

La vie en rose

James Clark explores the southern French destination of Toulouse, aka the Pink City, to explore its meandering terracotta streets, hidden courtyards, gourmet food and friendly gay scene

If you're a foodie, rugby enthusiast, or you just enjoy being in a relaxed yet lively atmosphere (or all three), then book yourself a weekend in the blushing pink city of Toulouse.

The southern French city nicknamed 'La Ville Rose' thanks to its assortment of terracotta brickwork buildings has many facets to its character. Its proximity to the border with Spain means that the Spanish have been coming to Toulouse for centuries. After the Second World War, more than 100,000 relocated to make it their home. Consequently, today's city is a melting pot of both cultures. Adding to Toulouse's vibe are the fresh faces of the 100,000-strong French and Spanish university students that make up nearly a quarter of the population. Business-wise, the fourth largest city in France is linked to the aeronautics and aerospace industries and is currently exploding with startups. On the culture side of things, the jazz, techno and LGBTQ+ scenes are equally buzzing.

An attractive place to explore first is the traditional old quarter, which is filled with various coral-coloured shopfronts, palaces and churches. I leave the Citiz Hotel (18, *allées Jean-Jaurès*), where I'm staying in the action-packed heart of the city, and take a stroll through the medieval antique-dealers' district around Les Allées Brocante. Only the French could make dusty old books look chic. Here, the streets are filled with mansions featuring towers and courtyards built during

CITY OF ROSES: Opposite: The Basilica of Saint Sernin, the largest Romanesque church in Europe; (clockwise from above left): The city is a maze of narrow streets; the impressive façade of the Capitole, the City Hall; the fountain in Place de la Trinité; market-fresh produce; colourful shutters are a feature of the buildings

“The old quarter is filled with coral-coloured shopfronts, palaces and churches”

the Renaissance period. Many courtyard doors are wide open – am I invited? I check with a group of students who assure me it is OK to enter. I take a wander around a few and decide to pop into the tourist information office on Square Charles de Gaulle later to find out more.

I make my way north to Place du Capitole, the city's central square and main focal point. It's filled with bars and restaurants – at weekends, there's a market – all overseen by the pink-tinged neoclassical façade of Toulouse's city hall. I take a seat, order a coffee from one of the fine-looking waiters and catch a smouldering look from a good-looking stranger at one of the other tables.

As in most French cities, Toulouse has plenty of dining options. I stop by La Gourmandine (17, *place Victor Hugo*) for lunch, an upmarket restaurant serving locally sourced French food and wine. After a little flirting with the waiter – on reflection, it was one-sided – I dine on duck spring rolls with orange and coriander, local beef tartare with mashed potatoes and vegetables, and polish it off with a chocolate ball with caramel and peanuts. Every mouthful is heaven.

After a couple of glasses of wine, I get talking to a woman sitting at the table next to me, by the name of Marie France Ceruti. As chance would have it, Marie works for Toulouse Tourist Centre, which saves me a trip. She has designed a walking tour that offers insight into the hidden side of the city that she's named 'A little tour through the courtyard'. Marie is passionate about Toulouse and is keen to show me around, so we finish lunch and head out to discover the lesser-known parts of the city.

We wander through alleyways and hidden doors into



OPPOSITE: ISTOCK; THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JAMES CLARK, ISTOCK; ISABEL BIRRES, JAMES CLARK, ISTOCK

“The streets are filled with Renaissance mansions and courtyards”



HIGH RISE: (Clockwise from left) Fountains are a feature of Toulouse; there are 50 towers dotted around Toulouse Old Town – the taller your tower, the higher your social standing; cheese is a feature of the region; pork Saucisse de Toulouse is famous the world over

some of the courtyards off the beaten tourist track. Many of these boast giant towers – during the Renaissance, the more money you had, the bigger your tower. Marie pulls out a huge set of keys that gives her access to some of the closed courtyards, while for others she asks shopkeepers to allow us entry. It’s a fascinating way to discover parts of Toulouse that many locals don’t even know exist. As we say goodbye, Marie points out that the local LGBTQ+ scene is relaxed and welcoming, giving me the green light to venture out by myself later on.

As evening falls, I head to Le Quinquina (26, rue Peyras), a gay-friendly bar where chilled-out locals and expats are enjoying cocktails on the outdoor terrace. It’s the perfect place to strike up a conversation with others about where to go next. The friendly feel continues at G Bar (11, rue de Thionville), which gives off a relaxing vibe – men glance but don’t stare. There’s a dancefloor where guys of all ages and types party before heading to Limelight (23, bd Pierre-Paul Riquet), the biggest gay dance club in Toulouse. There I spend the next four hours flitting between its massive dancefloor and the outside terrace.

Just as the next day is breaking – I am grateful that Toulouse’s



LGBTQ+ venues are within walking distance of each other – I walk back my hotel for some much-needed sleep.

The next morning, I join Jessica Hammer on the three-and-a-half-hour Taste of Toulouse walking food tour around the indoor food market, Marché Victor Hugo, to learn the skills and secrets of French market-food eating and drinking. Our gourmet journey begins at Maison Beauhaire Boulangerie, where we taste a traditional-style chocolate baguette; it’s a fantastic way to get my appetite going before we move on to meet the couple running Papaix et Fils. Here we sample farm-to-counter duck liver cooked in duck fat, along with various sausages, including the dried Saucisse de Toulouse locals are immensely proud of.

While sampling Spanish ham at Maison Garcia, we chat about the rugby that I plan to watch later that day, before heading to our next stop at Fromagerie Emilie to meet owner Emilie, who has a degree in cheese, no less. She impresses us with Pelta (a young, raw milk goat’s cheese made near Toulouse), Comté (a hard, cooked cow’s-milk cheese from the Jura in eastern France), Boule de Brebis (a hard sheep’s-milk cheese, made in the Massif Centrale northeast of Toulouse) and Fourme d’Ambert (a raw cow’s-milk blue cheese from Auvergne). I happily wash them down with a glass of Château l’Enclos des Roses Gaillac AOC Méthode Ancestrale Brut sparkling wine (100 per cent Mauzac, from a female winemaker) at Chai Vincent with a group of tipsy retired locals. My new friends introduce me to the red Château Joliet



A CITY FOR ALL SEASONS: (Clockwise from right) A stylish arcade in the Place du Capitole; lose yourself in the narrow streets of the Old Town; Stade Ernest-Wallon, home of Stade Toulousain, the city’s rugby club; a feast in store in the Marché Victor Hugo

“Our gourmet journey begins at Maison Beauhaire Boulangerie, with a chocolate baguette”

Haute Expression 2017, which is a blend of Négrette, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah grapes. Although I am enjoying the company of my new French friends, I must bid them farewell for one last local experience before I return to London.

I take a taxi over to Stade Ernest-Wallon to watch Stade Toulousain rugby club play Montpellier Hérault. Having won the Heineken cup four times and clinched a record 19 French Champion titles, Stade Toulousain is one of the most successful clubs in Europe. The atmosphere is electrifying, yet – as seems to be the theme for the weekend – the crowds remain friendly. The match over, I somehow manage to talk my way into the after-party to drink and chat with players – the perfect end to a hectic but fun-filled break. 🍷



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