Going football CRAZY

As France prepares to host the Euro 2016 championships this summer, **Tristan Rutherford** provides a guide to what the nine host cities have to offer during and after the matches

It is Europe's largest and most spectacular event of the year. From 10 June to 10 July, nine of France's most culturally rich cities will host Uefa's Euro 2016 football championships, with England, Wales and Northern Ireland joining the French hosts and 20 other national teams.

It's not just about the 51 games (although four magnificent stadia have been built from scratch just for the event and five others modernised). Each city will welcome tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of supporters with official fan zones (from *babyfoot* tournaments in Toulouse to sandy mini-pitches on Nice's Promenade des Anglais). Casual visitors will not miss out as they can take advantage of the many new museums, hotels and bars that have opened with the tournament in mind.

November's terrorist attacks in Paris have inevitably cast a shadow over the preparations, but both Uefa and the French government have insisted that the event – including the fan zones – will go ahead, but with increased security measures. www.uefa.com

PARIS

More than almost any other city, Paris has football in the blood. Seven matches (including the final on 10 July) will be held at the 80,000-capacity Stade de France in the suburb of Saint-Denis, where France were crowned World Cup champions in 1998. Another five games will be held across town at the 45,000-seater Parc des Princes, now home of Paris Saint-Germain, where France triumphed in the Euro 1984 tournament, the last Uefa championship held on French soil.

There are nearly 180 museums in the French capital and two of the latest are among the most inspiring: the reopened Musée de l'Homme (tel: (Fr) 1 44 05 72 72, www.museedelhomme.fr) and architect Frank Gehry's shiny Fondation Louis Vuitton (tel: (Fr) 1 40 69 96 00, www.fondation louisvuitton.fr). The former is an ethnological museum that contains the Galerie de l'Homme, a vivid timeline of human evolution. It reopened in late 2015 in the Trocadéro, the museum and gardens complex that undulates down to the River Seine. Gehry's creation is a glass-sailed cultural centre and art gallery dedicated to groundbreaking 20th-century shows from Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian and the like. It sits on the other side of the Bois de Boulogne from the Parc des Princes.

LE CLUB: Qatari-owned giants Paris Saint-Germain are the capital's Chelsea and Arsenal rolled into one. Managed by former French boss Laurent Blanc, their current strike force of Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimović and Argentinian Ángel Di María have swept all before them. *Banlieue* intellectuals support Red Star FC. These urban giantkillers have held aloft five Coupe de France trophies while yo-yoing through all six French divisions – they are in the second tier at the moment. A few thousand hardy souls attend matches in the industrial district of Saint-Ouen.

LES STADES: The French football team have picked up major trophies at both the Stade de France and Parc des Princes. For the former, take the rail express RER B (blue) line to Stade de France Saint-Denis or the D (green) line to La Plaine Stade de France. For the latter take the *métro* line 9 to Porte de Saint-Cloud or Exelmans.

LE BIG SCREEN: No ticket? Join up to 120,000 revellers in the nation's finest fan zone, located below the Eiffel Tower on the Champ de Mars. DJ David Guetta, who compiled the tournament's anthem, kicks off festivities here on 9 June. All the games will be shown for free on a 250 square-metre big screen, while other attractions include concert stages, places to eat and a sponsored 'village'.

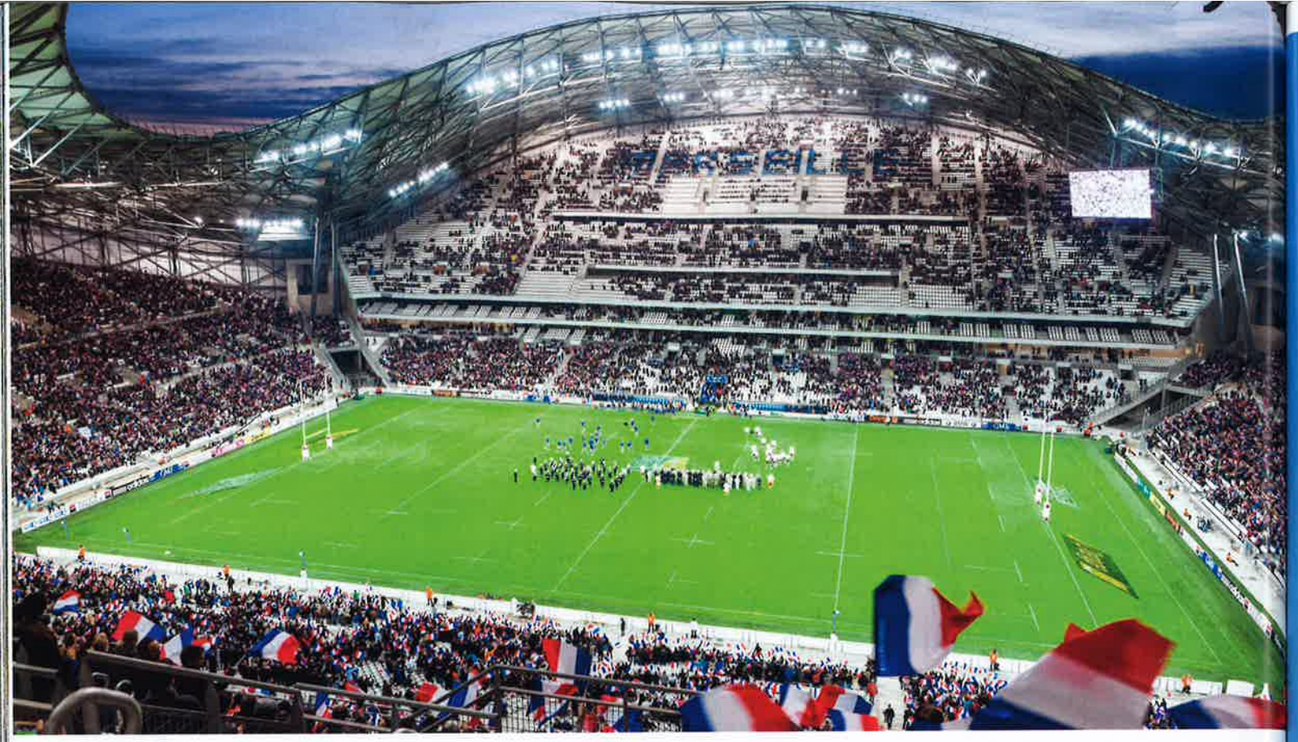
EAT: The city's *restaurant du jour* changes faster than a chef's whites, but two 2015 openings are already making a big impression. Heimat (tel: (Fr) 1 40 26 78 25, www.heimatparis.com) is a modernist trattoria in the 1st arrondissement offering an Asian-influenced €26 set lunch. Fulgurances, l'Adresse (tel: (Fr) 1 43 48 14 59, www.fulgurances.com) in the 11th arrondissement, is operated by a food magazine and allows up-and-coming chefs a six-month stint running the kitchens.

SLEEP: The funkiest recent opening in Paris is the Hôtel Molitor (doubles from €295, tel: (Fr) 1 56 07 08 50, www.mgallery.com), where guest rooms straight out of a classic ocean liner overlook the restored art-deco Piscine Molitor baths.

For a sexier new bargain try Le Grand Pigalle (doubles from €165, tel: (Fr) 1 85 73 12 00, www.grandpigalle.com). Locals have reconquered the vibrant surrounding *quartier* in the 9th arrondissement, transforming its seedy 1970s reputation. The England team can day-trip into town from their five-star base at the Auberge du Jeu de Paume in Chantilly (tel: (Fr) 3 44 65 50 00, www.aubergedujeudepaumechantilly.fr), where packages including a visit to Château de Chantilly cost from €285 a night. ➳

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: **The Fondation Louis Vuitton cultural centre in the Bois de Boulogne; The Hôtel Molitor and the restored art-deco pool; The Musée de l'Homme in the Trocadéro;** FACING PAGE: **The Stade de France in Saint-Denis, which will stage the Euro 2016 final**

PHOTOGRAPHS: ARNAUD CHICUREL/HEMIS.FR; HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; AGENCE NUEL/GILLES TRILLARD



MARSEILLE

It's impossible to avoid football in France's second city. Every taxi, bar and *tabac* features the blue and white colours of perpetual highflyers Olympique de Marseille. Thanks to 2,500 years of tradition – and a 2013 European Capital of Culture celebration that spruced up the entire city – Marseille has history in spades.

The best sights are the port's oldest and newest. Climb first to the timeless Basilique Notre-Dame de la Garde (tel: (Fr) 4 91 13 40 80, www.notredame delagarde.com). This Romanesque landmark topped by a gilded statue of the Virgin and Child commands views over the city, islands and Calanques national park, which was established in 2012. Then come back to sea level and stroll across the concrete *passerelle* to MuCEM (tel: (Fr) 4 84 35 13 13, www.mucem.org), a glass and concrete cube that houses France's latest museum on Mediterranean and European cultures.

A great way to see the sights is with a city pass, valid for one, two or three days, from €24 (tel: (Fr) 4 86 09 50 34, http://resa.marseille-tourisme.com). The pass grants you free access to all museums and public transport, including the tourist train up to Notre-Dame de la Garde, and adds a boat trip to the Îles du Frioul or Château d'If (of *Count of Monte Cristo* fame).

LE CLUB: Founded in 1899, Olympique de Marseille is the most successful club in French football, having won nine league titles and France's sole European Cup crown, in 1993.

LE STADE: Opened in 1937, the Stade Vélodrome, in the south of the city, is such a historic venue that it offers year-round tours. A makeover completed in 2014 added a roof to the 67,000-seater stadium, which has already welcomed two French World Cups (in 1938 and 1998) and two French Uefa Championships. It will host six matches (including a semi-final) this summer.

LE BIG SCREEN: The hottest action will be along the Prado beachfront fan zone area, about three kilometres from the Stade Vélodrome, where 80,000 fans are expected. A smaller fan zone will be sited near MuCEM in the *Vieux-Port*.

EAT: From Marseille *bouillabaisse* to Tunisian *tajines* you're spoilt for choice. Try Provençal tapas at Viaghji di Fonfon (€5-€10, tel: (Fr) 4 91 52 78 28, www.viaghjidifonfon.com), a discount offshoot of *bouillabaisse* specialist Chez Fonfon. Or load up your €17.50 Mediterranean buffet lunch at Marseille superchef Gérald Passédat's La Cuisine du Môle (online reservation only, www.passedat.fr) at the top of MuCEM.

SLEEP: In the beachy Prado area, laze around the seafront pool at the Pullman Palm Beach (doubles from €145, tel: (Fr) 4 91 16 19 00, www.accor hotels.com). Far quirkier is Mama Shelter Marseille, one of a group of hotels designed by Philippe Starck (doubles from €69, tel: (Fr) 4 84 35 20 00, www.mamashelter.com). Both hotels are about a 30-minute walk from the stadium.

TOP: The new-look Stade Vélodrome in Marseille; RIGHT: The glass and concrete cube housing MuCEM

PHOTOGRAPHS: HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; HUY ANH NGUYEN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; QUENTIN LAFONT/MUSÉE DES CONFLUENCES; FOTOLIA

LYON

You cannot argue with Lyon's principal pastimes: food and football. When not watching French superclub Olympique Lyonnais, locals dine *en famille* in *bouchons*, the backstreet eateries that dish up robust *lyonnais* sausages and hearty pâté. Lyon's 14 Michelin-starred restaurants provide an additional allure.

The city's bourgeois building stock and ever-enchanting Rhône and Saône riverbanks make up a 500-hectare Unesco World Heritage site. Rising up on the historic Presqu'île district between the two rivers is the monumental Musée des Confluences (tel: (Fr) 4 28 38 11 90, www.museedesconfluences.fr), a metal and glass ethnography museum that follows human development from its origins to the present.

LE CLUB: Olympique Lyonnais topped Ligue 1 for the first time in 2002 – then won the next six league titles.

LE STADE: The awe-inspiring Stade des Lumières, in the eastern suburbs, is a 60,000-seater constructed especially for Euro 2016 at a cost of €400 million. It will stage six matches, including a semi-final. Tramway 3 will run to the stadium, which is set to open just months before the tournament starts.

LE BIG SCREEN: Around 20,000 fans will be accommodated in the fan zone in Place Bellecour.

EAT: For a *bouchon* with a twist try Le Canut et les Gones (menus from €28, tel: (Fr) 4 78 29 17 23, www.lecanutetlesgones.com), where Japanese chef Junzo Matuno dishes up traditional French dishes with an oriental twist.

SLEEP: Mama Shelter Lyon (doubles from €69, tel: (Fr) 4 78 02 58 00, www.mamashelter.com) is one of the Philippe Starck designed hotel group, and combines industrial chic with an enviable location and bargain prices. Another budget choice is the hip hostel SLO, designed by a local architect and artists (two- to eight-bed dormitories from €25, doubles from €75, tel: (Fr) 4 78 59 06 90, www.slo-hostel.com).

MAIN PICTURE: The Musée des Confluences in the Presqu'île district of Lyon; INSET: Place Bellecour, site of the fan zone

SAINT-ÉTIENNE

The capital of the Loire *département* lies about 60 kilometres south-west of Lyon and was at the heart of France's industrial revolution, particularly in coal mining and arms manufacturing. This heritage is celebrated at the newly renovated Parc-Musée de la Mine (tel: (Fr) 4 77 43 83 23, www.musee-mine.saint-etienne.fr), which allows visitors to explore the underground mine shafts. In late 2015, city authorities inaugurated a combined travel and tourism city card (tel: (Fr) 4 77 49 39 00, www.saint-etienne tourisme.com), which welcomes visitors to key sights such as the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain (tel: (Fr) 4 77 79 52 52, www.mamc-st-etienne.fr), France's second-largest contemporary art space after the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The Le Corbusier complex, 20 minutes' drive away in Firminy (where the Swiss-French architect built a church, stadium and much else), is on Unesco's tentative World Heritage list.

LE CLUB: AS Saint-Étienne, known as *Les Verts* due to their distinctive green strip, rose from provincial obscurity to dominate French football in the 1960s and 1970s. They won six Coupes de France, topped Ligue 1 a record ten times and reached the European Cup final in 1976, losing 1-0 to Bayern Munich. After a period of steep decline, they are now back in Ligue 1.

LE STADE: Nicknamed *Le Chaudron* (cauldron) because of its intimidating atmosphere, the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard (*pictured*) seats 42,000 fans in steep tiers. The stadium will host four games and is two kilometres from the city centre, on tram and bus routes.

LE BIG SCREEN: The fan zone will occupy the esplanade outside the Gare de Châteaucreux. Expect *babyfoot* competitions, inflatable games and football documentaries alongside the big-screen action.

EAT: Blue-veined Fourme de Montbrison is the biggest cheese in Saint-Étienne. Buy it at Fromagerie Grangier (3 Rue Pierre Bérard, tel: (Fr) 4 77 32 23 97) or find it on the menu alongside fondue classics at Chez les Fondus (mains from €19.50, tel: (Fr) 4 77 33 29 68, www.chezlesfondus.com).

SLEEP: Saint-Étienne makes a bargain base for the championships. Try the minimalist and hip Hôtel Vulcain (doubles from €67, tel: (Fr) 4 77 22 17 11, www.hotel-vulcain.com) or the designer hotel Les Poteaux Carrés near the railway station (doubles from €75, tel: (Fr) 4 77 32 34 36, www.hotelrestaurantpoteauxcarres.com).

BORDEAUX

France's wine capital is one big Unesco World Heritage Site, so it's little wonder that the tourist office (tel: (Fr) 5 56 00 66 00, www.bordeaux-tourisme.com) encourages visitors to take a two-hour city stroll through 500 years of architecture. A €33 three-day city pass grants access to the history and wine museums, as well as the landmark CAPC modern art gallery (tel: (Fr) 5 56 00 81 50, www.capc-bordeaux.fr), which trim the River Garonne. For Bordeaux's finest, hit the fashionable Chartrons *quartier*, once the heart of the city's wine trade. Bars in this quayside locale scribble inexpensive vintages on blackboards out front. For wine tours and tasting masterclasses, try Bordovino (tel: (Fr) 5 57 30 04 27, www.bordovino.fr), which runs a two-hour sommelier course for €49.

Serious oenophiles should take a trip to Saint-Émilion by bus, bike or boat (tel: (Fr) 5 56 39 27 66, www.bordeaux-river-cruise.com). It's another Unesco-protected town, where hundreds of miles of wine caves burrow beneath the *commune*. From Bordeaux, the most enchanting route runs up the River Garonne and then down the River Dordogne, passing the *appellations* of Margaux and Haut-Médoc en route. The oyster ports and towering dunes of the Baie d'Arcachon (all criss-crossed by cycling paths) are due west of Bordeaux.

LE CLUB: Bordeaux is an unlikely soccer city, but *les marines et blancs* of FC des Girondins de Bordeaux have footballing calibre, with six Ligue 1 titles to their name, most recently in 2008-09. French captain and World Cup winner Zinedine Zidane had four seasons with the club in the mid-1990s.

LE STADE: The new €183 million Nouveau Stade de Bordeaux was designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the star Swiss architects behind the Bird's Nest Stadium in Beijing. Sloping tiers create a cauldron effect inside the 42,000-capacity arena, while the tree-scape exterior was inspired by the nearby Forêt des Landes. Catch the Line C tram to the stadium.

LE BIG SCREEN: The 50,000-capacity fan zone in Place des Quinconces will show all 51 matches on a 116-metre-wide screen, including the five being staged in Bordeaux. The square is the biggest in France after Place de la Concorde in Paris.

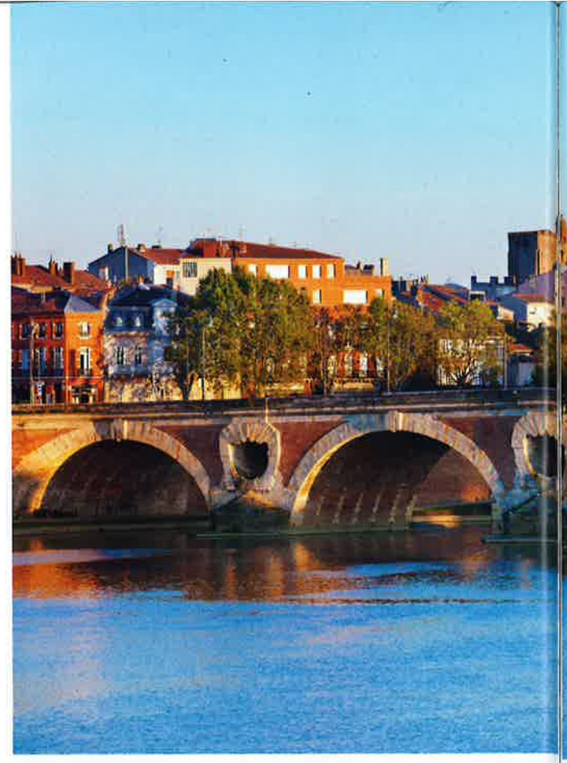
EAT: From Atlantic oysters to *cœurs de canards* look no further than the retro Bistrot des Capucins in the eponymous square (tel: (Fr) 5 56 31 59 00).

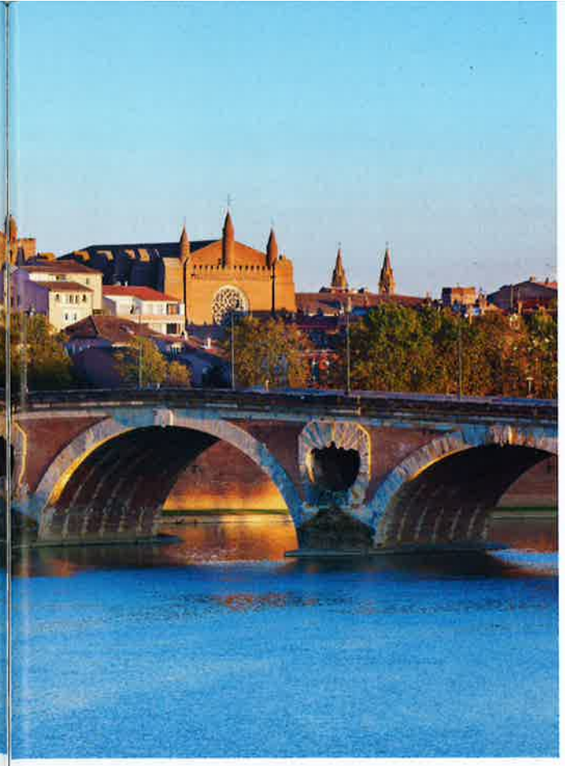
SLEEP: For offbeat indulgence, head for the five-star Hôtel Yndo (doubles from €200, tel: (Fr) 5 56 23 88 88, www.yndohotelbordeaux.fr). Gourmet *chambre d'hôte* Maison Fredon (doubles from €110) offers *bordelais* menus from €18 at its neighbouring eatery La Tupina (tel: (Fr) 5 56 91 56 37, www.latupina.com).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Bordeaux Cathedral dominates the skyline; The city's new €183 million sports stadium; The wine village of Saint-Émilion is within easy reach; Striking decor in the Hôtel Yndo

PHOTOGRAPHS:CAL SPORT MEDIA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; EPA EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY BV/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; FOTOLIA; PIERRECARTON/YNDO

TOULOUSE





RIGHT: **The Pont Neuf spans the River Garonne in Toulouse;** FACING PAGE, BELOW: **A room at the Cour des Consuls Hôtel & Spa**

In June and July, all eyes are on the Garonne, the mighty river that flows through France's elegant fourth city. Pedal past the river and the Unesco-protected Canal du Midi, or rent an electric boat from NaviCanal (tel: (Fr) 6 75 28 60 83, www.navicanal.com). Sightseers who just want to sit back and relax should head for Les Bateaux Toulousains (tel: (Fr) 5 61 80 22 26, www.bateaux-toulousains.com), which operates half a dozen cruises including dinner voyages and Canal du Midi trips from €7. The newly opened Musée Aeroscopia (tel: (Fr) 5 34 39 42 00, www.musee-aeroscopia.fr) near the airport, focuses on the city's great export: aviation. See pioneer aircraft such as the Blériot XI, Concorde and CT20 drone, or step into the cockpit of a locally made Airbus.

LE CLUB: Toulouse Football Club were recurrent underachievers before financial irregularities led to them being relegated to France's third tier in 2001. River Garonne rivals FC Bordeaux simply laughed (the two clubs play the fiery *Derby de la Garonne*). However, Toulouse bounced back quickly and are now a mid-table Ligue 1 side.

LE STADE: The Stadium Municipal was built for the 1938 World Cup on the Île de Grand Ramier south of the city centre and had a starring role in France's triumphant 1998 tournament. The freshly renovated 33,000-seater arena will host four matches. Access is by the yellow *métro* line to Saint Michel or Empalot, or by free shuttle buses from the railway station.

LE BIG SCREEN: A huge screen is being put up on the pedestrianised Allées Jules-Guesde, where the fan zone will feature *babyfoot* tournaments and 'human table football'. Former Manchester Utd and Toulouse player Fabien Barthez will also be appearing (*see interview below*).

EAT: For a picnic of *confit de canard* and *saucisse de Toulouse* visit the Marché Victor Hugo and Marché des Carmes (except Mondays). Eat a *véritable cassoulet* with the local Tarbais haricot beans (€25) at Le Colombier (tel: (Fr) 5 61 62 40 05, www.restaurant-lecolombier.com).

SLEEP: Opened last autumn, the five-star Cour des Consuls Hôtel & Spa (doubles from €199, tel: (Fr) 5 67 16 19 99, www.cite-hotels.com) has minimalist vintage rooms and a gourmet restaurant. At a more modest level, the cosy two-bedroom *chambre d'hôte* HorsScene (doubles from €80, tel: (Fr) 5 61 63 46 41, www.horsscene.com) is arranged around a private courtyard and garden.

My Toulouse by Fabien Barthez

The former Marseille and Manchester Utd goalkeeper was a member of the French teams that won the 1998 World Cup and Euro 2000 championships. For Euro 2016, he is city ambassador for Toulouse, where he made his professional debut for the local club.

1 Sum up Toulouse in five words.
Welcoming, seductive, festive, pink and sporty.

2 Where will you watch the big match?
I don't know as there is still quite a long time to go, but I suspect I'll be somewhere with my friends.

3 What is your favourite Toulouse dish?
The sausages served in the Brasserie Les Beaux-Arts [laughs].

4 What is your favourite wine from south-west France (such as Fronton, Gaillac, Cahors, Madiron, Jurançon etc).
I don't drink wine, but the ones you mention are certainly very good.

5 Do you support a local sports team in Toulouse?
Yes, I follow [rugby union side] Stade Toulousain.

6 What do you think tourists will bring to the Toulouse fan zone next June?
They'll bring their different cultures and their smiles with them. But the more important question is how are the people of Toulouse going to look after and welcome all the supporters and visitors? The 350 passionate and motivated city volunteers will, of course, take care of this. I'd like to thank them all in advance, and by volunteering like this, they truly are the best ambassadors for the city.

PHOTOGRAPHS: UEFA 2016; FOTOLIA; AFLO CO. LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

NICE

The capital of the Côte d'Azur seems always to be in a party mood. The Promenade des Anglais seaside boulevard rocks all year, with the carnival in February, the jazz festival in July and the *Fête du Port* in September. During Euro 2016 Nice expects to welcome an additional 300,000 visitors.

The city has inaugurated a €20 seven-day museum pass (tel: (Fr) 8 92 70 74 07, www.nicetourisme.com). That's just as well, as Nice has more museums than any other French city outside Paris. Summer favourites include the beachside Musée Masséna (tel: (Fr) 4 93 91 19 10), which charts the history of Nice up to the belle époque and is also blessed with sun-kissed gardens. A new arrival – and a topical one as well – is the Musée National du Sport at the football stadium (tel: (Fr) 4 89 22 44 00, www.museedusport.fr), which displays a timeline of France's sporting history.

LE CLUB: France's worldly fifth city was the first to welcome foreigners to its home club. OGC Nice have won three Coupes de France and also topped Ligue 1 four times in the 1950s, while managed by the likes of Englishman Bill Berry, with Argentine international Hector de Bourgoing among their stars. After a period of decline they are now back in Ligue 1.

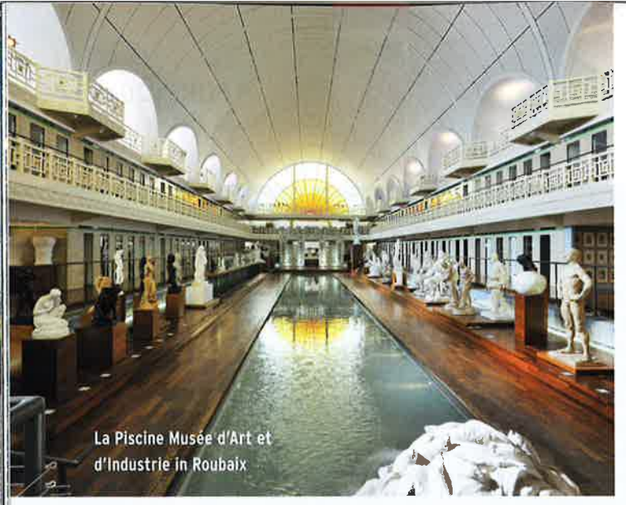
LE STADE: Yet another new edifice, the Allianz Riviera stadium, crashes like a transparent wave five kilometres north of Nice Côte d'Azur airport. Shuttle buses will operate from the city centre during the three group games and a last-16 knockout match.

LE BIG SCREEN: Nice will have two fan zones. The first, an 8,000-capacity site featuring two giant screens, will be in the alfresco Théâtre de Verdure where the jazz festival is held each summer. The second venue is a huge beachside pavilion complete with a 20-metre by 40-metre sand pitch beside the Promenade des Anglais. The authorities are also installing huge TV screens on the wide crescent of public beach, with hundreds more public ones in bars.

EAT: Nice's gifts to global cuisine are *salade niçoise* and *socca* (chickpea pancakes). Dine on the former at beach bar Castel Plage (mains from €16, tel: (Fr) 4 93 85 22 66, www.castelplage.com); lunch on the latter at Chez Pipo, a *socca* specialist in the port area that opened in 1923 (tel: (Fr) 4 93 55 88 82, www.chezpipo.fr).

SLEEP: The fun Vague de Saint Paul (doubles from €128, tel: (Fr) 4 92 11 20 00, www.vaguesaintpaul.com) is housed in a wave-like former office building, a short walk from the village of Saint-Paul-de-Vence and about half an hour's drive from the stadium. All the games will be shown on a big screen in the garden. Families and groups will save by bedding down in one of the 170 one- to six-bed properties along the Riviera managed by Pebbles (apartments from €90 a night, tel: (Fr) 4 97 20 27 30, www.nicepebbles.com). All offer fast Wi-Fi and a complimentary Euro 2016 beer pack.

www.completefrance.com



La Piscine Musée d'Art et d'Industrie in Roubaix

LILLE

The capital of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region is not just a Eurostar and TGV hub (although it will offer direct high-speed rail access to most Euro 2016 host cities this summer). Lille's industrial and footballing history has brought it a host of excellent museums plus six matches at its new stadium. The two most eye-catching cultural sights in the area are LaM, the Musée d'Art Moderne (tel: (Fr) 3 20 19 68 68, www.musee-lam.fr), with works by Calder, Miró and Modigliani among others, and La Piscine Musée d'Art et d'Industrie (tel: (Fr) 3 20 69 23 60, www.roubaix-lapiscine.com), a showcase for fine art located in a former art-deco swimming pool in nearby Roubaix.

LE CLUB: Giantkillers Lille OSC have won six Coupes de France, and also did the Ligue 1 and cup double in 2011. Current Chelsea star Eden Hazard was a product of the club's youth system.

LE STADE: The 50,000-seater Stade Pierre-Mauroy was built in 2012 with Euro 2016 in mind. The six games it will host include a quarter-final in early July. From Lille city centre the stadium is a 45-minute walk or a short Line 1 *métro* ride to the Cité Scientifique stop in the suburb of Villeneuve-d'Ascq.

LE BIG SCREEN: Lille will have a 30,000-capacity fan zone (that's three times larger than regional rivals Lens) in the central Place François Mitterrand.

EAT: Beer and seafood are the staples here; take your pick of restaurants to sample the self-explanatory *coq à la bière* or a selection of meats slow-cooked in hoppy beer. For turbot and oysters from *la Manche* try the little eatery Gabbro in the Vieux-Lille district (menus from €21, tel: (Fr) 3 20 39 05 51).

SLEEP: For five-star palatial splendour, stay at the brand-new Clarance Hôtel (doubles from €170, tel: (Fr) 3 59 36 35 59, www.clarancehotel.com). Find old-school charm inside an art-deco mansion at the *chambre d'hôte* À La Fleur d'Oranger (doubles from €95, tel: (Fr) 3 20 04 25 03, www.alafleurdoranger.com).

LENS

The town of Lens in Pas-de-Calais owes its past to coal mining and the area's pyramid-shaped slagheaps have won Unesco World Heritage status. However, its inhabitants are savouring the present with the modern Musée du Louvre-Lens (tel: (Fr) 3 21 18 62 62, www.louvrelens.fr), which is exhibiting a timeline of works on loan from the Musée du Louvre in Paris until 2017. The town also makes an inexpensive base from which to see the matches in Lille (45min by train) and Paris (1hr 10min by TGV).

LE CLUB: The 110-year history of Racing Club de Lens has been a tale of mediocrity with occasional flashes of flair, including a Ligue 1 title in 1998. They have a bitter rivalry with Lille OSC, 40 kilometres up the road.

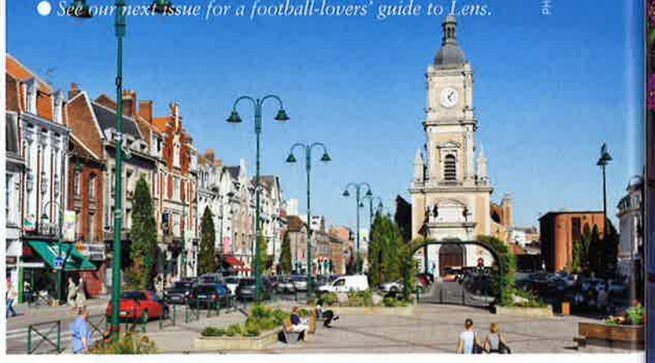
LE STADE: The atmospheric Stade Bollaert-Delelis has hosted every major French rugby and football tournament since its inception in 1933. The renovated stadium, which will stage four matches including England v Wales on 16 June, is a ten-minute walk from the fan zone in the town centre. It can hold 38,000 spectators – 6,000 more than the population of the football-crazy town.

LE BIG SCREEN: Place Jean Jaurès (*pictured*) will entertain 10,000 revellers with a giant screen and animations.

EAT: Lens is a land of excellent beers and regional produce markets. Sample both at locals' favourite Le Césarine in Avenue Alfred Maës (mains from €11, tel: (Fr) 3 21 75 21 45). It dishes up great-value northern favourites including *poulet au maroilles* (a strong Pas-de-Calais cheese).

SLEEP: Get away from Lens's many chain hotels and choose a *chambre d'hôte* instead. Les Cèdres Bleus (doubles from €70, tel: (Fr) 3 21 44 70 91, www.cedres-bleus-lievin.fr) has three comfortable modernist rooms with parquet floors, centred around a walled garden. The simple Le 33 (doubles from €75, tel: (Fr) 3 61 00 58 97, www.le-33-chambres-d-hotes-lens.fr) is a short walk from both the Musée du Louvre-Lens and TGV station.

● *See our next issue for a football-lovers' guide to Lens.*



PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD SOBERKA/HEMIS.FR

GETTING THERE

BY RAIL: Eurostar's latest direct lines mean Euro 2016 supporters can travel straight from London to Lille (1hr 20min), Paris (2hr 20min), Lyon (4hr 30min) and Marseille (6hr 40min). They also allow easy connections to Lens (2hr 30min via Lille). Journeys to Bordeaux, Saint-Étienne, Nice and Toulouse will require a change in Paris or Lille (tel: 03448 118 444, www.eurostar.com). French rail operator SNCF (tel: 0844 848 5848, www.voyages-sncf.com) is organising 700 extra trains.

BY AIR: UK operators fly direct to Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseille, Nice, Paris and Toulouse.

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