

A yellow train with four passenger cars is crossing a suspension bridge over a dense green forest. The bridge has multiple cables supporting it. The train is moving from left to right. The forest is lush and green, with sunlight filtering through the trees. The sky is bright and clear.

TOUR OF OCCITANIE BY TRAIN

Along a multi-day train pass, David Bowden travels on various local trains to discover France's Occitanie region in the southeast of the country.

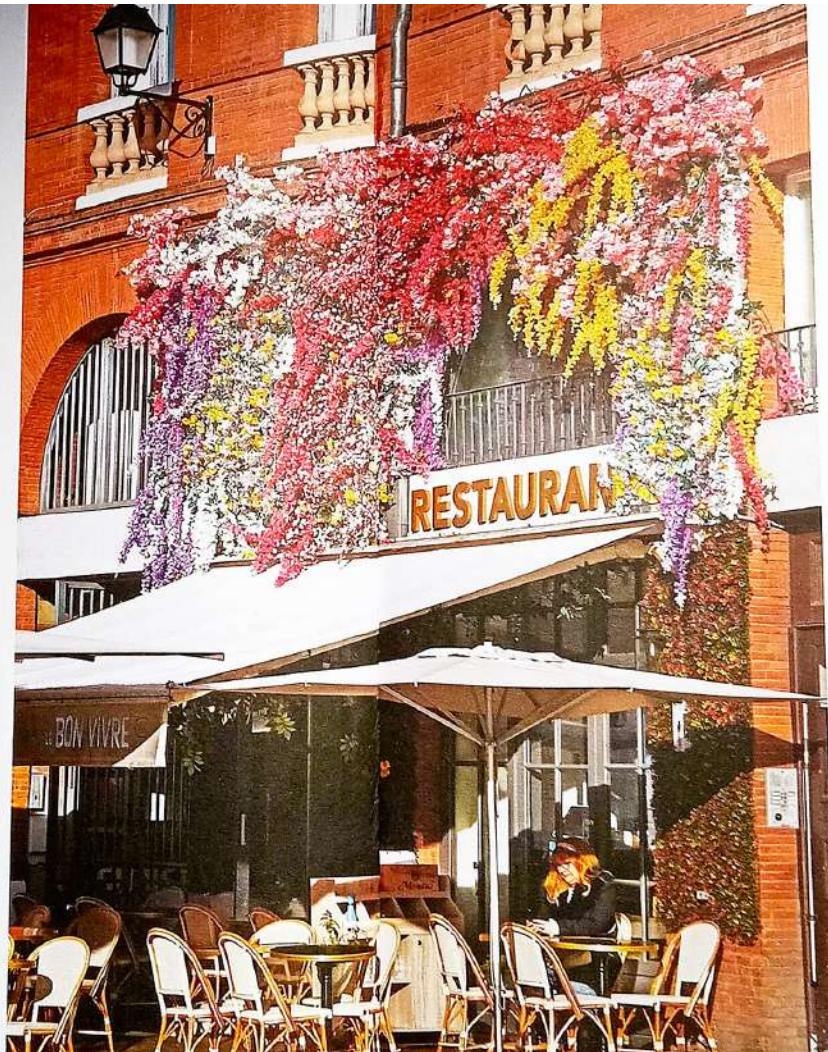
WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY (EXCEPT WHERE CREDITED) BY DAVID BOWDEN

FRANCE

Just RM50 per day seemed like a great bargain for discovering Occitanie, or France's southeastern parts. With a few days to spare after exploring Toulouse, France's Ville Rose or Pink City (named after the marble used to build many buildings here), I purchased a train pass and headed south towards the border with Spain, and then boarded the century-old, Petit Train Jaune (Little Yellow Train) for Villefranche-de-Conflent. Over a few further days, I travelled to Perpignan, down to Cerbère beside the Mediterranean Sea and on the border with Spain, and then back to Toulouse for my KLM flight back to Kuala Lumpur via Amsterdam.



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LITTLE YELLOW TRAIN

TOULOUSE TO THE SPANISH BORDER

After exploring the sights of Toulouse, including the Aeroscopia Museum (a celebration of Airbus and aviation), La Cité de l'espace (a space exploration theme park), La Halle de La Machine (a fascinating collection of oversized machines), and the historic heart of the city with its UNESCO-recognised Saint Sernin Church, it was time to depart Toulouse Matabiau Station for the three-hour journey into the Catalan Pyrenees and Latour-de-Carol on the border with Spain.

I stocked up on some delicious treats of cheeses, cold cuts and freshly baked baguettes at the Victor Hugo Markets near the Mercurie Wilson Capitole, my hotel of choice in central Toulouse. The journey southward slowly increased in altitude as we began climbing into the Pyrenees. We passed fortress-protected towns like Foix and others providing access to ski slopes, hiking trails, and thermal spas before reaching the Latour-de-Carol terminus.

LITTLE YELLOW TRAIN

My main reason for travelling to the southeast awaited me at Latour-de-Carol. The famous Petit Train Jaune is a three-hour journey through the spectacular Catalan part of the Pyrenees, and made more impressive with an open car for uninterrupted photography. The train is named after its yellow and red colours, derived from the Catalan flag.

The train passes Bourg-Madame Station, which is close to the border with Spain and Andorra, for those who want to explore these Catalan parts. The mountainous scenery along the 63km line is quite remarkable, especially when the electric-powered train reaches Bolquère-Eyne at 1,593 m, France's highest railway station.



Upon arriving in Villefranche-Vernet-les-Bains, I contemplated just how many places there were along the route for those who wanted to explore the small villages before rejoining the next train. Reading my helpful guidebook, I noted places to stay and eat in all the villages along the route. Font-Romeu-Odeillo-Via is one of the region's outdoor capitals, with skiing, caving, rafting and canyoning. I chose to stay in the valley before taking the train to Perpignan via Prades.



CREDIT: Occitanie Tourism Conflent Canigo Office



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CATALAN PRIDE

In ancient times, many peoples fought to control Perpignan, an important trading centre in the lowlands at the base of the Pyrenees Mountains. Its new railway station is an impressive and colourful structure, while the centre of this medieval city is Le Castillet. Perpignan and most other parts to the south showcase Catalan influences, as witnessed in Perpignan Cathedral. In comparison, the enormous Palace of the Kings of Majorca is a celebration of Romanesque and Gothic architecture. From the ramparts of the Spanish citadel, I enjoyed my first view of the Mediterranean Sea.

The railway south of Perpignan travels along the spectacular coastal region known as the Côte Vermeille (Vermilion Coast). It passes through the highly regarded vineyards of the Roussillon-Languedoc region and picture-perfect coastal towns like Collioure and Banyuls-sur-Mer before pulling into Cerbère for a change of train for those travelling to Portbou in Spain.

The coast attracted 19th century artists like Picasso and Matisse to the fort-protected port of Collioure. While a popular tourist destination, alighting here to stay for a day or so to explore the historic narrow alleyways will appeal to many.

Exploring Occitanie by train is easy and offers a variety of landscapes, from the shores of the Mediterranean to the snow-capped ski slopes of the Catalan Pyrenees.

Essentials

Arriving

Fly from Kuala Lumpur non-stop to Europe via KLM's (www.klm.com/my) daily service to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. From here, the flight to Toulouse, in southeast France, takes 90 minutes.

Getting About

French trains are operated by SNCF, with the local trains known as IO. TGV trains operate on the high-speed network. Tickets for such trains were not included in my pass, which was only for the local trains.

Contacts

Destination Occitanie (www.visit-occitanie.com). Purchase a copy of the book *Tour of Occitanie by Rail* in bookshops or Occitanie Tourism offices for 200 pages of solid information on every train journey in France's southeast.