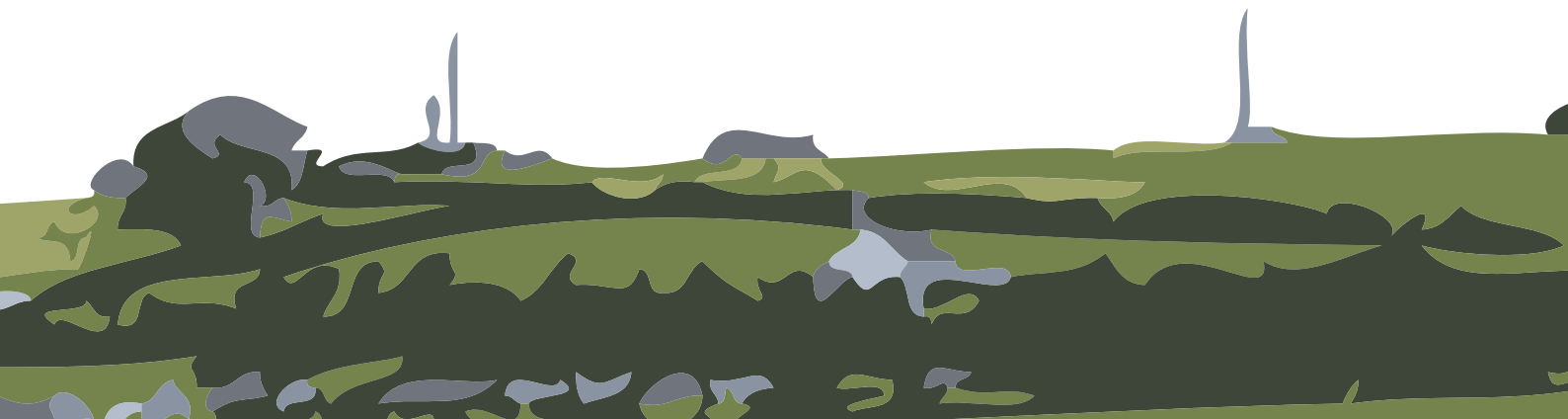


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Passa Païs

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Passa Païs

The 80km PassaPaïs rail-trail is a dream cycle route, a traffic-free glide through the hills of the Haut Languedoc. Mountains, woodland, Mediterranean *garrigue* (shrubland), and hillside villages – including Olargues, reputedly the most picturesque in France – form an ever-changing backdrop to a well-kept, compacted path.

For adventurous tourers and curious families alike, that would make a sought-after cycling holiday in its own right. But for those who want more of a challenge, the V84 cycle route extends it to 200km. It begins with the *rigole de la montagne*, a gentle path beside the winding water feeder that channels mountain water into the coast-to-coast Canal du Midi. This near-flat path runs for 20km to Revel, after which tiny lanes head for Castres and the beginning of the rail-trail at Mazamet. Between Castres and Mazamet there's no signposted route, but you can follow quiet roads with a few sections on the busy N112.

Mazamet is the start of the peerless PassaPaïs rail-trail itself. It climbs slowly to the Col de la Fénille, the border between the Tarn and the Hérault, and the watershed between Atlantic and Mediterranean. Along the way, you'll cross bridges engineered by Gustav Eiffel, dive through stone-lined tunnels, and cling to paths etched into the hillside.

Olargues, on the descent, is a must-stop, and the dramatic waterfalls of the Gorges d'Héric (a few km further, at Mons) are worth a detour. Lamalou-les-Bains is a spa town with roots in antiquity and would make an excellent overnight stopping point.

The rail-trail finishes at Bédarieux, but the V84 cycle route continues south to Béziers and the Canal du Midi once again. Before you get there, though, there's a tough 6km climb to face – definitely one for the seasoned tourer rather than the railway path devotee. It's worth it for the 35km descent on tiny roads through vineyards, sure to work up a thirst for your arrival at Béziers. Here you meet the Canal du Midi, just 16km from the Mediterranean.

