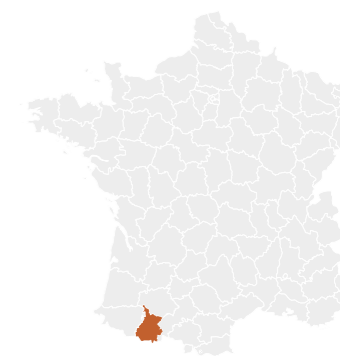


# ENCHANTÉ

“MOOOOM, Lady Catherine de Burgh is **chasing** me!!!”

*Text & photography Isabelle Vander Heyde*





**I**

t's hard to keep a straight face standing in the middle of a hanging vegetable garden with a little girl rushing towards me, an elaborately-named chicken at her heels. It's not every day that you get stalked by noble poultry, but then again: a stay at Chateau de Gudanes is not your everyday experience.

I actually find it hard to believe I've finally made it here, a place that has become insta-famous over the past decade. The story of an abandoned 18th-century castle hidden within a mountainous valley of the French Pyrenees, bought and lovingly brought back to life by an Australian family, has captured hearts and imagination worldwide. A real-life Sleeping Beauty story, an incredibly romantic world full of secret doors, overgrown rose gardens and unexpected treasures. But as it goes with all things notorious on Instagram, there must be a catch. Something wrong in a picture that seems too good to be true, right? Fairytale, ghost story or modern-day social media myth? I'm busy finding out, trailed as always by my two toddlers and, just for this occasion, by a bunch of bustling chickens named after the *Pride and Prejudice* cast. We climb what's left of the Medieval terrace gardens to the great castle kitchen, past an abundance of tomato vines, mint bushes, tulips, daffodils and snowdrops. Up there, in what is almost literally the beating heart of the chateau, a long-haired tabby is keeping court. Chestnut was once found with a bullet in his paw, but now spends his days watching over pastry that seems to be baking 24/7 in the great ovens. He only drinks from a crystal waterglass whilst perched on a counter overlooking the natural wilderness. Chestnut is one of the many stray cats and dogs that found refuge at the Chateau and have become part of its décor.

*“There’s an eerie set of mismatched sofas and chairs in front of the big door. As if we just interrupted a GHOSTLY tea party.”*

The animals gave us a more than enthusiastic welcome only a day ago as we drove up the legendary lane in the late afternoon. I suppose there’s one thing nobody could ever exaggerate, and that is the first impression of the Chateau: a set of heavy, overgrown wrought iron gates giving way to the majestic façade, forever shrouded in a mysterious mist. The animals aside, there was no one there to greet us. Nothing but an eerie set of mismatched sofas and chairs placed in front of the big front door. As if we just interrupted a ghostly tea party. I couldn’t help but feel like this whole place has a life of its own. Whilst the girls took their time greeting our furry hosts, I pushed open the grand front door, which of course gave me that dramatic creak every enchanted castle door is supposed to give, and bumped into Karina Waters, who has become almost as famous as the home she’s building. Her welcome equalled the one her pets gave us in warmth as she apologised for not coming down earlier - *“I was weight-lifting in the dining room”* - and ushered us inside her kingdom. It’s been almost a decade since she and her husband stepped through those very doors for the first time and were greeted by 500 tons of rubble, a collapsed roof, caved-in floors and about ninety-four ruined bedrooms. Chateau de Gudanes was grand once upon a time, radiating all the wealth and power of the 1740s. It was built on the remnants of a 13th-century fortress and a 15th-century castle by the legendary architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel, the mastermind behind Marie-Antoinette’s Petit Trianon and the Parisian Opera House. History would not be kind to its turrets and frescos however, taking blows throughout the French Revolution, Reign of Terror, upheavals, pandemics and world wars. Nevertheless, the Chateau was still inhabited during World War II, after which the age of decay began. Over the years, it was briefly used as a summer school and later became the object of a big hotel project -which explains the presence of a turquoise pool and tennis court on the property. A dispute regarding building permits sentenced the place to further neglect, turning it into a regular ruin, and that is the state the Waters found it in. They bought it, dreaming of a romantic summer home in southern France. A dream that didn’t last, as they quickly realised how intense the restoration works would be. Their plans have since evolved into a conscious restoration and hospitality project. The Château opens its gates to the world each summer; guests can act as volunteers or join in on floral, culinary, musical or artistic workshop experiences.

#### CATS AND BATS

That is how we came into the picture, eager to experience this surprising mixture of old and new. Our first night was eventful. Albeit, it has been in my head. I dare anyone to keep their imagination under control whilst sleeping in what looks like a former ballroom at the end of a gallery accumulating tons of furniture, scribbled old books, faded pictures and other memorabilia. Not that I’m complaining; on the contrary, it’s just that I couldn’t help but wonder which ghost of the past might still be lingering. Around bedtime, I urged my mother, who graciously accepted the role of assistant-nanny on this trip, to accompany me in case of a nightly toilet visit because that would mean crossing the aforementioned attic all by myself in the dark. I also wanted to ask her how fast phantoms can float, but I didn’t dare push it too far. We all bunked together in two great old princess beds -call it the world’s most glorious sleepover- and my little team quickly fell asleep that night, leaving me to my ghostly calculations. Around three in the morning -I could hear the local village’s church bells chiming through the window- I suddenly felt a presence in the room. I was immediately wide awake, unlike the three-year-old snoring in my neck. Was it her snoring I heard, or something else’s? Don’t ask me how, but I felt something approaching -imagine my panic- slowly yet surely, and then jumping on the bed. My shriek was loud and dramatic... as was the answer from the very soul crossing our room: a joyful meowing!







*"I heard our cat Claude Monet visited you last night. Don't mind him; he's part of the furniture. It's all cats and bats around here. People dream of the romantic side of this Chateau, but in reality, fairytales are hard work,"* laughs Karina back in the kitchen as she pours two glasses of delightful rosé wine from what looks like a petrol jug. She seems nothing like the polished lady of the castle I was expecting. A Google search results in glamorous pictures of a Kate Middleton lookalike, in tune with the majesticness of this place, whereas the woman in front of me is more of a Jane Birkin type, matching the bewildering vibe hanging in the air. No shiny façade, but an authentic glow. She looks glorious in men's clothes, sporting heart-shaped sunglasses and a wicker hat, as she manages her way through a discussion with the local plumber in juicy *franglais*. *"They always start by saying whatever I need is impossible, but then it turns out they can do it in an instant, I guess it's part of the local folklore..."* Karina has become a local legend herself as she stood her ground through heavy renovation work, bureaucracy and setbacks these past years. Until six months ago, there was little to no electricity -candlelight it was- and only one fire in the kitchen in winter. Temperatures in the Pyrenees can run as low as -20°C, and more often than not, it was far colder inside than out. She even had to set up a tent in her bedroom to survive the freezing temperatures once. *"It's not all sugar and spice; it's a real story. I cringe when I see Instagram accounts of ex-pats pretending to live this so-called conscious, slow life in France, seemingly walking around in reclaimed dresses and picking lavender all day. No one lives like that; it's all but a façade. I love vintage and wearing floaty dresses too, and some days are indeed spent weeding and picking wildflowers, followed by a farm-to-table dinner with the Chateau family. But others are for plumbing issues, and quite frankly, I'm dying to have*

*"You get to play chateau here, but without taking it too seriously. We draw, surrounded by FADED FRESCOS and flaking wallpaper. We eat rosé ice cream made from the garden's roses. We spend hours escaping the sultry summer heat on an inflatable shark in the pool."*

*anything delivered to the castle doors -most of all McDonald's!"* No polish, no shine, but cracks in the walls and a good dose of authenticity -a philosophy she also applies to the Chateau. *"Sometimes it feels as if the restoration is taking too long, but perhaps you can't rush something you hope will last forever. It would be heartbreaking if this place looked brand new overnight. It should never become a museum piece, a perfect copy of what it once was. That would mean the death blow whilst I'm trying to keep it alive. We don't plan to erase the Chateau's patina and age as it will become another part of her history. For instance, we won't wallpaper everywhere, only in the areas where larger parts have been lost. Smaller areas will be left without encouraging everybody's imagination. We hope to set the scene to help you along a journey within your mind. I call it a renaissance because we're bringing life back to the chateau. The same goes for the surrounding property and woodlands: it's about keeping the freedom, the natural state and the wilderness of the gardens as they currently are while enhancing them a little."*

As we speak, men are busy carrying old furniture in and outside the castle. Nothing ever seems to stand still in this quirky place. One daughter goes off playing Uno cards in the old dining room. The other one disappears, a habit she's taken on since we arrived. I know she's upstairs in our room for a little wardrobe change with Bruce, the castle bulldog, acting as her stylist. Living the princess life and all, she wants to dress the part... I'm amazed by how easily they've adapted to their new surroundings, however child-unfriendly those may seem on paper. No toys, no entertainment and a whole lot of old,

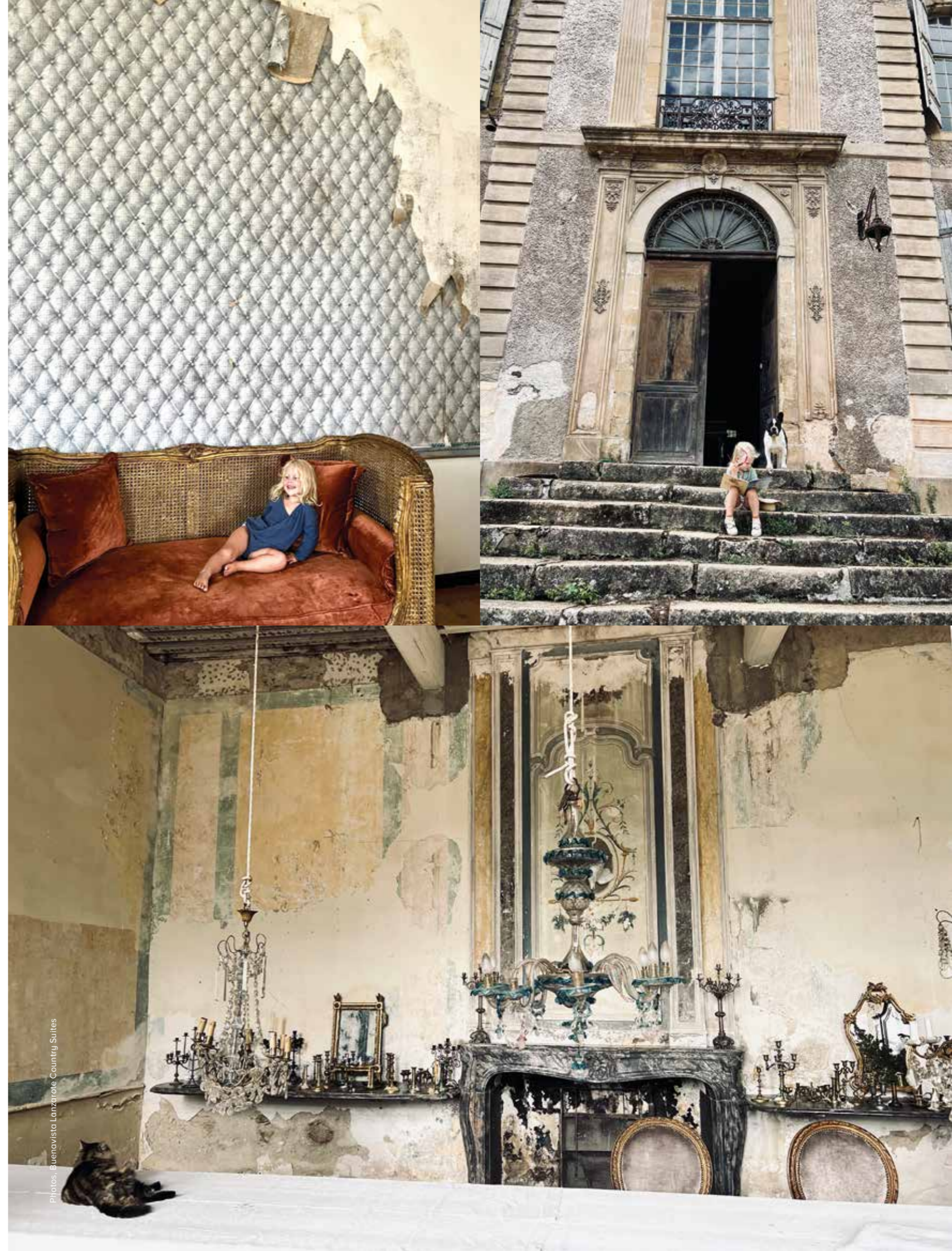


*“In the morning,  
we tiptoe down the  
cold stone staircase  
to a great wooden  
cupboard filled with  
home-baked cookies  
and MACARONS.”*

fragile stuff they could potentially break. They seem unphased and just go about their business like they own the place. Admittedly, the urge to play dress-up is genuine, even for adults. The heart-shaped sunglasses part already gave away that Karina herself is far from immune to it. *“But of course not; that is what all this is about! You get to play chateau here, but without taking it too seriously. The idea is you get to be a child again, and the playful element is ever so important. Adults love it; they rediscover their imagination and play potential. The thing with conventional hotel concepts is you need and expect to be entertained, and there are people there to guide you, but these amazing “six star” experiences will soon be forgotten. I love it when there’s not much to do, nothing else left but just being. Standing still and taking in the surroundings, learning something new and having real talks with the people around you. Children don’t want to be entertained all day; they want to be heard. In many places, the entertainment and blitz factor take that space to listen away. We need a holiday now and then where we just get to be mere humans, nothing more. Just doing the simplest things.”*

It explains why Karina leaves us to our own devices all day long, free to wander around the Chateau, help out where we like and in doing so make our own stories. We spend the nights in our princess beds, bundled in pink silk sheets breathing the fresh mountain air pouring in through a missing window panel. In the morning, we tiptoe down the cold stone staircase, straight to a great wooden cupboard filled with home-baked cookies, macarons and other sweet pastries. We take long, lazy baths alongside a row of unicorn-rubber ducks in one of the washrooms in the bathroom gallery, soaking in an old tub all the while admiring the dramatic backdrop of the Pyrenees. We colour and draw, surrounded by vivid portraits, faded frescos and flaking wallpaper. We eat rosé ice cream made from the garden’s roses. We spend hours escaping the sultry summer heat on an inflatable shark in the pool. We peek through dilapidated doors giving way to luxurious suites and even a secret chapel... Are we not entertained?

On our last night, a bunch of bats cross the room as I’m reading the girls a bedtime story about chickens -they’re super intrigued by poultry since the whole Catherine de Bourgh episode. The bats’ wings make a clapping sound as they cast long shadows on the beds and walls. Luckily for my night’s rest, my daughters are too immersed in the story to notice anything ghostly going on. I look at my mother, and we both stifle a laugh; this whole trip is so deliciously off-the-wall. We turn off the light and drift off. The flapping intensifies – signalling we’re spending the night with a cauldron of bats now – as the distant sound of a summer jazz concert reaches us from the village below through the open windows. Altogether, it’s a lullaby I had never heard before, but an enchanting one it is. Bonsoir, enchanté...



Photos: Buenavista Lanzarote Country Suites

# SURPRISE

An extremely varied **scenery**, natural attractions, architectural wonders and ancient treasures buried deep inside the **earth**: though often forgotten by travellers, the **MIDI-PYRÉNÉES** region is as surprising as a big box of chocolates!

*Text & photography:*  
Isabelle Vander Heyde



Chateau de Gudanes is far from the only gem at **Les Cabannes**, a picturesque croissant-shaped town near the Ariège river. **Maison Beaucoup**, a charming guesthouse and restaurant hidden in an 18th-century presbytery, serves comforting family meals with a twist, offers a good night's rest in the comfortable attic apartment and... marmalade. Lots and lots of marmalades. Which is kind of inevitable when you're staying with the local confiturier. If you follow the track just behind Maison Beaucoup, you're in for a lovely hike along the borders of the Ariège and for those who dare even an icy swim at one of its natural beaches. Don't miss a lovely crafternoon at **Au Gres Des Mains** a few doors down the road: ceramic artist Ingrid welcomes visitors with open arms for a few hours of satisfying kneading, moulding, and painting in her cosy atelier. [www.maison-beaucoup.fr](http://www.maison-beaucoup.fr)  
**Instagram @augresdesmains**

Les Cabannes is the starting point of a Tour de France celebrity: **plateau de Beille** with its 16km-climb. Not for the faint-hearted, although you can also ascend by car and enjoy the semi-wild horse and cow herds grazing along the way. The reward upon arrival is a breathtaking 180° view and the promise of more

outdoor fun: walks or mountain bike rides, horseback riding, dog hiking, sledging, bivouacs, cattle herding alongside local farmers, etc.

For centuries markets and fairs have been the beating heart of the area's economy and social life, and their traditions are being kept alive. Keep an eye on the **belle brocante** calendar, a travelling bric-a-brac fair boasting both vide-greniers (the fairly untouched Pyrenees abound with treasure caves and attics!) and curated antique dealers. We visited the fair at **Saint-Girons**, also famous for its enormous outdoor Saturday market.

Just drive around and get lost. Your eyes won't regret this, but your stomach might: we missed a turn, resulting in us accidentally covering part of the mythical **Route des Cols des Pyrénées**, a 942km track along 34 mountain passes, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. This route was on the thermal itinerary in the 19th century, and nowadays, it's for adventurous bikers and hikers. Or, as was our case, for lost souls looking for a good road trip and an excuse to sing along to old French pop whilst driving through abandoned villages and mysterious mountain forests.

The Haute Ariège region is brimming with dark green forests, sparkling lakes, mighty peaks and vast plateaus. **The Réserve Nationale de Faune Sauvage d'Orlu** is a treat for hikers, fishermen, climbers and animal lovers alike. Starting off at parking de fanguil, a relaxed, two-day hike takes you to and from the **En Beys** shelter. You get there following sinuous forest tracks, crossing vast mountain meadows that are abound with marmots, and swimming in one of the many lakes. Hot tip: rent a donkey to accompany and carry part of the family on this sweet trip.

[la-ferme-aux-anes.com](http://la-ferme-aux-anes.com)  
[refuge-enbeys.com](http://refuge-enbeys.com)

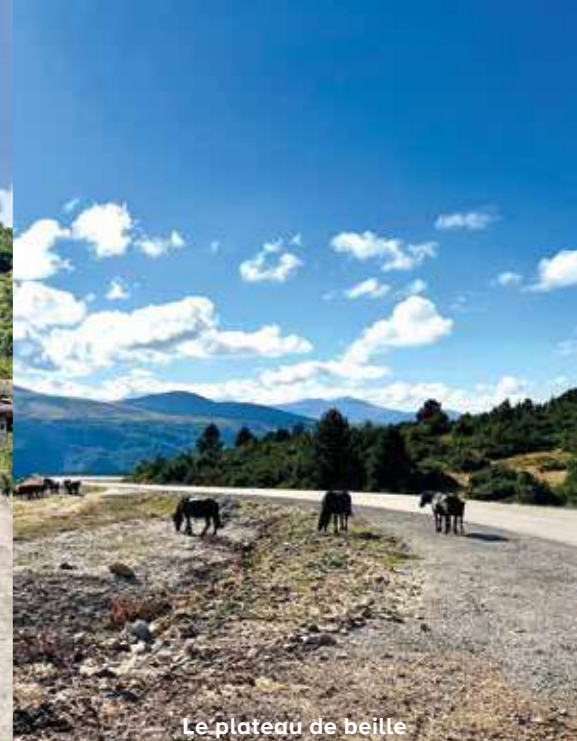
You will find no less than four caves harbouring prehistoric paintings near the medieval trading town Tarascon-sur-Ariège. **The Bédeilhac Cave** shows signs of 15,000 year old civilizations, **the Grotte de la Vache** is a masterpiece of ancient bestiary art, **the Niaux Cave** bears witness to the enchanting prehistoric Magdalenian culture and **the Lombrives Cave** counts more than 39 kilometres of galleries on seven different levels. Follow the painted tracks of ancient buffalo, Alpine ibexes, horses, deer, fish and weasels, and take a deep dive into history!



La ferme aux anes



Les Cabannes



Le plateau de beille



Augré des mains



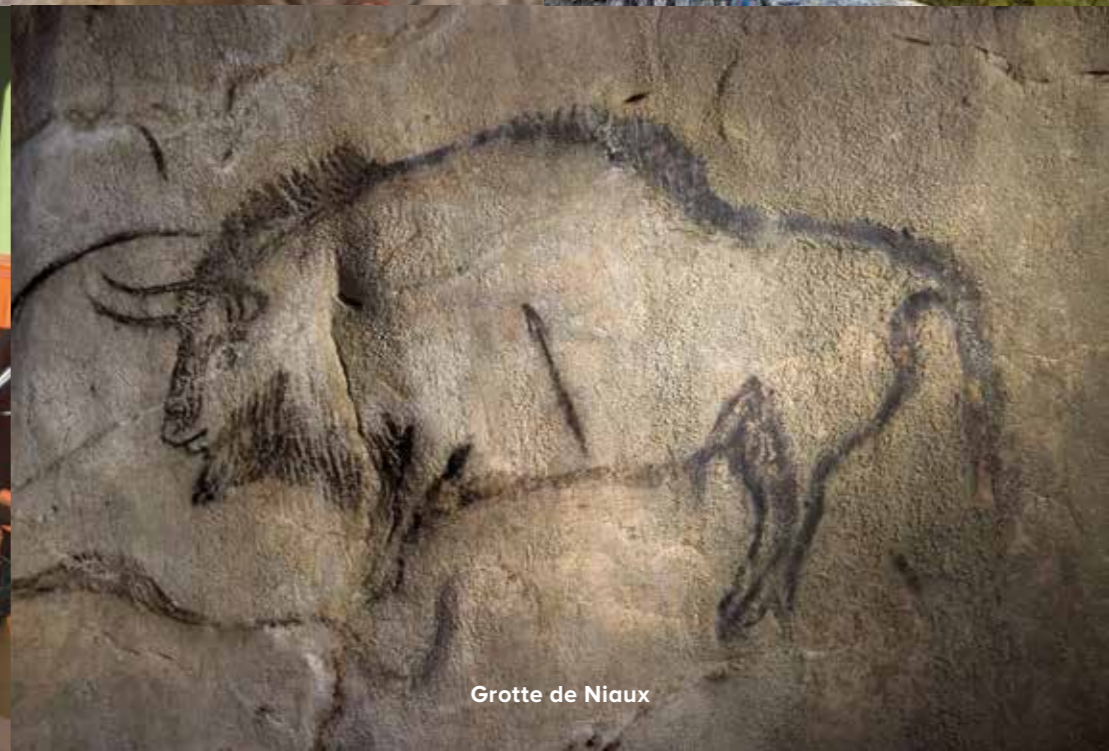
Belle brocante



La route des cols



Maison Beaucoup



Grotte de Niaux

Photo DR

Photos © E. Demoulin Sesta, DR