

# TOULOUSE

## Runway of regeneration

New attractions and ongoing development ensure that Europe's centre of aerospace remains a hub of innovation

**M**y day in Montaudran, a once forgotten but now transformed suburb in the southeast of Toulouse, started off on a surreal note. I was standing next to a runway yet instead of watching aircraft there was a 14-metre-tall, 47-tonne minotaur called Asterion crossing paths with a giant spider named Ariane, a cloud of steam and an array of special effects adding to the show. For arachnophobes, the image of a towering eight-legged creature would be the stuff of nightmares, but for me it seemed a sign of the city's innovative spirit and ability to regenerate.

The animated creatures, operated by a team of technicians, are relatively new, and retrace the path of the earliest pioneers of civil aviation. Toulouse's first aeroplane took off from this 1.8km runway in 1918 when it was used by the French airmail service (Lignes Aériennes Latécoère, which later became Aéropostale) to deliver post to destinations such as Barcelona, Morocco, Argentina and Chile. The runway was subsequently taken over by Air France in 1933 and used for aircraft maintenance purposes until 2003.

Today the airstrip is aptly known as Piste des Géants (The Runway of Giants) and lies at the heart of a 56-hectare innovation district named Toulouse Aerospace. The runway plays a cultural role, housing museums and acting as a playground for free theatrical street performances and concerts. This includes hangar-like museum L'Envol des Pionniers which tells the stories of the Aéropostale trailblazers through archives, exhibits and performances by costumed characters which resemble scenes from the film *Night at the Museum*.

**THIS PAGE:**  
Ariane, the mechanical spider; Toulouse's rooftops  
**OPPOSITE:**  
La Halle de la Machine

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER



The hangar-like museum tells the story of the Aéropostale trailblazers

Visitors can learn about pilots such as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (who subsequently wrote the novel *The Little Prince*), Henri Guillaumet and Jean Mermoz, and be inspired by their 20th century adventures.

While L'Envol's focus is on the past, La Halle de la Machine breathes new life into discarded items. Crafted from wood, steel and leather, the aforementioned creatures are the brainchild of French art director François Delarozière and his fittingly named company La Machine, based in Nantes.

The eccentric exhibition space was set up in 2019 to animate the neighbourhood and house the machines when they are not on tour, with productions taking place in destinations including Ottawa and Yokohama. During their stay in Montaudran, the machines also regularly take to the tarmac, carrying guests on their backs and allowing them to experience a new form of flight – one that has no destination other than the experience itself.

The soaring hall is best described as a crossover between a circus and Willy Wonka's factory, with boiler-suited technicians (known as 'machinists') playing instruments fashioned from industrial spare parts. Cue a cacophony, plenty of pyrotechnics and a highly entertaining day out.

The experience is best summed up by a fellow visitor's exclamation: "C'est fou!" (It's mad!)

Besides the cultural attractions, Toulouse Aerospace also comprises 50,000 sqm of R&D centres and educational institutions across sectors such as aeronautics, space, robotics and artificial intelligence – including the start-up incubator B612, named after the fictional asteroid in Saint-Exupéry's novel. A third metro line is also in the works, which will connect the neighbourhood to the city centre by 2028, along with the development of accommodation, public green spaces, workspaces, retail and dining facilities.

### PAST MEETS FUTURE

Toulouse is widely known as the European capital of aerospace, home to industry giants such as aircraft manufacturer Airbus and the National Center for Space →





ABOVE: Aeroscopia museum  
BELOW: L'Envol des Pionniers

While Airbus is focused on the future, the industry's heritage has not been forgotten. Adjacent to its assembly line is Aeroscopia, a museum which exhibits aviation through the ages. The tarmac at the entrance is occupied by the Concorde 209, operated by Air France from 1976

until its retirement in 2003, as well as the Sud-Aviation Caravelle, the first mass-produced jet aircraft designed in the 1950s for medium-haul flights. Plane enthusiasts will be glad to hear that the collection of prototypes and decommissioned aircraft continues inside the 7,000 sqm hangar – from a replica of Louis Blériot's plane, which marked the first flight across the English Channel in 1909, to the A300 and a Super Guppy that has been opened at the nose so visitors can experience the immense

interiors required to carry cargo overseas.

A platform connects the fuselage of various aircraft, providing a panoramic view of the hangar, and guests can also walk beneath the



**A Super Guppy has been opened at the nose so visitors can see the enormous interiors**

Studies (CNES). The city has witnessed flight in many forms over the years, from Clément Ader's bat-like Éole aircraft in 1890 to Concorde in 1969 and the A380, the world's largest passenger airliner, in 2005. The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, challenged its raison d'être – the global grounding of planes and uncertainty regarding the future of travel worrying for a city synonymous with aviation.

Thankfully France's fourth largest city had begun to widen its appeal before the crisis, revitalising neighbourhoods through the upcycling of abandoned aerospace infrastructure and creation of new attractions, as demonstrated by the redevelopment of Montaudran.

Since Montaudran's runway has been taken over by mechanical members of the animal kingdom, travellers to the city are now likely to land at Toulouse-Blagnac airport where the city's innovative spirit continues to soar. Beside the airport is the headquarters of Airbus, which employs over 20,000 people across its various departments in the Occitanie region.

As the aviation industry recovers from the pandemic, Airbus is hard at work with the assembly lines of commercial jets including the A320, A330 and A350, along with facilities for cabin outfitting, the painting of completed aircraft and training of flight crews and attendants. Looking ahead, the manufacturer is also carrying out an ambitious decarbonisation programme, improving the fuel burn of its existing fleet, developing sustainable aviation fuel and investing in zero-emission technologies such as liquid hydrogen.

# Less emissions? Make a decision.

Fly more sustainably with  
Neste MY Sustainable Aviation Fuel™ (SAF)  
and reduce GHG emissions by up to 80%\*.  
Commercially available and in worldwide  
use today.

[Neste.com/SAF](https://neste.com/SAF)

**NESTE MY**  
Sustainable Aviation Fuel

\* Calculated with CORSIA.







Narrow alleyways  
wind through  
basilicas, cathedrals  
and tempting  
restaurants



**THIS PAGE:**  
La Ville Rose attracts  
tourists and residents  
with its pretty  
architecture and  
sunny climate

jets to experience the full swathe of engineering power. Visitors can also now step aboard an A380 on the north tarmac, the significance of which has grown since Airbus halted production of the superjumbo in 2021. This particular aircraft was used for test flights, and features interactive screens, a glass floor in certain zones allowing you to examine the detailed underfloor mechanics, and the chance to peek into the cockpit. Aeroscopia also has an educational purpose, using interactive workshops, simulators and tours to inspire younger generations to take on the mantle of aeronautics.

As I left the premises, passing by air crew enjoying the gift shop in their hours off, I wondered which items would be added to the collection in the decades to come now that hybrid and electric aircraft are in the works.

## POWERS OF ATTRACTION

While aerospace is an intrinsic part of Toulouse's DNA, the city is eager to ensure that it does not detract from its many other features. The aim is to "show everybody that Toulouse is not just Airbus and aerospace", Clémence Long, deputy director of Toulouse Convention Bureau, explained. Over the course of my long weekend in the city, I discovered a quality of life that is hard to match. Toulouse is blessed with 2,000 hours of sun annually, its famous rose-pink terracotta buildings at their best during golden hour, while its narrow alleyways wind through

Romanesque basilicas, Gothic cathedrals and tempting restaurants. Locals can enjoy seasonal and refined cuisine en terrasse with a glass of wine in hand or head to the Victor Hugo food market to source ingredients themselves. "Food is a religion", Long explained as we enjoyed a seasonal menu of local produce at brasserie Aux Pieds Sous La Table.

Aside from attractions within the city, Toulouse is well-situated geographically. Should you wish to explore further afield, countryside and coast are both within reach. Located on the banks of the River Garonne, it is 150km from the Mediterranean Sea and an hour from both the Pyrenees and the medieval fortified city of Carcassonne (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Other French cities are also accessible – I travelled by rail from Paris in just over four hours (see our review of the Ouigo service on page 66). The TGV is set to shorten the journey to around three and a quarter hours by the year 2030.

The appeal of Toulouse is long-lasting and ever-evolving, with all of those that I met during my trip having relocated to the Ville Rose, many citing their university days and the city's job opportunities as inspiration for the big move. Some 10,000 people move to Toulouse annually, adding to the existing 1.3 million inhabitants (as of 2021) and driving the redevelopment of areas such as Montaudran. I'm told by the new Toulousains that the city is a good virus to catch. Time will tell if I've got the bug. **BT**

## WHERE TO STAY: THE SOCIAL HUB

With a rich student presence – 120,000 students attend its institutions every year – it makes sense that Toulouse has opened a hybrid form of accommodation to house tourists, business travellers and university students. Dutch brand The Social Hub opened its Toulouse property in October 2022, facing the Place de l'Europe and the Jardins Compans Caffarelli Park in the university and business district.

The hotel blends 190 university flats with 164 hotel rooms, some of which are designed for extended stays and include kitchenettes. I was sceptical of the idea at first, with flashbacks to rowdy student days, but the layout of the property means that you are distanced from the students' halls and my room was noise-free.

The hotel is also well-designed for the post-pandemic age. Every generation can connect in the open-plan public spaces, which include a movie room, pétanque court, rooftop pool, restaurant and bar (with grab-and-go options) and flexible workspaces – there are USB and plug sockets at seats, and a collaborative space downstairs as well as a dedicated quiet room. It's not for everyone but it's worth the adventure, especially if you want to work alongside others or are feeling nostalgic.

*Rue de Sebastopol 1, 31000, Toulouse; [thesocialhub.com](https://thesocialhub.com)*



**RIGHT:**  
Rooftop pool at The  
Social Hub and the  
hotel's communal  
work spaces

