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A slow train journey in search of France's greatest small town

Ride the rails from Toulouse through spectacular landscapes to underrated towns packed with history and culture



Anthony Peregrine
Destination expert

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Montauban is an alluring southern city 'full of commerce, art and rugby' Credit: getty

I have just completed a little rail trip around a small slice of south-west France. I can't tell you how good it was. Well, I can – because I'm about to – but it will take time and be at the outer edge of my abilities. Toulouse is a good place to start because you can fly there from several airports in Britain. [Then you catch a local LiO train](#). This will ease your conscience about the flight, if you have one.

There are many advantages to a rail holiday. You may read, or watch the countryside without fear of crashing into it. There are no worries about parking, driving on the wrong side of the road among lunatic foreigners or breaking down. Insurance and the concern that your car will attract the attention of the criminal classes may be forgotten. [And the rail pass costs less than £9 a day](#).

First leg: Toulouse – Moissac (1 hour)

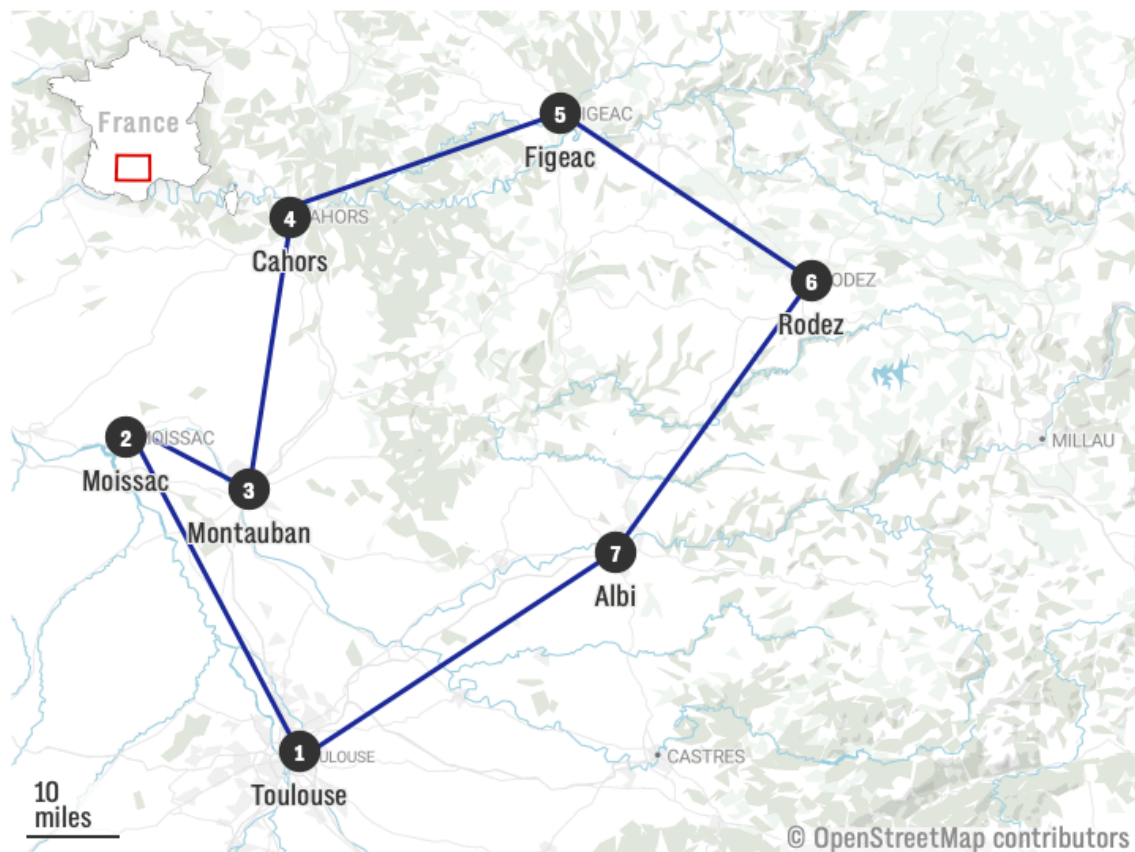
You head first for Moissac's Abbey of St Peter. It is an undisputed marvel of medieval France. The soaring porch is so deeply rich in sculpture – a three-armed Christ in Judgement, Evangelists, seraphims, 24 Elders, the Holy Family fleeing for Egypt, snakes sucking at the breasts of Lust as feasting Dives is carted off to hell – that it will take you through Lent to take it all in.



Catch a local LiO train out of Toulouse to Moissac Credit: Moment RF

Beyond, the cloisters are extraordinary: 76 pillars topped with capitals untouched since the 11th century and so intact that you may still read their stories. See, for instance, St Lawrence on the grill, as Romans blow on the flames. I visit cloisters whenever possible – my aim is to have a set built in the garden at home – but none comes close to the majesty of Moissac.

Then you wander down to the Tarn river, to encounter Moissac's unsung Second World War heroism. Some 500 Jewish children were given refuge here, hidden by locals in and around town. No child was ever betrayed. A walking tour – details from the tourist office – follows the story.



Second leg: Moissac – Montauban (20 mins)

A revelation. Why did no-one tell me about Montauban before? A monumental harmony of pink-red brick, the town has swung from a virulently Calvinist past via Catholic re-establishment to a robust 21st century, full of commerce, art and rugby. Pretty much perfect, then.

The cathedral is shut because bits are falling off, but the St Jacques church compensates. It still bears cannon-ball damage from 1621, when Louis XIII tried to dislodge ruling Protestants. He failed. The central Place Nationale, with two rows of arcades and a town crier every Saturday at 11h44, may be the most satisfying main square in southern France. Intense pedestrian streets – look out for the Couderc hardware shop on Rue de la Resistance for everything from skillets to axes – lead finally to the Ingres-Bourdelle museum.



The Musée Ingres Bourdelle in Montauban Credit: alamy