this part of the Languedoc. It was wet, windy, gloomy and atmospheric.

Occasionally, swathes of scudding cloud would allow a sort of dull glow to shine through, revealing the folded layers of the Montaigne Noire. Eventually, having just come through a challenging hailstorm, Minerve emerged, another settlement clinging to a spur of rock stuck out into a gorge. The place is almost surrounded by cliffs. Another ideal spot for a siege. As we crossed the huge stone bridge to the village, we spotted a model of Malvoisine ("bad neighbour" – so nicknamed by the villagers of Minerve) the *trebuchet* which led to the downfall of heretic Minerve, positioned more-or-less where it would have been during the siege. Essentially what

happened was that Simon de Montfort, the leading light of the Albigensian Crusade and the man of the moment at Minerve, set up Malvoisine in such a position that he could lob rocks onto the walled stairway leading to the only well. It was duly smashed up, no-one could get at the water and the village was driven to surrender by thirst and the resulting death and pestilence. De Montfort graciously offered to spare everyone who would swear publicly to abjure heresy, an offer declined by about 140 of the faithful, who were duly burned at the stake on the canyon floor below the fortress village.

Today, however, Minerve is a peaceful place, with an interesting museum which tells the story of the siege in small models, and a scruffy and unassuming café with stuffed boars' heads, civet cats and an eagle with spread wings, displayed as trophies on the walls.

The next eagle we saw was very much alive, wheeling in the sky above Peyrepertuse, a magnificent ruined Cathar fortress, where you need a good head for heights. In all the to-ing and fro-ing between heretic lords and king's crusaders, this place was never besieged, it is just too inaccessible – even horses and mules couldn't make it



Medieval misery: A La Cité church gargoyle.

## TRAVEL UPDATE

Grant Dean

Three nights for the price of two are on offer from Motours at the Hotel Les Cedres, near Boulogne. The restaurant specialises in regional dishes and seafood. The package, which includes return ferry crossing with car, is £91pp. Details: 01892 686666.

A series of theatrical events, themed walks, tours and talks to mark the bicentenary of Jane Austen's visit to Bath, are being held in the Georgian city towards the end of the month. To mark the occasion, the Francis on the Square Hotel has a two night-rate of £128pp. Details: 0870 400 8223. Festival programme: 01225 463 362.

Crusader castles and the ancient city of Petra are some of the delights on the itinerary of a new tour of Jordan over six nights which costs £898pp. Included are scheduled flights, transfers, travel by air-conditioned vehicle and dinner, bed and breakfast at good hotels. Details from Elite Vacations: 020 8864 4431.

Dartmoor in autumn can be a beguiling place, and Toad Hall Cottages have a wide range of properties available in picturesque villages. For example, a two-person place in Belstone, with a woodburning stove, is £175 a week, or £115 for three nights. Details: 08700 777 345.

From Tradewinds comes a winter sunshine break in Miami in November or December for £499pp for seven-nights. Fourteen nights is just £699. Car hire and flights from Gatwick are included. Details: 0870 600 4002.

A "Classical Music Day" in the spectacular settings of the St Louis Cathedral in Carthage is an added attraction of an autumn break in Tunis. The events are between October 2 and 27. A three-night break is about £380pp, including flights and hotel accommodation. Details from the Tunisian National Tourist Office: 020 7224 5561.

Leisure Direction have a wide range of short breaks to Brussels. In early October, to coincide with the city's World of Art Nouveau events, three nights costs £84pp, when four travel together by Hoverspeed. Details: 0208 324 3030 or [www.leisuredirection.co.uk](http://www.leisuredirection.co.uk)

A five-night, room only break to Kuala Lumpur starts at £539pp, a saving of £70, say AsiaWorld. Flights are from Heathrow with Malaysian Airlines. Other packages also available. Details: 0870 990 8098.

Seafarer Cruises have September and October jaunts from Venice. Ports of call include Dubrovnik, Corfu, Santorini and Paxos, and there is a trip through the Corinth Canal. Prices start at £549pp, for an inside cabin. Included are return flights from London, transfers and full board on the cruise. Details: 01732 229900 or [www.seafarercruises.com](http://www.seafarercruises.com)

A Christmas or New Year holiday on board the Canadian, viewing the vast prairies and Rocky Mountains, is £1,740pp (over Christmas). This is for 12 days, including seven nights' hotel accommodation in Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria. Details: Great Rail Journeys: 01904 521 940 or [www.greatrail.com](http://www.greatrail.com)

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Classic Cathar country: The Montagne Noire.

up to the fortress, apparently. Nearby is the Château de Quéribus, the castle which provided refuge for the last lot of Cathar heretics. It was taken in a full-scale assault, though just how is a mystery – the edifice rises from virtually sheer rock. Sadly, we did not make it to Montsegur, the castle-fortress from which, when it surrendered, 207 martyrs walked voluntarily onto the funeral pyres rather than recant.

The Cathars suffered appalling atrocities at the hands of the Crusaders: bodies of captured heretics would be dismembered and the limbs fired back over the walls from *trebuchets*; dead heretics would be dug out of their graves and the corpses burned in public. In Toulouse, a dying woman was tricked

into admitting she was a heretic, tied to her bed, carried from her home, and burnt in public as an example.

At Bram, a village near Carcassonne, which still exists, Simon de Montfort once cut off the noses and lips of 40 men, and gouged out the eyes of 39. He left the 40th with one eye to lead this sorry caravan of mutilated misery on a local tour as an example of the fate which awaited persistent unbelievers. Today, simply looking at these fortresses perched on their rocky eyries, they look sad, with an air of faded power. But with a bit of research, and imagination, it is a short step away to hear the melancholic echoes of past glories and horrors of the Cathar heresy.

## WHO WERE THE CATHARS?

Cathars believed that temporal life was a kind of hell on earth, and was created by the Devil. They gathered to mock hypocritical Roman Catholic Church of the time. Heresy were beyond the pale. Believers of heretics could strive to escape earthly hell and the continual cycle of reincarnation, striving with the will to attain a high state of goodness, in which they had seen already. This was the Perfect, the *simon* of the world, who upon death would rise to a spiritual, eternal paradise, where they would be reunited with their loved ones.



Medieval misery: A gargoyle on a La Cite church.

## Fact file:

**Ryanair** has daily flights from Stansted airport to Carcassonne. Booking: 08701 569 569 or [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com).  
**Parking** at Stansted: Pink Elephant Car Park: 0800 844 844; £6 a day, £5.70 a day from day two onwards.  
**An information pack on the Languedoc Roussillon** can be obtained by phoning 09068 244 123 (Mon-Fri, 8.30am-8pm, Sat, 9am-5pm; 60p a minute).  
**Fax:** 0207 493 6594; **e-mail:** [info@mdif.co.uk](mailto:info@mdif.co.uk) or write to Information Dept, Maison de la France, 178 Piccadilly,

London W1J 9AL. You can also visit the French Travel Centre at this address. **website:** [www.franceguide.com](http://www.franceguide.com).  
**Catha-Rama:** There are two of these centres, one in Limoux and one in Carcassonne. They are half-hour, sound and light shows, in English, which give a coherent précis of Catharism in the Languedoc Roussillon.  
**Reading:** *The Perfect Heresy – Life and Death of the Cathars*, by Stephen O'Shea (Profile Books, £15).  
*The Cathars*, by Malcolm Lambert (Blackwell, £19.99).