

# traveller

Everyone's flocking to Longreach  
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YOUR GUIDE TO THE PERFECT DESTINATION

The Daily Telegraph

A gathering of the clan took ANGELA SAURINE to a hideaway in rural France

In the midst of the towering Pyrenees mountains in southern France, close to the border of Spain, is a quaint village by the name of Oloron-Sainte-Marie. But although it has a wealth of history and culture and is surrounded by breathtakingly beautiful countryside, it goes largely unnoticed by travellers to the area.

The village is hardly the kind of place you would point to on a map and cry: "I want to go there!" Yet, by a bizarre twist of fate, I found myself making a pilgrimage to this virtually anonymous little dot on the globe.

Like many young Australians, I neither knew — nor cared — too much about family history. Until I learned of Leon Saurine. Leon is your typical Frenchman. He is 79 years old and is never seen in public without his beret and walking stick.

Despite his poor eyesight, he still drives a car and has been known to take the side-vision mirrors off parked cars in the village. He's also the most fanatical genealogist you are likely to meet, having spent the past eight years researching the Saurine family tree.

Surfing the internet for Saurines, I discovered a website listing distant relatives tracing their family trees. Feeling obliged, I replied to a guy in Tasmania, who turned out to be a second cousin.

He told me he had been to visit the Saurine family patriarch in southern France a couple of years earlier and was returning this year for a Saurine reunion. Sounds like a chance to see a bit of the "real" France, I thought.

I wondered if Leon would mind if I came along as well? I had no idea what to expect.

Unable to communicate with my distant French cousins, I was relieved when the Australian contingent of Saurines arrived — my Tasmanian cousin and his wife, their daughter and son-in-law, both doctors, and a cousin who was a French teacher.

We had not met before, but over the next days we bonded in the presence of dozens of crazy French Saurines.

Our reunion was an agenda-packed long weekend in which we immersed ourselves in all things Saurine.

It involved five five-course formal dinners, all at Leon's favourite restaurant on the outskirts of town, in which we indulged in cheese, wine, baguettes and wine.

We also visited the World Heritage-listed Sainte Marie Cathedral, the Sainte Croix Church, the heritage museum to see Roman artefacts dug up around Oloron, and were scheduled to visit two farms. By the time we had our first lunch and visited one farm, owned by Saurines, for Saurine-made cheese and more wine, we were exhausted.

We decided to forget about the second farm and make a getaway back into town for a pre-dinner rest.

But on a quiet country road our car was stopped by a carload of fanatical Saurines, one of whom got out and literally made us turn around and

## French connect



Peering at the Pyrenees . . . the Sainte Marie Bridge straddles the Aspe River in the rustic idyll of Oloron-Sainte-Marie in France

### NEED TO KNOW

**Getting there:** France has an extensive train network which allows you to access nearly every part of the country. The high-speed TGV is the pride of the country's transport system.

**Stay:** Oloron-Sainte-Marie has a range of B&Bs and hotels, including the Maison Moikeenah Guest House. Information at [reallifeenglish.com](http://reallifeenglish.com)

**More:** [oloron-ste-marie.fr/](http://oloron-ste-marie.fr/) or the French Tourist Bureau. For information, 9231 5244.

follow another carload of Saurines who had come up from behind. Leon's network of spies was everywhere.

It reminded me of the movie *Outbreak* when the desperate townspeople drove through a military barricade in an attempt to escape the virus-ridden town, only to be tracked down by military helicopters.

In the end, I am glad we went though. The farmhouse was owned by Archbishop Saurine in the 1700s and even had a plaque engraved with the family name above the door.

Around the time of the Revolution, Archbishop Saurine was instrumental in getting the clergy to be paid by the state and not the church. There were 80 people present at the final lunch on the Sunday.

The French Saurines sang folk songs about the beauty of the mountains and how when they die they want to be buried in a wine cellar. In response the Australian contingent of Saurines got up and sang a song about a bloke who stole a sheep.

We did get some of the words wrong, but then our relatives couldn't understand us anyway.



High point . . . Notre Dame (Our Lady) Church in Oloron-Sainte-Marie

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