

All an illusion

Hitting the trail again to track down the next of the (14) murals, I recall my knowledge of art. The trompe-l'œil genre is perhaps best illustrated by the mind-bending optical illusions of 20th-century Dutch artist M.C. Escher. However, it has a long and rich tradition that includes such marvellous masterpieces as Caravaggio's Supper at Emmaus (1601) and Pere Borrell del Caso's Escaping Criticism (1874).

More recently, the technique has been taken up by pavement artists the world over, drawing us into impossibly realistic 3D landscapes. However, in contrast with these essentially ephemeral works, the murals in Béziers – brainchild of the city's mairie – have been designed for lasting impact.

Achieving this on such a huge scale, though, required a fresquiste (mural painter) of supreme skill. Enter Patrick Commecy and his team from A-Fresco, based near Lyon. Typically, it takes them many months of meticulous research planning and execution to

produce a mural. Key to the planning phase are *maquettes* – small models that aid visualisation of the concept.

But how are the designs actually transferred to the walls? The short answer is that it's a very complex process based on the ancient technique of marouflage – mounting prepainted sections to the surface using a grid, then applying more paint. Hence, Patrick regards himself as 'more artisan than artist'. However, charming modesty aside, the further I go along the trail, the more impressed I become by his all-round creativity.

Unearthing history

I'm enamoured by the power of this unique approach to storytelling, despite having the limitations of my local knowledge exposed. I had no idea, for instance, that Béziers was at the centre of a winemakers' revolt in 1907 that threatened a secession of the south, or that one of the Chemin de Saint Jacques pilgrimage routes to Spain branches through the city.

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

ome 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: Béziersborn 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 Caufoppé peers from her balcony above L'Arlésienne

Right: Béziers sits or the River Orb



CURIOSITY CORNER







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.

Galerie ROMANIN

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 Francois: 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. I'œil trail.

trompe-l'œil trail. ♥
beziers-in-mediterranee.com

SPLENDOUR

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 Jaurés, with its spacious, tree-lined, square and playful fountains.