



## Medieval Toulouse & Languedoc

Art & architecture in south-west France

8–14 May 2025 (ML 703)

£2,820 • 7 days

Speaker: John McNeill

Wide-ranging tour which includes all the medieval building arts – architecture, sculpture, painting, stained glass, woodwork and precious metals.

Stay in one hotel in the centre of Toulouse.

Led by medieval architectural historian, John McNeill.

The area is topographically heterogeneous, encompassing the arid limestone hills of the Minervois, the rolling vineyards of Quercy, and the broad and fertile Garonne valley. This varied landscape was never fashioned into a distinct political entity in the course of the middle ages; indeed it was not until the thirteenth century that French royal authority was exercised with any success in Toulouse and Languedoc, and even then the middle Garonne valley sustained a culture at some remove from that of the sparsely populated upland counties around Cahors.

The tour will principally concern itself with the medieval art and architecture of this wider region, though as Toulouse was a substantial Roman city, that antiquity is evident in the Romanesque architecture and sculpture of Languedoc, and we shall seek out what survives of Late Antique Toulouse. It is, however, the medieval culture which predominates and with Romanesque churches of the quality of Saint-Sernin at Toulouse and Cahors, monasteries of the calibre of Moissac, the sculpture of Saint-Lizier and Monastiers, the late Gothic churches of Carcassonne and Albi, the area does not want for masterpieces. Several of these monuments are of outstanding importance – the cloister at Moissac, for instance, encompasses the most varied and complex set of images ever to have adorned a monastic cloister. But equally impressive is the landscape through which we pass – the limestone cliffs and tumbling watercourses of the valleys of the Tarn and Lot, the lush orchards and vineyards to the east of Toulouse and, above all at this time of year, the early moorland flowers of the hills.



Toulouse Cathedral interior from *Etchings on the Loire*

### Itinerary

**Day 1: Toulouse.** Fly at c. 2.00pm (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Toulouse. Coach transfer to the hotel in Toulouse, arriving in good time for dinner.

**Day 2: Toulouse.** A day devoted to Toulouse, starting with Saint-Sernin, one of the principal monuments of Romanesque architecture in Europe, boasting two significant sculpted portals and acting as a major pilgrimage church in its own right as well as a stage on the road to Santiago de Compostela. Then to the Musée Saint-Raymond, housed in a former medieval hospital and home to much the best collection of Roman sculpture in south-western France. Afternoon walking tour of Toulouse, taking in the Capitole, Musée du Vieux Toulouse and river quays.

**Day 3: Albi, Lescure d'Albigeois, Monastiers.** Famed for the warmth of its brick and the drama of its situation above the river Tarn, Albi is one of the outstanding towns of southern France. Visit the cathedral, a quite stupendous Gothic aisleless church, its huge vaults forming a crown 100 feet above the pavement. The afternoon will take us north, initially to Lescure d'Albigeois, home to a superb late

11th-century monastic church, and eventually to Monestiers, whose tiny chapel of St-Jacques houses one of the greatest sculptural cycles of Christ's Passion from the late Middle Ages.

**Day 4: Moissac, Cahors.** Morning spent within that marvellous assemblage of cloister, tower and church which is most of what now survives of the Benedictine abbey of Moissac. Most astonishingly the capitals of the cloister – the earliest historiated cloister to survive in Romanesque Europe – have come down to us complete. The afternoon will then unfold in Cahors, cathedral to the fore, where we shall meet the one southern French Romanesque form we have not hitherto encountered – the aisleless domed church – and in a building which is arguably the most majestic of them all.

**Day 5: Toulouse.** A leisurely day in Toulouse, starting with the cathedral – its bizarre juxtaposition of an aisleless early 13th-century nave and unfinished later Gothic choir creating a memorable if disturbing silhouette. Then on to the Jacobins, a Dominican church built between 1244 and 1292 hard up against the former 'Saracen wall'. The Jacobins is understandably regarded as one of the most architecturally accomplished mendicant churches in Europe, its reputation secured by

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its combination of slender columnar supports, low lateral chapels and an apse vault akin to half the Westminster chapter house. The afternoon is free for independent exploration.

**Day 6: Carcassonne, Rieux-Minervois.**

Carcassonne is a major medieval walled city, famously restored by Viollet-le-Duc and glorying in a remarkable network of intra-mural passages in addition to the castle and cathedral of St-Nazaire. This last is amongst the most significant churches of Mediterranean France – a curious amalgam of 11th-century nave and 13th-century presbytery, its eastern parts having been described as ‘the first and last stylistically pure Parisian Rayonnant work in the south’. Continue in the afternoon to Notre-Dame at Rieux-Minervois, a real virtuoso piece, whose seven-sided nave incorporates sculpture from the circle of the Cabestany Master.

**Day 7: St-Lizier, St-Girons.** Visit the spectacularly sited early Romanesque painted church of Saint-Lizier in the foothills of the Pyrenees, complete with an exquisite cloister. Break for lunch in nearby Saint-Girons, before driving up to Toulouse Blagnac airport. The return flight to London Heathrow arrives at c. 7.00pm.

## Practicalities

**Price. Two sharing:** £2,820 or £2,660 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,230 or £3,070 without flights.

**Included:** Flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 320), travel by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts and 4 dinners with wine or beer, soft drinks, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

**Accommodation. Grand Hotel de l’Opéra, Toulouse** ([grand-hotel-opera.com](http://grand-hotel-opera.com)) a central 4-star hotel in a converted 17th-century convent, set back from the Place du Capitole. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

**How strenuous?** Quite a lot of walking and standing around is involved, particularly in the town centres, sometimes on rough or cobbled terrain. The tour is not suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking and stairclimbing. There are some long days and coach journeys.

**Group size:** between 10 and 24 participants.