

Travel tips

Bordeaux – always worth a trip

In just two decades, Bordeaux has been transformed from a tourist wasteland with a lack of infrastructure into a travel Mecca. As well as wine enthusiasts it also attracts gourmets, surfers and culture lovers.

The département of Gironde would grind to a halt without wine: one inhabitant in six earns their living from it, with the timber industry and aircraft technology following a distant second and third. 'But the future', mayor Chaban Delmas predicted thirty years ago with a tremor in his voice, 'the future will belong to tourism! Ah, le beau fleuve qui est la Garonne! Le coucher du soleil sur le bassin d'Arcachon!' (The beautiful river Garonne! The sunset over the Arcachon basin!)

Chaban was right. Tourism, virtually non-existent thirty years ago, has truly blossomed like a water lily in May. His successor Alain Juppé, another victim of French power politics who (like Chaban) was exiled to Bordeaux but could now be a contender for the 2017 presidency, turned this faded beauty with its fantastically well-maintained ensemble of 18th-century buildings into a thriving pearl and a magnet for visitors from all over the world. The tourists thanked him for it and came in their droves – especially once the city was accepted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The tourism infrastructures are continually improving and there is something to suit everyone: fans of sea, surf and sun occupy the endless sandy beaches of the Atlantic coast during the summer months. Nostalgia-lovers disappear down the shaded alleyways of the town of Saint-Emilion with its medieval atmosphere. Introverted culture vultures investigate the hidden treasures of the Médoc, Entre-Deux-Mers and southern Gironde, which have remained fairly untouched by mass tourism despite being used by French TV as picturesque backdrops for its soap operas. And wine enthusiasts head for the 200 world-renowned chateaus and spend their days touring the Médoc, Pomerol or Saint-Emilion, taking photos of the stucco facades concealing cellar facilities in which the greatest wines in the world are made, and fill up their memory sticks and SD cards with gigabytes of pixels of endless, manicured rows of vines, fairy-tale turrets, pseudo-classicism and neo-baroque architecture – I am not mocking them, as I count myself as one of them. Although I know all of these sites inside out – these Pichons and Moutons and Cos and Montroses and whatever else, my heart still beats faster when I am fighting it out with ten



Americans, three Japanese, five Germans and a solitary Swiss for the best angle at which to photograph the weeping willows in front of Lafite for the umpteenth time without any annoying shadows against the picture-postcard blue sky, or when I am rummaging around in the siliceous earth with the tip of my boot, stroking the leaves of a sprouting Cabernet or Merlot with a tender glance and engaging in a dialogue with the source of the greatest pleasure the world has ever created: the vine, whose grapes produce wines that delight the entire world, now more than ever. Yes, Bordeaux - the city, the region, the Gironde - is truly worth a visit.

The only people who disagree are Bordeaux locals themselves, still dreaming of the old days and pitch-black facades, of city-centre traffic jams and smog created by exhaust fumes. Since Juppé made the quays of the Garonne pedestrian-friendly - for which cyclists, roller skaters and joggers are eternally grateful - they have been giving this part of the city a wide berth and sulking off at the weekend to the 'bassin', the Atlantic basin between Cap Ferret and Arcachon, where they, and all the stars who have second homes there, keep very much to themselves. 'Le Bassin' is as fashionable now as the Lubéron was ten or twenty years ago. Passing the entry exam to join the chic and exciting Bordeaux scene means calling the gigantic "water mirror" opposite the stock exchange a blot on the city landscape and grumbling as it steams, ripples, spits and spurts to the