

by KEVIN GLEESON

# LINE OUT HERE FOR A TRULY SCRUM-PTIOUS CITY BREAK

*If you're not among the hopefuls heading to Japan for the World Cup, rugby-mad Toulouse could be worth a try*

**B**ACK in February, a former colleague of mine packed up and set off on a 15,000km cycle to Japan with the aim of reaching The Land of the Rising Sun in time for this month's Rugby World Cup. You read that right. Cycling!

But fear not. While Ireland take on Italy in the final home game today before heading east, there are easier ways of combining the games with a few days away that won't leave you saddle sore.

Toulouse is home to the most titled rugby union club in France and one of the most successful in Europe, Stade Toulousain, making France's fourth largest city the ideal destination for rugby fans. During my visit in June, the city was buzzing ahead of their win over Clermont Auvergne in the Top 14 championship.

While the match was taking place in Paris, the main square of Toulouse, the Place du Capitole, was a hive of activity all weekend.

Temporarily turned into a rugby pitch, there were training sessions and activities for all ages and abilities, culminating in a friendly match for kids and former rugby professionals before the crowds gathered in their hundreds to watch the game live on giant screens.

This is a city that takes its rugby seriously. Due to the time difference, both Ireland and France will play their first matches of the World Cup opening weekend shortly after 8am. While it might be a little early for most, there's only one place to watch should you make it to Toulouse. The brilliantly-named Pub O'Clock is an Irish bar in the heart of the city which I have been told will, among others, be open to accommodate fans during the tournament.

**B**UT what is there to do come noon, when all the excitement is over? Well a visit to the Stade Ernest Wallon is a must for rugby fans. Home to Stade Toulousain, the stadium has plenty to offer if you're not there to catch a match. There is a comprehensive boutique where you can pick up all sorts of souvenirs and a fantastic restaurant.

On entering La Brasserie du Stade Toulousain, visitors are greeted by a replica of the Heineken Cup and the walls are lined with cabinets displaying a collection of photographs and awards. More importantly, you're quite likely to spot some players passing through or enjoying the fantastic food and wine over a business meeting.

One of the team's most celebrated players and honorary Frenchman is Kildare's very own Trevor Brennan. If the breakfast beers and lunchtime wines haven't gotten to you yet then a visit to the legendary rugby international's Brennan's Bar on the outskirts of the city is the perfect way to round off your evening.

Toulouse, known as The Pink City due to the colour of the stone used in its buildings, has a huge amount to offer visitors outside of rugby and if I could have stayed for a week I'm sure I wouldn't have got around to seeing, or eating, all it has to offer.

For if there's anything the French love more than their rugby then it has to be food. The Victor Hugo



market in the city centre is a vast and bustling temple to cuisine at which locals come to worship in their herds. The mouth-watering array on offer here can be intimidating for many of us — especially if your French isn't up to scratch. Usually I like to take a chance on whatever catches my eye but admittedly that approach doesn't always work out.

Instead on my visit I joined a food tour with 'Taste of Toulouse'. This English-speaking event, in the company of founder Jessica Hammer, not only helps you

discover more about the food on sale but also the culture surrounding this most famous of French past-times.

Over three hours, Jessica details the origins and production methods of the meats, cheeses, breads, chocolates and wines on offer at each of the stalls we visit.

We collect generous samples along the way and at the end of a hugely enjoyable and informative tour we gather around an old wine barrel and get to tuck in.

If you like your food and yearn to learn more about the country's

world-renowned cuisine then there's no better way to spend an afternoon.

As you might expect, in terms of restaurants, visitors to Toulouse are spoiled for choice. We had dinner at Huguette on Place du Président Thomas Wilson, where I sampled the city's most famous dish of all, Toulouse sausage. As delicious as it was, the standard dish for myself and my dining companions

was the boudin noir, more commonly known to us Irish as black pudding. But this was no ordinary black pudding. Served tapas-style with grilled red peppers, I had to make a return visit to the market the next morning where the butcher kindly vacuum-packed a stash for me to stick in my suitcase.

In the unlikely event that all of this rugby and food still leaves you looking for more to do in Toulouse then head for Aeroscopie. Located next to the company headquarters of Airbus, this aviation museum is considered one of the

best in the world. The massive exhibition hall is home to two of the world's 20 Concorde airliners and an Airbus A300B with a transparent section of its cabin allowing you to get a never-before-seen look at the workings of the aircraft's system. Some other legendary planes are suspended from the giant hanger's ceiling and there is also a 58m-long mural depicting 100 years of aviation history.

If museums are your thing then others worth visiting include the Musée des Abattoirs which houses works of Modern and Contemporary Art in a former slaughterhouse and The Museum of Old Toulouse, housed in the Renaissance-style Hôtel Dumay, where the history of this fantastic city can be explored in more detail.

But no matter what you choose to do, or what the outcome for Ireland is in Japan, Toulouse is sure to provide thrills on and off the pitch at any time of year.



#### TRAVEL FACTS

How to get there: Aer Lingus now flies all year round from Dublin to Toulouse. Fares start from €70.99 one-way, including taxes and charges. Visit [aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com). What to do: Visit [tasteoftoulouse.com](http://tasteoftoulouse.com) and [toulouse-visit.com](http://toulouse-visit.com)

## Treat yourself to a foodie getaway

From Derry's Slow Food Festival to Festival Lough Erne, there are so many foodie experiences waiting less than two hours away. Get lots more ideas in tomorrow's supplement.

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