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# FRANCE

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**Kate Mosse**

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January 2013 | Issue 172

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# Castles in the clouds

Walking in the footsteps of the Cathar heretics in Languedoc led **Clare Hargreaves** through some of Europe's most dramatic landscapes





**T**he jagged landscapes of the forests where France melts into Spain and the Mediterranean meets the Pyrénées are as turbulent as their history. Nothing encapsulates this more poignantly than the area's Cathar castles, perched on rocky outcrops and strung across the area like a line of historic washing hung out to dry.

The castles were built originally by local noblemen to keep out Spanish marauders, but later in the Middle Ages they became strongholds for humbler inhabitants – the Cathars – who rebelled against the established Catholic church. As the result of crusades against them led by nobles from the north, the Cathars were virtually wiped out by the middle of the 13th century. Today their castle hideouts make the rocky backbone of an inspiring walk – now called the *Sentier Cathare* – through south-west France.

The 250-kilometre trail stretches from just north of Perpignan, on the watery coastal flats of the southern Languedoc, to the town of Foix, tucked among the mountains of the Pyrénées. Rather than being a single

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## We wandered through scented pine forests, our path illuminated by harebells and orchids

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path, there are several variants. Whichever you choose, the route divides into around 12 parts, so walking the entire length takes around a fortnight. As my walking companion Mary and I had only a week, we decided to walk the eastern half, which includes some of the best-preserved castles such as Peyrepertuse.

Depending on budget, you can either stay in rustic *gîtes d'étapes* (refuges), or small hotels and *chambres d'hôtes*. If you go with a travel company you can get your bags carried too – something you may be heartily thankful for as you stomp up the vertical path to another castle; especially if, like us, you travel in the heat of summer.

However, we began our trip in Carcassonne – Languedoc's most important Cathar stronghold – staying in the newer *Bastide*, the lower town, a 20-minute walk from the medieval *Cité*. We got up early to wander the grassy *lices* (lists) between the honey-coloured double walls of the *Cité* that look over the River Aude. The city's heyday was from 1084 to 1209 under the Trencavel family, who were viscounts of Béziers and Nîmes, and also sympathetic to the Cathar cause. Under them the Basilique Saint-Nazaire et Saint-Celse and the Château Comtal were built, but Carcassonne's glittering beauty and strategic importance made it a target. Simon de Montfort and his soldiers captured the city at the start of the Albigensian Crusade in 1209, saw off the last Viscount Trencavel and expelled the Cathars.



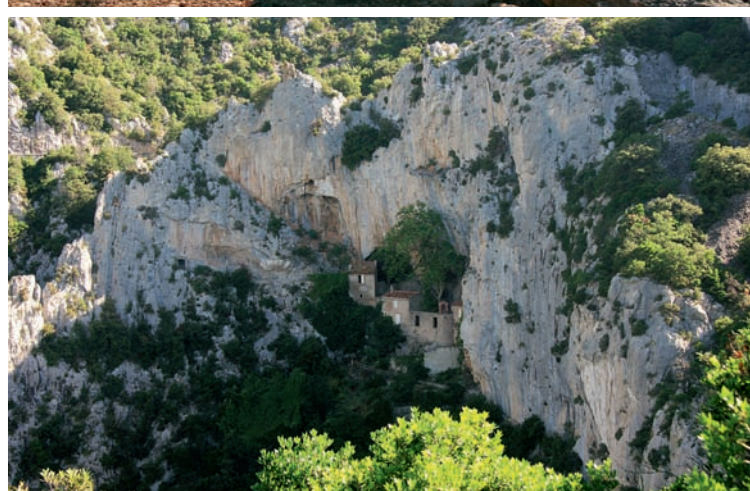
**ABOVE: The Château de Peyrepertuse on its rocky outcrop**  
**OPENING PAGES: The trail leading up to the Château de Quéribus**

Our walk along the *Sentier Cathare* started at the village of Axat, about 60 kilometres south of Carcassonne. Oddly, there is no signposting to indicate you are on the route – but we soon gathered that a blue and yellow paint flash did the trick. Wandering through scented pine forests, our path illuminated by harebells and orchids, we slowly found our walking legs. Nothing, though, could prepare us for the sight that met us as we rounded our final bend: a steel-grey castle with fairy-tale crenellated walls that seemed suspended in the clouds.

We pinched ourselves to believe the apparition on its rocky summit was real. We had reached Puilaurens, our first Cathar castle, so-called because it served as a shelter for fleeing heretics during the siege of Montségur, further west. A local Cathar deacon took refuge here in 1241 and, after Montségur's capture in 1244, the Cathar *parfait* (perfect) – as its

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: CLARE HARGREAVES





leaders were called – did the same. Later, the monarchy turned it into a fortress to defend the border with the Spanish kingdom of Aragon.

The late afternoon, with its golden light and refreshing breeze, proved a perfect time to take the path up through pine-clad rocks to Puilaurens' imposing gateway. Entering the castle, you encounter an incongruously wide swathe of grass, almost the size of a football pitch, which makes a great place to catch your breath. It's well worth climbing up to the square keep, the oldest part of the fortifications. But for panoramic views, pop up to the postern and tower in the far corner. In the distance, we made out the peak of the 2,784-metre Mont Canigou straddling the Spanish border. Since a Cathar *parfait* had to abstain from meat, women and, sometimes, food altogether, the view must have been some compensation.

That night we stayed at the Hostellerie du Grand

**ABOVE, FROM TOP:**  
Looking up to the  
Château de  
Peyrepertuse;  
Clare takes  
a break; The  
hermitage of  
Saint-Antoine

Duc, five kilometres to the south in the hamlet of Gincla. The hotel was as traditionally French as you could find. Clothed in Virginia creeper, and fronted by a tranquil terrace, it got its name from the local *hibou grand duc*, the eagle owl (which sadly we never heard). The original manor house was built in 1780 for the owner of the forges next door and has been run as a hotel by the Bruchet family since the 1970s.

We toasted the first leg of our Cathar journey with a glass of *Blanquette de Limoux*, the sparkling white wine that has been made in the nearby town since medieval times (long before champagne was invented). Thanks, no doubt, to its inebriating powers, the stuffed owl in the restaurant seemed to wink as we sat down to a dinner of home-made pâté and river trout.

We picked up the *Sentier Cathare* again at the Gorges de Galamus, north of the town of Saint-Paul- ►







de-Fenouillet. From the car park we caught a tantalising glimpse of the dramatic hermitage of Saint-Antoine clinging to the rockface. Hikers used to be able to grab a bed here, but sadly no more. Crystalline pools in the gorge provided further temptation, but we forged eastwards through box trees up to a limestone ridge with views over the plains and to the layered blue mountains of the Pyrénées. Our reward was picnic lunch on the milky limestone rocks before descending in the direction of the Château de Peyrepertuse. Here we made a detour northwards to the village of Soulatgé, with its enchanting *chambres d'hôtes*, rejoining the route two days later.

Mighty Peyrepertuse, clinging to a long rocky ridge 800 metres above sea level, has to be one of Europe's most awe-inspiring castles. It is remarkable not just for its setting and views, but because the complex, with its dungeons, churches and enclosures, is so beautifully preserved. Like Puilaurens, most of its fortifications were built after the defeat of the Cathars as part of the French defences against Aragon.

You enter the castle from the north, via thickets of boxwood, but once inside there is plenty of space to enjoy the site and tone your calf muscles further by tramping up myriad flights of stone steps. As it turned out, the path away from the castle down towards the village of Duilhac was much tougher going, with its spiny bushes tearing at our legs. Arriving at the terrace of the chic *Hostellerie du Vieux Moulin*, we downed two *Perrier-menthes*, a refreshing mix of Perrier water and mint cordial, as we sat in the shade of the plane trees. By the end of our trip we had both learned how to ask for a '*Perimant*' with a southern twang.

Descending to the village of Cucugnan, spilled over a rocky outcrop like a glass of *Blanquette*, we were now in wine country. Every cultivatable patch of land was planted with the vines that make the well-known Corbières wines, and at the entrance to the village were several wineries selling their wares. We saved our thirst for our hotel, the *Auberge du Vigneron*, whose subterranean restaurant was a wine cellar in a previous life. Its owner, M Fanny, plied us with local *vin doux* as a vein-fizzing *apéritif*. A dinner of *cassoulet* on the terrace, with dreamy views to the mountains, rounded off the evening perfectly.

Woken by church bells and the smell of freshly ground coffee downstairs, we rose early to beat the heat for our ascent to the Château de Quéribus. Forging upwards through vineyards and flower-studded mountainsides, we finally reached the Col du Grau de Maury, where the castle towers up at a height of 728 metres. The gates guarding the final

## Peyrepertuse, clinging to a long rocky ridge, has to be one of Europe's most awe-inspiring castles



ABOVE: Attractions in all directions  
FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Château de Puilaurens; The Salle de Palmier at the Château de Quéribus; The village of Cucugnan; Ruins on the path to Paderne; Checking the map on the Sentier Cathare



## CATHAR HISTORY

Supporters of Catharism, which swept the Languedoc in the 12th and 13th centuries, believed that the official Catholic Church had betrayed the genuine doctrine of the Apostles and become degenerate. In contrast to the official monotheist Christian doctrine, the Cathars believed in two opposing principles: good and evil, God and Satan. The spiritual world was good, but the material world made by Satan was corrupt. It was this spiritual insistence on purity, in a world that was seen as the work of the Devil, which gave rise to the theory (now disputed) that the name Cathar derived from the Greek '*katharos*' meaning pure or clean.

Cathars were divided into a 'pure' elite, known as *parfaits* ('perfects'), and the mass of simple believers. The *parfaits* were initiated by receiving the sacrament of baptism called '*consolation*'. A *parfait* led an extremely austere life, abstaining from meat and dairy produce, and staying celibate. Ordinary believers did not have to bide by such austerity, except just before death when they received the sacrament of '*consolation*' and began a total fast.

With such ideas infecting large areas of the Languedoc – at that time not yet part of the French kingdom – the barons of the north of France decided to act. With the blessing of Pope Innocent III, who branded the Cathars as heretics, and with the connivance of the French kings, northern nobles descended on the area in a series of crusades, beginning in 1208 and for many years led by Simon de Montfort, who became notorious for his cruelty. Cathars who were caught were burned in communal conflagrations, 100 or 200 at a time, and their lands laid waste or seized.

This barbarity united Cathars and their Catholic neighbours in southern solidarity against the barbarian north – a resentment that can be said to continue to this day. Though military defeat became irreversible with the fall of Montségur in 1244, it took another 70 years to root out the Cathars completely. [www.payscathare.org](http://www.payscathare.org)



track were just opening, so for a magical hour we had the castle all to ourselves.

In contrast to Peyrepertuse's sprawling fortifications, the ones at Quéribus extend upwards like a menacing spear. The castle, started in the 11th century, is a showcase of how the maximum number of rooms can be crammed into the minimum space – split-level architecture pushed to its limits. The space inside, reached via a single stairway, is

**ABOVE: Journey's end at a *café* in Padern**

dominated by a heavily restored polygonal keep, the centre of which houses the *Salle du Palmier* (Palm Tree Room) so-called because the single pillar supporting the vaulted arch resembles a palm tree trunk and its fronds. It's a pleasing poetic touch, in contrast to the otherwise harsh military architecture.

The Cathars held out in the castle until 1255, more than a decade after the fall of Montségur, so the fortress competes for the distinction of being the last stronghold. One can't help thinking that as hiding places go, few can be as scenic.

Our final stretch wound through forests, studded with coconut-scented broom and a ruined abbey just before the village of Padern. Lizards, basking on the hot rock, scuttled away as we approached – one found here, the scaly Large Psammmodromus, is quite rare. Padern's 11th-century castle may lack the drama of Quéribus and Peyrepertuse, but its position just above the village provides wonderful views of the eastern Corbières towards Perpignan. Our journey through Cathar history was complete, so we headed to the Café des Sports on the main street. Time for a final celebratory *Perrier-menthe*. [👉](#)

## FRANCOFILE

Explore the rugged world of the Cathars

### GETTING THERE

**By rail:** Clare travelled from London to Carcassonne via Paris with Rail Europe.

Tel: 0844 848 4064  
[www.raileurope.co.uk](http://www.raileurope.co.uk)

**By road:** Carcassonne is ten hours from the northern ferry ports.

**By air:** See *Holiday Planner* on page 90.

### WALKING TOUR

Clare's walking trip was organised by Inntravel, specialist in self-guided walking holidays (Tel: 01653 617001, [www.inntravel.co.uk](http://www.inntravel.co.uk)). Its six-night Castles of the Cathars holiday costs from £745 per person including accommodation, transfers, luggage moves, evening meals and three picnic lunches. Inntravel's route includes sections

of the *Sentier Cathare*, but not the legs from Axat to Puilaurens, or from Quéribus to Padern, which Clare added.

**Maps:** The 1:55 000 *Le Sentier Cathare* (No 9), published by Rando Editions, shows the whole route. The detailed maps covering Clare's walk are IGN 1:25 000, 2348 ET and 2447 OT.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Hostellerie du Grand Duc

11140 Gincla  
Tel: (Fr) 4 68 20 55 02  
[www.host-du-grand-duc.com](http://www.host-du-grand-duc.com)  
Old-style French hospitality in a tranquil manor house with restaurant. Doubles from €78, breakfast €11, half-board (based on two people) from €84

per person. Menus from €30.

#### La Giraudasse

2 Place de la Fontaine  
11350 Soulatgé  
Tel: (Fr) 4 68 45 00 16  
[www.giraudasse.com](http://www.giraudasse.com)  
*Chambre d'hôte* in a 17th-century mansion in a small but dynamic village. The owners provide meals using local produce (much of it from their garden). Rooms, including breakfast: €54 for one person, €64 for two, €74 for three. Evening meal €25.

#### Auberge du Vigneron

2 Rue Achille-Mir  
11350 Cucugnan  
Tel: (Fr) 4 68 45 03 00  
[www.auberge-vigneron.com](http://www.auberge-vigneron.com)  
Auberge converted from a wine-maker's house, with a restaurant

terrace giving views of the Château de Quéribus and the mountains. Doubles from €59, breakfast €9, menus from €21.

### WHERE TO VISIT

#### Château de Puilaurens

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 20 65 26  
[www.pays-axat.org](http://www.pays-axat.org)  
Open Feb to mid-Nov, admission €4.

#### Château de Peyrepertuse

Tel: (Fr) 4 82 53 24 07  
[www.chateau-peyrepertuse.com](http://www.chateau-peyrepertuse.com)  
Summer attractions include daily falconry shows and a medieval festival. Open all year, admission €6.

#### Château de Quéribus

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 45 03 69  
[www.cucugnan.fr](http://www.cucugnan.fr)  
Open all year, admission €5.50.



### TOURIST INFORMATION

#### Carcassonne tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 10 24 30  
[www.carcassonne-tourisme.com](http://www.carcassonne-tourisme.com)

#### Aude-en-Pyrénées tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 20 07 78  
[www.aude-pyrenees.fr](http://www.aude-pyrenees.fr)

#### Corbières Sauvages tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 45 69 40  
[www.corbieres-sauvages.com](http://www.corbieres-sauvages.com)

#### Perpignan tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 66 30 30  
[www.perpignan-tourisme.com](http://www.perpignan-tourisme.com)

#### Aude tourist board

Tel: (Fr) 4 68 11 66 00  
[www.aude-tourisme.com](http://www.aude-tourisme.com)