

Sleepy lanes, magical villages and impressive medieval castles, this region of France is ripe for exploration

SUCH beauty, such yesteryear charm, such healthy fertile country living at a sublimely gentle pace. Dreamy villages, deep in the heart of France, with the coloured stone buildings in keeping with their natural environment.

Shutters pronounced with their hues differing from celadon to lilac, from sky blue to burgundy. Proper broad rivers on which to go canoeing, truffle-hunting and hot air balloon flights, foie gras and weekend food markets.

The Dordogne, a region of Aquitaine, is the third most visited and third largest area of France. For centuries it's had an abiding appeal to visitors and is forever enduring.

The region is fondly broken into areas called Périgord Noir (for its dark forests), Périgord Blanc (white stone), Périgord Vert (trees and ponds) and Périgord Pourple (vineyards). The region is well served by flights from Ireland to Toulouse, Bordeaux and Bergerac airports all year round.

I recommend visiting by car as it's lovely to drive around and get lost, almost willingly, down sleepy lanes and through magical villages, which are made for exhibitions in their own right. It's all so highly explorable.

I drove to Périgueux, the capital of the Dordogne region, with a divine centre that is like a film set with its misty romanticism. Devoid of traffic and preserved in all its medieval glory, the streets are higgledy-piggledy with their uniquely wonky sandstone buildings, turrets and doors.

For lunch I went down a narrow passage in the Old Town to Le Pétrécote restaurant, named after the town's original settlers. It was spacious, minimal and chic. The food did all the talking, from the confident menu that was both creative and exciting.

From its exterior, the town's Saint-Front cathedral has an oriental feel with its minaret-style belltower and its mass of onion-shaped domes allegedly deriving from Istanbul and Venice. I roamed around the artisan boutiques that are far preferable to the cheap tat of typical souvenir shops.

I loved walking along the banks of Périgueux's River Isle, a tributary of the Dordogne, from which I spotted L'Eschif, the especially charming 14th century look-out post of a hut on stilts.

For dinner, I experienced Oxalis restaurant, down another side street and named after the edible flower. It rightfully claims to be a 'restaurant of experiences' and within is a small and discreet stripped-bare cavern.

The highlights of my taster menu comprised the local foie gras, 'ceviche de bar' with beetroot, pistachio and sapphire pared with a glass of local red Pécharmant.

En route to my hotel further south, I stopped off at Sainte-Alvère, home to the best-known truffle market in the Dordogne. I walked round this idyllic village where

Dreamy delights of THE DORDOGNE



ing the former home of Josephine Baker at Château des Milandes. Not only is it an exquisite chateau presiding over the river with beautifully proportioned rooms, broad fireplaces and a lovely old kitchen, but it's also a permanent exhibition to the American dancer and singer.

The gardens are geometric and include a rectangular mirrored pond, and the neighbouring chapel has an atmosphere all of its own with its deeply calming simple white altar.

I went to the morning market at Sarlat. Down the town's long spinal cord that is the Rue de la République, it was almost bazaar-like with its mounting stacks of local produce: honey, cheese, sausages and, of course, foie gras. The outdoor market people bear typically weathered, rosy complexions.

The picturesque nature of its medieval streets has been cleverly preserved with its warm limestone buildings and characteristic roofs of lauze tiles. Everywhere, teddy bears were in evidence.

So much was left to be seen another time. I missed the town of Bergerac with its eponymous Cyrano fame. I must also go to Lascaux IV, the brilliantly recreated version of the famous prehistoric art cave, deemed too delicate now for the original to be exposed.

I must go back, whenever but soon.

TRAVEL FACTS

Flights from Dublin to Bordeaux from €31, or from Dublin to Toulouse from €45, ryanair.com. Rooms at Le Domaine de Rochebois are priced from €180, see rochebois.com. Adam had support from Périgord-Dordogne Tourist Board.

BY ADAM JACOT DE BOINOD

French fancies: Main, Chateau de Montfort; above, the boxwood in Marqueyssac Gardens and Le Domaine de Rochebois; below, a room at the hotel

houses instantly get snapped up, and entered the church with its resounding echoes.

It's right next door to Dix Restaurant, where I met the chef Raphael and his English wife. They have developed an excellent reputation for delighting their customers with culinary creations, all performed within and without the walls of their house for a truly authentic treat.

I drove an hour south to my hotel, Le Domaine de Rochebois. Located in the heart of Périgord Noir and recently run by Salesian monks as an orphanage, this historic manor was restored and reopened as a family-run hotel in 2022.

It has a high-class country club feel as some come to play golf, others to be pampered in the spa.

I arrived down a beautifully

landscaped drive beside a pond speckled with swans and a rockery cascading with water. The expansive grounds border the river Dordogne in one of its many meandering 'cingles' (oxbow bends). It's an invitation to explore and perfect, I discovered, for a romantic walk past the local Château de Montfort.

Inside the hotel, past 16th-century tiles and a balustraded stairway, I reached my room. Classic and contemporary, it all felt so fresh, with the high finish of the décor comprising calm neutral greys and beige, as did the chic cement of my bathroom floor.

Rooms at the side have private terraces with views over the pool and terrace, where birds twitter among walnut and chestnut trees. The Spa Nuxe boasted the latest hydrotherapy pool and hammam for me to relax after a day sightseeing.

With three restaurants on offer, it's all very spoiling for dinner. Le Wedge, the brasserie beside the nine-hole golf course, is a minute's walk away under the stars and had an excellent menu. A pianist tickled the ivories elsewhere at Josephine Bar. You can't beat a brand new hotel.

It's close to Vitrac, long considered the region's most expensive area. Legend calls it the 1,000-castle valley, with

