



SAISSAC

CASTEL

T O U R G U I D E

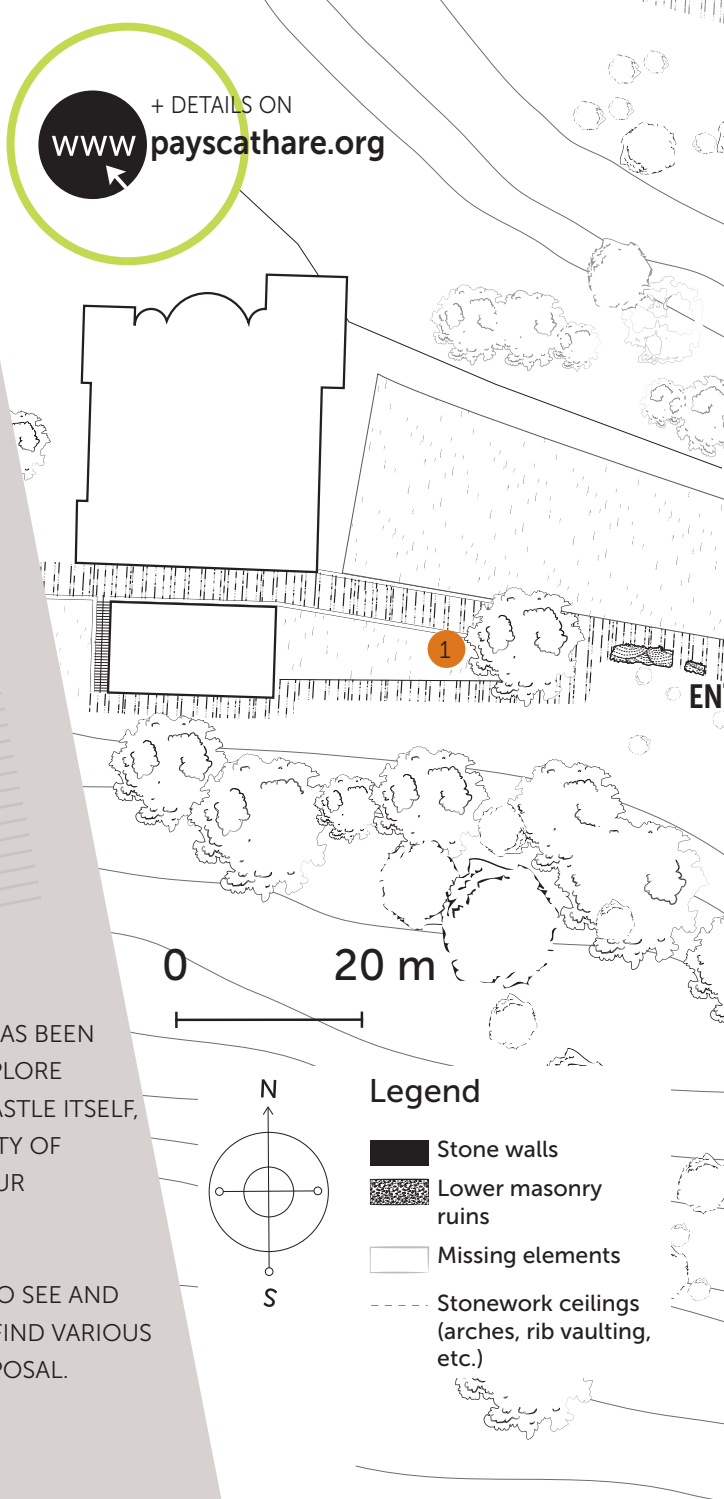


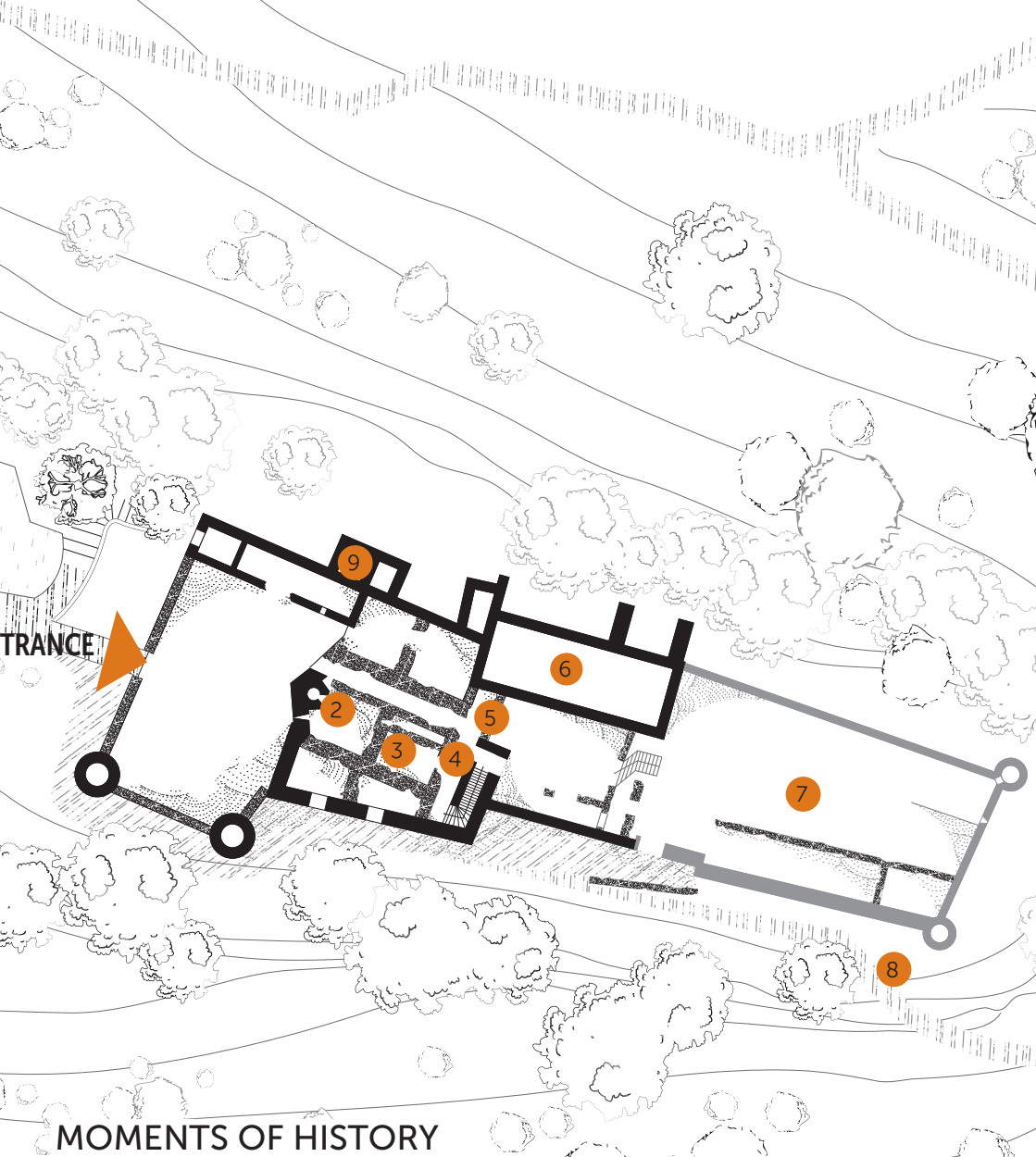
SAISSAC CASTLE

+ DETAILS ON
www.payscathare.org

THIS VISITOR COMPANION HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO HELP YOU EXPLORE THE SITE AT SAISSAC: THE CASTLE ITSELF, THE VILLAGE AND THE BEAUTY OF NATURE. IT INCLUDES ALL OUR FAVOURITE SPOTS...

AND FOR THOSE CURIOUS TO SEE AND FIND OUT MORE, YOU WILL FIND VARIOUS OTHER TOOLS AT YOUR DISPOSAL.





MOMENTS OF HISTORY

A moonless night around 1270 Imagine, a silhouette glides out of a house, not far from the Church of Saint Michel. Everything is calm, you can hear the water running alongside the mill. The silhouette, clearly carrying something, goes up the few streets in the new village. It is not fortified, you can leave easily. The figure climbs the hill. Enters a field. Digs a hole, and places the load inside. And then returns to the village. The Inquisition challenges every believer, every friend of a believer, simple witnesses. Rovers abound. You must watch your back, be aware of the jealous. The earth is the safest friend, it will keep hold of this mysterious package for many years. 2000 deniers with the effigy of Saint Louis, royal money, real treasure...



1

A TEMPORAL MILLEFEUILLE

A first glimpse reveals a medieval-looking fortress standing behind its moat. The wide esplanade where find ourselves gives us another impression. This large space lined with the remains of ramparts, crossed by a paved path coming from the village, has a very residential feel: we can easily imagine a carriage rattling over these cobblestones up to the castle door...

+ Further information

The ditch in front of the castle, created in the 14th century, has two watchtowers on the right, which were added later. Throughout the castle, from the 10th century to the present day, each era has left its mark, sometimes its scars.



👁 More to see

The village of Saissac overlooks the castle. This is surprising, as normally the castle dominates. The castle's story after the Albigensian crusade explains this peculiarity. The village was built at the end of the 13th century, long after the castle. The ramparts that can be seen going up towards the church are from that time.



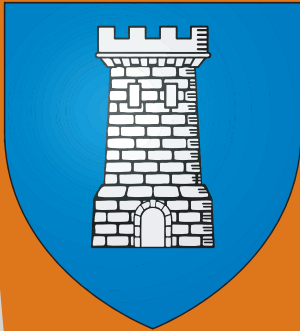
GRANDEUR AND OUTRAGE

THE MAIN TOWER

2

This tower, which includes the primitive dungeon, was built at the end of the 13th century. The seigniorship of Saissac passed to the hands of crossed lords who led a crusade to answer the call of the Papacy. It was to eradicate what the Pope considered a heresy, Catharism. Saissac was a fine catch. Together with Lastours, it was one of the richest seigneuries in the Montagne Noire...

BERTRAND DE SAISSAC, AN IMPORTANT LORD



Bertrand, lord of Saissac at the end of the 12th century was a rich lord, whose brilliant court was frequented by troubadours and their entourage of jugglers and musicians. There, you could meet celebrities, like Peire Vidal or Raimon Miraval, who, around then, invented '*fin'amor*', a new literary form. You could also hear '*sirventés*', satirical and political poems. Bertrand was a leading figure, guardian of the young viscount of Carcassonne, Raymond Roger Trencavel. He was also a sympathiser of the Cathar faith and believers found a safe haven with him.

+ Further information

In the Middle Ages the question of faith was fundamental. It was at the heart of individual concerns: the devil, sin, death... topics which affected everyday life. It was also, with the domination of the Church of Rome, what structured society. The lords of Saissac, who protected the Cathar believers, also performed the duties of every great Christian lord. They sponsored the foundation of the abbey of Compagnes, which would become Sainte-Marie de Villelongue, where Cistercian monks settled. This order was, however, very committed to the fight against Cathar heresy. They were one of the main founders of the Pexiora Knights Hospitaller Commandery in Lauragais.

+ Further information

Saissac castle fell without a struggle into French hands. It is likely that Bertrand was, at that time, on the ramparts of Carcassonne alongside Viscount Trencavel, during the siege of 1209. The new lord of Saissac was Bouchard de Marly, a companion of Simon de Montfort, leader of the Crusade. Ironically, Bouchard de Marly would be captured by the lord of Cabaret during an ambush and would serve as hostage to this lord to negotiate his surrender.

👁 More to see



As in all the castles of our region which became royal at the end of the Crusade, Saissac castle was refortified in the 13th -14th centuries. The main tower, reinforced, was equipped with a door and a huge portcullis: the traces are visible on the left of the tower.

👁 More to see



Unlike the arrowslits of the same period, which were in a stirrup form to allow crossbow shooting, they have no widenings. They were probably used to light the stairs.

👁 More to see

A simple little window with a white frame catches your eye, asks questions. It is alone. Around it, there are missing stones, openings which yawn sadly... This is the evidence of successive looting. The castle was used as a quarry for many houses in the village where its elements were reused. It was even bought in the late 19th century, to be broken up. These unfortunate owners were looking for a fantastic treasure... and to find it, used an explosive.





ABUNDANCE AND DEFENCE

THE TIME OF PASTEL 3

In the middle of the 16th century the Sieur de Bernuy acquired the medieval castle of Saissac. He was one of the richest men in Christendom. His family made its fortune thanks to the plant known in Lauragais as 'Pays de Cocagne': pastel. Pastel with its blue tint... And you were in the pink if you could exploit it. Bernuy used his fortune to enlarge the castle and make it a residence worthy of its status.

Historic landscapes 4

The magnificent landscape you see when you lean on this large window frame is a clear indication of the strategic interest of Saissac castle. It looks over the Lauragais and Carcassonne plains, and in the distance, the Pyrenees. It is in a meeting point for two worlds, which, in the 11th -12th centuries, fought over Languedoc. These were the earldoms of Barcelona and Toulouse who battled during the 'Great Southern War'.



More to see

With you back to this opening, the rear of the dungeon reveals strong bases for walls with a different construction: the stones are arranged in a herringbone pattern. This method is called '*opus spicatum*'. These are the remains of the buttresses of the primitive tower, which carbon dating estimates was constructed between 960 and 1020. Saissac was then the seat of a viguerie, an administrative and military court.

+ Further information



Until the 18th century, the lords of Saissac were of high nobility. Built in barony, then in marquise, it passed into the hands of the House of Luynes, one of the most powerful of the kingdom. One of its young members, who had a somewhat erratic life, can be seen in the letters of Madame de Sevigne under the name of 'Lord of Cessac'...



OLD LANDSCAPES

The exhibition on this floor shows the landscape at the beginning of the 20th century, when pastures dominated. What a change! It also introduces the idea of treasure... which is not very far from you...

The kitchens 5

These are imposing kitchens, where you can imagine many people at work. The meal time is approaching. Cabbage, beans, focaccia bread and biscuits are piled up on the table. The wine is resting in jars, terracotta pots are simmering on the fire, and two kitchen boys turn a spit in the huge fireplace, sparks flashing every time a little fat drips... Dogs in search of some bones to chew are sent out. We clean the floor with lots of water...



Aldonce's rooms 6

This building, dated to the end of the 16th century, is named after the daughter of M. de Bernuy, Aldonce. It was renovated in the 2000s. This is where Saissac's treasures are displayed. Monetary, but also knowledge. What would you buy with so much money in the Middle Ages? How was the money made? What was the punishment for forgers?... Questions abound, and answers too, which fascinate young and old alike.



+ Further information

This is a real treasure that emerged from the bowels of the Earth in 1979: the most important set of the first royal coins found in Languedoc.

Who buried it and why?

The Inquisition was everywhere at the time, is this a clue?...

7 The Renaissance was the era of humanism: arts and sciences developed, architecture sought to blend harmony and comfort, the individual asserted themselves... But the 16th century also saw the birth of a bloody fratricidal conflict: the wars of religion, which pitted Catholics against Protestants throughout the kingdom. Here, as elsewhere, the situation was tense. Protestants attacked and took the village twice. But the castle, renovated by Jean de Carmaing, stood firm.

+ Further information

The castle, perched on a rocky outcrop, with the village to the north, and flanked by the steep valleys of Aiguebelle to the west, and Vernassonne to the east, is well guarded. The strong gate, the ramparts and the turrets on the third terrace, equipped with cannons, were added to reinforce its weak point, the south. The old Roman and medieval paths, still climb this slope from the plain...



The castrum 8

At the end of this small path, scattered in wild nature, the remains of the first village of Saissac can be seen. A gate, the Toulouse gate, is still standing. It was the entrance to the castrum, or fortified village, as you came from the plain. Lower down, by the river, the mills turned using the power of water to clean, grind, and process the ore...

+ Further information

In the Montagne Noire, iron, copper and silver ore abound. Mining has been going on in Saissac since ancient times. In the Middle Ages, it was a source of power for the seigneuries of the region like those of Lastours.

The latrines 9

This immense wall reveals the real dimension of the castle, its true power. The tower has latrines on each floor, a luxury. The waste descended through a conduit to the visible hole at the base. This could have been a weak point, like for Château-Gaillard, which was taken by this access point. But here, the impassable cliff that dominates Vernassonne replaces a rampart.



👁 More to see

Oval openings line the walls and turrets. These were for cannons that covered all lines of fire.



THE VILLAGE OF SAISSAC

THE VILLAGE

This is the kingdom of water. It runs everywhere in the village, which is full of fountains, washhouses and drinking taps. It trickles through the streets, thunders under a terrace, and disappears by the mill... Two rivers have carved their valleys on either side of the village and its castle: to the west, the Aiguebelle, to the east, the Vernassonne.



FROM THE CHURCH OF SAINT MICHEL TO THE "PLACE AUX HERBES"
Saint Michel is Saissac's patron saint. The church dedicated to him was built in the 14th century, and has a single nave, lined with side chapels with blue vaults, dotted with stars. Marble from Caunes-Minervois can be seen everywhere. Going up rue de Verdun, you come across your first fountain. Turn left a little further on to reach the Place aux Herbes, on the right. It is in the heart of the village. It is where you bought fruits, vegetables and herbs, for cooking and for healing. In the centre, there is a fountain dating from 1722.

THE "PORTE D'AUTAN"

The Porte d'Autan guards the entrance to the village, and was created after the forced abandonment of the *castrum* after the Albigensian Crusade. The path climbs up to the plain, an old Roman road, and ends there. We can see three coats of arms from the 13th and 14th centuries. Imagine a portcullis, enormous leaves, a passage and a second door, the remains of which, a piece of the arch and a hinge, are visible on the wall on the right, going towards the washhouse. Under François I, five gates, complete with turrets and towers, defended the village.





THE WASHHOUSE

This crossroads where the washhouse is located, marks the boundary between the village and one of its suburbs. The Cers and Autan 'barris' or districts, developed at the end of the 17th century. The period was quiet and prosperous, and saw the bourgeois and artisans settle here: notary, apothecary, inn-keeper, trader, parchment

maker, cradle manufacturer, clog maker... Populated the village and its suburbs. The cloth and wood industries, as well as sheep farming, provided jobs: millers, drovers and shepherds, charcoal burners, yoke makers, farm hands... were all required. The washerwomen would meet at the washhouse, plunge their hands into the icy water, then warm up with laughter, songs, and chat...

THE BIG TOWER AND THE ROUSSIGNOLE TOWER

These two medieval towers, with machicolation, framed the new gate in the 16th century. Locals call the slender tower, the 'Rossignol', or nightingale, because a bird would have nested there. The grosse, or big, tower, is 18 metres high, and has a clear view of all the surroundings (closed to the public). Seen from here, the castle appears isolated on its outcrop, like the castles of Lastours, bordered by rivers, which seem to navigate through the landscape.



THE FOIRAIL

The wide space around the towers was used for fairs. During celebrations, villagers decorated a greasy pole: at the top, sweets, sausages or poultry hung from a cartwheel, the reward for anyone who managed to climb the greased mast... On the ground, business would be going well.

Saissac is known for its pigs that we look for at the fair of Saint Thomas:

'Per Sant Tomàs, tua ton pòrc gras/Se non l'as pas/A Saissac le traparàs'

'Saint Thomas, kill your fattened pig, if you don't have it, you'll catch it at Saissac.'

TRIPS

At the end of the 19th century, Saissac was connected to Bram by a narrow railway. Taking the 'little tram' was quite a picturesque adventure, full of steam, squeaks and skids. The small road called 'La Promenade', which you will find a little further on, in front of the pharmacy, takes you along the route of this train, for a short and pleasant walk. On your return by rue de Lilas, you will have a magnificent panorama of Saissac, the castle, and the Pyrenees. You can then walk down the road, back to the village.

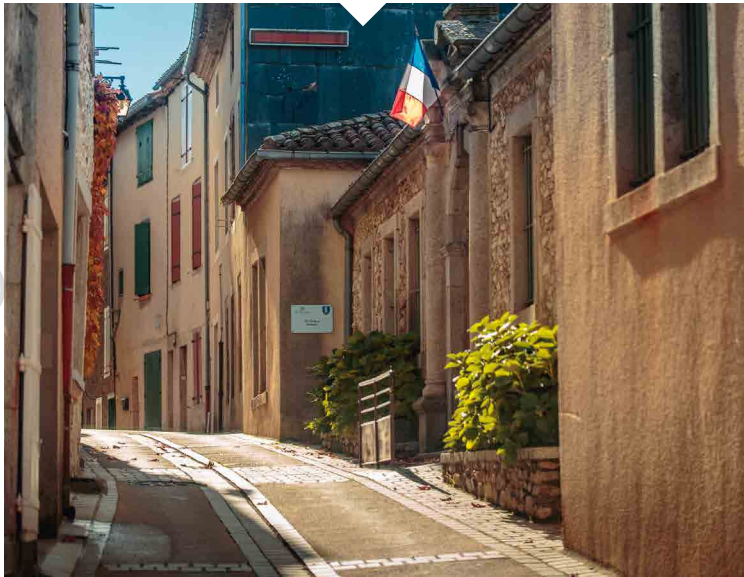


THE "MAISON DES SAPTÉS"

The Saptés were gentlemen from Tuchan whom Colbert summoned to teach the residents of Saissac to weave sheets as fine as those from Holland. Their house, a veritable little fortified palace, with turrets and machicolation, is evidence of their importance. Until the 19th century, the cloth industry flourished in Saissac and enjoyed an excellent reputation in the Levant region.

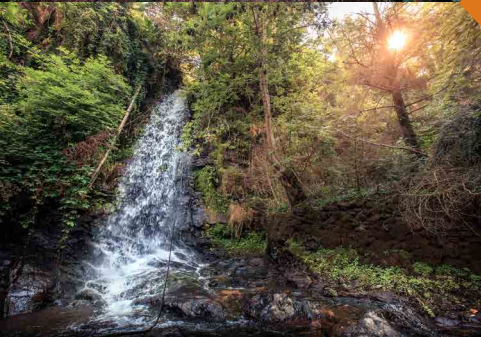
THE "LA RUE DU BÉAL"

To the left of the Maison des Saptés, there is a postern, a small covered passage, which leads to rue du Béal. Listen: the sound of a small waterfall hitting the ground. It springs forth from the béal, or canal, covered in large slabs. Since the 17th century, this channel has brought the waters of the Aiguebelle and Vernassonne to irrigate the village, and to power its mills, sawmills...



THE ART OF SHAPE

In front of the Town Hall, a fountain is adorned with a Marianne by the Beziers sculptor Jean-Antoine Injalbert. Fine and natural, it is one of the most common representations of Marianne from the late 19th and early 20th century. Taking the stairs back to the road, a covered terrace, facing the rue du Béal, houses a typically Art Nouveau carved gate. A few metres further, at the end of a small car park, there is a magnificent Louis XII style house, a transition between Gothic art and the first Renaissance.



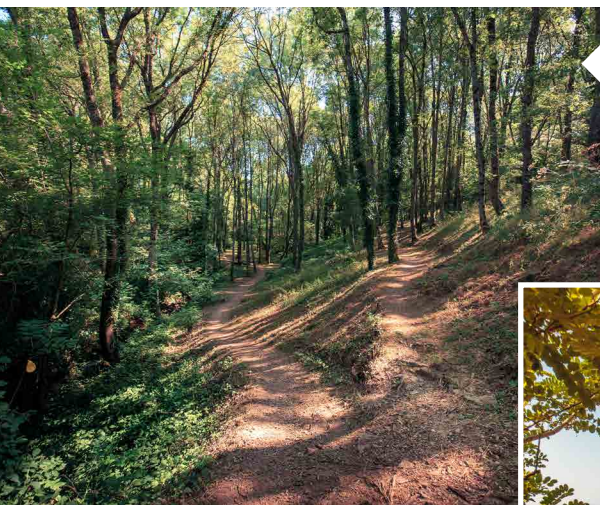
GETAWAY

Opposite the Art Nouveau gate, rue Urbain Blanc, marked by a fountain, plunges towards the village. A footbridge spans a part of the béal where the water rushes like a small torrent under the esplanade before coming back to the surface between the houses. At the end, rue Bertrand de Saissac goes along the gardens towards the castle, following the old rampart. The Cers gate was demolished to make way for it.

Further on, a little before the castle, on the right, an alley goes down into the gardens. It leads along the banks of the Aiguebelle, to a waterfall where you can see the remains of fuller mills. You can turn and make your way back along the rural path at this point, or continue until the end. It brings you to the road to Revel, at the end of rue des Lilas, which you can then take to get to the Promenade, and then the porte d'Autan.



NEARBY



THE ARBORETUM

Located next to the village, the arboretum is popular with families, with its streams, waterfalls and botanical trail, as well as waterways, sports facilities and play areas...



THE RIGOLE

A few kilometres above Saissac, a beautiful walk along the Rigole, which feeds the Canal du Midi. Walking or cycling with, on some circuits, beautiful views of Saissac.



PRACTICAL INFORMATION



GOOD PRACTICES

Walking shoes

Pets welcome



SERVICES

TOILETS

Toilets are available in the village and on the Promenade



PARKING

Free car parks in the village. Parking for mobile homes is available opposite the campsite, on the way out of the village, towards Revel.



CASH WITHDRAWAL

Cash machine outside the Post Office.



SHOP

In the castle reception area.



TOURISM OFFICE of the Montagne Noire

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