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Train Journeys**



USA by locals Latvia **Bermuda** Occitanie **El Salvador** Malaysia sleeps **Alberta** Puglia

Contributors



Poonam Binayak
Shekhawati, p258

"My mum is from Churu, in Shekhawati, so I thought I had a sense of this region. What I hadn't realised was how many painted havelis (mansions) there are. I was particularly captivated by the galleries of the Dr Ramnath Podar Haveli, which bring together Rajasthan's art, history and royal culture."



Richard Collett
Iraqi Kurdistan, p104

"Kurds say that they have 'no friends but the mountains', but when I walked Iraqi Kurdistan's first multi-day hiking route, the depth of hospitality surprised me. The Zagros Mountain Trail (215km) reveals the resilience of the Kurdish people, connecting hikers with homestays and enthusiastic local guides. And it might just make this region the next big adventure travel destination."



Kate Humble
Puglia, p64

"After a 20-year cycling-trip hiatus, I set out to rediscover the pleasures of exploring a new place on a bike. To truly embrace slow travel, I began my journey to the south of Italy by taking the train from Wales to Lecce. Was I worried my legs wouldn't be up to multiple days in the saddle? Yes! Were these worries overridden by the thought of eating as much gelato as I liked? Absolutely!"



James Logan
Health, p75

"I've always been fascinated by how tiny creatures shape our world – especially insects. And when you think of how many insects there are on the planet, it blows your mind. They are quietly supporting ecosystems, but with changing climates, our encounters with them are growing, bringing new health challenges for travellers. For book lovers, it's a delight!"



Jo Jukes
New Forest, p266

"Few realise that Hampshire's New Forest holds an enchanting literary legacy. Alice Liddell, the real-life muse for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, made her home near the village of Lyndhurst; Arthur Conan Doyle wove the forest's mystery into his tales; and Jane Austen is said to have sailed the Beaulieu River. For book lovers, it's a delight!"



Emerson Mendoza Ayala

Southern France, p92

"My fondest memories of Occitanie are set against the backdrop of the bucolic Cévennes National Park, the snow-capped peaks of the Pyrenees and the everlasting Mediterranean. However, during my idyllic journey tracing France's Canal du Midi by rail, I deepened my knowledge of the region's history further and found myself immersed in awe-inspiring landscapes that now brimmed with untold stories."

Diversity in travel writing matters

Since 2020, *Wanderlust* has committed to working on commissioning at least 20% of its content from travel writers from underrepresented backgrounds and historically underrepresented groups. These include members of Indigenous communities, people of colour, LGBTQIA+ activists, people with health conditions or impairments, and people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. We want everyone to share their passion for travel with our readers!



SUSTAINABILITY *Wanderlust* is printed on paper from sustainable forestry and produced using suppliers who conform to ISO14001, an industrial environmental standard that ensures commitment to low carbon emissions and environmentally sensitive waste management. The paper can be widely recycled.

Who is the *Wanderlust* traveller?

We've often met you at events and shows, but through our Reader Survey, we set out to understand what we all share in common. Meet the typical *Wanderlust* traveller...

Well-informed

Wanderlust travellers love to research their journeys. They book their trips with expert tour operators and explore with knowledgeable local guides.

Aventurous

Wanderlust travellers are curious about the world and always seek out the road less travelled. They delve beneath the surface of a destination to find authentic experiences all year round.

Nature-loving

Wanderlust travellers relish the feeling of being in the natural world. They delight in exploring the outdoors and encountering wildlife where it belongs: in the wild!

Discerning

Wanderlust travellers seek out meaningful culture, art, music and gastronomic experiences to better immerse themselves in the destinations they visit.

Eclectic

Wanderlust travellers have a wide range of interests and will explore every angle of a destination. From hiking and rail adventures to luxury stays and expedition cruises, each journey is always different.

Respectful

Wanderlust travellers care about their impact on people and the planet. They cherish local customs, traditions and values, including those of Indigenous communities. They always opt for ethical wildlife experiences.

Locally focused

Wanderlust travellers actively support local communities and businesses. They seek out accommodation, restaurants and shopping experiences with a clear sense of place, and they forge lasting connections with the locals they meet.

Unbiased

Wanderlust travellers are open-minded and receptive. They are keen to form their own opinions about a destination and are willing to challenge preconceptions and prejudices.

Sustainable

Wanderlust travellers aspire to travel sustainably. They are conscious of their carbon footprint as well as their impact on local communities and the planet. They want their journey to be a force for good.

Trailblazing

Wanderlust travellers are pioneers in exploring emerging destinations and are always open to new experiences. They embrace off-season travel, take longer trips and go beyond the usual tourist hotspots.

Wanderlust Get in touch

LONDON OFFICE

Capital House, 25 Chapel St,
Marylebone, London NW1 5DH

Subscriptions +44 (0)1371 853641,
subs@wanderlustmagazine.com

Advertising +44 (0)20 4583 5486,
sales@wanderlustmagazine.com

General Enquiries:

UK: +44 (0)20 8185 0958
USA: +1 64 6844 8718
info@wanderlustmagazine.com

EDITORIAL CONTENT

Editor-in-Chief George Kipouros
@georgiostravels

Founding Editor Lyn Hughes
@wanderlust.lyn

Associate Editor Gareth Clark

Senior Digital Editor Dianne Apen-Sadler
@diannedeewrites

North America Editor Jacqui Agate
@jacquiatigare

Special Features Managing Editor
Rosie Fitzgerald

Regional Editor Laura Field

Editorial Projects Manager Tom Bennedik

Contributing Editors
Kate Humble, Bettany Hughes,
Shyala Martin, Sophie Morgan,
Alice Morrison, Sherry L Rupert & Mark Stratton

Assisted by
Lisa Duke (design); Yvonne Gordon (editorial)

DESIGN
Art Director Graham Berridge

DIGITAL
Digital Creative Director Todd Padwick

COMMERCIAL PARTNERSHIPS
Chief Commercial Officer
Adam Lloyds
(adam.lloyds@wanderlustmagazine.com)

VP Brand Partnerships David Read
(david.read@wanderlustmagazine.com)

VP Destination Partnerships
James A Smith
(james.smith@wanderlustmagazine.com)

International Partnerships Manager
Jack Brown
(jack.brown@wanderlustmagazine.com)

BUSINESS
Chief Executive George Kipouros
COO & Head of Creative Content
Eliot Wellsteed-Crook

Wanderlust Club Manager Maria Marta

In memory of Co-founder
& Publisher Paul Morrison

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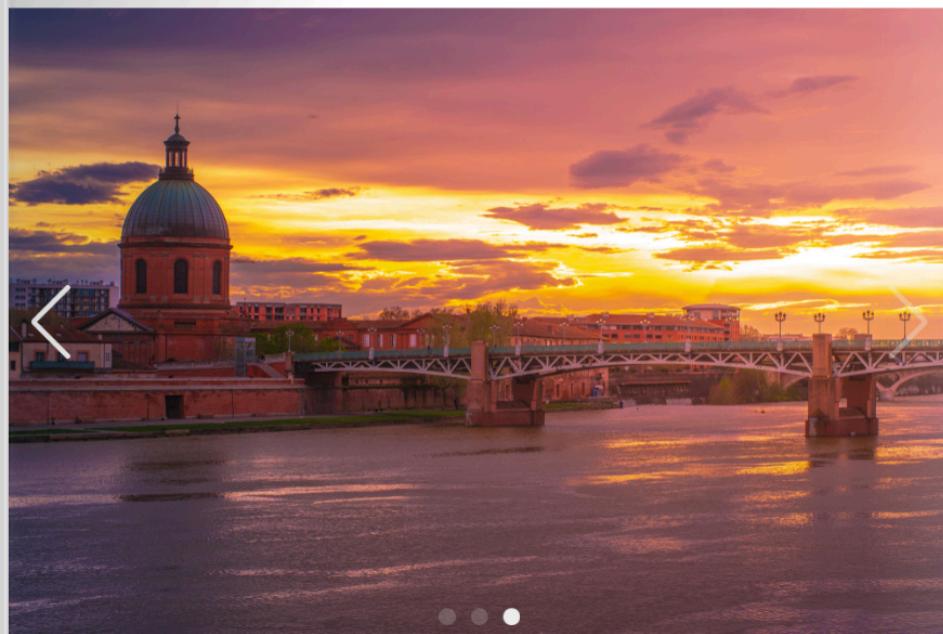




Taking the **SLOW ROUTE**

A slow train journey through southern France shines a light on one of Europe's early engineering masterpieces, the Canal du Midi, and the historic cities that thrived on its waters

Words **Emerson Mendoza Ayala**



With the rush of the Garonne river fading into memory, my train diverted away from the vineyards of Bordeaux and into Occitania, France's second-largest region. Absorbed in my thoughts, which hurtled by like the fields outside the carriage window, I wondered how all this would have looked before the railways arrived, when 120-tonne barges ploughed the canal, drawn by teams of horses on the towpath.

"GARE DE TOULOUSE!" The train's tannoy snapped me out of my reverie. With the metallic echo of the speaker still reverberating in my ears, I quickly stirred from my seat to beat the rush. I had a date with history.

I'd come to Toulouse to find the starting point of the Canal du Midi. This UNESCO-listed waterway revolutionised southern France in the 17th century by linking the Atlantic (via the Garonne) to the Mediterranean. A miracle of engineering, it paved the way for France's Industrial Revolution, as goods and materials became far easier to move. It was also centuries in the making.

The idea of creating a navigable inland corridor to bypass the Iberian Peninsula dates back to the time of Emperor Augustus. But the unevenness of the land made it an impossible task. It wasn't until 1666

that Pierre-Paul Riquet, a salt tax collector in Languedoc, presented to Louis XIV an ingenious proposal overcoming all of these obstacles that it was finally realised.

To solve the issue of the water supply and the steepness of the terrain, Riquet conceived the idea of using the streams and channels that run off the Montagne Noire range. He proposed a revolutionary system of locks, allowing the canal to overcome the 189m difference between sea level and its highest point at Seuil de Nauouze. By the time it

was inaugurated as the Canal Royal de Languedoc in 1681, a matter of months after Riquet's death, it extended 240km.

Fast-forward to the mid-19th century, and the Industrial Revolution saw canals fall out of favour, replaced with faster, more efficient railways. In 1857, a train route from Bordeaux was extended to the canal's terminus at Sète; a year later, the same company behind this took over the waterway's lease and raised the fees, driving users to the new railway. The days of the Canal du Midi seemed numbered, and yet it survived.

On 15 May 1681, the first boats set out on the canal from Toulouse, reaching Sète

ten days later. Today, 70,000 people cruise these waters each year, travelling the same distance in a week. I chose to go by train instead, making the most of my time and money by using the Occitanie RailTour pass.

Toulouse greeted me with a burst of spring sunshine, and I wandered like a flâneur. On the way to the Garonne, I paused at the terraces of the Place Roger Salengro and Place de la Trinité. Although in different areas, their fountains share the trait of being surrounded by grand Neoclassical façades. But I couldn't

stop for long: the river was calling my name.

The course of the Garonne tells a kind of tragic love story: it rises in the lonely Pyrenees, then winds its way, young and free, through the Val d'Aran and across

the south-west of France, via Toulouse and Bordeaux, before meeting and merging with the Dordogne to die entwined in the Atlantic.

On its banks, I watched as Toulousains strolled a promenade dedicated to the post-Impressionist painter (and local) Henri Martin. As I listened attentively to the hard-luck stories of some friends enjoying a beer, it occurred to me that a modern-day version of Martin's *The Banks of the Garonne* would ▶

Photo: iStock/ullstein bild/Contrasto

"A miracle of engineering, the Canal du Midi paved the way for France's Industrial Revolution"



The Pink City (this page, clockwise from top left) Set by the banks of the Garonne, Promenade Henri-Martin pays homage to the local painter whose work can be seen on tours of Toulouse's Town Hall; the Place du Capitole is the heart of the city, dominated by the 128m-long Neoclassical Town Hall; the Place de la Trinité fountain dates back to the 16th century; it might take a week to boat the Canal du Midi from Toulouse to Sète, but it takes just two hours by train; (opposite page) despite its name, the Pont Neuf (New Bridge) is the oldest bridge in Toulouse; (previous spread) vineyards wrap the medieval citadel walls of Carcassonne



Familiar sights (this page: clockwise from top) Toulouse's La Grave Chapel is instantly recognisable for its copper-covered dome; Castelnau-d'Aude is known as the home of the cassoulet, a dish that was said to have originated during a siege in the Hundred Years War, when citizens cooked up what they could in one big pot to nourish the soldiers; the Canal de Brienne links the Garonne to the Canal du Midi; a TGV crosses the River Orb; Toulouse-Matabiau station dates from the early 1900s; (opposite page) Castelnau-d'Aude grew rich on the trade brought by the Canal du Midi, though it wasn't part of the canal's original design



not look so dissimilar to the artist's 1906 original; this is still a city of walkers and dreamers.

I lingered a while to gaze at the reflection of the Pont Neuf on the Garonne and watched as some canoeists crossed its arches, blurring for a few moments the illusion of the seven perfect circles in the water created by the oldest bridge in the city.

Without losing sight of the turquoise dome of La Grave Chapel, I crossed to the other side of the river and walked past the Saint-Pierre lock to the Canal de Brienne. This waterway was inaugurated 95 years after the opening of the Canal du Midi to allow boats to circumvent the dam at Bazacle mill and arrive safely at the Port de l'Embouchure, where the Midi joins the Garonne. It's here that it symbolically connects the Mediterranean with the Atlantic. I had finally reached the start of my journey.

THE ART OF PERSUASION

I set off again by train from Toulouse. Sunflower fields smiled at me from both sides of the tracks, and after trundling through Avignanet-Lauragais, I glimpsed the Canal du Midi again not long after. I gazed with curiosity at where it collects the waters of the Montagne Noire at the Seuil de Naurouze.

My next stop was Castelnau-d'Aude, where I had intended to enter via the 17th-century Pont Vieux, which had opened the way for

boats to the Grand Bassin, the largest body of open water on the Canal du Midi. However, I got a little disoriented and turned up at the Pont Neuf instead, built nearly a century later.

The current swayed the colourful *péniches* (boats) below, anchored on both sides of a beautiful harbour that Riquet had never planned to build. It's said that the consuls of Castelnau-d'Aude worked hard to persuade Louis XIV to authorise the diversion of the Canal du Midi to the town, building a huge port they hoped would become the first stop for boats from Toulouse on their way to Sète.

The city's main thoroughfare, the Course de la République, seemed like a land extension of the canal, so I strolled it to the centre. Castelnau-d'Aude is known as the 'capital of cassoulet', a regional dish dating back to the Middle Ages. This rich blend of lingot beans, salted lard, duck (or goose confit), pork and sausages is a one-pot feast served in a terracotta dish known as a *cassolo*, from which this stew gets its name.

I took a friend's recommendation and made a beeline for Place de Verdun's Le P'tit Moka to try it. A good cassoulet takes its time, and I eagerly waited almost 30 minutes before it arrived at my table, bubbling away, accompanied by a glass of deep-ruby Carcassonne wine. It was deliciously filling.

I continued my exploration at the city's Saint-Roch Locks, a four-chamber

Occitanie by train

The Occitanie Rail Tour pass links the region's towns for less than £10 a day. Here are some unmissable stops...

Montpellier

The MOCCO. Panacée, located in the former Royal College of Medicine, is a fantastic space for emerging artists, and it also offers a taste of Montpellier's spirit: open, creative, cultural and historical. Afterwards, delve into the streets of l'Écusson, the medieval centre, to admire the 19th-century buildings of the Place de la Comédie, then head for the giant lagoon of l'Étang d'Or for sunset.

Nîmes

Among the remains of the Roman colony that still exists in present-day Nîmes are two masterpieces of the ancient world: the Maison Carrée temple and the Arena of Nîmes, a vast amphitheatre that rivals Rome's Colosseum. Learn more at the Musée de la Romanité, then take a bus to Pont du Gard, the world's tallest Roman aqueduct.

Narbonne

The city's location – where two ancient roads meet – made it a key port in Roman times. Wander the historic centre in search of Roman remains hidden in plain sight: underground galleries, the arch of an ancient bridge, a section of the Via Domitia. Later on, stroll the Canal de la Robine, which was linked to the Canal du Midi in the late 18th century.

Aigues-Mortes

Fortified Aigues-Mortes is the medieval gateway town to the marshy Camargue region. Catch the sunset reflection from its towers and ramparts on the waters of the Étang de la Ville, where flamingos preen unabashed in the salt marshes. It is surely one of Occitanie's most striking images.



staircase that allows boats to negotiate a near-10m difference in height. My arrival coincided with the ascent of a péniche.

As the young boatman was mooring at the end of the lock, he asked if this was my first time here. Without giving me time to answer, he added with a smile: "Stay, because the show is about to start!"

The lock system is both simple and ingenious. As soon as the boat was inside the first oval lock and moored, the *éclusier* (operator) opened the gates of the next one, and water gradually filled the chamber and raised the péniche. This continued, one lock after the other, until the boat reached the Grand Bassin de Castelnau-d'Agde.

I said goodbye to the boatman, the crew and the controller and crossed the Pont Saint-Roch. From the Quai de Canelot, I witnessed the reflection of the Old Town in the basin's still waters, like a dark mirage. It was then that I understood what Riquet had envisioned for the Canal du Midi: to confront us with the unparalleled beauty of the region.

A WISH COMES TRUE

Back on the train, the ten-year-old boy sitting across from me asked his father quietly: "Why does Monsieur have such a big backpack?"

Today, I found the area to be teeming with life and colour, as it is every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning, thanks to stalls selling fruit, vegetables and regional produce.

When vineyards began to appear in the window, I knew I would soon be approaching the walls of Carcassonne. Certain cities make me look forward to the day I return; this is one of them. I have idealised its medieval citadel since I was a child, and I was eager to get lost once more in its 'quartiers'.

Of course, if I had navigated the Canal du Midi at the end of the 17th century, I would have arrived instead at the lock of the Fresquel, around 5km from the city. This had been far from ideal. The losses caused by the high costs of transporting goods into town had ground trade to a halt in Carcassonne for most of the 18th century. It would be another 100 years before the town consuls reached an agreement to build a double lock and aqueduct that would finally bring canal-going vessels to the city gates.

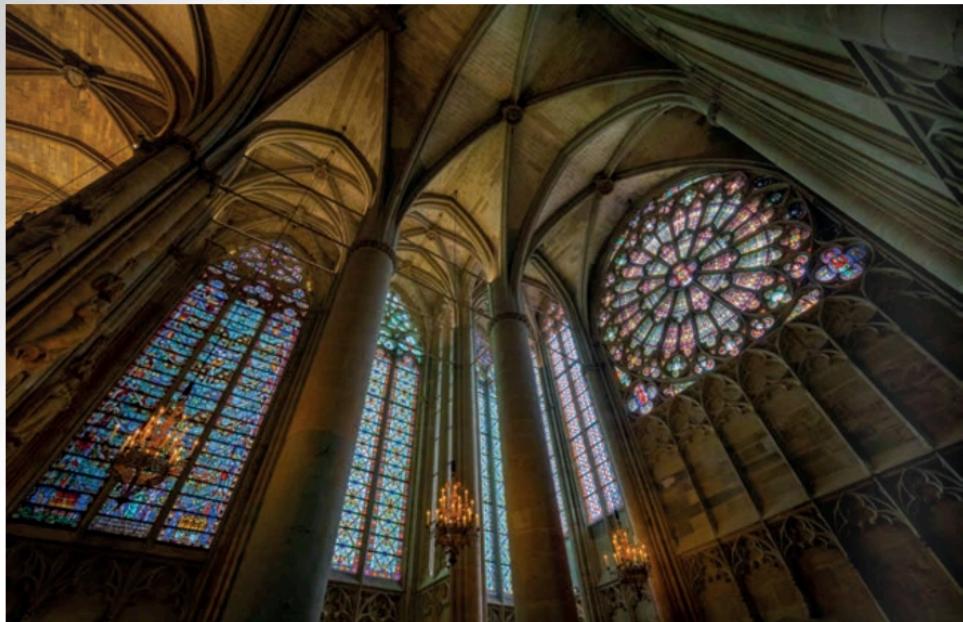
In the afternoon, I crossed the Romanesque Pont Vieux and stopped at the Jardin Emile Aïn to contemplate what I consider to be the city's finest view. Among the most cherished scenes that I retained from a previous journey through Occitanie was the sight of the Acropolis of Béziers and the Pont Vieux framed against the sunset. As I approached this time, many years later, the midday sun did nothing to diminish the scene.

From there, I ambled along the riverbank until I came to the banks of the Canal du

Anne-Marie Mazzoni



Medieval pleasures (this page; clockwise from top left) The Saint-Étienne cathedral in Agde is a gloriously medieval sight, originally built from black basalt lava stone in the ninth century; the Occitanie Rail Tour pass is only available on IIO trains; a boat passes through the lock at the Pont Marengo, a bridge in Carcassonne named after Napoleon Bonaparte's victory in Austria on the Marengo Plain; narrowboats and old-school gin cruisers line the canal in Carcassonne; (opposite page) the Pont Vieux in Béziers was the only way to cross the Orb River on the route from Marseille to Toulouse until deep into the 19th century



Windows to worship (clockwise from top left page) The stained-glass windows of the Saint-Nazaire Basilica date from around the 14th century and are said by many to be the most beautiful in the region, making a grand focal point for this Romanesque and Gothic church; the Onglous Lighthouse signals the end of the Canal du Midi, where its waters bleed into the Étang de Thau, the largest (75 sq km) of a string of lagoons that stretch along the French coast from the Rhône to the tip of the Pyrenees; the Fontaine du Titan by virtuoso local sculptor Jean-Antoine Injalbert stands 17m high amid the gardens of Béziers' Plateau des Poètes

Midi. I then tracked the Quai du Port Notre-Dame to the spectacular hydraulic mechanism that had been conceived by Riquet for his hometown: the Fonseranes Locks.

On completion of the Saint-Roch Locks in Castelnau-d'Orbieu, Riquet realised he needed to double the number of *sas* (lock chambers) to bridge the 25m height difference between the Canal du Midi and the Orb River in Béziers. The works lasted 13 years and were only completed in 1680, the year of Riquet's death.

Fortune was with me, for without having planned it, I'd arrived precisely as a boat was ascending the locks to continue its journey towards the Atlantic.

"They're on their honeymoon," said an enthusiastic onlooker. As the boat climbed the last lock, the gathered crowd cheered and applauded the young couple. When everyone had left, I stayed behind and silently beheld the sunset over the Acropolis and Riquet's masterpiece.

A PERFECT ENDING

The journey between Béziers and Agde lasted three songs – almost as long as it takes to walk from the station to the town's remarkable Écluse Ronde (Round Lock). Its three gates allow boats to access Agde and its seaport or to sail on to Sète and the Mediterranean.

The historic town centre, founded by the Greeks as Agathé Tyché (meaning 'Good Fortune'), was built from volcanic stone. It can be an imposing sight, most notably the 12th-century Saint-Étienne Cathedral, which resembles a rampart fortress.

While the town is known these days for its naturist beaches, the highlight for me was the

Art Nouveau Château Laurens, a magnificently colourful *fin de siècle* villa that channels Oriental, Egyptian and Modernist inspiration.

The next morning, I boarded my last train. As the Canal du Midi bled into the Étang de Thau – part of a string of coastal lagoons – at Les Onglous, the train slowed to pass the strip of land that separates the largest body of water in Occitanie from the Mediterranean. It was my favourite and final stretch of the journey.

To the left of me, flamingos balanced in Thau's shallows. To the right, seagulls flapped alongside the train in the direction of

Sète, a town dubbed 'L'île Singulière' by its most famous son, the poet Paul Valéry, because of its setting – a slip of a peninsula squeezed between a sea and a lagoon.

I reflected on my train journey along the Canal du Midi as I strolled beside the town's Canal Royal to the sea. I thought of Pierre-Paul Riquet, who had died just months before its opening, exhausted and in debt, while overseeing the final section of the route to Sète. He never saw the first boats traverse his masterpiece or the grandeur of the towns that grew rich on the trade that it brought.

The Canal du Midi has long outlived the purpose for which it was built. But while the railways stole its usefulness, they couldn't take its beauty. With thousands navigating its waters every year, and far more tracing it on foot or by bike, it is nowadays all about the pleasure of slow travel in Occitanie. As I gazed out over the Mediterranean, I couldn't help but think that this might not have been what Riquet intended, but it ensures his name will rightly be remembered for years to come. □

Need to know



When to go

Go in **spring** or **autumn** to avoid the summer crowds. **Boating** on the Canal du Midi is only possible from April to October, although you can **walk** or **cycle** it all year round.



Getting there & around

British Airways (ba.com) and **Ryanair** (ryanair.com) fly direct to Toulouse from London Heathrow and Stansted respectively. The latter also flies from Edinburgh. Flights cost from £72 return and take upwards of two hours.

By train, consider using the **Occitanie Rail Tour pass**, which offers unlimited travel in the region for €10 (£8.60) per day (minimum two days; up to six days). This is only available on **TER** trains (ter.sncf.com).



Carbon offset

A return flight from **London** to **Toulouse** produces 220kg of CO₂ per passenger. **Wanderlust** encourages you to offset your travel footprint through a reputable provider. For advice on finding one, visit wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/sustainable-travel.



Where to stay

The family-run, three-star **Grand Hôtel d'Orléans** (grand-hotel-orleans.fr; from £58pn) in Toulouse has quaint rooms and an internal terrace. Carcassonne's

Maison du Canal du Midi (maisonducanaldu midi.com; from £107pn) is a delightful converted townhouse that is a stone's throw from the station. **Le Grand Hôtel Sète** (legrandhotelsete.com; from £127pn) has rooms overlooking the Canal Royal in Sète.



Further reading & information

Plan your next trip using the Canal du Midi interactive map (canal-du-midi.com).

