



# ***Cathar Country***

***By Gazza***

December 2006.

## **Carcassonne, December 2006.**

Forewarned is forearmed, according to some old saying, so I hereby forewarn anyone reading this tripe that it comprises almost 100% gibbering, drivel and inane ramblings about nothing in particular. Nothing new there, you might say, but there is more – this whole report contains a mere two beers and therefore a scoop-to-word ratio of 1 : 3,156! Now some of you may be thinking, quite rightly, “Why do you feel it necessary to waste everyone’s time writing an inflated quantity of crap about two beers? Wouldn’t it be easier to simply list the two beers, say the South of France is rubbish for scoops, and move on?”

Thinking about this, it does seem an attractive option, but I’m going to stick to my guns and spend countless hours of my time - which would undoubtedly be better spent doing something far more constructive - in creating a report on Carcassonne... so there. I’ll leave it up to you whether to read it or not; if you don’t want to know all the exciting details such as our bottle opener’s price or which cheeses are available for scooping in the local supermarkets then simply scroll down to the end (press the “end” button if you can’t manage scrolling) and read the beer gen which should take you all of ten seconds by my reckoning. If you read r-e-a-l-l-y s-l-o-w-l-y...

**Friday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2006.**

### ***The 1<sup>st</sup> instalment of beer-less gibbering.***

This trip wasn’t planned as a beer jaunt – let me spear that vampire right now before anyone gets any funny ideas that I might have made some almighty cock-up in booking Carcassonne rather than Köln or something similarly buffoon-like. No, the trip was booked as a simple relaxing weekend away, looking at medieval architecture and drinking local wines, with any beers scooped being classed as a bonus.

We were flying from [East Midlands airport](#) for the first time in many months – since August 2004, to be pedantic – and I was interested in my sad, obsessive kind of way to see what changes and - for want of a better word - plastification had been done to the once relaxing airport since we’d last visited; EMA had always been a small, (relatively) stress-free departure point and I was desperately hoping that someone hadn’t managed to make a right royal bollock out of it.

I’d booked us into the sociable [Airparks](#) carpark at Donnington but the best part was that, flying from a closer airport than usual (well, most places are closer than Stansted), we had the luxury of a lie-in until 02:45; sheer bliss! I’d already checked us in online via Riotscare’s website – discovering that any new bookings incurred a £2.50 charge; anyone would think they didn’t want you to check in online anymore – so all we had to do was to arrive on-time and survive the Hitlers on the security desks!

We were soon parked up and on the bus to the airport and realised that, as usual, we’d arrived far too early for our flight... ah well, better than missing the thing, I suppose, so off we trolled past the snaking queues at the check-in desks and joined the shortest looking line for the x-ray machines. Despite having to remove my boots and belt, which I’m getting used to by now, we passed through the security check without incident and soon confirmed my fears – the airside had changed from slightly scruffy and hospitable to sleek, slick and consumerist with garish

signs and brand-names everywhere and, even worse, it was packed with people waiting for their flights! Saying that, my rose-tinted vision of EMA is probably down to the time I flew to Prague on new years' day 2004 when it was just me and the tumbleweed there!

After ten minutes we'd seen all there was to see airside and so settled down for the remaining 90-minute fester. After what seemed to be hours, not minutes, we fortified our flagging spirits with a double espresso and wandered over to the pokey little side terminal where Riotscare flights seemed to go from. Suddenly, before we were ready, the flight was called and we joined the queue at the gate; having sequence numbers 7 and 8, and being in the priority boarding group on account of having checked in on-line, I reasoned that I had every right to be before most of the people in front of me and, filled with righteous indignation, I stomped my way to the front - brandishing my on-line printout as justification - and was soon through. Sue hadn't been as militant as me but we were soon aboard and ready for the off.

### ***A day in the life of a shock-absorber.***

The flight was only about two thirds full and we were soon boarded, cross-checked and under way. Cloud obscured Europe all the way south, although we had glimpses of Brittany and Nantes, and it wasn't long before we were executing a tight turn at what seemed an unnecessarily low altitude directly over Carcassonne's new town - giving some excellent views of the canal du Midi and the cathedral - before smacking into the runway with rather more ferocity than is usual! In mitigation, I suppose the weather was somewhat windy and drizzly, but that landing must be one of the worst I've experienced in the last few years!

Immigration formalities were rapidly concluded and we were soon landside where we decided that this airport was the smallest we'd been to for quite a while, with only a few check-in desks and buggie-all in the way of facilities and shops (beware, there is NOTHING airside at all!). The promised navette to the city was waiting outside and so, having enough Euros from our previous trips to save us from using the ATM outside, we jumped aboard and paid the extortionate fare of €5 each; I attempted to obtain a discount by asking for the tickets in French, but discovered that there wasn't any discount for speaking Gallic and so paid up and sat down feeling a little hard done by. Thinking about this, the French seem to make great efforts to provide rubbish and/or expensive public transport to their airports, whereas the Germans, for example, have rail links built to most of their airports making escaping from them easy - both on the pocket and (usually) in practice too! €5 for what should have been a 3km hop did seem like extortion to us, or are we just tight?

We decided to wring the maximum value possible from the €5 ticket and so took the bus all the way to it's terminus alongside the main gate of the medieval city. To justify this ludicrously high fare the bus takes an extremely tortuous route into Carcassonne, which I'm positive is about three times as long as it needs to be, so as to persuade you that the airport is at least five miles away rather than the two it actually is! Eventually we passed the SNCF station then trundled along the inner ringroad before getting a brief glimpse of our hotel for the next two nights, then crossed the river Aude en-route to the medieval city.

As soon as we were out of the new part of the city the gloriously spiky castellated mass of the old city glowered through the drizzle from it's nearby hillock and looked as Disney-esque as I'd seen from photos; it was hard to take in, but the perfectly-preserved castle - looking just like castles schoolkids draw minus only the fire-breathing dragons below - wasn't some fake mock-up or recent tourist lure but a 1,000 year old historic monument built by the Cathars to defend themselves (ultimately unsuccessfully, ending in the Albigenian wars) against all-comers,

although it was almost totally rebuilt in the 1800's. As we drew closer the walls seemed to grow in size; what had, from a distance, resembled a model now glowered over our bus, all massive towers hewn from beige stone and dripping from the rain, looking as impregnable as it must have to the approaching [Catholic crusade](#) all those years ago.

### ***The Cité Médiévale.***

We alighted from the bus into the heavy, blustery drizzle, realising that we could have had a better meteorological welcome to the city, before trooping over the footbridge through the huge gates and into the city's depths. After a quick visit to the tourist office, housed in one of the towers and suitably historic inside, we carried on along the slippery cobbled road which wound uphill into the heart of the city – or we would have, if we'd not had to wait for several cars to crawl their way through the thronged streets! The rough guide had suggested that the city's streets were car-free in the daytime (and now, seeing how narrow they were, I could agree why) but these drivers obviously didn't care for the rules and were determined to drive there anyway! Bloody militant French...

The first building we passed after the gates was a patisserie and, looking at the drool-inducing wares arrayed in the window, I wondered why the British are incapable of making cakes as good as these looked? Yes, we have lots of cake shops, but they're almost all factory-made chemically crap and never look handmade as French, German, and Austrian cakes do... in fact, most other country's cakes do! One executive decision later, we were in possession of some monumentally delicious pastries which, considering the tourist honeypot location of the patisserie, were superb value at €2.90 each; Sue had an apricot tart whilst I went for the myrtleberry and they tasted even better than they looked – if this was possible... We ate them next to a parked tourist train, and a particularly diminutive version it was too, which somehow seemed depressed as it sat in a quiet side street in the drizzle.

We spent the next couple of hours wandering around the medieval city and, fortuitously, the rain soon stopped allowing us to appreciate the beigeness and history of the place to the max. I'd not known what to expect from the city as some guidebooks had lambasted Eugène [Viollet-le-Duc](#), who'd restored the crumbling city from ruins in the 1850's, as using far too heavy a hand, but to me it was a magical place with cobbles everywhere, turrets peeking over every rooftop and narrow, winding lanes with leaning, twisted buildings closing out the sullen sky giving some parts a rather ominous feel; not dangerous as in populated by dodgy characters cradling Glock 22 pistols, but more as in I half expected to walk slap-bang into a plodding dragon or clanking knight around one of the blind corners!

One thing that I'd been determined to do was to find some outlets for Carcassonne's very own beer, Trencavel, named after the last Viscount Raymond-Roger de Trencavel, and allegedly now brewed a few kilometres from the city – I say allegedly as French beer gen is notoriously hard to come by, and I'd read several conflicting accounts of the beer's existence, or not, depending on who I believed at the time. I had a lead from [Ratebeer](#) that café Le Trouvère on Place Marcou sold it and was sent into paroxysms of glee when I saw the beer on the menu of the café. We also saw it somewhere else, for 50¢ cheaper, but somehow I totally forgot this second place's details by the following day...

Despite it being December and drizzly there was still a hefty amount of tourists wandering around, mainly Spaniards, and I shuddered to think of the crowds and mayhem which summer must bring to the city; I'm sure we'd have hated the place had we visited in the summer months but now all was fine and, with the rain gone, I began to fill my camera with photos of the almost

too-perfect castellations; “Disney could never build anything like this”, I thought, “They might manage the outside walls to some degree of tatness, but the inside wouldn’t be anything like as real-feeling as Carcassonne actually does and it’d be full of McScum and shops hawking tat!” I reasoned, as we walked past yet another stall selling plastic swords and shields...

### ***The Ville Basse.***

Deciding to come back the following day, hopefully in sunshine for better photos, we trudged down the unnervingly-steep street leading from the city’s walls to the old bridge across the Aude. We crossed the bridge, stopping to admire the view back to the medieval city, before checking into the Ibis hotel on Place Gambetta where our room was what I suppose would be called “bijou” in estate agent bollocks-speak, but it had a bed, a bathroom (well, a bath-cupboard; to sit on the toilet took considerable dexterity and elasticity of the torso!) and a TV, so everything we required for two days was there. Tired from our early start, we awarded ourselves an hour’s doss to try and keep ourselves awake for the evening’s exploration!

It was over two hours later when we finally awoke and prepared for a quick exploration around the Ville Basse (lower, or new town). One amusing incident occurred right outside our window when a fish van somehow managed to crash into another van despite having no obvious motive for doing so; we were hoping for a fight, but the drivers seemed to be best mates and departed with a handshake – no fun there, then! As we got ready to leave, however, there was suddenly a huge roar of jet engines which seemed to be very close overhead; we peered out of the window just in time to see a Ryanair 737 performing exactly the same manoeuvre ours had earlier in the day, although this one seemed even lower than ours had been!

We set off along Rue de Verdun in the hope of finding a supermarket or suchlike to buy some wine for that evening’s drinking; I was under no illusion that we’d find anywhere selling loads of local beers, and so it was looking like a couple of bottles of wine a night; luckily, Carcassonne is close to some superb lesser-known wine regions such as Jurançon, Madiran and Maury, so we had high hopes of being able to buy some very good local wines and any beers found would be an additional – if unexpected - benefit.

Not far along Rue de Verdun we came across La Ferme, a superb-looking deli and wine shop, which seemed to be the answer to our wine-buying requirements by the look of the groaning shelves and tables inside! After a quick look around the wines we realised that we were inside the kind of place that you just wish would open a branch at the end of your street; most AC’s we could think of were represented, but the main excitement was caused by the presence of a very rare Pacherenc-du-Vic-Bilh. We quickly snatched one of these, followed by a bottle of the local Muscat de Saint Jean de Minervois, a bottle of Basque Irouleguy and also a rare Maury 10-year-old – La Ferme seemed to sell everything we needed except, annoyingly, the local beer...

We then had a quick spin around some supermarkets in the hope of finding some more huge winners; there was nothing wine-wise which grabbed us, but I was elated to see a winning beer in the form of Jenlain Noël (6.7%) so I snapped this up along with two pieces of scoopable cheese, namely Tomme Noir de Pyrenees and St Nectaire, to aid our digestion of the wine later on. Another essential we were lacking was a corkscrew as, due to them being classed as terrorist weapons, we’d had to abandon our 10p trusty corkscrew in Jersey earlier in the year... we soon located the cheapest one in the supermarket, but it didn’t look as good as our faithful 10p one had been and – to rub it in even more – it cost 30 times as much!

To top up our feast collection we then called in to an excellent little bakery on Place Carnot (with

a Christmas market in the process of being set up) where we tried our best to clear out their stocks, buying a baguette, pizza, cakes and pain-au-chocolate as we'd decided to amass a load of snacks to graze on whilst drinking our bottles of wine that night instead of going out for some food – we'd do that the following evening.

### ***A night in.***

After dropping off our stash of food in our bijou room we took a short wander across the new bridge with the hope of getting some decent photos of the medieval city and old bridge; this was aided by the walls being spectacularly lit and I spend a good ten minutes composing photos of the luminous ramparts and bridge below, earning several decent shots, despite passing lorries causing the bridge to shake at just the wrong moment and the existence of a huge pile of beige dogshit right where my feet wanted to go...

On the way back to our hotel we passed a small chocolatiers and, despite trying to resist, the wares on display tempted us inside. We emerged five minutes later with a small assortment of truffles and chocolates to aid the digestion of our wine – at least that was our excuse! Back in the room we discovered that the “glasses” left for our use were in fact plastic cups – with one already split – and so I was forced to go back downstairs and blag two proper glasses from the receptionist before the evening's scooping could commence. The drinking vessels acquired, our stash of food was arranged on the table it was clear that we were in for a feast of epic proportions; first of all we had the pizza with some baguette, both being very good indeed, washed down with the [Jenlain](#) Noël which was deep amber, fruity and malty with a dryish malt flavour, some blackcurrant fruit, then a full, toasted malt finish with more fruitiness; this was a lot better than I'd expected!

With all the necessary equipment in place we cracked open, with the aid of our decidedly dodgy new corkscrew, the bottle of Irouleguy and found it to be a superbly tannic, full-bodied, intense wine with loads of character and nothing like the common French wines stereotype of a thin, weedy, insipid drink – there was nothing feeble about this wine! We followed this with a delicious cake, although I contrived to spill most of the raspberry sauce mine contained onto my chest which I then inadvertently transferred to a towel, no doubt giving rise to a frenzied manhunt the next day to discover the butchered body we'd hidden somewhere in the hotel...

We continued the evening with more wine (Maury) and our cheeses; the Maury was like a divine mixture of Port and Madeira and totally superb, whilst the cheeses were creamy and smooth and just what we were after. The TV didn't turn up much of interest, as is usual on our trips recently, although there was one programme we watched – a documentary about marzipan, including the superb [Niederegger](#) of Lübeck! We tried the chocolates we'd acquired earlier but, despite them being perfectly decent, they weren't as superb as they'd looked in the shop, especially the *cerises*, which had an excessive burn of alcohol so we washed them down with yet more wine and cheese... and so on.

### **Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2006.**

#### ***Nice for the time of year.***

A minor lie-in was the order of the day as we'd reasoned that we had a full day to explore the city and we'd seen most of it already! We finally hauled ourselves out into the bright morning

and trailed across the new bridge towards the old city, although I was slightly miffed that the sun was very low and blazing from directly behind the castellations, leading to a lot of glare on my lens despite me reluctantly cleaning it! We decided to enter the city via the main gate and so walked through the slightly shabby area around the base of the citadel until we entered via the towering gates of the Porte Narbonnaise.

It was breakfast time and as a result, you guessed it, another visit to the cake shop was in order! We'd actually considered sitting in for an espresso but it was already well filled with tourists and so we quickly gave up on that idea and repeated our take-out order of the day before - and the cakes, if anything, tasted even better with the addition of a bit of sunshine! We munched our way around the snaking cobbled streets, gazing at the historic surroundings, pausing on occasions to allow the tiny tourist train to edge its way through the streets; I couldn't really see the point of this train as the streets were so narrow it hardly got above 5mph, meaning it would be quicker to walk around, plus you'd see more standing rather than sitting in a miniscule toy train!

The delights of the Medieval city exhausted, we took a walk around the *lices*, the grassy area between the two sets of castellated walls, which gave some great views out to the Massif Centrale and over the Ville Basse as well as providing some excellent photos of the walls and turrets bathed in midday sun. By the time we'd completed the circuit of the turret-studded walls I was decidedly thirsty, therefore we headed off to the cafe we'd seen the previous day on Place Marcou which, hopefully, would sell my desired local scoop. We went via Rue du Plô where we encountered a particularly cute cat dosed on a deck chair, being groomed by all and sundry who passed him by!

### ***"Scoop of the weekend".***

Café Trouvère seemed to have an above-average beer selection for a tourist trap, including strange choices such as Affligem and Murphy's (obviously a Heineken bar then!), so I was hoping not to get blown out for my scoop of the week - especially as we'd totally forgotten where the other bar which sold Trecavel was! My luck was in; the waiter acknowledged that the beer was in stock and we were shown to a small table looking out over the narrow lane leading to Place Marcou.

Within a couple of minutes the beer had arrived and I was suspicious; the bottle was a tall 33cl one with a very attractive coat-of-arms style label on it which have no indication of the brewer at all - this says to me either it's a contract brew or the producer isn't that proud of the stuff! My cynicism relaxed somewhat, however, as I noticed that the beer was bottle conditioned with a healthy-looking dollop of crud lurking at the bottom and so, deciding to accept that this was indeed the local beer brewed by a company with a good label designer, I poured the golden fluid out in to the Belgian Tripel-style glass and prepared to scoop.

Now let me put this into perspective; Trecavel isn't a really bad beer, I've had a hell of a lot worse, but sadly it's not as good as the presence of sediment would have you believe. It's golden with a dry, malty flavour, quite bland, with a thin body and a strange powdery mouthfeel. The finish is short, unremarkable and dry with more maltiness. I was quite disappointed with the beer although given my experience of French beer thus far I wasn't surprised... what did surprise us was the appearance of a donkey outside, being led around by blokes dressed in Mediaeval costumes!

My principle objective of the day accomplished, we descended back to the Ville Basse and

spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the grid-like streets and alongside the Canal du Midi. Our wine supplies had been depleted more than we'd anticipated doing the preceding evening and so we called into La Ferme again to stock up with more scoops before a quick Nutella pain au chocolate; that's another scoop! We dropped off our newly acquired drink in the room before setting off on a quest for Cassoulet; we'd resolved to try the local dish and had seen a prospective venue the previous day, out of the tourist areas, so off we went in the hope of getting the local dish in the big orange book.

### ***So it's come to this... Cassoulet scooping!***

We had a quick lurk outside the café to confirm our choice; it seemed to be a cosy yet spacious venue with an upstairs eating area so, with the lack of any other decent-looking alternatives, in we went with the hope of finding a good resident-style Cassoulet as opposed to a tourist-style one. We chose a table upstairs in the deserted restaurant - as no-one was eating in the bar downstairs - and waited for events to unfold; we didn't have to wait long before the older barman, who I presume was the owner, arrived and asked what we wanted. In my best *Français*, I asked for the menu, but was told;

"There is no menu - Cassoulet or Lasagne!" with a very Gallic shrug of the shoulders.

This sounded like the sort of place we liked, no pretentious crap just (hopefully) good food, so we ordered two Cassoulets – or is that Cassouli? - before the younger barman arrived to ascertain our alcoholic requirements. I'd already seen there was nothing on the bar I required beer-wise (Wel Scotch was the rarest thing) so we asked what wine was available; at this, he scurried off, presumably to the cellar, and returned with three bottles - a 75cl, a 50cl and a 37.5cl! I was very impressed with this place so far; only two choices for food and three for wine, and I was fervently hoping the food would live up to my current impression! We chose the half bottle of Minervois on account of it being a very local wine from just outside the city and it being in the pocket wine book, and I was immediately pleased we had as it was a full, tannic, rich and fruity wine, being drunk young as is the tendency in France.

Two steaming dishes of Cassoulet soon arrived along with a basketful of bread and we tucked in; I don't know what makes a good example of this dish but this one certainly hit the spot with me with it's buttery beans, coarse herby sausage and gamey meat all contained within a sauce with a silky-smooth consistency, presumably as a result of the goose fat I found at the bottom of the pot! Ten minutes later our dishes were empty and I sat back with a huge smile - that had been a superb meal and certainly hadn't been the microwaved tourist tat I'd feared we would find. The wine was also a cracking example of the Minervois appellation so when we finally left, half an hour later after taking amiably with the owners, we were very happy with life indeed.

Back at the hotel we carried on where we had left off the previous evening with the local Muscat de Saint-Jean de Minervois, then the Pacherenc-du-Vic-Bilh, followed by the remains of the Maury, all helped down with yet more cheese scoops in the form of a pungent block of Beaufort; by the time we'd finished all the wine and cheese it was quite late and we only had time for some half-hearted packing before dossing out. We had an early flight the next morning and thus needed to be out of the hotel by 08:30, so packing might have been a good idea to give us an extra ten minutes doss... hindsight, eh?!

**Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2006.**

### ***Where did that shop go?***

Despite our almost total lack of clearing up the detritus from our last two days in the bijou room we were out by just before 08:30 and trudged along deserted streets towards the SNCF station where we'd catch the airport bus; this move had been decided on as, despite the bus stopping much closer to our hotel, we were determined to get our money's worth out of the journey and, besides, we knew where the stop at *la gare* was! It soon became apparent that we'd seriously misjudged the time required to walk to the station as we arrived with 25 minutes still to go before the bus was due to depart and, just to put a cap on things, heavy rain began to fall! After a quick look around the station, including a quick play with the ticket machine, we became bored and resigned ourselves to sit in the little bus stop which at least gave shelter from the deluge.

Much to our surprise, the navette suddenly arrived - but travelling in the wrong direction! I scampered across the road to intercept it, but it soon became apparent that the bus was turning round in the station entrance before backing up to our bus stop and so I sheepishly returned and we climbed aboard, paying the extortionate €5 fare yet again, which still felt like robbery! Despite the bus not leaving for 20 minutes, sitting on a dry bus was 100% better than sitting in a damp bus shelter, so we took advantage of the time to repack our bags better and I attempted to get a signal on my GPS mini-Aston but, for some reason, the satellites weren't co-operating.

We headed out through the city, past our hotel, over the river and then to the gates of the medieval city where we picked up a few more passengers, laden with huge rucksacks on wheels which could hold enough to feed an army over winter, before we finally left the city behind and headed for the airport. As we passed field after field of vines there was a brief spectacular view of the turret-encrusted walls looming over a field of snaking vines; this would have been the perfect picture of Carcassonne although, even if I'd had a camera to hand, the weather wasn't exactly conducive to photography...

At the airport, we were pleased to walk straight up to the check-in desks for the East Midland flight, but less than happy to be allocated sequence numbers of 134 and 135; it seems as if the airport is one of those which prints out the boarding cards beforehand and then splits the pack amongst the check-in desks, meaning that if you pick the wrong desk you still get a ludicrously high number despite theoretically being the first to check in - it's a shambles, but there wasn't a lot we could do and so we went through the single x-ray machine where, predictably, I had to remove half my clothes to pass through.

Safely in airside we found ourselves in a long, narrow room which led straight out onto the tarmac where nothing was happening; we thought that a quick look in the shop we'd seen from the check-in desks might while away a few minutes, but after we'd walked right to the end of the room and found nothing but a plasterboard wall, it became clear that for some obscure reason the shop was situated landside - what's the point of that then? It's not as if you can buy anything then take it through security now that bottles of wine are classed as the same security risk as a phial of Polonium-210... so, we had over an hour sat in a shed with absolutely nothing to look at - cheers then!

Another potential problem soon reared its head with the discovery there is only one toilet each airside which could be an issue should a full plane-load be waiting for boarding! Happily, our flight back was no more than two-thirds full and it even arrived 40 minutes early due to very high tailwinds which slightly affected our return trip although, having departed half an hour early, we were still twenty minutes early into East Midlands to the accompaniment of a PA announcement declaring;

"Bing-bong! You're on another Ryanair on-time arrival!"

Well, I suppose it makes a change from them trying to flog all manner of tat such as scratchcards, crappy drinks in bags, celebrity perfumes, rubbish gifts and the like...

### **Conclusions.**

Don't do to [Carcassonne](#) if you're after scoops - in fact, don't go to France if you're after scoops full stop - with the exception of Lille, apparently! There might be a brewery in Carcassonne or there might not, depending on who you believe, but the fact is a beer is available called Trencavel, named after the last Viscount of the city, and it's badged as "Biere d'Occitaine" which seems to suggest it's brewed somewhere around there if not actually in Carcassonne itself. This supposed brewery is called "Le Biere de la Cite" or "Domaine de Sautés", again depending on who you believe, and the beer itself is 5.8% although I wouldn't really shout it up as a great example of artisanal brewing to be honest - bland is probably the best word I can use to describe it's attributes fully.

Other beers are available in bars across the city, but they're mainly the products of multinationals and none of them are really worth bothering with unless you're *really* desperate - and even then I'd not bother. Heineken produce Pelforth and Affligem, whilst Kronenbourg (S&N) churn out 1664, [Wel Scotch](#) plus a load of other crap you just don't want to try. We saw a bar serving [Karlsbrau](#) from Brasserie de Saverne in the Alsace on Rue Plô in the Medieval city but that was about it for beer; even the supermarkets (one on Blvd Omer Sarraut opposite the station and another on Place Carnot in the heart of the Ville Basse) don't have a fat lot save dross like Desperados - which is what you'll need to be if you want to scoop anything in France!

Anyhow, if you're in France then you should be drinking wine; they do make an awful lot of the stuff, and the good news is that a lot of the unknown appellations of France are situated around the city and down towards the Pyrenees. Most of these AC's are lesser known than others for reasons of size and offer some of the most interesting and characterful French wine you'll find anywhere - for reds, try a Madiran, Irouleguy or Cahors or for white have a go with Jurançon or Pacherenc-du-Vic-Bilh and see what the French can really do with the grape.

Basically, the only reason to visit [Carcassonne](#) is to see the historic Medieval city - and it's certainly worth a visit, being one of the most emblematic sights in all of France and, as long as you visit off-season, a pleasure to explore and wander around. The local [Cassoulet](#) (basically a duck, bean and sausage stew) is well worth a try, as are the local wines, so if you're after a "normals" weekend with a lot of scenery and culture then there's a lot worse places to visit, and with Ryanair's low fares the trip won't break the bank, either.

### **Getting there and getting around there and staying there.**

Carcassonne's tiny [airport](#) at Salvaza must be one of the smallest I've visited thus far in my European scooping career. It's about [3 miles](#) from the city centre tops, but the *navette* buses - run by Agglobus, the local operator - take a long and winding road into the city to give the impression that it's a long way and to justify the outrageous €5 flat fare (pay the driver); if there are more than two of you then a taxi will almost certainly be cheaper. The airport is almost exclusively served by Ryanair, who operate flights to East Midlands, Liverpool, Shannon,

Stansted and Dublin. Facilities at the airport are extremely limited with absolutely nowt airside - not even a shop, nothing - although there is an ATM on the exterior wall outside arrivals. There's also a restaurant upstairs landside which promised "biere preisson" (draught beer) but we weren't interested enough to see what it was! There is a shop, selling what looked like local goods and wine, but it's landside and so is pretty irrelevant with the new security rules.

Once you've got to Carcassonne itself, things look a bit better. The city has an SNCF station providing links to Toulouse and elsewhere, and the city is also on the Canal du Midi so you could always escape by boat. The city's bus services are provided by Agglobus although it's doubtful you'd need to use them as they serve the local population's needs not tourists. As mentioned in main report, there is a little toy tourist train thing in the city itself (and a wee one it is too) but I could see no advantages in getting on the thing as it moves at a walking pace and visibility is better when you're walking anyhow!

We stayed at the IBIS Centrum on Place Gambetta in the Ville Basse (although close to the river and ten minutes from the citadel) for a reasonable €62 a night room-only, although the rooms are a touch bijou; there are plenty of posh hotels either in or close to the old town if you want to spend more than that – Carcassonne hotels aren't cheap, even off-season! Beware also that there is more than one IBIS in town, and the others are some way out of town to the east although I think there is a bus service into town from there.

### ***Beers and pubs of the weekend.***

I shan't bother with this for Carcassonne as I only scored two beers and so, despite the Trencavel being very bland, it would therefore still get placed by default! As far as bars went, the Café Trouvère on Place Marcou right in the medieval city and was okay if a bit of a tourist honeypot, although they do sell the rare Trencavel beer. The bar on Rue Courtejaire where we ate Cassoulet looked a decent enough little place although the best beer they had seemed to be Wel Scotch!

So there, a full report with only two beers mentioned! Maybe it was a total waste of my time, but as 95% of the work on this drivel was done during work time I feel vindicated that I didn't waste my precious hours slaving over it and, anyhow, it's the only way I'm going to get paid to write beer reports!

OK, on with the Harz one now... really, it's never ending...