



Lapérouse statue in Albi; Lapérouse museum, below

ALAMY

In the wake of an intrepid explorer

MARIAN McGUINNESS

It's difficult to imagine how a 200-year-old watercolour paintbox could make such an emotional connection. While in France and seeking the road less travelled, I find myself in the small town of Albi, northeast of Toulouse in the Midi-Pyrenees region.

At Albi's core is its towering 13th-century Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile. One of the largest brick constructions in the world, its formidable silo-towers belie the delicate gothic tracery of its interior. Its partner in juggernaut red-brick construction is the adjacent Palais de la Berbie (the Bishop's Palace) with its curlicue gardens and witches-hat turrets. It houses the artworks of Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi's No. 1 of postimpressionist Parisian life.

But the paintbox of emotional connection is not that of Toulouse-Lautrec's. Albi has produced two No. 1 sons, the other being one of the world's greatest navigators, Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de Lapérouse, the same La Perouse of the Sydney suburb on the shores of Botany Bay.

I walk past Cecile, the organ grinder, who is entertaining the café clientele by the Tarn River, and cross the 11th-century Pont-Vieux to the less salubrious side of the city.

In a modest square named Botany Bay, a petite museum the size of an 18th-century frigate is dedicated to Lapérouse.

A rusty anchor that looks more like a giant's pick axe guards the entrance. Its two small rooms display models of Lapérouse's frigates, his compass and astrolabe. There are other navigational instruments, swords, listed duties of crew members, portraits and intriguing wicker containers used by naturalists to transport plants.

After the success of Captain Cook's exploits in the Pacific, France was determined to match Cook's achievements. Louis XVI personally contributed to the preparation of

the four-year, 150,000km expedition. A giant world map charting Lapérouse's scientific voyages during the Age of Enlightenment looks like a blue meandering snail's trail. Among the 220 men on board were the cream of French science, including an astronomer, botanists, mathematicians, geologists, physicists and a surgeon. One notable reject was Napoleon Bonaparte.

I skim the handwritten letters. After a romantic odyssey with Eleonore in Mauritius, Lapérouse sought his father's permission to marry. The reply tells much of rank and fortune for this 36-year-old heroic navigator. "By degrading yourself you humiliate your entire family, sacrificing your fortune for a frivolous beauty. Do you not realise that you are under my authority?"

Among the exhibited curiosities, there is one that jabs at my heart. It not only shows the navigator's accomplishments, but also his humanity. Tucked into a glass cabinet is Lapérouse's paintbox. It is a wooden and canvas box with rows containing 56 tiny ceramic pots of watercolour paint. Most thumb-nail pots have tinges of remaining washes, while a few unused colours are cracked and crazed. An almost-bald brush is secured by a canvas flap.

Like a portal, the paintbox draws me into the life of Lapérouse. While on board, as professional sketches were composed, Lapérouse was painting his unique observations. I imagine them one day being discovered in a dusty French attic.

On March 15, 1788, after almost three years of extraordinary adventures, Lapérouse left Botany Bay to explore the Solomon Islands. He was never seen again. Like the vanishing MH370, Lapérouse's disappearance sparked one of the greatest sea searches known.

In 2003 divers discovered a skull, a vital clue to the mysterious disappearance. Thousands of other items were found: a watch, china, glasses, silver salvers and sculptures. Many are displayed in the museum.

Facing the scaffold in 1793, Louis XVI, who instigated the original expedition, reportedly asked: "What news of Lapérouse?"

Even Jules Verne, through the voice of Captain Nemo in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* commented, "the disappearance had shaken the entire world. A splendid death for a seaman".

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