

Midi-Pyrénées

Overview

The Midi-Pyrénées is huge – it's the largest French region by area, and comprises eight departments offering visitors a vast array of sights, sounds and tastes to explore: Lot, Aveyron, Tarn-et-Garonne, Tarn, Gers, Haute-Garonne, Hautes-Pyrénées and Ariège. Extending from the Gascony hills in the east up to the Lot Valley, and taking in the Tarn and Aveyron gorges and Pyrenean foothills, it's a region packed with historical towns and pretty bastide villages, wonderful countryside perfect for pursuits of both the leisurely and action-packed kind and everything to stimulate the senses from architecture to Armagnac and Toulouse-Lautrec to the Knights Templar.

Main cities and towns

Toulouse, known as the Pink City due to its brightly-hued brickwork, is the vibrant regional capital with more than its fair share of churches, museums, galleries, shops and restaurants, all of which make it a perfect short break destination or base for exploring the wider region. With over 100,000 students, the bar scene is buzzing to say the least, even more so when the town's famous "rugbymen" are in action. Other large towns worthy of a visit include pretty Albi astride the Tarn, hilltop Auch, provincial charmer Rodez, Cahors (former capital of Quercy), Montauban with its beautiful arcade-framed Place Nationale, Foix in Ariège and Tarbes – the ideal location from which to make a pilgrimage, religious or otherwise, to Lourdes.

Places to visit

Of all the architectural must-sees, Albi's vast, ship-like cathedral Sainte-Cécile stands out. Marvel at its superstructure and beauty before heading inside to admire the affecting Last Judgement mural. Next-door is the Palais de la Berbie, home of the newly refurbished Toulouse-Lautrec museum. The diminutive, absinthe-addled brush-stroker was an Albi native and the exhibition does him proud. For striking modern design, head to the awesome Millau viaduct near the town of the same name, and while you're there, duck into the Roquefort caves for a whiff of the celebrated cheese's production process. Elsewhere, of the countless stunning villages to take in, make cloud-touching Cordes-sur-Ciel and cliff-hanging Rocamadour priority viewings. The Romanesque sculpture at Moissac's church cloister, meanwhile, is something that historians won't want to miss, while jazz fans should head to Marciac for the summer festival.

Things to do and see

Midi-Pyrénées is just the ticket for a holiday en plein air, so head to the huge swathes of lush countryside to make the most of nature's blessings. Roads and pathways lend themselves to hiking and horse riding – perhaps taking the well-trodden route of Santiago of Compostela appeals (keep an eye out for the shell motif to trace his path). Or don your lifejacket and paddle your way along one of the region's many stunning waterways, be it a gentle canoe trip down the Lot or a hold-tight, white-water rafting afternoon in a cool Pyrenean river. With more than 150 natural sites, there are many options for climbing and caving, while golf and fishing provide a more sedate means of communing with what is quintessentially rural France.

Food and drink

Such is the huge array of renowned local produce and speciality dishes in the Midi-Pyrénées, that several visits might be required to tick everything from the menu. The Gers region (aka Gascony) brings some real treats to the table – geese and duck in every guise from magret to foie gras, and the much-vaunted black gold truffle, sniffed out by trained pigs and shaved into dishes for a luxurious, heady twist. Toulouse is the place to sample the much-debated classic cassoulet, while Roquefort, Bleu des Causses and Rocamadour vie for your knife's attention on the cheese board. Top regional tipples include increasingly well-regarded wines from Cahors, Montbazillac and Gaillac and the delicious Gascon eau-de-vie, Armagnac.

Family attractions

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to work out that the Cité de l'Espace, a high-tech amusement park on the outskirts of Toulouse, offers prime children's entertainment. Head for the 55-metre space rocket and then explore loads of stimulating exhibits based around space exploration. Meanwhile, to the west of the city lies the Airbus factory, itself well worth a guided tour with kids in tow. Other family friendly sites include Micropolis, City of Insects in Aveyron, the Prehistory Park in Ariège and the Forges of Pyrène in Montgaillard, where youngsters can learn about artisan tools and trades of yesteryear.