

# Carcassonne

September 2013 – trip report by Jennifer Nesteroff - trip led by Norman Peterken

We began our six day trip at 8.30 AM on Sunday morning (We were told to be at the bus stop before 8.0 am!!). The bus had already picked up several U3A members from Campello at 7.30, so we all enjoyed an early start!

After a “comfort break” en route, our first sightseeing stop was at Peñiscola. There was time for lunch and a fairly brief look at this fortified medieval town with its narrow winding streets and huge ramparts.



The main attraction is the Castle del Papa Luna. Built on the foundations of an Arab fortress by the Knights Templar in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it later became the residence of the papal pretender, Pedro de Luna, cardinal of Aragón.

We continued to Calella for our first overnight stay at the comfortable Kaktus Playa Hotel.

After breakfast the next morning, we drove on to Girona, an ancient city which has a remarkable Old Town with wonderful Roman and medieval monuments. Here we enjoyed a most interesting and informative guided tour. We visited the 11<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century cathedral...



... which still shows elements of the first Romanesque building including the cloister and tower of Charlemagne. The nave has the widest Gothic arched span in the world. In the cathedral's museum we admired the beautiful 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century tapestry called "The Creation".



We saw the Monastery of Sant Pere de Galligants and passed by the Jewish Quarter with its intriguing narrow-stepped passageways. The brightly coloured houses lining the river Onya are a memorable feature of Girona. Our time there was too short to enjoy all that this city has to offer and I felt it would be well worth a second visit.

Having crossed the border into France, we traveled fifteen miles North to Collioure where we had a couple of hours in which to explore this formally strategically important point on the rocky Catalan coast. It has an impressive history having suffered successive invasions.



There is a chateau by the sea from which lovely views of the bay and the town can be enjoyed. The bay is of particular interest as it was frequently painted by several Fauvist artists, including Matisse and Picasso, who stayed at Collioure. While there, some of us took a "small train" up the mountain to Port Verger and back and admired the views as well as viewing the castle at close range.



After that we continued on to Carcassonne, the highlight of our trip, where we spent the next three nights at the Hotel Les Trois Couronnes from where we could enjoy a fine view of the 'cité'.



The following morning, after breakfast, we were split into two groups for a guided tour of the 'cité', a medieval town surrounded by 3km of ramparts and 52 towers. This is a World Heritage Site and no wonder, as it is an extremely impressive place, steeped in history. Our guide was a very knowledgeable and humorous girl who made our tour a lot of fun. First we stood between the gigantic double walls surrounding the 'cité' and heard about some of that fascinating history.

We entered through the Porte Narbonnaise, walking through streets lined with characterful medieval buildings and shops selling souvenirs and local delicacies.



We reached the St. Nazaire Basilica with its truly beautiful huge rose windows and weird gargoyles.

After visiting the Basilica, our guide left us and we continued to the Château Comtal to explore the ramparts and photograph the lovely surrounding scenery from them.



The next day we visited two interesting cities, Albi and Toulouse. Albi, a centre of Cathar repression in the thirteenth century, is as it was in the Middle Ages with cobbled streets, gabled houses and half-timbered shops giving it a great atmosphere. The huge cathedral which stands on top of a hill is the largest brick building in the world and looks like a fortress. However, the interior is most impressive with much decoration including a beautifully fresco-ed vaulted ceiling in vivid colours.



We continued with the bus to Toulouse where there was so much to see and so little time to see it in! We arrived at the Capitole (the Town Hall) to find the great square in front of it covered with the tents of the local Market that rather impeded the view! Inside, we ascended the great stairway to take a quick look three magnificently decorated halls.



Next we went to Saint Sernin Basilica, famous for its relics of saints. It also has an unusual vaulted ceiling and various interesting treasures. Rushing back to the bus, we promised ourselves we would return to Toulouse some time.



Back in Carcassonne for our last night there, the whole group went to a nice restaurant in the town square.



After breakfast the next morning we set off on our way back to Spain. We called in on the bastide (fortified) Medieval town of Mirepoix to enjoy a visit to the quaint central square with its twelfth century architecture. The houses around the square are painted in attractive pastel shades and wooden arcades line it. Heavy wooden beams support the arcades and some have wooden heads carved on their ends. This is, indeed, a very charming square.

Our next stop was Foix, a town of ancient origins that is dominated by the seventh century Château des Comtes de Foix. Foix is “the gateway to the Pyrenees” and its fascinating history requires much reading by history buffs for this town to really be appreciated.



We continued on our wonderful scenic route over the Pyrenees to our next overnight stay in Andorra. We stayed at the Hotel Delfos where we enjoyed dinner at the hotel.



For a few hours we were able to do some duty-free shopping in Andorra the next morning. As a woman, I was fascinated to see so many Perfumeries and shops selling cosmetics in such close proximity and, of course, I had a ball!



After all this excitement, we travelled on to spend a few hours in Montblanc, back in Spain. This is a town dating back to Palaeolithic times. The historic centre of the medieval village lies within its defensive walls and one can wander through old streets with their thirteenth and fourteenth century buildings. Here lives the legend of St. George and the dragon and the St. Gordi gate is where St. George is supposed to have killed the dragon.



We then drove on to our last night's stay in the Hotel Imperial Tarraco in Tarragona which is wonderfully situated, overlooking the Balcon del Mediterraneo and the Roman amphitheatre. This is another place to go back to!

Many thanks to Norman Peterken for his great organisation and leadership of the trip, to his very able assistant, Carol Mantle and to our expert bus driver, Pepe. Thanks also to Roy and Sue Spencer for the entertaining quizzes they put together for us to answer during the longer stretches on the road.