



OFF THE BEATEN TOURIST TRACK,
TOULON OFFERS A MORE AUTHENTIC
EXPERIENCE OF FRENCH CULTURE.

PARIS? TRY TOULON

BY JULIA TEITELBAUM





For the traveller who wishes to experience authentic French culture, Toulon, a lesser known city in the south of France, is an ideal destination. Toulon offers warm, Mediterranean beaches, a port with lively markets, a historic city, and laid-back beaches.

Photo: Julia Teitelbaum.



Rocky piers reach out into the calm, Mediterranean waters, providing perfect perches for sunbathers and diving boards for the more adventurous.

ESCAPE THE TOURIST TRAP

Certain cities' lives are built around their visitors. These so called "tourist traps" are some of the most popular destinations in the world. In Italy, it's Rome. In the United States, it's New York City. In England, London. In China, Beijing. In Australia, Sydney. And, of course, Paris, France.

Paris draws visitors from around the world, and for good reason. It is a stunning, historic, unique city. Paris embodies sophistication, culture, couture, and glamour. Still, for all its charms, Paris is only one city in France. Just as New York City has a distinct culture and species of denizen, so does Paris.

And yet, for many Paris is France. This misconception is clear in certain stereotypes. For instance, internationally, the French are often perceived as snobs and antisocial. Paris is not France, and outside Paris, there lies a wealth of diversity in culture and environment. While Paris is chillier, both in climate and attitude, other cities offer more warmth in both aspects.

Among the cities of the Riviera, Toulon is unique because it is not centered around the tourist industry. Its beaches are not meant for celebrities' photo shoots, but instead have the feel of a park—a shared space for the people who live there. Other cities, not centered around the tourism industry, also offer a better sense of the rhythms of French daily life.

One such warm place is Toulon: a lesser known city in the south of France. For the traveller who wishes to experience authentic French culture, Toulon is great destination. Toulon offers warm, Mediterranean beaches, a historic city with down-to-earth French people going about their lives, a historic shopping district and port with lively markets, and lush islands nearby.

WARM AND WELCOMING

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Toulon is located in the south of France. It is one of the westmost of a series of cities along the Mediterranean coast. It is closer to Spain, Italy, and Africa than it is to Paris.





The Toulon night market has a unique, lively, relaxed feel. Shops and merchants sell sweets and their handicrafts next to a port where the light dances off the water.

Outside the tourism office, a sculpture leaves open seats, inviting visitors to join the two mens' casual conversation over a bottle of wine.



Brasseries (bars) along the port are popular gathering places for locals and travellers alike.



If Paris is New York,

then Toulon is San Diego.

THE VIBRANT PORT

Toulon has been a maritime city for centuries, even before France was a country. It was a military outpost for the Romans. Its coastal location gave it both strategic and economic importance. It remains a major base for the French navy. If Paris is New York, then Toulon is San Diego. The port of the city is not there for show: the ships there provide livelihoods for many people in the city.

The cafés are typically, authentically French. Unlike overpriced cafés in Paris, decorated with fleur-de-lis wallpaper for the benefit of the tourists, these cafés are reasonably priced to appeal to the locals. The fare is meant for a French palette, not a foreign one.

The main daytime attractions of the port are its shops and restaurants. At night, the night market opens up. Local merchants sell their handicrafts. The souvenirs they sell are unique: more aimed at French who vacation in Toulon than foreigners. Rather than miniature Eiffel towers (ubiquitous in Paris), merchants at the night market sell jewelry, soaps, artwork: gifts that are more than novelties.

Cafes and shops remain open during the night market: you can watch people browse through the wares from a table in a dimly lit café, enjoying a crepe and rich hot chocolate. An independent candy shop sells liquor and handmade chocolates and sweets by the pound.

Crowds gather around performers in the streets. Local dance troupes perform on the plaza, while mimes charm onlookers. The market feels just a little loose—not wild. At the night market, even more than other places in Toulon, people draw down their guard and relax.

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OLD CITY, YOUNG AT HEART

Toulon is still a growing city. While Paris feels eternal, Toulon is still developing. Workers renovate buildings and streets throughout the city. The city features newly built movie theatres and stores that are strikingly modern.

Nonetheless, walking a bit away from the main streets of the city, where the only traffic is foot traffic, you enter a part of town that has a great deal of character. The architecture is historic: the streets are made for people. The narrow streets are broken up by broad plazas.

This part of town is not deserted though, nor filled with tourist traps. Once upon a time, these shops might have sold cheese, ropes, wood, or handmade clothes for sailors. Now, boutiques, small food vendors, and chain stores occupy the same spaces.

As you go deeper into the Old City, you get farther from the urban feel of the main streets and closer to the feel of a real French town. Go far enough, and on one street you'll find a market buzzing with activity.

MARKETS, NOT SUPERMARKETS

While supermarkets encroach on Paris and other cities, the market is still very lively in Toulon. Local merchants sell fruits, vegetables, and fabrics. The variety is incredible. One merchant will have all different kinds of melons. Another sells a hundred varieties of olives, offering them to you to taste. Along the streets, small business owners sell baskets, hats, or books.

They sell to their fellow citizens. Here, at the city market, a person can get a feel for the real France and the people. Not just stony faces on a metro or frustrated ticket vendors at major landmarks, here you can immerse yourself in French life and take in all the sights, sounds, and smells of a real French city.

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The old city features classic architecture, but it is far from a preserved historical site. Old spaces have been filled by new shops, and the city continues to evolve.



LAID-BACK BEACHES

The French Riviera is world famous for its warm Mediterranean waters and soft, sandy beaches. Still, many cities along the Riviera exist solely as beach destinations. Cannes, for instance, is a ghost town for all but the few months of the year when tourists flock there for the annual film and celebrity-spotting festival.

Toulon is unique among the cities because its beaches are not made for celebrity photo shoots. They are not the private retreats of the upper crust: they are open, public spaces. Well-maintained and enjoyed by many, locals and vacationers both lounge on the beach and swim in the warm, calm waters.

Walking along the beach, you can climb on the rocks and view the coastline wraparound faraway. In the distance, you can see ships at sea. Children and adults alike dive playfully off the pier. Ice cream shops and restaurants along the beach feed hungry sunbathers.

Though the local bus system provides convenient access to the beach as well as other parts of the city, if you're willing to drive or take a taxi, you can get farther out of town.

Outside the main city and most popular beaches, there are quiet coves with waters so calm that parents let their toddlers swim there. Relax and listen to the talk of the French around you. Realize that they are not cold snobs: just people, concerned with their own daily dramas and lives. Listen to the cadence of their voices and hear the relaxed attitude. The French are known for savoring the details of their lives; their wine, their food, their friends, their families.

Try on the attitude as you vacation in this city. You aren't in Paris, you don't have to move at breakneck speed from attraction to attraction. Immerse yourself in the slower pace of French life in Toulon, and experience the culture.

*Immerse yourself...
experience the culture.*

Children and adults play in the calm Mediterranean waters of beaches in Toulon. Others sit on the beach, chatting or reading.



Photo: Julia Teitelbaum.

EXPERIENCE

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Poquerolles



Photo: Julia Teitelbaum.

POQUEROLLES IS THE BIGGEST OF THE THREE ISLANDS OF OR IN THE HYERES GULF.

7 km long and 3km wide, Porquerolles is the most popular, with the largest population. It is situated at the same latitude as Cap Corse, and therefore shares the same pleasant climate - almost daily sunshine (more than 300 sunny days a year), mild winters (rarely below 0°C) and hot summers with a delightfully cool seabreeze.

Nature Preserved

In 1971, the state bought 4/5 of the island, thus protecting it from any unsightly housing or hotel developments. The style and architecture of the existing houses blend harmoniously with the natural beauty of the site. Porquerolles is a site where the land is protected, cultivated, replanted and studied, thanks to the Conservatoire Botanique and to the Parc national de Port Cros.



A Charming Village

As soon as you arrive at the port, you will be captivated by the island: behind the boats tied up to the quay, the first houses can be seen, surrounded by lush vegetation.

After leaving the port (where you can hire bikes and obtain directions from the tourist office) you will arrive in the village with its large square and beautiful church, a cluster of shops and several cafes and restaurants where you can eat outside.

Beautiful Countryside

To discover the rest of the island you can choose between several delightful routes. In the north, three superb beaches offer fine sand and the coast here slopes gently down to sea which is exceptionally clear.

In the interior, there is a mosaic of vineyards, olive trees and fruit trees of all variety... lemons, oranges and mandarins. The paths are bordered by pines, eucalyptus and numerous plantations.

Most of the paths are shaded, sheltering visitors from the "coups de chaud". In spring the flowering scrub, with its myrtles and heather, transforms the island into a huge fragrant bouquet of flowers. In autumn, the pine forest's different shades of green mix with the white flowers and red fruit of the strawberry trees.

In summer the cicadas sing to their hearts content... reminding you that you are in Provence and not in a tropical island at the other end of the earth.