



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.

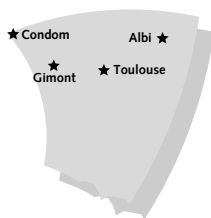
Toulouse itself is one of France's liveliest and fastest-growing cities. Bolstered by its booming hi-tech industries (notably aerospace; this is the epicentre of the huge Europe-wide EADS aircraft manufacturing consortium), this city is dynamic, confident and bags of fun. Party with students until dawn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

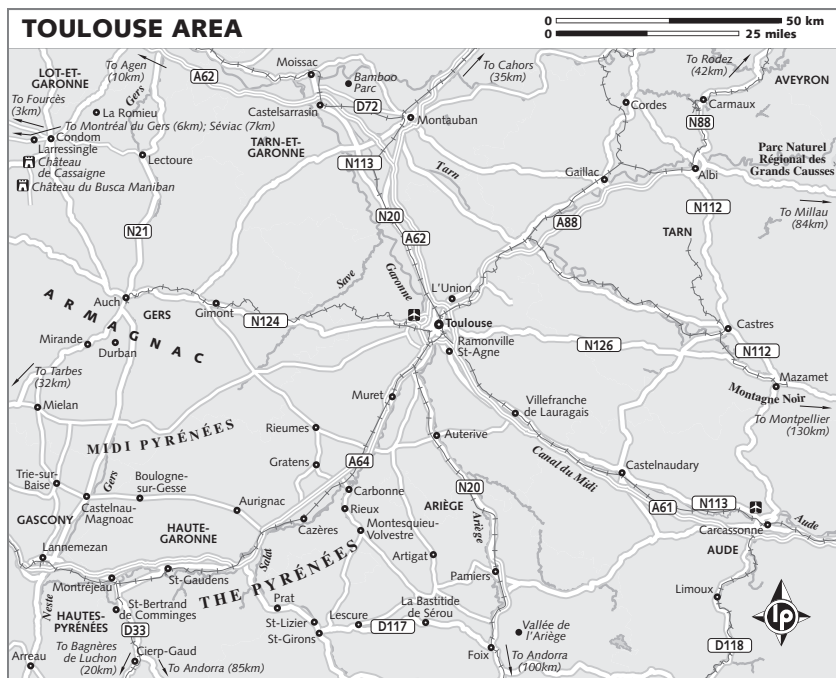
HIGHLIGHTS

- 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