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**The Great Southwest:
Toulouse and Albi**

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The interior of Sainte Cécile cathedral

Astonishing ALBI

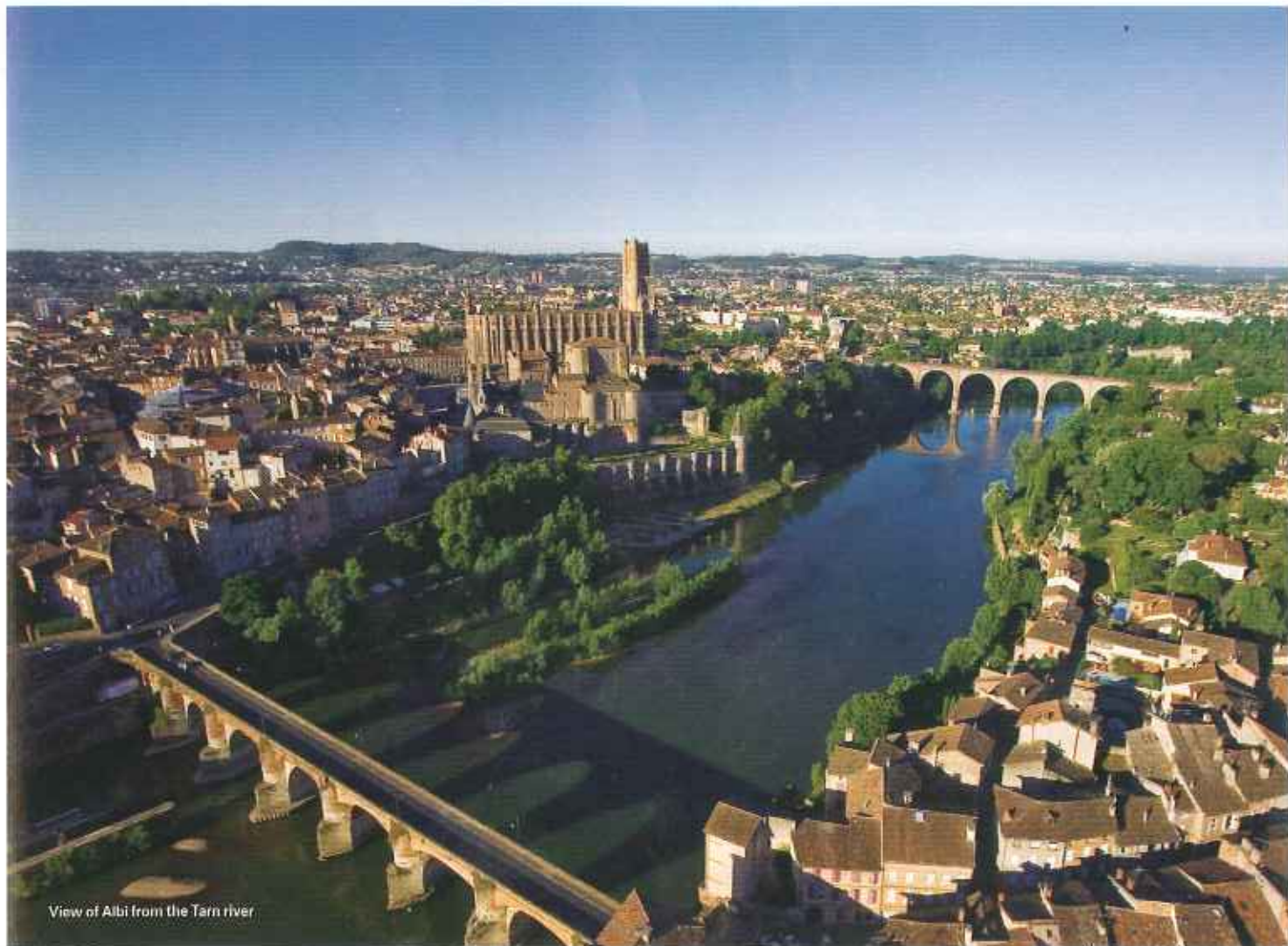


by Abigail King

"Look closely," whispers Jean-Marc Troullier, owner of the Auberge du Pont-Vieux. In the flickering light of the basement, as water splashes into the well below, I reach out and place my fingers in the hollow handprint in the wall. They fit perfectly, snug between the cool, crumbling ridges. A dappled red brick wall arches over our heads, and almost every brick bears the impression of a hand, made by a laborer some 400 years ago.

Bricks and artistry form an integral part of Albi, the pink city on the banks of the River Tarn. Less than an hour's drive

from Toulouse, Albi's outskirts display all the trappings of a successful, modern French town—supermarkets, sports fields and big warehouse-style shops devoted to do-it-yourself *bricolage*. But at its center Albi has a core of solid beauty, of sky-blue shutters and rose-pink mansions, with a massive pink-brick fortress cathedral soaring above beautiful riverside gardens. With its historic center poised to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010, Albi focuses on the future while proudly conserving the splendors of its turbulent past.



View of Albi from the Tarn river



There are various theories about the origin of the city's name—perhaps from the Celtic *alb* or *alp*, meaning a high place, or maybe from the Latin *albus*, white, referring to the surrounding limestone cliffs. But it's certain that the city passed the name along to the Albigensian heresy, and to the Albigensian crusade which raged through southwest France between 1209 and 1229, aimed at wiping out the religious rebels more commonly known in France as the Cathars (from the Greek word for pure).

In fact, the Cathars were spread throughout southern France and other parts of Europe, but Albi became particularly associated with them as the site of several of their councils. The rigorous Catharism arose partly in reaction to the corruption in the Catholic Church at the time—an early attempt at Reformation—but the principal heresy was the belief in dual

powers of good and evil: The force of good was the creator of all things spiritual; and evil, or Satan, was the creator of the material world. Not only were their beliefs contradictory to Catholic doctrine, but their spreading influence was undermining the authority of the Church.

Pope Innocent III launched the campaign against the Cathars, and years of massacres followed, spearheaded by Simon de Montfort. Albi's shifting alliances spared it from the worst of the violence, but by the time the slaughter ended, with the siege of the mountaintop castle of Montségur in 1244, the formerly independent region had become annexed to France and the Catholic clergy was back in power. Albi's subsequent bishops initiated the construction of the city's most prominent landmarks, the Sainte Cécile Cathedral and the Palais de la Berbie, the

episcopal residence.

Often compared to a fortress—with its space-rocket towers, flat roof and monumental austerity—the 13th/15th-century cathedral was meant to symbolize the strength of the victorious Church. In startling contrast, the ornate and lacy Gothic baldaquin porch carved in white stone softens the intimidating impression and provides the transition from the colossal facade to the polychrome majesty of the interior.

Inside, Renaissance frescoes radiate in midnight blue and gold from every surface of the vault. Created by Italian artists in the early 1500s, their restored geometric patterns make the walls seem almost to dance in dizzying array. Behind the altar, a splendidly gruesome depiction of the Last Judgment covers an entire 2,000-square-foot wall, illustrating the demons and tortures that await the damned in



hell. In another elegant contrast, a flamboyant white Gothic roodscreen, a fantasia of carved limestone, surrounds the choir.

Overlooking the Tarn, the Palais de la Berbie, with its witch-hat turrets and slate roofs, was designed to protect the bishops in the immediate aftermath of the Albigensian crusade—the walls of the fortified palace are 23 feet thick, and there's an escape route via the river. A visit today holds two delightful surprises. The first is the formal French garden in the courtyard, with its swirling, manicured curls designed by Versailles gardener André Le Nôtre in the 17th century. The second is the realization that where leaders of the Inquisition once slept, cancan dancers and *cocottes* now frolic, in the works of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi's most famous native son, a direct descendant of the feudal counts of Toulouse.

Since 1922, the palace has housed the

world's largest collection of the artist's work. Experts disagree on how he fractured both legs in childhood, why they failed to heal properly and whether his death at 36 resulted from a psychiatric illness, absinthe, syphilis or all three. But the museum offers a comprehensive vision of the world in which he lived—cabarets, brothels, racetracks, the circus, the cafés of Montmartre. The collection also includes incisive sketched self-portraits and the renowned series of lithographic posters that immortalized the stars of the Moulin Rouge.

From the cathedral, Rue de la Croix Blanche leads into the medieval neighborhood of Castelnaud, with half-timbered brick houses crowded along its medieval streets. A painted snail swings above La Forgeronnette, where Lionel Dousset opens the door and welcomes me into his aunt Martine Moulet's blacksmith shop. The family business still

keeps its furnace blazing to fashion wrought iron furniture, keys and ornaments. At the next intersection, summer-blue scarves flutter outside L'Artisan Pastellier, a boutique whose wares bear witness to the product that changed Albi's fortunes: woad.

Until explorers discovered indigo in India at the end of the 16th century, *pastel*—the woad plant—was the only blue dye known in Europe. To produce the dye, woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) was crushed into small balls or *cocagnes*. *Pastel* earned the region around Toulouse and Albi enormous riches, and the nickname *pays de cocagne*—a phrase used ever since to indicate an earthly paradise of wealth and ease.

"Cushions and cosmetics are the most popular," says Cathy Jacob as she tends to L'Artisan Pastellier's rows of lavender-blue blouses and aprons. "But a lot of artists also

still insist on using real *pastel*."

At the Pâtisserie Jean-Paul Galy, another artist is at work. "He's been baking since five this morning," observes his wife, as she deftly wraps some *spécialités albigeoises*, "and in the afternoon he makes chocolates." Her parcel contains *navettes*—diamond-shaped scones with dried fruit and vanilla—and donut-shaped *gimblettes*, with a hint of lemon. Their sweetness provides a counterweight to Albi's more savory specialties, among them radishes with salted liver and tripe with saffron.

From the busy Rue Sainte Cécile, a gate marks the passageway to the oasis of the Saint Salvi church and cloisters. Built in stages between the 11th and 15th centuries, the church is a curious amalgam of Romanesque and Gothic styles. After the ravages of the French Revolution, only the delicate southern gallery of the cloister remains, surprisingly made of stone rather than brick. The church takes its name from one of the city's first bishops who freed residents from slavery in the 6th century.

Another of Albi's prominent sons was Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse, the baby-faced admiral and scientific explorer. In Square Botany Bay, named after the explorer's last port of call in Australia before his



Sainte Cécile cathedral

expeditionary ship sank in the New Hebrides in 1788, the Musée Lapérouse displays glittering swords, yellowed maps and naval uniforms that chart the maritime hero's voyages and the history of 18th-century Pacific navigation.

Next door, the art center Le LAIT showcases local contemporary art. Its spacious brick building blends into the modern



La Maison du Vieil Alby

Mercurie hotel, whose bar-side balcony provides an impressive view of the city.

On Sunday mornings, everything is still, except for the *boulangeries* and the covered market at Rue Emile Grand. Pigeons bask between shadows and old men in berets carry their fresh baguettes through the rustic streets of Castelviel. Tucked behind the grand cathedral, this peach-walled neighborhood is Albi's oldest district. It overlooks the river's three main bridges: the railway bridge to the west, the Pont Neuf (or Pont du 22 Août 1944) to the east, and in the center the Pont Vieux. For almost a thousand years, the Pont Vieux has carried passengers across the Tarn, first by foot, then horse-and-cart and now by car. The bridge, of course, is made of brick. But at this hour, Albi is no longer blood red or rosy pink—it glows a deep pomegranate orange in the early morning light. ■

ALBI NOTEBOOK

HOTELS

Hôtel Mercure Albi Bastides 41 rue Porta, 05.63.47.66.66. Riverside view. www.accorhotels.com

Inter Hôtel Le Cantepau 9 rue Cantepau, 05.63.60.75.80. A simple, clean hotel with free parking. www.hotelcantepau.fr

Hôtel La Réserve Route de Cordes, 05.63.60.80.80. In the countryside surrounding Albi. www.relaischateaux.com/reservealbi

RESTAURANTS

La Tartine 17 pl de l'Archevêché, 05.63.54.50.60.

Auberge du Pont-Vieux 98 rue Porta, 05.63.77.61.73.

Le Lautrec 13-15 rue Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 05.63.54.86.55.

SHOPS AND MUSEUMS

La Forge du Vieil Alby 9 rue de la Croix Blanche, 06.06.47.60.45

L'Artisan Pastellier 5 rue Puech Bérenguier, 05.63.38.59.18.

Pâtisserie Jean-Paul Galy 7 rue de Saunal, 05.63.54.13.37.

Musée Toulouse-Lautrec Palais de la Berbie, Place Sainte-Cécile, 05.63.49.48.70.

Musée Lapérouse Square Botany Bay, 05.63.46.01.87.

Centre d'Art Le LAIT 41 rue Porta, 05.63.38.35.91.

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