

# Traverse walled cities in French region



**Rick Steves**

Sunny, out-of-the-way Languedoc stretches from the Mediterranean to the Pyrenees in southwest France. It shares a balmy climate, winter wind, grapevines and the sea with the better-known neighboring region of Provence. To me, Languedoc is somehow more “France in the rough.”

I first came here as a teenager, when I visited Languedoc's spectacular fortified town, Carcassonne. Sitting on the ramparts, I wrote in my journal: “Before me lies Carcassonne, the perfect medieval city. Like a fish that everyone thought was extinct, somehow Europe's greatest Romanesque fortress city has survived the centuries. I was supposed to be gone yesterday, but here I sit imprisoned by choice — curled in a cranny on top of the wall.”

Anyone can feel like a kid on a rampart in this ultimate walled city, but it's easier to savor its fairy-tale towers, turrets and cobbles if you don't have to struggle with the midday mobs. By 10 a.m., salespeople are standing, poised eagerly, at the doors of their souvenir shops, creating a cheesy gauntlet of tacky temptations. But in the early morning, evening or off-season, a quieter Carcassonne is an evocative playground for any medievalist.

The massive walls enfolding the old town are nearly 2 miles around, with 52 towers, each topped with a “witch hat” turret. For good measure, an outer rampart was added in the 14th century. While the double walls seem mighty enough, moats strengthened the city's



With its 52 towers, witch-hat turrets and nearly 2 miles of ramparts, Carcassonne is France's ultimate walled city. **CAMERON HEWITT**

defenses even more. These weren't actually filled with water and alligators — they were just a dry, dangerous no-man's-land designed to expose attackers. The only way to beat a place like Carcassonne was a starve-'em-out siege. (Charlemagne supposedly tried it but gave up.)

During Carcassonne's 12th-century golden age, troubadours sang ballads of ideal love, chivalry was in vogue, and a pragmatic spirit of tolerance ruled. The area became a center of the Cathars, a heretical Christian group. They opposed the un-Christ-like materialism of the Catholic Church, which put them on a collision course with the pope.

But as France consolidated its central power, it clamped down on feisty groups like the Cathars,

even in this remote corner of the country. The king and the pope joined forces to launch the brutal 13th-century Albigensian Crusades. The Cathars retreated to isolated strongholds in the hills but in the end were ruthlessly wiped out. Today, the ruggedly beautiful land around Carcassonne is dotted with their haunting castle ruins; the closest are those at Lastours and Minerve (accessible only by car).

Scrambling around remote ruins and meditating on medieval life always whets my appetite. In Languedoc, I go for stick-to-your-ribs cassoulet. This regional specialty is an old Roman concoction of goose, duck, pork, sausage and white beans. Be warned: “Going local” here can get you tripe (cow

intestines) or foie de veau (calf liver). Whatever you order, wash it down with one of the region's well-made wines.

In these parts, the Cathars were also called Albigensians, named for the nearby town of Albi. This enjoyable river commune of sienna-toned bricks and half-timbered buildings has two world-class sights: a towering cathedral and the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum.

Albi's big and bold St. Cécile cathedral is hard to miss — locals claim it's the biggest brick cathedral in the world. It looks less like a church and more like a fortress. In fact, it was a central feature of the town's defensive walls. Built during the height of the Cathar heresy, this place oozes power: Get on

board or get run over, was the message.

Next to the church, the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum contains the world's largest collection of artworks by the famous hometown boy. Born in Albi in 1864, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was crippled from youth. His father, once an engaged parent, lost interest in his deformed son. Henri drifted to the fringes of society, where he gained an affinity for other people who didn't quite fit in.

He later moved to Paris and made his mark painting the city's underclass. His candid portraits — of winos, prostitutes and cabaret dancers — are uniquely colorful and graphic. His advertising posters for Paris' theaters and dance halls were his bread and butter, and today are some of his most recog-

nizable works. He died at age 36, unmourned and unappreciated by the art establishment. Luckily, the mayor of Albi had the good sense to accept his artwork when his heirs offered it to the city.

Languedoc's hard-fought past and independent spirit are evident everywhere — in its landmark fortified city, ruined castles, hearty cuisine and go-it-alone art. Venture to southwest France to discover this distinctly local culture.

*Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. This column revisits some of Rick's favorite places over the past two decades. Visit his website at [ricksteves.com](http://ricksteves.com), email him at [rick@ricksteves.com](mailto:rick@ricksteves.com) or follow his blog on Facebook.*

## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

### Artist blends pop, folk sounds

By **Jae-Ha Kim**  
Tribune Content Agency

Many westerners view Korean music as being synonymous with K-pop. However, artists like Song Sohee want to make it clear that her country's music is diverse, ranging from traditional folk and classical, to pop and rock to metal. On her latest EP “(Re:5),” the singer-songwriter incorporated world, folk and contemporary sounds to create songs that are memorable and distinct.

“I've always loved music that has a bit of a traditional (or) folk feeling to it,” she said from her home in Seoul. “Even when it comes to pop music, I'm drawn to songs that carry a unique soul, like the sounds of Africa, Mongolia, indigenous cultures or the Nordic region.”

This interview, which was conducted in Korean and translated into English, has been edited for length and clarity.

#### Q: How would you describe your sound?

**A:** Right now, I'm working in two different fields. I'm a singer who performs traditional Korean folk music, but I also create my own kind of pop, something new and fun, filled with my own soul and character. So naturally, I'm really inspired by pop music that has the mood of world or folk music in it. “(Re:5)” blends alternative rock and world music.

#### Q: “(Re:5)” is such a unique album title. What does it stand for?



Song Sohee said her music is inspired by what she hears and sees around the world. **MAGIC STRAWBERRY SOUND**

**A:** This mini album speaks about recovery, which is why it begins with “re.” The number 5 that follows carries two meanings. It represents the five tracks on the album and the concept of the Five Elements, which is an ancient Eastern philosophy that explains the changes and balance of the world. Wood, fire, earth, metal and water are not simply materials, but rather a system that explains how nature's forces flow, circulate and maintain balance. I wanted listeners to experience (the album) not just as individual songs, but as a complete story with a continuous narrative that unfolds around the central theme of the cycle of life. I hope that as listeners follow this journey, they can experience a moment of healing and restoration.

#### Q: Did you film your music video in Seoul?

**A:** It was filmed entirely in Gwangju, using a variety of indoor and outdoor locations. One of the main shooting spots was a small island surrounded by dense trees and forests. Though tiny, the island's serene and peaceful atmosphere left a strong impression. The natural energy of the setting perfectly aligned with the theme of the album. In particular, it visually embodied the emotions of the ... track, “Hamba

Kahle,” which conveys a heartfelt (Zulu) farewell to travelers setting out for another land. Through filming in Gwangju's forests and on the island, I wanted to capture the beauty of nature and express the cycle of life and quiet comfort that exist within it.

#### Q: Do you work on your music when you're on the road?

**A:** I think travel shouldn't turn into work, so I usually don't do any songwriting while I'm away. However, when I visit a place that inspires me or go somewhere peaceful where I can enjoy quiet reflection, I sometimes end up writing lyrics. None of those songs have been released yet, though.

#### Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?

**A:** At the time of this interview, I'm preparing for my upcoming show in New York. After the performance, I plan to stay in the city for a few days to travel and unwind a little. Communicating with people through music in new spaces always gives me great inspiration and motivation. I believe this time, too, I'll gain fresh creative energy from the local atmosphere, scenery and the audience's reactions to my music.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

### Agency, Carnival at odds over which one should refund \$500

By **Christopher Elliott** | King Features Syndicate

I booked a Carnival cruise through the American Airlines cruise travel agency in February for a July sailing. I paid \$3,738 upfront, plus \$342 for trip insurance. When we canceled in mid-March, the travel agent said that Carnival would refund \$3,300 but withhold a \$500 penalty for a “nonrefundable promotion rate.”

Nobody mentioned this fee when we booked! The travel agent told us to take it up with Carnival, and Carnival told us to contact the agent. The insurance company also refused to cover the \$500.

When I asked Carnival to explain the “promotion rate,” they redirected me to the agent, who claimed that they couldn't access fare details. I'm stuck in a loop. How can I get my \$500 back?

— *Cory Belkov, Virginia Beach, Virginia*

**A:** Carnival and your travel agent had a duty to clearly disclose the cancellation terms before you booked. Federal Trade Commission rules prohibit unfair or deceptive practices, including burying fees in fine print. If your rate was nonrefundable, this should have been prominently stated in your confirmation — not revealed retroactively.

Carnival's “Super Saver” fares often carry strict terms, and consumers deserve to know exactly what they're trading for a discount. The terms aren't exactly spelled out on Carnival's website. It only says that “a nonrefundable and nontransferable deposit is required at the time of booking,” but it doesn't say how much. Your travel agent at AAdvantage Cruises should have disclosed this to you.

Agencies have a legal obligation under state consumer protection laws

(like Virginia's Consumer Protection Act) to accurately explain booking terms. Passing you between Carnival and the agent is a breach of this duty. Your travel advisor should have also acted as your advocate when you raised questions about Carnival's \$500 fee. Based on the correspondence you showed me of the back-and-forth between you and the agent, it appears that this didn't happen.

I notice that most of your communication between you, your agent and the cruise line happened by phone. Certainly, a phone call can be helpful if you need immediate action to resolve something, like a cancellation or rebooking. But when it comes to a refund request, you need something in writing.

There's an important lesson for all of us here. Always scrutinize the terms of your purchase before booking. The confirmation you received

did not mention a \$500 cancellation fee. When frontline reps stonewall you, contact an executive. I publish Carnival's leadership contacts on my consumer advocacy site, [elliott.org](http://elliott.org). This is sometimes enough to break the logjam.

Fortunately, Carnival's ticket contract suggests cancellation penalties must be outlined at the time of booking. If yours wasn't, you've got some leverage. Companies love blaming each other, but consumers shouldn't pay for their chaos.

I contacted American Airlines cruises on your behalf. The company refunded the \$500 as a “goodwill gesture.”

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