

Leisureguide: Travel

Spend your summer break just like the French - in Montpellier

How to get there: Easyjet flights from Bristol take 2 hours, prices start at £27.25 one way
Where to stay: I sampled the Hotel Ibis Style, just off the main Place de la Comedie. Excellent, full of character, helpful staff. See www.montpellier-france.com for help finding accommodation
Where to eat: Good quality food is so easy to find, at various prices. I enjoyed regional speciality algote at Maison de la Lozere; delicious ravioli a la limon at La Maison d'Anna; foie gras and duck at Terminal and delicious quiche at Les Halles Laissac.

This is an independent review. All views expressed are the personal opinion of the reviewer.

MONTPELLIER is a city with so many different faces it seemed impossible to see everything in three days... but I tried.

The city is quite new by French standards, founded in the 12th century, and is extremely proud of its heritage. Now that a direct flight from Bristol goes to Montpellier, it's really easy to enjoy its many attractions.

First there is the charm of the city's historic quarter, where classic French five-storey buildings are separated by wide boulevards complete with tracks for the Tramway which criss-crosses the city, and enchanting series of small winding, sometimes cobbled, side streets which are packed with shops, cafes, private homes and the occasional surprise.

Lots of city centre shops and restaurants are set into vaults which are all that remain of the historic Middle Ages buildings, which make lovely cool refuges from the heat of the day and bustle of the city centre.

For this is truly in the South of France – even in late May typical temperatures reach 30 degrees.

Montpellier is teeming with different styles of art and culture. I fitted in a visit to the Musee Art Brut. Literally dry art,



One of the most spectacular trompe l'oeil sights in Montpellier

Photos: Alison Phillips

it's like what we call term naive art, although its director Patrice Michel was keen to make it clear to me that in French art culture naive art is a specific strand, and his collection includes art singuliere, one-off pieces often created by people whose harsh life experiences, or physical and mental illnesses, have driven them to art as their only form of self-expression; naive art, French-style and art Brut.

I could easily have stayed far longer, but our next port of call beckoned. Classical art is housed in the Musee Fabre, which also has an impressive

collection of modern art, hung in some of the lightest and brightest spaces I have ever seen. I certainly found I appreciated it more than in many places, including Tate Modern.

Street art, accepted in France long before Bristolian Banksy brought it to reputable status here, is everywhere in Montpellier. You need to open your eyes and look around you – and look up!

There's also a vast collection of bicycles, stuck half way up walls and sometimes half buried in them, reputedly the brainchild of someone who commandeered

a stray bike to get home one night after a skinful and then found he had created an art form.

Trompe l'oeil is everywhere too, in varying sizes. Look carefully – is that a cat in the window above you or a painting? One set of buildings are painted so cleverly I had to cross the street to convince myself they were actually a flat surface, and not a street corner.

Art in everyday life is everywhere: the brand new Laissac market hall is a round steel-girdered building under a vast glass roof, cleverly painted



A shoal of fish in the main aquarium at Planet Ocean

to look like the inside of a melon; beige-y concrete office blocks, a bid to echo the pale and golden stone of the older city centre, have often been shaped and shaded to give texture and depth of field, and things are constantly evolving.

I spotted one set of, I think, offices with curiously large ovoid windows, like pebbles on a beach. I don't know how light the rooms inside are, but the exterior effect is pleasing.

At L'Arbre Blanc, the city's latest architectural marvel, Sou Fujimoto, Nicolas Laisne and Manel Rachdi have created a block of apartments, with a ground and first floor restaurant and rooftop terrace bar, to fill quite a small plot of land with a tall building in which it seems no two planes are the same. I lost count of how many faces it has, from the outside none of the windows and balconies line up while projecting sets of clothes-hanger like bars appear like leaves, casting shadows.

The effect is that of a giant white tree which almost seems to move in the breeze as your perspective changes.

As well as the sand and

shingle beaches of the clear blue Mediterranean, 10 minutes away by car, no family trip here should be complete without a visit to Planet Ocean, the city's aquarium and planetarium combined. It's been created in an effort to encourage everyone, young and old, to relate to the planet we all live on and our role in its survival to its place in the universe.

Beware the simulator of the bridge of a deep sea fishing trawler unless you've got sea legs and a strong stomach. Then it's on through tropical swamps and beaches to space and the view from the space shuttle's cupola.

Montpellier is, most of all, a properly French city, rather than a tourist destination. It's where French people go for their holidays, the best recommendation there can be.

Some people speak English, but others, reassuringly like us, are unsure about trying their skill. If you want to sample the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the real France, rather than the seaside resorts, then this is a great place to head for.

ALISON PHILLIPS



L'Arbre Blanc towers mesmerisingly over you



Street art is all around you in Montpellier



The Mediterranean awaits in Montpellier



Art used to create style in the old quarter