

Le weekend

Short but sweet city breaks





Auch's cathedral towers
over the River Gers



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO/JACKF

AUCH

Paola Westbeek finds the capital of France's most rural *département* makes an idyllic base for a Gascon break

Auch may not draw as much tourism as Bordeaux to the north-west or Toulouse to the east, but the capital of Gers still has enough cultural allure to merit a weekend getaway. The attractive town centre, perched on a hill overlooking the banks of the Gers river, breathes history with its characteristic monuments, medieval architecture, fascinating museums and gastronomic heritage. Strolling through the pretty streets, it's easy to see why Auch (pronounced 'osh') was named Pays d'Art et d'Histoire.

Stepped alleyways

At first sight, Rue Caumont seems like your average residential street. The narrow road is lined with cars on one side, windows are shaded by weathered pastel shutters, and aside from the occasional passer-by, not much is happening. Yet tucked between some of the robust townhouses is a whimsical part of Auch that begs to be discovered, provided you're up for a good workout: its medieval stepped alleyways known as '*pousterles*'. The five sloping passages once provided residents in the upper part of town (the Haute-Ville) with easy access to the river below. Four are on this street, and the

other one can be reached via the adjacent Rue de Montebello.

I brave the climb up the rugged steps of Pousterle de Paris and head to Maison Henri IV, my first stop today. Located on 22 Rue Espagne, the half-timbered house dates from the 16th century and is named after Henri de Navarre who stayed here in 1578. I stop to admire the angels decorating both sides of the basket-handle arch, but the real charm is the beautifully preserved wooden and stone staircase in the courtyard. I look up to take it all in and wonder if the current residents don't mind the constant flow of curious tourists passing through.

Following this street, it's a pleasant two-minute walk north to Place de la République where I am greeted by the magnificent Cathédrale Sainte-Marie on my left. Built between 1489 and 1680 in a mix of Flamboyant Gothic and Renaissance architecture, it was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1998 and is the architectural highlight of Auch. My eye is immediately drawn towards the stained-glass windows, considered the jewel of the cathedral and made by Arnaud de Moles between 1507 and 1513. I am most impressed, however, by the stalls in the choir. Intricately carved from solid oak in the 16th century, ▶



there are 113 stalls in total, and each one is a work of art in its own right.

On the ground floor of the neighbouring 40m Tour d'Armagnac, erected as a prison in the 14th century, you can visit the Musée du Trésors to learn about the cathedral's history and admire its paintings and other works of art.

Local delights

After enjoying a *grand crème* coffee for breakfast, I head back to the cathedral square where the Saturday market is in full swing. It may be early, but I wouldn't turn down a steaming bowl of *garbure*, a peasant stew from Gers made with beans, pork, duck and seasonal vegetables. Perhaps it's the sight of those rustic heads of dark-green Savoy cabbages (one

Top left: The intricately carved choir stalls

Left: D'Artagnan's statue watches over Auch

of the main ingredients in this delectably comforting dish) or the crisp winter chill.

Besides the cathedral, another eye-catcher towering over the market is Maison Fedel, home to the tourist office until 2016. The 15th-century *maison à colombages* (half-timbered house) originally housed a shop on the ground floor and the merchant's dwelling above it much like the other buildings on Rue Dessoie, the town's main shopping street since the Middle Ages. You'll find everything from clothing stores to bookshops here, but my favourite address is La Cave Gourmande at number 13. Gers is the cradle of Armagnac (the oldest brandy in France), and this is the best place to find the perfect bottle. The friendly owner is particularly knowledgeable

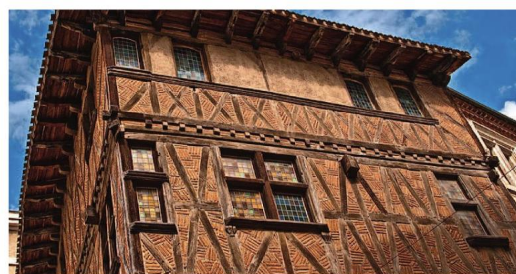




when it comes to the regional tippie, but she'll also gladly advise you on local wines which can be paired with some of the duck and goose specialities that are on offer.

Art and history

My Sunday afternoon is spent indulging my passion for art and history at Musée des Ameriques, which boasts France's second-largest collection of Pre-Columbian art. The first pieces were donated by Guillaume Pujos, appointed curator in 1911. They were part of his personal collection acquired during his travels through Latin America. The museum is also a great place to discover Gascony's history. I am especially captivated by the work of Mario Cavaglieri, an Italian painter who retired to the town of Pavie, about an hour south. The quick, nonchalant brushstrokes in *Juliette sur Fond Rouge* (1927) almost seems to mirror the nonchalance of its



Above: Maison Fedel's distinctive facade

Left: Market day in Auch is a colourful affair

subject, a woman leaning back on a sofa.

As for me, there's no time to rest just yet. I am ending my trip to Auch by climbing the 374 steps of Escalier Monumental. The Neo-Renaissance staircase dates to 1863, and like the *pousterles*, it connects the lower part of town with its historic centre. I stop on the first landing to catch my breath under the watchful eye of Gers' most famous son, Charles de Batz de Castelmor, French musketeer d'Artagnan. Exhausted but satisfied, I reach the top of the staircase and feast my eyes on the splendid views over the sprawling Gers valley. ♥

Francophile

TOURIST INFORMATION:

Tel: (FR) 5 62 05 22 89

auch-tourisme.com

Département: Gers (32)

GETTING THERE

From Toulouse-Blagnac, it's a one-hour drive west to Auch. The train from Toulouse will take you to Gare d'Auch in 1hr 45min.

GETTING AROUND

Pass Culturels

Enjoy a variety of tours plus reduced entrance to the town's museums. Passes are available at the tourist office, Musée du Trésor and Musée des Amériques.

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel de France

Tel: (FR) 5 62 61 71 71
hoteldefrance-auch.com
Comfortable rooms in a historic building, just a stone's throw from the cathedral. Doubles from €75 per night.

WHERE TO EAT

La Table d'Oste

7 Rue Lamartine
Tel: (FR) 5 62 05 55 62
Savour authentic regional cuisine made with farm-fresh ingredients from

local producers. Try the *oeuf cocotte au foie gras* as a starter. Menu Gascon: €16.

Le France Bar Brasserie

5 Rue de la République
Tel: (FR) 5 62 05 01 15
Have lunch with a view of the cathedral at the restaurant's large and lively terrace. In between sightseeing, drop in for a 'Tapas Gascons' platter with a delectable variety of duck specialities. Menu du jour: €14.50.

WHERE TO VISIT

Jardin Ortholan

9 Quai Lissagaray
Head to this impeccably maintained oasis (located in the lower part of town, across the river) to read a good book or watch the world go by.

