

Southwest France

HIGHLIGHTS

- o Tour the dramatically floodlit buildings and monuments of central **Bordeaux** (p211), making up the world's largest Unesco-listed urban area
- o Sip some of the **world's best nectars** (p179) in the cellars in which they take flavour
- o Marvel at the prehistoric **cave paintings** (p197) of the Vézère Valley
- o Venture into the underworld at the **Gouffre de Padirac** (p204)
- o Shop till you drop at the hectic street markets of **Sarlat-la-Canéda** (p195)
- o Highest pedalled pass – the road from **St-Céré to Leyme** (approximately 600m; p208)

TERRAIN

Flat along the coast, giving way to rolling hills in the wine country, and then deep river gorges separated by high plateaus in the Dordogne and Lot *département*.

Telephone Code – 05

www.tourisme-aquitaine.info



Southwest France offers magnificent beaches, expanses of pine forest, dense oak woods, famous wine-growing regions, extraordinary food, and architecture and artefacts testifying to a rich history of human settlement.

In this chapter, Southwest France includes the Aquitaine region (which administers the *départements* of the Dordogne, Gironde, Landes, Lot-et-Garonne and Pyrénées-Atlantiques) and a little of the Limousin region.

The *département* of Dordogne and the Lot is the spiritual home of *foie gras* and the fattened goose, a land of cliff-lined watercourses, rolling fields of sunflowers and corn, oak and walnut woods, peaceful roads, tiny villages and colourful markets that give them a heady appeal. While the rest of France seems desperate to catch up to its European neighbours, this is one corner of the country that seems perfectly content to keep things just the way they are with a laid-back lifestyle, superb cuisine and the world's richest collection of cave art.

With all this and the student-fuelled buzz of central Bordeaux – not to mention the buzz brought on by endless cellar-and-châteaux stops in the Bordeaux wine region – Southwest France has something to offer every cycle tourist. Whether you're looking for a leisurely family holiday, an indulgent, wine-quaffing, gourmet B&B experience or a dip into an archaeological and architectural wonderland, you'll find it here.

CLIMATE

Southwest France is known for its mild climate. Around Bordeaux, the wide Gironde Estuary carries the steady humidity and temperatures of the Atlantic Ocean far inland, while the Landes de Gascogne forest to the south acts as a windbreak.

The Atlantic Coast is one of the sunniest places in France, receiving more than 2000 hours of sunshine a year – the bulk of them between May and September. In these months, average daytime coastal temperatures are 20°C. While autumn on the coast can be very wet, inland – around the wine-producing areas – the weather is delightful. Winter is usually short and, except on Pyrenean peaks, snow rarely falls. Spring is usually mild and damp. Summer is hot, with occasional storms. The prevailing wind is from the west.

This mild, maritime climate extends inland to about the Dordogne, which experiences weather influences from both the Atlantic Ocean and the mountains of the Massif Central. Here spring is cool and wet, and summer (June to September) long and hot. Winter is usually mild but can be cold and dry. Autumn is generally dry and sunny, with comfortable riding temperatures (17°C maximum).

PLANNING

Cycling Events

Paques en Quercy (depart from Bretenoux; April) For three days, cyclists tackle the roads of Quercy from the Cère to the Dordogne Rivers. See <http://randocyclovtt46.free.fr> for more information.

Randonnée des Bastides en Bergeracois (departs from Château du Roc, Creysse; May)

Over two days, this randonnée of 71km, 73km, 100km and 127km through the Dordogne takes in numerous bastides. Contact Cyclo Périgord Pourpre Evasion (☎ 05 53 22 75 47).

Randonnée de la Double (departs from Montpon-Monestérol area; July) Organised by Cyclotourisme Montponnais (☎ 05 53 80 39 30), routes of 34km, 75km, 91km and 136km fan out across White Périgord, the longest finishing in St-Émilien.

Randonnée en Forêts et Vignobles du Haut-Médoc (departs from St-Laruent Médoc; September)

Hosted by Cocarde Cyclotourisme (<http://pagesperso-orange.fr/cocarde-cyclo-medoc>), cyclists can cover three routes (35km, 65km and 90km) within the magical confines of Haut-Médoc.

Information Sources

Fédération Française de Cyclisme (FFC; ffc.fr, in French) Runs five Aquitaine VTT sites (p440).

Ligue Aquitaine de Cyclotourisme (<http://aquitaine.ffct.org>, in French) The regional cycling league associated with the Fédération Française de Cyclotourisme (p425).

Regional Tourism Committee of Aquitaine (Comité Régional de Tourisme; ☎ 05 56 01 70 00; www.tourisme-aquitaine.info; Cité Mondiale, 23 parvis des Chartrons, Bordeaux) Comprehensive brochures downloadable from the website will help you with planning. These include the excellent *Aquitaine à Vélo/by Bike*, summarising 12 rides and the extensive cycling resources throughout the region. Also look for the new-in-2008 *Carte Touristique Voie Verte – Bordeaux-Toulouse à vélo*, a map and resource guide for the greenway along the Canal de la Garonne between these two great city centres.

GATEWAY

See Bordeaux (p211).

BORDEAUX WINE REGION

The 123,000-hectare grape-growing area around the city of Bordeaux is the largest fine-wine-producing region in the world. Think Haut-Brion, Mouton-Rothschild and Yquem and you have just a few of the prestigious wineries competing for tippers' attentions. Most famously a region of great reds and painstakingly created dessert wines, Bordeaux is also home to rosés, sweet and dry whites, and even sparkling wines. The majority have earned the right to include the abbreviation AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) on their labels. This indicates the contents have been grown, fermented and aged according to strict regulations (see boxed text p127).

