

La Couvertoirade: a fortified Templar town

High on the windswept Causse du Larzac is the photogenic walled village of La Couvertoirade, fortified first by the Templars around 1200. A cluster of fine craftspeople (notable leather goods, ceramics, regional Laguiole knives, weavers) and snack shops make a living from a stream of tourists who come to admire the medieval stone houses huddled inside an intact curtain wall. Time to destination: 1 hour.

NOTE: you can easily extend this day trip to include an outing to the cheese town of Roquefort. See the Roquefort day trip for details.

Visitor reviews: https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g196627-d614276-Reviews-La_Couvertoirade-Millau_Aveyron_Occitanie.html

From the house in Valros, take the N9 toward Pézenas. Stay on the N9 through Clermont-l'Hérault. There the N9 widens to become the A75-E11, a major highway.

Stay on the N9-E11 through Lodève. You're climbing steeply to the Larzac plateau. The terrain changes, and the climate. A hot day in Valros can be windy and 15 degrees cooler on the *causses* (French for plateau or mesa).

At the Aire du Caylar, exit the highway. There's a large gas stop and diner at the exit. Follow the signs to La Couvertoirade, left onto D9, then right onto D55. Parking for the town is in a gated lot on the outskirts. The automatic gate requires a 10f piece when you leave (euros in 2002). There are clean unisex restrooms at the parking lot.

Hikers: the GR71, a marked footpath, passes through the town of La Couvertoirade. This is glorious, empty country.

Hidden leather artisan, Jean-Pierre Romiguer

We first discovered products from this leather workshop in the small fortified Templar town of la Couvertoirade, in sheep and cow country, 45 minutes from our house. There were soft, gorgeous leather jackets for sale; and a distinctive shepherd's knapsack called Le Sac du Berger that is sturdy enough to last centuries and capacious enough to pack for a two-day trip. They were all made up the road a piece, at the workshop of Jean-Pierre Romiguer, in Latour-sur-sorgue. Then you couldn't visit. Now you can. In fact, the welcome is out big time. There's even a tour.

Jean-Pierre has been working leather for more than 25 years. He has a beautifully restored small factory employing locals who are expert in leather work; plus a brand-new showroom; all at the end of a long, winding, wooded ravine. There are plenty of signs;

don't worry about getting lost. Some of his best customers are Japanese; if a tour bus can negotiate this lonesome, dappled, mountain road, so can you.

This is the best place to find a full selection of Jean-Pierre's shepherd-inspired designs and modern adaptations. Layrolle (the name of his company) has a line of sandals and heavy boots to die for. I already had one of their waist-length leather jackets (my default coat throughout the winter). This time I purchased a good-sized man-purse of unique design; plus some above-the-wrist gloves.

Time to destination (through some very pretty, non-Mediterranean landscape): 1.25 hours

Directions: From Valros, take the N9 toward Pézenas. Get on the A75 toward Clermont-l'Hérault and Millau. Take exit 48 and follow the signs to Cornus, then to Latour sur Sorgue. You're on the D7. The turn is well-marked. You'll cross a mountain stream, then turn left.

Website: www.lesacduburger.com

Phone: 33 (0) 5 65 99 36 60

Leather-loving Millau and its nearby gorgeous gorges

Millau (pronounced: Mee-yo) is a charming micro-city tucked among surrounding mountains, like tea leaves settled in the bottom of a cup. It's a prosperous town with excellent shopping. The star attraction: leather goods. Millau has had an active leather industry since the 12th-century. The range of goods available here is enormous, from handbags to haute fashion, and well-priced. Prominent among the dealers are the many salons of André Salses, open M-F, 9-12:30, 14:30-19, Sat. 10-12:30, 14:30-19.

The Tarn and Dourbie rivers join at Millau, so the town also makes an excellent jumping off point for tours of the Tarn, Jonte and Dourbie gorges. The Tarn and its tributary, the Jonte, converge at le Rozier, a picturesque hamlet with a generous helping of restaurants. The Tarn gorges, Michelin rhapsodizes, "are one of the most spectacular sights in the Causses region." Canoe/kayak rentals are available at many spots along the Tarn. But the less-trafficked Jonte gorge above le Rozier is equally magnificent, with eagles soaring above you.

Hiking in the region abounds. The Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux has well-marked trails you can stumble through for a few hours. Michelin rates the Chaos three-stars; the back-story is good, but the actual star attractions - weirdly eroded rocks - are a bit ho-hum.

Time to Millau: 1 hour. To the start of the Tarn gorges: add another 20 minutes.

From Valros, take the N9 toward Pézenas. Continue on past Clermont-l'Hérault, then past Lodève, then finally toward Millau, as the N9 becomes the evolving highway A75.

In Millau, look for frequent signs for the Tarn gorges. The N9 continues through town. At Aguessac, turn right onto the D907. Le Rozier and the gorges are dead ahead.

Websites: <http://www.francethisway.com/places/millau.php>;
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millau>

Leather-bound Millau & the World's Highest Bridge

Le Viaduc de Millau, opened for traffic on December 2004, claims to be the world's highest bridge.

Designed by English architect, Lord Norman Foster, this graceful, technically advanced bridge spans the valley of the River Tarn, crossing more than 1.5 miles of thin air just downstream from Millau.

The bridge is already a popular tourist attraction, with a permanent visitors' center. Not only does the Viaduc hold a world record, but much of its steel was fabricated in the Eiffel factories, given it a lustrous pedigree. The Viaduc was built with private money, as a toll bridge. It is the last link in a major highway joining the north of France to the Languedoc.

Millau first earned fame for its gloves, and leather manufacturers still sell their wares in this pretty (and very walkable) small city. Fashion flows through its veins. At 21, rue Droite, in the old part of Millau (and a few doors down from a conspicuous Office of Tourism), Christian Canillac and his wife Chantal design and hand sew beautiful women's gloves in a rainbow of colors, leathers, and styles (some outrageous). Their workshop is called L'atelier du Gantier. Cost per pair: approximately 45 euros. Phone: 05 65 60 81 50.

<http://www.leviaducdemillau.com/fr>

Time to destination: 1 hour 20 minutes

Hiking with the vultures: a 3-star canyon rim ramble

The green Michelin guide calls the “Corniches du Causse Méjean” a three-star ramble, one of the best in France. The first part is more like a climb up ten flights of stairs. Once you reach the rim, though, you're in heaven -- or close to. Beneath your feet are stunning (and sometimes vertiginous) views of the Tarn and Jonte gorges, as deep and majestic as the Grand Canyon (but well wooded). Giant vultures were successfully reintroduced here. At the “Belvédère des Vautours” these huge predators soar past seemingly within reach.

For those who'd rather not climb, there is a road to the top.

Time to Le Rozier: 1.5 hours.

Full hike: 5.5 hours with lunch. Taking in just the Belvédère des Vautours and the other spectacular views on the Jonte side could cut your time in half. The Michelin green guide to the Pyrenees, Languedoc and Tarn Gorges provides a map and lots of details about the Corniches du Causse Méjean walk. Look it up in the section for the Gorges du Tarn.

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In Millau, look for frequent signs for the Tarn gorges. The N9 continues through town. At Aguessac, turn right onto the D907. Le Rozier is dead ahead. Look for the tourism office (on the main street, D996). The Corniches du Causse Méjean walk begins right next door.

Roquefort: the town that cheese built

The full name is Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, and since Roman times, it's been known for one thing: a creamy unpasteurized sheep's milk cheese laced with veins of blue penicillin mold. All the world's Roquefort cheese is made in this one small town, clinging to the side of a mountain. The cheese ages in moist, cool limestone caves that you can tour.

Time to destination: 1 hour 30 minutes.

NOTE: you can easily combine this day trip with an outing to La Couvertoirade, a fortified and picturesque Templar town. See the La Couvertoirade day trip for details.

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At La Cavalerie, turn left onto the D999, toward (and then through) St. Rome-de-Cernon, always following the signs for Roquefort.

Stay on the D999 until you see a left-hand turn onto D23. This road takes you up to the town of Roquefort. Signs for "Visite des Caves" are prominent.

The Société is the largest Roquefort producer, and runs regular tours through its caves. Each tour ends with a tasting. There are 10 types of Roquefort cheese. The Société makes three including Baragnaudes, an extra-creamy (and extra-expensive) Roquefort that's hard to find even inside France. Once you've tried Baragnaudes, you might find it hard to settle for anything less. There is a small fee for the tour. Bring a sweater for the caves, if you chill easily.

If you'd like some bread with your cheese, take a side trip to Nant. There's a baker there in the middle of town named W. Foissac who makes the best bread we've tasted in France. (Preferring it to the world-famous Poilâne bread we've eaten many times in Paris.) Foissac uses Egyptian wheat and bakes in wood-fired ovens. The baguette crust is crunchy and nut-flavored, the inside meltingly tender. It's worth the extra little drive east on the D999 from La Cavalerie.

Visitor reviews: https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g11038881-d266702-Reviews-Roquefort_Cheese_Caves-Occitanie.html

Hikers: You can enjoy several well-marked hikes (1 to 2.5 hours in duration) around the Combalou plateau above the town. You can park in the same lot where you park for the cave tour. There's a signboard there that shows the hikes.

Micropolis: The City of Insects

We read about this museum in a 2007 article by Robert V. Camuto in the Washington Post. "I expected to find one of those cheap, disappointing tourist traps you generally find anywhere in the middle of nowhere on this planet. Instead what we found was one of the best-conceived and -executed oddball-niche exhibits I've ever visited." It's all of that.

This stunning tribute to the amazing diversity of insects stands in the picture-perfect vale-side town where French entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre was born. The museum itself is architecturally daring. Its restaurant is stylish. We were fascinated throughout, listening to our English guide phone (signage is dual-language, too).

The museum leans a bit toward children, with some display cases at youngster-height and lots of interactive displays. But it never talks down. The day we visited it was pouring, so we couldn't explore the outdoor displays. We did, however, take the opportunity to pose in the mammoth Venus flytrap which closes around you as you sit.

And on our way home, we stopped off in Millau for a few minutes to buy handmade leather gloves, one of the small city's specialties.

Time to destination: roughly 1.25 hours.

<https://www.micropolis-aveyron.com/>

Directions: From Valros, take the N9 toward Pézenas. Continue on past Clermont-l'Hérault, then past Lodève, then finally toward Millau, as the N9 becomes the highway A75. You cross the Viaduc de Millau, the world's tallest suspension bridge, and exit soon after, at exit 44. Turn right. Micropolis is located a few miles away on the D911, at St-Léons. You'll see signs for Micropolis beginning on the A75.