

## France's 'Southern Paris'

[by Sharon Whitley Larsen]

MONTPELLIER, France - "We may not have the Seine, but we have the Mediterranean," exclaimed Danielle Christol, my tour guide, as we stood on a vantage point overlooking this delightful city in southern France, midway between Spain and Italy and only a few miles from the sea.



I had just told her that this charming, historic university town reminded me of a smaller version of Paris, one of my favorite cities. It may not have an

Eiffel Tower, but it has an Arc de Triomphe. Located at the main entrance to the city, this arc was built at the end of the 17th century to honor Louis XIV. Montpellier's Antigone area has a replica of the Paris Louvre Museum's "Winged Victory of Samothrace," and its imposing 19th century opera house, on the popular Place de la Comedie, reminded me of the neobaroque Garnier Opera House in the City of Light.

This was my second visit to this 1,000-year-old city, the capital of Languedoc-Rousillon, the largest wine-producing region in the world, with 300 days of sunshine per year - ideal not only for harvesting grapes but for outdoor sports: swimming, golfing, sailing, biking, strolling, tennis.

With a quarter of the 250,000 residents comprised of university students, the ambience is full of youthful energy, with sidewalk cafes dotting the cobblestone plazas and medieval passageways. This is the town where renowned 16th century physicians Nostradamus and Francois Rabelais studied, worked and hung out.

Today, as France's eighth-largest city, Montpellier continues to thrive as an important law, medical and high-tech research center, a cultural and economic melting pot boasting universities, museums, theaters, libraries, art galleries, a marina, fountains, botanical gardens, dance festivals and musical venues, including symphony and opera. And exquisite shops and boutiques.



"Shopping in the medieval, narrow streets is a must," Caroline Berland of the tourism office told me.

My favorite area is the historic town center's Place de la Comedie, a large pedestrian area that's great fun to walk around or sit at an outdoor cafe, listening to street musicians and just people watching. It's easy to get around here, too, by walking, bicycling or hopping on and off the modern tram system, which opened in July 2000 and carries some 100,000 passengers a day.

Founded in the eighth century, by the 10th century Montpellier, due to its great Mediterranean location, had become a regional trading center hub for those from North Africa, Spain and Italy, mostly for fabric, jewels and spices. Sold to France in 1349, Montpellier endured the tragedy of the Great Plague and the effects of the Hundred Years' War,

became a Protestant stronghold during the Reformation's influence in the region, and by the 19th century was an industrial center.

Today, Montpellier offers stunning architecture, from 17th century mansions with wrought-iron balconies to the neoclassical Antigone area, developed over the past 25 years by Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill. This area includes an Olympic pool and Central Municipal Library. The Odysseum, a 10-minute tram ride from the center of town, encompasses a multiplex cinema, France's first mixed-use ice skating rink, Europe's first immersion planetarium with 3-D digital video technology and an aquarium.



During my stay in Montpellier, I visited the Mikve, a Jewish ritual bath from the late 12th century, housed in the basement of a private mansion at 2 Rue de la Baralerie, and one of the best preserved in Europe. Both the Jewish and Arab

communities had a strong role in this area's successful development.

This pedestrian-friendly town has numerous popular landmarks, including the twin-towered St. Pierre Cathedral, originally built in 1364 and redone in the 17th century. Its adjacent former monastery has been the site of a medical school and library since 1795.



I also decided to visit the peaceful Chateau de Flaugergues winery and gardens just a few miles outside of town. Constructed in 1696 for an aristocratic family, its mansion - which has not undergone any significant architectural change since the mid-1700s - has been passed down 10 generations. Since 1972, it's been home to the Henri de Colbert family and, since 1981, it has been open to tours. In fact, some 30,000 people visit each year, enjoying a wine tasting with the award-winning wines, walking the gorgeous French and English botanical gardens and seeing the chateau's 17th century Flemish tapestries, 18th century furniture and porcelain, and a spectacular, tri-level staircase with wrought-iron banister.

"This is linked with history and our culture," said Pierre de Colbert, Henri's son, as he showed me around the house where he was born and raised. "We are a family here and we want to keep the history alive. This is typical of Mediterranean culture and 18th century way of life."

As Berland of the tourism office summed up the region's theme of "art de vivre" (art of living): "Montpellier is life - not just a city where you can see things, but where you can live things, to really feel the city."

And, although it's more than 1,000 years old, she sums up the area's vitality: "It's a very young city!"

#### IF YOU GO

You can drive or fly here from Paris - the airport is eight miles from town, and it's just over an hour flight - but I took the TGV high-speed train, about a four-hour ride. There's a train station conveniently connected to the Charles de Gaulle airport.

It's also convenient to take the train to nearby Carcassonne, Beziers and Nimes. For more information visit [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com)

or call (888) 382-RAIL.

Chateau de Flaugergues, 1744 Ave. Albert Einstein. For more information visit [www.flaugergues.com](http://www.flaugergues.com). E-mail: [colbert@flaugergues.com](mailto:colbert@flaugergues.com).

Besides sampling the great wines of this region, I also dined in some of Montpellier's fine restaurants, including Maison de la Lozere. A favorite of locals, it was a real treat, with such dishes as foie gras, sea bass and rabbit. Located at 27 Rue de l'Aiguillerie. For more information visit [www.celliermorel.com](http://www.celliermorel.com) (Web site is in French).

For information on the City Pass or guided tours in English, visit the Montpellier Tourism Office's Web site at [www.ot-montpellier.fr](http://www.ot-montpellier.fr). Click on "International Area" then on English version. E-mail [contact@ot-montpellier.fr](mailto:contact@ot-montpellier.fr). For more information visit [www.sunfrance.com](http://www.sunfrance.com) and [www.franceguide.com](http://www.franceguide.com). Sharon Whitley Larsen is a freelance travel writer.

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