

Land of many **WONDERS**

From a culinary cornucopia to breathtaking scenery and some of France's prettiest villages, Dordogne continues to captivate visitors and expats alike, writes **Paola Westbeek**



FPN

Beynac Château on
the River Dordogne



With impressive châteaux set amidst vine-covered hills and welcoming villages that invite you to stroll through pretty cobblestoned streets, Dordogne is one of France's most attractive travel destinations and a highly sought-after area for retirees or those looking to buy a second home.

Located in the heartland of Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the department owes its name to the main river that intersects it. This idyllic part of the country where winters are mild and life is good is also known as Périgord and is divided into four territories named after a colour: *Vert* to the north, *Blanc* at its centre, *Pourpre* to the south and *Noir* to the east.

Although each area has its own unique appeal, they are intertwined by their heritage and gastronomic traditions.

Dordogne's rich history is palpable in everything from the prehistoric caves of Lascaux in the Vézère valley to the impeccably preserved *bastides* (fortified medieval towns) where time seems to have stood still.

NATURE ON YOUR DOORSTEP

Slightly off the beaten track and sparsely populated, Périgord Vert is Dordogne's green oasis. The natural landscapes of dense woodlands, lush meadows and gently meandering rivers make it an excellent choice for anyone seeking breathing space and plenty of opportunities to engage in a range of outdoor pursuits.

Most of the area - 43 *communes*, to be precise - comprises the southern part of the Parc Naturel Régional Périgord-Limousin where you can go hiking, cycling or horse riding along more than 2,000km

of trails. You'll pass through magnificent chestnut and oak forests, streams, rugged limestone plateaux and valleys that bloom with more than 30 varieties of colourful orchids come springtime.

Nontron, the capital of Périgord Vert, is located in the heart of the park and known for its wooden-handled knives, made there since the 15th century. During the first weekend of August, a festival dedicated to this artisan product brings together craftsmen, designers and retailers from all over the world. The town itself is built on a hillside and offers beautiful views over the Bandiat valley.

Just 20km to the south is Brantôme, an enchanting village surrounded by the Dronne river and often called the Venice of Périgord. One of its main monuments is the Benedictine abbey, St-Pierre de Brantôme, founded in 769 by Charlemagne. On Friday ►

“You find yourself in a postcard world where blue shutters adorn rustic honey-coloured buildings”

and Tuesday mornings, don't miss the lively market held around the Place du Marché and spilling out onto the stone bridge that leads to the abbey. Brantôme is best admired from the water, so either rent a canoe and paddle your way along the river or hop aboard an electric boat and enjoy a pleasant cruise while discovering the village's history.

One of the most emblematic culinary products of Dordogne is foie gras, and Thiviers, a sleepy village to the east of Périgord Vert, happens to be its capital. At the Maison du Foie Gras (next to the tourist office) you can learn more about its history, production and preparation. You can also purchase the buttery delicacy (best served on brioche with a scattering of *fleur de sel*) at Thiviers' 'marché au gras' held on Saturday mornings from November through March.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

In the centre, Périgord Blanc (named after the area's chalky limestone soils) is home to Dordogne's attractive capital, Périgueux. The Gallo-Roman city, originally called Vesunna, was founded on a bend in the River Isle more than 2,000 years ago. Traces of its past can still be seen today - among them the arches of the Roman

amphitheatre, located in the Jardin des Arènes, and the Tour de Vésone, once part of a temple that stood in the middle of the ancient town.

The ruins of an aristocratic villa dating to the first century were unearthed next to the tower in 1959. They have been housed in the modern building of the Vesunna Musée Gallo-Romain since 2003, where you can marvel at an archaeological collection that includes sculptures, utensils and jewellery.

Périgueux's vibrant atmosphere, architectural wonders such as the Cathédrale St-Front (a UNESCO site) and attractive historic quarters with ancient half-timbered houses and Renaissance mansions make it especially interesting for those looking to invest in livelier surroundings.

According to Joanna Leggett of Leggett Immobilier, a house in the centre of town (150m²) with a small garden comes with a price tag of roughly €245,000, which is higher than in Dordogne's more rural areas where you would pay around €840/m².

With prices as low as €750/m² (€112,500 for a family house of 150m²), Dordogne offers plenty of choice for those with smaller budgets.

By contrast, should you



Vineyard view



Foie gras at Périgueux market

Did you know?

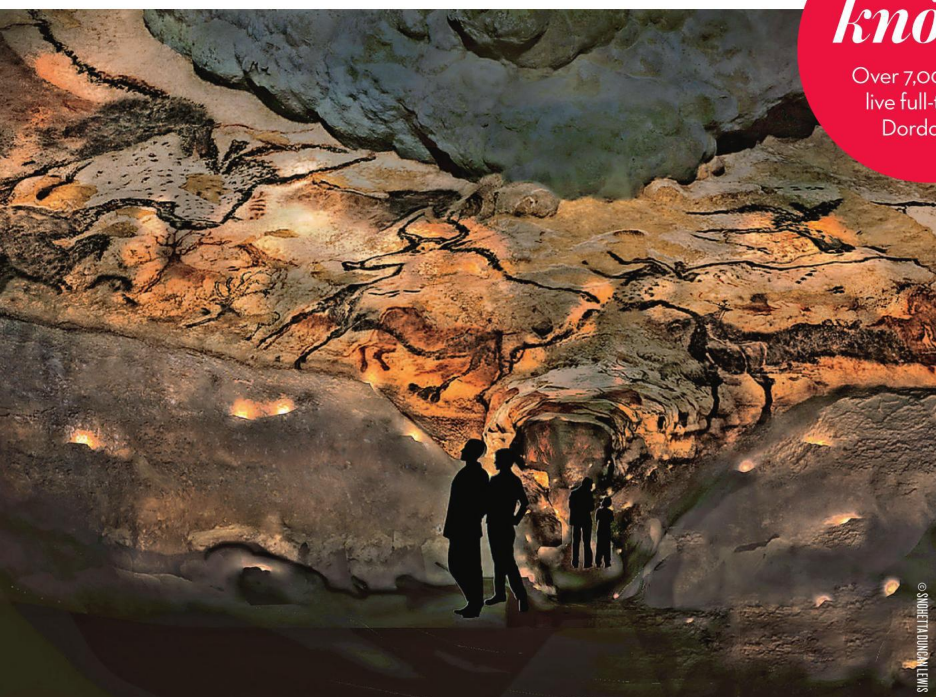
Over 7,000 Brits live full-time in Dordogne

dream of owning a château nestled in the countryside, be prepared to pay between one and two million euros for a property in good condition. “There really aren't many tumbledown châteaux for sale in

Dordogne,” says Joanna. “If you were able to find a proper castle, expect to pay €250,000 for the building/land and four to five times as much for the renovation.”

That didn't stop Emmy Postma from the Netherlands, however. When her husband Rutger found a derelict 16th-century château 30km south-west of Périgueux in the small village of Douzillac, she jumped at the opportunity and purchased it for €300,000.

“The roof was leaking, termites had caused horrible damage, and it was filthy and littered with junk,” explains Emmy, “but it definitely had that wow factor.” Although Emmy's budget allowed her to beautifully renovate two rooms and get Château des Chauvaux (chateaudeschauvaux.com) up and running as a B&B, the pandemic wreaked havoc on her plans and she had to set up a GoFundMe campaign in order to repair the



Prehistoric paintings at Lascaux Caves



Brantôme Abbey

roof. Nevertheless, Emmy hasn't regretted her decision and remains optimistic: "Life is so different here, almost like a fairytale. I feel privileged to be able to breathe new life into this château."

POSTCARD VILLAGES

Dordogne counts 10 *Plus Beaux Villages*, and Monpazier, situated in Périgord Pourpre to the south, is certainly one of the most endearing. Wandering through the *bastide*, especially in the quiet of a Sunday morning before it awakens with the buzz of tourism, feels like taking a trip back to the Middle Ages.

Not much has changed since Monpazier was founded by Edward I in 1284. Enter through the original stone gateways and you find yourself in a postcard world where blue shutters and climbing roses gracefully adorn rustic honey-coloured buildings. Even stopping for a coffee under the arched passageways lining the market square is a magical experience.

Another *bastide* that wears its history well, and one that has been happily adopted by expats, is Eymet. Approximately 20%

of the population is British, which makes feeling at home easier. At Roses Salon de Thé (roseseymet.com), one of several British-owned businesses in the town, David and Denny White serve their customers everything from a full English breakfast to an afternoon cream tea with scones and clotted cream, all served on beautiful vintage china.

Originally from Brackley, the couple moved to Eymet in December 2016 to fulfil their dream of living in France and opening a tearoom. "We wanted to introduce a little slice of England into the heart of Dordogne," says David. "Our customers - French, English and from all other parts of the world - walk in as strangers but leave as friends."

Just 25km north of Eymet is Bergerac, cradle of the 13 regional *appellations* that produce excellent wines and capital of Périgord Pourpre (purple refers to the colour of the vineyards in autumn and the skin of the grapes). The viticultural region boasts acclaimed Michelin-starred restaurants such as La Tour des Vents and Les Fresques, and attracts more than 400,000 visitors annually. ▶

5 REASONS TO LIVE IN DORDOGNE

- 1:** The Bergerac region produces bold reds, crisp whites, sunny rosés and sweet wines that taste of honey and candied fruits. Enough choice for those who appreciate a fine glass!
- 2:** In summer, Dordogne comes to life with night markets as well as picnic dinners and *apéros* hosted by local winegrowers. A perfect opportunity to meet new friends and discover the region's cuisine.
- 3:** A large expat population, which will help make feeling at home much easier.
- 4:** Excellent weather: long Indian summers, early springs and sunny, mild winters.
- 5:** Three airports (Bergerac, Bordeaux and Brive-la-Gaillarde) make Dordogne easily accessible from the UK.



The riverside town of Bergerac

CULINARY TREASURES

Speaking of food and wine, Dordogne's culinary cornucopia includes some of France's finest products. Besides the beloved duck and geese specialties, you can feast on lamb, dress your salads with aromatic walnut oil, satisfy your sweet tooth with succulent strawberries and end your meals with the lactic tang of Cabécou cheese.

True connoisseurs will appreciate the region's coveted winter truffles, described by renowned food critic Curnonsky as "the fragrant soul of Périgord". Anywhere between four and nine tonnes of the prized black fungi are harvested annually in Périgord Noir (hence the name) to the east of the department.

In Sarlat-la-Canéda, known for its golden sandstone townscape, special truffle markets are held every Saturday morning from the end of November until early February on Rue de Fénelon. In January, Sarlat's streets turn into a gastronome's paradise during the yearly Fête de la Truffe where you can sample the famous *croustous* (thinly sliced baguette topped with truffle and foie gras) and sit down to memorable truffle menus at the town's many restaurants.

From here, it's easy to access some of the department's other gems. Both the magnificent Château de Beynac dating from the 12th century, and Domme, another perfectly preserved medieval village perched high above a cliff overlooking the Dordogne, are just a short 20-minute drive to the south. With so much to see, taste and experience, it's no wonder that many who visit Dordogne keep coming back... or better yet, decide to call it home. ■

TURN OVER ►

For our property picks in Dordogne, essential factfile and a local's view

Next month:

Where to live: The best places in France for retirees



Cobbled alleyway in Beynac

Shaded café in Monpazier

