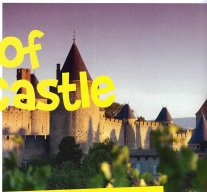


LANGUEDOC-
ROUSSILONking of
the castle

Explore the charming region of Languedoc-Roussillon, and discover medieval castles and mellow bike rides while bedding down in cozy, converted farmhouses.
Words: Pat Rickoll

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France: a known destination for most travelers, or at least it's somewhere most people think they know. But the reality is, you never really know until you get there. The world's most popular tourist destination is rich in regional variety with wildly contrasting climate, scenery, culture and cuisine.

So it was with a buzz of anticipation that we arrived in Languedoc-Roussillon. One thing we hadn't left to chance, though, was accommodation. Anglo-Spanish couple Becky and Philip Saillard opened Le Sarrail six years ago out of frustration at the false promises of "family-friendly" accommodation they'd encountered while traveling with their own two children.

Having spent 18 months hunting for the perfect property and location, and a further five years renovating the four dilapidated farmhouses they settled on, it's hard to fault their efforts. Set in rolling hills dotted with farms and vineyards, just outside the pretty hilltop town of Montlaur d'Aude, the views from La Sarrail are spectacular in all directions: the snowcapped Pyrenees to the south perhaps the highlight.

The four properties range from two to four bedrooms and retain a sense of their original features while combining modern luxury with family-friendly facilities. You sense the owners really have thought of everything — from bath toys and night lights to games, books and DVDs, there's everything you need to keep the kids happy. Highchair, stair gate and cot are all included, while the kitchen is stocked with all the basics — bread, milk, tea, coffee, cheese and wine.

Better still, there are three very patient cats and an exceptionally friendly dog that our six-year-old and five-year-old were besotted with. Outside, the beautifully landscaped grounds feature a play area with swings, trampolines and a large heated swimming pool.

Reputed exclusively to families, there's a real sense of safety and

security about Le Sarrail — when your kids, inevitably, make friends with the neighboring farmhouses' offspring, you feel comfortable watching them from your terrace while you sip a glass of vin.

A gas barbecue offers the chance to dine al fresco, if you don't opt for the range cooker in the kitchen, but with a pizza oven down the road and an extras list that includes locally-cooked meats delivered to your door, no one would blame you for taking the easy option. And when the weather's good — with 300 days of sun a year, it usually is — you could just flop by the pool all day.

But the endless attractions in the region mean there's more than enough to justify multiple visits; the family next door to us were on their sixth stay at La Sarrail (repeat business is an impressive 70% here). Just 30 minutes away, the UNESCO World Heritage



From left: Pope of Carcassonne, walking through the streets of Carcassonne; Le Somail; Marion Dupont, Le Somail

Site-listed medieval walled city of Carcassonne is the main draw, although the region is also home to an array of medieval Cathar castles that will fire kids' imaginations. Elsewhere, the Pyrenees offer hot springs and a Dan Brown adventure at Rennes-le-Château, while the Med's myriad beaches are just an hour away.

Closer home, you can hire bikes, check out local festivals or indulge in the Malpays and Corbières vineyards. The landscape changes within half an hour in virtually any direction — pine forests, mountains, vineyards, oaks — and so driving is easy, we managed to cover a lot of ground in a week. Even so, we barely touched a fraction of what was on offer. People tend to find their own favorite corner of France to return to; I think I've found mine.

Best for: Babies to teenagers.

How to do it: www.lezairrail.com



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Dordogne: Superb culinary credentials — from cheese to duck, wild to black.
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