



For hundreds of years the city of Toulouse was the center of a loose empire in Southwestern France with the Counts of Toulouse having almost as much power and status as the King of France. Then they used that wealth and power to build a city that showed their importance.

Because red clay and sand were the easily available building materials, Toulouse ended up with a very distinct architecture. It is often called "the rose-colored city." But for a brief time during the 15th century it owed its reputation to the color blue.

For centuries blue was a color to be avoided. The ancient Romans associated it with the Barbarians who colored their bodies blue before they went into battle. Even Julius Caesar was terrified of it. He thought of it in connection with hell and death. But during the 1400s things began to change.

Blue began to show up in the stained glass windows of important churches. Statues of the Virgin Mary that had usually been in red started coming in blue. Kings and nobles decided it made them look good. After all, the nobles thought of themselves as blue bloods, the least they could do was reflect that in their clothing and surroundings.

The way to get the best blue dye was to extract it from the pastel plant. Toulouse became the center of the pastel trade and home to a group of families who were just dyeing to get rich.

And they used their wealth, which came from blue, to buy things pink. Toulouse has over 30 magnificent pink mansions that were built by the families that controlled the pastel business.

Julbert Castlegrande is an authority on the history and culture of Toulouse and he guided me through the city:

Pierre Dessiar was this very rich merchant of woad and banker and businessman. And this man built a large house between 1555 and 1565. He made this house famous because of the stone, because of the decorations, the columns in Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian style. And then he built this high tower to show off his social position.



But it was a short-lived prosperity; a series of religious wars devastated the region. And the introduction of competitive dying products like indigo didn't help either.

Toulouse is also the home of the Basilique St. Sernin, which is

the largest and most famous Romanesque church in Europe. It is constructed on the burial site of the first bishop of Toulouse, who was martyred in the year 250 by the Romans for his Christian beliefs.

The original church was built in the 400s to protect the relics of the saint. These days the relics are kept below the church in an area known as the crypt.

During the middle ages, holy relics, the bones or possessions of a saint, were considered to have magical powers and could be counted on to attract pilgrims to a site. They were kept in special containers that were made of gold and silver and encrusted with precious jewels. One contains one of the thorns from the crown of thorns worn by Christ.

St. Sernin was designed to hold hundreds of pilgrims who were on their way to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Another example of the extraordinary church architecture in Toulouse is the Jacobins Church.

JULBERT CASTLEGRANDE:

The monastery of the Jacobins is the Dominican monastery built in the 13th and 14th century. And it was made for the preachers to speak against the heretics against the Cathars. And what's very special about this church is the way it's built. It's one naïve. It doesn't have the plaintive across. It's a succession of seven columns that divides the church in two pieces. So one part was for the monks, one part was for the people.



The windows are new but two rows of windows were kept from the 14th century. One red, one blue. The original were broken in the 19th century. So we put warm colors on the south sections to help the light of the sun to come in to enlighten the building. And then cold colors on the north side. The red and the yellow were for the parts of the sun. So that it gave the people the impression that heaven would be like the light in this church.

BASTIDES

At the beginning of the 13th century, the king of France decided to extend his control into what is now the Southwest corner of France. When his troops arrived, they were confronted by a local population that lived in small villages and farmed the surrounding land. Some of the villages were under the control of a local member of the nobility. Some were under the control of a monastery or other form of religious community.

But most of the population was made up of freemen, who accepted the authority of a local lord in exchange for protection.

The king's men soon realized that taking control of the area by force was beyond their capability so they came up with plan B, and what a great plan it was too. They disguised themselves as real estate developers and built new towns right next to the old towns. Ah, but they were not just new towns, they were new and improved.

The objective was to get the freemen to move from the old towns to the new towns and become loyal subjects of the king of France—loyal subjects who paid their taxes directly to the king instead of the local nobility. The new towns were built on top of hills and called bastides.



The first bastide was a town called *Cordes*. It went up in 1222 and it was a financial planner's dream come true. Bastides were developed according to a specific grid. The streets were straight. They connected to each other at right angles. A commercial square was placed at the center of the grid. Everything was carefully marked off. You could look at the town plan and know precisely its potential income. The entire economic life of the community was enclosed in a financial framework. The owners got the most income from the available space. It was an early example of the Donald Trump School of development.

Of course, the king's real estate men had the same problems as the Donald—now that I built it, how do I fill it, and what kind of tenants do I want? Well in those days you didn't want anyone from the upper classes because they might refuse to pay their taxes. Even then getting the rich to pay taxes was a problem. And you didn't want any peasants because they were already working your land or the land of some other Count who counted. You recruited the tradesmen and craftsmen and shopkeepers who were free to move about.



As time passed, the uniformity of the bastides gave way. Shopkeepers put up arcades to keep the customers dry so they could shop on rainy days. People who made lots of money built bigger and more elaborate houses. Churches were built. And

once you had something of value you felt the need to protect it, so walled ramparts were built around the bastides. Gates were put up so you could decide who should be allowed in and who shouldn't.

There are dozens of *bastides* in the region where you can stop in and see what life was like in the bad old days.

THE CANAL DU MIDI

The Southwest of France sits between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. In theory the region should conduct its commerce and cultural activities in both directions. But for centuries that was not the case.

It costs about ten times as much to move goods over land as it does to move them by water. Unfortunately, all the rivers in this area flow to the west to the Atlantic. And they flow through the city of Bordeaux which is the arch rival to the city of Toulouse.

This was too much for the people of Toulouse, especially for Pierre Paul de Riquet. Riquet was an engineer and astute businessman. In the middle of the 1600s he convinced the chief financial officer to Louis XIV to approve and help finance a canal that would run through the center of the region and connect the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.

It was an old idea. The ancient Romans had considered it and given it a pass—much too difficult. But for Riquet it was his life, his dream, the ditch into which he tossed all of his money. He did not understand the word "no" and it appears that was only one of hundreds of words he did not understand. He kept his dream and he kept digging.



It took 12,000 workers, the dowries that Riquet had put aside for his daughters and 14 years to build the 150-mile long canal. When it opened it gave an immediate commercial boost to the area and continued to do so until the early 20th century.

These days a considerable amount of the traffic on the canal is made up of tourists who rent boats and motor along the canal for a few days.



WHERE TO EAT

LE COLOMBIER

14 RUE BAYARD
TOULOUSE 31000 FRANCE
TEL: 011.33.5.61.62.40.05
FAX: 011.5.61.99.10.11
E-MAIL: COLOMBIER.R@WANADOO.FR

L'OCCITAN BAR

CROWNE PLAZA
7 PLACE DU CAPITOLE
TOULOUSE 31000 FRANCE
TEL: 011.33.5.61.6.11.919
FAX: 011.33.5.61.23.79.96
WWW.CROWNEPLAZA.COMADDRESS1

Southwestern France

You can also use the side paths along the canal for biking or walking. Either way you will pass through some of the most beautiful scenery in France.

CARCASSONNE

The Southwest of France is dotted with hill towns but the most famous is Carcassonne. The hill on which it was built has been occupied since the 5th century BC, which makes it one of the oldest continually occupied cities in Europe. By the 12th century AD it was one of the great power centers. Today it is the finest example of medieval fortifications in Europe.



For over two thousand years military types have just loved this place. The original defensive structures were put up here by ancient Roman soldiers. When Rome fell in the 400s the city was taken over by the warlords of the Visigoths. About 300 years later, Muslim troops came over from Spain and took

control. For a while the local counts were in charge. In the 1200s, the King of France extended his power into this area and his forces settled in. And when the Germans occupied France during The Second World War, Nazi troops turned the place into their headquarters.

In the center of Carcassonne is the Basilique St. Nazaire. The original part of this Basilica was built in the Roman style, but when the king of France took control in the 1200's he added a Gothic section. Just down the street from the Basilique St. Nazaire is the Chateau Comtal, a castle that displays just about every military defense that was available at the time. You've got your basic watchtowers so you can watch what's going on outside the walls. Those openings in the floor were a nice touch. In many movies that are set in ancient castles there is a scene where the guys in the castle pour boiling oil through those openings and onto the attackers below. Basically you turned your enemies into French fries.



Never happened in real life—only in the movies. Oil was much too valuable. They used it for lighting and cooking and as a medication. They would never have thrown it on the attackers. What came down from above were big rocks.

Today, the inner city has been restored. There are restaurants, bakeries, food shops, hotels and souvenir stands. They even have a traffic light.

TO LEARN MORE . . .

CROWNE PLAZA

7 PLACE DU CAPITOLE
TOULOUSE 31000 FRANCE
TEL: 011.33.5.61.6.11.919
FAX: 011.33.5.61.23.79.96
WWW.CROWNEPLAZA.COM

TOULOUSE TOURIST OFFICE

B.P. 0801
TOULOUSE CEDEX, FRANCE
TOULOUSE 31080 FRANCE
TEL: 011.33.5.61.11.02.22
FAX: 011.33.5.61.22.03.63
WWW.OT-TOULOUSE.FR/ENGLISH

MIDI PYRENEES TOURIST BOARD

WWW.TOURISME-MIDI-PYRENEES.COM

CARCASSONNE TOURIST OFFICE

WWW.CARCASSONNE-TOURISM.COM

FRENCH TOURISM OFFICE

444 MADISON AVENUE, #16
NEW YORK, NY 10022
TEL: 1.212.383.7800
WWW.FRANCETOURISM.COM

ALBI

Albi is the ancestral home of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, one of the greatest artists of the 19th century. When he died his parents donated the contents of his studio and set up the Musee Toulouse-Lautrec, which has the world's finest collection of his work. Christian Riviere was my guide through the museum
CHRISTIAN RIVIERE:

Toulouse-Lautrec was born in Albi in November 24, 1864, and he was from a very very wealthy family. His father was a Count, Alphonse Toulouse-Lautrec, and his mother was the Countess Adèle-Zoé-Marie-Marquette. And the problem was his parents were first cousins.



When Lautrec was 13 years old, an accident broke his left thighbone. A year later, a second accident fractured his right thighbone. His legs atrophied and stopped growing. Walking was difficult and he began to spend his lonely days drawing.

He studied with a number of traditional teachers but in the end was happier on his own and moved to the bohemian district of Paris where he started drawing the popular entertainers of the time. Lautrec wanted to capture the effect of movement. He felt free to draw figures that were anatomically incorrect, out of proper perspective and unstable in their environment. In doing so he was able to capture the intense rhythm and energy of their

ARMAGNAC



While I was in Toulouse I stayed at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. It's been awarded four stars and is right in the center of town which is the most historic part of the city.

The Crowne Plaza bar has an excellent selection of Armagnac, which is a type of brandy. It's a specialty of Southwestern France. By definition brandy is an alcoholic beverage distilled from fruit. Armagnac is distilled from grapes.

In 1514 King Louis XII issued the first license for the production of brandy, and since then the wine country of France has been a center for its production. The most famous brandy is probably Cognac, which is produced just up the road, but Armagnac is different and appears to retain more of the flavor of the wine.

When you look at the label of a distilled spirit you usually find a line that has the word "proof" and a number. The word "proof" goes back to medieval times and it describes a suit of armor that will withstand a gunshot wound. Today it just tells you how much alcohol there is in the bottle. But it's a doubling up number. If it's 80 proof that means that 40 percent of what's inside the bottle is alcohol. Another nice thing to know about Armagnac is that it ages extremely well, but only for 50 years. So you don't want to spend a lot of money on an Armagnac over 50; you're just wasting your money. And waste is something that they absolutely hate in this part of France.

bodies. He had an amazing ability to capture the true nature of a subject in just a few brief strokes.

CHRISTIAN RIVIÈRE:

In Paris there were a lot of cabarets all over Montmartre. One of them, Moulin Rouge decided to organize on a new show – Cancan. To promote the new show they would need a poster. And Toulouse-Lautrec would be the designer of the new poster. He would imagine something very very new. For that, he would be inspired by the Japanese prints and he saw the Japanese would use few colors and movement and never any text. For the poster, Lautrec would use all the combinations: few text, movement, and few colors. We have the first and the original poster done in 1892.



And with that poster he became the creator of the modern poster.

Albi is also home of the Sainte Cecile Cathedral one of the most magnificent churches in Europe. Construction started in 1282 with the intension of building a structure that would work for defense as well as devotion. At the time very few people could read. Their vision of the spiritual world came from architecture, paintings, and sculpture. Everything about the cathedral was designed to proclaim the superior grandeur of God. The beauty and the detail throughout the church were meant to show the triumph of the spirit over matter.

The great choir contrasts the terrible God of the Old Testament with the gentle God revealed by Christ.

The huge painting of the Last Judgment illustrates the gospel of St. Matthew. "When the Son of Man cometh in his glory and the Angels with him." The vaulted ceiling is an enormous fresco. The largest fresco in the world. Executed in 1509 by

Italian painters from Bologna, it has never been retouched. Christ in his glory, the triumphant virgin, saints joyous over their election.

WHAT'S COOKING

The restaurant Le Colombia has been in business for over 100 years. These days it's owned by Michel and Gerard Zezo. He does the cooking, she runs the dining room. It's a family restaurant that offers specialties of the region. The Southwest of France is a center for the production of foie gras, the fattened liver of goose or duck. Women on local farms have been turning out foie gras for hundreds of years. And I've been eating it for about 50.

The Southwest of France is also the land of *confits* – duck, goose or pork that has been salted, cooked slowly and preserved. The *confits* is used as the basis for dozens of dishes.

The most famous dish made with *confits* is *cassoulet*. In Toulouse it's made from *confits*, white beans, pork and sausages. There are variations in every family kitchen and restaurant for a hundred mile radius.

For centuries people have passed through these villages searching for an inner peace, and in the process they have transformed the local landscape both physically and spiritually. But they have also come to appreciate the traditional aspects of the region. To visit this area is to encounter one of the most unspoiled parts of Europe. The Southwest is the secret soul of France.

