

## A weekend in... Rodez, Midi-Pyrénées, France

It's by the third gallery of the new Musée Soulagés that I'm beginning to get to grips with Pierre Soulagés's enigmatic art. In front of me is one of the French master's vast black canvases. Except it's not black, because of the way the paint has been manipulated; this 3 sq m of void shimmers with golds and blues reflected off the surface. The effect is mysterious and oddly moving.

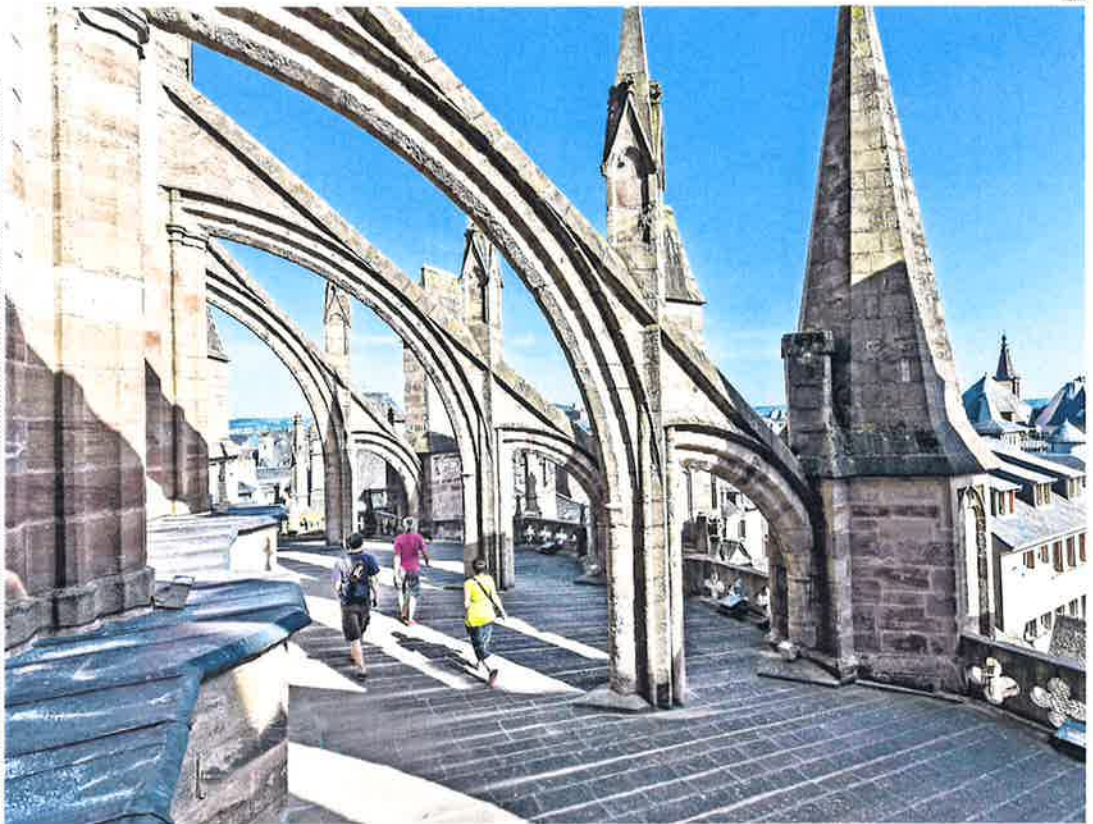
Who is Soulagés? The 95-year-old is "the world's greatest living artist" according to the French president, François Hollande, and one of his works recently sold for more than €5 million. Soulagés, who focuses on black in the way Yves Klein used blue, is revered on the Continent and has been the height of fashion in the States — though his fame takes a dip in the middle of the Channel.

To best appreciate the "painter of black and light", the Musée Soulagés, which opened last year in his home town of Rodez, in the Midi-Pyrénées, is the place to come. The artist, who still works every day, gave 500 works of art and documents to the building, which is an extraordinary creation in its own right.

Made of Corten steel, which develops a mottled rusty red appearance, the building consists of five interlinked cuboid galleries. The uncharitable might think of parked shipping containers but, particularly seen from behind, as a stark contrast to the city's nearby medieval gothic cathedral, the building has a dramatic strength. A little of the Guggenheim Museum's effect on Bilbao seems to be happening in Rodez. Some 15,000 people queued for entry in the gallery's first two days. For Brits, Ryanair now flies to Rodez directly from Stansted.

The gallery's impact on the senses does not stop there. The complex also hosts Le Café Bras, created by another great son of the Aveyron region, the three-Michelin-starred chef Michel Bras.

About 37 miles away at his hilltop restaurant in Laguiole, Bras creates culinary nirvana. (Michel Roux said that he ate the best meal of his life there.) But where eating at Laguiole might cost €200, Bras and his son Sébastien have created a €31 set-price lunch for Rodez. There's also a gourmet version of fast food available at the Comptoir (the counter) for those who haven't booked two weeks in advance. My wife and I had a delicate salad starter with a creamy fish mousse. Tender pork shoulder came with an intense jus made with black olives and intricately fashioned vegetables. Dessert was a tarte au caramel whose sweetness was countered by minuscule cubes of granny smith apple. Over coffee and sticks of unsweetened shortbread dabbled with cream, it was good to feel a little of what Roux had experienced for a fraction of the outlay. After this all-round sensory assault,



Flying buttresses of Rodez cathedral; below, the village of Conques

there is just time left to explore the old centre of Rodez, which, conveniently, is just 500m up the hill. It's one of those elderly huddles of buildings beloved of Francophiles, dominated by a cathedral with high-flying buttresses and an impressive crew of gargoyles. The narrow pedestrian streets are lined with decorated houses often up to 600 years old. Amid a crop of decent restaurants, the €22 fish menu back down the hill at Le Kiosque was particularly fine. Or you can just sit at a pavement café taking a glass or two of local fruity Marcillac wine. Which is what we did, watching the setting sun turn the towering sandstone of the cathedral from gold to red.

In contrast to the modern Musée Soulagés, we headed into yesteryear the next day with a visit to the famously photogenic hillside village of Conques, an hour away. This timewarp of a place is a reflection of how cut off this hilly, wooded region once was from the rest of France — in the Middle Ages getting to Conques from Rodez took more than a day. Apart from a car park and some electricity cables, Conques, with its half-timbered houses, ramparts and cobbles, looks as if it has time-travelled in from 1750. Up the hill are the castle and the houses of the bourgeoisie — it made sense to live high when sewerage was a pail tossed into the street.

Conques is still a community of 900 people, though if you buy a house here and renovate your floors, you may find arrowheads underneath. In summer it's a honeypot for tourists but on a warm spring day only we and pilgrims walking the route to Santiago de Compostela

seem to be exploring the nooks and crannies. The village has been an important religious centre for a thousand years thanks to its ancient abbey dedicated to Sainte-Foy, a reliable worker of miracles. Here too is more of the art of Soulagés, who created 104 windows to replace the abbey's stained glass; his are of subtly mottled clear glass which acquires its colour according to time of day and season — sometimes purple or blue, sometimes white or amber.

But the most remarkable sites of Conques are next to the abbey inside the Trésor. Behind steel strong-room doors are the abbey's priceless collection of medieval reliquaries — caskets, crosses and statues containing the bones of saints or twiggly portions of the True Cross. The delicately worked gold and silver glistens in the gloom; stupendous Catholic bling — religion at its most ancient, mysterious and, frankly, creepy. A silver sword arm

covers a bone or two of St George; caskets are stippled with precious stones but occasionally a ruby or emerald is missing, apparently prised off by cash-strapped medieval monks.

In pride of place sits the statue of Sainte-Foy. Part of the skull of a 12-year-old girl butchered for her faith in the 4th century lies behind the image's serenely blank gaze. For more than a thousand years, the figure has been primed and decorated. The last addition, in the 18th century, was a pair of dainty bronze shoes.

We enjoy two days of fine art, ancient and modern, and some fine dining too. Then reality intrudes with a strike by French air traffic controllers, and our flight home goes Awol. Eventually we manage to buy the last tickets on a packed train to Paris, then similarly scarce seats on Eurostar. Sainte-Foy, perhaps, is still working her miracles. **John Bungey**



### Need to know

John Bungey was a guest of Midi-Pyrénées Tourist Board ([tourism-midi-pyrenees.co.uk](http://tourism-midi-pyrenees.co.uk)).

**Getting there** Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) has flights to Rodez from Stansted from £17 return. **Further information** [rendezvousenfrance.com](http://rendezvousenfrance.com) [tourisme-aveyron.com](http://tourisme-aveyron.com)

### The budget hotel



The Mercure Rodez Cathédrale is a chain hotel but with its art deco mosaic frontage and ornate salon bar, the place has lots of character. As the name suggests, it's right next to the old town and up the street from the Musée Soulagés. Staff also speak excellent English, which not everyone does here. B&B doubles are from €92 ([mercure.com](http://mercure.com)).

### The luxury hotel



Sébastien Bras's fine dining restaurant, Le Suquet, is reason in itself to book one of the 11 rooms and two suites at the family-run Malson Bras, 37 miles from Rodez in Laguiole. Don't miss Sébastien's signature white monkfish with olive sauce. Enjoy stunning rural views over the Aubrac plateau through floor-to-ceiling glass. Doubles are from €300 (00 33 565 51 18 20, [bras.fr](http://bras.fr)).