

Carcassonne.



The origins of Carcassonne date back to about 3500 BC, and has been an important trading settlement since the 6th Century BC, and fortified by the Romans around 100 BC. The main part of the lower courses on the northern ramparts date from this time. The fortified city itself consists essentially of a concentric design with two outer walls with towers .

and barbicans to prevent attack by siege engines. The castle itself possesses its own drawbridge and ditch leading to a central keep. The walls consist of 53 towers built over quite a long period. One of these towers housed the Catholic Inquisition in the 13th Century and is still known as "The Inquisition Tower". Today there is a museum "Musée de la Torture", which shows some of the original torture equipment employed by the Church.

Carcassonne was struck off the roster of official fortifications under Napoleon and the Restoration, and the fortified part of the city fell into such disrepair that in 1849 the French government decided that it should be demolished. It was only due to a massive public uproar, that the government changed its mind and restoration started in 1853. The city is now a UNESCO world heritage site.

Spend about an hour walking around the ramparts between the inner and outer walls. You'll get a very good impression of the castle and ramparts and a real feeling for the scale of the fortress.

Also worth a visit is the Basilica of Saint-Nazaire, this was the former cathedral of the medieval city, restored by Viollet-le-Duc in the mid-19th century. A muscular, brooding, dark Romanesque nave counterpointed by soaring late Gothic windows and columns in the choir and chancel. There are some excellent stained glass including two rose windows and a Tree of Jesse. Interesting monumental work and sculptures include a moving early C16th polychrome pieta. Superb early organ and wonderful acoustics, and quite often there will be a choir singing.



If all the walking around has gotten you exhausted you can relax by going on a boat trip on the Canal du Midi, which is the second UNESCO World Heritage Site that you can see in Carcassonne. It was the vision more than three centuries ago, of Pierre-Paul Riquet, whose dream it was to link the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. It was funded largely by himself, There is commentary in English. The trip includes going through some locks (the oval shape of the locks is one of the hallmarks of the Canal du Midi) and a history of the canal. It is lined either side by the characteristic double row of plane trees, some of which are over 300 years old. If you are there in spring, the wild iris and gladioli that grow along its banks will enchant you. The boats leave from opposite the railway station, just to the east of the bridge, between April and November, every day except Mondays. Tickets can be brought in advance or on the spot.