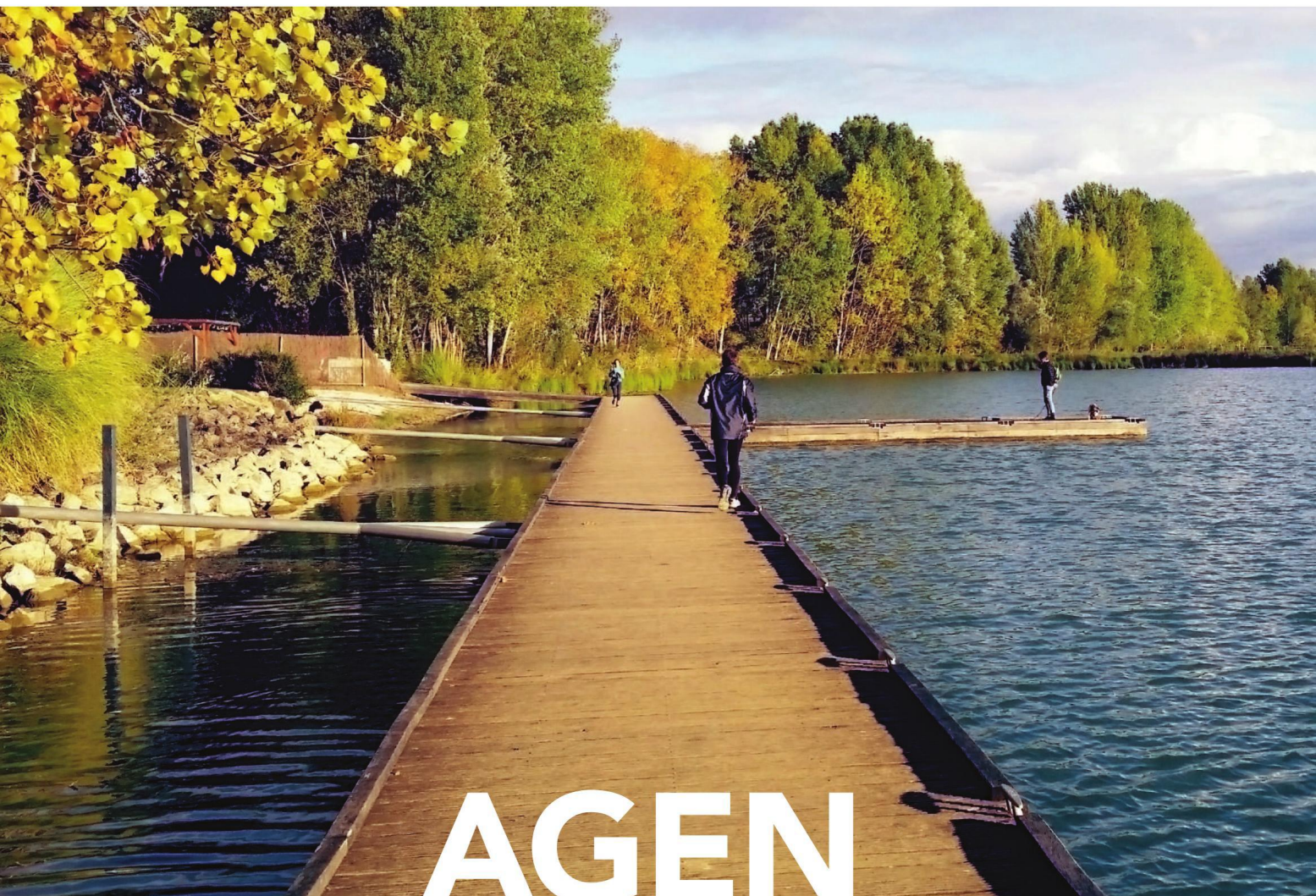


# Le weekend

Short but sweet city breaks



## AGEN

The city of quiet elegance entrances **Paola Westbeek** on a trip to Lot-et-Garonne

It wasn't an attractive description in a travel guide that first brought me to Agen, but rather a flyer left on our windshield late one August announcing the Grand Pruneau Show, an annual festival honouring the city's emblematic fruit. After three weeks criss-crossing the south-west, we had agreed to spend the last days of our holiday relaxing in our gîte. But how could I pass up a gastronomic

celebration? With whetted appetites, we squeezed in one final trip and headed to Lot-et-Garonne's capital, eager to discover more.

Inevitably, what most captured my attention that day were the stalls lining the streets, decked out in purple and tempting me with everything from *brochettes de canard aux pruneaux* to prunes covered in thick, dark chocolate. The animated hustle and bustle of

the culinary spectacle left little opportunity to explore the city at leisure, so after tasting to our heart's content we drove back – planning a weekend getaway.

### Arcaded streets

Located halfway between Bordeaux and Toulouse, Agen is not as showy as some of the larger cities in *le sud-ouest*, which might explain why it is often overlooked. Besides prunes, tourist brochures always





mention the famous Pont-Canal d'Agen, the second longest aqueduct in the country, dating to 1839. While its appeal is undeniable – the magnificent stone structure has 23 arches and stretches out over 580 metres – it isn't Agen's only architectural gem, as we are soon to discover.

Our tour of the historic centre starts with lunch at La P'tite Cuisine, one of the many restaurants dotting the lively Place des Laitiers. I am impressed not only by the quality of the food, but by the splendid decor with mirrored walls and an elaborately painted ceiling. The restaurant is a favourite among locals, and rightly so. My veal stew is wonderfully aromatic and the clafoutis for dessert has just the right amount of vanilla.

Though I am tempted to round off my *déjeuner* with an armagnac, I opt for a quick coffee before crossing the square to Rue des Cornières, an arcaded street which was once Agen's commercial hub. Built between the 13th and 19th century, its varied

architecture makes it one of the most photogenic places in town. Also worth a visit is the 14th-century Maison du Sénéchal on neighbouring Rue Puits du Saumon. I take note of the ornate Gothic windows on the upper gallery and wonder about the history of the building. Some speculate it was once a synagogue or home to the city's chamber of commerce, but the most plausible theory is that it belonged to a rich merchant.

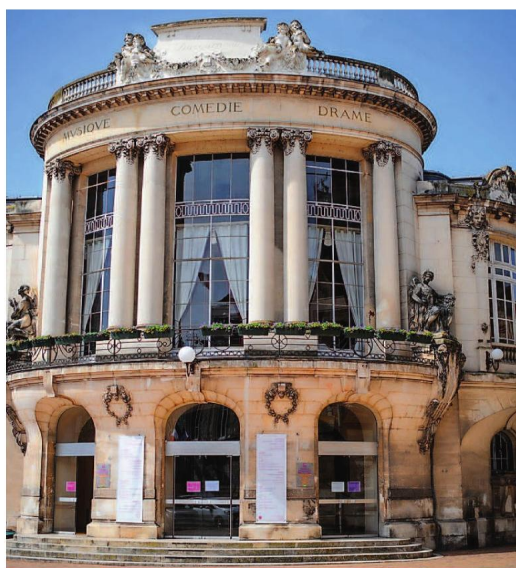
### Marvellous masterpieces

We decide to spend the following day taking in some of Agen's cultural attractions and first on our list is Cathédrale Saint-Caprais, a Unesco World Heritage Site. The cathedral was erected in the 12th century to replace a basilica destroyed by the Normans in 853. Ravaged again in the 16th century during the Wars of Religion, it now boasts an interesting blend of styles with a Gothic nave and Romanesque apse. The sumptuous frescoes depicting Biblical scenes and the life of the saints were painted by Toulouse artist Jean-Louis Bézard between 1845 and 1869. ▶

**Above:**  
Parc Naturel  
de Passeligne

**Right:**  
Théâtre  
Municipal  
Ducourneau

**Far right:**  
Aerial view  
of Agen and  
its cathedral







**Above:**  
Port d'Agen

**Left:**  
Rue des  
Corinières

**Below left:**  
Pruneaux  
d'Agen



The Musée des Beaux-Arts, situated just a five-minute stroll south, is next on the itinerary. Housed in four Renaissance buildings on Place du Dr. Esquirol, it is one of the region's most impressive museums.

The collection counts more than 3,000 works of art such as sculptures, ceramics, furniture and paintings exhibited in 26 rooms spread out over five floors. I start in the cellars where I admire dazzling stones and crystals as well as ancient artefacts. Interestingly, the cellar was once a prison and I can't help but gasp as we pass a hall with handcuffs still hanging from chains.

The museum is best known for its Goya masterpieces (including

a self-portrait of the Spanish artist), but I am most in awe of the exquisite Impressionist paintings on the second floor. Sisley's landscape titled *Matinée de Septembre* seems to almost draw me in with its serene light and expressive skies.

### Perle du Midi

One of my favourite ways to celebrate Sunday is with an early visit to the market, and luckily, Agen's *marché couvert* held on Place Jean-Baptiste Durand is open today. Conveniently situated under one roof, a group of dedicated food entrepreneurs offer visitors the freshest produce and regional delicacies such as the famous Agen prunes. I fill my basket



with cheese, charcuterie, a baguette, two prune *tartelettes* and a bottle of red wine from the Côtes du Brulhois vineyards south of the city.

Following the Garonne river, we enjoy a pleasant bike ride to Parc Naturel de Passeligne, Agen's verdant oasis located five kilometres outside the city. I've carefully packed the market goodies into a cooling bag and we've made no plans for the rest of the day. After a gentle cycle, we find a spot by the lake, spread out a blanket and pause for a *pique-nique*. Looking back on the past few days, I now realise why poet and Agen native Jacques Jasmin referred to the city as the 'pearl of the south'. Agen certainly wears its charm with quiet elegance. ♥



**Above:** Pause for a coffee on Place des Laitiers

## Francofile

### TOURIST INFORMATION:

Tel: 0033 (0)5 53 47 36 09

[destination-agen.com](http://destination-agen.com)

Département: Lot-et-Garonne (47)

### GETTING THERE

From Paris, the TGV will take you from Gare de l'Est to Agen's train station in a little under four hours. Agen is roughly a 90-minute drive from both Aéroport de Bordeaux-Mérignac and the Aéroport de Toulouse-Blagnac.

### GETTING AROUND

#### Locaboat Holidays

A little more time to spare? Rent a holiday boat (*pénichette*) and set off on a memorable cruise that will take you past the famous Pont-Canal and pretty towns such as Nérac and Vianne. Departing from

Quai de Dunkerque. Weekly rentals starting at €1,530.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Hotel Château des Jacobins

Tel: 0033 (0)5 53 47 03 31  
[chateau-des-jacobins.com](http://chateau-des-jacobins.com)  
Tastefully decorated rooms in a 19th-century townhouse located in the centre of Agen on the Place des Jacobins. Doubles €120.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### La P'tite Cuisine

Tel: 0033 (0)5 53 99 74 95  
[laptitecuisineagen.fr](http://laptitecuisineagen.fr)  
Chef Martin Cuny's two-course lunch menus change daily, reflecting

his creativity and love for local ingredients. Lunch is served from Monday to Saturday and is a bargain at only €12.50.

#### Mariottat

Tel: 0033 (0)5 53 77 99 77  
[restaurant-mariottat.com](http://restaurant-mariottat.com)  
In the mood to splurge? Reserve a table at Agen's Michelin-starred Mariottat and settle in for an evening of fine dining with chef Eric's 'terroir contemporain' – pure culinary artistry made with local produce. Three-course lunch menu served Tuesday to Friday €29. Tasting menu consisting of eight seasonal dishes €89.

### WHERE TO VISIT

#### Musée des Beaux-Arts

Tel: 0033 (0)5 53 69 47 23  
Founded in 1876 and a must for all art lovers visiting south-west France. Opposite the museum is the beautiful Italian-style building of the Théâtre Municipal Ducourneau, which is the work of Guillaume Tronchet and opened its doors in 1908. Museum admission €5.90.

