

THE BIG WEEKEND

MONTPELLIER

This southern city is arty, intellectual and just a bike ride from the beach.

By **Anthony Peregrine**

SATURDAY

Morning

For an almost immediate summary of what Montpellier is all about, rise early and head for **Place de la Comédie**, France's most elegant provincial square. Handsome women, brisk chaps and early buskers star in the awakening city spectacle. Most are brainy (Montpellier has been an intellectual centre for a millennium), with an artistic southern swagger: the Med is only six miles away. The morning sun lights 18th-century grandeur, promising fierce heat to come. Sensual, subversive and tolerant, this is without doubt France's most desirable city.

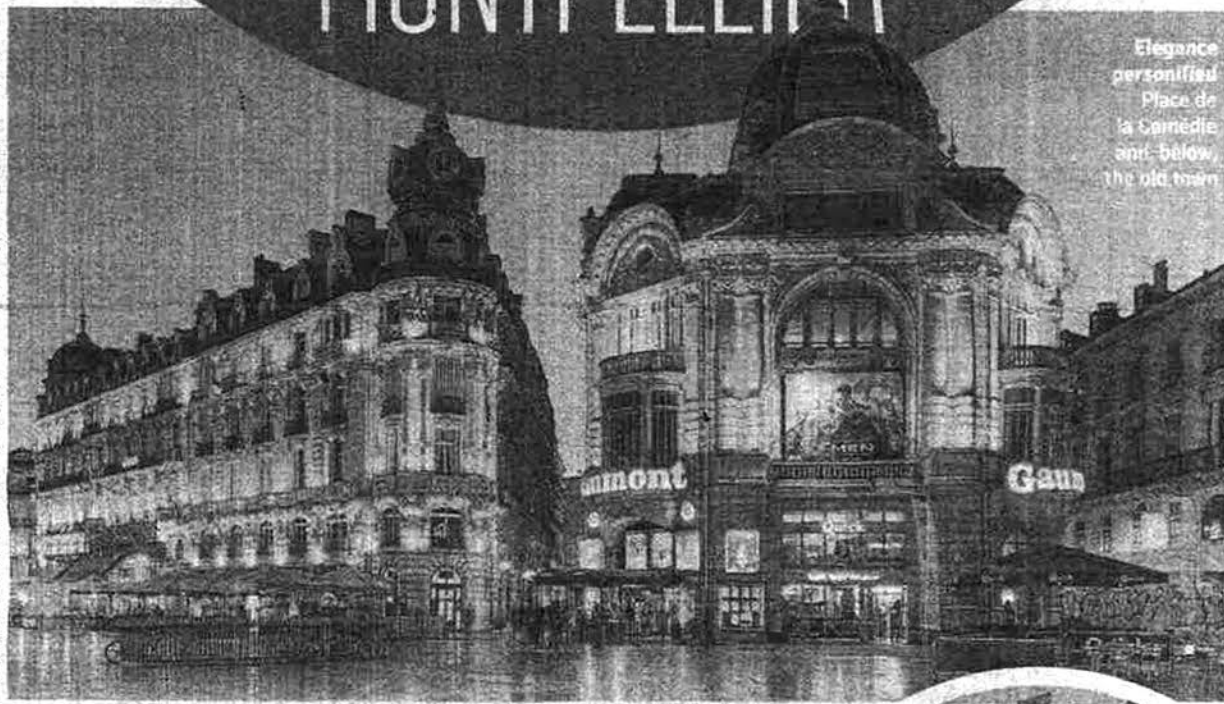
Take a seat, coffee and croissant on the terrace of **Grand Café Riche**. The waiters will fit you in between more important engagements — open-heart surgery, peace missions — as they've been doing for the city's notables for more than a century.

Time to explore. Go it alone in the historic centre. Car-free streets snake between grand townhouses, techno bars, ethnic jewellers and unexpected little squares. At the top, the **Arc de Triomphe** celebrates Montpellier's subservience to a Catholic monarchy. Beyond, on the magnificently formal **Promenade du Peyrou**, Louis XIV looks suitably gratified astride his horse. Beyond that soars the **St Clément Aqueduct**, at the feet of which bustles the city's brightest Saturday market. Have a look, have a nibble and have a drink at **La Cigale**, a real *bar de quartier* alongside.

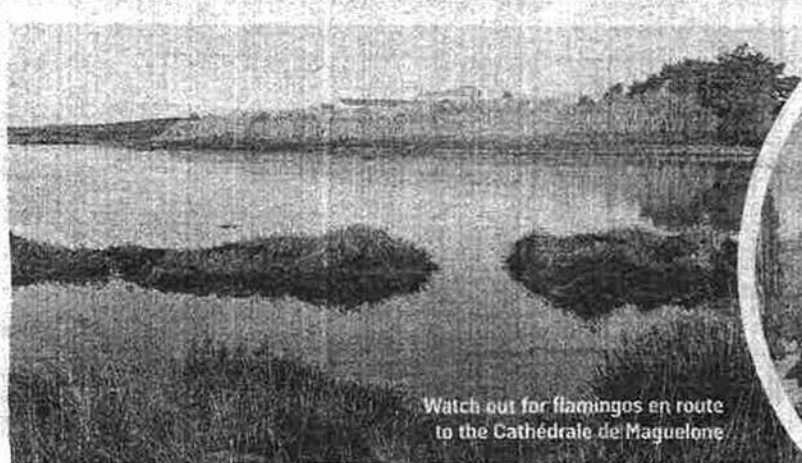
Plunge back into the old town for lunch at **La Panacée**, which opened in 2013 on the site of the Royal Medical College. Inevitably, the distinguished premises now hosts a contemporary cultural endeavour. Lunch — under lit-up scaffolding inside, or on the patio — is an informal treat. Try the *patatas bravas* for £3.30 or three courses for £12 (lapanacee.org).

Afternoon

A little shopping — one-off clothes on **Rue de l'Ancien Courrier**, funkier stuff on **Rue de l'Aiguillerie** (and, at No 33, **Pomme de Reinette**, old-fashioned toys to generate a nostalgic drool-fest in the over-40s). Then some art, at the refurbished **Musée Fabre** (£4.50; museefabre.montpellier-agglo.com). I rush past the Flemish, Romantic and neoclassical stuff to the second floor, where Courbet, Delacroix, local lad Frédéric Bazille and other bearded fellows put light, movement and bounce into 19th-century French



Elegance personified: Place de la Comédie and, below, the old town



Watch out for flamingos en route to the Cathédrale de Maguelone

Hans Georg Eiben/Betty; Jean du Buisson/Agf; Hennes IV

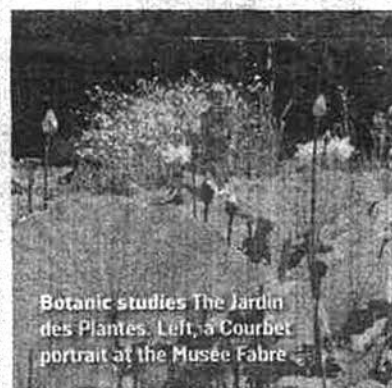
art. Newer rooms dedicated to the work of the veteran abstractionist Pierre Soulages leave me cross-eyed with puzzlement.

Outside, stroll the **Esplanade Charles de Gaulle**, graceful with gardens, fountains, trees and *guinguette* kiosks for refreshments. You might like to wear a boater, or something flouncy over crinoline.

Evening

Dumb down for drinks at the **Petit Comptoir**, in the St Denis quartier, on the cusp between forgotten and fashionable, with some of the lowest prices in town (1 Rue du Grand St Jean). More classically, and classily, the Hemingway-inspired **Papa Doble** has a lovely summer terrace near St Anne Church, and concoctions such as the almond-themed **Under My String** for £8.50 (papadoble.fr).

Through the overflowing streets of the old town again — everyone's out tonight, as they are every night — to dinner at the bijou **Saveurs et Sens**. It's a husband-and-wife operation with a grown-up take on regional food (three courses for £27; sensetsaveurs.com). Later, hang out on nearby bar terraces, take a walk to **La Pleine Lune**, a hot'n'sticky music bar (bar-lapleinelune-montpellier.com), or take one in the opposite



Botanic studies The Jardin des Plantes. Left, a Courbet portrait at the Musée Fabre

direction to the **Rockstore**, which is hotter and stickier. It hosted the bluesman John Mayall's 80th birthday tour last year (rockstore.fr).

SUNDAY

Morning

Ambles to **Antigone**. With monstrous unfairness, Montpellier has not only France's greatest old centre,

but its most audacious modern developments. The Antigone district extends the city to the **River Lez** in monumental bounds of neoclassical imagination unseen since the Mediterranean ruled the world. Its sweep is gigantic, almost caricatural, softened by greenery, fountains, humanity — and a fine farmers' market on Sunday morning.

If you fancy a picnic, stock up, then hire a **Vélo magg bike** (40p an hour; montpellier-agglo.com) and take the cycle path along the Lez. Within moments, you're at **Port Marianne**, the city's newest, spangliest sector. Jean Nouvel's vast, almost blue **town hall** stares across the river to **Bassin Jacques Coeur**, a sort of boatless port area around which bars and eateries cluster. If the picnic was an effort too many, lunch on tapas, planchas and wine at **Tringue Fougasse O'Sud** (£26 for four courses; tringuefougasse.com).

Afternoon

Pedal on five miles, via vines and lagoons, eyes peeled for flamingos, to **Palavas-les-Flots**. Montpellier's fishing port long ago diversified into seasidey in haphazard fashion. The best, most unkempt beaches are out towards the **Cathédrale de Maguelone**, which itself stands in ecclesiastical isolation between sea and lagoon. This is your time in the Mediterranean sun.

Evening

Take a gentle stroll to the **Jardin des Plantes** — France's oldest botanical gardens — before a sharpener or two at **Comptoir de l'Arc**, on nearby **Place de la Canourgue**. Apéritif-hour central is **Place Jean Jaurès**. From his plinth, the frock-coated socialist Jaurès turns his back to concentrate on loftier matters.

Take a seat wherever there's space — the bars are buzzily indistinguishable — before dinner round the corner at **Burger et Blanquette**. The place has hit on the wheeze of supplying both fast food (burgers à gogo) and slow (beef bourguignon, veal blanquette). It works such a treat, they've just opened a second, with a big terrace, on the Esplanade (burgers from £7, slow mains from £11; burger-et-blanquette.com).

Now wind down (a coffee, a cognac) back on the Comédie — every bit as elegant tonight as it was yesterday morning. You've missed much, but you'll be back.

WHERE TO STAY

Lord it over the city, *haute bourgeoisie*-style, at the 18th-century **Baudon de Mauny**, bang in the old centre, where doubles start at £115 (baudondemauny.com). Humbler, but barely less dignified, the old-stone **Hôtel du Palais** has doubles from £67 (hoteldupalais-montpellier.fr). A new kid on the city-centre block is **Ibis Styles** (doubles from £69; ibis.com).

GETTING THERE

Fly to Montpellier with easyJet from Gatwick or Luton, or with Ryanair from Leeds Bradford.

