

Aquitaine

Overview

Occupying the expansive chunk of land and coastline between Poitou-Charentes to its north, Limousin to the east and the Spanish border to the south, Aquitaine has it all to offer: it is spacious and topographically diverse, from the pine-flanked beaches of Les Landes to the vineyards of Médoc, from the rolling Dordogne countryside to the Pyrenean peaks. It is dotted with heritage sites of archaeological and historic import, blessed with richly cultured towns often in stunning locations and boasts world-renowned wines and a gastronomic culture to tempt and tease. Riding the waves in Biarritz, sipping St-Emilion in situ or settling with a café au lait in an ancient hilltop bastide – the options are endless.

Main cities and towns

Bordeaux, the elegant grand lady of Aquitaine with her 18th-century vieux quartier, imposing squares and shopping streets, is the region's main transport and commercial hub, and makes for essential city break viewing. Spread out along the banks of the River Garonne that facilitated its trading prominence and wealth, it demands at least two days of your time, if only to fully soak up the atmosphere. Other places not to miss in Aquitaine include Arcachon – a seaside resort of the old school, historic Pau; picture-postcard Sarlat, Perigordian favourites Bergerac and Périgueux, seaside favourite Biarritz and Basque Bayonne. And any self-respecting wine lovers will not want to miss St-Emilion or Pauillac.

Places to visit

After exploring Bordeaux – and paying special attention to the newly refurbished quayside area – head out into the wine country that made the name so famous around the world. Wine tourism is massive here, so plan your route and accommodation well – the Destination Vignobles label is a mark of quality. Be sure to head north to Médoc and east to St-Emilion to sample and buy some of the world's most reputed reds or visit the Maisons du Vin of big name producers like Margaux. And don't overlook smaller places like Sauternes, home to exceptional sweet whites. History lovers have it all to see, too: step back into pre-history in Périgord's Vézère Valley or chance upon the region's endless châteaux and fortresses ranging in style from Medieval to Renaissance.

Things to do and see

Those feeling fit, brave, or both, might be tempted to climb the enormous Dune du Pyla, the highest sand dune in Europe just along the coast from Arcachon. Elsewhere on the 250km-long coastline, the surfing mecca of Biarritz welcomes boarders of all ages and standards while highlights of the Côte d'Argent include the pine-forested trails of Cap Ferret and the saltwater lakes of Les Landes – perfect for a spot of windsurfing or sailing. Thanks to a mammoth maze of cycle tracks, almost the entire region can be explored at your own pace à vélo, with chambres d'hôtes and campsites along the way. The same goes for the Pyrenees, where adrenaline junkies can enjoy white water rafting. Fishing, golf, hiking and thalassotherapy complete Aquitaine's leisure pursuits list.

Food and drink

Anyone for duck? Aquitaine has a rich and varied culinary heritage but for many visitors this is the heart of canard country – it is served in many guises, from confit to magret, gésiers to foie gras. There are, of course, many other regional specialities to get stuck into: oysters from the Bay of Arcachon, mature hams from Bayonne, gutsy Béarn dishes like garbure (cabbage stew) and poule au pot (chicken stew), Basque piperade made with iconic red peppers and lamprey in red wine. The Lot-et-Garonne's cabécou is the goat's cheese of choice, while pastis from Landes, Agen prunes or gâteau Basque are tempting desserts, Wine lists in Aquitaine are, as you would expect, extensive but they do cater for those on all budgets.

Family attractions

Aside from the many summer activities available, namely seaside water sports, aquaparks and outdoor pursuits, such as tree climbing at Parc Robinson in Labenne Océan, plus winter activities like skiing in the Pyrenees, there is plenty more for children to enjoy in this vast region. They will love the Lascaux caves, the grotto containing preserved animal drawings that was discovered in 1940, and relish exploring the watery world at the Périgord Aquarium in Le Bugue.