



TALK OF THE TARN

Scattered with historic and artistic treasures, Tarn offers bountiful countryside and awe-inspiring villages that won't fail to delight, as *Zoë McIntyre* discovers



France doesn't get more glorious than Tarn, a bucolic south-west kingdom where ancient vineyards merge into wildflower meadows, and hilltop villages bear the imprint of their dramatic medieval past. Tucked into the folds of the Midi-Pyrénées region, the picturesque department boasts a 'golden triangle' of must-sees that encompass the UNESCO-protected city of Albi, the vineyard-ringed town of Gaillac and the dreamy medieval settlement of Cordes-sur-Ciel. Reachable in less than an hour from Toulouse's international airport, Tarn enjoys an equally enviable proximity to both the Mediterranean Sea and the Pyrénées, while sharing a southern frontier with Languedoc-Roussillon. Such attributes attract savvy house-hunters who favour undulating hills to busy beach resorts and prefer a converted barn over a grand château.

The historic capital is the bustling city of Albi, set astride the limpid waters of the River Tarn. A muddle of intricately woven alleyways makes up its medieval centre, flanked by characterful timber-framed facades that remain little changed since Albi's woad (*pastel*) trade prospered a few centuries ago. Walk the streets at different times throughout the day and you'll notice the distinctive clay brick ablaze in a kaleidoscope of crimson hues, testifying to Albi's epithet of 'la ville rouge' or 'the red city'.

The city's centrepiece is the vast fortress-like Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile, considered the largest brick structure in the world. Built in the 13th century as a symbol of catholic power during the Cathar Crusades, its towering vaults and impenetrable walls can't fail to leave a lasting impression. Little wonder that the cathedral and its surrounding historic quarter were recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2010.

Next door, the Bishops' Palace is home to Albi's other great draw, the Musée de Toulouse-Lautrec. Dedicated to the work of *fin-de-siècle* artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi's most famous son, it offers an in-depth narrative of his life and work with a collection of more than 1,000 lithographs, sketches and paintings that span from early childhood drawings to iconic cabaret scenes, which bring Belle Époque Paris to life.

While Albi claims its share of star attractions, its laid-back character makes the city not only loveable but liveable. The streets buzz with an assortment of affordable boutiques, cafés and restaurants that invite endless opportunity for indulging in true *art de vivre* - simply soaking up the finer things in life. A fine example is La Table du Sommelier, a right-bank bistro with a sweeping terrace, where diners can sit in the sunshine and feast on a delicious three-course lunch menu for a reasonable €27. A network of

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walking circuits criss-crossing the city will help work off dessert and the stunning views from the ancient arched Pont-Vieux bridge make the perfect finale.

Head out of Albi and soon the city boundaries give way to country lanes that cut through gently sloping vineyards and swathes of iridescent sunflower fields. Here, you're likely to cross the odd ramshackle farmhouse or isolated dovecote but only a handful of other motorists. Studding the land is a trail of hilltop settlements, known as bastides, that have been in existence since Raymond VII, the Count of Toulouse, founded them in the early 13th century. Each is a wisteria-clad, cobblestoned wonder more magical than the last.

One such place is Castelnau-de-Montmiral, one of Tarn's four *plus beaux villages* that boasts an idyllic setting overlooking the lush Vère valley. Its sense of tranquillity and wide open space are what led Jeanne Boden to move here from London 17 years ago, along with her husband David and their four young children. "It's such a lovely place to bring up a family," Jeanne explains. "It feels like England 40 years ago - the children grew up playing in the square, picking wild mushrooms and going out on tractors with local farmers. It's true natural countryside; it's safe, with good air and the local community really look out for you."

Jeanne runs a property development project in Castelnau and also works on the local council. Like many other expats, she's become well integrated into local life. "Some of us help with plantations so the village has lots of flowers, others are involved with the local festivals or are on school councils," she says. "It's not overrun by Brits but there is a community here, which is comforting for

newcomers. But we want to get involved with the existing community rather than change things."

By far the most renowned of Tarn's villages is Cordes-sur-Ciel, found dramatically crowning a rocky stone summit in the northern reaches of the department. Visit early morning to understand its suffix '*sur ciel*' - meaning 'in the sky': the mist rising from the surrounding Cérou valley wraps around its foothills making Cordes appear to be floating on a cloud. Beyond its stone ramparts, the inner *cité* is equally as heavenly, with its arcaded market square and honey-hued cottages. Such charms haven't gone unnoticed, and in 2014 Cordes was voted France's favourite village in a competition run by television channel France 2.

Of course, behind its fairy-tale facade, everyday life still goes on as usual. British resident Paul Bedford, who runs the local estate agency, explains its enduring appeal. "What attracted us here 20 years ago, and still attracts people now, is that Cordes has all the elements needed for normal life," he says. "It's got great pâtisseries, butchers and bakers so we don't need to go elsewhere for shopping; there are also doctors and pharmacies. It's got a pretty village feel but it functions as a 12-months-a-year village." His sentiments aren't far off those of writer Albert Camus who, after visiting in the 1950s, declared: "The traveller who, from the terraces of Cordes, looks at the summer night sky, knows that he needs to travel no further."

While Tarn's bastide villages may captivate history lovers, it's Gaillac and its surrounding vineyards that entice the wine-swilling *bon viveur*. Reputed to be France's oldest wine-producing area dating back to Roman times, the Gaillac AOC *appellation* stretches 4,000 hectares

Opening pages: Albi on the River Tarn; These pages, clockwise from top left: Albi's Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile; Castelnau-de-Montmiral; Gaillac; aerial view of Cordes-sur-Ciel; Albi is known as 'the red city'; the impressive vaulted ceiling of Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile



DESTINATION



Top to bottom: One of France's *plus beaux villages*, Castelnaud-de-Montmirail is an historic village with a strong local community; colourful houses overlook the River Agout in Castres

along both banks of the River Tarn to produce delicious vintages of international acclaim. Ample tasting opportunities arise while exploring the waymarked Route des Vins, which is littered with independent wine-producers who welcome in passers-by for cellar tours.

Right in the heart of the department, on the banks of the River Agout, lies Castres - home to top-level rugby club Castres Olympique. It's one of the Tarn's most unassuming towns, with a gentle pace of life that feels authentically French. The sense of local camaraderie is palpable at its morning market, which spills over Place Jean Jaurès; the central square named after the socialist leader born in Castres. Here you'll find local vendors exchanging *bises* with passing punters and selling sun-swollen fruit and seasonal vegetables, foraged ceps and dusty-pink garlic from the nearby village of Lautrec.

The market is where Chef Simon Scott often picks up ingredients for his local restaurant Le Bistrot des Saveurs. He's famed in the area and beyond for being the only British chef living in France to have been awarded a Michelin star; no small feat in a country famed for its culinary nationalism. Simon has been living in the area for more than a decade after moving from London with his wife, Marie-Hélène, who is from Castres. "At first, being a chef in France was a bit daunting," he recalls, "but once we got past the initial period, and got the Michelin star, it got much better."

The couple opened their first restaurant in the foothills of the Montagne Noire before deciding to move to a more central location in Castres six years ago. "Living here is great," Simon says. "We've got a good circle of friends and strong links to the rugby team, another great passion of mine. There are many international players living

here, who we've got to know. This is partly why we close the restaurant at weekends - to go and watch the rugby."

Aside from rugby, a favourite Castres pastime is packing up a lunch hamper and heading down to the river. Overhanging the water are picturesque houses painted in multi-colours that are vestiges of Castres' former textile trade. Here, in warmer months, you can board a traditional *miredame* wooden boat for a leisurely 20-minute meander downstream to the Gourjade Park - a fantastically verdant expanse of grassland perfect for a picnic. Like much of the Tarn, it's an experience to be savoured as an example of the endless joys of rural France at its very best. **LF**



NEXT MONTH...
DESTINATION: PYRÉNÉES-ORIENTALES
We discover the beauty and culture of the southernmost part of Languedoc-Roussillon.

Fact file

Tourist Information

Tarn tourist office

Tel: 00 33 (0) 5 63 77 32 10
tourisme-tarn.com

Where to stay

Hostellerie du Grand

Saint-Antoine
17 Rue Saint-Antoine
81000 Albi
Tel: 00 33 (0) 5 63 54 04 04
hotel-saint-antoine-albi.com

Hostellerie du Vieux Cordes

21 Rue Saint-Michel
81170 Cordes-sur-Ciel
Tel: 00 33 (0) 5 63 53 79 20
hostelleriehvc.com

Where to eat

La Table du Sommelier

20 Rue Porta
81000 Albi
Tel: 00 33 (0) 5 63 46 20 10
latabledusommelier.com

Bistrot des Saveurs

5 Rue Sainte-Foy
81100 Castres
Tel: 00 33 (0) 5 63 50 11 45
bistrot-saveurs.com

Getting there

The nearest airport is Toulouse. Regular flights run from various UK airports by carriers including Flybe, easyJet and Air France.