

RODEZ TO NOWHERE

There's much more to France than the well-trodden roads to Paris and Provence. The city of Rodez combines art, history, stunning scenery and gorgeous cuisine, as Antony Clay discovers

The city of Rodez in the Midi-Pyrenees region of southern France is very much on the artistic map at present, thanks to a world-renowned painter who was born in the town.

Two hours by road from Toulouse, Rodez may not figure on most people's map of places to go but it should.

The big deal for Rodez is the opening of the Musee Soulages in honour of artist Pierre Soulages. And it is a big deal, the facility was opened by the French president himself on May 23.

An artist with a long career - Soulages is in his nineties - the new museum has been gifted artworks worth 40 million euros by the man himself and saw 14,000 visitors in

its first few days. Not bad for a city of 30,000.

It is a fascinating venue showing works from across Soulages' career, including his famous Outrenoir works. These are paintings entirely in black for which Soulages has become particularly renowned.

An entirely black painting may sound odd, but to see them close up and witness how their carefully constructed textures make them shift and change as you move around them, is a fascinating and rewarding experience.

The Musee Soulages has something for every lover of art. Its contents can be challenging, enthralling and satis-

fying all at the same time.

Lovers of the art of good cooking don't miss out either as the museum is linked to Cafe Bras run by leading French chef Michel Bras.

It offers stunning meals at prices which are surprisingly affordable. Michel Bras wants people to enjoy his food and so makes it accessible to all diners.

Soulages was born just over the road from the box-like structure that houses his work and the town also features another museum containing objects which inspired him in his early career. The Musee Fenaille features statuettes, menhirs, ancient sculptures discovered from across the region and dating back to prehistoric times.

Below: *The historic village of Conques.*



The Musee Fenaille is spacious and informative, allowing visitors to wander around at their own pace. The truth is that no one knows what the statue-menhirs were for anyway, so the museum allows people to engage with them on a more personal level.

But Rodez offers much more. Shopping, dining and history are all there in a city where you feel you are travelling back centuries without ever losing touch with the present.

Diners can explore eateries such as Restaurant L'Aubrac on Place de la Cite or the Hostellerie de Fontanges in an old chateau just outside the town.

Lovers of history can take a look at Rodez Cathedral which is a beauty to behold, both inside and out. Notre Dame Cathedral - to give it its proper title - dates from the 13th-16th Centuries and includes features from various architectural periods: Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque.

But as with many things in France, there is a mixture of old and new with impressive stained glass windows that are bright and colourful contrasts to the dark poignancy of the building's interior. There is so much to see inside the place of worship that it just has to be experienced. The place is a testament to the devotion of people in times past through its statues, artworks, organ and chapels.

Take a short car journey out of Rodez and you will find yourself in beautiful countryside. Trees in all directions, stunning views and great walking opportunities are all

within miles of the city.

But travel just that bit further, about an hour north, and a real jewel will be discovered.

The village of Conques, home now to just 90 people, looks like a medieval film set and would be a pleasure to see for that alone but this out-of-the-way place is home to Conques Abbey, one of the most important centres of spirituality in the West.

Even before you venture into the tenth-century abbey, above the front entrance is a tympanum, a stone picture showing Heaven and Hell, which will take your breath away with its exquisite detail.

Inside the abbey features stained glass windows by Soulages which change colour with the light. But then you can see the treasures.

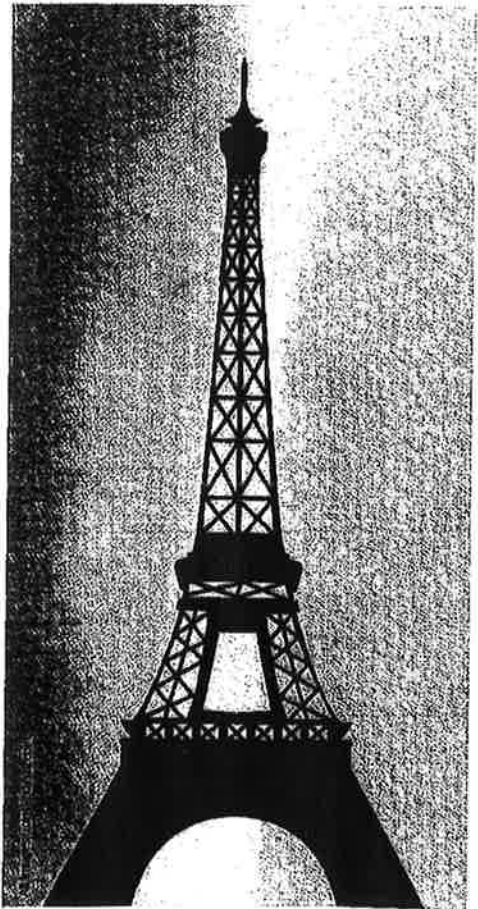
Once hidden in a garden to avoid being stolen, these gold bejewelled relics are housed in a secure site just off from the abbey itself. Located in a dark space with subtle lighting, the treasures seem to shine out and are so delicately made that I challenge anyone not to be awe-struck.

Conques Abbey is truly a hidden gem in a region of France that just begs to be better known.

To find out more about Rodez, visit www.tourisme-midi-pyrenees.com and www.tourisme-aveyron.com. Rodez is easily accessible by road, by train (from Paris or Toulouse) and plane (Rodez-Aveyron Airport).



Above: One of the treasures at Conques Abbey.



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