



Toulouse Area

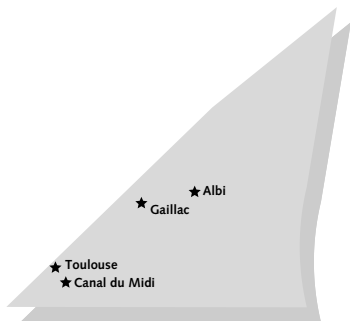
Once Languedoc's traditional centre, Toulouse was hived off when regional boundaries were redrawn almost half a century ago. In geographical limbo since, sort of, the city is a springboard for zillions of travellers who land at its airport, pick up wheels and motor west into Languedoc proper. En route are some fascinating historical sights and sun-drenched *bastides* (fortified medieval villages), more than deserving of a lunch or overnight stop.

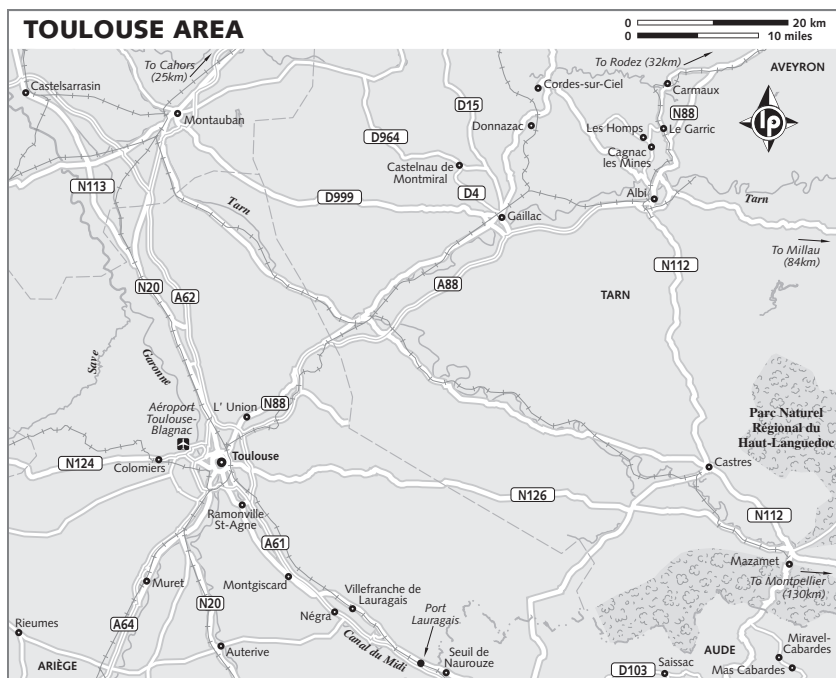
Toulouse, a dynamic and confident city astraddle the pea-green Canal du Midi, ranks among France's liveliest and fastest-growing urban centres. Bags of fun, it might not be quite as sultry and Mediterranean steamy as Montpellier (no palm trees for starters), but party with students till dawn in its vibrant bars, cafés and clubs, and you know Spain is not far away: for centuries Chemins de St Jacques pilgrims following the Chemin d'Arles road west to Santiago de Compostela have passed through here. Delve into Toulouse's quieter lanes and narrow backstreets 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.

A whisker away, the Pyrenees stride out spiky and snowcapped on the horizon. Toulouse-Lautrec was born in red-brick Albi, a historic town 75km northeast with a king of a cathedral and the world's finest collection of the artist's Parisian cabaret-inspired work (p41). Nearby is Gaillac, a gastronomic name any wine lover knows from the label on the bottle. Not far away, the beautiful *bastide* of Cordes-sur-Ciel crashes down a hillside in the most unladylike fashion.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sip an *apéro* on **place St-Pierre** (p245), catch a local band and party until dawn with Toulouse's student-busy **nightlife** (p245)
- Play astronauts at Toulouse's interactive **Cité de l'Espace** (p241)
- Grab a bike (p246) and go for a spin along the **Canal du Midi**, taking time out afloat at the **Buddha Boat Spa** (p242)
- Delve into the life, work and mind of an artistic master at Albi's **Musée Toulouse-Lautrec** (p248)
- Sniff, swill, sip and spit (or swallow) some of the region's finest wine in and around **Gaillac** (p251)





TOULOUSE

pop 437,100

From the contemporary art in its sleek two-line metro to its booming aerospace industry, this dynamic city – pink by day with its mirage of rose-red brick buildings, bright by night – bedazzles. No surprise then that *la ville rose* (the pink city), sliced in three by the green Canal du Midi and the mucky brown River Garonne, is in fact France's fourth-largest city.

Old Toulouse with its wonky medieval streets and bounty of churches oozes a rich and tumultuous history (p27). A sizeable student population gives the city a kick and injects a feisty energy into its bars, music venues and late-night clubbing alternatives, while the grassy banks of its waterways are peaceful and romantic any time of day.

Orientation

The heart of Toulouse is bounded by the River Garonne (west) and *blvd de Strasbourg* and its continuation, *blvd Lazare Carnot* (east). Its two principal squares are *place du Capitole* and, 200m east, *place Wilson*.

Information

The Bookshop (☎ 05 61 22 99 92; bookshop.tlse@wanadoo.fr; 17 rue Lakanal) English-language bookshop.

Bulle de Savon (56 rue des Blanchers; ☎ 8am-10pm) Laundrette.

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

Le Ch@t de la Voisine (☎ 05 61 57 36 18; 25 rue des 7 Troubadours; per hr €2; ☎ 10am-midnight) Internet access.

Ombres Blanches (☎ 05 34 45 53 33; www.ombres-blanches.fr; 48-50 rue Gambetta) Maps and travel guides.

Post Office (9 rue la Fayette)

Tourist Office (☎ 05 61 11 02 22; www.toulouse-tourisme.com; Sq 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

AROUND PLACE DU CAPITOLE

On the ceiling of the arcades on the western side of bustling **place du Capitole** are 29 vivid illustrations of the city's history, from the *Venus*