



# Toulouse Area

Once Languedoc's traditional centre, Toulouse, not quite the Pyrenees, was hived off when regional boundaries were redrawn almost half a century ago. Geographical limbo aside, this is a land rich in historical sights, and fascinating to explore.

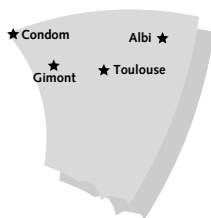
Toulouse itself is one of France's liveliest and fastest-growing cities. Bolstered by its booming hi-tech industries (notably aerospace; this is the epicentre of the huge Europe-wide EADS aircraft manufacturing consortium), this city is dynamic, confident and bags of fun. Party with students until dawn in its packed bars, cafés and clubs, and know that Spain is just around the corner.

In the south the Pyrenees stride out, spiky and snowcapped on the horizon in five small, historic and stunningly scenic towns: Toulouse-Lautrec's red-brick Albi, 75km northeast; the 16th-century Huguenot stronghold of Montauban, 53km north; Condom, 110km to the northwest, with its elegant 18th-century mansions and cheeky museum; Roman Auch, 77km west; and Moissac, 70km to the north, with its magnificent Abbaye St-Pierre and cloister where Chemin de St-Jacques hikers en route to Spain and Santiago de Compostela continue to picnic pilgrim-style. Delve into the quiet lanes and narrow alleys of this town and spot the odd rucksack strung from a 1st-floor window – a sure sign of a warm welcome for walkers seeking a bed for the night.

West of Toulouse city, the region of Gascony (Gascogne) rolls all the way to the Atlantic. Famous for its lush countryside, fine Gaillac wine, foie gras (fatted liver), ducks, and Armagnac liqueur, slow-paced Gascony is ideal for experiencing some of France's finest examples of medieval and Renaissance architecture – not to mention one of France's richest regional cuisines. Devote at least a day, luxuriously lazy lunch obligatory, to exploring the cluster of sleepy *bastides* (fortified medieval villages) northwest of Toulouse.

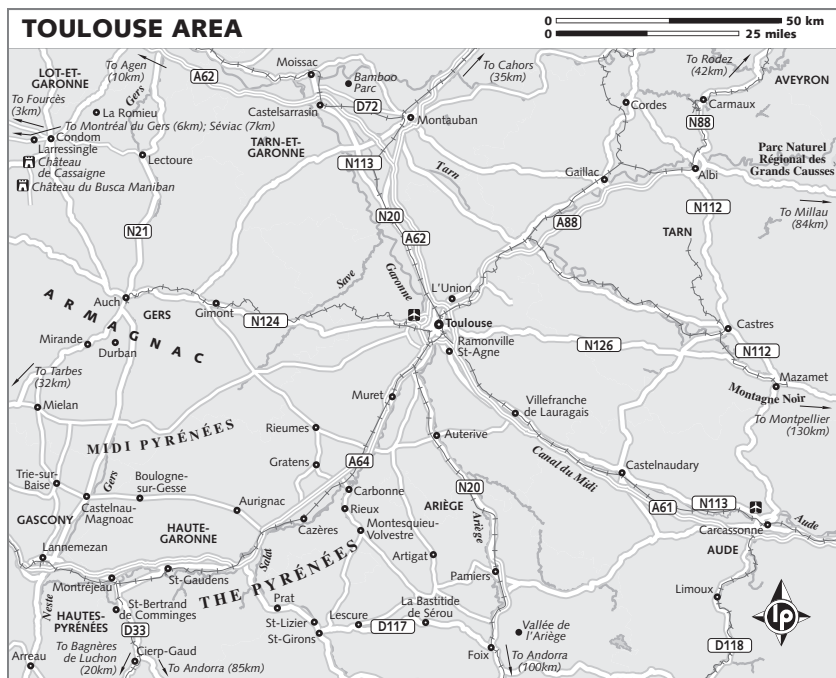
## HIGHLIGHTS

- Sip an *apéro* on **place St-Pierre** (p744), catch a local band and party until dawn with Toulouse's student-busy **nightlife** (p744)
- Play astronauts at Toulouse's interactive **Cité de l'Espace** (p740)
- Grab a **bike** (p746) and go for a spin along the pea-green **Canal du Midi**, taking time out afloat at the **Buddha Boat Spa** (p740)
- Delve into the life, work and mind of an artistic master at Albi's **Musée Toulouse-Lautrec** (p748)
- Invade Condom's army of surrounding **bastides** (fortified medieval villages; p756)
- Fatten up on fattened goose and duck liver in the gastronomic village of **Gimont** (p753), not missing its seasonal Fat Market



■ POPULATION: 2,560,000

■ AREA: 45,350 SQ KM



## TOULOUSE

pop 437,100

From the fun 'n' funky works of contemporary art in its sleek two-line metro (take a tour; see p741) to its dynamic dining and café scene, this friendly city – pink by day, bright by night, thanks to its mirage of rose-red brick buildings – is dazzling: no surprise really given *la ville rose* (the pink city) is France's fourth-largest city.

From its narrow medieval streets and alleys to the many churches and cathedrals, Toulouse oozes a rich and tumultuous history. Its sizeable student population of 115,000 gives the place a youthful kick and injects an infectious energy into its riverside bars, live-music venues and late-night clubbing alternatives.

Two waterways slice through the city: the pea-green Canal du Midi and the mucky brown River Garonne, both peaceful and romantic any time of day.

### History

Toulouse, Tolosa to the Romans, was the Visigoth capital from AD 419–507. In the 12th and 13th centuries the counts of Toulouse supported the Cathars (see p799). Three cen-

turies later, during the Wars of Religion, the city sided with the Catholic League. Toulouse merchants grew rich in the 16th and 17th centuries from the woad (blue dye) trade, until the Portuguese began importing indigo from India. The Toulouse parliament ruled Languedoc from 1420 until the 1789 Revolution.

During WWI, Toulouse became an arms and aircraft manufacturing centre. In the 1920s, Antoine de St-Exupéry, author of *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*), and other daring pilots pioneered mail flights to northwest Africa and South America, often staying in the city between sorties. After WWII, Toulouse became the nucleus of the country's aerospace industry. Passenger planes built here have included the Caravelle and Concorde as well as the 555-seat Airbus A380, and local factories also produce the Ariane space rocket.

French crooner Claude Nougaro (1929–2004), born and bred here, sang about Toulouse in the bittersweet tribute *Oh! Toulouse*.

### Orientation

The heart of Toulouse is bounded by the River Garonne (west) and bd de Strasbourg and its

## TOULOUSE IN...

## Two Days

Breakfast on **place du Capitole** (below), then explore the **Capitole** and **Vieux Quartier** (below). Lunch above **Les Halles Victor Hugo** (p743), then cross the river for modern art at **Les Abattoirs** (opposite). Dine on Gascon fodder back in the Vieux Quartier before hitting the many excellent bars (p744) and clubs (p745).

Next day get spacey at **Cité de l'Espace** (p740) and airborne after lunch at an **Airbus factory** (p740). Too hi-tech? Window-shop in the Vieux Quartier or flop in a **salon de thé** (tea house; p743) on a shady square.

## Four Days or More

Boat or bike along the **Canal du Midi** (p740), then head out of town to **Albi** (p746) or the **Condom area** (p754).

continuation, bd Lazare Carnot (east). Its two principal squares are place du Capitole and, 200m east, place Wilson. From the latter, allées Jean Jaurès leads to the bus station and Gare Matabiau, the train station, both across the Canal du Midi.

## Information

## BOOKSHOPS

**Bookshop** (☎ 05 61 22 99 92; bookshop.tlse@wanadoo.fr; 17 rue Lakanal; ☹ 2-7pm Mon, 10am-7pm Tue-Sat) English-language bookshop.

**Ombres Blanches** (☎ 05 34 45 53 33; www.ombres-blanches.fr; 48-50 rue Gambetta; ☹ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Maps and travel guides.

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Laverie des Lois** (☎ 05 61 23 71 45; 19 rue des Lois; http://laveriedeslois.spaces.live.com; per hr €4; ☹ cyber-café 11am-9pm Tue-Sat, laundrette 8am-9pm daily) Surf the net while your smocks wash.

**Le Chat de la Voisine** (☎ 05 61 57 36 18; 25 rue des Sept Troubadours; per hr €2; ☹ 10am-midnight daily)

## LAUNDRY

Toulouse's abundance of laundrettes includes one with a cybercafé (see above).

**Bulle de Savon** (56 rue Blancs; ☹ 8am-10pm)

## POST

**Post Office** (9 rue la Fayette)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 61 11 02 22; www.toulouse-tourisme.com; square Charles de Gaulle; ☹ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6.15pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Sun Oct-May) Inside a 16th-century tower.

## Sights

## PLACE DU CAPITOLE

Bustling **place du Capitole** is the city's main square. On the ceiling of the arcades on its western side are 29 vivid illustrations, all by contemporary artist Raymond Moretti, of the city's history, from the *Venus of Lespugue* (a prehistoric representation of woman) through to the city's status as a hub for the aeronautics industry. On the square's eastern side is the 128m-long facade of the **Capitole**, Toulouse's city hall built in the 1750s. Within is the **Théâtre du Capitole**, one of France's most prestigious opera venues, and the over-the-top, late 19th-century **Salle des Illustres** (Hall of the Illustrious).

## VIEUX QUARTIER

The predominantly 18th-century **Vieux Quartier** is a tiny web of narrow lanes and squares.

## BASILIQUE ST-SERNIN

Once an important stop on the Chemin de St-Jacques pilgrimage route, the **Basilique St-Sernin** (☎ 05 61 21 80 45; place St-Sernin; ☹ 8.30am-6.15pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-7.30pm Sun Jul-Sep, 8.30-11.45am & 2-5.45pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-7.30pm Sun Oct-Jun) still lures plenty of walkers. It is France's largest and most complete Romanesque structure and is topped by a magnificent eight-sided 13th-century tower and 15th-century spire.

Above the double-level crypt is the 18th-century tomb of St-Sernin beneath a sumptuous canopy. In the north transept is a 12th-century fresco of Christ's Resurrection. Note the shorter visiting hours for the ambulatory chapels and **crypt** (admission €2; ☹ 10-11.30am & 2.30-5pm Mon-Sat, 2.30-5pm Sun).

### MUSÉE ST-RAYMOND

Inside an 11th-century hospital, this **museum** (☎ 05 61 22 31 44; place St-Sernin; adult/child €3/1.50, temporary exhibitions €2/1.50, 1st Sun of month free; 🕒 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, to 6pm Sep-May) has displayed its collection of exceptional Roman sculptures, early Christian sarcophagi and treasure trove of gold Gaulish torques since 1891.

### MUSÉE DES AUGUSTINS

The beautiful **Musée des Augustins** (☎ 05 61 22 21 82; 21 rue de Metz; adult/under 18yr €3/free, temporary exhibitions €6/free, 1st Sun of month free; 🕒 10am-6pm Thu-Tue, 10am-9pm Wed) houses a superb fine-art collection ranging from Roman stone artefacts to paintings by Rubens, Delacroix and Toulouse-Lautrec. It's in a former Augustinian monastery, and its two 14th-century cloister gardens are postcard-prettly.

### ENSEMBLE CONVENTUEL DES JACOBINS

The church is the centrepiece of this magnificent ensemble. Indeed the extraordinary Gothic structure of **Église des Jacobins** (Parvis des Jacobins; 🕒 9am-7pm), flooded by day in multicoloured natural light from the huge stained-glass windows, practically defies gravity. A single row of seven 22m-high columns, running smack down the middle of the nave, appear like palm trees as they spread their fanned vaulting.

Artillery barracks in the 19th century, this is the mother church of the order of Dominican friars. Construction began soon after St Dominic founded the order in 1215 to preach church doctrine to the heretical Cathars and it took 170 years to complete, 45m-tall octagonal belfry included. Interred below the modern, marble altar are the re-

mains of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), early head of the Dominican order.

Equally arresting is a stroll around the **Cloître des Jacobins** (admission €3, 1st Sun of month free), a meditative cloister with boxed-hedge garden and stage for piano recitals (p741) in September. Art exhibitions fill the 14th-century refectory, **Les Jacobins** (☎ 05 61 22 23 82; 69 rue Pargaminières; admission free; 🕒 9am-7pm).

### CATHÉDRALE ST-ÉTIENNE

The **Cathédrale St-Étienne** (Cathedral of St Stephen; place St-Étienne; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) is in a hotchpotch of styles: the vast 12th-century nave being out of kilter with the equally monumental late-13th-century choir designed to realign the cathedral along a different axis. Improvised Gothic vaulting links the two sections. The glorious western rose window dates from 1230.

### HÔTEL D'ASSÉZAT

Toulouse boasts 50-odd *hôtels particuliers* – private mansions mostly dating from the 16th century. One of the finest is **Hôtel d'Assézat**, built for a woad merchant in 1555 and home to the **Fondation Bemberg** (☎ 05 61 12 06 89; www.fondation-bemberg.fr; place d'Assézat; adult/8-18yr €4.60/2.75, guided tour €7.35/5.50; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun, to 9pm Thu), with its lovely collection of paintings, bronzes and objets d'art from the Renaissance to the 20th century. Guided tours depart daily at 3.30pm and the foundation hosts history-of-art workshops (€8/5.50 for adults/eight to 18 year olds).

### ÉGLISE NOTRE DAME DU TAUR

The 14th-century **Église Notre Dame du Taur** (12 rue du Taur; 🕒 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun) was constructed to honour St-Sernin, patron of the basilica that bears his name, who was reputedly martyred on this very spot. The middle of three chapels at the end of the nave has a 16th-century Black Madonna known as Notre Dame du Rempart.

### LES ABATTOIRS

This former municipal red-brick abattoir built in 1831 on the *rive gauche* (left bank) has been transformed into a vast public space. The main building has been recycled as Toulouse's cutting-edge **Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain** (☎ 05 62 48 58 00; www.lesabattoirs.org, in French; 76 allées Charles de Fitte;

#### CENT SAVERS

With the plastic **Toulouse en Liberté** card, enjoy discounts on sights, accommodation, shopping, guided tours and so on. The annual card costs €10/5 for adults/kids and is sold at the tourist office and participating hotels.

To blitz museums buy a **Passeport 3 Musées** (€6) or **Passeport 6 Musées** (€9) covering admission to three and six city museums respectively. Admission to several museums is free on the first Sunday of the month.

## TOULOUSE

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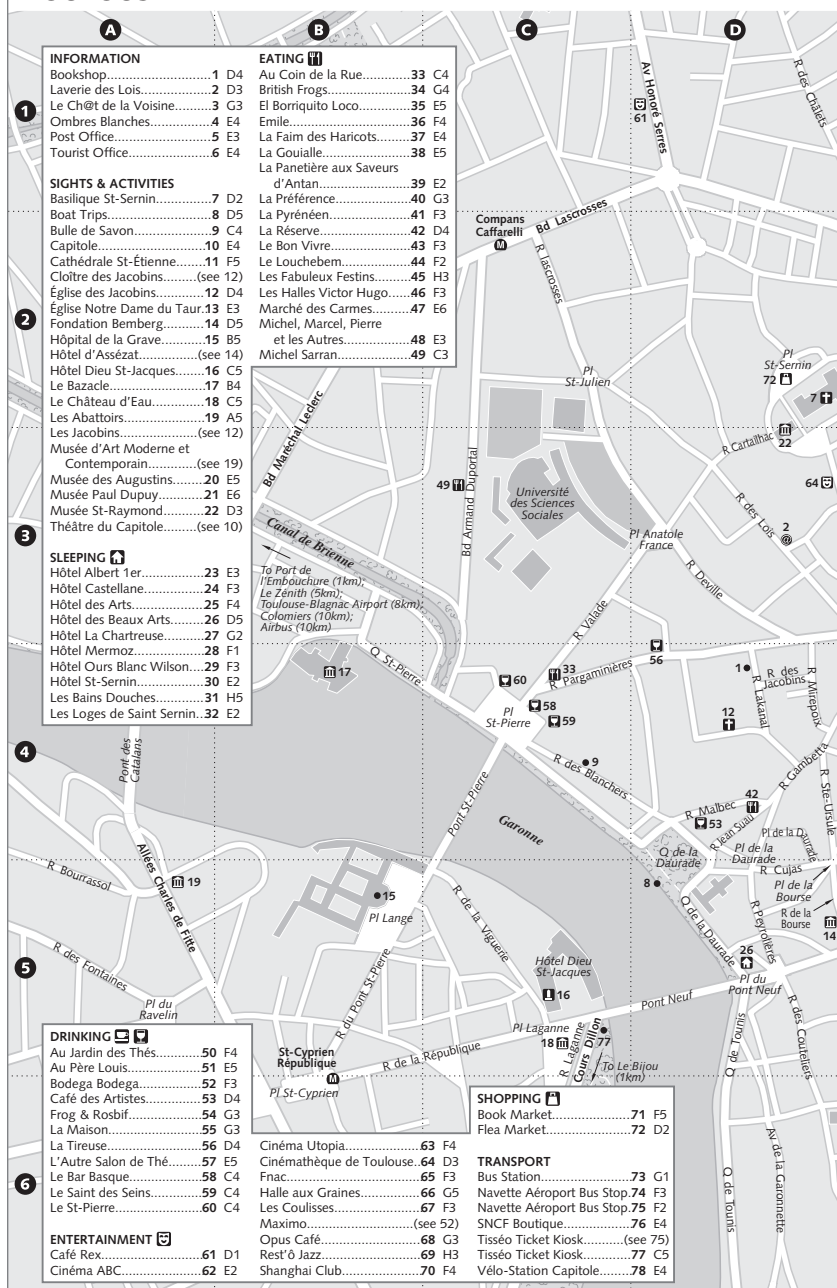
To Port de l'Embouchure (1km),  
Le Zénith (5km),  
Toulouse-Bagnac Airport (8km),  
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TOULOUSE AREA



**WANNA KNOW A SECRET...**

The pretty little tree-shaded garden abuzz with twittering birds and magnificent views of the basilica in front of the **Musée St-Raymond** – bear right after walking through its gates – is the perfect place to picnic in peace or pour over a book in the shade. A wooden hut hidden amid foliage sells drinks, fresh flowers in plastic cups decorate wooden tables, and the endearingly friendly gentleman of a handsome age who runs the kiosk knows everyone; it's mainly local here.

The picnic-perfect Left Bank equivalent is the French manicured garden, complete with sculpted box hedging, which sits snug inside the horseshoe of Toulouse's 12th-century hospital, **Hôtel Dieu St-Jacques** (rue de la Viguerie). Come sundown, students bask over an *apéro* in the shade of the striking copper dome of **Hôpital de la Grave** (place Lange), a hospital founded in the 15th century to treat plague victims.

admission depending on exhibition €5-10, 1st Sun of month free; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sun).

**MUSÉE PAUL DUPUY**

The **Musée Paul Dupuy** (☎ 05 61 14 65 50; 13 rue de la Pléau; adult/child €3/free, 1st Sun of month free; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, to 5pm Oct-May) showcases glasswork, religious art, china, weaponry, rare clocks, watches and other decorative arts from the Middle Ages to WWII. Its **chamber music concerts** (admission free; ☎ 3pm last Sun of month) perfectly reflect its setting: 18th-century Hôtel de Besson.

**LE CHÂTEAU D'EAU**

Inside a 19th-century water tower, **Le Château d'Eau** (☎ 05 61 77 09 40; www.galeriechateaueau.org; 1 place Laganne; adult/under 18yr €2.50/free; ☎ 1-7pm Tue-Sun) puts on superb exhibitions by the world's finest photographers.

**ESPACE EDF BAZACLE**

For a dose of industrial archeology, visit **Le Bazacle** (☎ 05 62 30 16 00; 11 quai St-Pierre; admission free; ☎ 2-7pm Tue-Fri, 2-7pm Tue-Sun during exhibitions), a monument to water power with a hydro plant over 100 years old and the remains of a 12th-century mill. Machines leave you cold? Not to worry. Watch fish make their way through their special bypass and revel in an invariably cutting-edge art exhibition held inside the waterside building.

**CITÉ DE L'ESPACE**

Dock your own space shuttle, tour Mir and launch a satellite inside **Cité de l'Espace** (Space City; ☎ 08 20 37 72 23; www.cite-espace.com; av Jean Gonord; adult/student/5-15yr Jul & Aug €22/19.50/14.50, Sep-Jun €19.50/16/13, guided visit €4.90; ☎ 9.30am-7pm mid-Jul-Aug, 9.30am-5pm or 6pm Sep-Dec & Feb-Jun, closed Jan), on Toulouse's eastern outskirts. Its stimulating

hands-on exhibits demonstrating basic physical laws and various space-based technologies make it a kid-must. Take bus 15 from allées Jean Jaurès to the end of the line, then walk 600m towards the 53m-high space rocket.

**AIRBUS**

Aerospace company **Airbus**, 10km west in Colomiers, runs 1½-hour **tours**: of its huge **Clément Ader factory** (adult/6-18yr/under 6yr €9.50/8/free), with its Airbus assembly line, and of the **Jean Luc Lagardère factory** (€14/11/free), where the earliest models of the A380, the world's largest airliner, are put together. The latter, a huge assembly facility measuring 490m by 250m, ranks as one of the world's largest buildings.

To both these standard tours, during French school holidays, a one-hour discovery tour of **Concorde series No 1** (adult/6-18yr/under 6yr €4.50/3/free) or a 1½-hour tour of **Concorde series No 1 & Air France's 'Fox Charlie' Concorde No 9** (€11/9.50/free) can be added on.

Tours run two to six times weekly Monday to Saturday and must be booked at least two weeks in advance through **Taxiway** (☎ reservations 05 34 39 42 00; www.taxiway.fr; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat). Cameras are forbidden and you need a passport or other ID.

**Activities**

The city's canalside paths are peaceful places to walk, run or cycle; see p746 for bike hire. At Port de l'Embouchure the Canal du Midi (1681; linking Toulouse with the Mediterranean) meets the Canal Latéral à la Garonne (1856; flowing to the Atlantic) and the Canal de Brienne (1776).

For those following the Canal du Midi, the **Buddha Boat Spa** (☎ 05 61 55 54 87; www.buddhaboat.fr; bd Montplaisir; ☎ 11am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun), a state-of-the-art spa aboard a contem-

porary wooden barge, is a dreamy pit-stop. The €35 fee for two hours includes use of Turkish bath, sauna, CD library, sun deck etc.

## Tours

The tourist office runs **walking tours** (2hr; adult/10-16yr €9/6) of historic Toulouse, metro art and Toulouse illuminated at night on foot (€10/7 for adults/10 to 16 year olds) or by coach (€14/10). To really get under the skin of the city, stride out on an urban stroll with **La Gargouille** (☎ 05 34 60 12 75; www.la-gargouille.org; adult/student €6/3); two-hour city hikes depart twice monthly from a designated metro station.

**Boat trips** along the Canal du Midi and River Garonne run by **Toulouse Croisières** (☎ 05 61 25 72 57; www.toulouse-croisieres.com, in French) and **Les Bateaux Toulousains** (☎ 05 61 80 22 26; www.bateaux-toulousains.com) leave from quai de la Daurade.

## Festivals & Events

**Festival de la Violette** Celebration of Toulouse's favourite flower in early February.

**Le Marathon des Mots** (www.lemarathondesmots.com, in French) 'Word Marathon' revelling in language and literature for four days in June.

**Toulouse d'Été** Jazz, classical and other music around town in July and August.

**Piano aux Jacobins** (www.pianojacobins.com) Piano recitals in Église des Jacobins in September.

**Jazz sur Son 31** International jazz festival in October.

## Sleeping

Toulouse hotels cater to a business clientele, meaning cheaper rates at weekends and in July and August.

## BUDGET

**Camping de Rupé** (☎ 05 61 70 07 35; 21 chemin du Pont de Rupé; 2 adults with tent & car €14.50; ☎ reception 9am-12.30pm & 5-8pm daily) Find this jam-packed campsite 6km northwest of the train station; take bus 59 from place Jeanne d'Arc. Pitch tents in summer; caravans year-round.

**our pick** **Hôtel La Chartreuse** (☎ 05 61 62 93 39; www.chartreusehotel.com; 4bis bd de Bonrepos; d/tr €37/48) *Bon repos* (good rest) is what this extraordinary good-value and clean hotel amid several scruffy offerings across from the train station provides. Canalside cyclists are catered for with free, safe bike parking.

**Hôtel des Arts** (☎ 05 61 23 36 21; couleurs.suds@club-internet.fr; 1bis rue Cantegril; d with shared/private shower €42/54) Price is the trump card for this modest place where every room shares a toilet. Those with shower can get steamy since only a plastic curtain separates the cubicle from the room itself.

**our pick** **Hôtel St-Sernin** (☎ 05 61 21 73 08; www.hotelstsernin.com; 2 rue St-Bernard; s/d/tr from €58/68/83) Exciting change is afoot at this boutique hotel with prime views of Basilique St-Sernin – rooms four, nine, 15 and 20 are to die for: Parisian couple Julien and Aurore bought it as the hotel of their dreams in 2008 and are renovating floor by floor. Free wi-fi.

**Hôtel Ours Blanc Wilson** (☎ 05 61 21 62 40; www.hotel-oursblanc.com; 2 rue Victor Hugo; s/d/tr €59/69/91; ☎) One of a trio of Ours Blanc (Polar Bear; no, nobody could tell us why) hotels, the Wilson is a solid choice sporting an original 1930s vintage lift. Risk it to the 5th floor for great pigeon's-eye views over the rooftops.

## SOMETHING DIFFERENT

First up is a canal boat moored 8km south in Ramonville St-Agne, the last stop on the metro line. Comprising three rooms and two teeny-weeny cabins to bunk up in, **Péniche Soléiada** (☎ 05 62 19 07 71, 06 86 27 83 19; www.peniche-soleiada.com; Pont Mange Pommes, rue Riquet, Ramonville St-Agne; s/d incl breakfast €60/80, dinner adult/under 12yr €30/15) is paradise for kid-clad families (assuming the kids can swim – if not, a stay could be stressful). Handsome sage-green in colour with plenty of colourful potted flowers and a sundeck for dining, it is moored beneath a poetically named bridge whose very name conjures up the carefree, *mange pommes* (apple-eating) lifestyle the boat embodies. Bicycles are aboard allowing guests to explore the bijou port nearby or pedal the easy 30 minutes along a shaded canalside towpath to Toulouse. Dinner on deck is a must, as well as a day cruise with lunch (adult/under 12 years costs €115/80) that Marie and Pascal, the creative couple behind the nautical venture, run twice a month.

And what about a tree house or tepee between trees at **Tepacap Rieumes** (☎ 05 62 14 71 61; www.tepacap.fr; rte de l'Isle en Dodon, Rieumes; tepee per person €20, breakfast €5, tree house d incl breakfast €135; ☎ Mar-Nov), an *accrobranche* (tree-climbing) park 40km southwest of Toulouse along the D632 and D7.



## A TWINSET OF MAISONS D'HÔTES

Enjoy the intimacy of a Toulousien home at these superb *maisons d'hôtes*:

- **Anjali Maison d'Hôtes** (☎ 09 54 22 42 93, 06 84 29 78 09; www.anjali.fr; 86 Grande Rue St-Michel; s/d/tr q incl breakfast from €75/85/125/150; 📺) Taking a 19th-century house with wooden shutters and a secret walled garden as her canvas, Delphine has created four delightful rooms, each with its own art-inspired quirk. Hampi is as serene as the journeys to southern India that inspired it; Brédoury is family-friendly with a kids' room kitted out with boatlike bunk beds and a tiny window to play 'I Spy' from; Tolosa is for wheelchair guests; and black-and-white Cinema Paradiso has its own bedside projector to screen films on the wall opposite.
- **Les Loges de Saint Sernin** (☎ 05 61 24 44 44; www.logessaintsernin.fr; 12 rue St-Bernard; d incl breakfast Mon-Fri/weekend €120/105) Sylviane Tatin, busy mother of four, is the creative soul behind this designer B&B on the 2nd floor of an 18th-century town house. Its four rooms mix old with new and reflect their natural surroundings – Saint Sernin is a romantic red-brick colour, Capitole is orange, Garonne is soft beige and Canal du Midi is vibrant green. Breakfast in summer is on a balcony overlooking Sylviane's husband's courtyard golf course!

## MIDRANGE

**Hôtel Albert 1er** (☎ 05 61 21 17 91; www.hotel-albert1.com; 8 rue Rivals; d Sat & Sun from €69, Mon-Fri from €84; 📺 📺) Centuries-old Albert Premier ('the first') was adopted in 1956 by the parents of Anne-Marie Hilaire, who runs this perfectly mannered hotel with her two grown-up sons. Don't miss the shopping, dining and drinking guide the hotel compiles for guests.

**Hôtel Castellane** (☎ 05 61 62 18 82; www.castellanehotel.com, in French; 17 rue Castellane; d/tr/q €72/84/88; 📺) Unbeatable value, brilliantly placed and ranking sky-high in the friendliness stakes, this unpretentious two-star hotel with a generous quota of family rooms and – *quelle surprise!* – sunlit interior patio is hard to fault. Children under 12 years breakfast for free.

**Hôtel Mermoz** (☎ 05 61 63 04 04; www.hotel-mermoz.com; 50 rue Matabiau; d/tr €125/140; 📺) Walk into this pretty little art-deco nook with its peaceful garden and bright rooms and you leave the city behind. The theme of its decor recalls aviation's pioneering days from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Vol de Nuit* (Night Flight). Free wi-fi; garage parking €10.

**Hôtel des Beaux Arts** (☎ 05 34 45 42 42; www.hotel-desbeauxarts.com; 1 place du Pont Neuf; d without river view €108, with river view €128-220; 📺) The romantic 18th-century facade of the Beaux Arts (Fine Arts) – soft, mellow caramel-coloured bricks framing nine windows adorned with green awnings and wrought-iron balconies – promises great things. And its interior, arranged as country-style home rather than hotel, doesn't disappoint. Free wi-fi.

## TOP END

**our pick Les Bains Douches** (☎ 05 62 72 52 52; www.hotel-bainsdouches.com; 4 & 4bis rue du Pont Guilhemery; s/d from €140/160; 📺) The urban creation of Monsieur and Madame Henriette, motorbike designer and interior designer respectively, this design hotel stuns. Hidden in the old city baths, the Henriettes took the historic two-storey facade with original 1950s mosaics and added two more floors on top – in glass. Inside, waxed concrete floors, stainless-steel surfaces and subtle neon lighting pave the way to 19 rooms and three suites, each individually designed and oozing New Yorker panache.

## Eating

Bd de Strasbourg, place St-Georges and the western side of place du Capitole are one big café-terrace line-up, perfect for lunch and hot in summer when everything spills outside. Cheap student places stud rue Blanchers while nearby rue Pargaminières is the street for kebabs, burgers and other late-night fast food.

**Michel, Marcel, Pierre et Les Autres** (☎ 05 61 22 47 05; www.michelmarcelpierre.com; 35 rue de Rémusat; starter/main/dessert €7/13/7, 2-/3-course menu €17/23; 📺 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This classic bistro with a quirk is *the* place for delicious bistro fare (mackerel fillets, pastry-baked cheese, *rillettes de canard* etc). Its marketing spin – 'not a restaurant but a place of life and good humour' – is spot on.

**our pick Les Halles Victor Hugo** (place Victor Hugo; menus €10-20; 📺 lunch Tue-Sun) Many of Toulouse's best-value places are the small, spartan, lunchtime-only restaurants above the appetite-sharpening food stalls of Toulouse's

busy covered market. Fast, packed and no-nonsense, catering for market vendors and shoppers alike, they serve up generous, delicious *menus* of hearty fare.

**El Borriquito Loco** (☎ 05 61 25 34 54; www.restaurant-borriquito.com; 25 rue des Paradoux; plat du jour €10, lunch menus €10-26; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This Spanish tapas bar is a bit mad with its jumble of masks, vintage clothing, red wedge shoes et al strung in its wrought-iron balconies. But it's as cheap as chips (€12.50 for a three-course lunch including wine and coffee) and morphs into a DJ club with a dance floor in the evening.

**La Réserve** (☎ 05 61 21 84 00; 8 rue Jean Suau; lunch menu €12.50, mains €10-15; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, all day Sat & Sun) When you need a break from duck, hit this stylish restaurant with an industrial interior and plenty of pavement seating. Its menu has everything – salads, pizza and pasta alongside the city's signature *confit*. Weekends, the kitchen's open all day.

**ourpick Chez Navarre** (☎ 05 62 26 43 06; 49 Grande Rue Nazareth; lunch/dinner menu €12.50/20; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat) Fed up with restaurant dining? This fabulous 16th-century *table d'hôtes* with red-brick walls, old wooden bar, beamed ceiling and shared candlelit tables is perfect. The rustic French cuisine of simple terrines, soups and one fixed meal ooze the same charming 'at home' feel.

**Au Coin de la Rue** (☎ 05 61 21 99 45; 2 rue Pargaminières; 2-/3-course menu €19/22, salads €14; ☺ lunch & dinner daily) A quintessential French bistro with wooden shutters and a well-aged bottle of Armagnac planted firmly on the bar, this contemporary spot has a handful of tables in the sun and several in the shade. A glass chandelier adds a touch of funk inside. Wi-fi hot spot and student hangout.

**Le Bon Vivre** (☎ 05 61 23 07 17; www.lebonvivre.com; 15bis place Wilson; menus €25-36; ☺ lunch & dinner daily)

Old-style regional cuisine doesn't get meatier at this local favourite: *ris de veau à l'ancienne* (calf sweetbreads old-style), *cassoulette de lentilles* spiced with *museaux* (muzzles) and pig's ears or a humble plate of cured ham (*noir de Bigorre*) courtesy of the region's precious Bigorre Gascony black pig.

**Michel Sarran** (☎ 05 61 12 32 32; 21 bd Armand Duportal; lunch/dinner menu €48/98; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri) As with many Michelin twin-starred gastronomic restaurants, lunch is good value at Michel Sarran's delightful town house on a tree-lined avenue; the *menu* includes wine and coffee.

Also recommended:

**Le Louchebem** (☎ 05 61 99 21 26; www.loulouchebem.com; 24 rue de Bayard; starters/mains €9/14, menu €20-23; ☺ 8pm-4am Tue-Thu, 8pm-6am Fri & Sat) Meaty choice – *cassoulet* and choice of grills – for night owls out 'til dawn; by day find it in the Halles Victor Hugo (opposite). **Les Fabuleux Festins** (☎ 05 61 62 08 31; www.lesfabuleuxfestins.com; 32 rue Gabriel Péri; starters/mains €11/13, menu €28; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Fabulous sums up this exotic space which lures a distinctly jet-setting, trendy crowd.

**Emile** (☎ 05 61 21 05 56; www.restaurant-emile.com; place St-Georges; lunch menus €20 & €30, dinner menus €36 & €41; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Top address, around since the 1940s, for the reputedly perfect *cassoulet*.

## SELF-CATERING

Buy fresh produce (and/or wine for €1.20 a litre!) at covered food markets **Les Halles Victor Hugo** (place Victor Hugo; ☺ 7am-1pm Tue-Sun) or **Marché des Carnes** (place des Carnes; ☺ 7am-1pm Tue-Sun).

Imaginative bread (chestnut, nut, chorizo, onion, and fig among others) and *baguette* sandwiches (Camembert and walnut) make bakery **La Panetière aux Saveurs d'Antan** (39 bd de Strasbourg; ☺ 7am-8.30pm Wed-Mon) a very satisfying picnic stop.

## TEA FOR TWO

Check out these two addresses:

- **Au Jardin des Thés** (☎ 05 61 23 46 67; 16 place St-Georges; lunch menu €13.80, breakfast/brunch €8/16; ☺ 11am-7pm daily) This equally civilised tea house has a buzzing terrace on perhaps the city's loveliest green squares (playground in the middle for the kid-clad) and pours a good range of Darjeelings and greens. Its good-value savoury tarts and salads pack it out at lunchtime.
- **L'Autre Salon de Thé** (☎ 05 61 22 11 63; 45 rue des Tourneurs; lunch menu €12-14, Sun brunch €17; ☺ noon-7pm) An old-world tea room wedged onto Toulouse's oldest bar (p744), this atmospheric spot is perfect for a tart-and-salad lunch or a simple cuppa poured from a flowery old-fashioned china teapot. Its cakes, laid on a table in the centre of the small salon, are divine.

Ginger cake, jammy dodgers, baked beans and other British products are what grocer **British Frogs** (☎ 05 61 62 69 78; 13 rue de la Colombe; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) sells.

## Drinking

Almost every square in the Vieux Quartier has at least one café, busy day and night. Other busy after-dark streets include rue Castellane, rue Gabriel Péri and near the river around place St-Pierre.

**Au Père Louis** (☎ 05 61 21 33 45; 45 rue des Tourneurs; ☎ 8.30am-3pm & 5-10.30pm Mon-Sat) Top of our list for irresistible old-fashioned charm, At Father Louis' is Toulouse's oldest bar franked 1889. A hybrid retro bar-cum-café and lunch spot, it deserves at least one drink.

**La Maison** (☎ 05 61 62 87 22; 9 rue Gabriel Péri; ☎ 5pm-2am Sun-Fri, 5pm-5am Sat) 'At home' atmosphere is what this crumbling old house with a retro collection of second-hand chairs, wine list chalked above the (decorative) fireplace and the odd visiting pigeon is all about. Overtly hip, students flop on the sofa sipping tea early on, cocktails late.

**Bodega Bodega** (☎ 05 61 63 03 63; 1 rue Gabriel Péri; menu €19.50, tapas €4.50-9; ☎ 7pm-2am Mon-Fri, 7pm-6am Sat, 8pm-2am Sun) Find all the fun of the *feria* at this vast party space in a historic building where the tax authority once lived. It heaves at weekends with live music and a frenetic tapas-quaffing crowd.

**La Tireuse** (☎ 05 61 12 28 29; 24 rue Pargaminières; ☎ 5pm-2am Mon-Sat, 6pm-2am Sun) Much loved by students, this friendly beer bar has 20 beers *en pression* (on tap) and is a fine place to drink away the night. Should the munchies strike, the street it sits on is studded with kebab and burger joints.

**Frog & Rosbif** (14 rue de l'Industrie; ☎ 5.30pm-2am Mon-Fri, 1.30pm-3.30am Sat, 1.30pm-2am Sun) Lively British

pub with dartboard, TV screen and its own microbrewery churning out very palatable real ales and stouts. A pint during 'happy hour' from 5.30pm to 8pm weekdays costs €4.50.

Near the river, place St-Pierre is Toulouse's terrace hot spot with its row of student-busy bars, including psychedelic **Le Saint des Seins** (☎ 06 07 81 90 52; www.myspace.com/lesaintdesseins; 5 place St-Pierre; ☎ 5pm-2am Wed-Fri, 5pm-4am Sat) with its hip clientele, jam sessions and rock concerts; mainstream pub **Le St-Pierre** (☎ 05 61 21 74 13; 10 place St-Pierre; ☎ 9am-2am Mon-Fri, noon-5am Sat, noon-2am Sun); and sports bar **Le Bar Basque** (☎ 05 61 21 55 64; 7 place St-Pierre; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Fri, 1pm-5am Sat, 1pm-2am Sun) with bench seating in a massive courtyard with dramatic rugby-pitch backdrop.

A skip away on place de la Daurade is another trio of café-bars with packed terraces, including the very romantic at sunset **Café des Artistes** (☎ 05 61 12 06 00; 13 place de la Daurade; ☎ 11am-2am daily) with river view and soft apricot-coloured, timber-framed facade.

## Entertainment

The scene buzzes. Pick up free listings guides at the *billetterie spectacles* (box office) in **Fnac** (☎ 08 92 68 36 22; 16 allées Franklin Roosevelt). Online see <http://toulouse.sortir.eu>.

## CINEMAS

Watch nondubbed foreign films at **Cinéma Utopia** (☎ 05 61 23 66 20; 24 rue Montardy), **Cinéma ABC** (☎ 05 61 29 81 00; 13 rue St-Bernard) and art-house **Cinémathèque de Toulouse** (☎ 05 62 30 30 10; www.lacinemathequedetoulouse.com, in French; 69 rue du Taur).

## LIVE MUSIC

Venues abound. For classical music and theatre, head for the city's elegant 1860s market hall **Halle aux Graines** (☎ 05 61 63 13 13; www.onct.mairie-toulouse.fr; place Dupuy), now a concert hall

## EAT GREEN

Hard to believe in this land of foie gras and duck, but wholly vegetarian restaurants do exist. For a complete listing, nip to the St-Sernin Sunday morning market and visit the stall of Toulouse's **Association Végétarienne et Végétalienne** (<http://avis.free.fr>; ☎ 11am-1pm Sun), on the corner of rue St-Bernard and place St-Sernin.

Not only does **La Faim des Haricots** (☎ 05 61 22 49 25; www.lafaimdesharicots.fr, in French; 3 rue du Puits Vert; menus €10-13; ☎ lunch Mon-Wed, lunch & dinner Thu-Sat) cook up a different *plat du jour* (daily special) every day alongside a handsome choice of homemade salads, savoury tarts and soups which you can play pick 'n' mix with, but the deal is *à volonté* meaning eat as much as you want. Desserts, also *à volonté*, include homely favourites like bread pudding, carrot cake, chocolate tart and vanilla flan. Vegetarian options available.

## THOMAS SALACROUP

This native of Villefranche de Rouergue, a village few know in the Massif Central, is a political-science student in Toulouse.

**Hot spots to drink:** The city's Irish soul **Mulligans** (☎ 05 61 14 04 21; www.mulligans.fr; 39 Grande Rue St-Michel); beer bar **La Tireuse** (opposite); and **Bar El Camino** (☎ 05 62 26 60 51; 138 Grande Rue St-Michel) where the owner César serves cheap drinks with excellent tapas.

**And for dinner:** For students and people who like the concept of *bonne franquette* (cheap well-cooked food), it's **La Gouaille** (☎ 05 61 25 65 66; 6 rue Joux Aigues) – the *menu* is cheap, about €13. I like **La Préférence** (☎ 05 61 13 62 74; www.lapreference.fr; 41 place Bachelier) because it's cheap, you can bring your own wine and the chef takes time to explain his dishes which combine traditional French with French island (like La Martinique in the Caribbean). Another is **La Pyrénéen** (☎ 05 61 23 38 88; 14 allées Franklin Roosevelt) – very French, very *bistro à la française*, very much like a living museum – try the *magret* (duck breast) with honey.

**Where do you club?** I don't so much, though **Maximo** (☎ 05 61 62 08 07; www.maximo-café.com; 3 rue Gabriel Péri) is a beautiful place in the centre for a couple of drinks. I prefer to listen to bands and Toulouse has some good venues. **Le Filochard** (☎ 05 61 52 66 80; 8 place du Pont Neuf) has eclectic gigs, is often full of people and must be tried if only to test *le chouchen*, a Breton drink, very sweet!

**Hot tip:** For any true jazz fan – I am – the best place is unfortunately a restaurant: **Rest'ô Jazz** (☎ 05 61 57 96 95; www.restojazz.com; 8 rue Amélie) is dark, atmospheric, uniquely friendly, soulful, with eclectic jazz-band concerts every week, closed Sunday.

and home to Toulouse's Orchestre National du Capitole.

**Le Bijou** (☎ 05 61 42 95 07; www.le-bijou.net; 123 av de Muret; admission free-€15) World music and upcoming artists predominate at this experimental venue tucked behind a neighbourhood bistro 1km south of the town centre (République metro stop); concerts start at 9.30pm.

**Havana Café** (☎ 05 62 88 34 94; www.havana-café.fr; 2 av des Crêtes, Ramonville St-Agne; admission free-€20) All sounds, reggae, rock, blues, heavy metal and gospel included, make this popular venue at the end of metro line B, 8km south of the city (Ramonville metro stop), Toulouse's biggest and best.

**Le Bikini** (☎ 05 62 24 09 50; www.lebikini.com; rue Hermès, Ramonville St-Agne; admission €5-20) The stuff of Toulousien legend around for 25 years or so, also at the end of metro line B (Ramonville metro stop).

**Le Zénith** (☎ 05 62 74 49 49; 11 av Raymond Badiou) Premier concert venue on the international circuit. Near Arènes and Patte d'Oie metro stops.

## NIGHTCLUBS

Several bars double up as clubs, as do concert venues **Havana Café** and **Le Bikini** (see above).

**Opus Café** (24 rue Bachelier; admission free; ☎ midnight-5am Mon-Wed, 11pm-6am Thu-Sat) Dance until dawn at this much-loved venue for seasoned club-

bers who flock here late for that quintessential French *l'after*.

**Café Rex** (☎ 05 61 12 16 39; 15 av Honoré Serres; admission €10; ☎ 8pm-2am Tue-Fri, 8pm-5am Sat) A bar-cum-club with a young crowd, lots of happenings and an Australian soul, near Campons Cottarelli metro stop.

## Shopping

Mainstream shopping embraces rue du Taur, rue d'Alsace-Lorraine, rue de la Pomme, rue des Arts and nearby streets. The place St-Georges area is boutique-fashionable.

## GAY & LESBIAN TOULOUSE

It's not called *la ville rose* (the pink city) for nothing; for a complete low-down on the gay scene see www.gaytoulouse.net. Gay venues include **Shanghai Club** (12 rue de la Pomme; www.shanghai-leclub.com; ☎ 12.30am-10am, to 11am Sun), a gay club and disco around since 1970; and **Les Coulisses** (5 bd de Strasbourg; tapas €8-12; ☎ 6pm-2am Mon-Fri, to 5am Sat), a mixed, gay-friendly champagne bar with shimmering-silver floor-length curtains, boxed-hedge terrace painted black, and resident DJ Luke Skywalker spinning tunes on Friday.

Markets include a bit-of-everything **market** (Place du Capitole; ☎ Wed), a **flea market** (place St-Sernin; ☎ Sat & Sun) and an antiquarian **book market** (place St-Etienne; ☎ Sat).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

From **Toulouse-Blagnac Airport** (☎ 08 25 38 00 00; www.toulouse.aeroport.fr), 8km northwest of the centre, there are daily flights to/from Paris (Air France and easyJet) and other European cities.

### BUS

Regional services to/from Toulouse **bus station** (☎ 05 61 61 67 67; bd Pierre Sémard) include the following:

Destination	One-way Fare (€)	Duration (hr)	Daily Frequency
Albi	12.90	1½	3
Auch	10.90	1¼	2
Castres	10.90	1½	6
Millau	26.50	4	1
Montauban	7.50	1¼	4

### TRAIN

Buy tickets at the **SNCF boutique** (5 rue Peyras) in town or at train station **Gare Matabiau** (bd Pierre Sémard), 1km northeast of the centre. Destinations include the following:

Destination	One-way Fare (€)	Duration (hr)
Albi	11.40	1¼
Auch	12.90	1½
Bayonne	37.30	3¾
Bordeaux	34.80	2-3
Carcassonne	13.30	1
Castres	12.70	1¼
Lourdes	23.40	1¾
Montauban	10.50	½
Pau	29.50	2¾

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The **Navette Aéroport** (airport shuttle; ☎ 05 34 60 64 00; www.navette-tisseo-aeroport.com) links the airport with town (one-way/return €4/6.30m, 20 minutes, every 20 minutes from 5am to 8.20pm from town and 7.25am to midnight from the airport). Catch the bus in front of the bus station, outside the Jean Jaurès metro station or at place Jeanne d'Arc.

A **taxi** (☎ 05 61 30 02 54, 06 07 41 29 33) to/from town costs €25.

### BICYCLE

Take to the streets with the city's bike-rental scheme, **Vélo Toulouse** (www.velo.toulouse.fr, in French; ☎ pick-up 5.30am-2am, drop-off 24hr), with 135 bike stations dotted every 300m around the city. A one-/seven-day ticket (including a bonus 20/30 minutes' free rental) costs €1/5, plus a €150 credit-card deposit; pay €0.50/1.50/2 for first/second/subsequent hours. Short-term subscribers need a credit card with a chip and PIN.

Otherwise, **Vélo-Station Capitole** (☎ 05 34 30 03 00; square Charles de Gaulle; per half-/full day €1/2, credit-card deposit €260; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) rents out bikes.

### BUS & METRO

Local buses and the two-line metro are run by **Tisséo** (☎ 05 61 41 70 70; www.tisseo.fr, in French), which has ticket kiosks located on place Jeanne d'Arc and cours Dillon. A one-way/return ticket for either costs €1.40/2.50, a 10-ticket carnet is €11.70 and a one-/two-day pass is €4.20/7.

Most bus lines run daily until at least 8pm (night bus lines 10pm to midnight).

## ALBI

pop 48,600

The fortress-like Gothic cathedral dwarfing Albi is a dramatic reminder of its violent religious past. The town was at the heart of the Albigenian heresy of the 12th and 13th centuries and the bloody crusade that crushed it. Almost all of central Albi, including the cathedral, is built from bricks of reddish clay, dug from the River Tarn that casually meanders through town.

Two things merit the trip: that extraordinary cathedral and the excellent museum dedicated to artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who hailed from Albi.

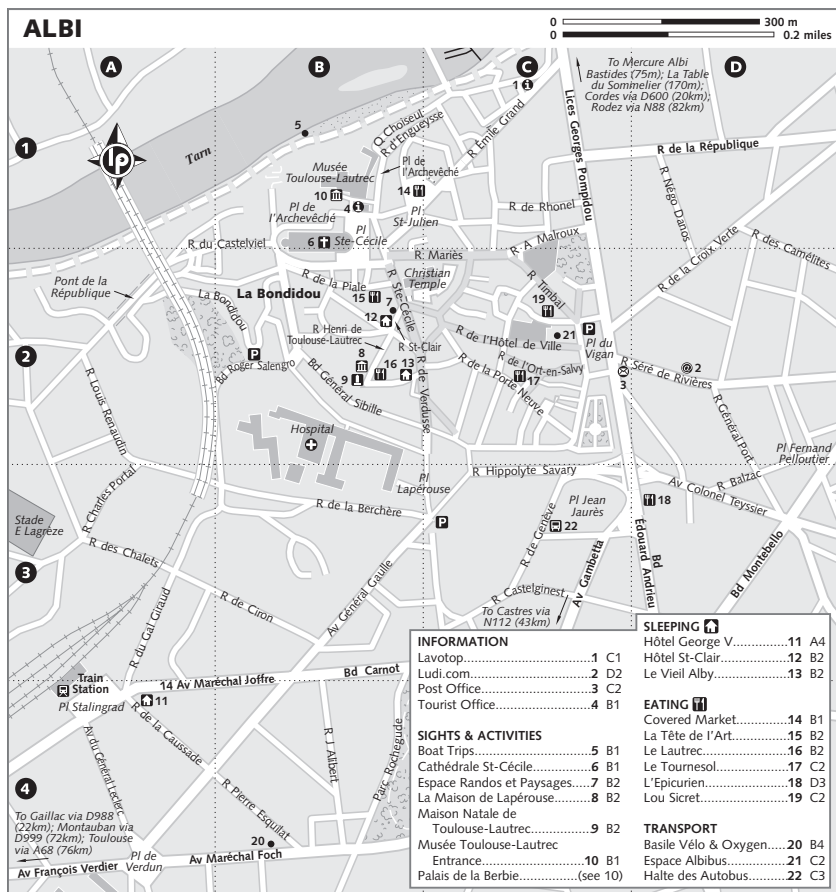
## Information

**Lavotop** (10 rue Émile Grand; ☎ 7am-9pm) Laundrette.

**Ludi.com** (64 rue Séré de Rivières; per hr €4; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Sat) Internet access.

**Post Office** (place du Vigan)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 63 49 48 80; www.albi-tourisme.fr; place Ste-Cécile; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Sun Oct-Jun) The leaflet *To Discover* maps six thematic walks around town, including an enchanting 'secret gardens' tour. Staff make hotel reservations (free by phone or email, €2 in situ).



## Sights & Activities

### CATHÉDRALE STE-CÉCILE

As much fortress as church, the mighty **Cathédrale Ste-Cécile** (place Ste-Cécile; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm Oct-May) was begun in 1282. Built to impress and subdue, it took over a hundred years to complete. Attractive isn't the word – what strikes you most is its sheer mass rising over town like some Tolkenesque dark lord's tower rather than a place of Christian worship.

Step inside and the contrast with that brutal exterior is total. No surface was left untouched by the Italian artists who, in the early 16th century, painted their way, chapel by chapel, the length of its vast nave. An intricately carved,

lacy rood screen, many of its statues smashed in the Revolution, spans the sanctuary. The stained-glass windows in the apse and choir date from the 14th to 16th centuries.

On no account miss the **grand chœur** (great choir; adult/under 12yr €2/free, adult Jul & Aug €1.50) with its frescos, chapels and 30 biblical polychrome figures, finely carved in stone.

At the western end, behind today's main altar, is *Le Jugement Dernier* (The Last Judgement; 1490), a vivid doomsday horror show of the damned being boiled in oil, beheaded or tortured by demons and monsters.

Look out for organ concerts in July and August (5pm Wednesday, 4pm Sunday).



**PAINTER, LITHOGRAPHER, POSTER DESIGNER**

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), Albi's most famous son, was famously short. As a teenager he broke both legs in separate accidents, stunting his growth and leaving him unable to walk without his trademark canes.

He spent his early twenties studying painting in Paris, where he mixed with other artists including Van Gogh. In 1890, at the height of the belle époque, he abandoned Impressionism and took to observing and sketching Paris' colourful nightlife. His favourite subjects included cabaret singer Aristide Bruant, cancan dancers from the Moulin Rouge and prostitutes from the rue des Moulins, sketched to capture movement and expression in a few simple lines.

With sure, fast strokes he would sketch on whatever was at hand – a scrap of paper or a tablecloth, tracing paper or buff-coloured cardboard. He also became a skilled and sought-after lithographer and poster designer until drinking and general overindulgence in the heady nightlife scene led to his premature death in 1901.

**MUSÉE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC**

The **Musée Toulouse-Lautrec** (☎ 05 63 49 48 70; www.musee-toulouse-lautrec.com; place Ste-Cécile; adult/student/under 14yr €5/2.50/free; 🕒 9am–6pm Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Jun & Sep, 10am–noon & 2–5pm or 6pm Oct–May, closed Tue Oct–Mar) is inside Palais de la Berbie, a fortress-like 13th- to 15th-century archbishop's palace. It boasts over 500 examples of Toulouse-Lautrec's work, giving an excellent idea of his development as an artist – everything from simple pencil sketches and rough pastel drafts to the final works such as his celebrated Parisian brothel scenes, with the *Salon de la rue des Moulins* taking pride of place. On the top floor are works by Degas, Matisse and Rodin. The attractive palace courtyard and ornamental **gardens** (admission free; 🕒 8am–7pm Apr–Sep, to 6pm Oct–Mar) are worth wandering around.

A short stroll away is the privately owned **Maison Natale de Toulouse-Lautrec** (14 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) where the artist was born. Next-door neighbour is **La Maison de Lapérouse** (14 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) where the Albi-born explorer lived before sailing around the Pacific in 1785. Both are shut to the public.

**BOAT TRIPS**

From mid-June to mid-September, **Albi Croisières** (☎ 05 63 43 59 63; www.albi-croisieres.com) runs half-hour **boat trips** (adult/3–12yr €6/4;

🕒 11am, 11.45am & every 40min 2–6pm) aboard a *gabarre*, a flat-bottomed sailing barge of the kind used to haul goods down the Garonne to Bordeaux. Boats depart from the Berges du Tarn landing stage.

**Festivals & Events**

**Carnaval** Albi celebrates Carnaval at the beginning of Lent (February or March) with particular gusto and confetti galore.

**Voix-là** In May, *Voix-là* (get it?) celebrates vocal music in all its richness.

**Pause Guitare** Early July's *Pause Guitare*, held in the sumptuous space of place Ste-Cécile, brings together the best of French singing and accompaniment.

**Sleeping**

**Hôtel St-Clair** (☎ 05 63 54 25 66; http://andrieu.michele.free.fr; 8 rue St-Clair; d €42–65; 🕒 ) Sweetly placed on a pedestrian street in the old quarter, this two-star hotel feels like home. Wafts of home-cooking drift across the small flower-filled courtyard and an old-fashioned bar gives reception a cosy air. Free wi-fi.

**Le Vieil Alby** (☎ 05 63 54 14 69; http://pagesperso-orange.fr/le-vieil-alby; 25 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; s/d €44/53; 🕒 closed Jan) This tiny old-town hotel falls under the Logis de France umbrella group and is located above a restaurant cooking up local fare.

**Hôtel George V** (☎ 05 63 54 24 16; www.hotelgeorgev.com; 29 av Maréchal Joffre; s/d/tr €45/50/55) Friendly, welcoming and family-run, this nine-room hotel with red bricks and blue shutters is excellent value. Rooms are spacious and breakfast is served on a small terrace. Free wi-fi.

**Mercure Albi Bastides** (☎ 05 63 47 66 66; www.accorhotels.com; 41 rue Porta; d €82–97; 🕒 ) Occupying an 18th-century brick building that served as

**ALBI PASS**

This card (€6.50), sold at the tourist office, gives free admission to the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec and cathedral choir and offers other reductions and concessions around town.

a mill and later pasta factory, this hotel on the other side of the water enjoys an idyllic riverside spot. Its 58 rooms are handsomely furnished, and prime views of red-brick Albi grace its restaurant terrace. Free wi-fi and parking.

## Eating

Old Albi is bespeckled with places to eat, including a tasty line-up along the western leg of V-shaped rue Henri de Toulouse Lautrec.

**Lou Siret** (☎ 05 63 38 26 40; 1 rue Timbal; mains €15, entrée/plat du jour €4/7.90; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Hidden at the end of a shop-clad alley, this very Occitan, arty restaurant serves regional *cuisine d'oc* on a tree-shaded patio.

**La Table du Sommelier** (☎ 05 63 46 20 10; 20 rue Porta; lunch menus €13-16, dinner menus €25; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Cross the 11th-century red-brick Pont Vieux to find this delightful bistro where the best of wines (the owner's a qualified sommelier) are married with fine food. The menus (€32) built around white, rosé or Gaillac wines are a particular delight.

**Le Lautrec** (☎ 05 63 54 86 55; 13-15 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; 2-/3-course menu €15/17, dinner menu €30; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Dine on the terrace or in the former stables of the Lautrec family – the house where Toulouse-Lautrec was born is opposite. Cuisine is market-driven and a *promenade gourmande* (€18/26/32/38 for one/two/three/four courses) takes diners on a tasty regional tour.

**L'Épicurien** (☎ 05 63 53 10 70; www.restaurantepicurien.com; 42 place Jean Jaurès; starters/mains €15/25, menus €28 & €37; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The steely grey and glass facade says it all: this dedicated gastronomy space by Swedish chef Rikard and Belgian front-of-house Patricia is hip, smart and trend savvy. Cuisine is Mediterranean with a creative hint of fusion.

Also recommended:

**Le Tournesol** (☎ 05 63 38 38 14; 11 rue de l'Ort-en-Salvy; starters/mains €6.90/9.50; ☎ lunch Tue-Sat & dinner Fri) The 100% vegetarian choice.

**La Tête de l'Art** (☎ 05 63 38 44 75; 7 rue de la Piale; menus €15-30; ☎ lunch & dinner May-Jul & Sep, Thu-Mon Aug & Oct-Apr) Tripe and boned pig's trotter mix with a more traditional local fare.

## SELF-CATERING

Buy fresh fare and fill your water bottle with wine (€1.10 a litre) at the striking, red-brick and glass **covered market** (place St-Julien; ☎ 8am-2pm Tue-Thu, 8am-2pm & 5-8pm Fri, 7am-2pm & 5-8pm Sat, 8am-2pm Sun).

## Getting There & Away

From the **Halte des Autobus** (☎ 05 63 54 58 61; place Jean Jaurès), buses serve Castres (€2, 50 minutes, up to 10 daily).

From the **train station** (place Stalingrad) there are trains to/from Rodez (€12.60, 1½ hours, seven daily), Millau (€20.80, 2¾ hours, two daily) and Toulouse (€11.40, 1¼ hours, at least hourly).

## Getting Around

Rent town bikes from **Basile Vélo & Oxygen** (☎ 05 63 38 43 09; http://chrisbas.iffrance.com, in French; 28 av Maréchal Foch; per day/week €15/75; ☎ 1.30-6.30pm Mon, 9am-noon & 1.30-7pm Tue-Sat).

Pick up information on local bus services at the **Espace Albibus** (☎ 05 63 38 43 43; 14 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; ☎ 2-5pm Mon, 10am-5pm Tue-Fri).

Call ☎ 05 63 54 85 03 for a taxi.

## CASTRES

pop 42,900

Founded by the Romans as a *castrum* (settlement), this town with place Jean Jaurès at its heart is something of an ode to its most famous son, the founding father of French socialism.

Downstream from the **tourist office** (☎ 05 63 62 63 62; www.tourisme-castres.fr; 2 place de la République; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-6pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-noon & 2-4pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2.30-4.30pm Sun Sep-Jun), on the eastern bank of the River Agout, are the one-time workshops of tanners, weavers and dyers who made the city's wealth.

The lovely formal gardens of the **Musée Goya** (☎ 05 63 71 59 30; Hôtel de Ville, rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; adult/under 18yr €2.30/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Sun Sep-Jun) were designed by Le Nôtre, architect

## À PIED

Dump the car and opt for exploration *à pied* (on foot): Albi's **Espace Randos et Paysages** (☎ 05 63 47 33 70; www.ffrandonnee-tarn.org; 6 rue St-Clair; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Fri, to 7pm Sat), run by the Comité Régional de la Randonnée Pédestre, sells walking maps and topoguides – many outlining short family-orientated walks – and stocks a mountain of leaflets outlining walks around Albi. *L'Echappe Verte d'Albi* details three 1km-long 'green' strolls in the city itself.

of Versailles' parkland. The museum's collection of Spanish art includes several works by Goya himself and canvases by Murillo, Ribera and Picasso.

**Parc de Gourjade** (av de Roquecourbe, D89), north of town, has campsites, golf course, 15km of jogging trails, riding centre, swimming pool and ice-skating rink. Take bus 6 or 7 from the Arcades stop on place Jean Jaurès or hop aboard **Le Miredames** (☎ 05 63 62 41 76; return adult/6-13yr/under 5yr/family €4/1.60/free/10; ♿ up to 5 daily May-Oct), a wooden river barge that links the park with the quay in front of the tourist office.

## MONTAUBAN

pop 53,200

Montauban, southern France's second-oldest *bastide* on the right bank of the River Tarn, was founded in 1144 by Count Alphonse Jourdain of Toulouse who, legend says, was so charmed by its trailing willow trees (*alba* in Occitan) that he named the place Mont Alba. It was badly battered during the Albigenian crusade and later became a Huguenot stronghold, only to again suffer persecution when the Edict of Nantes (1598) was repealed by Louis XIV a century later.

Montauban's attractive arcaded 17th-century brick buildings around place Nationale date from the prosperous decades following the Catholic reconquest.

## Information

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 63 63 60 60; www.montauban-tourisme.com; 4 rue du Collège; ♿ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Sep-Jun)

## Sights

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, the sensual neoclassical painter and accomplished violinist, was a native of Montauban. Many of his works, plus canvases by Tintoretto, Van Dyck, Courbet and others, are in the **Musée Ingres** (☎ 05 63 22 12 91; 13 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; adult/under 18yr €4/free; ♿ 10am-6pm daily Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jun, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sun Easter-Jun & Sep-mid-Oct), a riverside bishop's palace. The entry ticket also admits you to the nearby Histoire Naturelle (natural history), Terroir (local costumes and traditions) and Résistance et Déportation (with mementos of WWII) museums.

An Ingres masterpiece, *Le Vœu de Louis XIII*, depicting the king pledging France to the Virgin, hangs in the 18th-century **Cathédrale**

**Notre Dame de l'Assomption** (place Franklin Roosevelt; ♿ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat). The fine 13th-century **Église St-Jacques**, in mellow pink brick, still bears cannonball marks from Louis XIII's 1621 siege of the town.

## Festivals & Events

**Alors Chante** A festival of traditional French song in May.

**Jazz à Montauban** A week-long jam in July.

**Légende des Quatre-Cent Coups** (400 Blows) This weekend street festival at the end of August commemorates the moment when, says local lore, a fortune-teller told Louis XIII, besieging Montauban, to blast off 400 cannons simultaneously against the town, which still failed to fall.

## Sleeping

**Hôtel du Commerce** (☎ 05 63 66 31 32; www.hotel-commerce-montauban.com; 9 place Franklin Roosevelt; s/d/q €52.50/64/81; ♿) Overlooking the cathedral, this is a charming family affair run by the Passedats for generations. A highlight is the breakfast salon with original 1930s Villeroy & Boch floor tiles, Calais lace curtains and Botticelli reproductions on the walls. Free wi-fi.

**Hôtel d'Orsay** (☎ 05 63 66 06 66; www.hotel-restaurant-orsay.com, in French; 29 av Roger Salengro; d €55-65; ♿) A stone's throw from the station, this hotel has comfortable if dated rooms within a solid building of mellow red. In summer, lounge on its floral terrace. Its upmarket restaurant, La Cuisine d'Alain, is open for lunch Tuesday to Friday and dinner Monday to Saturday (lunch/dinner menu costs €23/60).

## Eating

Place Nationale is ringed with several cheap-ish if unstartling brasseries.

**La Mangeoire** (☎ 05 63 20 70 64; 12 rue d'Auriol; starters €10-12, mains €15-17; ♿ lunch & dinner) Young, fun and bursting with creativity, La Mangeoire is a tapas bar and drinking haunt where a cultured set enjoys Mediterranean cuisine and an energising dose of contagious atmosphere. Everything spills outside in summer. Dessert? *Si tu es sage* (if you're good!)

**Le Couvert des Brasseurs** (☎ 05 63 91 30 61; 27 place Nationale; meat/cheese platter €22/16; ♿ lunch & dinner) Seafood is what this contemporary space with exposed stone walls and pillar-box red chairs cooks up. Feast on a *plateau royal* (€40/75 for one/two people) or a dozen oysters (€15).

**Au Fil de l'Eau** (☎ 05 63 66 11 85; aufiledel@wanadoo.fr; 14 quai du Dr Lafforgue; lunch menu Tue-Fri €18, menus €35-55; ♿ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) An

interior decorated with modern art for sale offsets a tempting menu crammed with local products at this riverside restaurant. *Crème brûlée de foie gras* drizzled with balsamic vinegar, followed by a pig-trotter mousse on a bed of Le Puy lentils, formed part of our memorable feast.

Morning **farmers markets** are on Saturday (place Prax-Paris) and Wednesday (place Lalaque), in addition to a smaller daily one (place Nationale).

## Getting There & Away

From the **train station** (av Mayenne), about 1km from place Nationale across the Tarn, trains serve Toulouse (€10, 30 minutes, frequent), Bordeaux (€26.70, two hours, frequent) and Moissac (€5.20, 20 minutes, five daily).

## MOISSAC

pop 12,300

Pretty riverside Moissac, an easy trip from Montauban or Toulouse, remains a well-trodden halt for walkers following in the footsteps of Santiago de Compostela pilgrims on the Spain-bound GR65 route.

**Abbaye St-Pierre** (place Durand de Bredon), resplendent with France's finest Romanesque sculpture, became a model for more modest ecclesiastical buildings throughout southern France. Above the **south portal**, completed around 1130, is a superb tympanum depicting St John's vision of the Apocalypse, with Christ in majesty flanked by the apostles, angels and 24 awe-struck elders. In the **cloister** (adult/12-18yr €5/3.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-5pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) 116 delicate marble columns support wedge-shaped, deeply carved capitals, each a little masterpiece of foliage, earthy figures or biblical scenes. The Revolution's toll is sickening – nearly every face is smashed.

Enter through the **tourist office** (☎ 05 63 04 01 85; www.moissac.fr; 6 place Durand de Bredon; ☎ as cloister). Cloister admission includes a museum of folk art and furnishings, and a library containing replicas of the monastery's beautiful illuminated manuscripts.

**Le Pont Napoléon** (☎ 05 63 04 01 55; www.le-pont-napoleon.com; 2 allée Montebello; s/d from €35/40) stands guard over the bridge that Napoleon built after his stay here in 1808. This historic 12-room hotel is a delight. Its retro rooms are stylish and its gastronomic restaurant, **Le Table de Nos Fils** (menus €25-38; ☎ lunch & dinner Fri-Tue, dinner Thu), creates a real buzz. Chef Patrick Delaroux runs weekend cooking courses.

**Le Moulin de Moissac** (☎ 05 63 32 88 88; www.lemoulindemoissac.com, in French; esplanade du Moulin; d €68-85) is a grain mill built on the banks of the Tarn in 1474. It exported flour to the young USA in the 18th century, was shelled during WWI and sheltered Jewish children and clandestine Resistance activity in WWII. Revel in unparalleled river views from its hotel rooms and waterside **restaurant** (lunch/dinner menu €22/34).

Five trains daily run to/from Montauban (€5.20, 20 minutes), most serving Toulouse (€12.10).

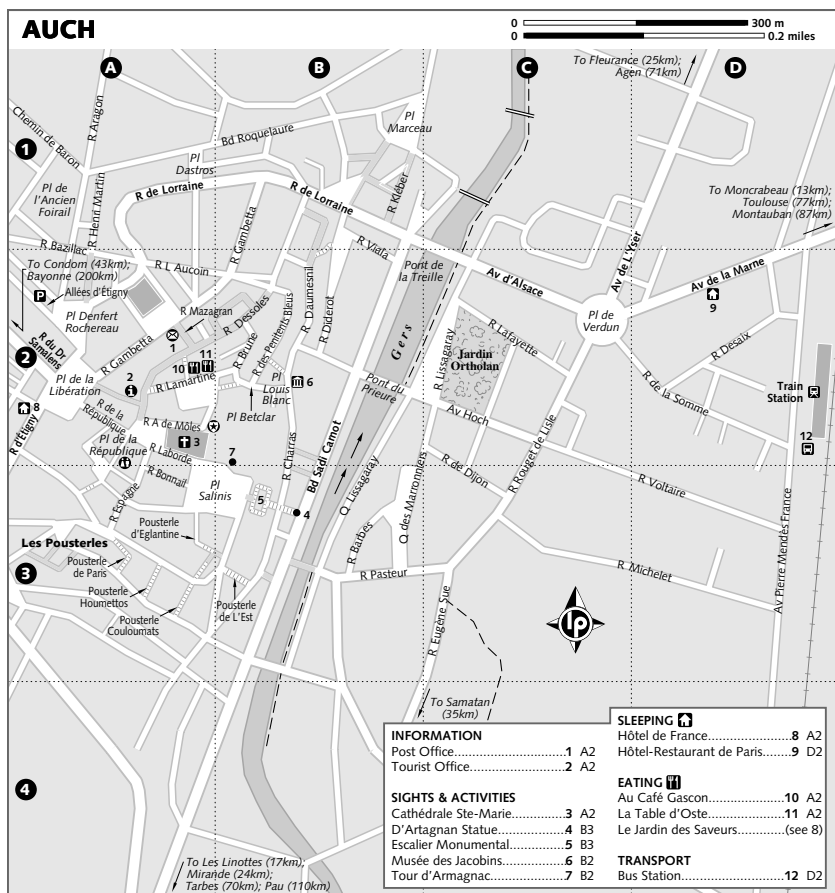
## AUCH

pop 23,500

Auch (it rhymes with Gosh!) has been an important trade crossroads ever since the Romans conquered a Celtic tribe called the Auscii and established Augusta Auscorum on the flats east of the River Gers. The town's heyday was in the Middle Ages when the counts of Armagnac and their archbishops together ran the city and built its cathedral. Its second flowering was in the late 18th century, as new roads were pushed southwards to Toulouse and into the Pyrenees. A slide into rural obscurity followed the Revolution in 1789.

## BAMBOO BONANZA

You don't get any greener than the attractively landscaped, well thought-out forest of the **Bamboo Parc** (☎ 06 70 64 55 28; www.bamboo-parc.com; Château de Lériet, Gandalou; adult/2-12yr €6/3; ☎ 2-6pm Wed, Sat & Sun Mar-May & Sep-Nov, 2-6pm Wed, Fri & Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jun, 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug), an 9-hectare park arranged around the ruins of a château where 100-year-old banana trees rub leaves with bonsais and 80 types of Chinese bamboo. Log cabins, water-spouting dragons, witches and *lutins* (elves) keep kids enchanted, and the monthly *bien être* (well-being) shiatsu sessions (two hours, €25) create a Zen Sunday moment. Music concerts complete the open-air repertoire. Find it 8km east of Moissac, signposted off the D72 (direction Gandalou).



## Orientation

Hilltop Auch, with place de la Libération, place de la République and the cathedral at its heart, has most of the sights, restaurants, shops and hotels. Pedestrianised rue Dessoles is the principal shopping street. The old town, tumbling away to the south, is a web of lanes, steps and little courtyards. Across the River Gers is the 'new' Auch and adjacent train and bus stations.

## Information

**Post Office** (rue Gambetta)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 62 05 22 89; www.auch-tourisme.com; 1 rue Dessoles; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.15pm & 3-6pm Sun mid-Jul-mid-Aug, 9.15am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Aug-mid-Jul, 10am-12.15pm

Sun May-mid-Jul & mid-Aug-Sep) Inside 15th-century Maison Fedel.

## Sights

### CATHÉDRALE STE-MARIE

This magnificent building, a Unesco World Heritage Site, moved Napoléon II to exclaim 'A cathedral like this should be put in a museum!' Constructed over two centuries, **Cathédrale Ste-Marie** (☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm) ranges in style from pure Gothic to Italian Renaissance. To appreciate the contrast, take a look at the doorway in the external north wall; the lower part is lacy Gothic while the upper, unadorned arch is purest Florentine.

The heavy western facade impresses with its sheer bulk - and looks imposingly grand when

illuminated at night – but the real splendour lies within: 18 vivid 16th-century Renaissance stained-glass windows and an astonishing **choir** (admission incl audioguide €2), featuring over 1500 individual carvings of biblical scenes and mythological creatures in the 113 oak choir stalls.

For a multisensory experience, enjoy a free **recital** (🎻 6pm Sun Jul & Aug) on the cathedral's grand booming organ or look out for occasional chamber-music concerts (tickets €10).

Behind the cathedral, the 14th-century, 40m-high **Tour d'Armagnac** (closed to the public) served Auch's archbishops as their archive, then briefly became a lock-up during the Revolution and later times of trouble.

### MUSÉE DES JACOBINS

An old boy around since 1793, the **Musée des Jacobins** (☎ 05 62 05 74 79; 4 place Louis Blanc; adult/under 18yr €3/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Apr-Oct, 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Nov, Dec, Feb & Mar) fills an elegant 14th-century Dominican monastery. Its eclectic collection came from property seized during the Revolution and includes early Gallo-Roman villa frescos, pre-Columbian artefacts from the Americas and a rich collection of 19th-century Gascon costumes. Show your ticket to the cathedral's choir to get half-price admission to the museum, and vice versa.

### ESCALIER MONUMENTAL

Auch's 234-step **Escalier Monumental** (Monumental Stairway) drops to the river from place

Salinis. Near the bottom postures a **statue of d'Artagnan**, the fictional swashbuckling Gascon hero immortalised by Alexandre Dumas in *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (*The Three Musketeers*). Nearby, a series of narrow, stepped alleyways, collectively called Les Pousterles, also plunge to the plain.

### Sleeping

**Hôtel Restaurant de Paris** (☎ 05 62 63 26 22; 38 av de la Marne; s/d €40/43, with shower €32/37, with shared bathroom €27/30; 🕒 Dec-Oct) Cheap as chips and old-fashioned, the Paris has been run by one family for over 70 years. With few concessions to the passing years, it nevertheless has cosily furnished rooms, a well-stocked bar and restaurant serving copious quantities.

**Hôtel de France** (☎ 05 62 61 71 71; www.hoteldefrance-auch.com; 1 place de la Libération; s/d from €70/86; 🕒) Shabby from the outside, this age-old hotel is sweetness and light inside. Its *chambres prestiges* (€140) and jacuzzi-clad suites (€230 to €330) are grand in size and decor, as is Le Jardin des Saveurs (lunch *menu* €20.50, dinner *menu* €27 to €55), its splendid restaurant in a glorious Second Empire salon.

### Eating & Drinking

A stroll along rue Dessoles uncovers several informal, friendly bars-cum-bistros.

**La Table d'Oste** (☎ 05 62 05 55 62; www.table-oste-restaurant.com; 7 rue Lamartine; lunch/dinner menu €16/37; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, lunch Sat, dinner Mon mid-Jun–Oct, lunch & dinner Tue-Sat Nov–mid-Jun) Strung with copper

### GIMONT: A GOURMET GALLIVANT

Foodies with a fetish for *foie* (liver) should gallivant to **Gimont**, a village in the Gers (www.foie-gras-gers.com), 28km east of Auch on the Toulouse-bound N124, where two fine-food houses conserve the corn-fattened livers of ducks (*canards*) and geese (*oies*) to make France's best foie gras (fattened liver).

**Comtesse du Barry** (☎ 05 62 67 85 44; www.comtesseclubarry.com; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-7.30pm Sun Sep–mid-Jul), with upmarket *épiceries* (specialists grocers) from all over France, has been in business in Gimont since 1908 and offers free guided visits of its factory at 9am Thursday; advance bookings only. Drool over foie gras in all its guises – *frais* (fresh) and *entier* (whole), *mi-cuit* (semicooked) or preserved in the form of a *bloc de foie gras* – in its boutique.

Direct competitor **Ducs de Gascogne** (☎ 05 62 67 84 75; www.ducsdegascogne.com; 3 av de Cahuzac; starters €7-16.50, mains €10-15; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sun) arrived in Gimont in 1953 and runs a restaurant with a museum above its shop. Liver predictably hogs the menu, the highlight being an inspired tasting platter of three foie-gras types – oven-baked to golden, spiced with black pepper and salt crystals or laced with black truffles. No time to stop? Grab a foie-gras sandwich (€6) to eat in the car.

Unforgettable is a trip around Gimont's weekly **Marché du Foie** (Liver Market; 🕒 8am-2pm Wed) and seasonal **Marché du Gras** (Fat Market; 🕒 8am-2pm Wed & Sun Nov-Mar) which ushers in a line-up of hundreds of ducks and geese – dead, but with head, beak and fattened liver very much intact.



## LES LINOTTES

Lazily set amid gently rolling fields of yellow canola with a soul-stirring view of the spiky snow-capped Pyrenees as a backdrop, **Les Linottes** (☎ 05 62 61 04 79; www.leslinottes.com; Porteteny, Durban; d incl breakfast €60; dinner from €20), 17km south of Auch, is country living at its best. Everything at this three-bedroom *chambre d'hôte* – a converted hay barn – is ecological: the interior walls are built from bales of hay 'plastered' in a mix of earth and straw, stones cobble the floors of the spacious bathrooms with fabulous walk-in showers, and a waxed mud floor in the book-busy kitchen-cum-dining room lends it a distinctly modern air. Each room has its own terrace with table and chairs overlooking a lovely garden, and breakfast is a 100% homemade feast. Psychologist Laurence and TV producer Patrice, the creative couple behind the project, are planning an ecological swimming pool next, filtered naturally by frogs, aquatic plants and other wildlife.

pans from its beamed ceiling and bedecked with a wooden terrace, this local favourite cooks up a cosy dining experience, with ample beef, pork and duck to fill you to bursting.

**Au Café Gascon** (☎ 05 62 61 88 08; café.gascon@wanadoo.fr; 5 rue Lamartine; menus €35 & €48; ☎ lunch & dinner) Next-door neighbour Georges Nosella envelopes diners in an all-embracing Gascon experience with his regional fare, cultural happenings and so on. *Menus* must be booked at least two hours in advance; otherwise the only choice is the fixed €22 meal.

## Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 05 62 05 76 37; av Pierre Mendès-France) buses serve Condom (€6.50, 50 minutes, three daily) and Agen (€11, 1½ hours, five to seven daily). Trains or SNCF buses link Auch with Toulouse (€13.30, 1½ hours) from the neighbouring **train station** (av Pierre Mendès France).

## CONDOM

pop 7250

Poor Condom, whose name has made it the butt of so many nudge-snigger, English-language jokes (the French don't even use the word, preferring *préservatif* or, more familiarly, *capote anglaise*, meaning 'English hood' – touché!).

Condom, whose name is actually a derivation of the old Gallo-Roman name Condatomagus, is a self-confident town on the River Baise, worth a visit for its cathedral, locally produced Armagnac appreciated by Santiago de Compostela pilgrims for aeons, sober neoclassical mansions...and seasonal condom museum.

## Information

**Tourist Office** (☎ 05 62 28 00 80; www.tourisme-tenareze.com; 1 place Bossuet; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat,

10.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Within the 13th-century Tour Auger d'Andiran.

## Sights & Activities

Condom's 16th-century **Cathédrale St-Pierre** (place St-Pierre), with its lofty nave and elaborately carved chancel, is a rich example of southern Flamboyant Gothic architecture. Its most richly sculpted entrance – much defaced during the Revolution – gives onto the square. Abutting the cathedral on its northern side is the vast but delicately arched 16th-century **cloister**, topped with a tent-like structure to provide shelter to picnicking walkers heading south along the Chemin de St-Jacques.

**Musée de l'Armagnac** (☎ 05 62 28 47 17; 2 rue Jules Ferry; adult/child €2.20/1.10; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm Apr-Oct, 2-5pm Wed-Sun Nov, Dec, Feb & Mar, closed Jan) portrays the traditional production of Armagnac, Gascony's fiery rival to cognac, distilled to the north in the Bordeaux vineyards.

For the real stuff, head to **Armagnac Ryst-Dupeyron** (☎ 05 62 28 08 08; 36 rue Jean Jaurès; admission free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri year-round, plus 3.30-6.30pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug), one of several Armagnac producers offering free sampling. Or try the **Cave Cooperative** (☎ 05 62 28 12 16) on the D931.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, must be the rationale behind Condom's seasonal **Musée du Préservatif** (Condom Museum; ☎ 05 62 68 25 69; 2 rue Jules Ferry; adult/under 18yr €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm early-Jul-mid-Sep), a space relating the contraceptive's history from its birth in 1665.

Down by the Baise on quai Bouquerie, **Gascogne Navigation** (☎ 05 62 28 46 46; www.gascogne-navigation.com; La Capitainerie, 3 av d'Aquitaine; ☎ 9am-noon & 2.30pm or 3pm-7pm) runs 1½-hour river cruises (adult/child costs €7.80/5.80) and 2½-hour bring-your-own-picnic (€12/8) or lunch cruises (€33/19). From April to October, it rents small boats (hour/half-day/full day



10am-12.30pm Sat) Grab a couple of titles from the bookshop and plop yourself down at a table in the café to browse in leisure over a light lunch or a slice of Armagnac-laced fruit cake.

**La Cambuse** (☎ 05 62 68 48 95; place Bossuet; 2-/3-course menu €10/12, salads & bruschettas €10-13; ☺ lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Fri & Sat) This quick-fix place next to the tourist office cooks up snacks and more substantial fare to eat around a gay violet-pink bar, on place Bossuet in summer, or for takeaway.

**La Table des Cordeliers** (☎ 05 62 68 43 82; www.latabledescordeliers.fr; 1 rue des Cordeliers; weekday lunch menu €22, dinner menus €39 & €58, with wine €90; ☺ lunch & dinner Thu-Sat, lunch Sun, dinner Tue & Wed) There aren't many places you can dine beneath the sweeping stone arches of a 13th-century chapel: A Michelin-starred, Gascon-inspired cuisine befits the stylish setting.

### SELF-CATERING

The weekly **Marché au Gras** held Wednesday and Saturday morning in the **covered market** (place Sapien Dupleix) is more experience than shopping trip. **Churchill's: The British Grocer in Gers** (☎ 05 62 68 43 89; place Sapien Dupleix; ☺ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sat) sells British groceries.

### Getting There & Around

Condom, ill-served by public transport, has three daily buses to/from Auch (€6.50, 50 minutes), including one that continues to Toulouse (€15.10, 2½ hours), and an early bird run to Bordeaux (€19, 2¾ hours, Monday to Saturday).

### VULGAR VILLAGES

The more puerile English-speaking visitors to France have long been amused by place names such as Condom (not to mention the likes of Pissy or Stains), but the French are in on the act now too. In an attempt to really put themselves on the map, a group of French villages with names that mean silly or rude things in French staged their first summit meeting of 'Villages of lyric or burlesque names' in 2003 in a tiny village outside Toulouse called Mingocebos ('eat onions' in ancient Occitan). Members include Saligos ('filthy pig'), Beaufou ('beautiful mad'), and Cocumont ('cuckold hill'). Trecon ('very stupid') and Montcuq ('my arse') have yet to join.

## AROUND CONDOM

This swath of the ancient province of Gascon was in its time wild frontier country, caught between the French, entrenched in Toulouse, and the English with their power base in Bordeaux. The better-endowed of the hapless villages caught in the crossfire fortified themselves against all comers, creating what are known as *bastides*. You can drive from one to another in a long morning. But better to take them at a more gentle pace; these mild undulating lands are ideal for cycling. Or view them from the basket of a hot-air balloon (see p758).

The area's claim to contemporary fame is as a producer of Armagnac, a feisty liqueur that invariably finds its way into the local Gascon cuisine, be it as a lacing for prune soufflé, with foie gras or duck.

### Fourcès

Fourcès (pronounce that s), 13km northwest of Condom, is a picturesque *bastide* on the River Auzoue. Uniquely circular, it was founded by the English invaders. Nowadays, its shady expanse is ringed by well-restored medieval houses. In one corner is the tiny, dusty **Musée des Vieux Métiers** (Museum of Ancient Crafts).

The village bursts into colour during the last weekend of April as thousands pour in for its **Marché aux Fleurs**, more a flower festival than market.

The tiny seasonal **tourist office** (☎ 05 62 29 50 96; www.fources.fr; ☺ Jun-Sep) is in the square (or, more accurately, circle).

### Larressingle

Larressingle, a textbook bastion 5km west of Condom, must be France's cutest fortified village. It's certainly the most besieged, bravely withstanding armies of tourists and Compostela pilgrims who come here to explore the remains of a **castle keep**, once the principal residence of the bishops of Condom, and the sturdy Romanesque **Église St-Sigismond**, both within the largely intact original walls.

Year-round the **Stand de Vente**, a hut at the entrance to the village, acts as unofficial tourist office and sells honey, pork, duck and Armagnac products from three local farms. Come summer, the seasonal **tourist office** (☎ 05 62 68 22 49; 10am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat May, Jun & Sep, Tue-Sun Jul & Aug) inside the walls organises **guided tours** (☺ 11am, 3.30pm & 5pm Tue-Sat Jun-Sep).

The fun waxwork museum of medieval village life, **La Halte aux Pèlerins** (☎ 05 62 28 11 58;

## ARMAGNAC

Ask any Gascon: Armagnac slips down just as smoothly as the more heavily produced and marketed Cognac to the north. Produced from white grapes that ripen in the sandy soils hereabouts and aged in barrels of local black oak, it was originally taken for medicinal reasons but is drunk with gusto today, often as a digestive. In local restaurants, *Floc de Gascogne* – a liqueur wine made from Armagnac and red or white grape juice – is the traditional aperitif.

A couple of major distillers are headquartered in Condom (p754), and driving or cycling among the vineyards, you'll stumble upon one siren-call notice after another, signalling you to taste and buy direct from a small-scale farmer-distiller in his *chais* (traditional wine cellar).

Two dreamy addresses oozing history are 13th-century **Château de Cassaigne** (☎ 05 62 28 04 02; www.chateauducassaigne.com; Cassaigne; ☎ 10am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun), 6.5km southwest of Condom, just off the D931 to Eauze, where you can visit the cellars and sample the Armagnac from its 18th-century distillery; and 17th-century **Château du Busca Maniban** (☎ 05 62 28 40 38; www.buscamaniban.com; Mansencome; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Nov), the stuff of dreams 5.5km further south along the scenic D229 in Mansencome.

adult/12-18yr €7.50/5; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Jul-Sep, 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Jun & Oct, 2.30-5.30pm Sun Nov-Mar), has optional English commentary. Outside the fortifications, **Cité des Machines du Moyen Âge** (☎ 05 62 68 33 90; adult/child €5/3; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm school holidays, Sat & Sun Mar-Jun & Sep–mid-Nov) particularly excites the male species with its feisty displays of catapults, canons and other medieval war machines, arranged as if about to assault the city.

With the *Chemin St-Jacques* passing footsteps away, **Auberge de Larressingle** (☎ 05 62 28 29 67; http://auberge.larressingle.free.fr; d €55, half-board per person €49.50), with six rooms and prime village views, is a busy pit stop for hikers. Decor is countryside rustic and fare is local – *foie gras*, *magret de canard* (duck breast) or *confit de canard* (preserved duck) and lots of Gers poultry.

## Montréal du Gers & Séviac

Montréal du Gers, dating to 1255, was one of Gascony's first *bastides*. Its chunky Gothic church squats beside place Hôtel de Ville, the arcaded main square.

At Séviac, 1.5km southwest, are the excavated remains – a work in progress – of a luxurious 4th-century **Villa Gallo-Romaine** (☎ 05 62 29 48 57; adult/under 12yr €4/free; ☎ 10am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-Nov), part of the agricultural estate of a Roman aristocrat. Archeologists so far have revealed the villa's baths, outbuildings and large areas of spectacular mosaic floors.

Admission includes entry to the small museum within Montréal's **tourist office** (☎ 05 62 29 42 85; place Hôtel de Ville; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sat) displaying artefacts from Séviac.

## Abbaye de Flaran

Founded in 1151 by Pyrenees monks from Escaladieu, this delightful Cistercian **abbey** (☎ 05 62 28 50 19; Valence sur Baise; adult/student/under 18yr €4/2/free, 1st Sun of month Nov-Mar free; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Feb-Jun & Sep–mid-Jan), guarded by a 14th-century fortress door turned pigeon loft, is southwest France's loveliest. Built in a remote green spot, it was occupied until the French Revolution, by which point no more than a handful of monks remained. Its vaulted chapter hall propped up by coloured marble columns, refectory with 15th-century triple arch window and decorative moulding (spot the phoenix and pelican), and recently renovated monks' cells are particularly fine. Watch for art exhibitions and classical-music concerts in its grounds.

## La Romieu

This tiny village, 11km northeast of Condom, takes its name from the Occitan *roumieu*, meaning 'pilgrim'. It's dominated by the magnificent 14th-century **Collégiale St-Pierre** (adult/under 12yr €4.80/free; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-6.30pm May, Jun & Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Apr, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Oct-Mar). Embracing the church are two 33m-tall towers and a fine Gothic cloister with pretty garden. Left of the altar is the sacristy where original medieval frescos include arcane biblical characters, black angels and esoteric symbols. Climb the 136 steps of the double-helix stairway to the top of the octagonal tower for a countryside panorama. Buy tickets and access the

ensemble via the helpful **tourist office** (☎ 05 62 28 86 33; www.la-romieu.com; 🕒 same hours as church).

About 800m west of the village, **Les Jardins de Coursiana** (☎ 05 62 68 22 80; www.jardinsdecoursiana.com, in French; adult/7-16yr €6/4; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Sat mid-Apr–Oct) is the landscaped handiwork of a local agricultural engineer. Over 700 trees and rare plants, each clearly labelled, flourish in the arboretum English garden, aromatic herb garden and *potager familial* (family vegetable patch).

A ticket covering the church and gardens costs €8.50.

## Lectoure

Juicy melons aside, Lectoure's lure is its **Musée Archéologique** (☎ 05 62 68 70 22; place du Général de Gaulle; adult/child €4/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct-Feb) in the former episcopal palace, now the town hall. View finds from local Gallo-Roman sites (including 20 bull- or ram-head pagan altars, used for sacrifice), Roman jewellery and mosaics.

Rearing up above the museum is the bulk of the 15th-century **Cathédrale St-Gervais et St-Protais** (place du Général de Gaulle) with its curious, ornate tower. The **tourist office** (☎ 05 62 68 76

98; www.lecture.fr, in French; place du Général de Gaulle; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Sep-Jun) is next door.

Nearby, 18th-century mansion **Hôtel de Bastard** (☎ 05 62 68 82 44; www.hotel-de-bastard.com; rue Lagrange; d €50-65, menus €28, €50 & €62; 🕒 lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun, dinner Tue early Feb–mid-Dec) is best known for its Gascon cuisine served on a terrace overlooking the hotel's cypress-framed pool and the valley beyond.

West out of town on the road to Condom at **Bleu de Lectoure** (☎ 05 62 68 78 30; www.bleu-de-lecture.com; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun, closed Mon Jan & Feb), a dedicated Franco-American couple have revived the extraction of blue dye from the fermented leaves of the woad plant. You can visit the workshop in a former tannery and buy a whole host of products dyed in woad.

The best view of Lectoure and its surrounding *bastides* has to be aboard a hot-air balloon courtesy of **Montgolfières de Gascogne** (☎ 05 62 64 69 92, 06 82 76 46 01; www.montgolfieres-gascogne.fr, in French). A ride for one/two/three people costs €220/210/190 per person, and romantics can indulge in a two-hour flight at sunrise for €320 per person, Champagne included.