



The Southwest of France



Bonjour, my name is Bixente! Follow me on a tour of southwestern France!

WITH ABOUT 350,000 square miles, France is the largest country in Western Europe, and roughly the size of Texas. In 2003, its population reached 62 million, of which about 12 million live in or around the capital, Paris.

France also includes several overseas territories: Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean; French Guiana just north of Brazil; Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean; French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna in the Pacific Ocean; and the Antarctic territories.

Since the European Union's inception, some 50 years ago, France has been at the forefront of the construction of a strong and integrated Europe. The European Union remains one of France's top foreign policy priorities. As one of the five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council, and the fourth highest contributor to the U.N. budget, France is deeply involved in all significant international affairs.

But France is also a country where people are strongly attached to their regional roots. This brochure will help you understand the deep ties the French continue to have with their native regions.

This brochure belongs to a series of six: the Northeast, the Northwest, the Southeast, the Southwest, Ile-de-France, and the overseas territories. Brochures are available on request, by writing to info@ambafrance-us.org.





History: From Cave Paintings to Castles

THE TURBULENT PAST of southwestern France has left the region with an evocative historical legacy. Originally settled by prehistoric and Gallic tribes, southwestern France is a veritable historical goldmine. Rich with prehistoric artifacts, the region is spotted with evidence of an extensive Paleolithic civilization. In the **Dordogne** and **Lot** regions in particular, there are many prehistoric caves that are worth visiting. The most renowned of these is the **Grotte de Lascaux**. Discovered in 1940, the cave paintings cover three basic themes: animals, symbols and human representations. Because researchers feared that crowds of tourists would accelerate the irremediable deterioration of the cave's ancient paintings, an artificial cave was built that is an exact replica of the original. It is this cave, Lascaux 2, that may be visited today (www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/).



Prehistoric painting inside one of the Southwest's many ancient caves

Following settlement by the Gauls and a period of Roman occupation, southwestern France passed to the Franks when they defeated the Visigoths in 507. Charles Martel, famed leader of the Franks, restored a united Frankish kingdom and established a power base on which the Carolingian empire was founded. When the Frankish territory of Aquitaine (which included modern-day Poitou-Charentes and most of the Midi-Pyrénées) was raided by Muslim conquerors from Spain in the early 8th century, it was Martel who defeated the invading Muslims and halted their expansion into Europe. This legendary battle took place at **Poitiers** in 732 and served to unite Aquitaine under the Carolingian empire.



Charles Martel at Poitiers, Anonymous



Portrait of Queen Eleanor

THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR

Beginning around the 11th century, French and English kings vied for the control of southwestern France. In 1137, the region's status seemed settled when Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duchess of Aquitaine, married King Louis VII, thereby joining Aquitaine to France. The couple's divorce in 1152 left Eleanor free to marry Henry II (Duke of Normandy and later King of England), again taking the region out of French control. As a result, for more than a hundred years, France was embroiled in numerous battles with England over ownership of the territory. These battles came to be known as the Hundred Years War. Much of southwestern France was decimated by these wars.

But Aquitaine, ruled largely by the counts of Poitou, grew more and more autonomous, until it finally became part of the kingdom of England (see box above). The region only reverted to French rule at the end of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), a series of wars that eventually resulted in the English being driven out of France.

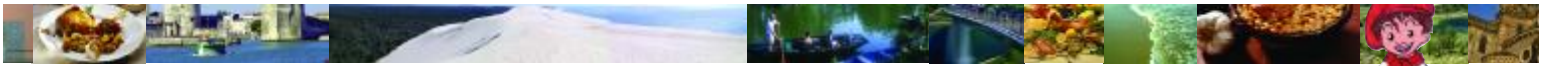
Meanwhile, unlike Poitiers or Bordeaux, the city of **Toulouse** managed to resist foreign conquest and remained a regional power for several centuries. The city and surrounding region were governed by counts in the name of the Frankish emperor, but their distance from France's seat of power made the area largely autonomous in practice. From the 9th to the 13th centuries, Toulouse was the site of one of the most beautiful courts of Europe, a civilization of refinement and great influence, featuring in particular the literature and *troubadours* of the *Langue d'Oc*. This regional dialect was spoken in the southern half of France between 1000 and 1600, and is the source of modern-day provençal.



The Basilique de St. Sernin in Toulouse

Toulouse's numerous architectural wonders speak to the city's relative stability. The Basilique de St. Sernin, for example, incorporates original Roman architecture into its structure and displays ancient murals on its walls dating as far back as the 11th century.

In the 13th century, the king of France used the emergence of a new heresy in the region, Catharism, as an excuse to intervene and restore his authority, and by the end of the century, the southwest of France became once more an integral part of the kingdom of France.



Endless Coastlines and Timeless Mountains

THE SOUTHWEST has a very temperate climate. There can be some rain in the spring, while summers are generally warm and dry. Autumn offers beautiful, sunny blue skies and agreeably warm temperatures. Winters are mild and short-lived, with snow a rare occurrence.

From the **Poitevin marshes**, known as "the green Venice" for its labyrinth of weed-colored canals, to the **Pyrénées** mountains, southwestern France is characterized by a very diverse topography. The countryside between **Périgueux** and the Pyrénées is graced by castles, churches and more than 300 *bastides*, which are 13th-century towns built following a precise grid layout (in what was one of the first instances of urban planning!). The verdant hills and sleepy villages of **Gascony** and **Périgord** embody an ideal country life.



The Poitevin marshes

The Southwest also has a seemingly endless Atlantic coastline (pictured), with fine sandy beaches. The straight coastline suddenly forms a lagoon in the **Bassin d'Arcachon**, famous for its natural beauty. In the north, islands such as **Ré** and **Oléron** are heavily visited for their pristine beaches.



Inland lies the pine forest of the **Landes**. Planted during the 18th and 19th centuries to drain the area's marshes, it covers more than 250,000 million acres, making it the largest of its kind in Europe.

THE DUNE OF PYLA

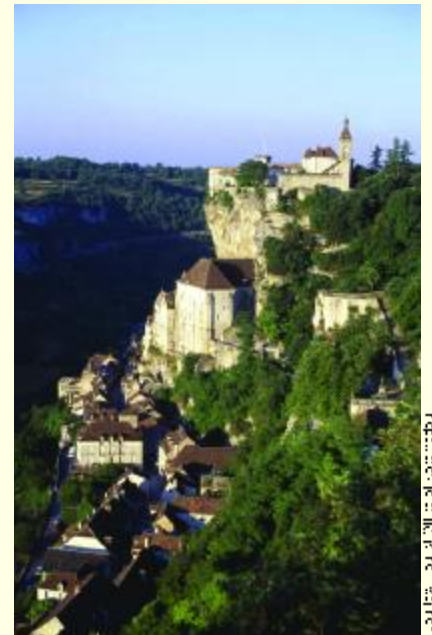
One of the most unusual spots in France is located just a few miles south of Bordeaux. The **dune of Pyla**, two miles long and 375 feet high, is the highest sand-hill in Europe. Wooden steps make the site accessible to most visitors, and intrepid climbers are rewarded with breathtaking views at the top. The azure-blue ocean on one side of the massive white dunes and the green pine forest of the Landes on the other both spread out as far as the eye can see.



View from the top of the dune of Pyla

CLIFF-HANGING ROCAMADOUR

A small village precariously perched on the side of a cliff high above the Alzou Valley, **Rocamadour** is unparalleled in its breathtaking beauty. Also famous for a goat cheese of the same name, Rocamadour became a world-renowned destination for pilgrims following the 1166 discovery of an ancient grave said to be that of the early Christian hermit Saint Amadour. Rocamadour is most awe-inspiring in the sunlight of the early morning, when the towers, battlements and cluster of medieval houses seem to spring forth from the base of the precipice.



Finally, the **Pyrénées** themselves, forming a natural border between Spain and France, are a huge part of the Southwest's landscape and culture. They symbolize the balance between nature and human civilization and the possibility of living in harmony with our environment. Bears, for example, which disappeared from France in



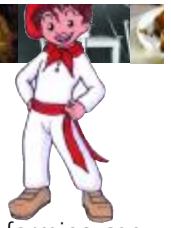
the 19th century, have been reintroduced in some parts of the mountain range in the last few decades. Other endangered species that are now experiencing a comeback include isards (a type of chamois), marmots (which were recently reintroduced into the Pyrénées National Park) and the black woodpecker (Europe's largest).

As a testament to its natural beauty and cultural importance, UNESCO registered the Franco-Spanish range of **Gavarnie-Mont Perdu** as a World Heritage Site in 1997 (learn more at www.parc-pyrenees.com).



Gavarnie in the summer

Advanced Aeronautics and Thriving Tourism

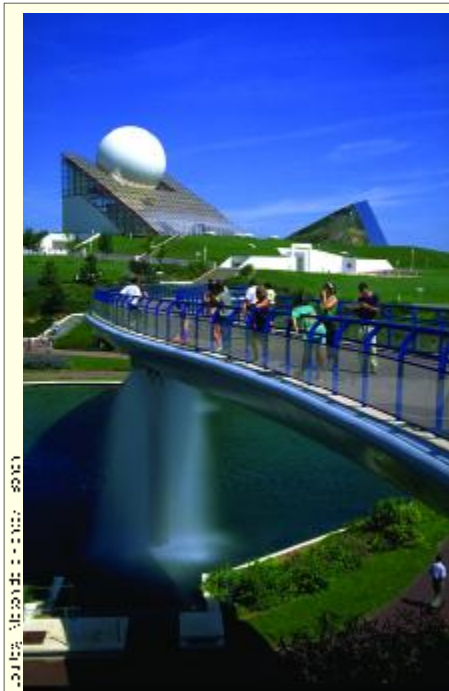


ONE OF SOUTHWESTERN France's main industries is without a doubt tourism. Indeed, the region attracts many travelers, whatever the season. In wintertime, 38 ski resorts in the Pyrénées open their doors to vacationers for downhill and cross-country skiing.



During the summer, the mountains attract many hikers, especially in the **Pyrénées** national nature reserve, which covers more than 620,000 acres. Of course, in summertime most tourists flock to the Atlantic coast, which offers a varied array of landscapes, ranging from Aquitaine's endless coastline, to La Rochelle's harbor, to the Ile de Ré.

Must-sees in the Southwest also include the **Lascaux caves**, with their prehistoric paintings, the **Futuroscope** park (see box), the natural thermal spas of **La Roche Posay** and **Dax**, the **Poitevin marshes**, the town of **Lourdes** and the **Gouffre de Padirac**, a huge 102-foot-wide, 250-foot-deep sinkhole that leads to an underground river.



The Futuroscope park

The **Futuroscope** park explores video technology in a futuristic architectural environment. Its 22 different buildings offer the newest in movie technology. The crystal-like Kinemax, for instance, has a screen equivalent in size to a seven-story building. Located only 4.3 miles from Poitiers (90 mn southwest of Paris by TGV), the park has attracted 30 million visitors since its opening in 1987, making it the number two amusement park in France (to learn more: www.futuroscope.fr).

The Southwest is also renowned for being the farming center of France. Indeed, **Aquitaine** is France's number-one agricultural region. Of all France's regions, it is home to the most "*appellations d'origine contrôlée*" (labels of origin), including Agen prunes and Espelette pepper. **Limousin's** claim to fame is the Limousin cow, which is exported for its delicious meat to over 70 countries.

In the Pyrénées, sheep breeders take pride in their time-honored traditions, and every July, the Fête de la Transhumance celebrates the seasonal migration of herds to summer pastures.



Harbor of La Rochelle

Major fishing ports dot the coast, including **Saint-Jean-de-Luz**, **Arcachon** and **La Rochelle**. The latter, with its famous Marennes-Oléron oysters, has helped make Poitou-Charentes France's leading oyster-farming area. Finally, who could forget the world-renowned Bordeaux wines, ideal for accompanying delectable morsels of foie gras.



The first commercial Ariane V rocket takes off from French Guiana in 1999

The **Cité de l'Espace** (www.cite-espace.com), inside Toulouse's city limits, shows the importance of the aerospace industry in the region. This "space park" features a planetarium and interactive exhibits related to the exploration of space, including a full-scale replica of an Ariane 5 rocket.

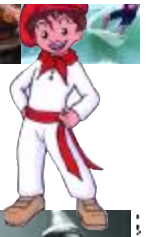
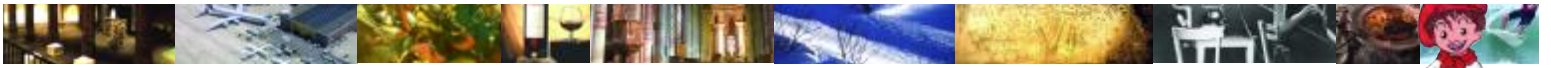
Within the past few decades, high-tech industries have blossomed in the Midi-Pyrénées. Indeed, **Toulouse** has become Europe's space and aeronautics center, as it is the home of Airbus,



Airbus site in Toulouse

the world's leading manufacturer of passenger jets. Companies such as EADS and Alcatel Space have also set up major operations in the area. The region is also the second-largest French software center and a leader in on-board electronics.

Alongside these very high-tech industries, traditional industries still flourish in the area, including **Limoges** china (world renowned for its fineness), Limousin leather and the carpets and tapestries of **Aubusson**.



From Medieval Pilgrimages to Sunny Surfing

SOUTHWESTERN FRANCE is rich with the cultural heritage of centuries past. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the Southwest's rich cultural history lies in its architecture, which reflects the influences of many a bygone era. There are villages that have hardly changed since the Middle Ages, such as **Moissac**, with its medieval monastery,

or **Cordes-sur-Ciel**, built on a hilltop. Even 100,000-strong **Poitiers** has not lost touch with its medieval origins, boasting Romanesque buildings such as the 12th-century church Notre-Dame-la-Grande. Then there are cities such as **Bordeaux**,



Inside Notre-Dame-la-Grande Church in Poitiers

which was entirely reconstructed during the 18th century and is now home to grand buildings and monuments, as well as **Toulouse**, whose Old Town was built entirely from rose-colored brick. **Sarlat**, famous for harboring one of the best markets in France, has the highest concentration of medieval, Renaissance and 17th-century façades of any French city.

For those who wish to experience this heritage, the road to Compostela (Compostelle in French), a medieval pilgrimage route, passes through much of the region. While on this route, walkers can follow in ancient footsteps and visit the magnificent churches that once hosted countless pilgrims, notably the church of Sainte-Foy in **Conques** and Saint-Sernin cathedral in Toulouse. More recently, the city of **Lourdes** has also become a major place of pilgrimage. Every year, 4 million people make the trip to Lourdes to visit a local cave in which a young woman is said to have had visions of the Virgin in 1853.



"Amacario" by Stalker in Bordeaux's CAPC museum

work (www.musee-toulouse-lautrec.com). **Bordeaux's** CAPC contemporary art museum is located in an elegant former warehouse for colonial goods (www.mairie-bordeaux.fr/musees/capc/capc.htm). The city of **Toulouse**, for its part, is home to a number of excellent art museums, including the Musée des Augustins (www.augustins.org), which displays an important collection of Romanesque statues, and a celebrated modern art museum, Les Abattoirs (www.lesabattoirs.org).

The cities of southwestern France are not only repositories of history, but are also lively places full of museums and cultural events. The Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in **Albi**, for example, contains the most complete permanent collection of the 19th-century artist's

If museums aren't your thing, a smorgasbord of festivals awaits you! Take, for instance, Jazz in **Marcillac** (www.jazzinmarciac.com), an international musical event that occurs every summer. Or the Festival International de la Bande Dessinée in **Angoulême**, where one can peruse the latest graphic novels and comic books every January (www.bdangouleme.com).

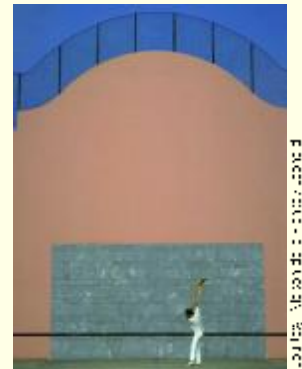


Scene from the play "L'Hypothèse" in the 'Molière-Scène d'Aquitaine' theater

BASQUE COUNTRY

Many have heard of Spain's Basques, but 10 percent of Basque country actually lies in France, and it includes cities such as **Bayonne**, **Biarritz** and **Saint-Jean-de-Luz**.

Though not fiercely separatist like their Spanish counterparts, the French Basques remain strongly attached to their unique culture. They have their own complex language, music, games (such as Basque pelota) and folklore. To celebrate their culture, the Basques have held the Festival of Bayonne every summer since 1932. People from all over the region show up in traditional red and white garb to take part in the festival's sports and cultural events, and in traditions such as the bull races.



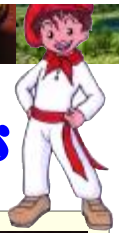
Basque pelota is a type of court sport played with a ball that is propelled against a wall using one's hand, a racket, a wooden bat or a stick fitted with a basket. It is very similar to squash, except it is played on a larger court.



Sports are also a major part of the Southwest's culture. Rugby, introduced in France at the end of the 19th century, has been passionately embraced by the Southwest, which fields excellent teams from Toulouse and **Agen** (pictured is a match between **Cahors** and Poitiers). More recently, surfers have discovered great spots on the beaches along the Atlantic coast, particularly around **Biarritz**, **Lacanau** and **Hossegor**. Indeed, for the past 25 years, internationally renowned surfers have met in Lacanau for summer competitions (www.lacanau-pro.com).



Surfer at the 2003 Lacanau Pro competition



A Gourmand's Eden: Foie Gras and Bordeaux Wines



Southwestern delicacies

TRUE TO THE SAYING "great cooking and great wines make paradise on earth," southwestern France is a gourmand's Eden. The best wines and gourmet foods in the world come from this region, so it is no surprise that many of the local dishes and specialties are absolutely mouth-watering.

With 284,320 acres of AOC (*Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*) vines, **Bordeaux** is the largest fine wine-making region in the world and is home to some of the most legendary labels. Its sterling reputation is built mostly on red wines, especially those from **Médoc**,

Saint-Emilion and **Pomerol**. But Bordeaux doesn't just mean reds. The region also produces a wide range of excellent white and rosé wines, including dry and sweet whites from the famous **Sauternes** districts, and a sparkling wine called Crémant de Bordeaux.

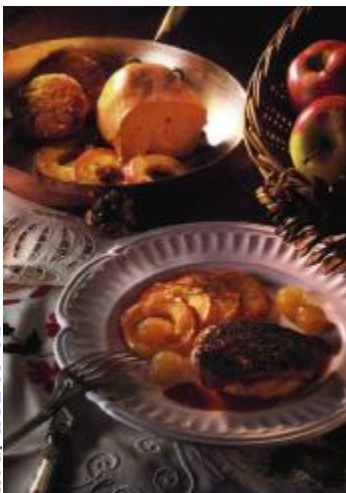
BRAWNY BRANDY

While Bordeaux wines are undoubtedly the most internationally known of all southwestern *boissons*, they are by no means the only beverages to originate from the region. Besides fine wines, the region's most famous drink is brandy. The best brandies are distilled in both **Cognac** and **Armagnac** and are used in a number of apéritifs that are exclusive to the region. One of these is Floc de Gascogne, which combines fresh grape juice with young Armagnac, both produced on the same vineyard. Invented four centuries ago, it continues to tantalize taste palates today.



Bottle of Armagnac brandy

When speaking of gourmet specialties, the archetypal product from the southwest is *foie gras*. An absolute must in terms of gastronomy, *foie gras* is the enlarged liver of a duck or goose that has been force-fed on corn, cooked in either brandy or port. In the **Gers** and in the **Lot**, which are the realms of good taste, *foie gras* is first and foremost a family affair. Foie gras families respect the best traditions of yesteryear but also invent new ways of varying the pleasures of goose and duck foie gras. This love of good craftsmanship can also be found in **Bayonne's** famous ham, which is prepared on the coast of Aquitaine by farmers who uphold traditions that go back hundreds of years.



Foie gras prepared with Autumn fruits

DELICIOUS DUCK

Duck is also a passion in the Southwest, and many recipes for its preparation can be found throughout the region. Favorites include *confit de canard* (succulent duck cooked and preserved in its own fat), *magret* (thin slices of lightly cooked duck often served with walnuts and greens, also known as *magret*), and *salade de gésiers* (hot pieces of tender duck gizzard, potatoes, olives and tomato slices over a bed of greens).



Duck confit, a renowned dish of the Southwest



Cassoulet of Toulouse

The mouth-watering and practically ritualized *cassoulet* of **Toulouse** arouses fierce competition among cooks in the southwest. Made from haricot beans which have melted into *confit*, as well as knuckle of pork, pork rind sausages, local herbs, garlic and nutmeg, real *cassoulet* requires lengthy preparation before it is ready to be served in small terracotta dishes.

A southwestern-style cheese board is another attractive prospect, with cheeses made from goat, cow or ewe's milk. One can choose between the small, round, melt-in-the-mouth pebbles of Rocamadour, the prestigious **Roquefort** cheese which, like the Bleu des Causses, has slowly matured, deep within time-worn cliffs, or the Pyrenean tomme cheese, fragrant from the cheese cellars of the **Ariège**.



Ewe's cheese maturing inside limestone caves in Roquefort-sur-Soulzon

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