

HESPER OUT WEST

Scenic views of rural heartland rich in history, food and wine

Martin Hesp samples culture and produce in the hills and valleys of south-central France

Imagine a vast area that boasts all the best bits of the Westcountry and very few of our less scenic zones. A place of forested hills and deep river valleys which combine to provide a rural heartland that seems to stretch on-and-on. A region so rich in history, there seems to be a castle on every knoll and evidence of prehistoric humankind somewhere near every cliff and cave.

Okay, so the Dordogne, which lies hundreds of miles south of the English Channel, does not have our dramatic coastlines – but it does have some of the best food in the world as well as a warmer, drier, climate.

What's not to like? Thousands of Brits have asked exactly that question and have moved down to this part of south-central France. I know several people and not one of them has regretted the move.

The latest figures show that somewhere around 40,000 Brits live in the larger Nouvelle-Aquitaine area, which includes the Dordogne.

I'm not suggesting anyone packs their bags forever, despite the cheap properties, the good wine, the amazing food and so on. But, having enjoyed a recent tour

around the Dordogne, I am more than happy to recommend it as a perfect venue for a holiday. I say that even though it was the end of October and the weather wasn't exactly clement all the time. The lunches and dinners alone were worth the trip.

But if you asked me to name what I loved most about this extraordinary part of France, I'd say it was the magic and excitement of being in such a vast and unspoilt rural paradise. That sense – of a forested, undulating, landscape stretching on-and-on – somehow reminds me of a world I never knew, but wanted to know very much. By which I mean a more ancient England. An agrarian land, interlaced by thousands of tiny byways that seem to weave and wind their way into leafy infinity.

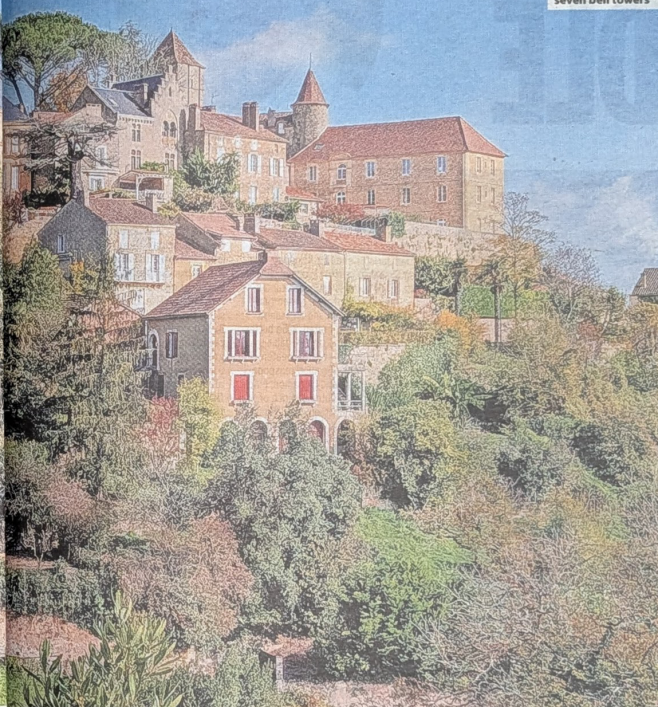
I was on a trip with other travel journalists, so there was not much chance to go wandering off alone, but I now intend returning to the Dordogne to do precisely that. To roam without any real destination in mind.

We flew to Bergerac and from there drove an hour-and-a-half past the town of Vitrac for an overnight stay in the Dordogne Valley at the rather grand Domaine

> A river view down the Dordogne



> Belvès, known as 'the village with seven bell towers'



de Rochebeis – an impressive hotel set in lovely grounds. We thoroughly enjoyed a glorious four-course dinner with a local wine pairing.

The next morning we were off to the amazing Eyrignac et ses Jardins – one of the region's most famous gardens – said to include a 'masterpiece of French topiary art'. I could see why they use the term 'masterpiece'. The seven full-time gardeners still use non-mechanical hand-tools and the highly manicured gardens located high on a hill must take endless labour hours to keep in trim. After marching around in the rain, wondering just how fabulous the place must be in the sunshine, we were given a rather splendid lunch of foie-gras omelette at the Côté Jardin restaurant.

By the way, if the thought of foie-gras upsets you, then perhaps give the Aquitaine region a miss. It is everywhere. Meat dominates most menus and the veggie option doesn't always look as good.

Next, it was a drive to the famous village of Domme, officially designated one of the most

beautiful villages in France. It is a magnificent medieval 'bastide', perched high above the Dordogne Valley, and we were there to help celebrate the Bastides Festival.

A bastide is a fortified market town with a uniform, organised design. Domme and Monpazier are two famous examples. During the medieval period these towns were usually founded by agreement between local lords and either the King of France, or England (we owned a large slice of France back then). In exchange for moving to a bastide, locals were offered freedoms and civil rights not available in the surrounding feudal villages.

Domme's impressive gate towers still guard the fortified village, leading visitors into the historic cobbled streets. Just past the square (which was decked-out with all the fun of a medieval fair as part of the festival) we arrived at the main reason for Domme's location – the edge of a high cliff – a promontory that allows this particular bastide to rule a large swathe of river valley.

Our afternoon stretched into the



> The canteine de campagne in Monpazier

evening because we had been invited to a community banquet, staged in Domme as part of the Bastides Festival. More than 250 locals turned up for the excellent four-course meal which had been prepared by members of the community (wild mushroom soup, salmon en-croûte and a hog-roast – not with a pig but a sizeable veal calf) and there were musicians playing medieval music with dancers and fire-eaters.

This extravaganza was followed

Next morning our trip continued with a drive to Belvès, otherwise known as 'the village with seven bell towers'. It could also be known as the 'village of secret caves' because right under the main square they've discovered a series of ancient dwellings. These were once lived in by poor folk who set up house and home inside caves which lined the defensive moat.

Lunch was enjoyed after yet another journey through the countryside – this time to Monpazier where a producers' market was taking place. We were there to join visitors and locals in a 'cantine de campagne' or 'countryside canteen' in the main square of this historic bastide, and we enjoyed an 'autumn dish' at the busy Le Croquant stall – cep-and-chestnut soup alongside a plate of barbecued roast potatoes, local sausage and chestnuts.

The afternoon featured a visit to Grotte de Maxanges, known for its remarkable and eccentric 'concretions', followed by dinner and an overnight stay at the Hôtel Restaurant Le Centenaire at Les Eyzies. And what a dinner! The chef-owner of this charming small hotel used to be an oyster farmer, but boy, can he cook!

Just across the road stands one of the most interesting museums in Europe, The Musée National de Préhistoire, in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac-Sireuil, is situated in the Vézère Valley – often called the 'Capital of Prehistory' (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Set into a cliff face, the museum was built in the early 1900s and now holds one of the world's largest collections of prehistoric artefacts, spanning over 400,000 years.

I could have spent the entire day there, but it was onwards along yet more riverine valleys for a guided tour of the Maison-Forêt de Reignac, a breathtaking museum, also set in a cliff. The privately-owned museum is hugely charming, but you do need a good head for heights to visit the upper sections.

They say leave the best until last, and in terms of accommodation and food that is what we did. The hotel Le Vieux Logis, in the village of Trémolat, is one of the much-celebrated Relais &

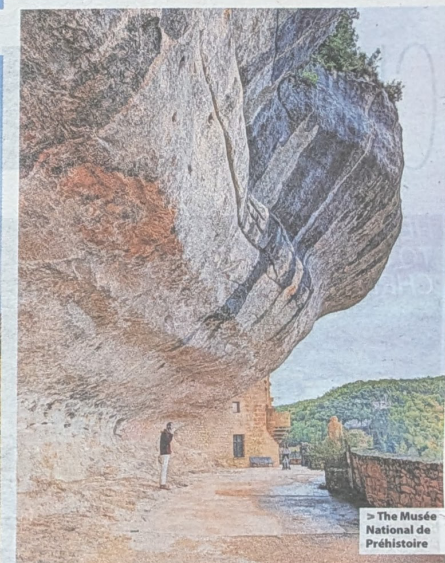
Châteaux properties (a kind of high-end Michelin style designation) – as such, it is an absolute gem. Once a 16th-century priory and agricultural estate, this luxurious four-star hotel offers both a classy sense of tranquillity and authentic Périgordian charm.

It is renowned for its gastronomic restaurant, led by a Michelin-starred chef, serving refined, modern cuisine rooted in classic French technique and local specialties like truffle and foie gras. At our meal, the complex small dishes involving locally caught river fish were a masterpiece of their kind.

During our drive to the airport the next morning we had time to visit the Château Terre Vieille, a Pécharmant Vineyard, where owner Jérôme Morand-Montell treated us to a spectacular lunch of what could be described as Périgord style tapas.

Even writing those last three words have made me hungry. Penning the article, however, has made me yearn for a return visit to the rustic, remarkable, adorable, Dordogne.

NEXT WEEK: MARTIN ENJOYS A COUPLE OF DAYS STAYING AT A REFURBISHED PUB IN ONE OF THE WESTCOUNTRY'S MOST 'UNTOURISTY' SEASIDE VILLAGES



> The Musée National de Préhistoire



> Dordogne countryside

FACT FILE

General information: www.dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr
Bergerac Airport: www.bergerac.aeroport.fr/

Hotels:
Domaine de Rochebeis
Château de Maraval
Le Centenaire
Le Vieux Logis

Recommended heritage sites:
Eyrignac et ses jardins
Domme village
Monpazier village
Grotte de Maxanges
Musée National de Préhistoire
Maison-Forêt de Reignac

Parking:
Martin flew from Stansted and parked with Holiday Extras – the market leader in UK for airport parking, hotels, lounges, and transfers. Last year its customers saved an average of £196 per trip by booking their airport parking in advance. Booking Airport Parking means you can enjoy more holiday with less hassle. Plus with Flextras, if you need to cancel or amend you can without charge. For more information visit HolidayExtras.com or call 0800 316 5678.