



Toulouse Area

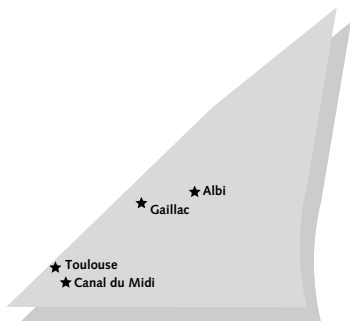
Once Languedoc's traditional centre, Toulouse was hived off when regional boundaries were redrawn almost half a century ago. In geographical limbo since, sort of, the city is a springboard for zillions of travellers who land at its airport, pick up wheels and motor west into Languedoc proper. En route are some fascinating historical sights and sun-drenched *bastides* (fortified medieval villages), more than deserving of a lunch or overnight stop.

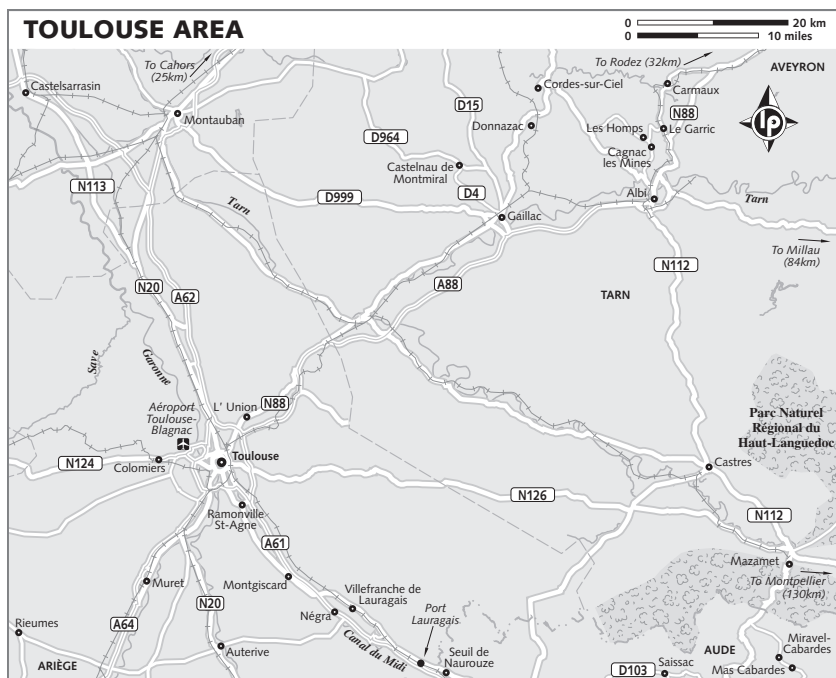
Toulouse, a dynamic and confident city astraddle the pea-green Canal du Midi, ranks among France's liveliest and fastest-growing urban centres. Bags of fun, it might not be quite as sultry and Mediterranean steamy as Montpellier (no palm trees for starters), but party with students till dawn in its vibrant bars, cafés and clubs, and you know Spain is not far away: for centuries Chemins de St Jacques pilgrims following the Chemin d'Arles road west to Santiago de Compostela have passed through here. Delve into Toulouse's quieter lanes and narrow backstreets and spot the odd rucksack strung from a 1st-floor window – a sure sign of a warm welcome for walkers seeking a bed for the night.

A whisker away, the Pyrenees stride out spiky and snowcapped on the horizon. Toulouse-Lautrec was born in red-brick Albi, a historic town 75km northeast with a king of a cathedral and the world's finest collection of the artist's Parisian cabaret-inspired work (p41). Nearby is Gaillac, a gastronomic name any wine lover knows from the label on the bottle. Not far away, the beautiful *bastide* of Cordes-sur-Ciel crashes down a hillside in the most unladylike fashion.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sip an *apéro* on **place St-Pierre** (p245), catch a local band and party until dawn with Toulouse's student-busy **nightlife** (p245)
- Play astronauts at Toulouse's interactive **Cité de l'Espace** (p241)
- Grab a bike (p246) and go for a spin along the **Canal du Midi**, taking time out afloat at the **Buddha Boat Spa** (p242)
- Delve into the life, work and mind of an artistic master at Albi's **Musée Toulouse-Lautrec** (p248)
- Sniff, swill, sip and spit (or swallow) some of the region's finest wine in and around **Gaillac** (p251)





TOULOUSE

pop 437,100

From the contemporary art in its sleek two-line metro to its booming aerospace industry, this dynamic city – pink by day with its mirage of rose-red brick buildings, bright by night – bedazzles. No surprise then that *la ville rose* (the pink city), sliced in three by the green Canal du Midi and the mucky brown River Garonne, is in fact France's fourth-largest city.

Old Toulouse with its wonky medieval streets and bounty of churches oozes a rich and tumultuous history (p27). A sizeable student population gives the city a kick and injects a feisty energy into its bars, music venues and late-night clubbing alternatives, while the grassy banks of its waterways are peaceful and romantic any time of day.

Orientation

The heart of Toulouse is bounded by the River Garonne (west) and *blvd de Strasbourg* and its continuation, *blvd Lazare Carnot* (east). Its two principal squares are *place du Capitole* and, 200m east, *place Wilson*.

Information

The Bookshop (☎ 05 61 22 99 92; bookshop.tlse@wanadoo.fr; 17 rue Lakanal) English-language bookshop.

Bulle de Savon (56 rue des Blanchers; ☎ 8am-10pm) Laundrette.

Laverie des Lois (☎ 05 61 23 71 45; 19 rue des Lois; <http://laveriedeslois.spaces.live.com>; per hr €4; ☎ cyber-cafe 11am-9pm Tue-Sat, laundrette 8am-9pm daily) Surf the Net while your smocks wash.

Le Ch@t de la Voisine (☎ 05 61 57 36 18; 25 rue des 7 Troubadours; per hr €2; ☎ 10am-midnight) Internet access.

Ombres Blanches (☎ 05 34 45 53 33; www.ombres-blanches.fr; 48-50 rue Gambetta) Maps and travel guides.

Post Office (9 rue la Fayette)

Tourist Office (☎ 05 61 11 02 22; www.toulouse-tourisme.com; Sq Charles de Gaulle; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6.15pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Sun Oct-May) Inside a 16th-century tower.

Sights

AROUND PLACE DU CAPITOLE

On the ceiling of the arcades on the western side of bustling **place du Capitole** are 29 vivid illustrations of the city's history, from the *Venus*

of *Lespugue* (a prehistoric representation of a woman) through to the depiction of the city's status as a hub for the aeronautics industry, by contemporary artist Raymond Moretti. On the square's eastern side is the 128m-long facade of the **Capitole**, Toulouse's city hall, built in the 1750s. Within it is the **Théâtre du Capitole**, one of France's most prestigious opera venues, and the over-the-top, late-19th-century **Salle des Illustres** (Hall of the Illustrious).

Immediately to the south, Toulouse's 18th-century **Vieux Quartier** spills out in a tiny web of narrow lanes and squares below the 14th-century **Église Notre Dame du Taur** (12 rue du Taur; ☎ 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun), built to honour St Sernin, reputedly martyred on this very spot.

PLACE ST-SERNIN

Once an important stop on the Chemins de St Jacques pilgrimage route, the **Basilique St-Sernin** (☎ 05 61 21 80 45; place St-Sernin; ☎ 8.30am-6.15pm Mon-Sat, to 7.30pm Sun Jul-Sep, 8.30-11.45am & 2-5.45pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-7.30pm Sun Oct-Jun) still lures walkers and pilgrims. It is France's largest and most complete Romanesque structure and is topped by a magnificent eight-sided 13th-century tower and 15th-century spire.

Next door, the **Musée St-Raymond** (☎ 05 61 22 31 44; place St-Sernin; adult/child €3/1.50, temporary exhibitions €2/1.50, 1st Sun of month free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm Sep-May) showcases exceptional Roman sculptures, early Christian sarcophagi and a treasure trove of gold Gaulish torques.

MUSÉE DES AUGUSTINS

This beautiful **museum** (☎ 05 61 22 21 82; 21 rue de Metz; adult/under 18yr €3/free, temporary exhibitions €6/free, 1st Sun of month free; ☎ 10am-6pm Thu-Tue, to 9pm Wed) houses a superb fine-art collection ranging from Roman stone artefacts to paintings by Rubens, Delacroix and Toulouse-Lautrec. It's in a former Augustinian monastery, and its two 14th-century cloister gardens are postcard-prety.

ENSEMBLE CONVENTUEL DES JACOBINS

The church is the centrepiece of this magnificent ensemble. Indeed, the extraordinary Gothic structure of **Église des Jacobins** (Parvis des Jacobins; ☎ 9am-7pm), flooded by day in multi-coloured natural light from the huge stained-glass windows, defies gravity. A single row of seven 22m-high columns, running smack down the middle of the nave, resemble palm trees as they spread their fanned vaulting.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS – TOULOUSE AREA

February & March

- **Festival de la Violette** Toulouse celebrates its favourite purple flower.
- **Carnaval** In Albi the beginning of Lent is marked with particular gusto and confetti galore.

May

- **Voix-là** (get it?!) Albi's ode to vocal music in all its richness.

July & August

- **Toulouse d'Été** Jazz, classical and other music sets the streets of Toulouse abuzz.

September

- **Piano aux Jacobins** (www.pianojacobins.com) Soulful piano recitals in Église des Jacobins, Toulouse.

October

- **Jazz sur Son 31** International jazz festival, Toulouse.

Equally arresting is a stroll around the **Cloître des Jacobins** (admission €3, 1st Sun of month free). Art exhibitions fill 14th-century refectory **Les Jacobins** (☎ 05 61 22 23 82; 69 rue Pargaminières; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm).

CATHÉDRALE ST-ÉTIENNE

The **cathedral** (place St-Étienne; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) is in a hotchpotch of styles, the vast 12th-century nave being out of kilter with the equally monumental late-13th-century choir designed to realign the cathedral along a different axis. The glorious western rose window dates from 1230.

HÔTEL D'ASSÉZAT

Toulouse boasts 50-odd *hôtels particuliers* (mansions), including **Hôtel d'Assézat**, built for a wool merchant in 1555 and home today to the **Fondation Bemberg** (☎ 05 61 12 06 89; www.fondation-bemberg.fr; place d'Assézat; adult/8-18yr €4.60/2.75, guided tours €7.35/5.50; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun, to 9pm Thu). Guided tours of its lovely collection of paintings, bronzes and objets d'art from the Renaissance to the 20th century

depart daily at 3.30pm, and the foundation hosts art-history workshops (€8/5.50).

MUSÉE PAUL DUPUY

This **museum** (☎ 05 61 14 65 50; 13 rue de la Pléau; adult/child €3/free, 1st Sun of month free; 🕒 10am–6pm Wed–Mon Jun–Sep, to 5pm Oct–May) showcases glasswork, religious art, china, weaponry, rare clocks, watches and other decorative arts from the Middle Ages to WWII. Its **chamber-music concerts** (admission free; 🕒 3pm last Sun of month) perfectly reflect its setting: 18th-century Hôtel de Besson.

ESPACE EDF BAZACLE

For a dose of industrial archaeology, visit **Le Bazacle** (☎ 05 62 30 16 00; 11 quai St-Pierre; admission free; 🕒 2–7pm Tue–Fri, 2–7pm Tue–Sun during exhibitions), a monument to water power with a hydro plant over 100 years old and the remains of a 12th-century mill. Watch fish make their way through their special bypass and revel in cutting-edge art exhibitions inside the waterside building.

RIVE GAUCHE

On the other side of the Garonne is **Le Château d'Eau** (☎ 05 61 77 09 40; www.galeriechateaueau.org; 1 place Laganne; adult/child €2.50/free; 🕒 1–7pm Tue–Sun), a 19th-century water tower turned exhibition space for some of the world's finest photographers.

A short walk away, an 1830s abattoir is the recycled stage for Toulouse's cutting-edge **Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain** (☎ 05 62 48 58 00; www.lesabattoirs.org in French; 76 allées Charles de Fitte; admission depending on exhibition €5–10, 1st Sun of month free; 🕒 11am–7pm Tue–Sun).

CITÉ DE L'ESPACE

Dock your own space shuttle, tour Mir and launch a satellite inside **Cité de l'Espace** (Space City; ☎ 08 20 37 72 23; www.cite-espace.com; av Jean Gonord;

CENT SAVERS

With the annual Toulouse en Liberté card, enjoy discounts on sights, accommodation, shopping, guided tours and so on. Buy it for €10/5 per adult/child at the tourist office and participating hotels.

To blitz museums, buy a **Passoport 3 Musées** (€6) or **Passoport 6 Musées** (€9), covering admission to three and six city museums respectively. Admission to many is free the first Sunday of the month.

adult/5–15yr/student Jul & Aug €22/14.50/19.50, Sep–Jun €19.50/13/16, guided visits €4.90; 🕒 9.30am–7pm mid-Jul–Aug, 9.30am–5pm or 6pm Sep–Dec & Feb–Jun, closed Jan), on Toulouse's eastern outskirts. Its stimulating hands-on exhibits demonstrating basic physical laws and various space-based technologies make it a kid-must. Take bus 15 from allées Jean Jaurès to the end of the line and walk 600m towards the 53m-high space rocket.

AIRBUS

Aerospace company Airbus, 10km west in Colomiers, runs 1½-hour tours of its huge **Clément Ader factory** (adult/6–18yr/under 6yr €9.50/8/free) with its Airbus assembly line, and of the **Jean Luc Lagardère factory** (€14/11/free) where the earliest models of the A380, the world's largest airliner, are put together.

To both these standard tours, during French school holidays a one-hour discovery tour of **Concorde series No 1** (adult/6–18yr/under 6yr €4.50/3/free) or a 1½-hour tour of **Concorde No 1 and Air France's 'Fox Charlie' Concorde No 9** (€11/9.50/free) can be added on.

Tours run two to six times weekly Monday to Saturday and must be booked at least two weeks in advance through **Taxiway** (☎ reservations 05 34 39 42 00; www.taxiway.fr; 🕒 9am–12.30pm &

WANNA KNOW A SECRET...

The pretty little tree-shaded garden abuzz with twittering birds and magnificent views of the basilica in front of the Musée St-Raymond – bear right after walking through its gates – is the perfect place to picnic in peace or pore over a book in the shade. A wooden hut hidden amid foliage sells drinks; fresh flowers in plastic cups decorate wooden tables; and the endearingly friendly gentleman of a handsome age who runs the kiosk knows everyone – it's mainly local here.

The picnic-perfect Left Bank equivalent is the French manicured garden snug inside the horse-shoe of Toulouse's 12th-century hospital, **Hôtel Dieu St-Jacques** (place Lange). Come sundown, students bask over an *apéro* in the shade of the striking copper dome of **Hôpital de la Grave** (place Lange), a hospital for plague victims in the 15th century.

CANAL DU MIDI

If you stand at the eastern corner of the modest basin that's Toulouse's Port de l'Embouchure, you're astride what was once one of the world's most significant trade junctions. If you paddle eastwards along the Canal du Midi for 240km, you'll reach Le Bassin de Thau and the Mediterranean. Head northwards along the Canal Latéral à la Garonne, dug in the mid-19th century as a smoother alternative to the unpredictable River Garonne, and you'll finish up in Bordeaux, on the Atlantic seaboard. Even today, more than 1000 seagoing vessels make this lateral crossing, avoiding a 3000km detour around Spain and mixing it with private craft and the 450 or so rental boats that ply the most scenic stretches.

In Toulouse see the **Buddha Boat Spa** (☎ 05 61 55 54 87; www.buddhaboat.fr; blvd Montplaisir; 2hr incl hammam, sauna, CD library & sun deck €35; 🕒 11am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun), a state-of-the-art spa aboard a contemporary wooden barge, is a dreamy pit stop.

For the first 50km eastwards as far as Port Lauragais, the towpath is an asphalted, level ride, smooth as a silk ribbon and ideal for bikers and in-line skaters (further east, you'll occasionally meet cyclists mildly cursing their more bumpy lot). Leaving behind the city suburbs, it runs roughly in parallel with the River Hers to meet the waving wheatfields of the Lauragais. A less welcome companion on occasion is the whining, growling A61 motorway that can ride uncomfortably close.

While you work the lock at **Montgiscard**, take a look at its canalside covered wash house, intact as the day it was built but for the grasses that poke through the tiled roof. It's a rare survivor of what were once many such structures, most of them open to the sky. Bizarrely, it was forbidden (why such scruples, one wonders?) for travellers to scrub their clothes in the canal. It's also worth wandering into this hamlet to visit the 13th-century parish church.

As almost everywhere along the canal's length, you're travelling beneath plane trees or, more rarely, cypresses, more than 45,000 of them, planted to stabilise the banks, reduce evaporation and impart welcome shade.

Beside the **Négra** lock there's a cluster of tumbling buildings and a small chapel where travellers could give thanks for journeying uneventfully so far. This is the spot where the *barque de poste*, the fast, passenger-carrying mail boat, would stop for lunch on its four-day journey from Toulouse to Agde – overnight stops were at Castelnaudary (p183), Trèbes (p177) and Le Somail (p122). Here too, a red-brick, triple-arched bridge carries the canal over the Négra, or Thésauque, stream.

A little east of Avignonet-Lauragais, which lies just off the canal, the modern pleasure-boat marina of **Port Lauragais** marks the end of guaranteed-smooth towpath bike riding, though there are plenty of comfortable stretches ahead too. Here, at the motorway *aire*, or rest stop, right by the canal, a free museum tells of the canal's construction and subsequent history.

Just a few more kilometres eastwards, over the border into the neighbouring *département* of Aude, **Seuil de Naurouze** (p186) marks the highest point on the canal's trajectory and the watershed between Atlantic and Mediterranean.

To rent a cruise boat, contact **Navicanal** (☎ 06 75 28 60 83; www.navicanal.com; Toulouse) or **Locaboat** (☎ 05 61 81 36 40; www.locaboat.com; Négra, near Montesquieu-Lauragais).

For more on the Canal du Midi, see p30.

2-6pm Mon-Sat). Cameras are forbidden and you need a passport or other ID.

Tours

The tourist office runs thematic two-hour **walking tours** (adults/children 10 to 16 €9/6). Boat trips along the Canal du Midi and River Garonne run by **Toulouse Croisières** (☎ 05 61 25 72 57; www.toulouse-croisieres.com in French) and **Les Bateaux Toulousains** (☎ 05 61 80 22 26; www.bateaux-toulousains.com) leave from quai de la Daurade.

Sleeping

Toulouse hotels cater to a business clientele, meaning cheaper rates at weekends and in July and August.

BUDGET

Résidence Jolimont (☎ 05 34 30 42 80; foyerjolimont@wanadoo.fr; 2 av Yves Brunard; dm incl breakfast €17.30) With reception and hostel open 24 hours, 365 days of the year, backpackers always have a bed in Toulouse at this modern salmon-pink

building with brightly painted bar. Ride the metro or bus 39 to the Jolimont stop.

our pick **La Chartreuse Hôtel** (☎ 05 61 62 93 39; www.chartreusehotel.com; 4bis blvd de Bonrepos; d/tr €37/48) *Bon repos* (good rest) is what this extraordinary good-value and clean hotel amid several scruffy offerings across from the train station is. Canalside cyclists are catered for with free, safe bike parking.

Hôtel des Arts (☎ 05 61 23 36 21; couleurs.suds@club-internet.fr; 1bis rue Cantegril; d with shared/private shower €42/54) Price is the trump card for this modest place where every room shares a toilet. Those with shower can get steamy since only a plastic curtain separates the cubicle from the room itself.

MIDRANGE

our pick **Hôtel St-Sernin** (☎ 05 61 21 73 08; 2 rue St-Bernard; s/d from €58/63) Free wi-fi. Exciting change is afoot at this boutique hotel with prime views of Basilique St-Sernin – rooms 4, 9, 15 and 20 are to die for: Parisian couple Julien and Aurore bought the building as the hotel of their dreams in 2008 and are renovating it floor by floor.

Hôtel Castellane (☎ 05 61 62 18 82; www.castellanehotel.com in French; 17 rue Castellane; d/tr €72/84; ☎) Unbeatable value, brilliantly placed and ranking sky-high in the friendliness stakes, this unpretentious two-star hotel with a generous quota of family rooms and – *quelle surprise!* – sunlit interior patio is hard to fault. Under 12s breakfast for free.

Hôtel Albert 1er (☎ 05 61 21 17 91; www.hotel-albert1.com; 8 rue Rivals; d weekend/midweek from €69/84; ☎) Centuries-old Albert Premier ('the first') was adopted in 1956 by the parents of Anne-Marie Hilaire, who runs this perfectly mannered hotel with her two grown-up sons. Don't miss the shopping, dining and drinking guide the hotel compiles for guests.

TOP END

Hôtel des Beaux Arts (☎ 05 34 45 42 42; www.hotel-desbeauxarts.com; 1 place du Pont Neuf; d without/with river view €108/128-220; ☎) Free wi-fi. The romantic 18th-century facade of the Beaux Arts (Fine Arts) – soft, mellow caramel-coloured bricks framing nine windows adorned with green awnings and wrought-iron balconies – promises great things. And its interior, arranged as country-style home rather than hotel, doesn't disappoint.

our pick **Les Bains Douches** (☎ 05 62 72 52 52; www.hotel-bainsdouches.com; 4 & 4bis rue du Pont Guilheméry; s/d from €140/160; ☎) The urban creation of an interior designer and motorbike designer, this hotel oozes New Yorker panache. Waxed-concrete floors, stainless-steel surfaces and subtle neon lighting pave the way to 19 rooms and three suites in the former city baths.

Eating

Blvd de Strasbourg, place St-Georges and the western side of place du Capitole are one big café-terrace line-up. Cheap student places stud rue des Blanchers (just west of the Vieux Quartier), and rue Pargaminières is the street for kebabs, burgers and late-night fast food.

Michel, Marcel, Pierre et les Autres (☎ 05 61 22 47 05; www.michelmarcelpierre.com; 35 rue de Rémusat; starter/main/dessert €7/13/7, 2-/3-course menu €17/23; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This classic bistro with a quirk is *the* place for delicious bistro fare (mackerel fillets, pastry-baked cheese, *rillettes de canard* etc). Its marketing spin – 'not a restaurant but a place of life and good humour' – is spot on.

our pick **Les Halles Victor Hugo** (menus €10-20; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun) The small, spartan, lunchtime-only restaurants above the appetite-sharpening food stalls of Toulouse's busy covered market are fast, packed and no-nonsense. Catering

A CANAL MOORING

Comprising three rooms and two teeny-weeny cabins to bunk up in, **Péniche Soléiada** (☎ 05 62 19 07 71, 06 86 27 83 19; www.peniche-soleiada.com; Pont Mange Pommes, rue Riquet, Ramonville St-Agne; s/d incl breakfast €60/80) is a canal boat moored 8km south in Ramonville St-Agne. Sage-green in colour with plenty of potted flowers and a sun deck for dining (dinner €30/15 for adults/children under 12), it floats beneath a bridge whose very name conjures up the carefree, *mange pommes* (apple-eating) lifestyle the boat embodies. Bicycles are aboard, allowing guests to explore the bijou port nearby or pedal the easy 30 minutes it is along the towpath to Toulouse. Dinner on deck is a must, as is a day cruise with lunch (adult/child €115/80) that Marie and Pascal, the creative couple behind the nautical venture, run twice a month.

A TOULOUSIEN HOME

Lap up local culture and a certain intimacy at these stylish *maisons d'hôtes* (B&Bs):

- Les Loges de Saint Sernin** (☎ 05 61 24 44 44; www.logessaintsernin.fr; 12 rue St-Bernard; d incl breakfast Mon-Fri/weekend €120/105) Sylviane Tatin, mother of four, is the soul behind this B&B on the 2nd floor of an 18th-century town house. Its four rooms mix old with new and reflect their natural surroundings: St-Sernin is a romantic red-brick colour, Capitole is orange, Garonne is soft beige and Canal du Midi is vibrant green. Breakfast in summer on a balcony overlooking Sylviane's husband's courtyard golf course.
- Anjali Maison d'Hôtes** (☎ 09 54 22 42 93, 06 84 29 78 09; www.anjali.fr; 86 Grande Rue St-Michel; s/d/tr incl breakfast from €75/85/125; ♿) Taking a 19th-century house with wooden shutters and a secret walled garden as her canvas, Delphine has created four rooms with their own art-inspired quirk. Hampi is as serene as the journeys to southern India that inspired it; Bréoudry is family friendly with a kids' room kitted out with boatlike bunk beds; Tolosa, typically Toulousian with its gorgeous exposed red-brick wall, is equipped for wheelchair guests; and black-and-white Cinema Paradiso has its own bedside projector to screen films on the wall opposite.

for the tastes of market vendors and shoppers alike, they serve up generous, delicious *menus* of hearty fare.

El Borriquito Loco (☎ 05 61 25 34 54; www.restaurant-borriquito.com; 25 rue des Paradoux; plat du jour €10, lunch menus €10-26; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This Spanish tapas bar is a bit mad with its jumble of masks, vintage clothing, red wedge shoes et al strung in its wrought-iron balconies. But it's as cheap as chips (€12.50 for a three-course lunch including wine and coffee) and morphs into a DJ club with dance floor.

La Réserve (☎ 05 61 21 84 00; 8 rue Jean Suaud; lunch menu €12.50, mains €10-15; ☺ lunch & dinner) When you need a break from duck, hit this stylish restaurant with an industrial interior and plenty of pavement seating. Its menu has everything – salads, pizza and pasta alongside the city's signature *confit*. Weekends, the kitchen's open all day.

Emile (☎ 05 61 21 05 56; www.restaurant-emile.com; place St-Georges; menus lunch €20 & €30, dinner €36 & €41; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This top address, around since the 1940s, is the place for the reputedly perfect Toulouse-style cassoulet (p43) on one of the city's loveliest squares.

ourpick Chez Navarre (☎ 05 62 26 43 06; 49 Grande Rue Nazareth; menu lunch/dinner €12.50/20; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat) Fed up with restaurant dining? This fabulous 16th-century *table d'hôte* with red-brick walls, old wooden bar, beamed ceiling and shared candlelit tables is perfect. The rustic French cuisine of simple terrines, soups and one fixed meal ooze the same charming 'at-home' feel.

Au Coin de la Rue (☎ 05 61 21 99 45; 2 rue Pargaminières; 2-/3-course menu €19/22, salads €14; ☺ lunch & dinner daily) A quintessential French bistro with wooden shutters and a well-aged bottle of Armagnac planted firmly on the bar, this contemporary spot has a handful of tables in the sun and several in the shade. A glass chandelier adds a touch of funk inside. Wi-fi hotspot; student-hot.

Le Bon Vivre (☎ 05 61 23 07 17; www.lebonvivre.com; 15bis place Wilson; menus €25-36; ☺ lunch & dinner daily) Old-style regional cuisine doesn't get meatier than at this local favourite: *ris de veau à l'ancienne* (calf sweetbreads old-style), *cassoulette de lentils* spiced with *museau* (pig snout) and pigs' ears or a humble plate of cured ham (*noir de Bigorre*) courtesy of the regions's precious Bigorre Gascony black pig.

Michel Sarran (☎ 05 61 12 32 32; 21 blvd Armand Duportal; menus lunch/dinner €48/98; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri) As with many Michelin twin-starred gastronomic restaurants, lunch is good value at Michel Sarran's delightful town house on a tree-lined avenue; the *menu* includes wine and coffee.

SELF-CATERING

Buy fresh produce (and/or wine for €1.20 a litre!) at covered food markets **Les Halles Victor Hugo** (place Victor Hugo; ☺ 7am-1pm Tue-Sun) or **Marché des Carmes** (Place des Carmes; ☺ 7am-1pm Tue-Sun).

Imaginative bread (chestnut, nut, chorizo, onion, fig etc) and *baguette* sandwiches (cambert and walnut) make bakery **La Panetière**

aux Saveurs d'Antan (39 blvd de Strasbourg; ☎ 7am-8.30pm Wed-Mon) a satisfying picnic stop.

Ginger cake, jammy dodgers, baked beans and other British products are what grocers

British Frogs (☎ 05 61 62 69 78; 13 rue de la Colombette; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, to 1pm Sun) sells.

Drinking

The Vieux Quartier buzzes with drinking venues, as do rue Castellane and rue Gabriel Péri, and near the river around place St-Pierre.

Au Père Louis (☎ 05 61 21 33 45; 45 rue des Tourneurs; ☎ 8.30am-3pm & 5-10.30pm Mon-Sat) Top of our list for old-fashioned charm, At Father Louis' is Toulouse's oldest bar, franked 1889. A hybrid retro bar-cum-café and lunch spot, it deserves at least one drink.

La Maison (☎ 05 61 62 87 22; 9 rue Gabriel Péri; ☎ 5pm-2am Sun-Fri, to 5am Sat) At home is what this crumbling old house with a retro collection of secondhand chairs, wine list chalked above the (decorative) fireplace and the odd visiting pigeon is all about. It's overtly hip: students flop on the sofa sipping tea early on, and there are cocktails late.

Bodega Bodega (☎ 05 61 63 03 63; 1 rue Gabriel Péri; menu €19.50, tapas €4.50-9; ☎ 7pm-2am Mon-Fri, to 6am Sat, 8pm-2am Sun) Find all the fun of the *féria* at this vast party space in a historic building where the tax authority once lived. It heaves at weekends with live music and a frenetic tapas-quaffing crowd.

La Tireuse (☎ 05 61 12 28 29; 24 rue Pargaminières; ☎ 5pm-2am Mon-Sat, 6pm-2am Sun) Student-loved, this beer bar has 20 beers *en pression* (on tap) and is a fine place to drink away the night.

Near the river, place St-Pierre is terrace hot spot with its bar line-up:

Café des Artistes (☎ 05 61 12 06 00; 13 place de la Daurade; ☎ 8am-2am Mon-Sat, noon-9pm Sun) Very romantic at sunset with river view and soft apricot, timber-framed facade.

Le Bar Basque (☎ 05 61 21 55 64; 7 place St-Pierre; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Fri, 1pm-5am Sat, 1pm-2am Sun) Sports bar with bench seating in a massive courtyard with dramatic rugby-pitch backdrop.

Le Saint des Seins (☎ 06 07 81 90 52; www.myspace.com/lesaintdesseins; 5 place St-Pierre; ☎ 5pm-2am Wed-Fri, to 4am Sat) Jam sessions and rock concerts.

Le St-Pierre (☎ 05 61 21 74 13; 10 place St-Pierre; ☎ 9am-2am Mon-Fri, noon-5am Sat, noon-2am Sun) Mainstream pub.

Entertainment

Pick up free listings guides at the box office in **FNAC** (☎ 08 92 68 36 22; 16 allées du Président Franklin Roosevelt). Online, see <http://toulouse.sortir.eu>.

CINEMAS

Watch nondubbed foreign films at **Cinéma Utopia** (☎ 05 61 23 66 20; 24 rue Montardy), **Cinéma ABC** (☎ 05 61 29 81 00; 13 rue St-Bernard) and arthouse **Cinéma-thèque de Toulouse** (☎ 05 62 30 30 10; www.lacinemathequedetoulouse.com in French; 69 rue du Taur).

LIVE MUSIC

Halle aux Graines (☎ 05 61 63 13 13; www.onct.mairie-toulouse.fr; place Dupuy) For classical music and theatre, head for the city's elegant 1860s market hall, now a concert hall home to Toulouse's Orchestre National du Capitole.

Le Bijou (☎ 05 61 42 95 07; www.le-bijou.net; 123 av de Muret; admission free-€15; M République) World music and upcoming artists predominate at this experimental venue tucked behind a neighbourhood bistro; concerts at 9.30pm.

Havana Café (☎ 05 62 88 34 94; www.havana-café.fr; 2 av des Crêtes, Ramonville St Agne; admission free-€20; M Ramonville) All sounds – reggae, rock, blues, heavy metal and gospel included – make this popular venue at the end of metro line B, 8km south of the city, Toulouse's biggest and best live-music venue.

GREEN PICK: EAT GREEN

Hard to believe in this land of foie gras and duck, but wholly vegetarian restaurants do exist. For a complete listing, nip to the St-Sernin Sunday-morning market and visit the stall of Toulouse's **Association Végétarienne et Végétalienne** (<http://avis.free.fr>; ☎ 11am-1pm Sun), on the corner of rue St-Bernard and place St-Sernin.

Not only does **La Faim des Haricots** (☎ 05 61 22 49 25; www.lafaimdesharicots.fr in French; 3 rue du Puits Vert; menu €10-13; ☎ lunch Mon-Wed, lunch & dinner Thu-Sat; V) cook up a different *plat du jour* every day alongside a handsome choice of homemade salads, savoury tarts and soups which you can play pick 'n mix with; the deal is *à volonté*, meaning eat as much as you want. Desserts, also *à volonté*, include homely favourites like bread pudding, carrot cake, chocolate tart and vanilla flan.

Le Bikini (☎ 05 62 24 09 50; www.lebikini.com; rue Hermès, Ramonville St Agne; admission €5-20; **M** Ramonville) The stuff of Toulousien legend around for 25 years or so; also at the end of line B.

Le Zénith (☎ 05 62 74 49 49; 11 av Raymond Badiou; **M** Arènes or Patte d'Oie) Premier concert venue on the international circuit.

NIGHTCLUBS

Several bars double up as clubs, as do concert venues Havana Café (see p245) and Le Bikini (see above).

Opus Café (☎ 05 61 62 37 46; 24 rue Bachelier; admission free; ☎ midnight-5am Mon-Wed, 11pm-6am Thu-Sat) Dance until dawn at this venue for seasoned clubbers who flock here late for that quintessential *l'after*.

Café Rex (☎ 05 61 12 16 39; 15 av Honoré Serres; admission €10; ☎ 8pm-2am Tue-Fri, 8pm-5am Sat; **M** Campons Cottarelli) A bar-cum-club with a young crowd, lots of happenings and an Australian soul.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **Aéroport Toulouse-Blagnac** (☎ 08 25 38 00 00; www.toulouse.aeroport.fr) is 8km northwest of the centre.

BUS

Regional services to/from Toulouse **bus station** (☎ 05 61 61 67 67; blvd Pierre Sémard):

destination	one-way fare (€)	duration (hr)	frequency
Albi	12.90	1½	3
Castres	10.90	1½	6
Millau	26.50	4	1
Montpellier	29.90	3	4

TRAIN

Buy tickets at the **SNCF information and ticketing office** (5 rue Peyras) or at train station **Gare Matabiau** (blvd Pierre Sémard). Destinations include:

destination	one-way fare (€)	duration (hr)
Agde	25.10	2½
Albi	11.40	1¼
Carcassonne	13.30	1
Castres	12.70	1¼
Narbonne	20.60	1¼
Nîmes	34.70	3¼
Paris	89.80	5½
Sète	27.30	2¾

GAY & LESBIAN TOULOUSE

It's not called *la ville rose* for nothing; for a complete low-down on the gay scene, see www.gaytoulouse.net. Gay venues include **Shanghai Club** (12 rue de la Pomme; www.shanghai-leclub.com; ☎ 12.30am-10am, to 11am Sun), a gay club and disco around since 1970, and **Les Coulisses** (5 blvd de Strasbourg; tapas €8-12; ☎ 6pm-2am Mon-Fri, to 5am Sat), a mixed, gay-friendly champagne bar with shimmering silver floor-length curtains, box-hedged terrace painted black and resident DJ Luke Skywalker spinning tunes on Friday.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The **Navette Aéroport** (airport shuttle; ☎ 05 34 60 64 00; www.navettevia-toulouse.com) links the airport with town. Pick it up in front of the bus station, outside Jean Jaurès metro station or place Jeanne d'Arc. Fares are €4/6 single/return and the journey takes 20 minutes. Shuttles run every 20 minutes from 5am to 8.20pm from town; 7.25am to midnight from the airport.

A taxi to/from town costs €25.

BICYCLE

Take to the streets with bike-rental scheme **Vélo Toulouse** (www.velo.toulouse.fr in French; 1-/7-day ticket incl 20/30min free rental €1/5 plus €150 credit-card deposit, €0.50/1.50/2 1st/2nd/subsequent hr; ☎ pick-up 5.30am-2am, drop-off 24 hr). Short-term subscribers need a credit card with a chip and PIN.

Vélo-Station Capitolé (☎ 05 34 30 03 00; per half-/full day €1/2, plus €260 credit-card deposit; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) rents bikes.

BUS & METRO

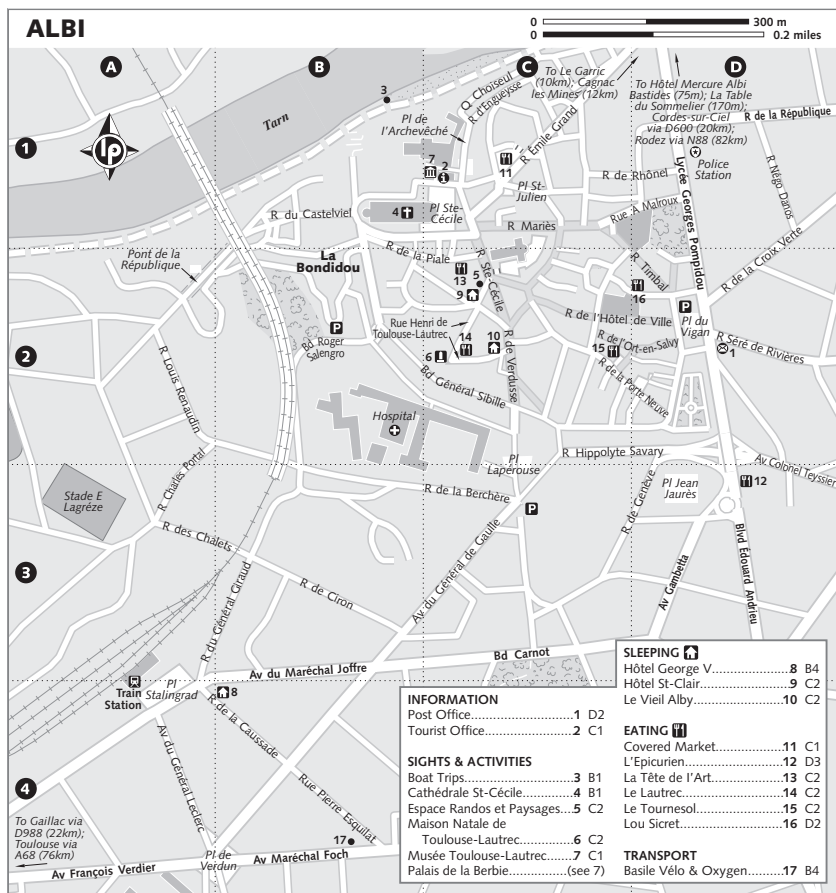
Local buses and the two-line metro are run by **Tisséo** (☎ 05 61 41 70 70; www.tisseo.fr in French). A single/return ticket costs €1.40/2.50, a 10-ticket *carnet* is €11.70 and a one-/two-day pass is €4.20/7.

Most bus lines run daily until at least 8pm ('night' bus lines 10pm to midnight).

ALBI

pop 48,600

The fortresslike Gothic cathedral dwarfing the rest of the town is a reminder of Albi's violent religious past. The town was at the heart of



the Albigenian heresy of the 12th and 13th centuries and the bloody crusade that crushed the Cathars (p197). Almost all of central Albi, including the cathedral, is built from bricks of reddish clay, dug from the River Tarn that meanders through the town.

Two things make a trip here well worthwhile: that extraordinary cathedral and the excellent museum dedicated to artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (p41), who hailed from Albi.

Information

Post Office (place du Vigan)

Tourist Office (☎ 05 63 49 48 80; www.albi-tourisme.fr; place Ste-Cécile; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Sun Oct-Jun)

Sights & Activities

CATHÉDRALE STE-CÉCILE

As much fortress as church, the mighty **Cathédrale Ste-Cécile** (place Ste-Cécile; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm Oct-May) was begun in 1282, not long after the Cathar movement was crushed. Built to impress and subdue, it took over 100 years to complete. Attractive isn't the word – what strikes you most is its sheer mass, rising over town like some Tolkienesque dark lord's tower rather than a place of Christian worship.

When you step inside, however, the contrast with that brutal exterior is total. No surface was left untouched by the Italian artists who, in the early 16th-century, painted their way, chapel by chapel, the length of its vast nave.

An intricately carved, lacy rood screen, many of its statues smashed in the Revolution, spans the sanctuary. The stained-glass windows in the apse and choir date from the 14th to 16th centuries.

On no account miss the **grand chœur** (great choir; adult/under 12yr €2/free, adult Jul & Aug €1.50), with its frescos, chapels and 30 biblical polychrome figures, finely carved in stone.

At the western end, behind today's main altar, is *Le Jugement Dernier* (The Last Judgement; 1490), a particularly vivid doomsday horror show of the damned being boiled in oil, beheaded or tortured by demons and monsters.

Listen out for occasional organ concerts which become a regular event in July and August (5pm Wednesday, 4pm Sunday).

MUSÉE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC

This museum (☎ 05 63 49 48 70; www.musee-toulouse-lautrec.com; place Ste-Cécile; adult/student/under 14yr €5/2.50/free; ☎ 9am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Jun & Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Oct-May, closed Tue Oct-Mar) is inside **Palais de la Berbie**, the vast, fortresslike 13th- to 15th-century archbishop's palace next to the tourist office.

The museum boasts over 500 examples of the artist's work – everything from simple pencil sketches and rough pastel drafts to the final works such as his celebrated Parisian-brothel scenes, with the *Salon de la rue des Moulins* taking pride of place. On the top floor are works by Degas, Matisse and Rodin. The palace courtyard and ornamental **gardens** (admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Sep, to 6pm Oct-Mar) are worth wandering.

A short walk away, a plaque on the wall of the privately owned **Maison Natale de Toulouse-Lautrec** (14 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) marks the house where the artist was born.

BOAT TRIPS

Mid-June to mid-September, **Albi Croisières** (☎ 05 63 43 59 63; www.albi-croisieres.com) runs half-hour **boat trips** (adult/3-12yr €6/3; ☎ 11am, 11.45am & every 40min from 2pm to 6pm) on a *gabarre*, a flat-bottomed sailing barge of the kind used to haul goods down the Garonne to Bordeaux. Boats depart from the Berges du Tarn landing stage just north of Palais de la Berbie.

Sleeping

Hôtel Saint-Clair (☎ 05 63 54 25 66; http://andrieu.michele.free.fr; 8 rue St-Clair; d €42-65; ☎) Free wi-fi; parking €8. Sweetly placed on a pedestrian

old-town street, this two-star hotel feels just like home. Tempting wafts of home cooking drift across the small, flower-filled courtyard, an old-fashioned wooden bar gives reception a cosy air and a couple of rooms have a small balcony.

Hôtel George V (☎ 05 63 54 24 16; www.hotelgeorgev.com; 29 av Maréchal Joffre; s/d/tr €45/50/55) Free wi-fi. Friendly, welcoming and family-run, this nine-room hotel with red bricks and blue shutters is excellent value. Rooms are spacious, and breakfast is served on a small terrace.

Le Vieil Albi (☎ 05 63 54 14 69; http://pagesperso-orange.fr/le-vieil-albi; 25 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; s/d €44/53; ☎ closed Jan) Tucked in the old town, this tiny hotel falls under the Logis de France umbrella group – and sits above a restaurant cooking up local fare.

Mercurie Albi Bastides (☎ 05 63 47 66 66; www.ac.corhotels.com; 41 rue Porta; d €82-97; ☎) Free wi-fi and parking. Occupying a handsome 18th-century brick building that once served as a mill and later a pasta factory, this hotel on the other side of the water enjoys a prime riverside spot. Its 58 rooms are handsomely furnished, and prime views of red-brick Albi grace its restaurant terrace.

Eating

Lou Sicret (☎ 05 63 38 26 40; 1 rue Timbal; mains €15, entrée/plat du jour €4/7.90; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Hidden at the end of a shop-clad alley, this friendly, very Occitan, arty restaurant serves delightful regional *cuisine d'oc* on a secluded patio full of trees.

La Table du Sommelier (☎ 05 63 46 20 10; 20 rue Porta; menus lunch/dinner €13-16/25; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Cross 11th-century red-brick Pont Vieux to find this bistro, where the best wines (the owner's a qualified sommelier) are married with fine food – be it a one-dish snack or several-course meal. The *menus* (€32) built around white, rosé or Gaillac wines are a particular delight.

Le Lautrec (☎ 05 63 54 86 55; 13-15 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; 2-/3-course menu du marché €15/17, dinner menu €30; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Dine on the shaded terrace or in the former stables of the Lautrec family – Toulouse-Lautrec was born

ALBI PASS

This card (€6.50), sold at the tourist office, gives free admission to the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec and cathedral choir and offers other reductions around town.

A CURIOUS DETOUR

From the grim line-up of uniform terraced houses (built in Les Homps in the 1920s for Polish, Spanish and other imported foreign miners) to the alpine chairlift in Le Garric that takes waterskiers down to the lake at the bottom of a 230m-deep pit, **Cap' Découverte** (☎ 08 25 08 12 34; www.capdecouverte.com; Le Garric; adult/under 1.35m €20/16; 🕒 10am-8pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 11am-6.30pm Fri-Sun May-mid-Jun, Sep & spring school holidays), 12km north of Albi, is worth a detour for the industrially curious (or kid-sick parents who can't stand the bickering in the back any longer).

The brainchild of a local entrepreneur, the vast entertainment site with artificial ski slope, lake for swimming, boating and waterskiing, toboggan run, giant zip-line, skate park, 35km of mountain-bike trails, minigolf, go-karts and so on was a vast open-cast coal mine until 1997. Six years and €61.4 million later, it is a breathtaking example of industrial regeneration drummed up to inject new life into the suddenly barren local economy. The 150-ton diggers, bucket-wheel excavators and other gargantuan machines once used to mine coal quietly rust on the hillside – an attraction in themselves.

Two kilometres down the road in Cagnac-les-Mines the **Musée de la Mine** (☎ 05 63 53 91 70; Cagnac-les-Mines; adult/5-18yr €7/4; 🕒 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm May, Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Tue-Sun Nov-Apr) portrays life in an underground coal mine, in business from 1886 until 1979. Cleverly designed, a 'terrifying' five-minute descent down to the coal shaft is followed by a tour of 350m of tunnels which took redundant miners a decade to construct. Forget extra sweaters; it's not cold.

opposite. Cuisine is market-driven, and an enticing *promenade gourmande* (€18/26/32/38 for one/two/three/four courses) whisks diners off on a tasty tour of the region.

L'Epicurien (☎ 05 63 53 10 70; www.restaurantlepicurien.com; 42 place Jean Jaurès; starters/mains €15/25, menus €28 & €37; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The steely grey-and-glass facade says it all: this dedicated gastronomy space by Swedish chef Rikard and Belgian front-of-house Patricia is hip, smart, trend-savvy and hugely creative. Cuisine is Mediterranean with a strong fusion hint.

Also recommended:

Le Tournesol (☎ 05 63 38 38 14; 11 rue de l'Ort-en-Salvy; starters/mains €6.90/9.50; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sat & dinner Fri; 🍷) The 100% vegetarian choice.

La Tête de l'Art (☎ 05 63 38 44 75; 7 rue de la Piale; menus €15-30; 🕒 lunch & dinner May-Jul & Sep, Thu-Mon Aug & Oct-Apr) Dishes for the adventurous – tripe and boned pig's trotter mix with a more traditional local offerings.

SELF-CATERING

Buy fresh fare at the architecturally striking **covered market** (place St-Julien; 🕒 8am-2pm Tue-Thu, 8am-2pm & 5pm-8pm Fri, 7am-2pm & 5pm-8pm Sat, 8am-2pm Sun).

Getting There & Away

From the **train station** (place Stalingrad) there are trains to/from Rodez (€12.60, 1¼ hours, seven daily), Millau (€20.90, 2¾ hours, two

daily) and Toulouse (€11.90, 1¼ hours, at least hourly).

Getting Around

Rent town bikes from **Basile Vélo & Oxygen** (☎ 05 63 38 43 09; http://chrisbas.iffrance.com in French; 28 av Maréchal Foch; per day/week €15/75; 🕒 1.30-6.30pm Mon, 9am-noon & 1.30-7pm Tue-Sat).

CORDES-SUR-CIEL

pop 996

This tourist-jammed medieval village tumbling down a hill ranks high on France's list of *plus beaux villages* (most beautiful villages). But pick your moment, and mooching its ramparts and cobbled lanes laced with sculpted sandstone and flowering lilacs, lounging in a

GREEN PICK: À PIED

Dump the car and opt for exploration *à pied* (on foot) instead: Albi's **Espace Randos et Paysages** (☎ 05 63 47 33 70; www.ffrandonnee-tarn.org; 6 rue St-Clair; 🕒 10am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Fri, to 7pm Sat), run by the Comité Régional de la Randonnée Pédestre, sells walking maps and Topo guides – many outlining short family-orientated walks – and stocks a mountain of leaflets outlining walks around Albi. *L'Echappe Verte d'Albi* details three 1km-long 'green' strolls in the city itself.

CHÂTEAU DE MAYRAGUES: A HARMONIOUS WORLD

It is as if time has stopped still at Château de Mayragues, a harmonious world where vines are nurtured as they were 400 years ago – with not so much as a whiff of pesticide or other chemical substance in the air. Two donkeys graze contentedly in the grassy fields fronting the 13 hectares of vines, a pair of swings strung from the four-legged dovecote promise many a carefree moment, and a black Labrador nuzzles up to anyone lucky enough to stumble upon this green paradise where pigeon droppings fed grapes in the 16th century.

'It is about working with nature rather than trying to dominate it,' explained impassioned winegrower Alan Geddes, Scottish by birth, whose AOC wine has been certified biodynamic since 1999. 'I work with a biodynamic calendar which tells me which days are favourable for doing certain types of work on the vines, which days should be avoided altogether and so on.'

'To fertilise, we use biodynamic preparations which are stirred rhythmically before being sprayed on the vines,' he explained, adding, 'Sure, there are many sceptics and, indeed, biodynamism is hard to explain: it is question of energy rather than matter; it deals with the intangible, you can't see it, you can't touch it.'

In biodynamic viticulture, cosmic influences and astrological star charts are as vital to a vineyard's success as the wildly natural 'homeopathic' preparations it uses that embrace everything from cow dung, stinging nettles, eggshells and tree bark to less salubrious items such as stags' bladders stuffed with certain flowers or horsetail infused in water.

In short, nature is king, as this Gaillac wine estate discovered to its peril in 2007 when the entire grape crop was destroyed by a hailstorm just days before the harvest. As demanded by the Gaillac AOC, harvesting is strictly by hand and is done over eight weeks from mid-September to some time in mid-November, when grapes used for Château de Mayragues' sweet dessert wine are picked.

Alan Geddes has been at home at **Château de Mayragues** (☎ 05 63 33 94 08, 06 86 43 14 34; www.chateau-de-mayragues.com; Castelnaud de Montmiral; d incl breakfast €85; 🗓 Feb-late Dec), 12km north of Gaillac (signposted off the D15), since 1980, when he and his French wife bought the ruined chateau and, bit by bit, restored it – never forgetting its original 13th- to 16th-century architecture. Built of a dreamy cream-coloured stone, the highlight is an overhanging covered walkway that guests slumbering in the two atmospheric *chambres d'hôtes* walk along.

'Vines have been here forever,' said the biodynamic winegrower, adding, 'When we were replanting we found parts of old Roman pots – Gaillac wines were cultivated by the Romans – so I can really say that with some justification'.

café on its vaulted market square or browsing its bijou art galleries and artisan workshops is a charm.

Born from the bloody crusade against the Cathars (p197), this sturdy *bastide* was built by Count of Toulouse Raymond VII between 1222 and 1229. Wealthy merchants and noblemen soon moved in, building magnificent Gothic houses on main street Grand Rue Raimond VII: **Maison du Grand Ecuyer** (No 79); **Maison Fonpeyrouse** (No 34), now the town hall; and **Maison du Grand Fauconnier**, a modern-art museum. For a complete DIY tour, buy the 48-page *Walking Guide* (€3.50) at the **Tourist Office** (☎ 05 63 56 00 52; www.cordesurciel.eu; 8 place Jeanne Ramel-Cals; 🗓 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 2-6pm Mon & Sat).

La Maison Bakéa (☎ 05 63 56 29 54; http://maisonbakea.eu in French; 28 Le Planol; d incl breakfast €56-78;

🗓 mid-Apr–early Nov) is a must, if only to view the interior of a 13th-century Cordois house wrapped around a cobbled interior courtyard dotted with lucky-charm swallow nests. Roses climb up its street facade, breakfast is served on a stone terrace with sweeping valley view, and singer Philippe who runs the five-room *chambre d'hôte* with wife Nadia hosts musical soirées around his piano. Crammed with priceless original features, the stone chessboard embedded in what was a bar (now part of an en-suite bathroom) and the monumental creamy-stone staircase spiralling three floors are highlights.

Another dreamy French retreat, **Les Vents Bleus** (The Blue Winds; ☎ 05 63 56 86 11; www.lesventsbleus.com; Le Bourg, rte de Caussade, Donnazac; incl breakfast €80-150, tr €130-150; 🗓 mid-Apr–early Nov; 📍), 7km south of Cordes-sur-Ciel along the D922

in Donnazac, is a stone farmhouse with a garden pool, a candlelit dining area (dinner €25 in July and August) outside beneath age-old beams, and five stylish rooms in the former *chais* (above-ground wine cellars). Immediately at home is how Parisian Valérie, Italian husband Filippo and their three kids instantly make guests feel.

GAILLAC

pop 12,100

It is impossible to dine in this vine-clad neck of the woods without stumbling across Gaillac, one of southern France's best-known appellations that produces well-regarded reds. Or marry an AOC Gaillac *Fraîcheur Perlé* (faintly sparkling white) with seafood and you're in aperitif heaven.

Uncannily Tuscan in feel, with its burnt-amber buildings, arches and terracotta-tile rooftops, the town of Gaillac grew up in the 10th century around the Benedictine **Abbaye St-Michel** (place St-Michel) on the banks of the River Tarn. Inside, the **Musée de l'Abbaye** (adult/under 12yr €2.50/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun) covers local viticulture history, and the **Tourist Office** (☎ 05 63 57 14 65; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm, 6pm or 7pm) has detailed information on the Route du Vin that motorists or cyclists can follow and

organises guided strolls by moonlight in the vineyards. The **Maison des Vins** (☎ 05 63 57 15 40; www.vins-gaillac.com; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm, 6pm or 7pm) pacifies wine aficionados with the reds, whites and rosés of 145 local *vignerons* (winegrowers) to taste and buy (€2.35 to €10.15 a bottle): Château Chaumet-Lagrange, Domaine d'Escausses, Domaine Rotier and Château de Terride are among the best known.

Wine-driven dining in a red-brick 14th- to 15th-century *chai* is the lure of **Les Sarments** (☎ 05 63 57 62 61; www.restaurantlessarments.com; starters/mains €14/17, 5-course menu €46; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue & Thu-Sat, lunch Wed & Sun), an irresistibly atmospheric restaurant behind the abbey in La Portanelle, the oldest quarter of Gaillac, which begs you to get lost in it.

Heading 3km north out of town along the scenic, vineyard-framed D4 the **Mas de Sudre** (☎ 05 63 41 01 32; www.masdesudre.com; s/d incl breakfast €50/70; ☎) is a flowery farmhouse *chambre d'hôte* run by Mr and Mrs Richmond Brown (Pippa and George are English) for 15-odd years. Green-fingered guests will love it.

A little further north in **Castelnaud de Montmiral** (population 895), another *plus beau village* with a seductive arcaded village square, is lovely **Hôtel des Consuls** (☎ 05 63 33 17 44; www.hoteldesconsuls.com; place des Arcades; d €58-78).

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