

TRAVEL

Toulouse Travel Guide by Valerio Esposito



A particularly slow week in the news resulted in me getting a few days off. Not enough for a holiday, but a reasonable amount of time for a quiet city break. I got a friend to agree, browsed a flight search engine, looked at the cheapest option and bought a return ticket to Toulouse, France for £32. Easy.

Buying the cheapest ticket meant having to get a late-ish flight which was, of course, delayed. *Merci beaucoup*, Ryanair!

I had never heard much about Toulouse before. I remembered that it is known as the 'Pink City', though I wasn't exactly sure why (it's because of the type of stone used to construct most of its buildings, I later found out). It wasn't exactly Ibiza, but then again, life is what you make it, as the song goes. So I boarded the plane with an open mind.

In less than two hours, we were in France. The airport is small but efficient and the passport control and baggage reclaim were quick and smooth. We got the Tisseo airport shuttle for around £7 and arrived at the Gare Routiere, one of the city's main stations, in less than 30 minutes.

We then headed straight for our AirBnb, minutes away from Boulevard de Strasbourg. The city was quite dead at that point, with a couple of loud exceptions – a group of red-cheeked British folk in an Irish pub, and me screaming silly things with a grotesque French accent.

It was too late for dinner and the only 'restaurant' still open was a McDonalds and a poorly stocked Epicerie De Nuit (a more depressing version of a British corner shop). Our first French meal, it follows, consisted of the (suitably called) French fries and a bar of Milka chocolate. Sorry, Julia Childs, *je ne regrette rien*.

The following morning we woke up to a beautiful, sunny French dawn. I took a stroll, determined to get myself a fresh baguette at a local bakery. I was given a tiny piece of brown paper to carry it. Not sanitary, I know, but how very Parisienne of me.

We then headed off for the Place Du Capitole, a popular spot with a Neo-Classical façade, and after five minutes, we were having breakfast at the Grand Café Albert, sitting at one of the outside tables next to an old, chain-smoking French couple.

We stuck with the traditional plan and ordered a French espresso (longer than an Italian Ristretto, way shorter than an Americano) and a criminally buttery croissant with jam. Simple but delicious nonetheless. The French sure know how to work that pastry.

Energised by the caffeine (and in desperate need to burn some calories) we walked to the Pont Saint-Pierre de Toulouse, a beautiful bridge parallel to the (ironically) older Pont Neuf, which translates as 'New Bridge'. We stopped to admire the stillness of the Garonne and set out to visit the Chapelle St Joseph de La Grave, in the in the Saint-Cyprien quartier, according to the Toulouse tourism site the "most photographed building in Toulouse". Of course, it was closed for the day so photographing the building from the outside was pretty much all we could do.

Once we crossed the bridge, we decided to explore the other half of the city. Most shops were closed – despite it being a weekday – but I think that contributed to its charm, making Toulouse a sort of ever-sleeping beauty even in broad daylight.

We walked past the Château d'Eau, a



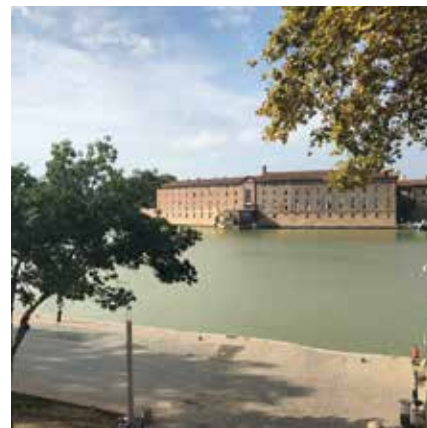
delightful tower that once provided clean water to the city and is now used to host galleries. It was also closed, so we didn't get to see much of what was going on inside. By that point, I couldn't help but wonder how the French get anything done, but I then remembered that everyone I know back in London could use an extra day off and nodded in agreement to every local resident enjoying the view from the park on a Wednesday morning.

We crossed the Pont Neuf and walked to the other side of the city, admiring the elegant shops on Place Esquirol and Rue de Metz, all the way to the Cathédrale Saint-Étienne, a Roman Catholic cathedral. It is minutes away from the impressive Monument aux Combattants de la Haute-Garonne, a tribute to WWI veterans.



At dinnertime, we headed back to the Place du Capitole, which turned out to be even more exquisite at night. We had dinner at Le Fabric, a moderately priced restaurant with a set menu comprising different options. I ordered a forgettable carpaccio, followed by a more satisfying piece of Sausage Toulousienne and a Chocolate Soufflé with vanilla ice cream. We paid less than £30 for a three course meal and a glass of wine.

On the second day, we visited the few remaining attractions on our list, starting with the Museum de Toulouse (£8 entry price) which was small but very interesting with an entire section on Easter Island and a convincing selection of stuffed animals, minerals and plants. The museum's garden is also worth a visit.



We finished our ecclesiastic tour with the Church of Les Jacobins - which houses the relics of Thomas Aquinas and the Basilique St-Sernin, completing our excursion at the Jardin Japonais, a bizarre Japanese oasis in the middle of Toulouse.

Back at Place du Capitole, we had dinner at Le Florida. We ordered a two-course meal and a glass of wine for around £25. Both the starter - a Caesar salad - and the main - Salmon Tagliatelle - left us full and satisfied. And so did the trip, overall.

On our first night in Toulouse, we openly wondered why we had decided to visit Toulouse. By the end of our trip, we found ourselves making plans to come back. If only for those formidable croissants.

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