

Via Domitia: Walk a Roman Road, 122 BCE

Hike #1 in the trusty guidebook, *l'Hérault...à pied*, takes you back more than two thousand years to tramp in the footsteps of Roman legions.

This easy 1.5-2 hour stroll through pine woods, aromatic rosemary, and vineyards planted in red volcanic soil follows in part the Via Domitia, named for consul Domitius Ahenobarbus, who connected Italy to Spain with a military highway along the coast. Signs in several languages tell the story of how the Via Domitia opened this part of France to viticulture and shellfish farming, both intensely practiced to this day.

Which brings us to lunch. Nearby is the Bassin de Thau, a shallow lagoon home to a huge oyster and mussel farming industry. Mèze is the bigger town, but we prefer the quieter Bouzigues where any number of waterfront restaurants offer shellfish from their own farms. Last time we ate at an attractive, welcoming three-story place called Le Grand Bleu, operated by producer Benezech Coquillages.

Time to destination: roughly .5 hour.

Directions: Take the N9 through Pézenas and exit toward Montagnac on the N113. Stay on the N113 toward Mèze. Turn right onto the D51 as you near Mèze, then onto the D18E1 toward Pinet. Look for the cave cooperative L'Ormarine. You'll see signs for the Via Domitia, directing you down smaller and smaller roads. There is parking behind the pine trees. Despite the hike's seemingly out-of-the-way location, you're within sight of the A9 Autoroute.

Bouzigues and vicinity: Oysters, brocante

What's the second largest industry in this part of France, after wine? Growing oysters. In the tiny port of Bouzigues, you can savor fresh oysters and mussels a few yards from the well-tempered Bassin de Thau, the flamingo-frequented lagoon where they grow. There's even a museum in town devoted to shellfish farming, for those who must know more.

Chez la Tchepe is typical of these barebones waterfront eateries: a few tables and a raw bar. Go in, tell the attendant how many oysters you'd like, pick a drink (a rosé or the local chilled white, Picpoul-de-Pinet, are perfect), sit. Service comes. When you're done, go in to pay. In 2002, La Tchepe engineered a takeover of the crepe shop next door, so even the shellfish-averse will find something to eat here. Open nonstop (unlike many French restaurants which close between lunch and dinner).

Eat to your heart's content, by the way. Raw oysters are a health food. An oyster has less than 10 calories. It is low in cholesterol. And the small amount of fat an oyster does contain is the good kind, high in omega-3 fatty acids.

Finally, for those who love brocante (used stuff, less than 100 years old): try the several stores in Fabrègues, toward Montpellier on the N113. We found one with ridiculously high prices, while another, operated by a young woman industriously cleaning her wares, was quite reasonable. All part of the fun.

From Valros, take the N9 toward Pézenas. Pick up the N113 directly to Mèze. Follow the N113 toward Montpellier. First stop: Pépinière Filippi. Next: Bouzigues. Last: Fabrègues.

Mèze: oysters, a wine abbey, and a Saturday flea market

Mèze is a prosperous oyster port servicing the shellfish farms of the Bassin de Thau. Surrounding the town's small, picturesque harbor are *coquillages* (oyster) restaurants where you can sample the super-fresh local product.

Every Saturday, Mèze hosts a flea market on its leafy esplanade (follow the signs for Centre Ville). Also in Mèze is the Ecosite, a science center open to the public. Not far away on a scenic back road is the Abbaye de Valmagne. Once among the richest religious establishments in southern France, the abbey ended up a winery after the Revolution. Now restored and selling very good wines, the abbey is open for tours. Time to Mèze: about 30 minutes.

From Valros, take the N9 around Pézenas and pick up the N113 to Mèze. You'll pass through Montagnac. Here you bear left onto the D5, which will take you to the front door of the Abbaye de Valmagne. Or you can go straight and hit the abbey on your return.

Portside in Marseillan, a notable new restaurant

The whole of France contains no more than two dozen Michelin three-star restaurants, the best of the best. One is in Montpellier, Jardin des Sens, operated by brothers, Jacques and Laurent Pourcel. Now they've opened a second place, much closer to our house, in the picturesque port town of Marseillan.

The new restaurant is called Le Château du Port. It's a lot of fun: casual (the hot July night we visited, everyone was in shorts); comfortable (there's indoor and terrace seating); perfectly sited (out the front door, you face a quay); in a restored grande dame building with purple trim. The food? Your high expectations will be honored. It's food of the region, intriguingly transformed. The wine list is superb.

Phone: 04 67 77 31 67

Website: <http://le-chateau-du-port.com/>

Reviews: https://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g608785-d2228247-Reviews-Restaurant_Le_Chateau_du_Port-Marseillan_Herault_Occitanie.html

Time to destination: 20 minutes.

From the house in Valros, take the road to St. Thibéry.

Drive through St. Thibéry. Pick up the D18 to Florensac. You'll pass signs for a Pont Romain, a Roman bridge.

Stay on the D18 through Florensac, headed toward Marseillan.

Veer onto the D32/e8 to Marseillan, one of the little shellfish ports of the Bassin de Thau; near the Mediterranean terminus of the Canal du Midi; and the waterfront home of the Noilly Prat distillery.

A Day at the Beach

Pack your lunch, your swimsuit (though you might choose never to wear it), and plenty of sunblock. We're headed for a Mediterranean beach. Time: 25-30 minutes.

From the house in Valros, take the road to St. Thibéry.

Drive through St. Thibéry. Pick up the D18 to Florensac. You'll pass signs for a Pont Romain, a Roman bridge.

Stay on the D18 through Florensac, headed toward Marseillan.

Veer onto the D32/e8 to Marseillan.

In Marseillan (one of the little shellfish ports of the Bassin de Thau; near the Mediterranean terminus of the Canal du Midi; and the waterfront home of the Noilly Prat distillery and La Taverne du Port, a small, superbly stocked wine store and bar), follow signs for Marseillan-Plage (*plage* means beach).

The beach in Marseillan-Plage is white, wide, and stretches for miles. Walking distance away, southeast, is Cap-d'Agde, promoted as Europe's largest "naturist" community. Imagine any beach resort. Now remove all clothing. There are nudist bars, nudist banks, nudist supermarkets serving tens of thousands of naked people on a hot, sunny day. We prefer Grau-d'Agde, at the mouth of the Hérault, a few miles from Marseillan-Plage. *Grau* means a channel through which a river runs into the sea. It's a pocket-sized resort with few pretensions and a hotel bar on the beachfront.