

Spotlight *on* ALBI



The vibrant colours of Albi dazzle in any weather. Gillian Thornton explores La Ville Rouge in the Tarn.

Wherever you travel in the world, some views just stick in your mind forever. To find one unforgettable panorama is a memory to treasure, but to find a succession of wow-moments in the same town is a rare treat.

Welcome to **Albi**, largest town of the **Tarn** department in south-west France and a feast for the eyes whichever way you look at it. I have never forgotten my first view of Albi's enormous hilltop cathedral, largest brick cathedral in the world. From the outside, Sainte-Cecile resembles a towering

fortress, built in the early 13th century as a blatant show of Roman Catholic supremacy following a Papal crusade to suppress the Cathar movement.

Welcomed by the ruling Counts of Toulouse and by many local people, especially around Albi, the Cathar doctrine strongly opposed many Catholic practices. So Albi's new cathedral sent an unequivocal message to anyone reckless enough to sympathise with heretic ideology. Look at our church and then decide who's boss...

So when I make a welcome return to Albi this summer, I am humbled to find that the impact of this imposing exterior is still every bit as powerful. And not just the outside. Sainte-Cécile is also the largest cathedral in Europe with a completely painted interior.

Step through the ornate 16th century side porch and behind that sombre façade, the walls, ceiling and roof arches are covered in biblical scenes painted in brilliant rainbow shades. Created in the 16th century by Renaissance artists from Italy, they cover earlier painted scenes of which fragments are still visible. Entry to the nave is free but expect a small charge to enter the Choir.



Sainte-Cécile Cathedral



Interior of Sainte-Cécile Cathedral



Castelviel, the old castle district



Toulouse-Lautrec Museum



Jardins du Palais des Evêques

In fact everywhere you look, Albi shimmers with colour, the tones of the local clay earning it the nickname of La Ville Rouge, a counterpart to the pink bricks of Toulouse, La Ville Rose, capital of the Occitanie region. Around one hour from Toulouse by car – and easily accessible by fast train – Albi's population today numbers around 50,000 and whilst the city boasts a lively retail and restaurant scene, it is the rich history that attracts most visitors to this delightful city.

I start my visit in the Cité Episcopale, strategically positioned at the highest point of the town above the Tarn river and listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. First stop for most visitors is the cathedral but Albi's bishops lived in grand style next door in the Palais de la Berbie. Today this turreted, red brick building is home to a unique museum dedicated to the city's most famous son – artist, illustrator and printmaker Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

Born in Albi in 1864 into a wealthy family, Henri's mobility and lifestyle were compromised by a bone condition that gave

him short legs. But Henri showed a talent for painting from a young age and I linger over his vibrant studies of horses and his experiments with different genres of painting executed before he moved to Paris and developed his signature style. Here Henri painted everyday scenes of prostitutes and, during his last decade, his famous advertising posters for cabarets and music halls.

Ironically, Parisian museums considered Henri too provocative to accept a gift of his work from his mother after his death in 1901, aged just 36. His hometown, however, was delighted with the donation for their modest museum that has since grown into one of France's leading art collections. And behind the Berbie Palace is another of Albi's knockout views, a high-level panorama over the formal planting of the Bishop's Garden – classified *Jardin Remarquable* – and across the Tarn.

Head round the soaring cathedral tower to take in the village atmosphere and half-timbered houses of the Castelviel or Old Castle district. The chateau is long gone, but Albi's latest addition – and something of a



Albi's new footbridge



Cité Episcopale seen from the river

visitor attraction – is the new stylish footbridge that runs alongside and underneath the rail bridge to provide a third route across the Tarn.

The nearby Pont Vieux road bridge reopened in June after major restoration and is the oldest bridge in France still carrying vehicles. Look one way for views up to Sainte-Cécile; the other way towards the red brick arches of the lofty Pont du 22 Août 1944 and the former flourmill, now converted into offices, homes and a delightful hotel.

From the riverside windows of the Hotel Mercure Albi Bastides, the red and russet shades of the brick bridges and Cité Episcopale change with the weather and time of day. And what nicer way to wind down than with dinner at an alfresco table in the hotel restaurant, La Vermicellerie, named in honour of the alphabet-shaped vermicelli manufactured here in the 19th century.

The hotel and adjacent road bridge feature on Albi's Blue Circuit, one of three interconnecting walking routes detailed on a free map from the Tourist Office. Go Blue for views of the Episcopale complex; Gold for

town houses and city development; and Gold for the Old Quarter that includes not just the Cathedral but also Toulouse-Lautrec's birthplace and the pretty, flower-filled cloister of Saint-Salvi.

And there are other ways to explore the rich history of La Ville Rouge. Hop aboard Le Petit Train outside Sainte-Cécile for a 40-minute ride with commentary, or do as I did and take a private tour with **Le Tacot Cathare** and let your English-speaking driver Marc Fanals reveal some of Albi's hidden gems.



Tacot may be the French word for an 'old banger' but qualified tour guide Marc has nothing but affection for Griotte,

his classic red-and-white Citroën 2CV that can drive down narrow streets impassable to larger vehicles, including the city's narrowest thoroughfare at just 1 metre 40 wide. Only 5.5 million of these iconic vehicles were made between 1948 and 1990, but 2,000 beloved bangers still circulate on the roads of France. And Griotte? Marc bought his 2CV with a red 'griotte' cherry sticker already in place and the name just stuck!

But not everything in Albi is red. After a delicious 'bistronomic' lunch at **La Forge du Vieil Albi**, I set out to discover the city's green side on a short cruise by *gabarre* or flat-bottomed boat with **Albi Croisieres**. Starting from a mooring on the Echapée Verte, the Green Escape trail that hugs the riverbank beneath the cathedral complex, we glide away from town between tree-lined banks, watching for waterfowl, then turn back to pass beneath the new foot bridge and the Pont Vieux as far as the weir before the second road bridge. Longer options include 90-minute picnic cruises and nature cruises.

Before I leave, there is just time to discover some more vibrant local colours at **Les Poteries d'Albi**, a thriving artisanal business around ten minutes' walk from the hotel. Founded in 1891 as a brick factory, this renowned pottery has been in the same family for seven generations, and now produces stunning pots and vases for indoor and outdoor décor, all hand-made and enamelled in vibrant colours.

With 127 shapes and sizes to choose from and 54 tempting colour combinations, what do I choose to brighten my own home? A hard choice but in the end, I go for a sparkling shade of reddish-brown. The perfect souvenir from the Tarn's stunning Ville Rouge.



LE MOULIN SUR CÉLÉ

An enchanting luxurious riverside retreat in the beautiful Célé Valley

Experience la France Profonde

www.lemoulinsurcele.com

 An aerial view of a large, historic stone mill with a red-tiled roof, surrounded by lush green trees and a small swimming pool.


www.lapont.com

Embrace the Essence of Burgundy

11-DAY FRENCH IMMERSION IN BURGUNDY

ACCOMMODATION	MEALS	ACTIVITIES
Stay at the Château Private Room with En-suite 1 Complimentary Night at the Boutique Hotel in Lyon-Center	Regional Wines & meals All Meals Prepared by In-house Chef Dinner at Michelin restaurant	French Language Course Cultural Tours & Guided Visits Cooking Workshop Day Trips & Wine Tasting <i>*All Inclusive and planned</i>