



# AQUITAINE and the Pays Basque

**But although many visitors are attracted to the area for its waters - surfing, swimming, water sports, therapeutic healing, boating or simply lazing on the beach - it is actually a myriad of different landscapes.**

It was this patchwork of aesthetics and culture that I was most interested in discovering when I spent a week on the west coast.

Covering the whole of the south west corner of France, Aquitaine is the country's third largest region and takes in such well-known destinations as Gascony (dubbed France's answer to Tuscany), Périgord, Guyenne, Armagnac, and at the western side of the Pyrénées, Béarn and the Basque Country.

With swathes of vineyards - Bordeaux is the largest fine wine producing area in the world - it is also a mecca for wine connoisseurs. (Not that I'm an expert, but I love the business of learning to become one!)

Because of its natural irrigation system, much of Aquitaine is lush and green - with pine forests, agricultural land and hundreds of miles of rolling countryside. The Lot-et-Garonne, an up-and-coming destination with British holidaymakers and second home buyers, boasts a temperate climate and fertile valleys.



Cos d'Estournel, with its vineyards

Sitting on a 270 km Atlantic coastline, the region's western edge consists of one long expanse of sandy beach stretching as far as the eye can see. Known as the Côte d'Argent (silver coast), it is a source of joy not only to swimmers but also to surfers. Its high, rolling breakers make it one of the best surfing spots in Europe.

Not being much of a deep water type (I've seen too many Jaws films), I opted instead for an afternoon of body boarding. The highest natural dune in Europe, Le Dune du Pyla, is found here and attracts handgliders as well as sand boarders.

At 3km long and 100m high, it was a slippery uphill climb, but the views at the top of the dune were worth it. The white, powdery sands of the Bay of Biscay and dense pine foliage of the great forest - Les Landes, spread out like a multi-textured tapestry below. As I shot downwards



Canyoning in the Pyrénées, sport for all ages with Goudurix



Monpazier

## TOP TIPS:

For a quick hop in Dordogne or Bordelais region, Buzz Airlines fly to Bergerac and Bordeaux twice a day. See the timetable on page 11.

Tired of a lengthy drive through France? Try P&O Ferries Portsmouth to Bilbao for a mini cruise and it will take you only one and a half hours to reach the French Basque country by car.

Fancy a bike ride or a week-end amongst the Médoc châteaux? Take the small ferry at Royan and you will save a lot of time and avoid the traffic jams. In high season it runs every half an hour, and lands you in the vineyards.

AQUITAINE is...

5 départements : Dordogne, Gironde, Landes, Lot-et-Garonne, Pyrénées Atlantiques.



Nontron knife

in a cloud of sand, exhilaration and muffled screams, I felt like the heroine of an action movie. Keanu Reeves, eat your heart out. This was FUN.

The forest of Les Landes, designated a regional natural park, is a treasure trove of flora and fauna, including more than 260 species of migratory birds in the Teich Bird Reserve.

For outdoor types, the park's numerous quiet, scenic roads and sleepy farming villages can be explored by bike, horse or foot. I took a leisurely cycle among the sun-streamed pines - an unforgettable experience. There are 550km of cycle tracks stretching from the mouth of the Garonne to the Spanish border, most of them far from the traffic of the roads.

Try the local, famous specialities of 'foie gras' (goose liver pate) and truffles. The region is also noted for its rich goose and duck dishes such as 'confit d'oie' (goose conserve) and 'magret de canard' (duck breast). South of the Gironde estuary, the Bassin d'Arcachon is the only one of a series of ten lakes hugging the coast which opens out to the Atlantic. It also a centre of oyster farming. Lined with typical 19th century seaside villas and small fishing ports, it was the perfect place to sample some of the basin's plentiful ware. My lunch of live oysters seasoned with lemon juice and washed down with a glass of chilled white wine was one local custom not to be missed. For committed fans of these slippery molluscs, visit the Maison de l'Huître (Oyster Museum) in the small town of Gujan Mestras. Throughout July and August, there are also oyster fêtes in most of the local towns and villages.

It was only a matter of time before I stumbled, dry mouthed, into France's capital of fine wines, Bordeaux.

With over 3000 wine 'châteaux', the city is a haven for touring tipplers. Most (Médoc, Saint Emilion, Fronsac...) are open to visitors all year round although others are closed during the annual grape harvest in October.

I kicked off my wine tour at the excellent La Maison du Vin, a focus of homage to all things grape-derived and alcoholic. In June, a bi-annual wine fête takes over the town and the quays of the Garonne river.

As well as its famous appellations, Bordeaux is also a magnificent example of 18th century grandeur with ancient quarters, wide avenues and numerous historical monuments, such as the elegant Grand Théâtre (Bordeaux Opera House). It also has a vibrant night life and a lively university community of around 60,000 students.

## AQUITAINE: LAND OF CONTRAST

Throughout the region, the imposing outline of 'bastides' are a reminder of the royal battles between France and England. These fortified villages, surrounded by ramparts, were often built on cliff tops, of which Monpazier is a fine example.

One of the most charming ways to see the area is from the watery perspective of a houseboat or barge. These can be hired on many of the waterways in the area - including the famous Garonne river and its lateral canal linking the Mediterranean canal and river system with the Atlantic.