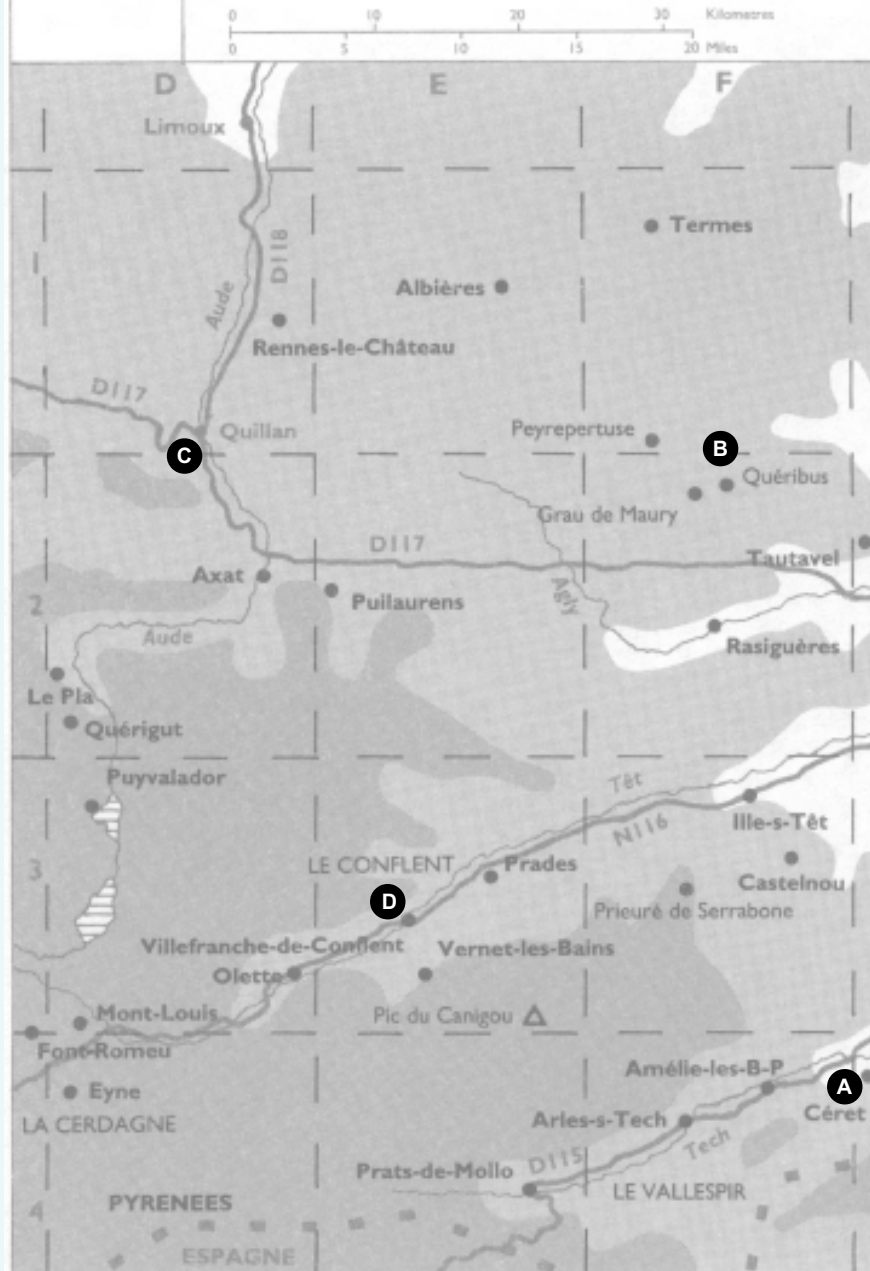


44

7Cs: Canigou/Capcir/Cerdagne/Conflent/Cathars/Celia/canari.
 La terre Catalane. Vauban again – at start and finish. Four
 solaire. Various bains. *Homus erectus*. Controversial Rennes.



I started the first chapter in *Mapaholics' France* with a plea for you to 'look beyond the obvious'. That advice is just as valid in this final chapter – about terrain which is part of Roussillon or, to be more specific, *la terre Catalane*. There's a varied mix of great treats.

Access the area by the following spectacular route. Leave bustling Ax-les-Thermes (43:C2) on the D25 to the east. There's nothing exciting on the ascent of the Port (pass) de Pailhères; the fireworks start at the 2001m col. To the south and west are jagged lines of high peaks; and to the east the sleeping hulk of Madrès (D3) fills the horizon. As you start the descent take the short new northern loop of road which, I imagine, has been especially built to allow you to gasp at the never-ending northern panorama, more akin to a relief map *par excellence*.

At the pass you enter the Pays de Donézan, a small, circular and secret enclave ringed by a high bowl of mountains, with the River **Aude** (D2) as the eastern border and **Quérigut** (D2) at the centre. Head first for the tourist office at **Le Pla** (D2). Ask for leaflets and details of the numerous walks in Donézan – from easy to difficult – which lead you to high pastures, dense woods, lakes and streams, flora and fauna, old Catalane forges, ruined castles and humble villages.

In the past I've always entered the Haute Vallée de l'Aude from **Axat** (D2). I recall one glorious April day when the combination of the river in full flood, fed by melting snow from the high peaks to the south, splendid gorges, the numerous new tints on the trees and a clear blue sky left an indelible memory. I remember, too, the forest south of Carcanières-les-Bains (D2) when, on one hot October day, the beech trees were mammoth drapes of burning autumn shades.

At **Puyvalador** (D3) you enter Le Capcir, a land of lakes, the largest are man-made, and pine forests. Bordered to the west by the twin peaks of Pic Peric and Pic Carlit (43:C3), this high-altitude terrain, most villages are around the 5000 ft mark, is perfect for both the walker and botanist. Head west from the D118 (up the dead-end D60 road from **Mont-Louis**: D3) to the Lac des Bouillouses (43:C3): numerous *étangs*, wild flowers in the spring, and woods to the east provide bags of interest (both the Aude and **Têt** rivers rise nearby, west of D3).

As you cross the Col de la Quillane (D3) you catch your first sight of **La Cerdagne** (D4), a high-altitude, broad valley cum plateau renowned for its dry and bracing air and, allegedly, 3,000 hours of sunshine every year. I can believe the latter: ringed by high protective peaks, the Cerdagne is too much of a burnt landscape for me – even when the rest of France has had weeks of rain. But seek out these sites.

First, the remarkable *four solaire* (solar furnace) at Odeillo, just below **Font-Romeu** (west of D4); the space-age marvel is a giant concave wall made up of 10,000 small mirrors which concentrate the sun's energy into useable power. There's also a permanent exhibition at the foot of this Temple du Soleil (every day except mid Nov to mid Dec). Font-Romeu is both a winter ski-resort and, during the summer, a mecca for athletes who use the high-altitude facilities for training.

The massive fort at **Mont-Louis** (D4) is yet another Vauban creation (aren't they all?). More to my liking are **Eyne** (D4) and nearby Llo. The latter is renowned for a Romanesque *église* with grotesque capitals; the former for sand-coloured stone houses, famed flora in the Eyne Valley to the south-east, and for many local prehistoric sites (a four-hour walk, every day in July/Aug, starts in the village at 2.30 p.m.: tel 05 68 04 72 48). Note the Spanish 'island' south-west of Font-Romeu.

East to differing terrain, the **Têt Valley** (D3/E3/F3). Where the river starts its long fall from La Cerdagne, to the man-made lake east of **Prades** (E3), the valley and nearby mountains are known as **Le Conflent**. At the high western end the landscape is dry scrub; so, too, are the south-facing northern hillsides all the way down to **Olette** (D4); the north-facing, cooler slopes seem to be entirely covered with cool, deciduous woods. Beyond Olette the countryside has a typical Mediterranean face.

As you descend the Têt Valley from La Cerdagne, along the improved N116, you'll notice the impressive viaducts and bridges of a metre-gauge railway line – a remarkable piece of engineering which allows *Le Petit Train Jaune* to travel from **Villefranche-de-Conflent** (F3: 427m) to the highest station in the Cerdagne (and for SNCF in all France) at Bolquère/Eyne (D4: 1592m), a climb of getting on for 4,000 ft. The red and yellow train, nicknamed *le canari*, provides an exciting scenic ride, especially if you sit in one of the open flat-cars.

Three differing small towns are among Conflent's main attractions. Medieval Villefranche-de-Conflent's (F3) two long main streets are within high ramparts, redesigned by 'guess who?'; the claustrophobic *cit * is notable for the ramparts (climb them), *portes*, 13th-century bridge, 12th-century church and two towers. **Vernet-les-Bains** (E3) is a colourful, flower-filled spa with, high above the small resort, a 12th-century *église* and restored castle sitting above the old town's streets. **Prades** (E3) is famed for both its 17th-century church (built on the site of a Romanesque *église* – hence the golden-stone tower) and the interior's ornate Baroque wood carvings; and an annual music festival founded by the celebrated cellist, Pablo Casals (Syndicat d'Initiative, 4 rue Victor Hugo, 66500 Prades: tel 05 68 96 27 58).

You'll enjoy driving the many roads, some quite taxing, which link Vernet and Prades and snake up the **Pic du Canigou** (E3) slopes (2784m). The most impressive views of this giant slumbering dinosaur of a mountain, with several humps across the top of its back, are from further afield than the Têt Valley; especially good are those from the east and north. But walking on the high wooded Canigou slopes rewards you much, much more (this is true of the ring of country surrounding the *massif*). Woods, wild flowers, birds of prey, *mouflons*, *izards* (cousins of the *chamois*), a *maquis*-like undergrowth scented with thyme and herbs: all combine to tempt the senses. One underground site worth a call is the Grottes des Canalettes, north of Vernet: discovered only 50 years ago, the caves have a collection of illuminated stalagmites, stalactites and pillars of varying colours, shapes and textures.

Visit other man-made sites: **Castelnou** (F3), in the eastern Canigou foothills, a restored medieval fortified village with endearing cobbled lanes and houses – the site dominated by a castle; and **Ille-sur-Têt** (F3), enclosed within ramparts, where the old town and its rare geological *orgues* are picturesque attractions.

But much the most alluring man-made pleasures in Le Conflent are the Romanesque treasures. First the *église* at Corneilla-de-Conflent, north of **Vernet** (E3): see the doorway, choir, apse, wood carvings and marble Virgin with child. South of Vernet is the most spectacularly-sited abbey in France, St-Martin-du-Canigou – perched on a rocky outcrop high above wooded valleys. You have to make a steep 30-35 minute hike to savour the cloisters, square bell-tower, two-level *église*, the capitals and, above all, the remote mountain setting. Next, the Abbaye de St-Michel-de-Cuxa, south of Prades, in a desolate, dry site, with a handsome, multi-arched tower; this is the home of the Pablo Casals festival.

An even more evocative Romanesque site is the **Prieuré de Serrabone** (F3), in an isolated setting off the D618. You wind up eight hairpins, and pass both heather and holm oaks, on the four km D84 drive. Relish the dividends: cloisters, tribune, carvings, pillars, arches, capitals and a Mediterranean garden with hundreds of plants.

The D618 run from the Têt to the **Tech Valley** (F4), only 45 km long, is a real scenic thriller. I doubt if there's a straight longer than 100 metres. The views, as you head south, include distant glimpses of the Med, vistas of Canigou, a mountain much revered by Catalans, and a panorama of the peaks on the Spanish border; and woods, all the way, starting with small holm oaks in the north, then changing, south of the Col Xatard, to a mixture of chestnuts, oaks and beech.

The Tech Valley is part of an area called **Le Vallespir** (F4) – a market garden where cherries, oranges, vines and olives grow side by side. In February, mimosa is a fragrant, colourful show; at the end of April and in early May, cherry blossom provides a bright, eye-catching spectacle. **Amélie-les-Bains-Palalda** (F4) is a smart but busy thermal spa. **Prats-de-Mollo** (E4) is an old fortified town with a Romanesque *église*. **C ret** (east of F4), with an atmospheric, bustling heart, is famed for its links with Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Dali. The Musée d'Art Moderne has recently been altered and enlarged.

Nature offers many tempting alternatives. Note the source of the Tech on the Roc Colom (E4: 2507m). By C ret the river has fallen to 120 m, in a distance of just 30 km as the crow flies. As a consequence the valley is subject to severe changes in water levels after heavy rain; you'll see plenty of evidence of the damage caused by the river. Higher up the valley sides woods dominate; walks and views to both north and south are magnificent, as are the many dead-end roads.

If time allows walk the Gorges de la Fou (F4: access from the D115): the gap can be as narrow as three metres in places, yet the cliff walls reach as high as 100m. If

not, do the following drive through cool forests and with great views – but, I implore you, in a clockwise direction: **Arles-sur-Tech**; D54 to Montferrer – past high ochre and grey, cave-pocked rock faces; D44 to Corsavy; and Arles.

Now north. **Rasiguères** (F2) used to be called *un village perdu*. Not any more. Moura Lympany, the pianist, bought a house there 30 years ago; at the time she was in a trough of depression but both the village and Roussillon did much to rejuvenate her spirits. Her appreciation comes each year in the form of a music festival at the end of June when musicians from all over the globe play (details: Festival Moura Lympany, 66720 Rasiguères). **Tautavel** (east of F2) is to the north-east. In 1971, in a cave near the village, the skull of a 20-year-old man was discovered, an individual who had lived 450,000 years earlier. A skilfully-designed museum, above the village, explains the story of Europe's first *Homo erectus* (open every day; cave in July/Aug only).

The northern half of 44 is Cathar country. Cathars wanted to free man from the materialism of the Catholic church and they also repudiated the divinity of Christ; inevitably they clashed with papal authority. From 1209 to 1244 a series of crusades against the Cathars forced them to take refuge in remote castles. The ruins of several can be seen on map 44. **Peyrepertuse** (F1) is the most spectacular – a long line of battlements and towers, astride a high granite ridge (allow 30 minutes to reach the top-most tower). **Quéribus** (F2), to the east, looks for all the world like a fingernail stuck to the top of a rocky finger (approached by a two km-long, first-gear climb; then a 15-min hike). Others are at **Puilaurens** (E2), east of Axat; **Termes** (F1); **Quérigut** (D2); and Puivert (west of D1). (One must: be sure to read the classic *Montaillou* (Penguin), the story of the Cathars in the remote hamlet of **Montaillou** (43:E4) during the period 1294-1324.)

Scenically the north-east corner of 44, part of Corbières, has little to offer – other than millions of holm oaks. However, the views from the **Grau de Maury** (F2) are superb – of saw-tooth ridges, Canigou, peaks and the Med. **Termes** (F1) is a cool delight, care of a couple of dozen plane trees and running water. The D212 north of **Albières** (E1), and the D613 to the west, run through a completely different landscape: forests of beech, chestnut and oak, fine views and little traffic.

Finally, to the unnerving, hill-top village of **Rennes-le-Château** (D1), steeped in a turbulent history. Before you go read the controversial *The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail*. Immediately you arrive seek out the shop adjacent to the *église* and *musée*. At the shop buy the English-language *Visitor's Guide* and have a natter with Celia Brooke, an English lady. What was the secret of the Abbé Bérenger Saunière (1852-1917) and his servant, Marie Denarnaud (1868-1953), one which went to the grave with her? (For information about Rennes and its history join Le Reflet de la Fabuleuse Rhédae. Write to the association, at 11190 Rennes-le-Château, for details of regular newsletters.)