

Carcassonne, France: A Medieval Walled City

by Cheryl Pendry, *PassPorter Featured Columnist*

Carcassonne is not a name I'd been familiar with, until I was told about this beautiful medieval walled city in the south west of France by my mother-in-law. Immediately, I mentally put it on to a "bucket list" of places to stop at, if we were ever to make a trip by road down to my in-law's villa on Spain's Costa Blanca.

The opportunity finally arose for us to take enough time off work to make the 3,000 km round trip and, of course, Carcassonne was then high on my list of places to visit. Located almost midway between the cities of Toulouse and Perpignan in the region of Languedoc-Roussillon, it's an easy enough place to get to, which probably explains why it attracts so many visitors. Having made a stop on our way there, we arrived late morning, and of course, the car parks were busy by then, but despite that, we had no problem with parking. We were immediately impressed by the fact that the first hour's parking was free, allowing people, presumably more likely to be residents and visitors from nearby, to pop into the city and enjoy a little bit of shopping or perhaps a quick meal, without having to pay for parking.

The medieval city stands on a steep bank, overlooking the River Aude, beside the modern day city, known as the Basse Ville (or lower city) which seems to sprawl for some distance in front of you. The city was originally settled because of its strategic location between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. It was also used as a stopping off point between the Iberian peninsula, what we know today as Spain and Portugal, and the rest of Europe.

As with many places in Europe, the first settlers here to put their mark on the place were the Romans more than 2,000 years ago. It went on to become a key site for many battles over the following 1,000 years or so, but came into its own in the medieval era. In the 12th century, it was owned by the Trencavels, who left their mark on the city, building the chateau and the cathedral that still stand today.

Both chateau and cathedral are impressive, with the chateau really another fortress within this already walled-in city. It has a moat, with five towers overlooking it, and today makes for a beautiful picture postcard scene. We found the cathedral, Basilique St. Nazaire a little less impressive. It's still a lovely place, but although travel does broaden the mind, sometimes it can dull the impact of the places you see. Having now seen many other stunning Gothic cathedrals throughout France,

we looked at this one and felt it was something we'd seen before elsewhere, with nothing outstanding to commend it.

Sadly for Carcassonne, as the wars receded over the next few hundred years the city fell into decline, and it was only thanks to the work of the 19th century historian Viollet-le-Duc that it was restored to its former glory. Of course, restoration work will always be contentious and, while I'm sure there are some people who'd rather see this place in the state it was left in, personally I'm glad that someone took the time to do this work and give us an idea of how it would have looked hundreds of years ago.

As we walked up to the main entrance to the city, we spotted Le Petit Train, or small train, waiting outside the imposing walls and we decided to take a tour on it to get more of a feel for how big the city is. The quick answer is that it's huge -- or that's certainly how it feels when you view it from outside the walls. I guess it's probably the right feeling, as in total, the walls are around two miles long. That's a lot of wall to defend!

There are two sets of ramparts, with a space in between them and a total of 52 towers dotted along both sets of walls. Once you view it from below or a little distance away, the towers make it look more like a fairytale castle than anything else, although of course, for much of its life, it was anything but that.

The city has only been taken in battle twice in its history, and as you view it from outside, you can certainly understand why. It's an imposing sight and one I'd have thought twice about attacking.

Once we completed our external tour, we headed inside through the imposing Porte Narbonnaise, with its two external towers that date from 1280. The defences as you go through what is now the main entrance into Carcassonne include two iron doors, two portcullises, a moat, and a drawbridge. This is not somewhere you'd have entered easily in centuries gone by.

Once inside, it's easy to forget that this was designed as a fortress. Today, it's thronged with people, exploring the huge variety of shops along the little streets, and the restaurants. You really can buy just about any type of souvenir here, and indeed we even saw swords being sold in some shops! Probably the biggest problem here is the amount of choice you're presented with. We wandered for a good hour or so, checking out all the restaurants, and trying to decide which would be best for us for a hearty lunch. Every turn we took led us into another shopping area with more places to eat. You certainly won't starve in

here, and it's good to see that nearly every place we passed is open from late morning until late night, with no pause in serving.

We eventually made our way to the back of the city, and the Porte d'Aube, almost opposite the main entrance we'd come in, with its view over the more modern city below us. It must be wonderful to live there and be able to look up at this beautiful sight above you. If I lived there, I'd be heading up for regular visits, perhaps to browse the shops, have a meal or just to enjoy the wonderful scenery.

Perhaps the biggest joy of this place is there's no fee whatsoever, apart from what you pay to park here, to visit Carcassonne. It's a beautiful place to stop and spend time, and should our travels take us down to that part of France again, we'll definitely be calling in again.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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