We had a couple of days spare for some Pyrenean wanderings.

"Do you want the mountains or the sea?" our French friend asked.

We hesitated. "I know," she said, pointing at the map, "you can have both! But beware, you'll fall in love!"

And so we did.

As soon as we stepped off the train at the little platform above the bay we knew it was special.

Walking down the quiet treetravelled avenue from the station and onto the flag-stoned quay, the vista opened before us.

The town buildings shone like brightly coloured domes stacked above the church beach (the Boramar plage).

Its little port (le Port D'Amont) was set under a horizon of soft blue, fading to white sea mists.

"This is it!" we said, almost simultaneously. We had fallen in love - and hard.

Collioure is a tiny seaside Mediterranean village dating back to Phoenician times. tucked into the foothills of the Pyrenees at the far southern end of France.

The village is wrapped around a circular bay.

Only 20km from Spain, it is in the heart of French Catalonia - a region France claimed in 1669 - and has two cultures and three languages.

Firmly French with a historic vein of Catalan language and culture - celebrated in festivals, food and dance - Collioure is in a time warp.

Saved from the ravages of developers of the 1970s and '80s, and avidly protected by its enthusiastic mayor, it has kept its true coastal village 'historique'.

Collioure is dramatic.

The 12th Century lighthouse, the red copper-domed bell tower, the castle (with block-like layers jutting into the water in the centre of the bay), the windmill amid olive trees behind the Dominican convent (now wine cellar), and the high hills topped with watchtowers founded by the Majorcan kings.

The village is framed by jutting headlands and a landscape of leaning vineyards and split-rock retaining walls, cork trees, thyme and rosemary scrubland, with the snow-capped Mount Canigou in the distance.

The light and colour brought Matisse and Derain here in 1905. They established the Fauvist movement by painting on the balconies, streets and quay fronts.

Signac, Picasso, Dufy, Chagall and Mackintosh are among the evolving constellation of artists who still capture tours from the village into the hills and neighbouring towns. Snorkel, sail, scuba dive in the bay or try a day's fishing.

How to get there: Air - RyanAir to Perpignan or Girona - www.ryanair.com

Train - TGV/SNCF (Paris to Collioure six hours) - www.tgv.com

Car - Well-known hire brands available from local airports and towns.

*Where to stay: The Lemon House - www.collioure.com.au

Village information: Collioure Tourist Office - www.collioure.com

Sightseeing: Anchovy tours through the interpretation centre and the factories.

Explore the century-old Chateau Royale, Collioure's centrepiece.

Visit the Dominican Convent, now a wine interpretation centre and sample or buy local wines.

Eat at the Hotel Des Templiers, with its walls adorned by famous artists.

Take a food, wine or nature tour. Le Petit train

Sunning in the Bay - The bay at Collioure is small enough to swim across.

If you go...
takes you back
place in time

the town’s spirit of colour
and form.

Patrick O’Brian, the
author of Master and
Commander and more than
20 historical sea novels,
lived there for more than 50
years and is buried there.

Strolling in the narrow
flag-stoned streets between
high-coloured walls hung
with geraniums and fest-
tooned with blazing
Bougainvillea, you walk
through an ancient stone
archway onto the waterfront.

There you can sip a
chilled white wine or lick
gelati by the limpid plane
trees.

French families revel in
the clear, clean, azure water,
while Catalan ladies slice
sausage onto crusty bread
on the beach.

There are tourists, espe-
cially in the crazy months of
July and August, though
mostly French.

But all year, the town has
its own rhythm.

Twice-weekly markets
burst with fresh fruit and
vegetables, cheese stalls,
crusty breads and the heav-
ily scented racks of roast-
ing chickens, ribs and
sausages.

The cycle of the wine
year is celebrated and local
wines are sold at the many
‘caves’ in the village and
surrounding area.

Fishing - now mainly in
nearby Port Vendres - is
popular, with a fantastically
diverse fish market open all
week at La Croisette tucked at
the end of a true working
dock.

A few village fishermen
sell their night’s catch early
in the morning by the little
dock.

Anchovy products are
a town mainstay, with bou-
tique vendors selling fillets
and ‘ancholades’ among the
local honey and olive oil.

The town is sufficiently
small that a car isn’t needed
and only people roam in the
old town and along the spec-
tacular seaside promenade
just made for lazing and eat-
ing.

A Catalan cuisine of
grilled sardines (la plan-
cha), squid, tomatoes and
peppers, washed down with
a local Collioure red is a
must.

We regularly swim
across the bay from one
beach to another or walk
the herb-scented hills on
paths from the village
streets. Scuba and boating
are readily accessible and
sketching or painting is a
common pastime.

You can use Collioure as
a base to discover the
region.

French and Spanish
Catalunya. Dalí’s house at
Cadaques and Museum at
Figueres are only an hour’s
drive; Barcelona too.

The Pyrenees and
Andorra are easily reached
by car or scenic train.

Then there’s the Cathar
region with its high castles
and wines, the Tech and the
Tet river valleys and hill
villages - but it’s the light,
colour and water that bring
people here.

At 42 degrees north (our
Australian home is at 42
degrees south), and with an
average 330 days’ sunshine a
year, there’s always plenty
of light.

Collioure has called us
back again and again.

We now own a small
stone fisherman’s house
we’ve called The Lemon
House in the Faubourg
quarter, less than a minute’s
walk from the sea.

Our last evening in
Collioure finished with four
of us sitting on a bench gaz-
ing across the bay as the sun
set, colours fading through
pastel to soft shades of blue-
purple.

Easy to see why it’s called
The Jewel of the
Mediterranean.

http://www.collioure.com.au