The French city of Toulouse has long been considered one of Europe’s most important and influential aeronautical hubs. Its flirtation with aviation started in 1890 when Clément Ader took to the air for the first time in his steam-powered Éole flying machine on the southern suburb of Muret. La Ville Rose (the Pink City, so named on account of its many terracotta brickwork buildings) was subsequently the birthplace for such classic aircraft as the first aviation SE 210 Caravelle and Aerospatiale/RAE Concorde, and more recently the Airbus A380 and A350 super jumbos. It is also home to Pan-European aerospace giant Airbus and France’s first helicopter manufacturer ATR, with an estimated 40,000 people in the wider Midi-Pyrénées region now directly employed by the aviation industry.

It is somewhat fitting, therefore, that the city has what it dubs ‘one of the richest [aircraft] collections in France’ – Aeroscopia.

Introducing Aeroscopia

In 1980, the Ailes Anciennes Toulouse association was launched with the aim of preserving aeronautical heritage, along with fostering an aviation culture among younger generations. Initial work focused on predominantly military and General Aviation types, with the first jet airliner, former Air Toulouse Caravelle 12, F-GHMU (c/n 249), arriving in 1995. The collection has since grown substantially, aided by Airbus and ATR jobs with local and regional councils. It was the association’s partnership with fellow Toulouse-based aerospace museum L’Aérothèque, under the umbrella Terre d’Envol (Earth Flight), which led to the creation of Aeroscopia, a dedicated facility at the city’s Blagnac airport. The foundation stone for the new museum was laid on June 16, 2011, and construction was completed last half-year. However, it wasn’t all plain sailing. The official opening on January 15, 2015 marked the culmination of more than two decades of work and several false starts, driven largely by difficulties in finding both the financial support for the project (estimated to be around €21.2 million and a suitable site on which to build the museum).

Aeroscopia lies on the northeastern edge of Toulouse-Blagnac airport and is the result of more than two decades of planning.
Tailor-made

One of the most eye-catching elements of Aeroscopia is its architecture. The 161,500sq ft (15,000m²) site includes a striking zinc grey main exhibition hall designed by the Cardete Huet architect agency (which was also responsible for the neighbouring Lagadère plant). The modular building is 128ft (40m) long and currently spans 86,111sq ft (8,000m²), but could be expanded by a further 49,965sq ft (1,000m²) should finances allow.

In addition to the museum exhibit hall, Aeroscopia also includes the adjacent La Ferme de Pinot, an 18th century U-shaped farmhouse. The building is being refurbished and, once completed early next year, will incorporate an auditorium, restaurants, a documentation centre, educational activity rooms and offices. Inside the facility, the history of aviation in Toulouse is represented through more than 30 large-scale models, ranging from the 1920s-vintage Dewoitine D.1 C1 single-seat fighter and long-haul Latécoère 20 mail planes to the Caravelle, the Airbus family of airliners and ATR’s regional turboprops. The models are accompanied by five interactive ‘exposition islands’, which provide in-depth information on various aspects of the collection.

One such display – the Archaeology Aéronautique (aeronautical archaeology) island – showcases the fascinating work of aviation historian Gilles Collaveri and his team, who devote much of their time to finding the remains of aircraft that have crashed in the region.

On the upper level of the main hall, a 190ft-long (58m) mural retraces the history of French aviation from Clément Ader’s first flight through to the present day, while photography from the Jean Dieuzaide collection offers an unusual glimpse behind the scenes at Sud-Aviation and Aérospatiale. The ground floor houses 23 different models showing some of the country’s most important aircraft types.

Aérospatiale/BAC Airbus A300 and the Aeroscopia/AFR Concorde are open to the public. Entry displays currently feature a Concrete and a Caravelle, though Aeroscopia is expected to acquire an A400M military transporter soon.

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