



South West France: Simply Enchanting (Part III)

In the final article about their 10-day trip through South West France, **Amala and Karl Dantas** unravel the beauty and charm of Bay of Arcachon, Bordeaux city, the surrounding wine country, and the villages of Sarlat, Beynac and La Roque-Gageac



Medieval Town of Sarlat



Pilat Sand Dune- Bay of Arcachon

Pic Courtesy: Atout France



Beynac Village

OUR final leg of exploration of South West France commenced with a visit to Bay of Arcachon on our way to Bordeaux from St. Jean de Luz. Famous for the Pilat Sand Dune, the highest dune in Europe (113 mts high) facing the bay, with its world-famous oysters, Bay of Arcachon lies inside the bay close to Cap Ferrat and is two-and-a-half-hour's drive from St. Jean de Luz. Our guide took us on a walking tour of the town, the beach front and then for lunch to 'Chez Diego' seafront restaurant for the famous oysters and seafood. Later we drove past the Winter Town, one of the famous districts of Arcachon, well known for its villas.

A short drive of an hour and we reached Bordeaux and checked into Hotel Burdigala-MGallery Collection, a luxury five-star property, conveniently located near the city centre for our two-night stay in the city. Local tourist attractions are within walking distance of the hotel. The city centre of Bordeaux is easily within reach, as well as the Cathedral St. Andre. Armed with the map of Bordeaux, we slowly strolled down narrow cobbled streets lined with attractive shops and boutiques soaking in the ambience. We arrived at the Grand Theatre-Opera, boasting one of the finest pieces of 18th century architecture, which stands in the middle of Place de la Comedie, the historical centre of Bordeaux. We were in two minds whether to have dinner at the five-star Grand Hotel or the restaurant next to

it, 'Comptoir Cuisine'. We opted for the latter and were not disappointed as the cuisine and service both were excellent. We relaxed outside in the cool night watching the lit-up Opera House across, people walking past and the trams trundling by, experiencing the pulse of the city, which strongly looked like a mini version of Paris.

Bordeaux, with its historic centre, has been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 2007. A port city on the Garonne River, it has a unique blend of urban and neo-classical architectural style, and is also known for its Versailles-like architecture. Bordeaux is the major wine capital of the world. Major sites

include its historic churches, magnificent 18th century buildings, museums, the Pont de Pierre 'Stone Bridge' (500 mts long), a beauty to watch, especially at night when it is lit up. The magnificent architecture of Palais de La Bourse facing the river Garonne was once the city's stock exchange, and today this majestic building houses the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Across the street is the popular 'Miroir des Quais' –The Quay Mirror. The area is covered with a thin layer of water, which gives it its mirroring effect. This is one of the most photographed places in Bordeaux and we could not stop taking our photos against this spectacular backdrop that creates an enchanting atmosphere.

The city has a great deal to offer as a tourist destination, besides its well-preserved historic architecture and its fame as a wine capital of the world. It is a vibrant city, full of attractions and world-class shopping. It is a popular holiday destination all round the year due to its mild climate, and variety of accommodation to suit all budgets, which is cheaper than Paris to which it is always compared. Bordeaux has some fine Michelin Star gastronomic restaurants, as well as some good Indian ones. Our activity next morning was a walk in the old town, where we got a chance to taste the famous sweets of Bordeaux, which include cannelés, caramelised brioche-style pastries



St. Emilion

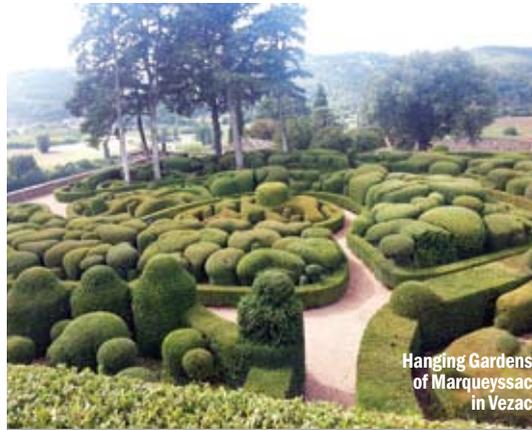
and the famous marrons glacés, candied chestnuts or noisettes du Medoc, and roasted hazelnuts rolled in sugar. Our stay in South West of France would have been incomplete without eating the Crepes. We discovered a wonderful small eatery, 'Creperie Reno', in one of the side streets that served excellent Crepes (savoury and sweet ones). Our host, Perrine Armandary from the Aquitaine Tourist Board & CCI Bordeaux, looked after our stay here.

Bordeaux serves as the starting point to explore the surrounding wine regions such as St. Emillion, Pomerol, Graves, Médoc etc., as well as the Dordogne Perigord region. One can explore these vineyards within 30 minutes. We drove to the famous medieval village of St. Emilion called 'the hill with a thousand château'. Also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, St. Emillion is recognised for its historical importance and its world-famous wine. This village is very beautiful, surrounded by the vineyards and chateaux. The walking tour of this charming village with Isabelle Auzely from the Tourism Department took us to another time and age. Later we visited Le Relais de Franc Mayne, a charming exclusive hotel set in the middle of its vineyard that produces their wine. The property, a 16th century Chateau, which has been recently refurbished, has nine beautifully furnished rooms and a pool. It is the perfect place to stay in the peaceful environment of the vineyards. Unfortunately, we did not partake in any wine tasting in St. Emilion as it was not included in our list of activities, which was rather sad. Our lunch was at Grand Barrail Château Hotel & Spa surrounded by three acres of land.

We headed East of St. Emilion to explore the famous pre-historic site, the caves of Lascaux. It is one of the foremost sources of knowledge on human evolution, located in the region of Dordogne in Perigord. Lascaux Caves is a complex of caves famous for its Paleolithic paintings. The original caves are located near the village of Montignac. A duplicate cave to replicate the original was created to preserve the original paintings, some of the best known Upper Paleolithic art. These paintings, mostly of large animals, are a superb work of art. In 1979, Lascaux was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list with other sites in the Vezere



La Roque-Gageac Village



Hanging Gardens of Marqueyssac in Vezac

valley. The icing on the cake was our last stop Sarlat. It is a well-preserved, attractive town and its beauty took our breath away. This town is built around a large Benedictine abbey founded in the early Middle Ages, and is a perfect base to explore the surrounding medieval villages of Beynac, La Roque-Gageac and the hanging gardens of Marqueyssac in Vezac. Our one-night stay in Hotel De La Madeleine was our last stop in our itinerary and at a walking distance to the wonderful old town of Sarlat. Dinner in a local restaurant serving excellent local cuisine

was hosted by Bouahlem Rekkas, Director of Sarlat Office of Tourism.

Our guided walking tour of Sarlat next morning was with Pierre-Antoine Batail. He brought to life the history of the place and we were able to see how the architectural heritage is preserved due to a law passed in 1962. We visited the covered market selling the local products of the region, the superb Maison de la Boetie opposite the cathedral, strolled down the pedestrian Rue de la Republic and the wonderful winding street of the Rue des Consuls, one of the highlights of Sarlat that contains a number of impressive mansions. Wandering through these streets with wonderful buildings in honey-coloured sandstone with their unique rooves in lauze-tiled was a treat. Visitors to this region are spoilt for choice. The recently installed glass lift in the bell tower of Saint-Marie Church gives a 360-degree spectacular view of Sarlat town spread below. There is an entrance fee and the driver of the lift acts as a guide. Sarlat is the most famous and one of the most beautiful towns of the Dordogne and frequented by foreign tourists all year round, but completely unknown to Indian tourists; truly a jewel not to be missed.

On our way to Toulouse airport for our flight back home, we visited the villages of Beynac and La Roque-Gageac, tucked into the rock, nestled between the cliff and the river. The village appears to be emerging from the rock itself. Both are classified among 'The Most Beautiful Villages of France'. Beynac, clinging to one of the highest cliffs in the Dordogne Valley, is a medieval village with cobblestones-paved narrow little streets and fine stone houses. The Dordogne River flows in front of these villages and one can take a boat ride in the traditional flat bottomed boats. After a quick lunch at the restaurant, La Petite Tonnelle, consisting of fresh fish and salad, we visited the Hanging Gardens of Marqueyssac in Vezac. The Gardens are well laid out in different patterns on a hill and offer a superb view of the Dordogne Valley. We bid adieu to this beautiful region and drove to Toulouse, a scenic three-and-a-half-hour trip through picturesque hills. It was a very exciting and memorable journey through South West France; a must-see for those who love to see and experience different regions. ■

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