



The formal gardens at the Toulouse-Lautrec museum, overlooking the Tarn River in Albi.

Loving Languedoc

At the end of our review of a tour to the Normandy/Loire Valley area of France (*March '11*, pg. 6) that we took with George Nevin of Intimate France (Oakland, CA; 800/676-1247, www.intimatefrance.com), we stated, "We will definitely travel with Intimate France again!" We are here to report that we have, indeed, traveled with George again, and we were just as delighted with his tour of the Languedoc region of France.

The sights

Languedoc, located in the far southwest corner of France by the Pyrénées Mountains and the Spanish border, is filled with beautiful Mediterranean coastal towns, medieval walled cities, forts, castles and villages perched like aeries atop the hills. During perfect weather in September 2013, we visited several villages on Les Plus Beaux Villages de France (The Most Beautiful Villages of France) list, as well as a UNESCO-recognized abbey, a partially restored castle dating back to the 13th century and awe-inspiring cathedrals.

This 12-night tour included breakfast daily and eight other



*Jack & Yvonne Prevost
McKinney, Texas*

meals (lunches and dinners), was comprised of eight travelers and used 3-star hotels. We had multi-night stays in Collioure, Narbonne, Carcassonne and Albi, spending the final night in Toulouse. The cost of \$3,895 per person, double, did not include airfare.

Carcassonne's medieval double walls were beautifully lit at night, and they were spectacular.

In Albi we visited the world's largest brick cathedral, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as is the finely restored castle that now houses a museum dedicated to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, whose hometown is Albi.

In Collioure, a coastal resort town, we shopped for picnic supplies at their weekly market where, in addition to food, produce, cheese, bread and wine, vendors sold clothing, ceramics, fabrics, flowers and hand-crafted jewelry. We also took a small



George Nevin and a waiter discuss the wine for dinner in Carcassonne.

open train on a rather bumpy but thoroughly enjoyable ride through the vineyard-covered hills up to a medieval watchtower overlooking the coast.

It was our good fortune to be in Mirepoix on a Sunday, when there was a flea market being held with interesting household items, antiques and junkie.

DISCOVER EUROPE WITH *Intimate France Tours*



George Nevin founded *Intimate France* in 1994 to share his experience, knowledge and exciting discoveries, accumulated over 22 years of European travel, with Americans. In 2015 we celebrate our 21st anniversary.

How are we different? To begin, we're small (we like it that way)

<i>Intimate France</i> tour	Big bus tour
Small groups – usually eight travelers	Groups 30, 40 even 50; "small" can be 24
Travel in comfortable, nimble van	Large, bulky coach, long loading times
Restaurants of exceptional quality	Institutional meals with little or no choice
Town center hotels, high charm quotient	Cookie-cutter hotels in dreary suburbs

Traveling with *Intimate France* – like traveling with family, but hold the bickering

Over the years, our travelers keep coming back. Friendships have formed and endured, and there's even been a whiff of romance now and again. It's like traveling with family – in the very best sense.

We hope you will join us for an *Intimate France* travel adventure in 2015 or beyond.

GOURMET DINING? YOU DECIDE. We dine exceptionally well on *Intimate France* tours, and many of our travelers ask, "Why don't you tell people that these are gourmet tours?" We answer, "Because we want to attract travelers who appreciate fine quality but aren't overly, tiresomely food-obsessed."



NOW ENROLLING FOR 2015

- **Belgium-Netherlands, May 3-15**
Amsterdam, Bruges, Delft, villages, Dutch Golden Age art, the tulips of Keukenhof Gardens, van Gogh-Rembrandt-Vermeer
- **Austria, Alps & Vienna, May 17-29**
Innsbruck, Salzburg, abbeys, lakes, waterfalls, Alpine walking, Austria's highest Alp, rococo architecture, splendidly baroque Vienna, palaces – Schönbrunn, Hofburg.
- **Dordogne, France, Sept. 6-18**
Médoc wine country, St. Emilion, cave art, castles, exceptional dining
- **Spain North of Madrid, Sept. 20-Oct. 2**
Segovia, Salamanca, Burgos, cliff-hugging Cuenca, magnificent Toledo, El Escorial monastery & palace, UNESCO sites

Did You Know?

All 2014 tours sold out well in advance, and 2015 departures are selling briskly.

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The cloister garden at the Abbey of Fontfroide, dating from 1093, is planted with bright red geraniums.

A short cruise on the Tarn River, with good views of the Albi cathedral, was relaxing and fun.

The Canal du Midi, which we encountered several times, is a prominent feature of the area, and one day we had a lovely lunch nearby. As we traveled through the countryside in George's comfortable 9-passenger van, we passed numerous fields of sunflowers and, of course, vineyards.

The food

We dined at two Michelin-starred restaurants — one of which was included in the tour cost and the other, optional — as well as two others which are cited in the Michelin Guide.

One of our more notable included meals was at *Auberge du Pont Vieux* in Albi, where a husband-and-wife team prepared a glorious meal. Eric, the chef, without an assistant, prepared everything from appetizers, soup and salads to entrées and desserts. His wife, Emilie, demonstrated her knowledge of food and wine as she and George discussed the menu.

It was amazing how nine diners could receive their individual choices for each course all at the same time and all perfectly prepared and garnished.

George speaks fluent French, and it was enjoyable to watch and hear him translate the menus and confer with the waiters on the food and wine selections for the group. One of the nicest benefits of this tour is being able to order from the menu rather than having a set group meal.

George is also flexible on the itinerary, and there are no forced marches through museums and churches. When visiting a site, he always announces a time and place to reconvene, enabling travelers to pursue their own interests.

George not only arranges and books his tours, he is a food-and-wine connoisseur, an excellent driver and a teacher. Before each of our excursions, he gave us a brief but informative history lesson, which helped put Languedoc's long and complicated history in perspective and added to our understanding and enjoyment.

Accommodations

George chooses hotels that are well located. The **Mercure** in Carcassonne was especially comfortable, and **Hôtel La Résidence** in Narbonne was ooh-la-la! *Tres chic!*

It was amusing at our hotel in Albi to awaken to the view of a handsome man's nude backside on tapestry. No one else in our group had such "art" in their room (and some were disappointed about that).

Although we didn't see her, Helen Mirren was in the village of Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val filming a movie based on the book "The Hundred-Foot Journey." The day we were there, the square was being set up for a market scene. It was interesting to see storefronts being painted, vines trimmed and the vast amount of movie-making equipment.

A few details

The structure of George's tours is very much to our liking, and we welcome having free time after each day's planned activities and excursions have been completed. At that point, we find having options appealing. Should we seek out additional points of interest, get a snack, do some shopping or have a nap? The nap often wins.

George runs four tours a year. You can check his website for destinations, dates and prices.

In our group of eight, six people had previously traveled with him. Will we travel with George again? Positively!

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The Geografile China supports four times as many people as the United States on roughly the same land area. — *Bryan Henry, Contributing Editor, Hollywood, FL*