

In the footsteps of a Master: St Papoul Abbey and Village

St Papoul, a small fortified village nestled in the foothills of the Montagne Noire in the Lauragais region of the Aude, is a location that you could easily miss while travelling the region. However, in doing so you would be robbing yourself of an amazing cultural and artistic experience featuring one of the greatest mysterious legends of the region, the Master of Cabestany.

The village is not far from the D6113 making it quite easy to visit and if you are fan of driving on the roads that crisscross the mountains then it is also not too far from the hill-top fortress of Saissac. This was the way we chose to travel on our visit from the eastern part of the Aude during the height of summer. Some of the roads are a little hairy and at this time of year you can often find yourself stuck dawdling behind a large tractor pulling hay. However, the difference between the cool, mountain village of Saissac and the sun roasted pavements of St Papoul makes for an enjoyable contrast.

The abbey of St Papoul is by far the central draw of the village, which in itself is quite historic and beautiful. As part of your entry to the abbey you will be given a map of points of interest in the village as well giving you plenty of opportunity to explore either before or after. The abbey is situated on the western limit of the village so it is only a short walk back into the town and there's lots of little hidden pockets of history to be discovered, scattered throughout the village.

Primarily the sights are architectural with ancient stonework, doorways and lintels adorning most of the buildings in the small fortified centre. Remains of the main gatehouses stand in varying states of definition and several houses are clearly ancient, built in the traditional style with timber corbels all over the walls. Not many of them looked like they may still be occupied today, but certainly many other houses had been attractively converted to keep their old world charm but also remain habitable.

However, it is the abbey, baking in the sun on the far side of the white-marbled Place Monseigneur de L'Angle that is the main attraction of the day. At four euros to enter it seemed like a bargain if only to escape the oppressive summer heat, and beyond the entrance way the abbey proved to be a beautiful, shady solace.

Inside, the first room is dedicated to the work and art of the mysterious master stonemason, the Master of Cabestany who worked on the abbey in the 12th century and whose carvings you can see clearly displayed throughout the abbey.

The Master of Cabestany is something of a local legend in the Aude. His sculptures of religious figures are unmistakable once you are familiar with his style. His subjects are always carved with exaggerated, elongated fingers and almond eyes that look more akin to something from science fiction, than ancient history.

These works adorn several major religiously significant sites in the region including the significant and important abbeys at Lagrasse and St Hilaire as well as the octagonal church in Rieux-Minervois. No one is really sure of his name, gender or if he was even just one person or a school of travelling artisans. However the distinctive style passed extensively through the Aude in the 12th century, travelling up from religious sites in Girona, Spain via the eponymous Cabestany near Perpignan. It was here where his works were first discovered and after which the mysterious master is now named.

St Papoul Abbey has possibly the largest collection of his work (outside of the museum at Cabestany itself) with casts of all of his major works found within the Aude on display. The majority of his work done at the abbey itself is posed up high atop the capitals outside the semicircular apse of the main

church building. This can make them a little difficult to see with the naked eye but most depict the biblical tales of Daniel in the Lion's den. Luckily, all also have replicas on display in the museum room so you can truly admire the Master of Cabestany's work in all its extraterrestrial glory.

Beyond the little museum lies the magnificent cloister, the heart of the abbey. It is beautifully preserved with a lawn at its interior surrounded by four columned galleries. Some of the columns are ancient whereas others have been entirely replaced by brickwork, which is in itself now fairly archaic. The cloister is serene and calm and most importantly in the heat of summer, cool. Dotted around the exterior of the cloister are several gothic tomb recesses and alcoves decorated with grimacing gargoyles who look like they may be feeling the pressure of keeping the tiled roof aloft for all these hundreds of years.

The next stop after the arcades of columns lies the access to the church itself, a large chapel dedicated to the local St Papoul. Not unlike the Master of Cabestany, the legend surrounding the man that became St Papoul has since been somewhat confused by the mists of time. He was either a disciple of the first Bishop of Toulouse or simply just a local wild man who lived in a nearby hermitage. The chroniclers even now remain unsure. Whichever he was, the tale of his gruesome martyrdom is clear.

There is a small chapel dedicated to the saint near the main apse. Here you will find a statue of St Papoul which at first glance you will be mistaken for thinking that perhaps he has lost his bishop's hat to the ravages of time, as his carved head appears oddly flat. However on closer inspection it becomes clear that it is actually on purpose. He has no crown to his head at all, and in fact he is holding it in his hands. This is because St Papoul was martyred by a rather clumsy beheading which only took off the top of his skull.

The ancient tales have it that once beheaded St Papoul laid the top of his head upon the ground himself before expiring and from whence a spring immediately gushed forth. The spring, which is reputed to have healing powers, is part of the nearby hermitage site located just outside of the village of St Papoul. You cannot visit the hermitage as it lies on private property but there is a religious procession to the site every year after Easter.

Aside from the dedications to St Papoul the church remains quite empty as there are not very many dedicated chapels or vast religious artworks. The choir stalls in the apse do have some spectacular carvings on them however and the suspended organ at the rear of the church is quite impressive.

Back outside the church into the cloister there is still much ancient artwork and architecture to admire or just an opportunity to sit and absorb the quiet serenity of the cloister. At the time of our visit there was a photography exhibition on the cloister walls featuring a variety of other abbeys found in the Aude, including Caunes-Minervois, St Hilaire, Lagrasse and Fontfroide. All sites that the Master of Cabestany would have visited. After a quick dip back into the sunshine to peer up at the works of the Master and admire the vast bell tower and spire it was time to pass back through the shop and out of the abbey once more. All in all a very insightful and cultured visit.

St Papoul Abbey is a fantastically preserved example of the ancient cloisters that made the cultural and religious backbone of the mediaeval region of the Aude, of which the modern French are rightfully proud. It boasts a fascinating collection of the famed works of the Master of Cabestany as well as detailed information on the mysterious life of the master artisan. With the additional bonus of a beautiful fortified village just outside the abbey walls St Papoul is well worth a visit.