

Five classic French regions | The Sunday Times

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Brittany, the Loire, the Dordogne, the Côte d'Azur and the Alps: Anthony Peregrine and Alicia Burrell show you how to spend the perfect week in each



Best of Brittany: hiking in Finistère (hemis.fr)

Brittany

There are three things to bear in mind on a Breton jaunt. First, once you've seen one menhir (a local speciality), you've seen them all. They're just big stones. They don't get any more interesting. Second, Celticness is fine when it's singing, dancing and eating. It's crackers when it embraces magical amulets and mystical symbols. Third, a blazing sun in a cloudless sky doesn't mean it won't be chucking it down in 15 minutes. With all this in mind, we're in for a belting trip round the far west — starting in Roscoff, where the ferries arrive.

The granite-hard little port is now softened with flowers, bars and memories of onions. Roscoff was base to the Onion Johnnies, who, for a century to the 1960s, peddled Britain peddling their local produce. Check in at the portside Chez Janie and dine there. Go for the stuffed artichokes at £9 (doubles from £52; 00 33-2 98 61 24 25, chezjanie.fr).

Next, head west along the Finistère coast, overlooking coves strewn with rocks and islets, as if someone up above were crumbling landscapes. One moment, you'll see untamed rocks, cliffs and blasted heath; the next, well-tailored farmland; then hamlets of cottages with hedges and hydrangeas, almost suburban in their serenity. So to Plouescat, the dunes of Keremma and the stone-chaos coast at Brignogan-Plages, where, in April, the entirely eco Hôtel de la Mer opens up (sea-view rooms from £68; 06 76 93 40 55, hoteldelamer.bzh).

Soon, the Wrac'h and Benoît inlets ("abers") wriggle inland for miles, tracked by lanes no larger than two lobsters aligned. Covered in oil by the Amoco Cadiz spill in 1978, Portsall is once again bright with holiday folk and loose-limbed boatmen. From Kersaint to Argenton — the best stretch — moorland sweeps to the rocky foreshore, horses gambol and there's a cathedral to St Samson, a Welshman who announced his arrival in AD548 by curing a woman of lunacy. This did not set a precedent for Welshmen.

Now, via Le Conquet, to Pointe Saint-Mathieu, where Brittany ends in a wave-thrashed promontory overseen by an abbey and a lighthouse. Head to the nearby Hostellerie de la Pointe Saint-Mathieu (doubles from £64; 02 98 89 00 19, pointe-saint-mathieu.com), dine there (three-course menu £25), then wander into the night. As abbey looms, light flashes and sea pounds, you may howl. It's cathartic.

Inland to Landivisiau. Here begin the villages with calvaires — crucifixion sculptures on poles, set amid biblical scenes - testifying to a baroque element in Breton belief. To the south, the rounded Monts d'Arrée have, especially on misty days, a Celtic swirl. Somewhere close by are the Korrigan little people, spectral washerwomen who wring the blood from careless bodies, and the gates of hell. So Locronan is reassuring — excessively pretty, in truth — as is the minute port of Sainte-Marine, on Brittany's softer, sandier south side. The Hôtel du Bac is a practical two-star by the sea, with a decent bistro (doubles from £63; 02 98 51 33 33, www.hoteldubac.fr). Water and land get confused here. Views promise peace.

You'll want to linger, but the walled port town of Concarneau awaits, as does Pont-Aven, set in a wooded valley and painted to prominence by Gauguin, Renoir and the rest. The little town's Fine Arts Museum reopens in late March after a three-year refurb.

Further east, at the Gulf of Morbihan, you'll visit the stones that have stood at Carnac for 6,000 years. They're a world-famous eyeful, 3,000 of them across 100 acres. But don't pay for a guided tour: you can see all that needs seeing from outside. Save your cash for an oyster boat trip from nearby Baden, with Ivan Sélo (aurythmedesmarees.fr). It's £22, and you'll eat, drink, sail and learn what vicious little blighters starfish are. Then repair for final nights to Les Vénètes, with its feet in the sea at Arradon, a spit from Vannes (doubles from £90; 02 97 44 85 85, lesvenetes.com). Relax. Swim. Eat seafood. Drink cider, if you must. Bretons do. But they're not right about everything. AP

Getting there Brittany Ferries sails to Roscoff from Plymouth and Cork. Flybe has flights from London City to Rennes and from Birmingham to Brest.

Loire Valley

The soft, green region of France's least tamed river bears the greatest collection of chateaux in the world, no contest. They weren't built to pretty up the landscape (although they do). For

400 years from the 12th century, they resounded to a heavyweight cast thundering through real history. From here, king and court ruled France, plotted to rule France, partied, gardened (my, how they gardened), had affairs, stabbed, embraced the Renaissance and lorded it over the rest of Europe. The chateaux were the stateliest statement of French aspirations. That's their point. The architecture is outstanding, but the stories — sex, violence, power and horticulture — are the lifeblood. Bone up before you go. And don't attempt more than one or two castles a day. Chateau fatigue leads to the "Loire Valley slouch" and excess drinking.

Consider a central gîte as a base. Brittany Ferries has a good choice, including elements of a 17th-century chateau at Monnaie, near Tours. It sleeps eight in four bedrooms, and a week starts at £1,017, including return ferry crossings (brittanyferries.com). Or tackle the trip in two hotels. Start at the Hôtel Diderot, in Chinon, a spot of creaking corridors, wood polish and homemade jam (doubles from £60; 02 47 93 18 87, hoteldiderot.com).

From there, go to the Royal Fortress of Chinon, a ridge-top stunner overlooking town and river. Here's a proper fighting fort. (Renaissance pleasure chateaux can look a little girly by comparison.) Chinon was a favourite of Henry II's when he ran the best bits of France; he died there in 1189. About 240 years on, back in French hands, it hosted Charles VII when Joan of Arc showed up, telling him to get a grip, give her an army and let her thrash the English (£6.40; forteressechinon.fr). Nearby Villandry has the finest formal gardens (£4.90; chateauvillandry.fr).

Nearer still, at Léméré, Patricia Laigneau has woven fantasy and surrealism into the gardens, and interior, of her Château du Rivau (£7.90; loire-castle-rivau.com). This is the dreamiest of the Loire's smaller chateaux. It's also the only one to feature wellington boots the size of a shed. Light lunches start at £7.

Now transfer operations to Blois and the riverside Auberge Ligérienne, where wood-fired memories fill nooks and crannies, and the food is terrific (doubles from £44; dinner menu £23; 02 54 78 07 86, coteloire.com). You'll need to explore Blois itself, and the overbearing castle whence queen mum Catherine de Médicis sent out flying squads of beautiful women to bed, and bring to heel, errant nobles (£7.50; chateaublois.fr). From the terrace of the chateau at nearby Amboise, you will feel a manifest desire to govern France. It's traditional: half a dozen monarchs lived here as kids and kings (£8.40; chateau-amboise.com).

Across town, the red-brick Clos Lucé manor house celebrates Leonardo da Vinci. The fellow who was better than everyone at everything spent his last years here, as intellectual companion to Francis I (from £9; vinci-closluce.com).

So to the Loire's two finest chateaux. In Chenonceaux, arching over the River Cher, Château de Chenonceau has feminine grandeur so perfect, it seems to embody a universal law of aesthetics (£9.40; chenonceau.com). The gardens witnessed unchained parties hosted by Catherine de Médicis for her cross-dressing son, Henri III, and aristos of ill-defined morality. Not far away, Francis I had Chambord built to put foreign royals' noses out of joint. Here, along a 170yd facade, with 440 rooms and 282 fireplaces, was majesty, ramming home the superbness of the French monarch — second only to God, and a damned close second, too (£8.30; chambord.org).

That's the seven best chateaux — one a day for a week, with a side trip to Clos Lucé on Amboise day. Splendid. Now you'll need a change. To boat, then, at Chaumont-sur-Loire or

Amboise with Jean Ley, whose flat-bottomed toués respond to the river’s moods, rather than a set itinerary. For all the flanking grandeur, the Loire remains the grandest item of all (£15 for 90 minutes; milliere-raboton.net). AP

Getting there Ryanair flies to Tours from Stansted.

Dordogne

The Dordogne reaps the benefits of backwardness. For centuries, the landscape scarcely evolved. It remains tailored for mellow wellbeing. Woodland, rivers and ducks, comely hills and ladies with wicker baskets in country village squares — this is how life was when we were young, things were better and front doors went unlocked. The region has its tough side — wars, unreason, the usual — but that simply roots sunlit recreation in reality. Old-fashioned farming still fills in the contours, although gold-stone farmhouses have now been retooled for renting. (That’s progress, but minor.)

Try one. Go for the Périgord Noir region, to the south. It’s the prettiest part, and the British-run Simply Périgord covers it well. Near Sainte-Alvère, Au Bois Dormant sleeps six in style — and the deepest countryside. Prices start at £1,290 for four in high season (05 53 54 54 31, simply-perigord.com).

A hotel? Château de Maraval, at Cénac-et-St-Julien, invests old stones with urban design (doubles from £130; 06 08 40 32 62; chateaudemaraval.fr). Much more remote, beyond Meyrals, Domaine de la Rhonie abounds with country life. Ideal for kids (doubles from £47; 06 82 80 80 29, domainedelarhonie.com).

And so to Sarlat, ideally for the Wednesday or Saturday markets. Arrive early or you’ll be parking in Calais. These are popular markets. They colonise a town whose network of streets, passages and exceptional buildings articulate a medieval and Renaissance past better than any other in France. This is a place to loiter, before lunch at La Rapière, near the cathedral (£17; 16 Rue Tourny; 05 53 59 03 13). Then out to La Canéda and Gorodka, where for 40 years or more, the artist Pierre Shasmoukine has made a conceptual assault on a wooded hillside. He is a fine man with a tattooed face. His is a strange place. There are dozens of works: a dragonfly crafted from a real helicopter, spit-roasted local councillors, magical lights. I’ve no idea what’s going on, but it’s bracing (gorodka.com).

Further south is the land of medieval bastides, country towns whose chequerboard layout round an arcaded square indicates that town planning reached perfection circa 1280; it has been downhill since. The loveliest are Monpazier and Beaumont, where Bariat is the densest hardware shop in France, with everything from tableware to 12-bores (quincaillerie-bariat-dordogne.fr).

The Dordogne Valley itself demands attention. Its villages compete mercilessly in the prettiness stakes, with La Roque-Gageac — climbing up over itself between lazy river and honey-coloured cliff — winning by a short head from Beynac-et-Cazenac. Nearby, Château des Milandes tells the story of its former owner, France’s greatest interwar music-hall star, Josephine Baker. Here are the topless photos (from the Parisian Revue Nègre), the gowns, the micro-skirt made of silver lamé bananas and astonishing memories. Of dozens, this is the most moving chateau in the Dordogne (£7; 05 53 59 31 21).

Very much older memories — 400,000 years old or thereabouts — vitalise the Vézère Valley. Stone Age man showed up mob-handed for the game, the fishing and the caves in which to paint. The best prehistoric site is Font-de-Gaume, near Les Eyzies, with original polychrome friezes of bison, horses — and a stag reindeer leaning to lick a doe's face. Specialists say the image is sexual. I say they're obsessed. I think it's a message of tenderness over 17,000 years; it's lucky it's dark, or they would see your tears. Visitor numbers are limited, so book ahead, in person (£5.60; 05 53 06 86 00; eyzies.monuments-nationaux.fr).

Upstream, and more obviously appealing, the Roque Saint-Christophe, more than half a mile long and 260ft high, was home to hundreds from 53,000BC until the Renaissance (£6.40; roque-st-christophe.com). Upstream again, at Montignac, this autumn will see the opening of Lascaux IV. At last, France's greatest cave art — long off limits to the public — will get the complementary coverage it requires.

And Lord, there's so much more to do. Too much. Ignore it and take to a canoe. It's the done Dordogne thing. Go for canoes-loisirs.com at Vitrac, on the Dordogne, or canoevezere.com at Saint-Léon, on the Vézère. Think £11 per person for two hours. Such paddling merits draughts of Pécharmant red and confit de canard at the end. That's stipulated in the constitution. AP

Getting there Ryanair, Flybe and Jet2 fly to Bergerac.

Cote d'Azur

Much nonsense is talked about the Côte d'Azur. That it is concreted over, end to end. That it is entirely colonised by Everyman, his wife and their flip-flops. That style has fled. That, in short, the Côte is not what it was. Of course it isn't. There has been development, and visitors are more numerous than ever. (What did you expect? You would have Europe's most desirable coast to yourself?) But, although more reticent, glamour persists. The Riviera may still fulfil the promise of heat, light, beauty and frisky decadence sanctified by generations of nobles, artists and high rollers. Elemental stretches remain largely untouched. Beaches are not all packed.

And the hand of man has not invariably wreaked calamity. Some villas look pretty good. You could rent one for this trip. The English-run Pure France has a cracking selection, not least an eight-sleeper high above Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, with a pool, terraced gardens and astounding views from £2,380 a week (020 3514 2359, purefrance.com). Or you could take B&B in another, Villa Kilauea, on the heights of Nice, looking across the infinity pool to the mountains (doubles from £98; villakilauea.com).

You need to start in Nice, azuréen capital. With a past of Greeks, Italians, Ligurians, royalty, Russians, bent politicians, mobsters, painters and makers of chickpea pancakes, the city is vivid and of variable virtue. From the Promenade des Anglais, curving round the Bay of Angels, to the Cours Saleya morning market and on to Vieux Nice — a boisterous Med warren if ever there was one — here is a permanently simmering sunshine event. Chuck in Matisse, Chagall (his museum reopens on Wednesday) and the Acchiardo niçois restaurant (38 Rue Droite), and you have the complete package.

The beaches are all pebbles? You don't go to Nice to make sandcastles. For sand, you take the six-minute, £1.30 train to Villefranche-sur-Mer or, better yet, a jaunt to Menton (36 minutes, £3.90). The last of the Alps drop direct to the sea. A past of wintering Britons ensures a legacy of gardens, good manners and celebrity graves (William Webb Ellis, Aubrey Beardsley). The old town is a broth of sedate and Italian, and the beaches are amply adequate.

Talking of trains, consider the Train des Merveilles (TdM). The Côte d'Azur isn't only coast. It's also the mountains behind. The best way into them is on the 9.23am TdM from Nice-Ville station to Tende. In summer, it comes with PA commentary on the mountainscape. At all times, it rises from sea level to 3,200ft via startling bridges, ridges and tunnels. Stop after an hour at Breil-sur-Roya, where the good people of Roya Evasion lay on canyoning, climbing, kayaking and other upland ways of knocking yourself out before nightfall. We paid £28 each for half a day's rafting, and survived (royaevasion.com).

Back on the seaside, hie to the Cap Ferrat peninsula to be shut out by the bewilderingly rich. They've holed up here for generations. It is forbidding, but glamour is the more glamorous when barely glimpsed. The only way in is via the Villa & Jardins Ephrussi de Rothschild, developed by Béatrice EdR to express dictatorial fantasies. The ridge-topping site, treasure-stuffed villa and gardens must have seemed like a full stop to experience. There was nowhere better to go — or to host, as Béatrice did, a full-dress wedding between her poodles (£10.20; villa-ephrussi.com). Stick around for lunch on the terrace (£13 for two courses).

I'd skirt Monaco, but you won't. So go for the 11.55am changing of the guard before the palace up on the principality's rock, and wander the gleaming bubble of extravagance — from the old town, buffed up to Disney standards, to Monte Carlo, with its North Korean levels of police charm. Then return to the real world.

Further west, Cannes does little that Nice doesn't do better. The reason you go is to get onto the Corniche de l'Estérel, just beyond. Porphyry red rocks plunge direct to the briny creeks and hidden beaches. The idea of overdevelopment is laughable. You twist, you turn and, just short of St Raphaël, you stop at Agay. Here is one of the loveliest of Mediterranean bays, modestly unaware of its splendour. Beaches are terrific. You might stop and stay at the Relais d'Agay (doubles from £51; 04 94 82 78 20, relaisdagay.com). I wouldn't argue against it. AP

Getting there British Airways, easyJet and Norwegian fly to Nice. Eurostar has returns from London to Nice; from £121.

The Alps

Snow does not maketh the Alps. Visitors bus in, swoosh down the pistes, chug a vin chaud, then slope off until next winter. Skiers don't know what they're missing. When the snow melts, the real Alps are revealed: cheaper, prettier and quieter. The mountains set the scene. The air is pure. Nowhere does grass smell better. It's surprisingly sunny, and there are beaches.

Head for the northern stretch, the Chablais Alps, underneath Lake Geneva. The Alpine charm is the rural way of life: flat-capped farmers, clanging cowbells (you get used to it) and serene slowness. Start in Abondance, a real-deal Alpine village where cow and cheese are king, and

chalets are festooned in flower boxes. Hire one as place to stay. Chalet Alys, in the centre of town sleeps up to 10 in four bedrooms and starts at £945 for a week. There's a separate apartment sleeping five; from £298 a week (chaletalys.com).

Or try Les Cornettes, just outside town. The family-run hotel's main draw, other than the resident marmot, is the dining room. Natives and tourists alike pile in for bubbling bowls of berthoud, a local speciality of melted, nutty abundance cheese sizzling in white wine (£17). Even if you don't stay, come for this (doubles from £155; 04 50 73 50 24, lescornettes.com).

Learn more about the cheese at the Maison du Val d'Abondance, the official cheese museum. The handful of certified makers preserve traditional cooking methods using copper cauldrons. Hit the shop to pick up enough dairy goods to fill a suitcase (entry £4.50, including tasting; abondance.org).

Get some fresh air on a trot up to Lac des Plagnes. Follow the River Malève for three miles, past two tiny saints' shrines and grazing cows. Dip your toes in the icy lake and reelax.

Not for too long. Southwards is Châtel, the ultimate playground for adrenaline junkies. Hurtle down 22 bike trails, ducking through forests and fording streams. A less hair-raising trail, the Enterlou, opens this summer. And don't miss the Fantastivable zipline (£27; info.chatel.com). Zoom along 4,000ft of cable at 60mph as the world rushes past. It's good for yodelling practice.

You're in the mountains, so you have to climb one. Work off the fromage in the Cornettes de Bise, on the Swiss border. Walkers are nature's guests. Wild flowers such as dainty purple gentians blanket the meadows. And, best of all, you'll come face to face with herds of ibex.

For the best loop — and the best part of a day — take the Col de Bise climb. At the summit, you'll enjoy worth-the-pain views of the glinting crescent of Lake Geneva. Now turn right to follow the Col d'Ugeon path up to 6,620ft and see the Alps smother everything in sight.

Time for culture. Westwards, up and over the Col du Corbier pass, is the Abbaye d'Aulps, in Saint-Jean-d'Aulps. The 11th-century Cistercian monastery was destroyed in 1823, leaving only a lone facade. Eerie. Have a sniff in the monks' herb garden, then brush up on the convoluted local history in the learning centre. (£4.50; abbayedaulps.fr).

More thrills down the road in Le Jotty, at Les Gorges du Pont du Diable, where, over millennia, glacial waters have created cavernous trenches bedaubed with moss. Creep along the cliff-hugging walkways hung high above the crashing waters of the Dranse. Don't look down (closed until April, £4.50; lepontdudiable.com).

Unlace walking boots in Evian-les-Bains, on the shores of Lake Geneva. This was the Victorian VIP hotspot, and a whiff of well-to-do lingers in the belle époque town centre. Stop by the Palais Lumière, on Quai Besson, for Paris-worthy contemporary exhibitions (£6; 04 50 83 15 90) then break at the Comptoir d'Arômes tea salon for artisan chocolates (from £1; 8 Rue du 8 Mai 1945; 04 50 49 52 29). Thrifty types can fill up on free Evian water at the pavilioned Source Cachet (Avenue des Sources).

Soothe weary legs on the grassy banks at the municipal beach on Avenue Général-Dupas, which has a water slide and pedalos for gentler kicks (£3.50; ville-evian.fr/fr/loisirs/piscine).

Then say au revoir to the day on a lakeside stroll as the sun melts into the Jura Mountains. Book dinner at Les Cygnes (menus from £24; hotellescygnes.com). Ask for an outside table and watch black kites dive for fish as you dine on fresh perch.

Now, did you even miss the snow? AB

Getting there BA, Swiss and Monarch fly to Geneva.

I love the French, but...

A national character assassination by Matt Rudd

Why do they refuse to understand our excellent GCSE French? You go into the bakery (at least they still have them) and say: “Bonjour, une baguette, s’il vous plaît.” The baker looks puzzled. You say it again, only more French. Nothing. Rien.

The person in the queue behind you has worked out that you would like a baguette, primarily because you’re in a shop that only sells baguettes.

“Une baguette?” he says.

“Oui,” you say.

“Une baguette,” he says to the baker.

“Ahh, une baguette,” says the baker, patronisingly.

“Oui, une baguette,” you say.

“Pardon?”

The French own more poodles per capita than any other country, but they refuse to clear up after them. This makes walking in France a hazardous affair, which is fortunate because the French don’t have many footpaths. They have a lot of privately owned countryside, through none of which you’re allowed to walk.

Which brings us to sex and alcohol. Yes, it does. The French are excellent at sex, despite or perhaps because of their restrained alcohol consumption. When an Englishman orders another “bouteille du vin rouge” –

“Pardon?”

“Bouteille du vin roooogggggee?”

“Pardon?”

— the waiter gives him that look of disdain, as if to say: “You English, with your uncouth drinking problems and your sexual inferiority.”

It's a myth, of course. The French drink more than we do. And they spend, on average, three minutes less on foreplay. Va-va-voom.