

Limousin, the Dordogne & Quercy



If it's the heart and soul of France you're searching for, then look no longer. Tucked away in the country's southwestern corner, the neighbouring regions of the Limousin, Dordogne and Quercy sum up all that's best about *la belle France*. This is a land of dense oak forests, rolling green fields and rich country cooking, where historic châteaux and cobblestone villages line the river banks and wooden-hulled *gabarres* (barges) still meander along the waterways. While the rest of France seems desperate to catch up to its European neighbours, this is one corner of the country that seems perfectly content to keep things just the way they are.

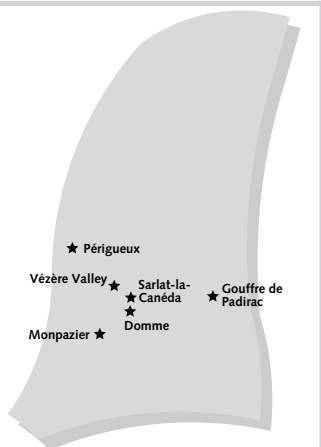
Of the three areas, Limousin is the most traditional, dominated by country farms and sleepy backcountry hamlets. Known for its emerald-green countryside and famously rich food, Limousin is home to the bustling city of Limoges, the undisputed capital of French fine china.

Slightly to the south, the Dordogne is best known for its history and heritage. With a bevy of dramatic monuments, from sturdy *bastides* (fortified towns) to cliff-top châteaux and medieval towns, the Dordogne is also celebrated for its astonishing prehistoric sites, including some of the most spectacular cave paintings in Europe.

Still further south is the old region of Quercy, closer in many ways to the nearby Mediterranean regions of Toulouse and Languedoc than its northern neighbours. Sliced through by the snaking River Lot, and pock-marked by limestone valleys and subterranean caverns, Quercy is home to the fairy-tale *fortresse royale* of Najac and the holy city of Rocamadour, as well as the vintage vineyards around the capital city of Cahors.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the prehistoric cave paintings of the **Vézère Valley** (p630)
- Venture into the underworld at the **Gouffre de Padirac** (p647)
- Stroll around an excavated Roman villa at the **Musée Gallo-Romain Vesunna** (p622) in Périgueux
- Shop till you drop at the hectic street markets of **Sarlat-la-Canéda** (p626) and **Périgueux** (p621)
- Drink in the panoramas from the hilltop fortresses of **Monpazier** (p637) and **Domme** (p637)
- Take to the waterways aboard a traditional river **gabarre** (p636)



■ POPULATION: 1,134,959

■ AREA: 25,654 SQ KM

Activities

KAYAKING & CANOEING

Cruising the waterways in a self-powered canoe is one of the most memorable ways to explore the region. There are lots of operators along the Dordogne and Vézère Rivers; hire fees include compulsory life jackets (*gilets*) and an introduction to basic safety procedures (such as how to survive capsizing). Prices vary according to your chosen route – most places charge around €20 to €25 per day, including minibus transport.

Dordogne

Canoë Vacances (☎ 05 53 28 17 07; www.canoevacances.com; La Roque Gageac) Canoe and kayak trips between Carsac and Les Milandes via Vitrac, Domme, Marqueyssac and Castelnau (trips €10 to €17).

Canoës-Loisirs (☎ 05 53 28 23 43; www.canoes-loisirs.com; Pont de Vitrac, Domme) Trips include Carsac–Vitrac (9km, €10), Carsac–Beynac (25km, €19), Vitrac–Castelnau (12km, €12) and Vitrac–Beynac (16km, €15).

Safaraid (☎ 05 65 37 44 87; www.canoekayak-dordogne.com; Vayrac canoe/kayak per day €19/22) Based in Vayrac, this operator has various stations between Argentat and Beynac, with lots of possible routes in between, as well as a seven-day canoe safari (€197 to €312 for two people, including campsites).

Vézère

Canoës Vallée Vézère (☎ 05 53 05 10 11; www.canoesvalleevezeze.com; Les Ezyies) Trips from Les Trois Châteaux (26km, €22 to €24), Saint-Léon-sur-Vézère (19km, €16 to €18), La Saint-Christophe (13km, €14 to €16) and La Marzac (10km, €10 to €14). A 5km initiation course costs €8.

Canoëric (☎ 05 53 03 51 99; www.canoepereigord.com; Le Bugue) Runs day trips of between 9 and 21km to Le Bugue (€9 to €23).

WALKING, CYCLING & HORSE RIDING

This corner of France is renowned for its natural beauty and has three *parcs naturels régionaux*: **Périgord-Limousin** (Map p608; ☎ 05 53 60 34 65; www.parc-naturel-perigord-limousin.fr) in the northwest, **Millevalches en Limousin** (☎ 05 55 67 97 90; www.pnr-millevalches.fr) in the east and **Causse de Quercy** (☎ 05 65 24 20 50; www.parc-causses-du-quercy.org) in the south.

There's fantastic walking and mountain biking in all three parks; you can pick up *balades à la journée* (day walk) leaflets and *VTT (vélo tout terrain)* (mountain bike) guides from tourist offices. Serious walkers will prefer the dedicated park topoguides, which

detail major walking routes, including the GR (Grands Randonnées) trails. Many of the trails and bridleways can also be explored on horseback.

Major areas for walking include the Monts de Blond, le Massif des Monédières and Monts de Chalus in northwest Limousin, the area around Cahors (on the GR36 and the GR65) and the Lot Valley, and the classic Santiago de Compostela trail which runs through many of the region's southerly towns.

Getting There & Around

The major transport hub is Limoges (see p613), which has regular flights to many French and UK cities. Bergerac (p639) also has budget flights to the UK. The A20 motorway heads north from Limoges to Paris and continues south to Toulouse.

As always in rural France, having your own wheels is really handy. The bus network is patchy and frustratingly geared around school timetables; most towns and small villages can be reached faster and more easily by train. A useful rail link meanders down to Toulouse from Limoges via Brive, Souillac and Cahors, and Limoges and Périgueux are both on the southwest main line from Paris.

LIMOUSIN

The rich green fields and hummocky hills of Limousin are less well known than the

MONKEY BUSINESS

For adrenalin junkies looking for their next fix, head for one of the **Parcours Aventures dans les Arbres** (Tree Adventure Parks). With a network of walkways, swings and bridges running between towering trees and linked with cross-country trails and obstacle courses, these woodland playgrounds are suitable for everyone from six-year-olds to septuagenarians. Eat your heart out, Tarzan...

La Forêt des Ecoreuils (☎ 06 89 30 92 99; www.laforetdesecureuils.com; St-Vincent-le-Paluel)

L'Appel de la Forêt (☎ 05 53 46 35 06; www.appel-de-la-foret.com; Thenon)

Indian Forest Périgord (☎ 05 53 31 22 22; www.indianforestperigord.com; Carsac-Aillac)

Parcours Aventure des Jaumâtres (☎ 05 55 65 43 11; www.lespierresjaumatres.fr; near Guéret)