



FPN

Glorious GASCONY

Ste-Marie and Tour Armagnac in Auch



Rustic charm and culinary riches abound in the beautiful, rural department of Gers. **Paola Westbeek** explores this unspoilt region where armagnac flows and French musketeer d'Artagnan once roamed

The onward rush of life seems a world away as you gently cycle through Gers' peaceful country roads. Scattered with sleepy villages, wide pastures, vineyards and sunflowers, the department's undulating landscape has a quiet, almost soothing beauty. Gers is delightfully devoid of major motorways and urban noise, but abounds with rustic charm, conviviality and a gastronomic culture that reflects the richness of its *terroir*. This is the cradle of the French paradox, a land of plenty where inhabitants feast on sizzling duck breast with bold Madiran wines and still boast of having the country's longest life expectancy.

RURAL LIVING

Gers, part of the area known as Gascony, is in the west of Occitanie, not far from the snow-capped Pyrénées and glistening coastlines of the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. Sparsely populated and with a predominantly agricultural economy, it is the quintessential *France profonde* that appeals to those who crave a slower existence and space to simply be. Nevertheless, it's good to know that Gers is conveniently located between two of France's largest cities: Bordeaux is 180km to the north-west of Auch, its capital, while Toulouse is 80km to the east. Gers may be France's most rural region, yet a weekend of skiing or a day trip to the sea is well within reach.

In 2018, Kirstie and David Richardson left Hertfordshire in search of a more balanced and relaxed lifestyle. After visiting Marciac in the south-west, known for its famous international jazz festival, they settled in Montréal-du-Gers, a *bastide* village of about 1,300 inhabitants.

"While we loved the Marciac area, the proximity to the mountains (important to satiate our love for skiing) also meant a more changeable climate. Being just 60km farther north meant that we were well positioned for skiing but also had drier, sunnier weather," Kirstie explains. Grand Tourmalet, the largest of the 33 ski resorts in the Pyrénées, is only 140km away. The couple offer luxury retreats at their beautiful Gascon farmhouse with everything from yoga to healthy cooking (lepelot.com).

"We were both consultants helping businesses provide better working environments to their employees, but we realised we weren't following much of our own advice," she says. While Kirstie's early experience in the hotel industry and training as a chef coupled with David's corporate background provided a head start in setting up their business, an honest look at finances and flexibility have proved imperative.

Kirstie says: "Be realistic about your income during the first years (especially if you're not drawing a pension) and keep

"It is the quintessential 'France profonde' that appeals to those who crave a slower existence"

your options open. Don't be afraid to adjust your business model and consider creating different revenue channels. The pandemic has shown us the importance of being creative."

Montréal-du-Gers is tucked away in the heart of the armagnac region in the north. Though wine is produced in Gers, armagnac is the drink the department is best known for. The vineyards encompass roughly 5,300 hectares in the regions Bas-Armagnac, Armagnac-Ténarèze and Haut-Armagnac. The fine grape brandy is the oldest in France and was granted AOC (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*) certification in 1936. Its history dates to the early 14th century when doctor and cardinal Vital Dufour outlined the tippie's many virtues, among them aiding in the "preservation of health and good shape".

The Gersois relish their glass of armagnac after dinner as a *digestif*, but it is also used in cocktails and traditional recipes such as *pruneaux à l'armagnac* (prunes soaked in armagnac) or *croustade gasconne* (apple pie made with flaky pastry). At the Musée de l'Armagnac, situated in the episcopal town of Condom, you can learn more about how the brandy is produced.

CULTURAL ALLURE

A lack of large cities does not make Gers any less appealing to those who appreciate history and art. If you want to follow in the footsteps of Gers' most famous son, Charles de Batz de Castelmoré, the French musketeer d'Artagnan who served King Louis XIV, head to the hilltop village of Lupiac where he was born in 1611. D'Artagnan is not only honoured with an equestrian statue on the village square, but also at the Musée d'Artagnan where his life and heroic deeds are documented.

Auch also pays tribute to d'Artagnan with a statue on the first landing of the magnificent 354-step Escalier Monumental. Auch is Gers' largest town with a population of about 22,000 and offers plenty to see and do. Its impressive Cathédrale Ste-Marie, built between 1489 and 1680 in a mix of Flamboyant Gothic and Renaissance architecture, is a Unesco World Heritage Site. To its south-east is the 40m Tour d'Armagnac which was erected as a prison in the 14th century. Since 2015, it has housed the cathedral's Musée du Trésor where more than 200 works of art can be admired. From here, you can take a



D'Artagnan in Auch



Abbaye de Flaran

Did you know?

Les Trois Mousquetaires by Alexandre Dumas was first published in 1844

leisurely stroll to the Musée des Ameriques and feast your eyes on the country's second largest collection of Pre-Columbian art as well as discover more about Gascony's history from antiquity to the 20th century.

As you make your way through Auch, don't forget to look out for its long, sloping *pousterelles*. These stepped medieval alleyways (there are five in total) once provided residents with easy access to the river and are well worth a climb for the panoramic views over the town.

The Abbaye de Flaran, an architectural gem 40km north of Auch in Valence-sur-Baïse, is Gers' top tourist attraction. Founded in 1151, the beautifully preserved Cistercian abbey is home to the Simonow art collection with masterpieces by artists such as Monet, Picasso and Rubens.

BARGAIN PROPERTIES

"The average price for a three-bedroom house in Gers is between €100,000 and €285,000," says Yvonne Russell, an estate



Enjoying a vineyard meal with friends



8 REASONS TO LIVE IN GERS

- 1:** Close proximity to the Pyrénées with its hiking trails and skiing as well as the beautiful beaches on the south-west coast
- 2:** Full of rustic charm with peaceful countryside, wide-open farmland and pretty villages
- 3:** Toulouse, capital of the Occitanie region, with its airport, is just 80km away and the port city of Bordeaux is 180km north-west
- 4:** The centuries-old brandy armagnac is produced here with tours, cellar visits and tastings
- 5:** Plenty to see and do in the historical capital, Auch, including the Armagnac Tower and St-Mary's Cathedral, a Unesco World Heritage Site
- 6:** Prices are lower than neighbouring departments, with three-bedroom houses still available for as low as €100,000
- 7:** There's bountiful and hearty regional produce ranging from garlic and melons to duck and Gascon beef steaks
- 8:** The stunning Abbaye de Flaran, built in the 12th century, draws many tourists to the area who will need somewhere to stay if you plan on running gîtes or a B&B

Sunflowers are a Gascony icon

agent for Leggett Immobilier. Due to rural depopulation, prices are lower than in neighbouring departments, with the most affordable properties being found in the south and the most expensive near Auch in the centre.

There are bargains to be found with a certain amount of luck, but keep in mind that renovations can be costly. In March 2018, culinary writer and photographer Véronique Pouw (ohmydish.com) and her husband Marco purchased their home in the tiny village of Préchac-sur-Adour, in the far west of the department.

"Our house is more than 300 years old and located at the end of the village on the main road," says Véronique. "The *terrain* is 3,500m² and the house is quite large, but at the moment, only two bedrooms, a bathroom, living room and a temporary kitchen are habitable."

The children of the owner, who had passed away, were eager to sell, which meant the young couple were able to buy the house for much less than they expected. However, renovations so far

have cost about the same as the purchase price. "We stripped everything back. The electricity, bathroom, windows, doors, tiling and ceilings are all new, and we're not quite done yet," explains Véronique. "The roof will be completely renewed at the end of this year."

If you dream of running a gîte or B&B, expect to pay a little more than average. For example, in Nogaro, a small town in the west of the department situated on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, a 12-bedroom property in excellent condition and with a pool was recently available for €337,600. A little further south in Mirande, an attractive 13th-century *bastide*, a three-bedroom house with the potential to create a separate gîte went on the market for €247,000.

GOOD FOOD AND CONVIVIALITY

The people of Gers are known for their hearty appetites and appreciation of time-honoured culinary traditions. Garbure, a thick soup made with creamy Tarbais beans, chunks of pork, duck, cabbage and seasonal



Ducks and geese are king in this part of France



White garlic is a local speciality

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jazzinmarciac.com



Tour d'Armagnac Auch

vegetables is a beloved peasant dish usually served at dinner, though lighter versions are sometimes offered as a starter.

The east of the department is a wonderland of regional products. Aromatic white garlic from St-Clar-de-Lomagne is sold from July to December, and juicy melons from Lectoure are harvested from June to September (they're delicious with ham and Floc de Gascogne, a fortified wine made with armagnac).

Ducks and geese are king in this part of France. They have been fattened since Gallo-Roman times to make specialties such as foie gras, confit and magret. Even the fat of these revered fowl is used in cooking as a replacement for butter and olive oil. Gers counts more than 900 foie gras producers, and Samatan is known as the foie gras capital of the south-west. The town's folkloric *marketé au gras* held every Monday from October to April sees dedicated producers proudly selling their 'pink gold' as well as other duck and goose products. Can't make it on Monday? Gimont, just 20km north, holds a similar market on Sunday mornings from November to March.

In Gers, people don't shy away from

eating plenty of meat. The black pork of Bigorre is turned into beautifully marbled hams while thick Gascon beef steaks are grilled to perfection over vine prunings. And yet the region has one of the lowest rates of cardiovascular disease in the country. Perhaps an explanation could be found in the consumption of local wines made from tannat grapes which are especially rich in polyphenols (micronutrients that protect the heart).

The Gersois are not only generous eaters, but also generous hosts who delight in lavish meals with friends and family. Food is more than sustenance. It is a way to honour the region's heritage - a good thing to keep in mind when invited to lunch with your new French neighbours. As Véronique says: "The locals really appreciate it if you integrate into the French lifestyle and culture. In my opinion, they have a lot of warmth in their hearts for everyone coming to live here." ■

TURN OVER ►

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



Relaxing in Auch