

Toulouse Stay & Explore – Days 1 & 2

Wednesday & Thursday, October 22–23, 2025

Bienvenue à Toulouse!

Rain greeted us in Toulouse—not the dreary kind, but the soft, silvery drizzle that gives everything a quiet sheen and makes café lights glow warmer. Our small group—intimate, cheerful, and already teasing one another—arrived in what felt more like a family gathering than the start of a tour.

We've come to the Ville Rose (Pink City), named for its rosy bricks that change hue with the light, from coral to mauve to deep rose. Capital of Occitanie and heart of the French southwest, Toulouse blends old-world charm and modern energy—Romanesque churches beside aerospace campuses, and café terraces filled with conversation rain or shine.

Our Tour Manager, Gwen, greeted us warmly and introduced us to our comfortable home base: the **Mercure Hotel**, which quickly felt less like a hotel and more like home. The friendly staff immediately became part of our team—sharing smiles, jokes, and umbrellas as if they'd been waiting for us all season.

In the evening, we gathered for our orientation meeting, a cozy get-together that set the tone for the week ahead. We toasted to new friendships and adventures with a traditional French **Kir**—a simple blend of crème de cassis (blackcurrant liqueur) and Aligoté, a crisp Burgundy white wine.

Recipe: Pour about 1 part crème de cassis into a glass, then top with 9 parts chilled Aligoté.

Result: a soft blush-pink drink that tastes of summer berries and optimism—perfect for a rainy evening in France.

After the briefing, laughter flowed as easily as the wine. Some of us lingered in the lobby chatting with the ever-charming hotel staff, others ventured out to find dinner nearby, and a few slipped away early to enjoy the sound of rain against their windows. The weather might have been gray, but inside, the mood was pure sunshine.

Day 2 – Toulouse in the Stormlight

Thursday, October 23, 2025

If Day 1 was all about rain's gentle whisper, Day 2 brought a full symphony—gusts of wind, bursts of sun, and the kind of dramatic sky painters dream of. Parks were closed due to the storm, but no one in our little family was discouraged. After a morning stroll through our neighborhood with Gwen, we met our local guide, Elvire, on the lively Place du Capitole—the heart and symbol of the city.

Elvire began by showing us the map of Toulouse, France's third-largest metropolitan area, with over 1.3 million residents and a spirit that feels both intimate and cosmopolitan. She introduced the magnificent Capitole building, home to the city hall. Its grand neoclassical façade dates from the 18th century, but its foundations trace back to the 12th century, when the Capitouls—the city's elected consuls—governed a proudly independent Toulouse long before it was integrated into the French crown.

Beneath the Capitole's covered arcades, we admired the colorful painted ceilings by artist Raymond Moretti, created in 1997 to celebrate the city's rich cultural history—from its medieval troubadours to the modern aerospace industry. Elvire then tempted us with talk of *fénétra*, a local almond cake layered with lemon and apricot jam, and introduced us to Claude Nougaro, Toulouse's beloved jazz poet-singer, whose songs blend French lyrics with Latin rhythms and deep affection for his hometown.

Following the Rue du Taur, we reached Notre-Dame du Taur, where Elvire shared the dramatic legend of Saint Saturnin (Saint Sernin), the first bishop of Toulouse, who was martyred in the 3rd century when he was tied to a bull and dragged through the streets—hence the name “du Taur” (of the bull). Just steps away stood our next masterpiece: the Basilique Saint-Sernin, one of the largest Romanesque churches in Europe and a key stop on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route. Its soaring brick bell tower and intricate sculpted portal left us in quiet awe.

Gwen conjured up a special surprise: a visit of the **Cloister of the Dominican Church**, guided by the ever-passionate **Elvire**.

As rain tapped softly on the ancient stones, Elvire led us through the quiet arcades, her voice rising above the wind with stories of faith, scholarship, and the centuries-old Dominican presence in Toulouse. The cloister garden, glistening with raindrops, looked like a scene from a medieval manuscript—serene, timeless, and unexpectedly peaceful. Then came one of Toulouse's most extraordinary sites: the Church of the Jacobins, a jewel of southern Gothic architecture. Built in the 13th century by the Dominican order, it boasts stunning ribbed vaults that meet in a central “palm tree” column—one of the most unique designs in all of France.

We continued past the Lycée Pierre de Fermat, named after the 17th-century mathematician known for his famous “last theorem,” housed in a Renaissance mansion that once belonged to noble families. Our tour concluded with a walk to the Garonne River, where the sunlight shimmered on the water and locals lounged on the Place de la Daurade, a favorite gathering place at sunset. From there, we admired the graceful bridges and the pastel reflections on the opposite bank—Toulouse at its most romantic.

By midday, the clouds began to lift, revealing patches of blue sky that felt like small miracles. The group scattered for the afternoon: some took the **little train** for a charming city circuit, others braved a **boat ride on the Garonne**, while a few explored markets, backstreets, and cafés—umbrellas in hand, laughter echoing through the lanes. Toulouse, windswept and shimmering, rewarded us with an adventure none of us would forget.

Back at the hotel, the evening took a familiar, family-like turn. A few gathered at the bar, where stories of the day mingled with the clink of glasses and the laughter of the hotel staff. Even the director joined in, chatting as if we were old friends rather than passing guests. Later, everyone headed out for dinner on their own—some chasing a recommendation, others following the music of a nearby brasserie—but all with that same warm glow that comes from a day well lived, whatever the weather.