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Le Carnet de France: Albi — the pink city

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When approaching most French towns or villages by road or rail, the first site for visitors is usually the church steeple. Entering the city of Albi in the southwest of France, tourists are met with a large red structure on top of a hill, which looks like a medieval fortress, but this is no castle — it is the Sainte-Cécile Cathedral which took more than 100 years to build between 1282 and 1392. Like many cathedrals, it is situated on an east-west axis with the main altar at the east end. However, the main entrance is on the south side (not on the west end, as is the case with other cathedrals) adorned by a canopy added in the 16th century. The layout of the building is not like a Latin cross; it lacks a transept. The contrast in the architecture of the Cathedral is unique: the main building is constructed in the local austere style, whereas the main entrance with its Gothic flamboyant style is more in line with northern Gothic cathedrals.

The structure gets its red hue from the more than 20 million red bricks used in its construction, making it the largest brick cathedral in the world. In this region (*l'Occitanie* — Occitania), red bricks were easy and relatively cheap to produce which is why many facades of houses are also made of brick. Albi and Toulouse (50 miles away) are often called *Les villes roses* (the pink cities).

Entering the cathedral leaves visitors in awe: the long nave measures more than 100 yards, separated in the middle by an ornate roodscreen. On the eastern side is the chancel, an entrance that only clergy members were permitted to use in the old days. It is richly decorated with magnificent wooden sculptures of kings, prophets and biblical figures. The main altar is at the east end of the cathedral, but there is another a major altar on the western side of the roodscreen in the nave. Here, worshipers face westward toward the altar and admire the largest painting ever made by Italian artists in France during the Renaissance (15th century). It depicts the Last Judgment and has been so well protected that to this day it has never required restoration. The walls and ceiling of the cathedral are adorned with breathtakingly colorful frescoes of biblical scenes which also have never required restoration.

As many readers are aware, Sainte Cécile is the patroness of musicians and some of her relics were brought to Albi as early as the 12th century. The organ was built by Christophe Mouchereau in 1734 and is regarded as the largest classical pipe organ in France — truly a concert not to be missed.

Not far from the cathedral is the Maison Bosc, where the artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born in 1864. Toulouse-Lautrec started out drawing and painting family portraits and horses that he cherished but ultimately decided to move to Paris, where he surrounded himself with artists and show businesspersons. His lithographs and posters of La Goulue (a French Can-Can dancer from the Moulin Rouge) are well-known. When he died in 1901, his mother did not want his works to be split up,



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Albi, the Tarn River and the old bridge (Vieux-Pont).

and she donated his collection to the city of Albi.

The Musée Toulouse-Lautrec is housed in the Palais de la Berbie; the former episcopal palace exhibits more than 1,000 pieces of the collection on the lower floor; on the upper floor works by Toulouse-Lautrec's contemporaries such as Gauguin, Matisse, Marquet and Dufy are displayed.

The Tarn River flows at the bottom of the hill where the cathedral stands. To reach the other bank of the river, visitors may walk or drive over one of the oldest bridges in France, Le Pont-vieux (the old bridge), built in 1040 on stone arches. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, 11 half-timber-framed houses were built on the arches of the bridge where the families of the artisans' lived; these houses were destroyed in 1766 due to a terrible flood.

Jean-François Galaup, Comte de Lapérouse was another well-known Albigeois (as the inhabitants of Albi are called). The famous navigator was born into an aristocratic family in 1741 and joined the navy at the tender age of 15, setting sail for the French colony of Saint Domingue (the western part of the island of Hispaniola, in modern day Haiti) in 1771 aboard the schooner *La Belle Poule*. During the American Revolution in 1778, Lapérouse was given command of the frigate *L'Amazone* positioned off the coast of Charleston to monitor local activity. In 1785, King Louis XIV appointed Lapérouse to explore the Pacific accompanied by leading astronomers and scientists. However, in 1788 his ship disappeared off the coast of Australia near Vanikoro. The circumstances of his death remain a mystery.

A statue was erected on the Place Lapérouse in Albi in his memory and the Musée Lapérouse on the Square Botany-Bay where models of boats, weapons, uniforms, maps, historical documents and many archeological discoveries are on display is dedicated to him as well. As some readers may recall, *La Belle Poule* and another schooner *L'Étoile*

were anchored in the Charleston Harbor in June of 2009 and Charlestonians were invited to go aboard.

Lapérouse was not the only Albigeois to serve in the American War of Independence — the Marquis Henri de Paschal de Rochegude, born in 1741 (the same year as Lapérouse) came from an aristocratic family as well and joined the navy in 1757, eventually becoming a member of the French Royal Naval Academy tasked with patrolling the Atlantic coast in 1776.

Rochegude was also a literary man and following his retirement from the navy in 1793 at the end of the French Revolution, he decided to devote his life to his passion, *La langue et la littérature occitane* (Occitan language and literature). For the rest of his life, he lived in his *hôtel particulier* (private mansion) in Albi, where he wrote and compiled approximately 20,000 books.

After his death in 1834 at the age of 93, he bequeathed his mansion along with its magnificent parc and book collection to the city of Albi. The site was used as the city library until 2001 and has since served as a center for art exhibitions.

In 2010, the Episcopal City of Albi was classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO — a well-deserved tribute. It is well worth a visit — the best hotel is located near the Musée Lapérouse and next to the other bridge Le Pont-Neuf (the new bridge) built in 1867. The Hôtel occupies the site of an old pasta factory and provides guests with a magnificent view of the Tarn River and the Cathedral Sainte-Cécile.

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