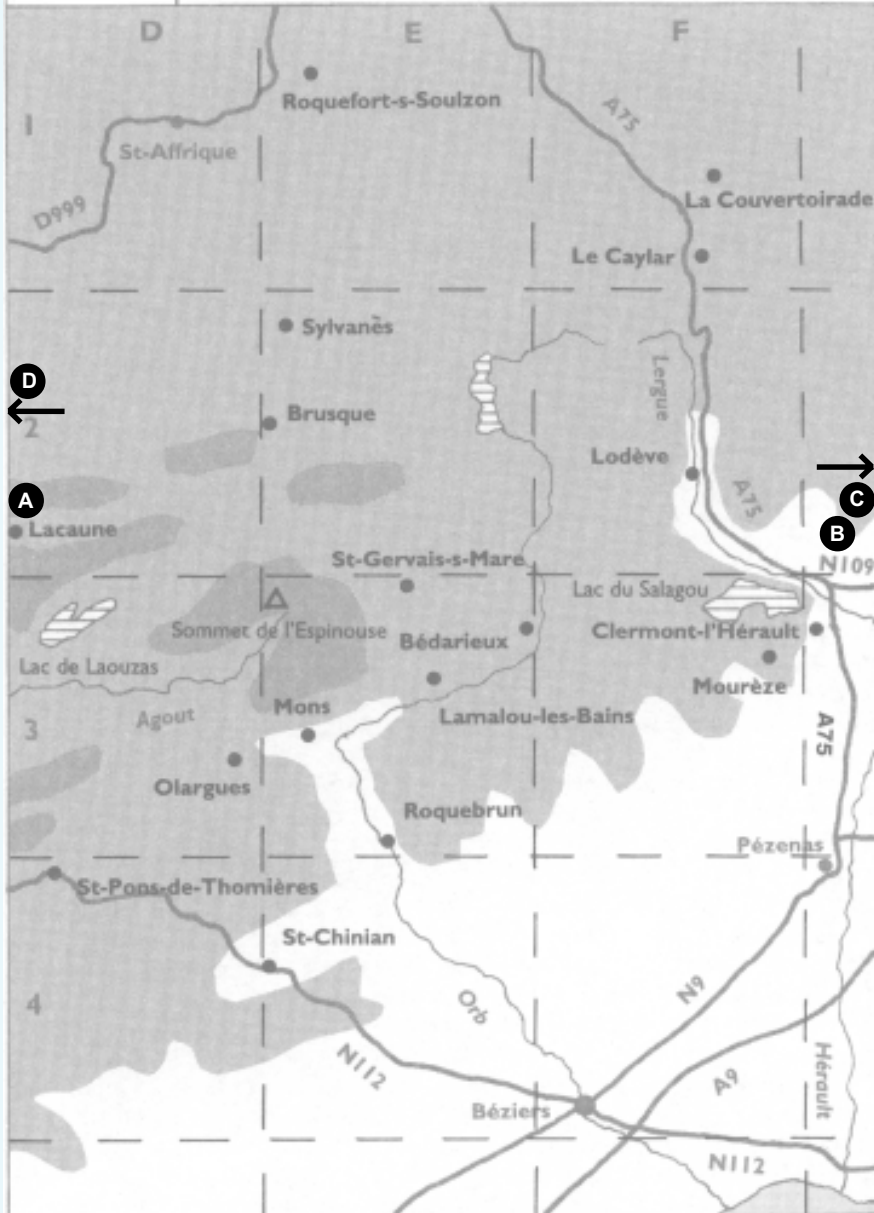


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Haut Languedoc: tennis balls, *pisseurs* and an elm tree. Skylarks, birds of prey and orchids. King of cheeses. Casino and *Charcuterie*. (Refer also to *St-Guiraud* on website.)



As hard as I try, I cannot find anything kind to say about the Languedoc coastline (to the east and south of map 39). A few years ago I revisited the stretch of coast between La Grande-Motte and Narbonne-Plage – to check, once again, if my previous criticism had been too harsh. Not at all: I hated every moment and was mightily relieved at the end of two hot days to head inland, to the cool green hills of the Parc Régional du Haut Languedoc (D3).

On another visit, in June, I chose a new way of approaching the regional park. I started at **St-Chinian** (D4/E4) early one Sunday morning; a busy open-air market was much to my liking, as was the large shaded *place*. As you travel the roads across the extensive ‘white’ area on the bottom of map 39 you’ll soon realise that almost every nook and cranny is stuffed full of vines. St-Chinian gives its name to one of the best Languedoc red wines; but there are dozens of different classifications, varying from *appellation d’origine contrôlée* to the humble *vin ordinaire*. At least the D20, east of St-Chinian, still very much in wine terrain, was more eye-pleasing than the flatter *pays* to the south-east, a sea of vines I long ago nicknamed ‘Vinsee’.

Roquebrun (E3), above the River **Orb**, was a delight – seemingly stuck to the hillside with house upon house and, above them, a ruined tower brooded silently in the increasingly hot southern sun. A 200-metre long curved weir added both visual and sound effects. Even better was the Jardin Méditerranéen above the village, a terraced site of over 200 different exotic plants (open every day: tel 04 67 89 55 29).

I followed the Orb upstream; the river was full and cherry trees were laden down with fruit. The landscape changed quickly: to the south I left behind a land of vines, olive trees and orchards of cherries and oranges; most of the vegetation covering the low hills straddling the Orb was small evergreen *chênes verts* (holm oaks); and further north I encountered masses of sweet chestnuts and beech trees.

At the junction of the D14 and D908, just east of **Mons** (E3), there are several attractions to the south-west. Ensure you don’t miss the first of them – especially after heavy rain or when the rivers are full. The Gorges d’Heric are immediately ahead of you, north of Mons. From the car park the walk north is both long and steepish, though the path is concreted. The waters of the short-lived stream weave a tortuous course between many a rock face being put to good use by climbers. In spring the jumping-jack water spits and sizzles; in summer the gentle trickle is a lifeless squib. If you want to make the trip, without any exertion, then use the small motorised train which runs from the station at Mons to the heart of the *gorges* (June to mid September; every day except Monday. April/May/mid September to October; weekends).

Four more attractions are to the south-west of Mons. First, the medieval perched village of **Olargues** (D3), best seen from the D908 to the west of the huddle of houses. Don’t pass the place by. Cross the River Jaur, park, and walk the narrow

alleyways; see, too, the museum devoted to the history of the area. **St-Pons-de-Thomières** (D4) has old streets; a richly-decorated cathedral (the organ is especially renowned); and the Musée Municipal de Préhistoire which explains just that and also has fine displays of the megaliths in the mountains to the north (more about them later). Beyond St-Pons is the Grotte de la Devèze, one of many Languedoc underground caves; there's also a Musée de la Spéléologie which explains the world of potholing to the uninitiated. Finally, one great detour from St-Pons is the D907 north to the Col du Cabaretou: the views are sensational.

An easy way of enjoying the valley scenery from Mons to **Bédarioux** (E3) is to use the Train Touristique which chugs between the two locations. Usually a diesel pulls the train but, on Sundays in July and August, a steamer does the job (runs same days as the earlier service).

Another way of approaching Haut Languedoc would be from the toll-free A75/A9 (F1/F2) and **Clermont-l'Hérault** (just east of F3); here, every Wednesday morning, there's a top-notch market; also see the Gothic church with its three naves. Then seek out Villeneuve, just east of **Mourèze** (F3) – a tiny 17th-century planned 'new town' originally built to house workers weaving woollen cloth for the army. The place is in a time warp, memorable for the buildings, cool streets and massive plane trees. The nearby Cirque de Mourèze is a battlefield of gigantic, dolomitic-shaped rocks; in prehistoric times one needle even had a small fort perched on the summit. The man-made **Lac du Salagou** (F3), isn't much to write home about; various watersport activities are available.

Head west, through **Bédarioux** (E3), to Boussagues, a hidden fortified village a few km to the north-west; a ruined castle and Romanesque *église* are extra pluses. Leave to the north – enjoy the great view of Boussagues – and loop south to Hérépian, east of **Lamalou-les-Bains** (E3). Here the Fonderie Bruneau-Garnier, founded in 1600, is an eye-opener: bells are cast and moulded into all sorts of sizes. Lamalou (E3) is a small spa with modern baths and a casino (open every day). Explore the cool, shady main street and then drive north, not from the spa itself, but on the D180 to the south-west of Lamalou.

The climb to the Monts de l'Espinouse is a pleasure at any time: I've seen the hills in spring when wild flowers abound; in June when broom dominates; in August when vast stretches of purple heather flood the high moorland; and in the autumn when thousands of sweet chestnut trees cover the hillsides, their unopened nuts glistening like a million yellowy-green tennis balls. This a *pays* where you must stop, walk, look and listen – just as I did in June when, north of the **Sommet de l'Espinouse** (D3/E3), I watched skylarks and birds of prey above me and, at my feet, orchids galore competed for my attention.

Back to the D180 climb. Shortly after the Col des Princes turn left on to a small crescent-shaped lane which leads to the Forêt des Ecrivains Combattants. In March 1930 the woods here were washed away by rain. The new forest of pines, chestnuts,

oaks and cedars was planted to commemorate the lives of 560 writers who were killed during the 1914-18 war. Detour to minuscule Douch (E3), where the stone houses are 'protected' and where, in October, drifts of lilac-tinted autumn crocuses shine brightly in the pastures. If you're a walking nut then make the one-hour climb to Mont Caroux (south of the hamlet). I've yet to make the effort; the views are said to be sensational.

I have driven most of the roads in the park so let me give you some ideas for drives. **St-Gervais-sur-Mare** (E3) is an unprepossessing place with a church above the houses; the Maison Cévenole d'Art et Tradition Populaire explains old local customs and the importance of both sheep and chestnuts to the hill people. Two large lakes, to east and west of La Salvetat-sur-Agout (just west of D3), are pleasant sheets of water with woods and roads encircling them; watersports are available at both. The **Lac de Laouzas** (D3) has the Musée de Rieumontagne (open July and August) on its northern banks: the museum evokes prehistoric times in the area and has models of many of the intriguing standing and other stones, many with intricate carvings, in the hills to the north.

Contemplate the scenic contrasts you have encountered in fifty km: from a Med landscape to one more akin to the Welsh borders (note the slate roofs at **Lacaune**: D2); from vineyards to fields of cereal crops; and where farmers earn their income from cows and pigs (Lacaune is famed for *charcuterie*). Visit Lacaune: gamble at the casino if you must but do nose out the rib-tickling Fontaine des Pisseurs in the place de Griffoul (I'll leave you to discover the fine details!).

The D12 which snakes down to **Brusque** (E2) is an eye-pleaser; in the autumn the lofty crag above the village, topped with castle ruins, is aflame with trees changing colour. The Cistercian abbey at **Sylvanès** (E2) is an austere yet graceful building. The abbey is renowned for the successful musical events held each year in the acoustically perfect, high-vaulted interior. For details write to the Abbaye de Sylvanès, 12360 Camarès (04 65 99 51 83). In recent years a new cathedral-sized organ has been installed, built by master craftsman Daniel Birouste at his small Plaisance workshop (see map 38:).

What else? Don't bypass **Roquefort-sur-Soulzon** (E1), the town which gave its name to the 'king' of cheeses. Visit, gratis, the caves which are the best natural refrigerators in the world. The blue-veined ewes' milk cheese matures in the caves, eventually emerging into that sharp exquisite taste which makes *Roquefort* unique. See also the medieval walled hamlet of **La Couvertorade** (F1), once a Templar staging post, on the barren Causse (plateau) du Larzac. Seek out **Le Caylar** (F1). Here, a dead elm tree, over 100 years old, has been shaped into a work of art by Michel Chevray: a variety of images – a shepherd, his dog, an eagle and others – evoke the harsh life of the *causses*. Finish at **Lodève** (F2) with its *ancienne cathédrale* St-Fulcran and, in the hills to the east, the 12th-century Prieuré St-Michel-de-Grandmont with nearby *dolmens* (burial stones). (Important: read website's *St-Guiraud* chapter.)