

French charmer: Holidaying en famille like the Famous Five in colourful Corbieres

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Beaches, vineyards, castles - and more baguettes than you can shake a stick at. Not only that, le pain is not delivered from automated machines like the ones those busy people in Paris enjoy, but over the counter of a delightfully old-fashioned village boulangerie.

It's no surprise - because this corner of the country seems to boast almost every slice of life that good old France has to offer.

Corbieres stretches over rolling countryside running down to the Mediterranean near the border with Spain.



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Picture perfect: The village of Lagrasse makes for a great base

With our two children, aged eight and four, we chose as our base a nearly-new, purpose-built riverside village created on the site where once a medieval monastery stood.

Les Jardins de Saint Benoit is effectively a smart hotel on a 20-acre site with houses instead of rooms, which means you get one to five bedrooms and can cook for yourself if you want. But you can also ring for fresh linen or a cleaner.

The houses are well-equipped for self-catering with modern interiors, their own little terrace or garden and flower beds with an almost narcotic aroma of rosemary and lavender.

Hardly any couples come here *sans enfants*, but if you want to relax away from your sprogs, there's a spa where you can swim in peace or flop on a lounger.

We did have a look at the children's club on site - for four-to-12-year-olds - where there are arts and crafts sessions, and rambles down to the shallow River Nielle. But decided to go exploring *en famille*, instead.

One morning, the river provided a delightful Famous Five-style adventure as we scrambled around the rocks, peering into pools and paddling in the cool water.

Having fished the smallest member of the party out of one shallow pool into which she'd slipped, we discovered a charming little flat stone bridge which (once we'd checked for trolls underneath) took us across the river and on to a path past several enticing cottage gardens into the village of St Laurent de la Cabrerisse.



© Alamy

Famous Five: Families can enjoy some old-fashioned fun in the water

A few miles to the north-west, we rambled awestruck in the ancient fortified city of Carcassonne, with its pristine and well-preserved, prettily crenellated walls. And to the West is the elegant village of Lagrasse and its impressive abbey.

After day trips in the car, we appreciated the relaxed intimacy of the village all the more. In fact, other than an excursion or two to the supermarket, you might happily stay on site all week.

The children loved flinging boules in the vague direction of the jack - though they came closer to bruising their father's unprotected toes - and were happy to spend hours splashing around in the pool.

The series of village events organised in the central gravelled area were a roaring success - like a scene from *The Darling Buds Of May*.

One night, a variety of old-fashioned wooden children's games was set up, and scores of families - lots of them Brits with well-scrubbed children in tow - materialised to chat and laugh in the evening sun.

Saint Laurent is safe, clean, elegant, and infused with the charm of the vineyards and vegetable gardens bordering its riverside. If you want to explore this varied and fascinating region, this is a pretty good place to start.

Travel Facts

One night in a one bedroom town house at Les Jardins de Saint Benoit costs from £150 (00 33 4 67 11 87 15, www.garrigaeresorts.com). EasyJet flies from London Gatwick to Toulouse from £52 return (www.easyjet.com).