

# The slice of 'La France Profonde' that's perfect in winter (unless you're vegan)

Rolling hills, handsome villages, foie gras and Armagnac beckon our writer for an off-season sojourn in the Gers department

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A classic countryside scene in the Gers department | CREDIT: Gett

Let us pool our knowledge about Gascony. It's in south-west France, home not only to d'Artagnan but also to foie gras and Armagnac, the region's twin gifts to planetary well-being. Berets are worn here even more than elsewhere in France and the wearers are tough blighters. They helped us no end in the Hundred Years War.

That's not bad, for a start. Things get better as one gets closer. I have never been to the Gers département, heartland of Gascony, without returning replete with food, drink and friends I never knew I had. The same thing happened the other week, when I also confirmed that the region works jolly well for an off-season break.

Granted, there'll be some things you may be less tempted to do off-season. River swimming, for one. Canoeing, biking and riding, maybe, for three more. But, even in summer, I find I never quite get round to such breathless activities, because the Gers itself gets in the way, ambushing me with a long view or a longer lunch.



And both of these are absolutely available in winter or early spring. This really is a lovely land. We're at the threshold of the Pyrenees – they rise in the distance, snow-capped, magnificent and menacing. Meanwhile, here, rounder hills roll up to forests and lakes, down to river valleys and vineyards. Old-fashioned farming defines the landscape. Small towns and villages continue the countryside by other means. Blokes down from tractors greet ladies with shopping baskets. The hum is of life slightly to the side of mainstream France.

Best start in Auch, the pint-sized county town (pop: 22,000). I did. It's small but masterful, like Napoleon. Up on a hill, the Saint Mary cathedral – gothico-Renaissance, vast – dominates proceedings. The Gers has had more than its share of whopping cathedrals. Religious orders, too. Notable in this one are stained glass windows featuring a hip-swaying Adam, then extraordinary sculpted choir stalls starring carved characters in bas-relief. One is showing his bare bottom. It's worth seeking out.



The glorious Saint Mary cathedral in Auch | CREDIT: Getty

Nearby, monumental steps, hundreds of them, lead to the River Gers. Halfway down – quite far enough – stands a statue of local lad d'Artagnan. You'll be bumping into him all over the place, including in your beer: the local Moussequetaire brew is very more-ish. This statue has him, as usual, embracing destiny with fortitude.

In case you've forgotten, the real d'Artagnan was born a minor noble near Auch, grew up to be a musketeer ('moussequetaire' in French, whence the punning beer name; "mousse" is slang for beer) and sometime military enforcer for Louis XIV. Few would have heard of him if, 170 years after d'Artagnan's death, Alexandre Dumas hadn't romanticised his story into the 1844 novel, *The Three Musketeers*. You'll doubtless have seen at least one of the resultant movies, so will effortlessly complete the saying: "All for one, and..."