TOULOUSE: LA VILLE ROSE

A look into the “rose red city” of France

Toulouse, a city situated between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, some 456 miles from Paris, is capital of the Great Pyrenees region (mountains in the natural border between Spain and France). It is located on the banks of the Garonne and is the fourth largest French city, with more than 700,000 inhabitants. The greater urban district of Toulouse is among the biggest cities in Southern Europe.

The warm glow of red bricks and tiles gives Toulouse its nickname, “La ville rose” (the rose red city). The materials used were almost exclusively the flat Toulousein brick, whose rosy colour gives the city this nickname. Culture is a keyword in Toulouse. The city is proud of its traditions and has long nurtured music and entertainment, which included dance, theatre and concerts.

Renowned for its pleasant way of life, Toulouse is a favoured venue for conventions and trade fairs. It is well known for some remarkable monuments and some worldwide famous products and companies (i.e. Concorde, Airbus, Spot, Aerospatiale, etc.)

CENTRE OF ACTIVITY

Off late, the name of Toulouse has been in the news front. Toulouse was one of the areas severely affected by the recent student riot which started in Paris. This is not a surprise as Toulouse is also the biggest university city outside Paris. Right from its foundation in 1229, the universities in Toulouse have managed to assert its personality and develop its own specific character. More than 110,000 students attend its three polytechnics and universities scattered within the walking streets of Toulouse.

The unveiling of the new Airbus A380 recently, the world’s biggest passenger plane, further put Toulouse on the tourist map. The enormous hangar where the A380 jet is assembled is located at Blagnac, on the outskirts of Toulouse. The 555 seat, double deck Airbus A380 is the most ambitious civil aircraft programme yet.
When it enters service in March 2006, the A380 will be the world’s largest airliner, easily eclipsing Boeing’s 747. Perched on a 30 metre high balcony you will have a panoramic view of the world’s greatest aeroplane under construction as you touchdown at Blagnac Airport. You will also see the A330/340 line and the last Concorde ever produced.

Toulouse is effectively quartered by two 19th-century streets - the long shopping street, rue d’Alsace-Lorraine/rue du Languedoc, which runs North-South; and rue de Metz, which runs East-West onto the Pont-Neuf and across the Garonne. The streets are all very compact and easy to walk about.

Driving is a no no if you are not familiar with the narrow streets and the amazing French drivers, who are able to steer their tiny cars (amazingly most cars in Toulouse are hatchbacks) with ease.

In addition to the general pleasure of wandering the streets, there are a few very good museums and some real architectural treasures in the churches of St-Sernin and Les Jacobins, and in the magnificent renaissance town houses of the merchants who grew rich on the wood-dye trade. This formed the basis of the city’s economy from the mid-15th to the mid-16th-century, when the arrival of indigo from the Indian colonies wiped it out.

The best place to stay in Toulouse is indeed in the city centre, where there are a number of excellent-value hotels, as well as many more upmarket establishments. The area around the train stations (metro) has a few acceptable options if you have no other choice.

Choose a hotel which is easily accessible via the metro or within walking distance of the city centre. Taxis in Toulouse can be expensive. A 30-minutes drive from Blagnac Airport to the city centre can cost you about 45 Euros (RM200).

Regular daytime cafe-lounges can be seen all around the popular student hangouts of Place Arnaud-Bernard, Place du Capitole, Place St-Georges and Place Wilson. Among them, the most popular is the Place du Capitole, which is the centre of gravity for the city’s social life. Its smart cafes throng with people at lunchtime and in the early evening when the dying sun flushes the pink facade of the big town hall in the opposite.

THE CAPITOLE
The Capitole has not changed its layout since 1190. The name Capitole comes from the word "chapter", the place for an assembly. The Capitole’s facade dates from 1750-1760. It was designed by the architect Georges Cammas and is decorated by eight marble columns that symbolise the eight Capitouls (or municipal magistrates) and statues.

Occupying the whole of the Eastern side of the eponymous square, the Capitole has been the seat of Toulouse’s city government since the 12th-century. In medieval times, it housed the capitouls, who made up the oligarchic and independent city council, from which its name were derived.

The inner courtyard of Capitole is known as the Cour Henry IV. The statue of the King Henry IV (and the only one to be made of him in his lifetime) is enthroned above a gateway. In the centre of the courtyard, there is a plaque to remind us that the Duke of Montmorency, godson of Henry IV, was beheaded there.

The rooms on the first floor contain paintings from the 19th and
early 20th-centuries, while the Salle des Illustres, where weddings are held, exhibits busts of famous Toulouse personalities. The superb paintings that decorate its ceiling were recently restored.

At the main square of the Capitole, there are a number of lively cafes and it is a meeting place for Toulouse people. The square covers two hectares and is right at the heart of the city. There is also an open air market there every morning and all day on Wednesdays. Beneath it is a car park for 1,000 vehicles. The square was largely redesigned and restructured in 1995 but has preserved its graceful proportions and provides a broad open expanse for pedestrians.

The people of Toulouse know the Capitole well as the official seat of municipal power. But the Capitole is also a reflection of Toulouse's historical heritage. Many of the old capitols built their hotels in the dense web of now mainly accessible to pedestrians. Although many of the hotels still survive till today, they are rarely open to the public, so you have to do a lot of nonchalant sauntering into courtyards to get a look at them.

A short distance West of Place du Capitole, you can't miss the church of the Jacobins. Constructed in 1230 by the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) which St. Dominic had founded here in 1216 to preach against Cathar heretics, the church is a huge fortress-like rectangle of unadorned brick, buttressed by plain brick piles, quite unlike what you'd normally associate with Gothic architecture.

The interior is a single space divided by a central row of ultra-slim pillars from whose minimal capitals spring an elegant splay of vaulting ribs. Beneath the altar lie the bones of the philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas.

On the whole, the general quality of life, including the excellent cuisine, makes Toulouse a fine place to live and work. It is a city with a distinct accent, often celebrated in song and poetry.

Nonetheless, in recent years we have seen huge strides in terms of town planning and infrastructure, with the underground (metro), car parks, bridges, ring roads, urban expressways and motorways, and the development of the Toulouse-Blagnac Airport. Let us hope that this development will not take away the uniqueness of Toulouse as the La ville rose.

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