



# colours of collioure



Many dream of finding an undiscovered, authentic French retreat that they can return to again and again. For **Stephanie Ager Kirz**, Collioure was just such a place. Photographs: **Howard L Kirz**



**T**he sun's reflection slides across the bay and Collioure basks resplendent in its dazzling light. Postcard stands flutter in the Mediterranean breeze sharing the narrow sidewalk with wooden boxes of homegrown apples, red and white radishes and lime-green heads of dirty lettuce. Coffee cups and croissants mingle on rickety beachfront tables. French waiters in white shirts take orders in pigeon English as I relax into a padded seaside chair. Ah, this is my kind of town.

Provence touts its lavender; Paris, the Eiffel Tower; the French Riviera, Bridget Bardot. But every self-respecting tourist has heard about these places whereas Collioure, quiet retreat for painters Picasso, Matisse, Duffy and

Derain is the new St-Tropez without the tourists. It is still an artists' haven today and hides out much further down the coast, just 15 miles from France's border with Spain.

Awash in aubergine and azure, this romantic seaside town flaunts a Mediterranean palette of wine tasting, waterfront cafés, art galleries and hillside hikes – and yes, like St-Tropez, there are topless bathers.

One hundred years ago, Matisse and Derain discovered Collioure. It's taken the rest of the world a little longer to uncover its true colours.

We stumbled across Collioure, my husband and I, after an exhaustive search for the perfect Mediterranean town in which to spend a year on sabbatical. Driving up and down the winding



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coastal roads in France from the Italian border down to the Spanish border it was one of our last stops before giving up. Yes, Nice was nice, Marseille marvelous but we were looking for something undiscovered and authentic. Many years later after that first visit, we return to this romantic spot again and again.

Collioure was built centuries ago and today sits calmly on a little horseshoe bay with a rather spectacular pink clock tower and a castle grandly reflected in the sea. An important strategic foothold on the Catalan coast, Collioure changed hands more than once between the French and Spanish. It's easy to see why this prized possession was worth fighting for.

Constructed and occupied by the counts of Roussillon and the kings of

Aragon in the twelfth century, the Château Royal is the landmark castle on the bay. Built on Roman foundations, it was then the thirteenth-century summer home of the Majorcan court before being recaptured by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The fortress remained in Spanish hands until it fell to the French in 1642.

## LIVINGFACT

In the thirteenth century wine, cloth, oil, honey, wax, soap, tuna, sardines and anchovies were exported from Collioure

Opposite, top: The Château Royal is one of Collioure's most famous landmarks  
Opposite, below: Shopping at the Wednesday market  
This page clockwise from left: The pink clock tower is reflected in the bay; a meander through the town's narrow backstreets; colourful *barques* remind us of the Catalan influence that makes Collioure so special



Brightly painted Catalonian fishing boats, called *barques* bob along the dock, reminders of the anchovy trade that has flourished for centuries and still does today. In fact, you can take a tour of the anchovy factory if you have a taste for those salty little fish.

## CAPTURED ON CANVAS

Collioure, is provocatively called 'the city of painters' and features more than thirty art galleries and a Museum of Modern Art. Indeed, even the tourist office uses a painter's palette for its logo.



**Left: Sitting on the dock of the bay: relaxing by the curved bay** **Opposite below: Take a wine tour and sample red, white and rosé Languedoc wine while you're in town**

Following the curve of the bay, the sandy beach on a sunny day attracts its share of sun worshippers. Outdoor cafés with lemon-yellow umbrellas shade the traveller from the water's glint and it was here, at one of these seaside cafés, that Collioure and its 2,750 inhabitants, captured our hearts.

For sport, we hiked the hills to get a glimpse of the forts and towers that were built as lookouts to protect this valuable land from invasion. At 2,100 feet above sea level, the thirteenth-century Medloc Tower presents a picture-postcard view of the Roussillon coastline and the tiny towns huddled against the rocky cliffs that dive into the blue Mediterranean.

It also makes for a great place to picnic. Well-marked trails honeycomb the hillsides through verdant vineyards and along the one-lane roads that snake up the steep landscape scattered with the ingredients for fresh-picked, French bouquet garni.

In this part of the world the French are trilingual. They speak French, Spanish and Catalan with a southern accent so thick that our very Parisian French teacher exclaimed that, once we had lived in Collioure, our pronunciation would be ruined.

Spanish sangria shows up on the menus along with paella and Catalonian delicacies. The twice-weekly farmers' market rolls into town on Wednesdays and Saturdays with its bulging carts and stalls of cheese, fruits and vegetables, and delicious *poulet roti* – spit-roasted French hens toasted to golden brown with a scent that lures all into the intoxicating shopping and eating adventure.

The dense vineyards around Collioure hang on dearly to the hillsides with gnarled, stubby roots that push out from the rocky soil defying machines to touch their tender grapes. All picking must be done by hand. Wine tasting is a national pastime and there are plenty of places in town to sip a sample of the



You can stand on the very spot where Matisse and Derain set up their easels and view twenty reproductions on a walking tour of the 'Path of Fauvism'. Each reproduction cleverly sits exactly where the masters sat as they painted the originals.

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appellation-controlled, naturally sweet Banyuls or the red, white and rosé Collioure wines. Tours of the Cellier des Templiers and the Banyuls Cave tell the history of wine making in the region and offer tastings.

A new walkway connects Collioure to the nearby town of Port-Vendres, less than two miles away, where small cruise ships tie up in the harbour. During the summer months, a tourist tram also chugs back and forth between the

towns. A stroll to the end of the pier in Port-Vendres leads you to the most delicious *fruits de mer* outside of Paris. Back in Collioure, with the pink glow of the setting sun and a sip of sangria or a glass of wine, you'll know why some call this town the jewel of the Côte Vermeille. ■

**Above:** Soaking up the sunshine at one of Collioure's many cafés

**Below:** Vibrant colours continue to inspire artists today



## Fact File

### WHERE TO STAY

#### L'Arapède

Route de Port-Vendres,  
66190 Collioure.  
00 33 (0)4 68 98 09 59

#### Hôtel Casa Païral

Impasse des Pamiers,  
66190 Collioure.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 82 05 81

### WHERE TO EAT

#### La Marine

Quai de l'Amirauté,  
66190 Collioure.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 82 06 39

#### Le San Vicens

Avenue Boramar,  
66190 Collioure.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 82 05 12

#### Les Poissonneries de la Côte Catalane

Anse Gerbal (at the end of the pier),  
66660 Port-Vendres.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 98 46 00

### WINE-TASTING

#### Cellier des Dominicains

Place Orphila,  
66190 Collioure.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 82 05 63  
www.dominicain.com

#### Cellier Des Templiers

Route du Mas Reig,  
66650 Banyuls-sur-Mer.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 98 36 92  
www.accueil-visite@templars.com

#### Banyuls Étoile

Société Cooperative l'Étoile,  
26 Avenue du Puig del Mas.  
66650 Banyuls-sur-Mer.  
www.banyuls-etoile.com

### TOURIST OFFICE

#### Place du 18 Juin

66190 Collioure.  
Tel: 00 33 (0)4 68 82 15 47  
www.collioure.com  
contact@collioure.com  
www.collioure.net

### HOW TO GET THERE

#### By Plane

Ryanair has flights from London to Perpignan, which is 17 miles from Collioure. Car rentals are available at the airport.

#### By Rail

The TGV from Paris to Perpignan takes four-and-a-half hours. ■