

OUR PODCAST!
NOW ON SPOTIFY

SURREY time & leisure

ISSUE 143
April 2025

FOOD AND CULTURE AWARDS

YOU VOTED! LOCAL
FINALISTS REVEALED

HOTEL-INSPIRED INTERIORS

GET THE LUXURY
LOOK IN
YOUR HOME

THE DIARY

ALL THE EVENTS TO
BOOK NOW IN SURREY

CASTLES & CULTURE

THE MAGICAL ALLURE OF THE DORDOGNE

5 THINGS NOT TO MISS EVERY WEEKEND timeandleisure.co.uk/VIP

DORDOGNE, REIMAGINED

This area of France perfectly blends the old with the new, and should be on your radar this summer.

By Tina Lofthouse



Château des Milandes à Castelnaud-la-Chapelle ©Michèle Delcroix



Château de Puymartin ©Philippe Mouton

Strolling through the cobbled back streets of Montignac-Lascaux, a cat meanders sleepily past followed by a moustachioed man cradling fresh baguettes. A church bell breaks the Sunday morning silence, and, as if on cue, pale blue shutters creak open across the houses in the village square. It couldn't get more quintessentially French than this. And the British have long been drawn to the Dordogne for its timeless charm.

Rolling vineyards, a landscape dotted with proud turrets of the many châteaux (there are apparently 1,001), beautiful villages, the home of classic dishes like *confit de canard* and *foie gras*... and, of course, the wine. While not as renowned as Burgundy, the wines from around Bergerac are very good, and cheaper...

I'd last visited maybe 20 or so years ago, kayaking along the Dordogne, exploring troglodyte sites hewn out of cliffs and scaling the ramparts of the famous castles. On my somnolent Sunday morning stroll, it

seemed the essence of the Dordogne hadn't changed. However, there's also a fresh energy – one that is reflected in innovative menus that combine the best of French cuisine with a global influence. Dinner the previous evening at 10.30, at the historic *Hôtel de Boulliac*, included *foie gras* served in a Japanese-style broth. Lunch at *le DDX* in Sainte-Avère offered guinea fowl with gammas, in a restaurant that looked like it would be just as at home in Soho.

It is also reflected in the châteaux, with many owners not only preserving the past but also bringing it to life in new and imaginative ways. *Château de Puymartin* evocatively portrays the lives of its occupants through the generations. On summer evenings, there are immersive shows imparting the ghostly legends of the castle's White Lady. There's currently a pop-up restaurant too from top chef Vincent Lucas, celebrating duck in all its forms including a delicious duck pie and a dessert topped with sweet crispy duck skin.

At *Château de Fayolle*, you can see the recently restored rooms that show off 18th and 19th interiors – or take an 'urban explorers' tour to discover hidden parts of the castle that have been left untouched.

Château de Commarque is a glorious rambling ruin – its owners Hubert and Christine de Commarque and their children have dedicated themselves to bringing back this amazing castle that had been hidden since the 1960s in thick woodland. In the summer months, it is magically illuminated

along with fire shows. Meanwhile, *Château des Milandes* is not what you might expect for a French château, telling the fascinating story of Josephine Baker, the dancer, singer and activist, who moved into the castle in the 1940s. To mark 50 years since she died, there will be special events this summer including film screenings and even a Playmobil exhibition about her life.

The region also has no shortage of great places to stay. *Château de Lalande* is stunning and its sweeping gravelled terrace in front of the mansion is the perfect spot for aperitifs before a seasonal menu in the restaurant – on my visit, this included white asparagus with eggs from the castle's hens, and local sturgeon. There's a pool for the warmer months. *L'Abbaye* in the village of Saint Cyprien is a delightful spot. My room had a view over the village church and surrounding countryside. The warm-hearted owners also offer transport in a vintage Renault – a trip in which had me beaming.

While this corner of France looks like it is preserved in aspic, it manages to achieve that perfect balance of history while offering something new so it will entice you back time and again. ■



Château de Commarque ©Christophe Desbrie



Château de Lalande