



FPN



Live and let live

think most people moving to another country worry that they might not 'fit in'. That is not a problem you will have in Ariège because nobody exactly fits in here. Ariège has for centuries provided a home to an eclectic mix of both locals and incomers drawn to the magic of the rolling hills, hidden valleys and rivers tucked away in the foothills of the Pyrénées.

The Ariège way of life is the epitome of 'live and let live' and hence anyone who has a similar outlook is welcome whoever they are, wherever they are from and whatever their background. In fact, Ariège has always served as a refuge: for prehistoric man who sheltered in the many caves, for the Cathars hiding from the Catholic Church, and for Resistance fighters, downed pilots or escaped prisoners who eluded the Nazis to escape over the mountains into Spain during the Second World War. Today, this beautiful and little-known area of France still provides that much needed

refuge to all of us looking for a retreat from the hectic pace of modern life.

Rather like Tuscany in the 1960s, Ariège attracts creative souls; musicians, writers, potters, painters, cheesemakers, carpenters, winemakers, sculptors, and anyone seeking a gentler, more forgiving, laidback lifestyle in a congenial climate with beautiful and inspiring scenery. It is ideal for those attracted to the uncommercialised and the unconventional, where they can create a simple lifestyle surrounded by stimulating landscapes and romantic architecture.

It also attracts those wanting to hide in plain sight such as

"There is a feeling of life going on just as it always has here, resisting the march of the modern world"

actors or politicians and those in the public domain who simply want to not be noticed, in a place where privacy and isolation are still both possible and affordable. There have also been waves of immigration into Ariège over the centuries including Italians after the Second World War and Portuguese in the 1960s and 1970s which added to the eclectic feel.

PROUD IDENTITY

Ariège is one of the 13 departments that make up the Occitanie region (formerly the Midi-Pyrénées and Languedoc-Roussillon) and was once an independent country with a proud identity.

Located on France's southern border next to Spain and Andorra, it is one of the least populated, most unspoiled and least known (even by the



Get blissfully lost in the wild Ariège landscape



Colourful buildings in Carla Bayle



Local markets are full of wonderful fresh produce



Ariège is ideal for walkers and nature lovers

French) areas of France. Much of the wild landscape is now designated as a natural park, but it is also easily accessible with a mixture of gentle rolling hills and pastures leading to the high mountain valleys and snow-capped peaks bordering Spain.

There are many interesting local villages and towns, and the area is known for its colourful markets full of fresh produce, often brought down early in the morning from the mountains. The market in St-Girons on a Saturday is so exceptional that it attracts people from all over France.

St-Girons is the sub-prefecture town of Ariège (Foix is the prefecture) and is full of tiny, independent shops, cafés, restaurants and local businesses that you won't find anywhere else. There is a jeweller, a traditional cobbler - whose tiny workshop and ancient tools wouldn't be out of place in a fairytale - and a leather maker.

An artisan chocolate maker with a full-size chocolate bear

in the window serves both as a reminder of when bears used to roam the hills but also that they are now being reintroduced to the Pyrénées much to the displeasure of most of the shepherds in the region. There is also a quirky bookshop, the inside of which wouldn't look out of place in central Paris with its fresco-painted ceiling, decorative stucco plasterwork and magnificent antique gilt mirrors. And there is a wine shop that at one end sells

extraordinarily expensive bottles of premier cru and, at the other, chicken food and bales of hay. This is another throwback to the past (the *autrefois* as it is poetically known in French) when farmers came into town to trade their produce for wine.

As with most of the towns in Ariège, St-Girons has an air of faded grandeur, thanks to the marble pavements and elegant, bourgeoisie buildings, a reminder of the wealth of

this region in the days of active quarries and paper mills. The proximity to waterfalls and fast-flowing rivers provided the perfect mix for the industries of the early 1900s before it became cheaper to mine and import minerals from other parts of the world.

There are still remnants of these industries, such as Trimouns, the largest talc (magnesium silicate) quarry in the world, established in 1905 and still producing 400,000

On the market

FIND MORE PROPERTIES ON [FRANCEPROPERTYSHOP.COM](https://francepropertyshop.com)



€158,000: Large four-bedroom chalet ideally located in the heart of the Monts d'Oles resort in the heart of nature (leggettfrance.com)



€199,000: Tastefully renovated four-bedroom, four-bathroom property with mountain views, currently run as a boutique B&B (beauxvillages.com)



€599,000: In the Couserans area near St-Girons, this renovated house comes with two gîtes, pool and 8.5ha of land (contact foothillsoffrance.com)



Ariège is a wild paradise

tonnes of talc a year. There are also working marble and granite quarries and even a clog maker; the Couserans area of Ariège was famous for its clogs until industrialisation brought in machines to replace the craftsmen and women. The word sabotage comes from these workers throwing their wooden clogs (*sabots* in French) into the machines to break them in protest for taking away their livelihoods.

TIME STOOD STILL

Ariège is full of history and curious tales like these but there is also a general feeling of life going on just as it always has here, resisting the march of the modern world. I often do a double take as I pass a field with a tractor that would be in a museum in many other parts of the world or I watch in fascination as farmers hand-scythe and rake hay into huge haystacks straight from a Turner landscape. It often feels as if time has stood still; you will even see people panning for gold in the rivers and they still find around 50kg per year.

All of this could help explain the increasing popularity of the Ariège department; it is certainly easier to live more naturally here. This is a part of the world that has been blessed with more than its fair share of nature's gifts; there is abundant woodland, numerous natural springs and rivers, a near perfect climate for growing fruit and vegetables, and a huge variety of wildlife and spectacular scenery, and thus it is easier to live in tune with nature here and one is more inclined to do so when surrounded by such natural beauty. The Ariègeois are, in practice, continuing to do what people have been doing forever; making the most of what the natural world around them has to offer but without destroying it in the process.

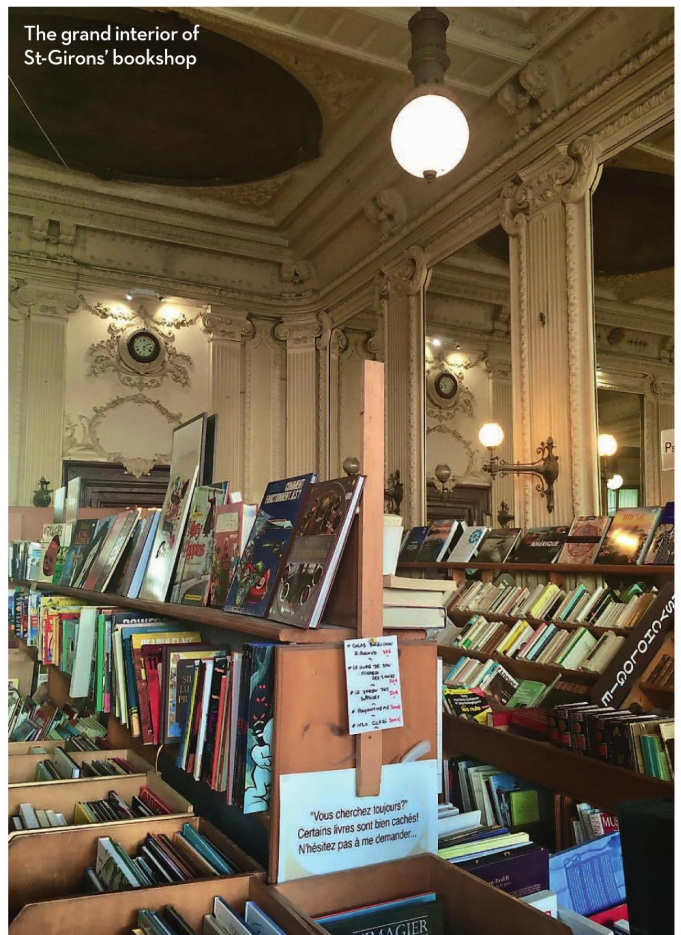
As a testament to the tradition of organic farming in the region, the Ariège Pyrénées are now a sanctuary for many animal and plant species which are very rare or extinct in most other parts of Europe. There are 400 species of flowers here and Ariège is an important



Stone houses are the norm in the countryside



The area has eight ski resorts



The grand interior of St-Girons' bookshop

migration route for millions of raptors and other birds while butterflies are seen in huge numbers. Consequently, a region once seen as alternative and bohemian is now regarded as progressive having, ironically, stayed pretty much as it has always been.

GREAT OUTDOORS

For walkers, Ariège has always been on the radar and the mountains are laced with footpaths used by inhabitants for centuries. The best known, long-distance walking trail in the Pyrénées - and arguably the best long walk in Europe - is the GR10 (*Grande Randonnée*) which runs the whole length of the Pyrenean chain from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

In the winter there is, of course, skiing. There are eight ski resorts in Ariège, most of which are smaller than those in the Alps but often link in with neighbouring towns to give extensive ski areas, while retaining a quieter, friendlier feel. It is this relaxed atmosphere which attracts great loyalty among the few British skiers to be found here, although it must be said that the majority of the British contingent on the slopes are actually now locals themselves and very reluctant to let anyone in on their skiing secret, which is why most of us have yet to discover these resorts.

ON THE RADAR

Do not make the mistake, however, of thinking that Ariège is frozen in time, irrelevant to the modern world. On the contrary, it always astonishes me that

TOWNS AND VILLAGES

■ The beautiful architecture of the region and ancient Romanesque churches which dot the area are worth a visit in their own right.

■ For history buffs, it is possible to follow the medieval pilgrim route to St-Jacques de Compostela and stay in traditional villages such as St-Lizier. Officially classed among the most beautiful villages of France and almost entirely a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is known to have been occupied for at least 2,000 years and is dominated by the substantial 17th-century Bishop's Palace. The village is full of quiet, flower-filled alleys, medieval, half-timbered houses, artists' studios and hidden gardens and around each corner is a different vista framing the mountains in the distance.

■ There are many other interesting and often eccentric

villages tucked away in the valleys such as Moulis, in a picturesque valley where the local Moulis cheese is made. There is also an ecological research centre here: the French National Centre for Scientific Research, which attracts scientists from all over the world to study, among other things, biological diversity, animal perception and decision-making and adaption to new habitats.

■ Visit too Carla Bayle, a fortified medieval village and Huguenot citadel situated on the top of a hill with wonderful views of the surrounding valleys and mountains of Ariège. One of its most famous inhabitants was the philosopher Pierre Bayle. Carla Bayle is famous for its inhabitants who are mainly artists; hence the numerous beautifully painted houses and colourful shutters around the village and the many art exhibitions held here throughout the year.

■ The town of Maz d'Azil is a medieval *bastide* with some beautiful timber-framed houses. This area has been inhabited for over 35,000 years, established by the discoveries made in the Palaeolithic Grotte du Mas d'Azil just outside the town. This was one of the first prehistoric caves to yield evidence of human habitation and it also served as a refuge for local persecuted people, some Cathars and also Huguenots. Occupations at the site range in date from 17,800 to 6,500 years BC.

■ Foix is Ariège's capital, an ancient and pretty medieval market town with much charm watched over by its imposing château. The castle has been attacked many times in its history without anyone succeeding in capturing it. It was also used as a prison and the names of English prisoners of war can still be seen on the old cell walls.

even in the most remote parts of the region, I come across highly skilled (and high-powered) people working for international companies or running businesses from their secluded farmhouses.

From the outside it looks like they're living a peasant lifestyle, but they have professional offices, high-speed internet (even in the most remote corners) and hold meetings with international clients and colleagues, albeit via Zoom. Plus Ariège is easily accessible, around an

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hour from Toulouse (with its international airport), hence teleworking a few days a week and international commuting are entirely possible.

This has put Ariège back on the radar for many people in the last few years, looking to escape crowded towns, cities and suburbs for a more rural, natural lifestyle while continuing to work and to be in close contact with friends, family and colleagues all over the world.

Somehow Ariège has succeeded in preserving

ancient traditions where people can live in harmony with nature while simultaneously providing easy connection to the modern world. It manages to combine natural calm with innovation and modern-day working methods to create the perfect balance for locals and incomers alike. ■

Nadia Jordan runs the property search agency
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and the national network of property finders
thefrenchpropertyfinders.com

On the market

FIND MORE PROPERTIES ON FRANCEPROPERTYSHOP.COM



€95,500: Property investment, furnished and rented one-bed apartment in a residence with a pool in Ax-les-Thermes (sextantproperties.com)



€360,400: Secluded five-bed stone house nestled among trees with valley views looking down towards Tarascon (leggettfrance.com)



€380,000: Typical Ariège-style house and converted barn set on its own at the end of a long track with a beautiful garden (contact foothillsoffrance.com)



€740,000: Five-bedroom château with Pyrénées views and swimming pool, outbuildings, 6ha land, 45 minutes from Toulouse (sifex.com)