

# Cordes-sur-Ciel

OCCITANIE, FRANCE



Photographed by Jon Davison



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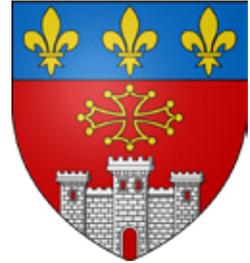
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the images are accurate depictions of what was recorded.



*The heraldic crest of  
Cordes-sur-Ciel. The slightly  
flattened version of the  
Occitanie cross refers to  
the longer east west axis of  
the town, compared to the  
shorter north south axis.*



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**RIGHT:** *Grand Rue Raymond VII on New Years Eve, looking west.*



# Introduction

We have created this souvenir of our village Cordes-sur-Ciel as a visual guide to help you navigate your way around this special place, as well as showing you some of the best locations to take impressive photographs. It is also a great accompaniment to the 'Walking Guide of Cordes'.

Many of us who live in Cordes have gravitated here from elsewhere, and arriving for the first time is an experience that none will ever forget. If you are driving from Albi along the D600, you will come around a bend in the road near Chateau Cazelles, and there in front of you will suddenly appear a fairy tale village angled down a perfectly conical hill, sunlight reflecting off creamy limestone buildings - it's a mesmerising sight and, for us, it is where the romantic dream of living in Cordes actually began. Now enjoying daily life here, we have discovered the many varied charms that the village has to offer, and indeed, we are still encountering little niches and alleyways we have never previously known.

For the visitor, getting around can seem a bit daunting, especially with the prospect of a steep hill to climb, so we have designed the book as if you are entering La Cite en Haut from Porte des Ormeaux, spending some time exploring the top of Cordes, including Les Remparts and Le Planol, before heading

down to Cordes en Bas. Cordes occupies all four sides of the pyramid shaped Mordagne hill, reaching more than 100 metres at its peak. The village is home to around 1000 people. Cordes has a strong community of artists working in many different media including metal, wood, ceramic, stone, glass, paint and photography. The village is about 1.15 hours drive from Toulouse centre or airport, and 25 minutes from Albi or Gaillac; the area between these two towns and Cordes is known as the Golden Triangle. Roads into Cordes are the D600 from Albi and through to Saint Antonin Noble Val, and the D922 from Gaillac to Carmaux. There is a train station at Cordes-Vindrac, around five minutes drive from the centre of Cordes, with a line connecting Toulouse and Figeac or Aurillac. Buses run daily to and from Albi.

## **SHORT HISTORY**

Cordes was initially created in 1222 by the forward thinking Raymond VII, Count of Toulouse, as a fortified town, complete with defensive walls. Following the ravages and upheavals of numerous religious wars and the persecution of Cathar heretics, the population was considerably displaced. Raymond VII's vision was to create 'Bastide villages' that would promote business and trade



*The view through the 13th century Porte des Ormeaux, looks west over the valley towards Tonnac, Alayrac and Les Cabannes. This gate is the main entrance to the town from the west.*

while protecting the population inside due to their elevated locations. Nearby Puycelsi, Castelnaud-de-Montmiral and Labastide-de-Levis are other examples of Bastide towns. Over the centuries wars, plagues, religious crusades and revolutions with different leaders came and went, until finally relative peace came and the old fortified walls had outlived their defensive purpose. The nearby Grain de Sel is a good vantage point from which to view and ponder on what Cordes may have once looked like.

In 2022 Cordes will celebrate its 800th year, enough time for details of its founding to have been blurred by the mists of time, but the village does have its creation legend, part of which is based on truth. During the terrible crusade against the followers of the Cathar faith in the 13th century, the nearby village of St Marcel-Campes, which guarded the Count of Toulouse's northern border, was destroyed by the armies of Simon de Montfort, the crusade leader. The survivors needed a home, so the Count decided on Puech Gaubel, close



to present day Cordes as the new location. Construction started, but every morning when the tradesmen arrived at the site, they found the previous day's work had been destroyed. This went on daily for a month. Finally, out of utter desperation, one of the team threw his work implement away. Work came to a stand-still as, in vain, he tried to locate it. Some time later a shepherd on nearby Mordagne hill stumbled upon a tradesman's tool. The find caused a flurry of excitement as it could only be a sign that here was where the new town should be sited. So Cordes was built on top of the almost impregnable, steep sided Puech Mordagne. If you look out from Cordes' Place de la

Bride across the Cerou valley, you can see a ruined stone tower amongst the trees at the right hand edge of the Bournazel escarpment. This is what remains of the site where Cordes was originally to be built.

We hope this photographic book enhances the enjoyment of your experience of Cordes-sur-Ciel.



**INSET:** *The ruined partially built tower at Puech Gaubel on the edge of the Bournazel escarpment, viewed from Place de la Bride.*

**LEFT:** *Cordes viewed from the edge of the Bournazel escarpment, looking towards Place de la Bride.*

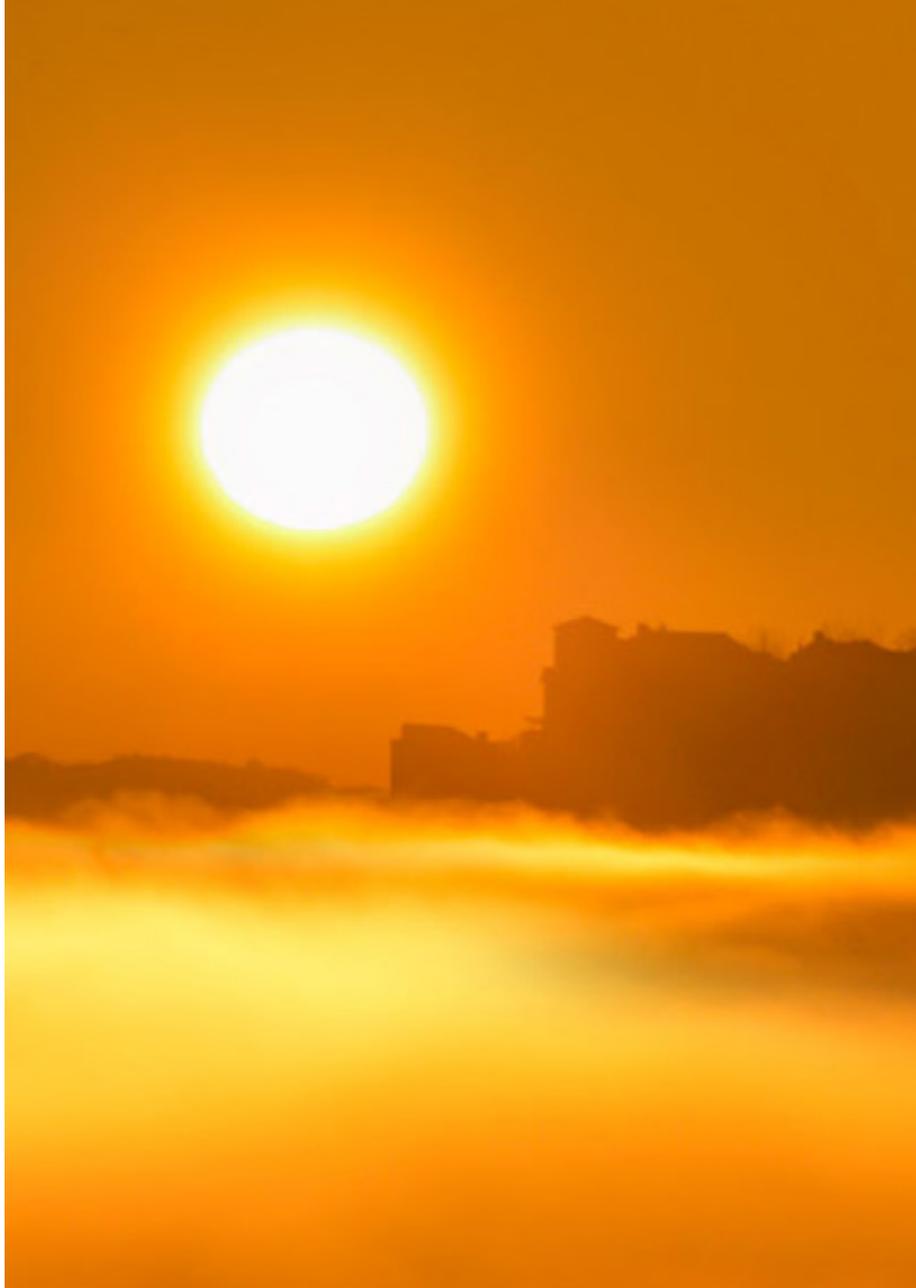


Throughout most of the year balloons fly over Cordes, launching from nearby Les Cabannes. It is a great way to see the beauty of the village and the Cerou valley.





Winter sun rising  
over Cordes and the  
mist covered Cerou  
valley, viewed from  
Cantalauze, the road  
to the hamlet of La  
Vedillerie, north west  
of Cordes.







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# The Town



Puech Mordagne, with Cordes perched on top, is hidden in the centre of the Cerou valley, therefore it is difficult to get an understanding of the true shape of the village until you are very close to it. In addition, it offers two distinct shapes depending from where you view it. From the north or south it is an elongated curved hill. The view from the Grain de Sel, giving an east-west perspective, shows its pyramid shape to good effect.

**LEFT:** A summer view of the approach to the town from the D600. **ABOVE:** A winter view from the D600 Albi road, at the top of the hill near Chateau Cazelles.





Cordes and sunflowers in July, seen here near Campes, from the D922 to Carmaux, showing the town's east-west profile.



*Two views of Cordes looking east, viewed from the 'Toulouse style' pigeonier, near Les Cabannes.*







A signature of the Cerou and Aurosse valleys are the morning mists. Here Cordes lives up to its name - sur Ciel - in the sky.



Derelict properties in Cordes are sometimes bought and restored to their former glory. An old salt warehouse overlooking the Cerou valley and Grain de Sel has now been transformed into Musee Saint Gregoire, a private gallery housing an extensive collection of significant Australian Aboriginal art.



**ABOVE:** On many buildings in Cordes, you will see practical architectural details, such as gargoyles that have been cleverly designed to hide water run-off pipes.  
**LEFT:** An original cobblestone in Rue des Mitons.





**OPPOSITE:** South east view at night taken from Les Remparts. The lights of Albi and Gaillac are visible in the distance. **ABOVE:** This view, taken at midnight from Les Remparts, looks over Rue de l'Acampadou towards Sarmazes and the mist covered Aurosse valley. **RIGHT:** One of the few remaining defensive towers in Cordes, this one on Le Planol overlooking the Aurosse valley, is now a private residence, although at one time it saw use as a pigeonnier.





Le Planol, a continuation of Les Remparts, is the levelled area of land at the foot of the second defensive wall, once covered by a continuous roof of wooden boards as a protection for combatants during times of trouble.

Today it has many chambre d'hotels and private houses that offer great views of the southern valley.





The view from Le Planol towards the medieval fortified farm of Malbosc, now a privately owned residence.

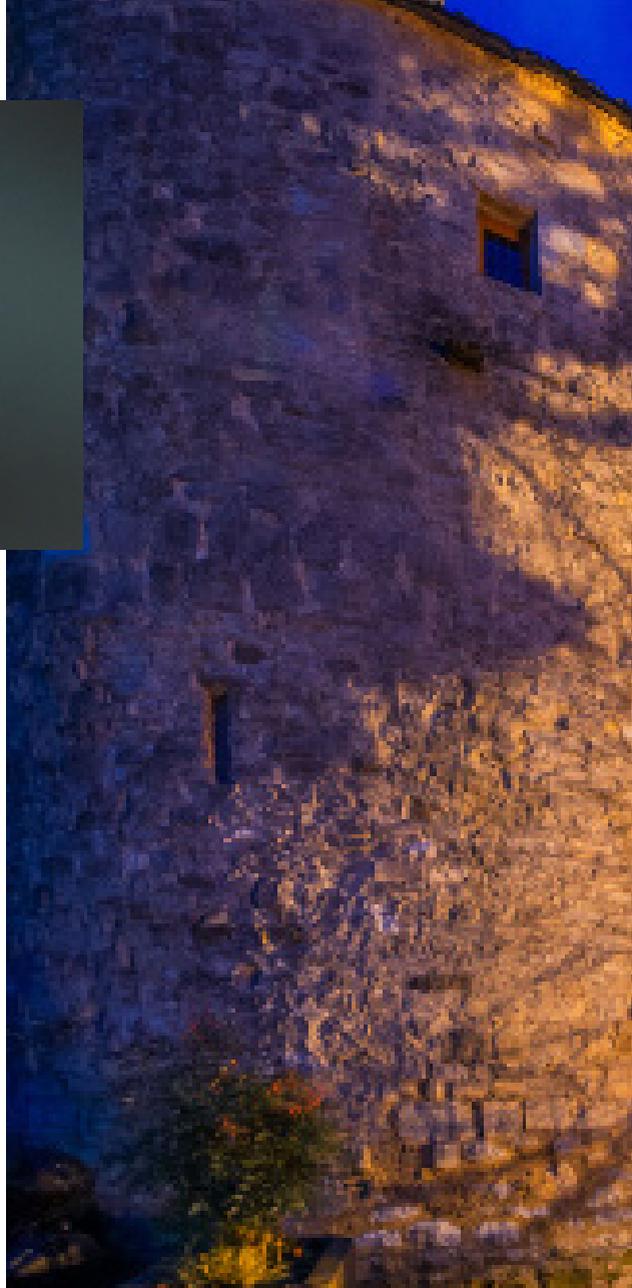
This entire area was once covered by forest and provided a perfect haunt for highwaymen and vagabonds. Names like Malbosc (bad woods) reflect this.



*During most of the summer all around the top of Cordes you will see the distinctive shape of the delicate hummingbird hawk-moth, or bee moth (*macroglossum stellatarum*) at work, taking nectar from the many red valerian flowers attached to the old stone walls.*

The Porte de la Jane (or La Viguerie gate) offers an entrance into the second line of fortifications, and was built during the founding of Cordes.

Where the exit to the car park is now, once stood Porte de Fontournies, a gate for the third defensive walls. Unfortunately, nothing now remains of this entrance except the retaining wall of the street.



# La Porte de la Jane







# Porte des Ormeaux

La Porte des Ormeaux is the first of the medieval entrances into the Cite of Cordes. Because of the one way traffic system, this porte can only be accessed by car if you are coming from Le Planol.



*This is the view through Porte des Ormeaux going up to La Cite, with Rue Saint Michel on the left, and Grand Rue Raymond VII on the right.*



**ABOVE:** Summer 'fete de la musique' at Porte des Ormeaux, outside Sur Les Pavés cafe.

**LEFT:** Night view of Sur Les Pavés cafe.



# PIC TO INSERT

*The church of Saint Michel.*



*Rue Saint Michel looking west.*



# Rue Saint Michel

After entering the village through Porte des Ormeaux you are faced with two cobblestoned streets, Rue Saint Michel on the left (which you take if you are driving up to the top) and Grand Rue Raymond VII on the right. The main feature of Rue Saint Michel is the imposing church of Saint Michel. Construction began in 1289, although the present structure represents many different periods of development up to the 15th century.

*Rue Saint Michel looking east.*

# Grand Rue Raymond VII

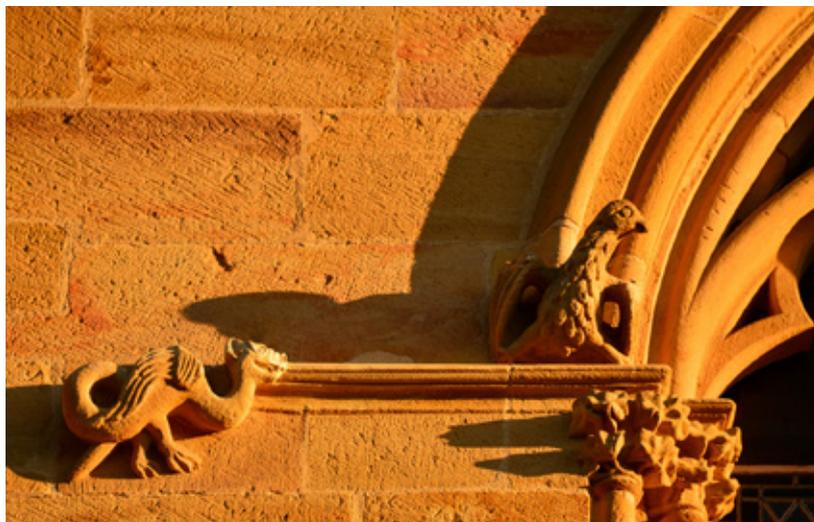


This is the main road through the village on an east-west axis. Although its name changes, it acts as a link to Porte des Ormeaux, Portail Peint, Porte du Vainqueur and Porte de l'Horloge.



**LEFT:** Grand Rue Raymond VII looking west. **ABOVE:** Grand Rue Raymond VII looking east.

All along Grand Rue Raymond VII, gargoyles and symbolic figures decorate the rich gothic architecture. The late sun casts deep shadows highlighting these architectural works of art on Maison du Grand Fauconnier.



**PIC TO  
INSERT**





The 13th century La Halle - covered market - was the commercial centre of Cordes. There is a famous legend associated with the 100 metre well alongside Grand Rue Raymond VII. During the Cathar heresies, the Inquisitors were a feared presence in any town or city and Cordes was no exception. In 1233, having recently burned a woman on a pyre, the Inquisitors were about to commit a similar atrocity to a man in Cordes. The villagers, however, had other ideas and united together to throw the three Inquisitors down the well instead. The Cordes coat of arms, or flattened Toulouse Cross echoes the shape of the north south (shorter), and east west (longer) axis of Cordes, perched on the Peuch Mordgane.

**LEFT:** La Halle, looking towards Rue Saint Michel. **ABOVE:** Le Portanel Nord, or the smaller north gate, guarding the north-south access into the city - leads to La Halle. Opposite this on the other side of La Halles was the Port guarding the southern flank. All that remains of this is the path that leads to Rue Chaude, Obscure and des Mitons.





*The 100 metre well is visible here in between the stone pillars of La Halle.*





Visitors and locals at La Halle, watching an act during Bastille Day celebrations.





## Place de la Bride

This is the best location on the north side of Cordes to obtain spectacular views over the Cerou valley at any time of the year. Restaurants, cafes, markets, music and activities in the summer make this a great place to simply 'hang out'.





Bastille Day is celebrated throughout France every year on 14 July. Cordes is especially proud of displaying its colourful medieval heritage during the popular Fete du Grand Fauconnier.





La Belle  
de France

12

12

La Belle  
de France  
Auberge de France

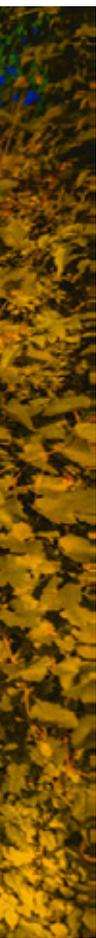


# Portail Peint

Portail Peint was an entrance to the first line of defensive fortifications. It is at the east end of Grand Rue Raymond (left) and leads you out to Rue des Mitons, to the left in the photo (above) or down the hill to Porte du Vainqueur and past La Barbacane.



**ABOVE:** From Portail Peint you can turn sharp right into Rue des Mitons (above). **OPPOSITE:** This will take you to Rue Chaude (left fork) or Rue Obscure (right fork). If walking, you can turn right before the Rue Obscure tunnel, up the hill, to get back to Grand Rue Raymond.





Rue Chaude and Rue Obscure are the narrow streets that link Rue des Mitons with Le Planol and Porte des Ormeaux. The name Chaude (hot) is believed to derive from the hot baths and public steam rooms that were once here. There is also a fountain that offers very cold water, great in summer!



**OPPOSITE LEFT:** *Rue Chaude.* **OPPOSITE RIGHT:** *Rue Obscure.*  
**ABOVE:** *Properties in Rue des Mitons offer superb views over the Aurosse valley.*





Porte du Vainqueur, guarding the second line of defences, was built in 1222 and is little changed since that time. This is the next gate going down the hill after Portail Peint. From here it's a steep downward walk to the bottom of Cordes. Just around the corner is La Barbacane.

Porte du Vainqueur

# La Grand Rue de la Barbacane

This road is named after La Barbacane tower, an advanced guard tower and the largest structure on the third line of defences, now converted into homes and a gallery.









From Porte du Vainqueur, you pass the Barbacane tower, and the large tree which offers great shelter on hot summer days, and down to Porte de l'Horloge and finally to Cordes du Bas along Grand Rue de l'Horloge.

**OPPOSITE:** *A private residence on Rue de la Barbacane. Just behind it you can see the ruins of La Chapelle.* **LEFT:** *Overlooking the rooftops above Rue de la Barbacane, to Grain de Sel. You can just see the tall tree to the right in this photo.*

*This view from Porte de l'Horloge is looking towards the Grain de Sel, the hill that offers the best overview of Cordes.*



# Porte de l'Horloge



Porte de l'Horloge closed off the fourth line of defensive fortifications. Prior to the installation of the clock tower in the 16th century, it was known as Porte de la Vergue (the Yard Gate).



## Le bas de Cordes

This is the entrance to Cordes from any direction, before heading up the steep hill to La Cite. It is where Le Bistrot, Le Moulin and Le Tabac are all situated. Here are all the services you need: banks, chemist, baker, hair dresser, butcher, garage, cafes, post office, news agency, supermarket. Every Saturday morning the car park turns into a market place, bringing visitors and locals alike to purchase fresh locally grown products and catch up with friends.





# The landscape

The landscape that surrounds Cordes is a mixture of the effects of ancient glaciation, river valleys, old forests and rolling rural farmscapes. But the Tarn in particular is unique for its share of pigeon houses, or pigeonniers, just on 2000 of them. There are some still to be seen in Cordes itself, a few of which have been converted into homes, while others are in surrounding fields in various states of restoration or decay.

**OPPOSITE:** A dawn view taken from Place de la Bride, looking along the D922 towards St Marcel-Campes. The ruined original stone tower from the Cordes founding legend is visible in the trees at top left. **LEFT:** Restored pigeonnier near Chateau Laborde, with the silo of Puech Gaubel in the background.

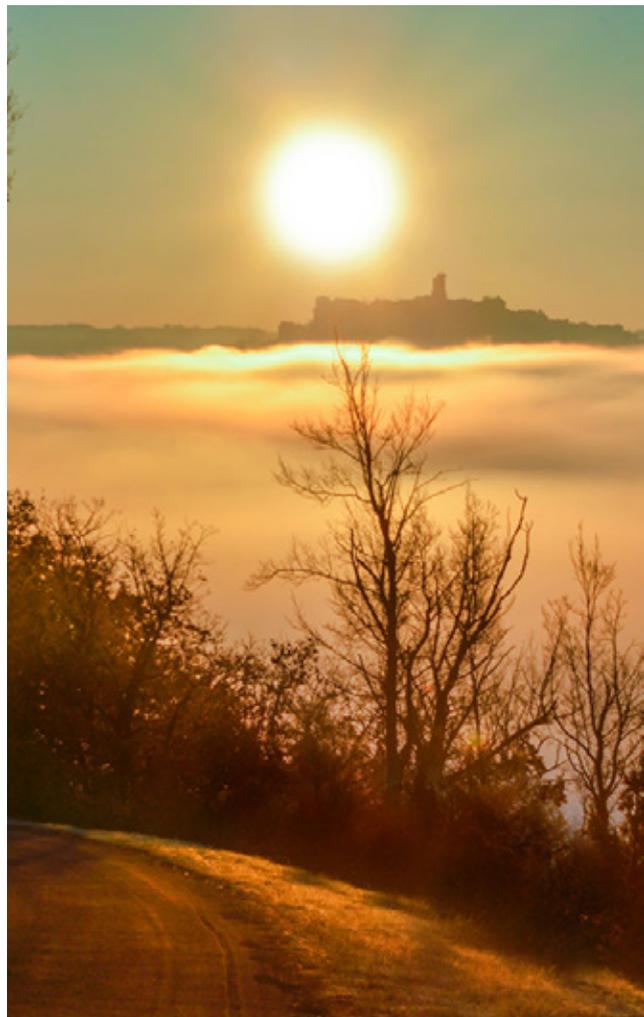


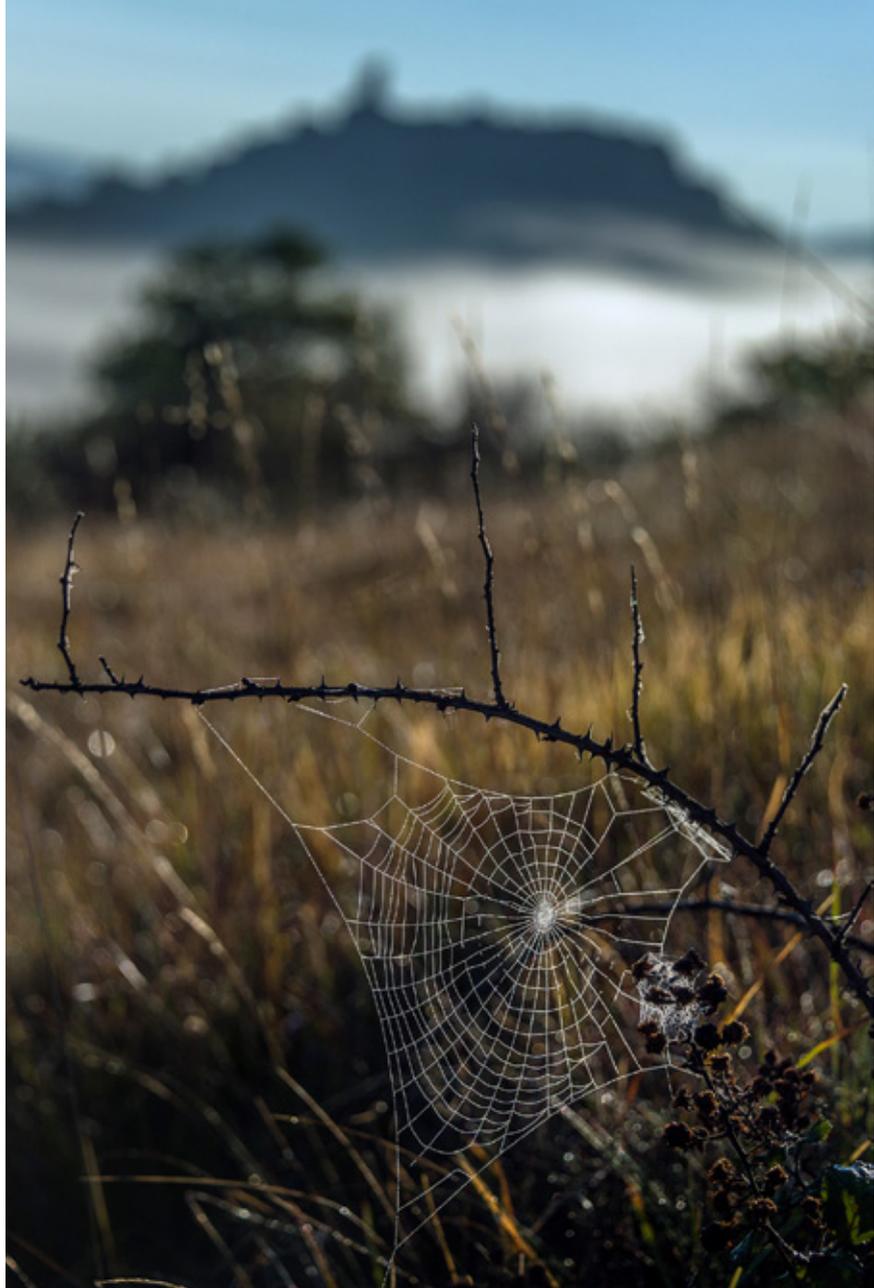


The pigeonniers of Chateau Cazelles are a very visible feature in the fields on the approach to Cordes, just off the D600 from Albi.



View north to south from Cantalauze road to La Vedillerie. The village of Les Cabannes is visible to the right.







**Opposite:** *Cordes seen from the south west, near Malbosc.*

**Above:** *Cordes seen from the fields near Les Cabannes.*





**LEFT:** Cordes looking south, from near Alayrac. **ABOVE:** Cordes viewed from Tonnac, looking through the village of Alayrac.



*Saint Crucifix Church, or Church of the Holy Cross, dates from the 15th century.*



*Cordes in a winter  
mist viewed from the  
Cantalauze road to La  
Vedillerie.*



*Seasonal changes in the Aurosse valley with the road to Saint Jean de Mordgane, as seen from Le Planol.*

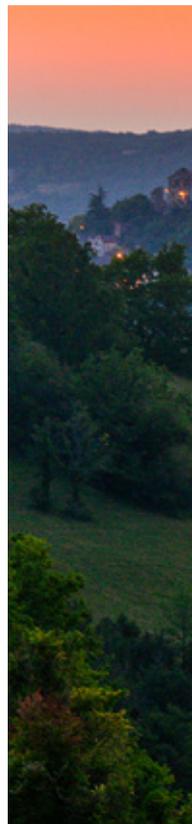


**LEFT:** *The medieval Pont des Anes, near Vindrac.*



**RIGHT:** *A dawn view over the D600 and a misty Aurosse valley.*

**OPPOSITE:** Cordes viewed from the hamlet of Sarmazes, looking north. **RIGHT:** This view to Cordes, with criss-crossing jet stream vapour trails is looking south-west from the D91 to Monesties.





Cordes is a great location to view from different perspectives, north, south, east and west, plus others in between. They all offer great photo opportunities, it just depends on the season and the lighting at the time.





**LEFT:** Dawn balloon launch over Cordes from Les Cabannes,  
**ABOVE:** The D600 and Les Cabannes seen from Porte des Ormeaux.





**ABOVE:** *The pretty church of St Jean, half way up the side of the Aurosse valley, is one of the few remaining structures of the village of St-Jean de Mordagne, built before Cordes existed. Victims of the many plagues that decimated the area over the centuries were taken here, so as not to infect the village. The bubonic plague, or Black Death, of 1348 wiped out over a quarter of the population of Cordes.* **LEFT:** *Cordes from the wild flower fields of St Jean in spring time.*



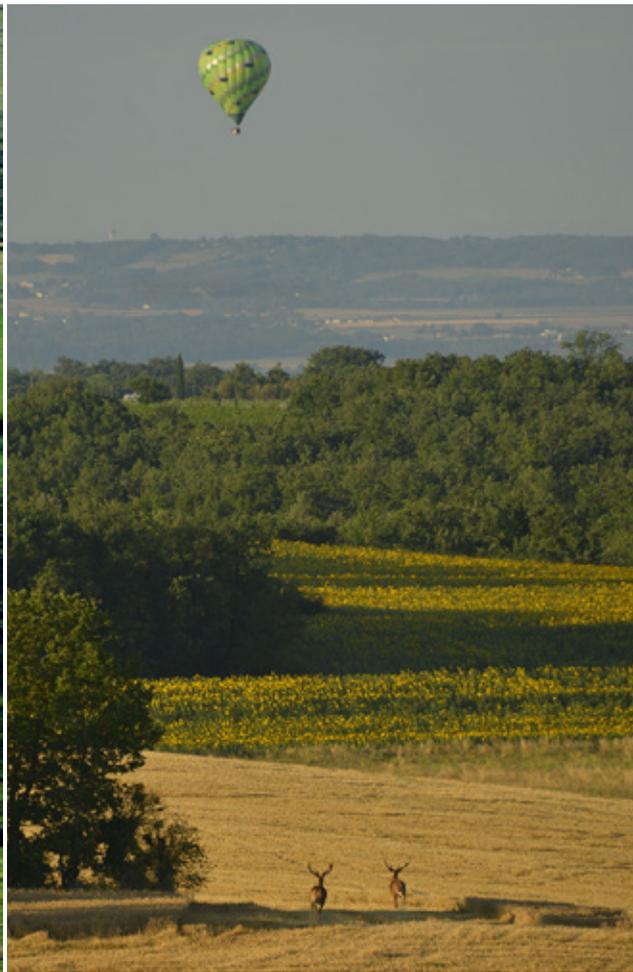
Cordes seen  
from the south  
west.







**LEFT:** Chateau Lestar viewed from Place de la Bride.



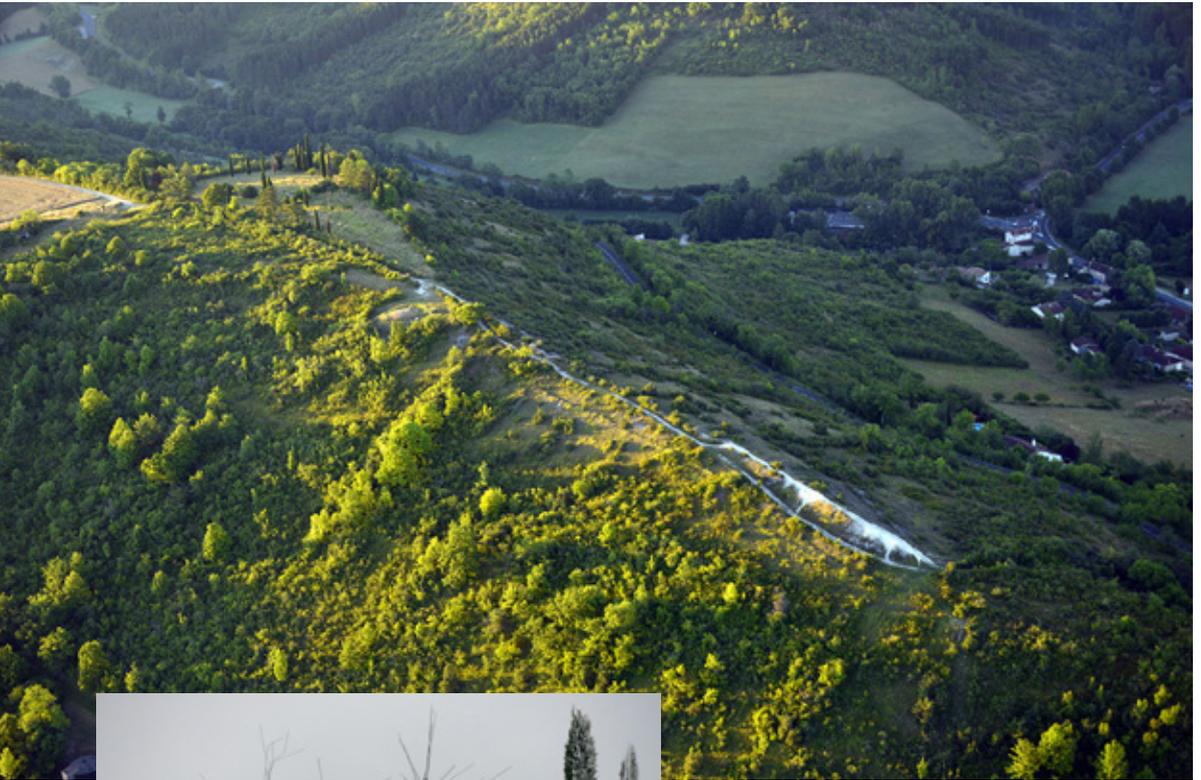
**RIGHT:** Farmscape with balloon and deer, near La Ratayrie.



Use of the land around Cordes has changed considerably from its very beginnings. Initially it was a major centre for the production of cloth, wool and leather. Then, starting from the 15th century, vast fortunes were made from the pastel or woad plant, used for dyeing cloth an intense indigo blue. Mills from that time can still be seen dotted along both the Cerou and Aurosse rivers. Many of them have just been left and are in ruins, others have been restored. The 'Le Moulin de Gargarides' above is on the Cerou river near Place St Felix at Les Cabannes. Today cultivation of land crops such as wheat, canola and sunflowers has superseded the need for water-driven mills. The changing colours of the landscape reflect the season's bounty.



The nearby Grain de Sel offers the best views over Cordes, revealing its pyramidal outline.



*One feature of this hill are the two unusual concrete and metal tree sculptures (left) by François Coustère (1914-1988). Unfortunately he died before revealing what his intentions were. From a distance it is easy to assume they are real trees.*











**Left to right:**  
Albi, Penne, Puycelci,  
Varen, La Nauze, Castlenau-  
de-Montmiral, St Antonin  
Noble Val, Castlenau-de-Levis,  
St Martin-Laguepie, Bruniquel.  
**Opposite:** Najac.

# Nearby



If you are staying in the Tarn or Aveyron for a few days, it is worth seeing some of the great sites that this region has to offer, including medieval villages and towns, ruined chateaux, pigeoniers, vineyards, rivers, ancient bridges and markets. Here are just a few of the recommended locations within a 30 minute drive from Cordes;

**Albi** - medieval city / museums / cathedral / palace / river Tarn

**Chateau Cazelles** - pigeoniers

**Castelnau-de-Montmiral** - bastide town

**Castelnau-de-Levis** - medieval castle ruins

**Gaillac** - old city / wine centre

**Le Verdier** - pigeonier

**Monesties** - medieval town

**St Martin-Laguepie** - castle ruins / rivers

**Najac** - bastide town / castle ruins / abbey

**Penne** - medieval town / castle ruins

**St Antonin Noble Val** - medieval town / market

**Bruniquel** - medieval castles

**Puycelci** - hilltop bastide town

**La Nauze** - pigeonier

**Varen** - medieval town / castle / pigeoniers

**Milhars** - medieval village /castle

**Vaour** - commanderie /dolmens

