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Why you should visit the home of France's answer to Shakespeare

France has reopened its borders to Britain – just in time to mark the 400th anniversary of its most revered literary figure, Molière

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Molière is what France has instead of Shakespeare, the country's premier man of the theatre and a pain in the head for teenage schoolkids. (If you, too, did *Le Malade Imaginaire* for A-level, you'll know the brain-freeze involved.) There's a cracking bust of the playwright in the southern town of Pézenas. He looks like a West Coast folk-rocker – most 17th-century Frenchmen did – flanked by a rock chick offering him flowers.

Opposite is the [Molière Hotel](#) and, nearby, the Molière Brasserie where, last week, I had a burger sadly not billed as a “Molièreburger”. Talk about missed opportunities.

The small town of Pézenas (population 8,000) is, then, big on Molière. And it’s going bigger, as the writer’s 400th anniversary has arrived. January 15 is, in truth, the anniversary of Molière’s christening, not of his birth, as no one is sure of his exact birthday. No matter. The whole nation is celebrating its most revered literary figure. An exhibition at the Palace of Versailles sets the tone, with the unambiguous title: “Molière: The Creation of a National Glory”. I know no French person who would argue with that.

Such unanimity doesn’t invariably survive the Channel crossing. Molière was, first and foremost, a writer of comedies. Or not. “As funny as a baby’s open grave,” sneered Laurence Olivier. And, certainly, during A-levels, I wasn’t so much laughing as wishing Molière had been kept a lot longer in prison (where, as a young man, he was thrown, for debt).

But a sharper understanding sees beyond the mannered French foreignness to the verve and comic spirit behind, which US writer Martha Fletcher Bellinger described as “the brilliance of wit ... inexhaustible mirth and triumphant gaiety”. I wouldn’t put it that high, but I now see what she was driving at. Plus that Molière’s works weren’t, in the main, simple entertainment. He set about the social and religious structures of his time – and, more especially, their hypocrisy – with gusto, courage and a dramatic precision which may still resonate today. When, in 2018, a French company took Molière’s *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* to China, the line: “Here they start by hanging the man, then they hold his trial” apparently brought raucous laughter of recognition.



The French Shakespeare: Molière is the nation's most revered literary figure | CREDIT: Alamy

That Pézenas should claim this fellow as its own is not entirely without reason. He showed up there in the 1650s. In fact he showed up in lots of places, but in none more frequently than Pézenas – and in none which retains such memories and such an utterly

smashing and sinuous medieval-renaissance centre, one through which Molière would still find his way.

As you will know, Molière started life in Paris as Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, son of one of the furnishers of the royal household. Dad assumed son would carry on the family trade, or perhaps become a lawyer. He didn't. Instead, he joined a theatre troupe, changed his name – most likely to save his quite highly-placed father from the shame of having an actor in the family – and quickly went bust. Hence his prison spell and, in 1646, the need to quit Paris.

His company toured the country before (long story short) arriving in Pézenas to bag the patronage of the Prince de Conti. The prince was a key man – governor of Languedoc, third personage of France (after the king and his brother), relentless skirt-chaser and holder of a mini Versailles court at his Château de la Grange des Prés outside Pézenas. As the seat of regional government, Pézenas filled up with other nobles, notables and dignitaries piling into the outstanding collection of townhouses, which still distinguish the old town centre.

Backed by the prince's money, Molière's troupe provided the entertainment around town, the man himself knocking out crowd-pleasing comedy playlets. He'd stay in the Bât-d'Argent auberge and often play almost next door at the magnificent Alfonsin in-town mansion. Both still exist on the Rue Conti as, on Place Gambetta, do the premises of Guillaume Gély's barbershop. Molière spent leisure hours here for, in those pre-café days, barbershops were where townsfolk gathered. He'd sit on a high-backed, walnut-wood armchair observing customers and the world in general. As he wrote in *Les Femmes Savantes*: "When you know how to listen, you always talk better."



'The multi-vaulted vestibule... and monumental staircase make today's luxury townhouses look a bit naff': Hôtel des Barons de Lacoste | CREDIT: Alamy

The barbershop is now a little museum dedicated to a more recent local troubadour, Bobby Lapointe. Opposite is the monumental Maison Consulaire, where the regional government deliberated. Just off right, the Vulliod-Saint-Germain museum contains the said armchair. It was tracked down to Paris by local Molière devotees earlier this century. Public subscription bought it for Pézenas for £84,000. “That’s a hell of a price for an armchair,” I said to my Molière-fan friend, Christine. “There’s hardly anything left anywhere associated with Molière, so this is valuable,” she explained. “And our greatest literary figure did sit on it, you know.”

In 1656, Pézenas life went belly-up for Molière’s bunch of players. Their philandering patron prince caught syphilis, had what was described as a “mystical crisis”, found God in a drastic manner – and dropped his sponsorship of the theatre group, actors being deemed godless.

Fortunately, Molière was just about ready to return to Paris – and the patronage of Louis XIV. Years of provincial exile had furnished an apprenticeship in writing, acting, directing and management. He was at the top of his game. Pézenas had also provided inspiration for characters. It is difficult not to equate the Prince de Conti with Molière’s Don Juan – a high-born fellow of low-born morals buffed up with hypocrisy – or the prince’s new pious retinue with sanctimonious humbug of Tartuffe.



The stage is set: Pézenas is home to several theatres | CREDIT: Alamy

The latter was (is) a masterpiece, performed just once in 1664 at Versailles before Louis XIV. The Sun King apparently enjoyed it, but had it banned immediately: its pungent attack on casuistry outraged clerics whom the monarch needed to keep on side. The play finally reappeared, toned down, at the Palais Royal in Paris in 1665.

Meanwhile, Molière was working like the clappers – writing plays but also musical comedies, some 30 in all in 15 years and including all the classics: *Le Misanthrope*, *L'Avare*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and the rest. He took the lead in most, fought off competition from rival theatre groups and ferocious criticism from prominent figures who felt themselves under the playwright's knife. These people stooped very low, spreading a rumour that Molière's promiscuous wife was his own daughter.

He finally worked himself into an early grave, dying at 51 shortly after starring in a performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire*.

Back in Languedoc, Pézenas was sliding towards backwater status. Clive of India livened local life up a bit, spending three months there in 1768, en route home from his governorship of Bengal. Legend has it that he was accompanied by a Hindu cook who taught a Pézenas baker how to make little pies from mutton, sugar, lemon, raisins and spices. Legend is apparently wrong.

The cook in question was Scottish, not Indian, and the recipe based on mince pies. That needed clearing up, and the fact is that the petits pâtés have been Pézenas' speciality ever since. They look like cotton bobbins, taste good when well made with the correct ratio of filling to pastry, go down well with a salad or at the aperitif hour but are, frankly, ambitiously priced at €1.20/£1 a throw chez Alary (9, Rue Chevaliers Saint-Jean).

As usually happens, though, backwater status has kept classical Pézenas looking good. It's wonderful wandering through the mix of scurrying streets and ancestral grandeur. Push the door of the Hôtel des Barons de Lacoste on Rue François Oustrin to see the scale on which Languedoc worthies lived. The multi-vaulted vestibule, columns, loggias and monumental staircase make today's luxury townhouses look a bit naff. You'd need the staff, mind.

The narrow old streets are, unsurprisingly, punctuated not so much with butchers and bakers as candle-stick makers – plus ceramists, potters, creators in leather and stained glass, painters, cutlers and other folk selling stuff that no one needs but quite a few people might like. At least, I hope so. I'm always mystified by how arty artisans in picturesque spots all make a living. Perhaps they don't. Or perhaps there's a bigger market for hand-crafted abstract lampshades than I thought.

Marvel at Moliere

In Pézenas, the big weekend is this weekend, January 15 being the 400th anniversary of Molière's christening. However, from a travel – and travel restrictions – point of view, you should focus on June 3-12, when the town kicks out the jams with a Molière theatre festival (capdagde.com). There is easy access via Béziers, Montpellier or Carcassonne, stay and dine at the four-star Distillerie de Pézenas (garrigae.fr; room-only doubles from £71; three-course dinner £27).

In Paris, the Comédie Française – effectively, France's national theatre formed by the merger of Molière's company and another on the Parisian scene (albeit after Molière's death) – is pushing out le bateau for the man they reckon was, and is, the boss. Starting this weekend they'll be putting on nine Molière plays and other Molière-related works in a series running until July. Further details: comedie-francaise.fr

These days, Pézenas goes to town on drama. The place has several theatres. And set into the pavement of the main avenue, the Cours Jean Jaurès, are clay plaques bearing the foot- or handprints of key actors who have performed in town. This is a strange idea, as nothing at all distinguishes an actor's handprint or footprint from anyone else's. I could

have left mine. But it's caught on quite widely. Claudia Cardinale and the recently-departed Jean-Paul Belmondo had, it appears, the same-sized hands.

At any event, I had a fine day following Molière around town. Had I wanted the Mediterranean seaside, it was just down the road at the Cap-d'Agde. But I didn't. I preferred roaming through the Pézenas past. I suspect that you might, too – once Britons are let back into France for fun. It's worth a try, if you're in the area. We have to cram in experiences while we can. As Molière wrote in *Le Dépit Amoureux* (usually translated as "The Love Tiff"): "We die only once – and for such a long time."

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