

TRAVEL

Lost in France by design

A meander around Dordogne’s broad rivers and dreamy villages

ADAM JACOT

WHAT beauty. What charm. What gorgeous country living and at how seductively gentle a pace. Dreamy villages, deep in the heart of France, with their stone buildings in keeping with their natural environment. Shutters painted in gentle hues ranging from celadon green to lilac, from sky blue to burgundy. Proper broad rivers for canoeing, woods for truffle-hunting and hot air balloons from which scan the scenery. Not to mention plenty of foie gras and weekend food markets.

The Dordogne, a region of Aquitaine, is the third most visited and third-largest area of France. It’s long appealed to people from the UK. The town of Eymet, for example, is 55% British with its own cricket pitch and once even had a British mayor. It certainly feels like a French version of the Cotswolds or of Tuscan Chianti.

The region is fondly broken into areas called Périgord Noir (for its dark forests), Périgord Blanc (white stone), Périgord Vert (trees and ponds) and Périgord Pourpre (vineyards). The region is well served by flights from Great Britain to Toulouse, Bordeaux and Bergerac airports all year round and to the local Brive and Limoges airports in the summer season.

I recommend visiting by car as it’s lovely to drive around and get lost, almost willingly, down its sleepy lanes and through its magical villages. I drove to Périgueux (www.destination-perigueux.fr/en). It’s the capital of the Dordogne “department” (region) and its centre is divine and like a film set with its misty romanticism. Devoid of traffic and preserved in all its medieval glory, the streets are higgledy-piggledy with their uniquely wonky sandstone buildings, turrets and doors.

For lunch I went down a narrow passage in the Old Town to Le Pétrcore restaurant named after the town’s original settlers. It was spacious, minimal and chic. It felt calm with all its natural colours. There were no pictures. It didn’t need them as the food did all the talking from the confident menu that was both creative and exciting.

From its exterior, the town’s Saint-Front cathedral has an oriental feel with its minaret-style belltower and its mass of onion-shaped domes allegedly deriving from Istanbul and Venice. I roamed around the interesting artisan boutiques that are infinitely preferable to the cheap tat of typical souvenir shops back home. I loved walking along the banks of Périgueux’s river L’Isle, a tributary of the Dordogne, from which I spotted L’Eschif, the especially charming 14th-century look-out post of a hut on stilts.

For dinner I experienced Oxalis



restaurant (restaurant-oxalis.fr). It’s down another side street and named after the edible flower. It rightfully claims to be a “restaurant of experiences” and within is a small and discreet stripped-bare cavern. You get what you’re given and the highlights of my taster menu comprised the local foie gras, “ceviche de bar” with beetroot, pistachio and samphire paired with a glass of local red Pécharmant.

En route to my hotel further south I stopped off at Sainte-Alvère, home to the best-known truffle market in the Dordogne. I walked round this idyllic village where houses instantly get snapped up, and entered the cool church with its resounding echoes. It’s right next door to Dix Restaurant (dixdordogne.com) where I met the chef, Raphael, and his English wife. They have developed an excellent reputation for delighting customers with their culinary creations and all performed within and without the walls of their house for a truly authentic treat.

I next drove an hour south to my hotel,

Le Domaine de Rochebois hotel, in the heart of Périgord Noir, is a restored historic manor house with the atmosphere of a high-class county club

Le Domaine de Rochebois (rochebois.com). Located in the heart of Périgord Noir and recently run by Salesian monks as an orphanage, this historic manor was restored and reopened as a family-run hotel in 2022. It has the atmosphere of a high-class county club as some come to play golf, others to be pampered in the spa. I arrived down a beautifully landscaped drive beside a pond speckled with swans and a rockery cascading with water.

The expansive grounds border the river Dordogne in one of her many meandering “cingles” (oxbow bends). Such an invitation to explore and perfect, I discovered, for a romantic circular walk past the local Château de Montfort.

Inside the hotel, past 16th-century tiles and a balustraded stairway, I reached my room. Classic and contemporary, it all felt so fresh with the high finish of the décor comprising calm neutral greys and beige – as did the chic concrete of my bathroom floor. Rooms are from £160 and those at the side have private terraces with views over

the pool and terrace where birds twitter amongst walnut and chestnut trees. The Spa Nuxe boasted the latest hydrotherapy pool and hammam in which to relax after a day of sight-seeing. With three restaurants on-site, it’s all very spoiling for dinner. Le Wedge, the brasserie, beside the nine-hole golf course is a minute’s walk away under the stars and had an excellent menu. A pianist tickled the ivories elsewhere at Josephine Bar.

It’s close to Vitrac, long considered the region’s most expensive area. It’s known as the 1000 castle valley thanks to its 730 chateaux and 200 “domaines” (vineyards). Nearby and perched high up on a rocky spur are the Marqueyssac Gardens (marqueyssac.com). They were the brainchild of a former owner of the accompanying slate-roofed chateau. This is understandably the most visited garden in the south-west of France. The winding pathways took me through a maze of immaculately clipped box hedging. Six peacocks stroll around and there’s a cage of

Travel notes

Adam was a guest of the Perigord-Dordogne Tourist Board. For further information visit holidayextras.co.uk (0800 316 5678) who offer airport lounges at all major UK airports and many international destinations.

From Edinburgh, you can fly to Bordeaux airport bordeaux.aeroport.fr/vols-destinations/destinations-depart-bordeaux and Toulouse airport toulouse.aeroport.fr/vols-et-destinations

divine doves. Six gardeners are employed full-time to trim all the topiary twice a year. From the wonderful vantage points of my walk, I looked down at the valley below and, across the river, at its many châteaux.

The gardens are close to Château de Beynac. Surely the most emblematic castle in the Dordogne with its heavy defensive walls once guarded by illustrious figures such as Simon de Montfort and King Richard I “the Lion-Heart” of England. It’s minutes from La Roque-Gageac, the a gorgeous roadside village set in a limestone cliffside beneath a large rocky precipice bordering the Dordogne river. The monochrome stone colour of the dwellings blend magnificently and harmoniously with the rock above.

I strongly recommend visiting the former home of Josephine Baker at Château des Milandes (milandes.com/en). Not only is it an exquisite chateau presiding over the river with beautifully proportioned rooms, broad fireplaces and a lovely old kitchen but it’s also a permanent exhibition to the American dancer and singer. The gardens are geometric and include a rectangular mirrored pond. Meanwhile, the neighbouring chapel has an atmosphere all of its own with its deeply calming simple white altar.

I visited the morning market at Sarlat. Taking place along the town’s long spinal cord that is the Rue de la République, it was almost bazaar-like with its bounteous stacks of local produce: honey, cheeses, sausages and, of course, foie gras. The outdoor market traders bear typically weathered, rosy complexions. The picturesque nature of its medieval streets has been cleverly preserved with its warm limestone buildings and characteristic roofs of lauze tiles.

So much to see ... so much still to be encountered. I hadn’t time to take in the town of Bergerac, famous for its link to the eponymous storybook character, Cyrano. And on my next visit, I must go to Lascaux IV, the brilliantly recreated version of the famous prehistoric art cave (lascaux.fr/en), deemed too delicate now for the original to be exposed.

I hope to return – some time soon.

TRAVEL EXTRA



FROM FREE UPGRADES TO THE SAFEST SEATS AIRLINE MYTHS BUSTED

We’ve been flying to holiday destinations for over 100 years, but the art of aviation is still shrouded in a considerable amount of myth and mystery.

Generated by fear, gossip and lively imaginations, the internet is rife with tall tales and alarming assertions.

Some rumours are so outlandish they have no foundation in fact, but other seemingly ridiculous statements hold a surprising amount of truth ...

IT’S POSSIBLE TO GET AN UPGRADE IF YOU SMILE POLITELY AT THE CHECK-IN DESK

Yes, you can request to change cabin class when you reach the airport – but only if you’re willing to pay either with cash or air miles (depending on the airline).

Empty seats are generally offered at a reduced rate or auction in the days leading up to the flight or at the point of online check-in.

It’s also worth remembering that if a flight is oversold and the crew are forced to shift passengers around, members of the airline’s loyalty scheme with a decent number of points will be given priority.

PLANE FOOD HAS AN UNHEALTHY AMOUNT OF SALT

A combination of dryness, low pressure and (oddy) engine noise can affect tastebuds, making it harder to distinguish salty and sweet flavours. As a result, airlines do add more salt to make meals more palatable – with some reports suggesting it can be as much as 30%.

IT’S SAFER TO SIT AT THE BACK OF THE PLANE

Travellers pay a fortune to turn left on planes, but statistically the safest seats are in cattle class at the back. According to a TIME investigation based on 35 years of aircraft accident data, those sitting in the dreaded middle seat had the lowest fatality rate at 28%. The next best option is an aisle seat in the middle of the plane.

RECYCLED AIR IN PLANES SPREADS DISEASE

This was a big concern during the Covid years, which was ultimately found to be false.

Modern aircrafts use a filtration system similar to those used in hospitals, eliminating 99.9% of airborne microbes. So, breathe easy next time you board a flight.

PILOTS AVOID FLYING OVER THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

Conspiracy theorists may have you believe otherwise, but pilots do not actively avoid the western part of the North Atlantic Ocean, famous for the mysterious disappearance of ships and planes.

Check tracking apps like Flightradar24 and you’ll find flight paths regularly criss-crossing the route.

PILOTS AND CO-PILOTS EAT DIFFERENT MEALS

Admittedly, they might have different dietary requirements but there is a good reason why pilots eat different meals – and it’s not down to fussiness.

If food is accidentally contaminated, it’s vital the most important people on the plane don’t fall sick.

The risk of this happening is reduced by serving separate meals to the cockpit team.

SARAH MARSHALL