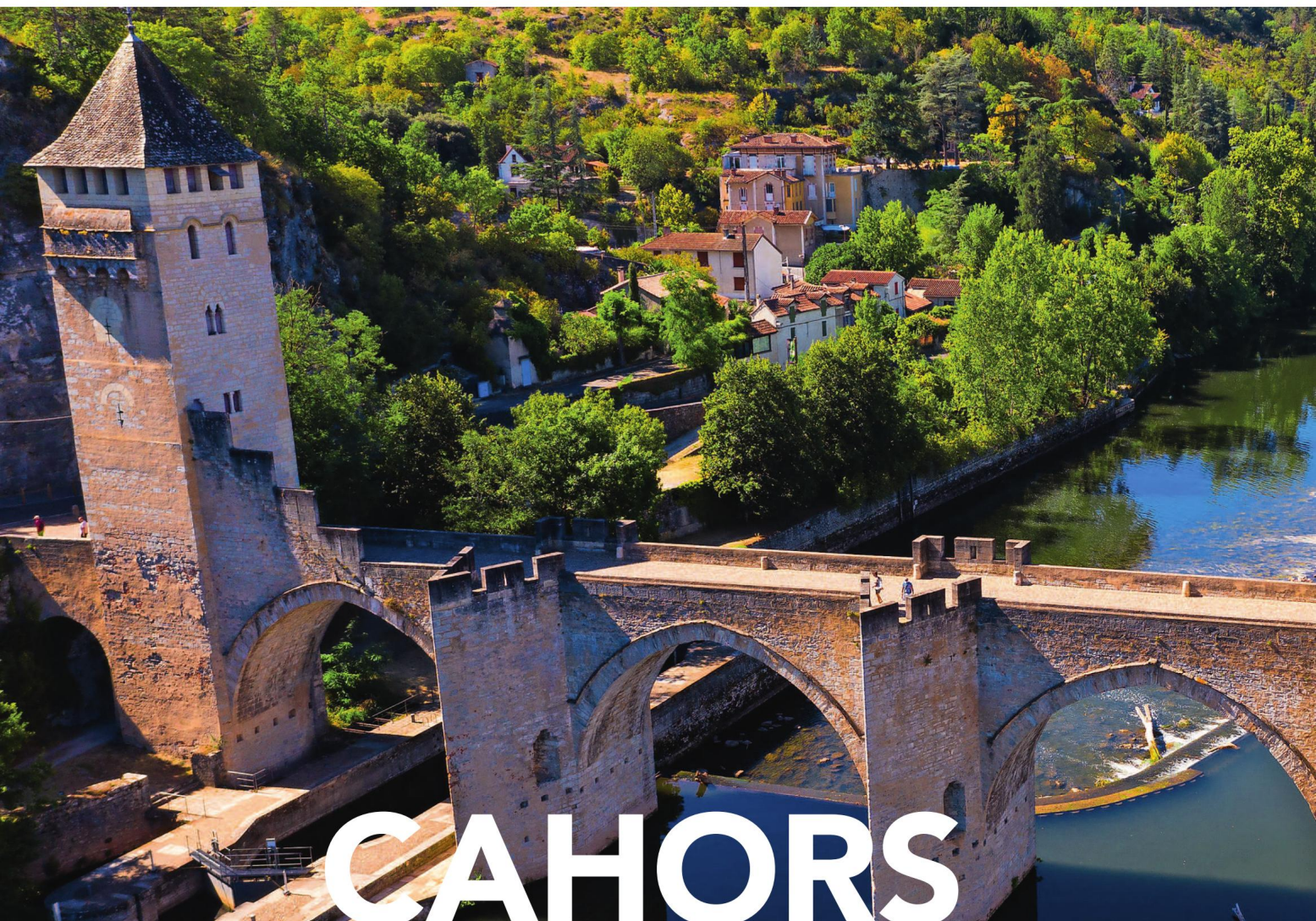


Le weekend

Short but sweet breaks



Paola Westbeek raises a glass to a medieval masterpiece on the banks of the River Lot

First planted by the Romans around 50 BC, Cahors is one of the oldest winemaking regions in France. Its characteristically 'inky' reds have been highly regarded by tsars, popes and nobility since the Middle Ages. Predominantly made with malbec grapes that thrive on chalky, limestone plateaux, the wines have concentrated tannins, spicy aromas and

plush black fruits, making them especially appealing to those who appreciate strong, rustic wines. But the eponymous town, located to the east of the *appellation* on a bend in the River Lot, charms one and all with its rich cultural heritage and bountiful markets flaunting some of France's most renowned gastronomic delights.

Historic allure

Standing in the middle of Pont Valentré, it feels as though I've

stepped out of a time machine. The 172-metre fortified bridge, an architectural wonder dating to the 14th century, boasts three square towers and six Gothic arches that gloriously stretch across the Lot. Classified as a Unesco World Heritage site in 1998, this iconic and utterly photogenic landmark is listed on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, which explains the many people walking by with backpacks and those stopping to

PHOTOS: JACK/GETTY; DOMINIQUE VIET/CRT OCCITANIE



university in 1331. Though it no longer exists (it merged with the University of Toulouse in 1751), you can still admire part of the pope's former mansion, albeit from the outside. Standing at 34 metres, the Tour du Pape Jean XXII is the tallest building on Boulevard Léon Gambetta, Cahors' main avenue dating back to the 19th century. I decide to stop for a well-deserved lunch break on this broad, tree-lined street. At Bistro de l'Isa's pretty terrace, I feast on crisp-skinned *confit de canard* while people-watching and making plans for the following day.

Old town charm

There's a slight chill in the air as I head to the market in Vieux Cahors, situated to the east of town. Held at the foot of the ancient Cathédrale Saint-Étienne on Saturdays and Wednesdays, it is one of the most beautiful in the region and a food lover's dream. I'm tempted by stall after stall brimming with lavish displays of local produce. There are velvety goat's cheeses, glistening olives, dried sausages in every flavour imaginable, stacks of rustic sourdough breads and

take pictures. The proximity to the river gained Cahors economic prosperity and from here, it's easy to imagine how back in the Middle Ages, flat-bottomed cargo ships known as *gabarres* slowly sailed to Bordeaux, laden with barrels of wine that were exported as far as England, the Netherlands and Russia. Today, it's attractive houseboats and *gabarots* (mini-*gabarres*) full of tourists that are navigating these peaceful waters.

Cahors also blossomed thanks to the efforts of one of its famous citizens, Pope John XXII, who founded the town's prestigious

Above:
Unesco-listed
Pont Valentré

Right:
Cahors is
perched on a
bend of the
River Lot





fruits and vegetables that look like they came straight out of a Baroque still life. A large crate of smooth-skinned, fleshy *cèpes* is commanding the most attention on this early mid-autumn morning, and I can't help but think that in just a few months, the black truffles will be the star of Cahors' culinary spectacle.

Leaving the excitement of the *marché* behind me, I seek a moment of quiet contemplation inside the Romanesque cathedral, the town's second most visited monument and another Unesco site listed on the route to Santiago de Compostela. Consecrated by Pope Callixtus II in 1119, Saint-Étienne's nave is capped by two monumental Byzantine domes, the largest in south-west France. I make my way to the front of the church

Above:
The market is an experience for all the senses

Below:
The area's famous 'black' wine

and pause to admire the richly decorated apse and magnificent stained-glass windows.

Leaving the cathedral, I stroll to nearby Rue de la Daurade – known for its beautiful old houses that were built between the 13th and 17th centuries – to indulge in a soothing cup of verveine and a slice of pear tart at Le Jardins des Thés.



Gardens and vineyards

Speaking of gardens, there are 25 '*Jardins Secrets*' scattered around Cahors referencing the town's history and culture. Found close to the most noteworthy monuments, these lush and tranquil corners are at their most resplendent from May through October. At the tourist office (Place François Mitterrand), you can pick up an informative guide outlining their location.

It's a wonderful way to discover the town, especially on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Though each garden has its own special charm, I seem to linger longest at Le Jardin des Pèlerins, located next to the 14th-century Église Saint-Barthélemy. Perhaps it's the heady fragrance of herbs that heightens the sense of relaxation found at these urban oases.

My weekend escape to Cahors ends with a visit to Villa Cahors Malbec at Place François Mitterrand in the town centre. At the spacious and ultra-modern wine lounge, situated in the building that houses the tourism office, you can sample a variety of Cahors vintages and learn more about this often overlooked *appellation*. While sniffing and swirling voluptuous reds, my thoughts wander to next summer. Discovering this town of great beauty, redolent of fine wines and history, has left me thirsty for more. It seems fit to come back for at least a week – enough time to taste my way through some of Cahors' 4,200 hectares of vineyards. ♥



The secret garden next to the Saint-Étienne cathedral

Francofile

Gardens and gabarres in the Lot Valley

GETTING THERE

By air: From Aéroport Toulouse-Blagnac, it's a 90-minute drive north to Cahors.

By rail: 5hrs 30mins from Paris Gare d'Austerlitz.

GETTING AROUND

Le Petit Train

Enjoy a 50-minute tour through town, departing from Allées des Soupirs. A ticket costs €7.50 for adults and €4 for children (free under the age of five).

WHERE TO STAY

Best Western Plus Divona Hotel

Tel: 0033 (0)5 65 21 18 39
divona-hotel-cahors.com

Situated at the foot of Pont Valentré with a panoramic waterside terrace where you can enjoy cocktails and a selection of divine Cahors wines. Doubles from €114.

WHERE TO EAT

Bistro de L'Isa

Tel: 0033 (0)5 65 35 22 35
Situated on the bustling Boulevard Léon Gambetta, this Parisian-style bistro serves traditional dishes made with local ingredients. Three-course menu €29.



TOURIST INFORMATION:

Tel: 0033 (0)5 65 53 20 65; tourisme-cahors.fr

Département: Lot (46)

Lili Bowl

Tel: 0033 (0)6 30 03 73 89

Though duck is the star of regional cuisine, this new, plant-based restaurant located on Rue de la Daurade serves vibrant salads, nutritious bowls and fresh juices. Open for lunch from Tuesday to Saturday.

WHERE TO VISIT

Villa Cahors Malbec

Tel: 0033 (0)5 65 23 82 35
vindecahors.com

Tasting of three wines from €5. For a more in-depth experience, register for a wine-tasting session with an oenologist, held every first Friday of the month; registration €15.

