

BICYCLING THROUGH BORDEAUX

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Four days into our cycling tour of France's wine country, our guides turn suddenly secretive. "Don't reach the canal before noon," they caution before they speed off in their van.

So instead of our usual athletic pace, we dawdle in cafes and wander through churchyards, glancing at our watches. When finally we reach the Canal de Deux Mers that links the Atlantic with the Mediterranean, the mystery's solved. Under a canopy of aged oaks are picnic tables heaped with foie gras, smoked salmon, caviar, cheeses, fruit tarts, champagne and regional wines.

Welcome to the world of luxury cycle touring, a world where the spartan solo rider may feel slightly uncomfortable. After all, we cushion our daily exertions with Cointreau and feather-bedding at three-star hotels. Better yet: There's guilt-free gourmet dining every evening because we know we can work it off the next day.

Though booking a tour is convenient, it's certainly not the only way to go. You can tour any of the wine regions mentioned in this article on day trips from a hotel because routes des vins are clearly marked and maps are readily available.

Biking in France is a joy: Motorists are courteous and secondary roads well-paved. More importantly, the rural French appreciate the fact that you've taken the time to see their country "up close" and are inclined to treat you like a guest rather than a tourist. Don't be surprised, as you strain up your first hill, to hear cries of "Bravo!" from bystanders. Grape pickers may insist you put down your camera and taste the sweetness of the season's harvest.

Bordeaux offers world-class wines and memorable meals, but they'll taste even better after a day on the open road. Haut-Medoc

This famed wine-producing region is perfect cycling country since the terrain is flat, the chateaux (wineries) magnificent. Before beginning your adventure, you may want to select an itinerary from the Maison du Vin, 1, Cours du 30 Juillet in Bordeaux, (telephone: 56 00 22 88). Wineries may be closed in August and during the late September harvest.

Twenty miles north of Bordeaux, the Relais de Margaux (56 88 38 30) is a good starting point for a tour of the Haut-Medoc. From this blond-stone inn on 55 acres, you can cycle north on D2 through quiet villages that produce some of the world's most celebrated vintages.

In 1855, when the French government completed its Official Classification of Great Growths (grands crus classes), the names Margaux, Lafite, Latour and Haut-Brion were all included in the highest category - premiers crus. The Haut-Medoc claims 60 crus classes properties, and following route D2 along the Gironde River brings you to their door.

Tall and golden, the neoclassical Chateau Margaux stands at the end of a long lane of plane trees. Under the direction of Mme. Corinne Mentzelopoulos, the vineyard has once again risen to the top ranks.

"Our job was to make (this winery) what it once was and to keep it there," she told us.

Phone 56 88 70 28 in advance for a tour and a tasting.

Just south of Margaux on D2 in Cantenac, the late Alexis Lichine's Chateau Prieure-Lichine welcomes visitors every day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. This former Benedictine priory has a vat room, built by monks, with 16th-century beams and a collection of cast-iron firebacks. Tastings carry a fee.

Turning north on D2 toward Saint-Julien, the Chateau Beychevelle marks the site of a medieval fort rebuilt in 1757. Tours in English are available Monday through Friday by appointment (56 59 23 00). To the left, Chateau Lagrange was restored by the Japanese whisky company Suntory and welcomes visitors.

Nothing matches the famous cellars of Mouton-Rothschild, Latour and Lafite-Rothschild in Pauillac. Latour takes its name from a tower that once defended Aquitaine from invaders and now stands abandoned in the vineyards. Abutting Latour's vineyards are those of Pichon Longueville Baron with its turreted chateau and Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande with its graceful terrace overlooking vines and the river. Each is open to the public.

Conversely, Chateau Lafite-Rothschild rarely opens its gates. If you're determined, phone Paris (1) 42 56 33 50 to make an appointment and confirm it in writing 10 days before arrival. The chateau is closed from Sept. 15 to Nov. 15. Nearby, Chateau Mouton-Rothschild (56 59 22 22) boasts a wine museum of ancient goblets, tapestries and paintings, and a spectacular chai (above-ground cask room). Rows of oak casks stretch as far as the eye can see, ornamented by the proud seal of Mouton. Jean-Michel Cazes, who also owns Pauillac's Chateau Lynch-Bages, runs an 18-room hotel and restaurant that's ideal as a base for exploring this area. Chateau Cordeillan-Bages (56 59 24 24) is also headquarters for L'Ecole du Bordeaux, a wine school dedicated to promoting the region's great vineyards.

Surely a candidate for "weirdest chateau architecture" is Cos d'Estournel in nearby Saint-Estephe, a pagoda-turreted fantasy fort with wooden carved doors from the palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar. There's an audio-visual presentation Monday through Friday by appointment (56 59 35 69). Saint-Emilion and Pomerol

More than 1,000 chateaux dot the vineyards surrounding Saint-Emilion, 18 miles east of Bordeaux. A convenient base from which to tour wineries here and in neighboring Pomerol is Hostellerie de Plaisance (57 24 72 32). The hotel's restaurant is first-rate, as is Logis de la Caden (57 24 71 40).

Countryside here is hilly but not steep. Cycle south from Saint-Emilion on D122 to the wineries of Chateaux Ausone, Belair, La Magdelaine and Pavie. Another itinerary is a day-long loop that takes you east on D243 to St. Genes de Castillon, north on D17 to Lussac, and back to Saint-Emilion on D122. The tourist office in the Place des Creveaux (57 24 72 03) has a list of wineries that offer tours in English.

To tour Cheval Blanc, Figeac, Petrus and the vineyards of Pomerol, head northwest on D243 until it connects with D245. This is an area of small wineries; even Chateau Petrus produces no more than 160 casks in an average vintage.

"Some of our vines date from the turn of the century," says Christian Moueix, who manages the vineyard. "They don't yield much but what they do yield is the secret of our greatness." But that secret you'll have to discover on your own; Petrus has no welcome mat. Barsac-Sauternes

When autumn mists form over the waters of the Ciron River and roll through vineyards

on either side, a "noble rot" collects on the white grapes and concentrates their sugar and alcohol. The result - when produced by chateaux like Yquem, Rieussec, Coutet and Climens - is a sweet nectar.

Forty-five minutes south of Bordeaux in Barsac, the three-star Hostellerie de Chateau de Rolland welcomes guests to a 15th-century monastery with 20th-century comforts (56 27 15 75). In its dining room - and at Sauternes' Auberge les Vignes (56 63 60 06) and Langon's Claude Darroze (56 63 00 48) - you'll sample southwestern dishes like lampreys a la bordelaise, spring lamb and duck breast grilled over a fire of vine shoots.

From Barsac you can pedal south on D118 to Chateau Coutet and Climens; then on to Bommès and Sauternes where more than 20 vineyards are clustered. (Sauternes' Maison du Vin lists them all.) Chateau d'Yquem - the only wine rated premier cru superieur in 1855 - requires an appointment to visit its fortress-like castle and cellars (56 63 21 05).

From atop the castle's battlements you can survey the appellation Sauternes wineries that crowd this region - Latour-Blanche, Rayne-Vigneau and Sigalas-Rabaud in Bommès; Suduiraut and de Malle in Preignac; and Rieussec in Fargues. They maintain a glorious tradition that's also a lucrative industry.

For information, contact the Bordeaux Wine News Information Bureau, 16 E 32nd St., New York, N.Y. 10016; (212) 685-2500.

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