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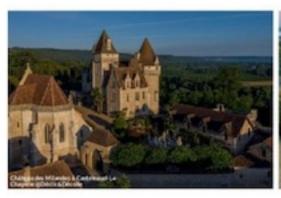
CASTLES & CULTURE

THE MAGICAL ALLURE OF THE DORDOGNE

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DORDOGNE, REIMAGINED

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





along with

Strolling through the cobbled back streets of Montignac-Lascaux, a cat meanders sleepily past followed by a moustachoed man cradling fresh baguettes. A church bell breaks the Sunday morning silence, and, as if oncue, 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 turnets of the many chateaux (there are apparently 1,001), beautiful villages, the home of classic dishes like conflit de canard and fole 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 stroil, 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 ro, bo, at the historic Hotel de Boulhac, included fole gras served in a Japanese-style broth. Lunch at le DIX in Sainte-Alvere offered guinea fow with gambas, 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 crippy 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 hâdden since the 1960s in thick woodland. In the summer months, it is magically illuminated fire shows.
Meanwhile,
Chilteau des
Milandes is
not what you
might expect
for a French
chilteau, 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 enablotion 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 aperliths 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 warmhearted 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 aspk; it manages to achieve that perfect balance of history while offering something new so it will entice you back time and again.