

# THE TIMES

WEEKEND

## South of France road trip: what to see in Gers

With its local bistros, cheap wine and vineyard scenery, this region in central Gascony is full of Gallic charm

James Stewart

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Spilling from colonnades, piled in rooms, was a cornucopia of French shabby chic: Ricard-branded glasses on farmhouse tables and old confit pots dripping yellow glaze; rusty wine racks, armoires and foxed mirrors. We were at the Village des Brocanteurs, a crumbling château in Lectoure, where comely hills rolled beyond the terrace. It was pure film-set France — and not cheap.

We'd come to Lectoure, just over an hour's drive west of Toulouse, to find a France

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, free of Brits. Not for us blingy Riviera hotels or galaxies of Michelin stars. We wanted family vineyards and bistros, where market produce was for eating not Instagram. A place to remember how to relax with guaranteed sunshine.

What we didn't want was to share it with the home counties. That ruled out Provence (lovely, but by Bardot it's busy). Also the Dordogne — its villages sprout more postcard racks than sunflowers.

It was a French pal who alerted me to central Gascony. Over a three-hour lunch of saucisson, duck confit, cheese, red wine and armagnac (a classic Gascon experience, I was to discover) Aldo told me about annual road trips through his home region; slumbering villages and gregarious locals who lived to eat and drink. Where was this? Gers (pronounced "chairs", but with a J). I'd never heard of it.

On a map Gers is an oval space between Toulouse and Bordeaux. Motorways and TGV lines race around it like water around a stone — no one discovers it by accident. Its capital, Auch ("Osh"), has only 23,000 inhabitants. Apparently ducks outnumber the region's 191,000 residents by about 20 to 1. Armagnac, the local booze, is distilled by 300 or so family producers.

There was just one thing: if Gers was so terrific, why had Aldo left? "There's nothing much to do but eat and drink," he said. I was in.

We set out from Toulouse — sunshine strobing through plane trees; folk sunning themselves on village benches like cats — to see Lectoure draped over a hilltop. We switchbacked uphill, popped through town walls and entered a street of small bistros, red-lozenge tabac signs and blue-grey shutters on stone houses. Dropping our bags, we sat among garrulous Gascons outside Café des Sports, drinking cheap local plonk, watching the dusk descend.

It was my partner's idea to ask about good local vineyards in an épicerie. The assistant in Fleurons de Lomagne suggested Château Arton, winner in 2017 of a Prix d'Excellence — the Oscars of French produce — for its armagnac. Frankly, I wasn't keen. There's only so much hushed reverence I can take from oenophiles.

What I'd overlooked was that this is Gers. While the château's armagnac was sensational — a reserve redolent with stewed pears and almonds; a chilled eau de vie that burst on the tongue — better still were the owners. Patrick and Victoire de Montal were my sort of winemakers; he posh-scruffy in chinos and an old polo shirt, she elegant with a mischievous twinkle. Victoire's family had been in Gascony for ten centuries; Patrick's for

five, “so we’re new”. They told us of finding Roman gold coins when planting vines 40 years ago.

The thing to understand about Gers, Patrick said philosophically, glass in hand, was that there was an art to life there. “It’s about prizing something aged slowly. You can’t force it. It’s like love — it can only come naturally.” He led us behind the château and we gazed across a French Tuscany. “This landscape has evolved over centuries. Everything you see,” he gestured towards the vines, trees and streams, “is just where it should be.”

The next day we took to backroads. I say “took to”. Aside from a stretch of dual carriageway into Auch, backroads are all you get in Gers. It is genuine slow tourism. Slopes blazed with sunflowers. Here and there a village was raised aloft on a swell of grass. After half an hour the tower of La Romieu church appeared.

The village is a rare tourism big-hitter. We ambled around a shuttered square the colour of pale shortbread, then explored a 700-year-old pilgrimage church muralled with jigsaw-like symbols that have baffled experts. A map? An esoteric code? Who knows, just don’t tell Dan Brown. One thing niggled, however: La Romieu had a few too many smart holiday homes to qualify as

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Fourcès, a 30-minute drive away, came closer. Locals in Gers describe it either as one of the official most beautiful villages in France or as its only circular bastide, a medieval market town fortified during the Hundred Years’ War. Both descriptions were bang on. Beyond a moat, halftimbered houses were circled around a leafy square where a few elderly gents lobbed petanque balls. The mairie noticeboard had adverts for tango classes alongside official announcements, and a chap in a beret straight from French central casting was reading the paper at Bar L’auberge.

It was improbably romantic. Yet while shelves in Au Cabas Gascon épicerie groaned under jars of local duck pâté and rillettes, Fourcès also had more gift shops than seemed prudent for a Lilliputian village. The search continued.

It was Hélène, owner of Les Bruhasses B&B near the town of Condom (they’ve heard all the jokes), who recommended Éauze, Gers’ fifth biggest town, population 4,000. It was as romantic as Fourcès, but in an unpolished way. Following a bug-eyed tractor we plunged into the Thursday market: cans of duck confit, plump capons, saucisson by the sty-load and lovely wicker baskets, presumably to lug your culinary swag home. Most stalls were attended by a farmer, usually wearing a flat cap and a suit jacket that had seen better days.

What explained such abundance, I asked a terrifically moustachioed chap selling garlic woven into plaits. He looked at me as though I was daft. The terroir, of course — Gers is famous in France for its soil, while hills permitted all possible planting positions. By noon everyone had knocked off work and was slugging down wine outside Bar du Marché. It seemed rude not to join in.

You’re probably not allowed to leave Gers without sampling its aperitif

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, a blend of grape juice and armagnac that is best drunk on a pretty square any time after about, oh, 10.30am. Ringed by colonnades and a cathedral, with a soundtrack of buskers in straw hats, Place de l’Armagnac fitted the bill nicely. At Loft Café we ate local duck and flaky apple-and-armagnac tarte croustade. The sun shone, and another floc arrived (“Oh, go on then”).

We were on the right trail. Things got better going south the next day. When we inquired about lunch in the fortified village of Montesquiou, an elderly gent (braces over T-shirt; face like a walnut) offered to make us a sandwich. “Really, it’s no problem. My house is just there.” At Bassoues we passed a watchtower, then went on a bric-a-brac hunt in a high-street barn (it’s now minus one white embroidered bedspread — a snip at £17).

Onwards south, the air smelling of hot hay, on what signs now named as the Route des Bastides et des Castelnoux. We crested a hill and a wall of mountains sawtoothed across the horizon.

This was wine country. We were heading for another tip from Hélène, vineyard Château Viella. Its owner, Claire Bortolussi, suggested a stroll through the vines. She chatted about her peasant forebears, who’d started the 65-acre vineyard four generations ago, and explained the terroir of the Madiran wine region (something to do with alpine streams and nutrient-rich soils producing aromatic booze). I nodded. But I

wasn't really listening. It was too beautiful. "I always feel all is right with the world here," Claire said with masterful understatement.

If Gers was too cultured, too welcoming, to be genuine France

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, it fulfilled every Gallic fantasy. Its appeal lay not in big-hitter sights or nightlife, but in quiet moments. Gers had been a singular reminder that sometimes a more satisfying holiday is, well, less. So,

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in a way after all.

*James Stewart was a guest of Atout France and Tourisme Gers ( [tourisme-gers.com](http://tourisme-gers.com) [tourisme-gers.com](http://tourisme-gers.com) ). Fly to Toulouse-Blagnac*

Where to stay

- L'Hôtel Particulier Guilhon in central Lectoure offers deco-mag glamour — 1960s pop art, 1920s antiques, superking beds — plus a spa and pool in a tropical garden. B&B doubles from £128 B&B (

[hotel-particulier-guilhon.com](http://hotel-particulier-guilhon.com)

)

- Les Bruhasses has château-style rooms in a palatial former farmhouse. Lovely hosts and communal dinners too. B&B doubles from £80 (

[lesbruhasses.fr](http://lesbruhasses.fr)

)

- Open your curtains to the Pyrennes at slick Le Montastère de Saint Mont. Doubles from £117 B&B (

[lemonastere-desaintmont.com](http://lemonastere-desaintmont.com)

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Place des Cornières in Fourcès, Gers

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**Lectoure countryside, Gers**

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**Collégiale Saint-Pierre church in La Romieu, Gers**

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**The watchtower in Bassoues, Gers**

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