

## About Fanjeaux, France



Perched on the crest of a hill in Southwestern France, Fanjeaux is a peaceful agricultural community that traces its origins back to the Romans. According to local legend, a Roman temple to Jupiter was located where the parish church now stands. Thus the name of the town proudly reflects its Roman heritage— Fanum (temple) Jovis (Jupiter).



It is hard to imagine that this sleepy little town with only 900 inhabitants was a busy commercial and social center of 3,000 people during the time of Saint Dominic. When he arrived on foot with the Bishop of Osma in 1206, Fanjeaux's narrow streets must have been filled with peddlers, pilgrims, farmers and even soldiers.

The women would gather to wash their clothes on the stones at the edge of a spring where a washing place still stands today. The church we see today had not yet been built. According to the inscription on a stone on the south facing outer wall, the church was constructed between 1278 and 1281, after Saint Dominic's death. You should take a walk to see the church after dark when its octagonal bell tower and stone spire, crowned with an orb, are illuminated by warm orange lights.



This thick-walled, rectangular stone church is an example of the local Romanesque style and has an early Gothic front portal or door (the rounded Romanesque arch is slightly pointed at the top). The interior of the church was modernized in the 18th century and is Baroque in style, but the church still houses unusual reliquaries and statues from the 13th through 16th centuries.



At the time of Saint Dominic, Fanjeaux was surrounded by a moat and defended by a rampart with fourteen towers. Four gates (“portes”) marked on the current map of the town of Fanjeaux serve as reminders of the medieval gates which controlled entry into the town.

Medieval Mediterranean villages were usually grouped around the castle of their local ruling lord, often at the bottom of the hill on which the castle was perched. We will see an example of this when we go to Puilaurens and climb up the narrow zigzag path to visit the ruins standing on an outcropping of rock above the little town.

This, however, is not the case of Fanjeaux. Fanjeaux is a prime example of the Occitan castle, or “castrum,” as it is designated in medieval documents. It is, in fact, an ancient fortified town designed according to a specific city plan. In such a plan, the houses are built in circles around one or more seigneurial dwellings, or a church, with the outside circle backed up to the wall surrounding the town, or sometimes the houses themselves form the rampart.

This plan apparently originated in Italy during the 11th century and by the mid 12th century, towns like this had been built throughout the South of France.



Today these picturesque 12th century towns still dot strategic hilltops throughout Languedoc and Provence. From the vantage point of the Seignadou lookout in Fanjeaux, you can see the town of Montréal, which is an ancient castrum like Fanjeaux, on the crest of a hill to the east. Historical records tell us that the castrum of Fanjeaux was a vibrant cultural center and a welcoming place for the itinerant preachers of the heresy known as Catharism. These preachers did not visit the larger towns but traveled to isolated farms, tiny villages, and castrums.

Fanjeaux was also well known to the itinerant performers or “jongleurs” who earned their livelihood by singing and reciting the beautiful poetry composed by the troubadours. Since many of the troubadours were of noble birth, it was usually looked down on to perform one’s own compositions. Pèire Vidal, however, who visited Fanjeaux was both a troubadour and a performer, and he composed the following song about Fanjeaux praising the refinement and culture of its society.

Comme j’ai le Coeur joyeux  
En voyant ce temps si doux  
Et le château de Fanjeaux  
Qui me semble Paradis  
Car Amour et Joie y demeurent  
Et l’on sait y aimer les Dames...

How joyful is my heart  
When I feel this pleasant weather  
And see the chateau of Fanjeaux  
That seems like paradise to me  
For Love and Joy dwell within  
And all who reside there know how to woo the ladies\* (\*my own translation)



You might ask, where is the château? There was never any grand château in Fanjeaux, just a group of modest homes belonging to the local aristocracy. As you can see, Fanjeaux is located on a high hill which dominates a network of valleys and, up through the Middle Ages, this walled town served as a major crossroads for traders, pilgrims, merchants, wandering performers and invading armies crossing east to west and north to south.

We can thus imagine Pèire Vidal approaching Fanjeaux on foot or on horseback through the flowering fields in the spring, seeing Fanjeaux grow slowly larger on the horizon with its fourteen towers and massive walls.

The castrum of Fanjeaux was a place of great conviviality at the turn of the 13th century. More than fifty noble families had their dwellings here and small workshops belonging to Cathars abounded. The whole complex of Fanjeaux is thus the troubadour's chateau, home of gracious living, where he knows he will be well received by an audience who can appreciate his verse. If you read the poem once more, you will note the use of the word "joy" associated with "love". In the vocabulary of the troubadours the word "joy" is powerful and loaded with meaning. It signifies a complex emotion unique to courtly love. It is a mixture of suffering and pleasure, anguish and elation.

Fanjeaux was not only culturally important, it held a geographically strategic position that served as a gateway connecting four vast territories which in the early 13th century were ruled by competing noblemen.(1) For example, the most direct road from the wealthy walled city of Carcassonne traversed Fanjeaux on its way to Mirepoix, an important market town. From there, the road continued to the major city of the area, Pamiers. We arrived in the town of Fanjeaux by following a modern tree-lined road that curves its way up the hill but, down by the convent of Prouilhe, you can see the original straight road that climbs directly up through the wheat fields to Fanjeaux. It is too narrow and steep for our bus, but the townspeople still use it.

A wide dry moat and double ring of walls still enclose the well-preserved medieval city of Carcassonne where we will spend an afternoon visiting the narrow cobblestone streets, the castle and the ancient basilica with its lovely stained-glass windows where St. Dominic preached in the early 1200's.



Early one Monday morning we will drive to the town of Mirepoix which, as I mentioned above, was famous for its market in the Middle Ages and we will experience the large farmer's market that is still held there every Monday. The stalls selling clothes, cheeses, honey, live ducks and chickens, embroidered linens, fruits and vegetables, home-made breads and chocolates, books and countless other treasures fill the streets of the small town. You'll have time to sit in a café under the wooden arcades of the picturesque central town square that is lined with restored 14th and 15th century half-timbered houses.

We have a tendency to forget that in medieval times only the wealthy had horses or carts and most people walked everywhere. It is a fact that the little towns here are exactly one day's distance by foot from each other. The Cathar preachers, each with their companion, walked these paths to visit their followers and it is in this precise area that Saint Dominic chose to take to the roads to win back the heretics to the Catholic faith. You will get a taste of what it was like when we walk down through the fields to the convent at Prouilhe together.

It is because of the Cathars that Saint Dominic came to Fanjeaux and because of the proliferation of the Cathar heresy that the young pope, Innocent III, called for the King of France to launch a crusade against them in 1209. There were many conflicting interests involving religion, politics and economics that emerged during this crusade. One of the basic issues revolved around the notion of territory.

In 1209, the southwestern Languedoc area was, in fact, not part of the Kingdom of France at all, but was considered an independent region and corresponded to the areas colored in light green on the map and marked Comté de Toulouse. In startling contrast, the small bright blue area surrounding Paris indicates the Ile-de-France, the seat of power of the King of France. In fact, the King of France wielded absolute power only over this small area and had to make concessions to his powerful vassals in the rest of his Kingdom. The areas of France we know today as important wine producers, Champagne and Burgundy (Bourgogne), were large wealthy regions ruled by independent-minded Dukes and Counts who jealously defended their own interests, often at the expense of the King. The Aquitaine, loosely the Bordeaux wine country of today, belonged to the English crown thanks to the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Henry II of England in 1153.

The Languedoc was also totally independent and divided between three major powers, the most important of which was Count Raymond VI of Toulouse. Raymond VI could be considered the most powerful nobleman of the times. To give you an idea of his vast holdings: he was Count of Toulouse, Duke of Narbonne, Marquis of Provence and overlord of a whole array of townships and, in addition, he was allied with certain enemies of the King of France. (2)

Underlining the status of Languedoc as an independent region is the fact that the language spoken locally, Occitan, was not understood by people living in the northern half of present-day France.(3) As you read in **The Women Troubadours**, the Languedoc or Occitan language is closely related to the Spanish language. So when the crusaders arrive to stamp out the heresy, the locals - heretics and good Catholics alike—can't understand them and call them the "French", meaning foreigners. We can imagine, however, that Saint Dominic felt at home in the Occitan language because he was born Dominic de Guzman in a small town in northern Spain. The Occitan language is not much used today but, interestingly, until his death only a few years ago, the local parish priest of Fanjeaux would say mass in Occitan at Christmas and on the feast of St. Roque, the patron saint of the farmers of Fanjeaux. There is also a canticle ("cantique") to Saint Dominic written in Occitan.



To return to describing life in Fanjeaux at the beginning of the 13th century: The nobles of Fanjeaux were not wealthy because of the inheritance laws peculiar to the Languedoc region. These laws divided any inheritance equally between all children, instead of giving all the land and money to the eldest son as they did in the north of France and in England. (4) Even the daughters could inherit. The drawback was that family wealth was diluted and power was lost because of the constant division of property. Consequently, towns were most often ruled jointly by several noblemen or co-seigneurs who did not have much money at all. Despite their relative poverty, however, the noblemen and women of the South were still the arbiters of good taste and very proud of their aristocratic traditions and personal honor. In fact, the whole idea of courtly love and good manners originated in the lyric poetry composed in the Languedoc and Provence regions and was spread north to Paris and beyond by the southern troubadours.

In 1206, when Saint Dominic arrived in Fanjeaux, he found that a fair number of noblewomen and girls in the area were either heretic preachers or living in convent-like Cathar schools or workshops. When he converted some of these women he was faced with a grave problem. The hostility of their Catharist families made it impossible for them to return home. Dominic decided to set up a convent for these lady converts to assure them of a refuge that would be a safe place of prayer and sanctification. The humble center at Prouilhe was organized as a “*ped à terre*”, a place for rest and recollection, as well as a center of supplies for the small group of preachers headed by Dominic. In this way, the group of women could support the small group of preachers, just like the hospices of the Cathars supported the itinerant Cathar preachers. Saint Dominic spent about 8 years developing Prouilhe before he moved to Toulouse in 1215.



In 1209, when the Albigensian Crusade began, Fanjeaux was taken over by the crusaders, forcing the Cathar preachers as well as many townspeople who were “*believers*” (as followers of Catharism were known) to flee to other towns. (5) The Cathar Bishop Guilhem de Castres who also resided in Fanjeaux withdrew to the castle of Montségur, the last of the Cathar outposts, where he died in 1244 just before it was captured. The famous leader of the Crusades, Simon de Montfort, recognized the strategic position of Fanjeaux and made it his headquarters in 1209.

Finally, after twenty years of intermittent fighting throughout the area around Toulouse, Albi, Carcassonne and Foix, a peace treaty was signed in 1229 in the town of Meaux, near Paris, officially ending the Albigensian Crusade and giving the King of France power over the entire Languedoc region. (6) One of the terms of the treaty was to tear down the walls and fill in the moats of Fanjeaux in order to destroy all defensive fortifications, so that there would be no chance of the townspeople rising up against the King. Neighboring Carcassonne was already the local headquarters of the King of France and, therefore, kept its crenellated walls and its massive gates.





In Fanjeaux today, the access road our bus takes as it circles up and around from the only café in town on its way to the Belvedere residence follows a curving line of houses where the stout defensive wall once stood. Narrow streets leading into the center of town still exist at the four points of the compass where four reinforced gates once pierced the old rampart and controlled the entrance to the town, closing securely at night.

After the signing of the peace treaty in 1229, life became relatively peaceful in Fanjeaux until the late Middle Ages, when there was a long enduring war between France and England aptly named the 100 years war (1337-1453). At this point, the famous Black Prince, Edward Woodstock, son of Edward III King of England led his army through Fanjeaux and burnt it to the ground.

The town seems to have rebuilt quickly enough and had a new period of prosperity due to the woad plant. You might ask what is “woad” and what is so special about the woad? Well, the woad, or “pastel” in French, is responsible not only for prosperity in Fanjeaux but also for the Golden Age of the great city of Toulouse that lasted from 1463 to 1560. This little yellow flowering plant (*Isatis tinctoria*) filled the fields around Fanjeaux and grew abundantly in the entire region around Toulouse, Albi and Carcassonne. When its leaves were crushed, rolled into balls and then boiled, they yielded a superb blue dye. The balls of leaves, called “coques”, became a synonym for immense wealth and gave Toulouse its nickname, “pays de cocagne”. (This expression is now used as a superlative to describe a place in terms of a paradise where you can find everything in abundance. Even Erma Rombauer, the author of **The Joy of Cooking** uses the word “cockaigne” in the title of some of her recipes and explains in the forward to her cookbook that this is a medieval expression meaning an imaginary country full of peace and plenty.)

All the Renaissance courts of Europe wanted cloth dyed this extraordinary blue and enormous fortunes were made in only a few years. The beautiful Renaissance mansions you will see when we visit the city of Toulouse were built thanks to the empires created by the culture of the woad/pastel plant. Unfortunately for the region, another plant, called indigo, which produced the same lovely blue, but in much more abundant quantities than the woad, was being cultivated in Asia. As soon as indigo hit the markets of Europe, the days of the woad industry were numbered.



One of the wealthiest wool merchants of Toulouse had a luxurious home built in both stone and the warm pink brick for which Toulouse is famous. Today, the Hotel d'Azzézat houses a fantastic art collection, the Fondation Bemberg, which you can visit on the day we spend in this remarkable city.

Fanjeaux never recovered its prosperity or its importance and is now just a small farming community. (7) It is, however, as we well know, a strong spiritual center thanks to the presence of the Dominicans and the lasting souvenir of Saint Dominic.

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### End Notes

1. *Fanjeaux is the gateway to 4 territories: the Carcasses, the Razes, the Lauragais, the Toulousain, and the western lands of the county of Foix.*

2. Raymond VI of Toulouse: overlord of many counties, such as Foix and Albi, (Comtat Venaissin, counties of St. Gilles, Foix, Comminges, and Rodez and of the Albigeois, Vivarais, Gevaudan, Velai, Rouergue, Querci and Genenois). He also forms powerful alliances with the Kings of England, Navarre, Castile, Aragon and France through his wives and his mother. (To give you an idea how complicated the changing alliances are: Raymond VI's fourth wife is Joan of England, whom he married in 1196 to secure a favorable treaty with her brother, Richard, the Duke of Aquitaine. Then when his aggressive neighbor the King of Aragon dies, the old King's successor Pedro II becomes his supporter because Raymond married Pedro II's sister, Eleanor, and in 1205 arranged the engagement of his young son, Raymond VII, with King Pedro's infant daughter.)

3. *From the fusion of vulgarized Latin and remnants of language of the Gauls is born the group of languages called "romanes". There are two main groups: "langue d'oïl" and "langue d'oc". Occitan is composed of several major dialects: Languedoc, Gascon, Limousine, Auvergnat, Provençal.) North of a line running from the confluence of the Dordogne and Garonne rivers in the west to Grenoble in the east, the word for "yes" was "oïl" (modern-day oui)*

*while to the south it was "oc". France was thus divided into two major areas of "langue d'oïl" (the tongue of oui) and "langue d'oc".*

4. Co-seigneurs of Fanjeaux. (Salic law prevails in the North which means that only the eldest son inherits. If there are no male heirs, a daughter may inherit but her property becomes her husband's when she marries, along with the right to pass it on.). In larger cities like Toulouse, the nobles were losing ground financially and politically to the new class of bourgeois who were tradesmen and earned money. Two rulers dominated in Fanjeaux, Guillaume de Durfort and a woman called Dame Cavaers. Another powerful co-ruler was the neighboring Count Raymond-Roger de Foix, who thus secured the gateway of his own adjoining territory of Foix.

5. Catharism had been spreading through Languedoc, Provence and Gascony almost without check for 25 years when Innocent III became Pope in 1198 at age 38 (3 years younger than Raymond VI) and this Pope made eradicating heresy in Languedoc his priority. Fanjeaux stood at the heart of Cathar territory which was comprised of Toulouse, Albi, Carcassonne and Foix.

6. By this time, Raymond VI of Toulouse has died and it is his son, Raymond VII, who signs the agreement and promises to destroy the heresy, return its possessions to the Church, and marry his daughter to the brother of the King of France, Alphonse de Poitiers.

7. Today, France is divided into 96 departments. Fanjeaux is located in the department of Aude, at the border of the department of Ariège where the town of Mirepoix, with its 15th to 16th century half-timbered houses, is located. The ancient territory of Foix falls within today's department of Ariège.