**The alternative South of France -Top 5 toddler-friendly activities in Languedoc**

It may not have the prestige of its neighbour Provence, but the Languedoc region of France has a *je ne sais quois* of its own. We chose the area for our first holiday abroad with our two-year-old daughter and it did not disappoint.

Here are our top 5 things to do while you’re there:

1. **The Pont du Gard -** Possibly one of the most show-stopping swimming locations on the planet. Bobbing around in the crystal-clear waters under the world’s largest surviving Roman aqueduct was a definite highlight of our trip.

You don’t need to be a history buff to appreciate the spectacular scenery and jaw-dropping feats of engineering on show here. Our daughter loved paddling in the river and picnicking on its banks. There’s also a special children’s section of the museum, which is a useful place to cool down on a hot day.

Entry is 8.50 Euros for adults but free for children under six, and you can easily spend the whole day there. Lots of the site is accessible with a pushchair but if you want to fully explore the surrounding parkland a carrier is a better bet as there are lots of steep steps.

1. **Train a Vapeur des Cevennes (The steam train of the Cevennes) -** What toddler doesn’t love areal-lifeThomas the Tank Engine? The Train au Cevennes is a steam train that takes you up into the mountains through gorgeous wooded valleys. The sounds, the smells, the soot and the dark tunnels carved through the mountains all add up to a memorable experience. Never mind that this holiday was our daughter’s first time on an aeroplane, she’s still telling anyone who will listen about the “choo choo”.

We caught the train from Anduze and took the 40-minute journey to St Jean du Gard where you can stop for a few hours for lunch before heading back. There’s a nice market there on a Tuesday morning but not a huge amount of other things to do, so I wouldn’t advise spending the whole day there.

1. **The beaches -** The beaches in Languedoc are tailor-made for toddlers with miles of golden sand that slope gradually into the water, making them a paddlers’ paradise. The water is calm and on the days we were there you could wade at least 20 metres out without the water coming above your knees.

The best beach we found was at Grand Travers, next to La Grand Motte, but head there early as parking is in high demand. One thing to bear in mind is that there is no shade, unless you are planning to rent a sunbed at one of the beach clubs (very expensive but worth it for an easy life), so it’s worth going prepared with a parasol and your food for the day.

1. **The markets -** If there’s one thing the French know how to do well it’s a market. When we read the glowing reviews of the Saturday market in the town of Sommieres, we were curious but sceptical. Surely a few bits of fruit and veg and counterfeit sportswear couldn’t be that exciting? Think again - this was a market on a whole new scale, where you could buy everything from a punnet of cherries to an antique wardrobe, and it filled virtually every street of the picturesque Old Town.

It makes you realise why all they seemed to do in the French textbooks we read at school was go to markets, and it’s a great chance to put some of your language skills in to practice. “Je voudrais deux bananes and trois…” - GAH! What’s avocado?! No-one ate those in 1997.

1. **The patisserie and the wine -** Ok, so technically two things, and aimed more at mums and dads than toddlers, but after a day of slathering suncream on wriggly bodies and wiping ice-cream from every surface imaginable, you need to treat yourself. Fortunately, this region is world-renowned for its wine and you can pick up a very nice bottle indeed for less than 5 Euros. Look out for the *caves* (wine producers) dotted around the countryside, where you can stop off and taste the wine before you buy.

As for the pastry, you will find boulangeries in virtually every town or village and the only difficulty is knowing when to stop buying. Croissants, pain au chocolat, fresh baguettes, the list goes on. But if you have to pick one thing, you can’t go wrong with the raspberry tarts.

**What you need to know**

* Getting there is easy - fly to either Marseille, Montpellier or Nimes in just under two hours from UK airports.
* You’ll ideally need a car to ensure you see the best the region has to offer. Driving was fuss-free, with the majority of it being gorgeous rural roads, with the odd toll road around the larger cities.
* We loved the fact that this area was not over-populated with British tourists, but this does mean that you may want to brush up on your French before you go. We managed to get by with our limited attempts, but do not assume that shopkeepers and waiters will speak English, as many don’t.
* Many restaurants, even in major towns, do not open for dinner until 7pm, so this can be tricky to fit in with toddlers’ bedtimes. If you want to eat out as a family, opting for lunch can be a better bet.
* We booked our holiday through Tots to Travel and stayed at the beautiful Moulin de Pattus, a converted watermill just outside Salinelles and less than five minutes’ drive from Sommieres.

**Biog**

Sarah Matthews is a [freelance writer](http://www.sarah-matthews.com/) and mum of two-year-old Olive. She loves nothing more than a swim in the sea but has somehow found herself living in the landlocked county of Nottinghamshire, so spends lots of her time dreaming of her next escape. When not writing or parenting she enjoys reliving her youth at Clubbercise classes and stretching out her achey limbs at yoga. And she definitely needs to get better at writing biographies that don’t make her sound like an old woman..