

Step back in time

Popular destination Lot-et-Garonne, in south-west France, is packed with plum orchards, pretty villages and a rich medieval history, as **Paola Westbeek** discovers

It's easy to fall in love with Lot-et-Garonne. The charming rural gem, intersected by the two rivers that give the department its name, boasts gently rolling landscapes characterised by vineyards, plum orchards and vast fields of towering sunflowers.

A welcoming part of France where English is almost the second language, the department is a favourite holiday destination and a popular area for retirees or those looking to invest in a second home. Immerse yourself in its rich medieval history, taste your way through a gastronomic paradise of deeply-rooted culinary traditions and wander through pretty villages that invite you to stop for a local wine or a *citron-pressé*.

DISCOVER THE BASTIDES

As you walk uphill through the narrow backstreets that lead to Monflanquin's authentically preserved Place des Arcades, it feels as though you're being transported back in time. On Thursdays, market day, the main square still buzzes with activity as it did when the village was founded by Alphonse de Poitiers (brother of Louis IX) in 1256.

Tempting displays of local produce vie for your attention while cosy terraces under the stone arches seem like the ultimate spot to sit back and watch the hustle and bustle. Monflanquin, one of Les Plus Beaux Villages de France, is a typical example of a bastide and a village replete with palpable history.

Built in a characteristic grid pattern with an arcaded main square where commercial activities took place, these 'new towns' (*villes nouvelles*) were established by French and English rulers between 1152 and 1453 in order to assert authority, bring structure to the expanding population and encourage trade.

Lot-et-Garonne has the largest number of bastides in Nouvelle-Aquitaine (42 in total) and Monflanquin is definitely one with plenty to offer. Not to be missed is the annual *Médiévales de Monflanquin*, a dynamic two-day festival in mid-August that brings the past to life through street theatre and parades with locals dressed in medieval costume, live music, banquets, daring fire performance and much more.

One of the quieter bastides in Lot-et-Garonne is Miramont-de-Guyenne, founded by English King Edward I in 1278. Though there aren't many major attractions, it's a joy to stroll through the town's sleepy streets, stopping along the way to admire its two churches: the 13th-century Église de Beffrey and the Église Sainte-Marie dating to 1860.

At *midi*, grab a table at Bistrot du Commerce, situated directly in front of the *mairie* on Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, and experience what a French two-hour lunch break really is. This friendly bistro serves a consistently delicious three-course menu which is a hit with local office workers who will not hesitate to start their meal with an *apéritif* or wash it down with a glass of wine! ▶



Lot-et-Garonne



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Lot-et-Garonne

VILLAGE LIFE

Approximately 20km to the north-west of Miramont is Duras, an endearing village overlooking the Dropt valley and known for its imposing 12th-century château. Duras attracts wine lovers with an *appellation* that has produced exceptional quality (and very affordable) wines since the 12th century.

Stretching out over 1,524 hectares, the Côtes de Duras is part of the Bergerac wine region and counts some 200 dedicated winemakers who make everything from bold reds to sweet dessert wines.

It is not unusual to hear English in the *centre-ville* as Duras is very popular with British expats. Estate agent Louise Sergenton of Immorama Aquitaine (*duras-immobilier.com*), a company that has been selling everything from building plots to castles for more than 30 years, explains: “Duras has a strong and growing reputation thanks to our château, the author Marguerite Duras (her father lived in Duras, inspiring her pen name) and all

the hard work the community puts into promoting our village through numerous events like the night market (*marché nocturne*) and wine festival.”

Nérac, in the south of Lot-et-Garonne, also holds a night market, one of the most popular events in the summer months where you can make new friends, sample the *produits du terroir* and even dance to live music. It was while visiting the weekly Saturday morning market, however, that Canadian elementary school teacher and food writer Mardi Michels (*eatlivetravelwrite.com*) first fell in love with the town.

She says: “Nérac may not be the most well-known of tourist destinations yet, but if you’re into a slower pace of life, good food and wine, sunshine and conviviality, this is a place you need to discover.”

Mardi, who published her first cookbook, *In the French Kitchen with Kids* in 2018, is especially enthusiastic



Enjoy the local tippie at the Duras wine festival



Canadian teacher and food writer Mardi Michels fell in love with the town of Nérac

Did you know?

The Romans planted the first varieties of plum in the historical region of Gaul, near Agen



Above: Plums are dried into glossy *pruneaux d'Agen*

Below: Marmande tomatoes are celebrated with an annual festival



PHOTOS © HANS WESTBEEK, MARDI MICHELS, CHRISAT / GETTY IMAGES

A charming rural gem, Lot-et-Garonne boasts gently rolling landscapes

about the town’s gourmet appeal.

“Local specialities include armagnac, Buzet wines and foie gras,” she says.

“Nérac is also home to the chocolate shop that is said to have inspired the book and film *Chocolat* (Chocolaterie Artisanale La Cigale).”

CULINARY TREASURE

Much like in the rest of south-west France, the cuisine of Lot-et-Garonne is centred around bold, hearty flavours that reflect its peasant traditions. Duck is an emblematic speciality and enjoyed in myriad ways: buttery foie gras is slathered on toasted brioche and seasoned with flakes of *fleur de sel*; thick, juicy *magrets* (duck breasts) are beautifully grilled over prunings from the *vigne*; and robust legs are preserved in balls of their own fat, which is then used to fry crisp, garlicky potatoes. *Gésiers* (gizzards) are added to rustic salads along with pretty much all the aforementioned preparations of duck, and pizzas are even topped with thin slices of *magret fumé*.

With an exceptional variety of sun-drenched fruit, the department is often called France’s largest orchard. It is the country’s leading strawberry producer and in 2009, three varieties of strawberries were granted Label Rouge certification: the Charlotte, Gariguette and Ciflorette.

By far the most celebrated fruit,

The Lot-et-Garonnais know all too well that good food need not be complicated

however, is the humble plum. Dried into glossy, wrinkly *pruneaux d'Agen*, the prunes have been part of France’s culinary history since the 12th century and are even honoured with a spectacular festival in Agen every year at the end of August.

You will often see *pruneaux* preserved in jars of armagnac, eau-de-vie or wine. They are popular as sweets, coated with dark chocolate and stuffed with sweet pastes, or as savoury bites for the *apéro*, wrapped in bacon and stuffed with goat’s cheese. *Pruneaux d'Agen* pair exceptionally well with rabbit or pork dishes and are delightful skewered between chunks of *magret* sprinkled with generous amounts of sea salt and rosemary.

Marmande tomatoes are another regional culinary treasure celebrated with an annual festival, the Tomato Fiesta, which takes place in their hometown

on the third weekend of July. The large beefsteak tomatoes are very fragrant and sweet. They’re wonderful in tarts, chutneys or stuffed and baked, but nothing beats eating them sliced, drizzled with olive oil and seasoned with just a dash of salt and pepper.

The Lot-et-Garonnais know all too well that good food need not be complicated and one of the best places to witness culinary simplicity is at Soumensac’s *marché des producteurs*. On Sundays in summer, this tiny village with a population of about 200, hosts an enticing market on an idyllic hilltop overlooking the vineyards. Locals and tourists come together to enjoy a picnic with food prepared on the spot by regional producers - everything from plates of duck charcuterie to desserts made with the department’s sunny fruits.

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

According to Immorama Aquitaine, property in Lot-et-Garonne is affordable, with an average price of €170,000. Mardi and her husband Neil Phillip purchased Maison de La Fontaine (*neracvacationrental.com*), a second home and holiday rental bungalow in Nérac in 2014, and she advises those who are thinking of buying property to also spend time there outside the warmer months. ➔



GOING GREEN IN LOT-ET-GARONNE

The department of Lot-et-Garonne is committed to the development of green tourism and is doing its bit for the environment. Keen to encourage residents and visitors alike to travel around in an environmentally-friendly way, the *voie verte*, an 87km-long cycle route running along the canal de Garonne, was officially opened in July 2007.

The path provides a safe place for cyclists to explore the area by bike, or for those who prefer to travel on two feet rather than two wheels it’s the perfect incentive to enjoy a leisurely stroll as the boats pass by on the water.



The *Marché des producteurs* at Soumensac



Above: The landscape has vast fields of towering sunflowers

Below: Duras is known for its 12th-century château, classed as a *monument historique*



She says: “You might love the area in the summer when it’s bustling and happening, but you might be less enamoured with it in the winter.”

Though she speaks French and found the property herself rather than initially enlisting the help of an estate agent, Mardi believes that working with an English-speaking *notaire* made things a lot easier.

“Property vocabulary is definitely not your everyday language and it can be a long process,” she explains.

“Not necessarily difficult, but different. Even if you are fluent, you’ll need someone who can explain the process to you in plain English.”

There are many reasons to consider either a permanent move or investing in a second home that can also be rented out to holidaymakers or those in the process of relocating. One of them, of course, is the pleasant weather with distinct seasons. Lot-et-Garonne’s oceanic climate means early springs and endless summers, perfect for all kinds of outdoor activities in its tranquil countryside. You can sail through 200km of waterways or hike, cycle and ride horses along 4,500km of trails.

Another advantage is the proximity to the major cities of Bordeaux and Toulouse. If you’re craving more urban surroundings, it’s good to know that within a maximum of two hours, you can be promenading

Did you know?

Marguerite Donnadieu, better known as Marguerite Duras, was a French writer and film director whose works include *The Lover* and *Hiroshima mon amour*

through Bordeaux’s wide boulevards while admiring the city’s stunning Neoclassical architecture, or ogling the sumptuous stalls at Marché Victor Hugo in Toulouse, one of France’s best covered markets.

Bergerac, known for its excellent wines, and situated a little closer in the neighbouring Dordogne department to the north, is also worth a visit.

After cruising through the river on a *gabarre* (flat-bottomed boat), you can stop for a drink on Place Pélissière, the largest and liveliest square, easily recognisable by the many tourists taking turns snapping pictures under Cyrano de Bergerac’s famous long nose.

Ultimately, what makes Lot-et-Garonne so appealing goes beyond its landscape, fascinating history, excellent food and great climate. It’s that quintessentially French *joie de vivre* woven into its culture and numerous cherished traditions that will make you lose your heart and yearn to call it home.

TURN OVER ▶

For an expat’s story of converting a farmhouse and barn into a luxury villa