

Limousin

Overview

Composed of the departments Corrèze, Creuse and Haute-Vienne, Limousin is a sparsely populated region that can lay claim to being France's rural heartland. With its swathes of green fields, plateaux and valleys, it's a nature-lovers paradise, where life rolls along languidly at the pace of the proverbial snail. Dotted with picturesque riverside villages, ancient châteaux and historic towns, it's the perfect place to escape the peak season crowds of neighbouring Dordogne or Charente. Its main airport at Limoges now welcomes several direct flights from the UK, making it the ideal holiday break destination for those in search of a little rustic tranquillity or keen to enjoy the atmosphere of France from days gone by.

Main cities and towns

Limoges is the capital of Limousin, and it is best known for being a centre for porcelain and enamelware production – its collections are quite something. However, the city's 17,000 students ensure that the place is anything but old-fashioned, as they get stuck into a lively bar scene. The Gothic St-Etienne cathedral is a celebrated local landmark, while the Art Deco train station is magnificent. The other main town is Brive-la-Gaillarde, well known to rugby fans and also a major administrative hub. It has a charming old town and makes a nice base for exploring the Corrèze (although Tulle is the capital). The pretty walled town of Rochechouart, meanwhile, can famously lay claim to having welcomed a 1.5km-wide meteor two hundred million years ago!

Places to visit

Check out the enamelware collections in Limoges, some of which date to the twelfth century – the best is at the Musée Municipal de l'Evêche. Craft fans will not want to miss out on a trip to Aubusson, either – it is a noted centre of tapestry weaving. For villages that are easy on the eye, Limoges spoils you. Try medieval Solignac just south of Limoges, Beaulieu on the upper Dordogne River or Collonges-la-Rouge, a picture-postcard joy and one of France's Plus Beaux Villages. However, the most astonishing place to visit in Limousin is probably Oradour-sur-Glane. It remains frozen in time, a living memorial to the horrors of World War Two and is untouched from when SS troops left it on June 10th 1944 after wreaking murderous havoc on this once peaceful village.

Things to do and see

Lovers of the great French outdoors should think seriously about choosing Limousin for their next countryside break – it's so spacious that often your only company will be a few of the famous reddish Limousin cows idly munching on verdant fields. Naturally, sedate activities like hiking and fishing come easily (see local tourist offices for maps of marked trails), but the more adventurous can get involved in kayaking canoeing on the River Vézère. A fine way to appreciate the countryside and its pretty villages and châteaux is from above, so why not take a hot air balloon trip – head for the Corrèze Montgolfière website for details for prices and departure points.

Food and drink

Given that it is such an agricultural region, nature's bounty leaves the dinner table groaning in Limousin. Beef from the famous Limousin is much sought after for its taste and tenderness, and Cul-Noir (Black-bottomed) pigs and lamb make the menu too. Patés and boudins (blood sausages) made with chestnuts make full use of locally produced fare, while a more unusual delicacy is tasty violet mustard. Limousin apples are also well reputed. For dessert, try a delicious black cherry clafoutis (batter pudding). The region may not be famous for its wine production (although Vin de Corrèze is growing in stature) but it does provide lots of the oak barrels used in the rest of France!

Family attractions

Limousin might be landlocked but that doesn't stop it having a great Aquarium, with over 300 fish species, in Limoges. For more active watery fun, take the children to the pools, slides and water jets at the centre Aquacreatif in Tulle. And for some adrenaline-pumping fun, head to the D'Arbre en Arbre tree park at Broussas or the Aubazine Adventure Park – there's even bungee jumping! On a more sedate, but equally enticing note, take the whole family on a steam train ride through the stunning gorges of Haute-Vienne or climb aboard a vélo-rail and meander through Charente-Limousine's ancient disused railway line.