

Slow down and recharge in glorious Gascony, France



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Sleepy villages, sunflower fields and superb food — France doesn't get more beautiful and blissful than Gers

Another quiet day in the medieval village of Fourcès and the door to the little épicerie — the only place near by to buy fresh bread and groceries — is firmly shut. It's been shut every day we've popped in to this little village near our holiday let in southwest France. We are, after all, in Gascony, about as deep into la France profonde as it gets.

While it might not have the most accessible shops, Fourcès is possibly France's quaintest bastide (fortified village), in unusual circular format. Plane trees now grow on the grassy circle that was once the motte, home to a wooden château. In the ring of colonnaded half-timbered stone houses lies an antique shop, a café selling tasty ice creams, and a friendly auberge near the appropriately named rue de la Soif (thirsty street).

A moustached Jean Ladeveze beckons us into his atmospheric alcohol shop, past the barrel bearing glasses for free tastings into an interior where shelves are weighed down by clear glass bottles, each holding liquid of a different tawny tone. It's like an ancient apothecary's, except that this is the place to get your armagnac mixed, not your medicine.

"It's pretty original," says Ladeveze. "My son makes it according to different tastes — he's an oenologist." It's a bit early for armagnac, so we sip "porthos", a still-heady mixture of the brandy with red wine and drink in the view through the open door. Who needs bread when you've got this?

This is typical Gascony, of which the prettiest part is the Gers, my favourite part of my favourite country in the world. It's the part of France I would like to live in when I stop roaming the world as a travel editor. They may have stunning

beaches in the Maldives, fascinating culture in Sri Lanka and an ace atmosphere in Paris, but none of them has the same hold on my heart as this bucolic corner of France, south and east of Bordeaux and near the foothills of the Pyrenees.

You'll understand why when you see the gently undulating hills with their opulent carpet of sunflowers patchworked by fields of vines. This is a place where you really understand what the French mean when they use the word *terroir* — where land, good soil and lots of sun is the key to everything and where flavours explode from local produce. It is *terroir* that explains the taste of the delicious golden armagnac that drips out of copper alembics — distillation stills that look like something out of your school chemistry set — and *terroir* that earned the region the nickname the granary of France.

Ducks and geese far outnumber the 180,000 residents in the Gers — there are actually 28 ducks per inhabitant — and you can't go far without seeing evidence of that, whether it's out in the farmyards, or on a restaurant table in the form of duck confit and foie gras. Yes, foie gras is big here, and the locals will try hard to persuade you that it's not cruel; this is an area where traditions die hard, with Gascons living off the land in the same way as generations have done before them.

"Are the people always this friendly?" asks my American friend, Peter, on our first day, when the lady at the supermarket counter takes time to talk about the different regional cheeses, giving us a taste of several. When we ask about wine, she beckons a friend over, who accompanies us to the alcohol aisle and gives us the low-down on the local plonk.

There are plenty of opportunities to taste both cheese and wine in the ambling forays we make to quaint stone villages across the region during the next week, foraging around small markets, and sampling delicious local produce in the restaurants. There are no big-hitter sights in the area to distract us other than the somewhat disappointing Flaran Abbey and a few statues of d'Artagnan, whose character in *The Three Musketeers* was modelled on Charles de Batz de Castelmore from Lupiac. It is slow tourism at its best and gives us time to absorb the delicious Frenchness of it all.

In Mézin, we stroll past beret-wearing locals playing boules to the market in the little village square, where they're putting up a stage for a party. The occasion? To celebrate 20 years of having a library. In La Romieu, as we feast on both confit and magret of duck, followed by fromage blanc flavoured with armagnac, we play spot the cats. They're not real, but stone cats perched in small alcoves, lodged in gaps between walls, figurines prowling across window sills. Unsurprisingly, La Romieu is known as the village of cats, after a girl named Angeline saved the locals from a famine by rearing cats that saw off disease-carrying rodents.

We crisscross the gorgeous countryside in the early summer sun and, as we go, I marvel that in the decade since my last visit, little has changed, the villages still firmly part of a more scenic, appealing past. Even the snigger-inducing town of Condom is surprisingly lovely. Here, by a statue of the musketeers, we meet a hiker from Luxembourg who has been on the road for three months, walking 2,400km along the Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelleroute.

There are a handful of other hikers in the fairytale-like Larressingle, the smallest fortified village in France, reached by crossing a stone drawbridge over a dry moat. But apart from them, this 13th-century fortress that was once the old residence of the abbots of Condom is empty on a June day. So after a five-minute walk in which we circumnavigate the ramparts, we sit and soak up the atmosphere, sampling crêpes that have soaked up quite a lot of armagnac.

Did I mention that armagnac is the defining flavour of these parts? It's drizzled or stirred into everything, from ice cream to meat sauces. But while on my last visit, you couldn't drive far without seeing a sign for a local armagnac producer, now the placards advertise wine, and Floc, a sweet pre-dinner drink of armagnac and grape juice.

We find out why when we visit a local producer — Jean-Marie Terraube at Domaine de Magnaut — who fills us in on what the French call the crisis of after-dinner drinks, which have been steadily losing ground to pre-dinner drinks and wine. "Ten years ago we produced more armagnac than wine," he says. "Now out of 40 hectares, we use three for armagnac, one for Floc and the rest for wine. It's pretty much the image of the region."

We can tell the great strides the region is making in wine production when we sample the light, grapefruity white and a deliciously heavy red called Passion. We leave with a clink and several bottles to consume at our rental home,

a typical stone house on the outskirts of Fourcès that has been beautifully restored. As we sit in the early evening sunlight around the pool, glasses in hand, it seems a delightful coincidence that the vines all around us are owned by the Domaine de Magnaut.

There is more drinking to be done at Château de Monluc in Saint-Puy. Here, they use a secret recipe to make Pousse Rapière (sword thrust), a delicious orangey-armagnac flavour liqueur, which is added to the château's own sparkling wine. "My grandmother made it as a liqueur and then my father added it to sparkling wine. I am now the holder of the secret recipe — my son doesn't even know it yet," says Noel Lassus.

It slips down a treat, as does the sparkling wine on its own. It's cheaper to buy both direct from the château, where you can also see both an ancient fireplace under the flagstones — the underfloor heating of yesteryear — and the cellars, almost cathedral like in the dark, with barrels and bottles ranged beneath a Romanesque roof.

There are, of course, local products other than alcohol from Gascony, chief of which is woad, a plant used to make a vivid blue dye. But, as we learn when we visit Bleu de Pastel de Lectoure, even this production originally depended on alcohol; urine supplied by the local pubs was used in the fermentation vats. Later on, men were paid to drink beer and urinate for the production process, creating a sort of official job of "pisser".

At least, that's what we're told by Denise Simeon-Lambert, a self-proclaimed "woad master" who is reviving what was once a major industry in Gascony on a smaller scale, with her 90 hectares of plants. She has already made a dye for paint used on a custom-made Jaguar, and to decorate the cabin of the inaugural Airbus A380 plane in Toulouse.

As we tour her workshop, she takes a piece of cloth from a fermentation vat containing woad. Before our eyes, it turns from bright yellow to green and then to blue as the sorcery of oxidation takes place — though she assures us, without urine.

It's another magical element to our week pottering around Gascony, which comes to an end all too quickly. On our last day, we pop into Fourcès for one last look around, walking past the impressive 19th-century stone château into the centre. And yes, the little épicerie is finally open, and voila, there is Madame selling her wares behind the counter. We no longer need bread and milk. Instead, we purchase a postcard of the place we'll never forget.