

A river runs through it

LOUISA WALTERS
TOURS THE REGION
THAT BOASTS 10
OF THE PRETTIEST
VILLAGES IN FRANCE

As Vianne Rocher in the movie *Chocolat*, Juliette Binoche fell in love with a fictional village in the Dordogne, but I fell in love with the real thing – and not just one village either, for each little hamlet along this winding river in the south-west of France is prettier than the one before it. If you like castles, medieval cities, *foie gras* and truffles, you will love it too.

The only thing this exquisitely beautiful area had been missing was a luxury hotel, but the Pruneyac family has seen to that, with the opening (in 2022) of **Domaine de Rochebois**, a 40-bedroom boutique property set on a stunning estate with a nine-hole golf course.



Le Château des Milandes

About an hour's drive from Bergerac airport, Rochebois is the kind of hotel where, once you enter your supremely comfortable bedroom decorated in a calming colour palette of pastel neutrals with French furniture and top-level bedding, and open the doors on to your terrace you simply won't want to leave. And with a gourmet restaurant recently opened under the auspices of Michelin-starred chef Adrien Soro, who trained under Joël Robuchon and Alain Ducasse, casual dining available at The Wedge restaurant on the golf course, plus an outdoor pool, a spa and a kids' club, you really don't need to.

And yet, this region, which is in many ways reminiscent of the Cotswolds with its honey-coloured buildings and multitude of little towns and gardens, needs to be explored – and we did just that.

The Dordogne is a river, said to be the cleanest in Europe, and stretches for 515km through hill country that is full of old villages,



La Roque-Gageac

castles (1,000 of them) and small towns. Among the 154 villages featured on the 'Most Beautiful Villages of France' list, 10 are along the Dordogne.

After breakfast on the terrace at Rochebois – it was still warm enough in September to eat outside – we headed to the market in the village of **Saint-Cyprien**, fondly described as "small city of character". Each Sunday morning, around 150 traders ply their wares along the main street – mainly food but also a deliciously sweet wine called Montbazaic from nearby Bergerac, along with craft goods.

We took a drive to the Italianate-style **Marqueyssac gardens**, a parkland filled with contrasts – 6km of pathways interspersed with winding labyrinths, with a castle at its heart that has been restored to support the typical stone Perigord Noir roof.



Juliette Binoche in *Chocolat*

The main feature of the gardens are the extraordinary boxwood, which number 150,000, and the beautiful views; which you can regard from a delightful, inexpensive restaurant onsite.

At the foot of a cliff running along the Dordogne is the tiny village of **La Roque-Gageac**, whose most notable feature

is the staircase cut into the rock leading to a recently-renovated fort with views of the river and verdant forests 40m below. It was a struggle climbing the steps in the midday sun, and equally so the steep narrow street that leads to a luxuriant botanical garden with palm trees, lemon trees and Japanese medlar trees – but so worth the effort as this is a truly fascinating feature in a quaint French village.

We had earned an ice cream at Glacier Fabricant Lambert in the walled village of **Domme**, a 13th-century royal bastide

A bedroom at **Domaine de Rochebois**



(fortified medieval town). Created in 1281 on a protected cliff by order of French King Philip III, it was invaded by the English in 1346 for a time but remained relatively unscathed and you can see the ramparts and the Porte des Tours in which the imprisoned Templars made engravings, which are still visible today.

Beynac-et-Cazenac is another medieval town with cobbled streets and forms part of the Valley of Five Chateaux, named for the five castles that date from the 100 Years War. Chateau de Beynac, perched on the clifftop overlooking the town, is one of the best preserved in the region and has been used many times for filming, including for Luc Besson's *Jeanne d'Arc* with Faye Dunaway, John Malkovich and Dustin Hoffman in 1999.

Castelnaud-la-Chapelle has two castles, one of which, the Milandes, is the former home of the music-hall artist Joséphine Baker. It was built in the 15th century by an aristocratic French family that wanted to bring back beauty into a region that had been ravaged by fighting against the English. It reached new fame in the 20th century after its restoration and enlargement and in 1947 it was bought by Mme Baker. She lived there for 30 years, the rooms representing her life as it was, from her costumes to the living rooms and bathrooms.

Jews lived in the Dordogne as far back as the 13th century, but were expelled in 1302.

There is a street known as Rue Judaique behind the Museum of Périgord in Périgueux, the largest town in the region and, during the Second World War, Alsatian Jews settled in the town. Eventually, the Resistance was suppressed and the Nazis deported them. A community centre was built in the 1960s, in the wake of the arrival of Jews from North Africa and there remains a synagogue today.

Every corner you turn in these hilltop towns affords another breathtaking view of the Dordogne sparkling in the sunlight. At dusk, the gently-lit villages reflect off the water, which is the beating heart of this region. Johnny Depp apparently never visited the area when he was filming opposite Juliette Binoche in *Chocolat*. To quote another well-known film: big mistake. *Huge*.

Rooms at Domaine de Rochebois cost from €190 per night. rochebois.com / perigordnoir-valleedordogne.com marqueyssac.com / milandes.com

Les Jardins de Marqueyssac



Domaine de Rochebois

