



Castle-hopping in Périgord

The French region of south-west France is a treasure trove of ancient castles, all waiting to be explored, writes Lisa Marks

There's something quietly theatrical about south west France. The air is thick with history but it's the castles that truly bring the past to life. They come in all shapes and sizes but whether they are grand, eccentric or atmospheric, they each have a story to tell.

Périgord is known as the 'land of 1001 castles', and many open their doors to a glittering array of festivities, that range from the cultural to the sporting to the gastronomic, from mid-April to early May. This is when the region celebrates the 'festival of castles', aka the Châteaux en Fête, and is the perfect setting for a truly memorable adventure.

Start your trip in the most famous of the four regions, Périgord Noir, where the dramatic Château de

Castelnaud rises above the 300-mile-long Dordogne River. With over 800 years of turbulent history, the fortress was captured, recaptured and fought over during the Hundred Years' War. After falling into disrepair, Castelnaud was rescued in the 1960s by the Rossillon family and is now home to the superb Museum of Medieval Warfare, a trove of war machines, armour and weaponry, with displays to thrill both kids and history lovers. Live demos that range from trebuchet firing to blacksmithing, bring medieval life into visceral focus.

Continue your journey to the stunning Château de Puymartin, a fairy-tale confection hidden among the woods of Périgord Noir. This 13th-century fortress was transformed in the 19th century into a graceful residence.



Château de Commarque in the Vézère Valley, main; Château Fayolle at Tocane Saint-Apre, above

“
Château des Milandes was once home to the iconic Parisian singer Josephine Baker

For romance, travel north to Château de Fayolle, in Tocane Saint-Apre, part of the lush Périgord Vert. Here, the 18th and 19th centuries echo through its salons and gardens, faithfully preserved – and only recently opened to the public by new owners Florence and Grégory Mangeret.

Visitors can wander through ornate rooms or stroll in English-style gardens, or for those who like creepy corners, take a tour of the castle's tunnels.

No tour of the Dordogne's castles would be complete

without a stop at Château des Milandes, once home to the iconic Parisian singer Josephine Baker. Bought by Baker, who was born in St. Louis, in 1906, she eventually became a French citizen and the castle became not just her sanctuary but her base for activism during the early part of the Second World War. Today, the château stands as a loving tribute, not only to its Renaissance origins, but to Baker herself.

Inside, you'll find intimate exhibitions that cover her life as an entertainer, Resistance fighter and humanitarian. The gardens, originally designed by Jules Vacherot, who was head gardener for the city of Paris during the Universal Exhibition of 1900, are host to birds of prey (Baker kept a large menagerie of animals), and family workshops ranging from fencing to beekeeping. Bringing together elements of history, espionage and celebrity, it's a complete day out, and there's also a brasserie on site.

Further east lies the exquisite Château et Jardins de Losse,

tucked beside the Vézère River. Originally built in the 11th century, it was reshaped into a Renaissance residence by Jean II de Losse, a soldier who served the future Henri IV.

Finally, located in the Vézère Valley, the Château de Commarque is a hidden gem steeped in 15,000 years of history. From prehistoric cave engravings to a dramatic medieval stronghold, this site offers a rare blend of archaeology, legend and architecture in one breath-taking location.

Visitors can explore prehistoric caves featuring Neolithic cliff dwellings and a once-abandoned medieval fortress with restored towers, chapels, noble houses and fortified passages.

Become the protagonist of your unwritten 'romantasy' novel by staying at Hôtel de Bouilhac, in the village of Montignac-Lascaux. A handsome 17th-century house, it was once home to Jean de Bouilhac, physician to the children of Louis XV. Now a delightful boutique hotel, it seamlessly blends antique character with 21st-century comfort, and is just a short drive from many of the region's best castles.

Alternatively, base yourself at the four-star Hotel L'Abbaye in Saint-Cyprien, a restored 18th-century residence with a welcoming, family-run feel. Its central location is perfect for castle-hopping, and the grounds, complete with a pool and parkland, offer the chance to unwind after a day of exploring.

Meanwhile, tucked away in the picturesque village of Sainte-Alvère, Le Dix is a

charming guest house and restaurant run by hosts Gemma and Raphaël. This beautifully restored property offers stylish rooms, peaceful surroundings and delicious seasonal cuisine. Whether you're relaxing on the terrace or exploring nearby markets and châteaux, Le Dix is a perfect base if you're seeking tranquillity.

Find another relaxing retreat, at the four-star Château de Lalande, a lovingly restored, elegant 18th-century manor. Run by Catherine and Yves Staebell, this boutique hotel blends historic charm with modern comfort. Dine at their restaurant, take a dip in the pool or explore nearby Périgueux. And of course, you can do all of the above while tasting Dordogne's local wines.

You don't have to be royalty to enjoy this part of the world. Whether you're here for romance, history or pure escapism, the castles of the region offer more than just ancient walls; they are living places of storytelling, reinvention and charm. Each one is a chapter in France's long, layered history and together, they create an unforgettable adventure.

To find out more about the Festival of Castles, and the Périgord region in general, visit www.france.fr/en/article/1001-castles-in-dordogne-perigord. For more information about the accommodation, visit: www.chateau-lalande-perigord.com (£135 to £370), www.hoteldebouilhac.com (prices from £200 to £350), www.hotel-labbaye.com (prices from £190 to £370), www.dixdordogne.com.



The pool at Hotel L'Abbaye in Saint-Cyprien



Shake up your Madeira break

The Madeira Rum Festival celebrates the Portuguese island's rich history of sugar cane and the spirit made from it, writes Neil Geraghty

A truck laden with glossy purple sugar cane pulls up at Madeira's historic Engenho do Norte rum distillery and time is of the essence to extract its precious juice. Sugar cane's sucrose quality rapidly degrades after harvesting, so within minutes of arriving, the stems are transferred onto a conveyer belt for crushing. Inside the factory I watch nervously as a machete wielding labourer hacks the moving sugar cane to pieces just inches from his toes. The stems then enter a vibrating crusher and the sparkling juice cascades down into a vat. The aroma is heavenly and I can't wait to taste the rums.

I'm visiting Madeira during the island's Rum Festival, an enjoyable late spring event that

celebrates one of the island's oldest traditional industries. Shortly after Madeira's discovery in 1419, Portuguese settlers brought sugar cane cuttings over from Sicily and it grew so well that the lucrative sugar crop became known as white gold. Wherever sugar cane grows, rum production is sure to follow and to this day, poncha, a refreshing cocktail made with rum, orange juice and honey, is one of Madeira's favourite tipples.

The Rum Festival is held in the historic centre of Madeira's capital Funchal, a stone's throw away from the cathedral in the atmospheric Placa Central. When I arrive in the evening there's a distinct Latin American vibe in the air. On a stage a jazz band is playing salsa and the island's rum producers are doing a brisk

trade in colourful cocktails decorated with scarlet hibiscus flowers. Masterclasses are held in a small marquee and tonight a Madeiran Michelin starred chef, Octavio Freitas, is presenting a tasting menu paired with local rums. I'm initially doubtful that such a strong drink would go well with food, but many of Madeira's rums are aged in vintage wine barrels and display subtle characteristics. As Octavio crisps up the skin of some pan fried trout with a blow torch, sommeliers rove around the tables filling our glasses with a range of rums. From an almond scented white rum that perfectly complements the trout to a smoky aged dark rum that enhances the deep savoury notes of slow cooked brisket, my doubts about rum are quickly dispelled.

I'm keen to learn more about Madeira's rum industry and early the next morning I embark on a vintage jeep tour run by AdventureLand which creates tailor made itineraries around guests' interests. The tours take in many of Madeira's beauty spots and on the windswept eastern tip of the island, Ponta do Furado, I brave the elements on a vertigo-inducing hike along its majestic limestone cliffs.

From here I take in sweeping views of Madeira's northern mountains, their summits enveloped by clouds rolling in from the Atlantic. Madeira's high rainfall and fertile volcanic soil gives the landscape a lush tropical feel and as we drive along the north coast we pass through dense banana groves and whitewashed colonial style villages reminiscent of Brazil.

In Porto da Cruz we stop at Engenho do Norte which is both a working distillery and fascinating rum museum. The buildings date from the 1920s and during the busy sugar cane harvest which lasts from March to May, the vintage boilers, fermentation vats and stills are a hive of activity. The rums are aged in oak barrels in a warehouse overlooking the ocean and the sea breezes impart a delicate salty, quality to the rums.

The next morning I set out on a tour of western Madeira where the lion's share of the island's sugar cane is grown on south facing mountain terraces. The terrain here is so steep that all the cultivation is done by hand. It's backbreaking work and as we drive along winding mountain lanes I spot farmers trudging up steep slopes carrying enormous bales of sugar cane on their backs. At

Cocktail making at the William Hinton stand at the Madeira Rum Festival

the pretty village of Ponta do Sol I stop for lunch at Sol Puente, a good value restaurant perched high on the cliffs overlooking the sea. There I order a jug of zesty iced poncha which perfectly complements a plate of piping hot crispy calamari and salted cod croquettes. Further along the coast I stop at one of Madeira's oldest rum producers, William Hinton, where I spot some rums ageing in recycled Scottish whisky barrels.

"Each barrel brings a unique heritage and flavour to the rum," explains Eugenio, William Hinton's affable manager.

Back in the rum festival I join a rum and chocolate masterclass where the last rum on the menu is a 6 year old William Hinton aged rum. The rich dark rum paired with a smooth caramel truffle works perfectly together but throw in some fiery notes from a Scottish whisky barrel and you have a marriage made in heaven.

For more information on holiday ideas in Madeira, www.visitmadeira.com/en

Four great value family holiday destinations

Looking for a good value summer break? Sarah Marshall has found some bargains to consider



There are 50 Wallace & Gromit sculptures spread across Bristol

Clawford Lakes Resort and Spa, Devon

There are plenty of opportunities for aquatic adventures at this water sports paradise and wildlife haven with 17 natural lakes, just 30 minutes from Cornwall's Bude beaches. Accommodation – including Luxury Cocoons, Lake Pods and Floating Lodges – serves as a base for fishing lessons, archery, and paddle boarding, kayaking and open-water swimming on the Leisure Lake. For younger children, there's an outdoor heated pool with flumes.

How: A seven-night stay in a self-catering Signature Lake Pod (sleeps four) costs from £1,079 in August. Visit hoseasons.co.uk.

Bristol

For families wishing to fill their days with activities, a staycation city break is a good option. Home of British animation studio Aardman, Bristol, is the setting for a new Gromit Unleashed 3 trail, featuring 50 Wallace & Gromit sculptures spread across the city. Download a map to tick them all off before the end of August.

How: Go to visitbristol.co.uk for more on Gromit Unleashed offers.

Sunny Beach, Bulgaria

Promising sun, sea and sand at affordable prices, the Black Sea has been growing in popularity over the past few years. According to Daniel Howick, a travel manager from Your Co-op Travel, it offers value, natural beauty, and family-friendly experiences.

"We've found holidaymakers love that they can book an

entire beach holiday – flights, hotel, food, and drink – for a fraction of the cost they'd pay in Spain, Portugal or Greece," he says, highlighting the golden sands and Blue Flag-awarded beach at Sunny Beach resort as a favourite. **How:** A seven-night all-inclusive stay at the Sunrise Blue Magic Resort in Obzor costs from £2,839 (two adults and two children), including flights from Birmingham in August. Visit cooptravel.co.uk.

Agadir, Morocco

There was a time when families would rarely venture beyond the Med. But due to a combination of rising prices in Europe and low-cost air links further afield, mid-haul holidays are now much more appealing. Topping the charts is Morocco, where – according to new research by online travel agent loveholidays – an all-inclusive break can cost as little as £81 per person per night.

"North African destinations like Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt offer a huge range of affordable, great quality all-inclusive resorts, making them a top choice for cost-conscious couples and families alike this summer," says Al Murray, chief marketing officer at loveholidays.

How: A seven-night all-inclusive stay at El Pueblo Tamlelt resort in Agadir in August costs from £1236 (for four), including flights. Visit loveholidays.com.