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The smart guide to Gascony

Francophile Anthony Peregrine's six favourite regions - here he plots the perfect break in Gascony

Anthony Peregrine

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You've been dithering about this year's holiday. Understandably, what with the financial world in meltdown and terrible uncertainty hanging over Cristiano Ronaldo's future. Now, though, it's decision time. Do you stay in Britain or not?

Let me do two things: (a) give you the long-range weather forecast. "We're certainly not expecting a particularly dry summer," said a jolly Met Office chap last week. "It is expected to be wetter than average." And (b) suggest France. For a start, it's not far. It involves no long-haul flights, jabs against disgusting diseases or being treated as terrorists by fat-bottomed customs officers. It has everything in one country: beaches, sun, mountains, forests, lakes, culture, wine, proper villages and the world's best-looking presidential wife.



And, despite the plunging pound, it remains affordable. Not cheap – some of the prices below are a little eye-watering – but reasonable value for the standards involved. Recently, I stayed in a decent three-star double room for £55 a night and had a very acceptable five-course lunch, with ample wine, for £30. The taxi back wasn't overpriced, either. If I could remember exactly how much after all the wine, I'd tell you.

Here's our guide to what we reckon to be the key French regions for summer 2008. All prices are for high season.

GASCONY

"Wellbeing" is the word. Not (heaven help us) "wellness", but real wellbeing, the sort that comes from comely hills and rivers, long lunches, landscapes defined by old-fashioned farming and the feeling that life has rolled on unruffled since d'Artagnan was a lad.

If I ran things, this is how the whole world would be. In Gascony, life relaxes down to ambling pace. Chaps drive tractors, ladies carry proper baskets and all meet up under the arcades of the village square, itself simply the continuation of country life by other means.

There's tons here to see (Lavardens castle, Flaran Abbey's art collection, Auch cathedral's extraordinary choir stalls) and do (biking, boating, hiking, horsing), but they can wait. Today, there is a sunny terrace to sit on, foie gras to eat, wine and armagnac to drink, and weighty matters to discuss. Notably rugby. Or jazz. Though bucolic, Gascony is anything but backward. In remotest Marciac, it hosts one of France's finest jazz festivals – first two weeks in August, this year featuring Diane Krall and Bill Evans, among many others.

Earlier (July 10-14), country music hoes down in Mirande and Latino/Afro/Cuban rhythms seize Vic-Fezensac (July 24-27). The region's most interesting museum, at Béraut, is devoted to international *art naïf*. Almost reasons enough to stir from the terrace, I'd say.

To stay: should you want a masterful take on Gascony, how about your own big, finely restored *maison de maître*, with landscaped gardens, a lake, 10-acre woods, a pool, a bar and an on-site gym? It's in Ladevèze-Rivière, near Plaisance, west of Auch, and sleeps eight. A week costs £1,995 with the regional

specialist Gascony Secret (0844 800 1637, www.gascony-secret.com), which also offers the even bigger and grander Château Robert at St-Sever, south of Mont-de-Marsan. Eighteen of you may stay there as if the French revolution had never happened, from £6,995 per week.

Noble overtones, too, at the Hotel Lous Grits, in Marsolan, between Lectoure and Condom (00 33-5 62 28 37 10, www.hotel-lousgrits.com ; doubles from £183). It's small, certainly, but with considerably more feminine elegance than is usually encountered in country villages.

Further south, outside Auch, Château-les-Charmettes (21 Route de Duran; 05 62 62 10 10, www.chateaulescharmettes.com ; doubles from £133) is a 19th-century manor house that has been repainted a sort of edible orange. It has sumptuous grounds, large salons and some of the fluffiest, most attractive bedrooms in the French southwest.

To eat: this is the land of the duck and the goose, so don't stint on the foie gras. (Its production, especially by smaller farmhouse producers, is not as cruel as you've heard. Believe me, I've watched.) Duck confit is also a favourite, and you'll certainly bump into cassoulet. Meaty red wines from nearby Madiran will do the trick. Try a *floc* (Armagnac and grape juice) before the meal, and as much real Armagnac as you consider reasonable afterwards.

The region's best table is Bernard Bach's Le Puits St Jacques, at Pujaudran, to the west of Toulouse (Place de la Mairie; 05 62 07 41 11, www.lepuitsstjacques.com ; menus from £46). This is especially the case on a warm evening, when you may take to the terrace for duck (naturally), sea bass, home-grown veg and a hefty feelgood factor.

Over in Condom – please, every joke imaginable has already been made – La Table des Cordeliers colonises a 13th-century vaulted chapel, which gives a spiritual element to turbot and red mullet (Rue des Cordeliers; 05 62 68 43 82, www.latabledescordeliers.fr ; menus from £33).

My favourite, though, is Bernard Daubin's Chez Simone, in Montréal-du-Gers (3 Rue Aurensas; 05 62 29 44 40; menus from £15). Under a winning veneer of modernity beats a proper Gascon heart.

Getting there: Calais to Auch by car is about 10½hr nonstop. The most convenient airports are Toulouse and Pau. Both cities are served by TGV trains.

HOW TO GET TO FRANCE

Train: it's fast, comfortable and not as pricey as you might think. Returns from London St Pancras to Paris (2hr 15min) cost from £59; to Strasbourg (5hr 11min) from £89; and to Avignon (5hr 30min) from £109. You can book through tickets from the UK with Eurostar (0870 518 6186, www.eurostar.com) or Rail Europe (0844 848 4070, www.raileurope.co.uk), the UK arm of the French rail company SNCF.

Tunnel and ferry: the quickest way across the Channel is with Eurotunnel (0870 535 3535, www.eurotunnel.com), which speeds from Folkestone to Calais in 35 minutes; prices start at £98 return for a car and passengers.

The short ferry crossing from Dover to Calais, Boulogne or Dunkirk can take as little as 50 minutes by catamaran or up to two hours by regular ferry. Choose less social hours and, even in summer, returns start at just £50 for a car and up to five passengers (on busy weekends, expect to pay at least £100). Operators include P&O (0871 664 5645, www.poferries.com), SeaFrance (0871 423 7119, www.seafrance.com), Norfolkline (0870 870 1020, www.norfolkline.com) and SpeedFerries (0871 222 7456, www.speedferries.com).

Or consider a crossing to Normandy. They don't take as long as you might think – 2hr 15min from Poole to Cherbourg, for instance. Returns in peak season start at £292 for a car and four passengers with Brittany Ferries (0871 244 0744, www.brittany-ferries.co.uk).

For the best deals, try Direct Ferries (0871 222 3312, directferries.com).

Driving: distances and tolls are the things to watch – both can be bigger than you bargained for. Go to www.viamichelin.co.uk or www.theaa.com , which will tot them up for you.

If that's too much of a slog, but you want the car, you could consider Motorail, which runs from Calais to six destinations in southern France. Journey times start at about 11 hours (overnight), with one-way fares from about £360, including the car and up to six passengers in a private couchette. Book with Rail Europe (as above).

Plane: there are plenty of options, with flights from more than 25 UK airports to a similar number of French airports. Carriers that are particularly strong on regional routes include Ryanair (www.ryanair.com), Flybe (www.flybe.com), Air France (0870 142 4343, www.airfrance.co.uk), Jet2 (www.jet2.com) and EasyJet (www.easyjet.com).

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