

Curiosity corner

Tales of the unexpected...



More than meets THE EYE

The magical murals of Béziers are hidden in plain sight, as **Stephen Turnbull** finds out on a visit to Hérault

Some of the buildings in Béziers are not what they seem. At first glance, you probably won't notice, but do a double take and you'll discover they're covered with magical trompe-l'œil murals. Better still, these fascinating murals are linked by a delightful trail, the Circuit Biterroise, that snakes around the city, telling fascinating stories from local history.

Guided by a map of the trail from the tourist office, I set off in search of my first mural: Béziers-born French Resistance leader, Jean Moulin. Moments later, I've found the right location but not the mural. "Surely it's around here somewhere?" I mutter to myself, as I scan the buildings again. Then I spot it. And in the same instant, I applaud the trick: so well has this work of street art been blended into the urban

background, it's literally hidden in plain sight.

As I approach the mural, I'm filled with an array of childlike emotions. There's excitement at finding my first 'treasure' on the trail, wonder at observing the magic of trompe-l'œil close up, and curiosity about the man, looking distinctly like a character in a film noir, staring down at me from the balcony. However, my mood turns to sadness and

humility as I learn from the accompanying plaques about Resistance leader Jean Moulin's fate: captured by the Gestapo, he was terribly tortured and later died in mysterious circumstances. Nonetheless, up to his final breath, he never gave away his comrades, his heroism inspiring them and earning him a resting place at the Panthéon in Paris.

Stepping back to reflect, I'm spellbound by the notion of an historical figure being brought so vividly back to life yet frozen in time. But I'm happy to conclude that cognitive dissonance is all part of the magic.

Above: Marie Cauffopé peers from her balcony above L'Arlésienne café

Right: Béziers sits on the River Orb



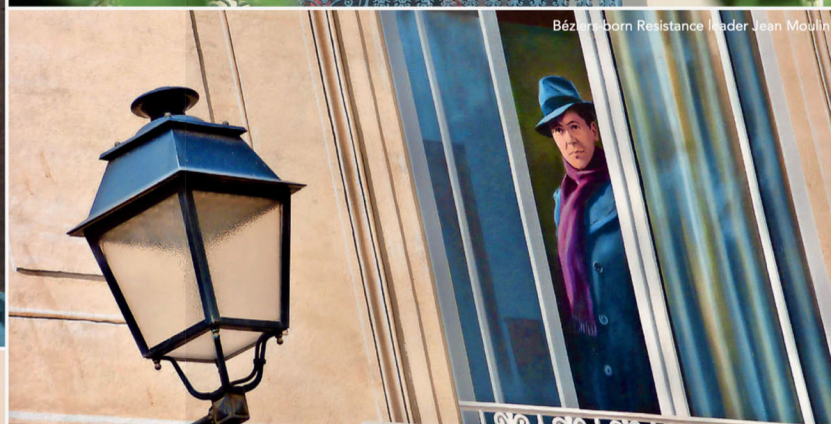
CURIOSITY CORNER



A soldier from the 17th regiment refuses to fire on the 160,000 winemakers in the revolt



Composer Camille Saint-Saëns



Béziers-born Resistance leader Jean Moulin



Molière completes his next line



Two lovers from Molière's play, Lovers Quarrels, are caught by surprise



Leader of the 19th-century revolt, Marcelin Albert, rallies his supporters



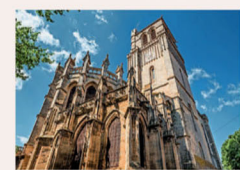
Frédéric Mistral (right) recounts the story of his hapless nephew to writer Alphonse Daudet

Southern SPLENDOR

Three more reasons to visit bedazzling Béziers

ÉCLUSES DE FONSERANES

Cascading locks on the adjacent Canal du Midi, dramatically demonstrating the engineering genius of local-born Pierre-Paul Riquet and World Heritage status of the waterway as a whole. Learn more about the site at the excellent visitor centre – focus of a very attractive redevelopment of the area in recent years.



CATHÉDRALE SAINT-NAZAIRE-ET-SAINT-CELSE

Majestic and richly historical 13th-century Gothic cathedral offering breathtaking views (particularly from the tower) of the city and surrounding area: the Canal du Midi, River Orb and mountains of the Haut-Languedoc.



ALLÉES PAUL-RIQUET

Quintessentially French central boulevard bookended by the elegant théâtre municipal to the north and picturesque Plateau des Poètes park (jardin à l'anglaise) to the south. In the centre, an imposing statue of Riquet overlooks the delightful new Place Jean Jaurès, with its spacious, tree-lined, square and playful fountains.

I'm also struck by the sheer diversity of the murals, each with its own special character. If I had to pick a favourite, it would be the 'mid-19th century café' on the Allées Paul-Riquet. At first sight, the main tableau of elegantly dressed gentlemen seems sedate enough. But it's the woman peering furtively from the balcony above who holds the key to the story; and it couldn't be more French.

It appears that said woman, Marie Cauffopé, had the Madame Bovary-esque audacity to indulge in infidelity. Sadly, it was all too much for her fiancé François: on uncovering the truth, the poor monsieur leapt

to his death. Quelle horreur! The tragic tale was then adapted by writer Alphonse Daudet and his play was set to music by composer, Georges Bizet. Ultimately, this became – you guessed it – the celebrated *Suite de l'Arlésienne*. However, as disgruntled locals maintain, it should have been entitled *La Biterroise*.

Looking back on the experience overall, I have to say, 'bravo' to both Béziers and Patrick Commecy. Together, they have created not just a captivating collection of street murals, but a truly magical trompe-l'œil trail. ♥

beziers-in-mediterranee.com