



Atlantic Coast

Sandwiched by Brittany to the north and the Basque country to the south, the area in this chapter slices through three distinct regions: Pays de la Loire, around the dynamic city of Nantes; Poitou-Charentes, spanning the history-rich university city of Poitiers to the arcaded port of La Rochelle (and its offshore islands); and Aquitaine, spreading from its neoclassical capital, Bordeaux.

These key cities will give you a taste of each region, but quiet country roads winding through vine-striped hills lead to countless other treats. Among them are the charming town of Cognac, tantamount with its double-distilled spirit; the country's largest wine-growing area, encompassing the Médoc's magnificent châteaux and the golden-hued, medieval, hilltop hamlet, St-Émilien; and the tranquil Bay of Arcachon, home to a dazzling variety of birdlife and weathered wooden oyster shacks.

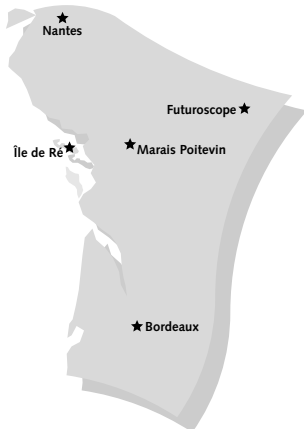
Fresh-from-the-ocean seafood proliferates on menus, of course, but the regions have their own equally distinct traditional cuisines – from crêpes (in the north) to snails (through the centre) and foie gras (further south), just for starters.

The regions' exceptional wining and dining is offset by a smorgasbord of outdoor activities, thanks to more sunshine than anywhere in France apart from the Mediterranean. Much more laid-back than the Med, all along this stretch of coastline you'll find reasonably priced beach havens with pine-forested dunes and some world-class surf breaks, as well as myriad cycling trails.

With more packed into these regions than could possibly fit in these pages, allow yourself time to savour spur-of-the-moment detours and new discoveries, too.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Glide through the emerald-green waterways of the **Marais Poitevin** (p660)
- Cycle the smooth, flat bike paths criss-crossing the sunbaked **Île de Ré** (p666)
- Hang onto your seat for a wild, cinematically simulated ride at the futuristic theme park, **Futuroscope** (p660)
- Tour the dramatically floodlit buildings and monuments making up the world's largest Unesco-listed urban area in central **Bordeaux** (p672)
- Ride a three-storey-high, 60-ton, 50-passenger mechanical elephant in **Nantes** (p654)



■ POPULATION: 4,529,642

■ AREA: 51,597 SQ KM

History

Nantes was, until 1941, the capital of Brittany, and still retains strong Breton roots. Most of the other areas in this chapter were historically part of Aquitaine. The Aquitaine came under English control when the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine (c 1122–1204) to the French king Louis VII was dissolved in 1152 and she married Henry Plantagenet, the future King Henry II of England. In 1361, during the Hundred Years' War, Edward III of England established the principality of Aquitaine. Less than a century later, in 1453, it was recaptured by the French and has since remained part of France.

The Atlantic Coast's ports and harbours were integral to trade with France's colonies, notably in salt and wine – and slaves, something that is increasingly addressed in historical exhibits.

Voyagers inspired by the coast included many of the early French settlers in Canada, among them the founders of Montreal, who set sail from La Rochelle in the 17th century. The loss of French Canada (and the right to trade with North America) to the English in 1763 dealt an economic blow, which was softened by the arrival of rail the following century.

Rapid rail links with the rest of the country have today made the Atlantic Coast popular with seachangers, as well as with students attending the area's many major universities.

Getting There & Away

Bordeaux is the main transport hub for the region, reached in three hours by TGV from Paris. From here, trains can take you pretty much anywhere in France. Nantes, Poitiers and La Rochelle are also well served by TGV, and a good rail service links most of the main attractions within the region. A car gives added freedom for the wine-tasting trail.

The region also has good air services, particularly from the UK, with airports at Nantes, Poitiers, La Rochelle and Angoulême-Cognac (all served by low-cost operator Ryanair among others) and Bordeaux (including easyJet flights).

UPPER ATLANTIC COAST

This bite of the Loire-Atlantique *département*, where the Loire empties into the ocean, might as easily be termed 'lower Brittany'. Breton in every sense – cultural, architectural and

historical – its centrepiece is Brittany's former capital, Nantes.

NANTES

pop 280,600

You can take Nantes out of Brittany (as happened when regional boundaries were redrawn during WWII), but you can't take Brittany out of its long-time capital, Nantes (Naoned in Breton).

Spirited and innovative, this city on the banks of the Loire, 55km east of the Atlantic, has a long history of reinventing itself. Founded by Celts around 70 BC, in AD 937 Alain Barbe-Torte, the grandson of the last king of Brittany, established the duchy of Brittany here following a series of invasions. A landmark royal charter guaranteeing civil rights to France's Huguenots (Protestants), the Edict of Nantes, was signed in the city by Henri IV in 1598. Its revocation in 1685 led to a Huguenot exodus from the region.

By the 18th century Nantes was France's foremost port, and in the 19th century – following the abolition of slavery – it became a cutting-edge industrial centre; the world's first public transport service, the omnibus, began here in 1826. Shipbuilding anchored the city's economy until the late 20th century. When the shipyards relocated to St-Nazaire to the west, Nantes transformed itself into a thriving student and cultural hub. The city centre has now nudged past Bordeaux's as the country's sixth-largest metropolis, and it's growing, with one in two Nantais today aged under 40.

Its renaissance extends from the extensive redevelopment of the former shipyards, to its brand new museum in the former Dukes of Brittany's magnificent castle.

Orientation

On the Loire's northern bank, central Nantes' two main arteries, both served by tram lines, are the north–south, partly pedestrianised *cours des 50 Otages* and a broad east–west boulevard (successively called *bd de Stalingrad*, *allée Commandant Charcot*, *cours John Kennedy* and *cours Franklin Roosevelt*), which connects the train station with *quai de la Fosse*. They intersect near the Gare Centrale bus/tram hub.

The old city is to the east, between *cours des 50 Otages* and the *Château des Ducs de Bretagne*.

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EMERGENCY

Hôtel de Police (☎ 02 40 37 21 21; 6 place Waldeck Rousseau) Police Nationale's 24-hour station is 1km northeast of the Monument des 50 Otages. Go to tram stop Motte Rouge.

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyber City (☎ 02 40 89 57 92; 14 rue de Strasbourg; per hr €3; ☎ 11am-midnight)

MEDICAL SERVICES

CHR de Nantes hospital (☎ 02 40 08 38 95; quai Moncoussu) Has a *service d'urgence* (emergency room).

MONEY

Commercial banks line rue La Fayette.

POST

Main Post Office (place de Bretagne)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office – Feydeau (☎ 02 72 64 04 79; www.nantes-tourisme.com; cours Olivier de Clisson; ☎ 10am-6pm, from 10.30am Thu, closed Sun)

Tourist Office – St-Pierre (2 place St-Pierre; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm, from 10.30am Thu, closed Mon)

Sights

The Nantes **city pass** (Pass Nantes; 24/48/72hr €16/27/32), available from the tourist office, includes unlimited bus and tram transport as well as entry to museums and monuments, and extras like a free guided tour and shopping discounts.

MUSEUMS

Forget fusty furnishings – the stripped, light-filled interior of the restored **Château des Ducs de Bretagne** (Castle of the Dukes of Brittany; ☎ 02 51 17 49 00; museum or exhibitions per adult/child €5/3 or both €8/4.80, grounds free; ☎ 9am-8pm mid-May–mid-Sep, 10am-7pm Wed-Mon mid-Sep–mid-May) houses multimedia-rich new exhibits detailing the city's history, such as computer terminals that allow you to tour the old medieval city, juxtaposed with images of it today. Other exhibits to look out for include sobering documentation of the slave trade, and vintage scale models of Nantes' evolving cityscape. Duchess of Brittany, Anne de Bretagne (1477–1514), was born in the château; her heart (encased in ivory and gold) is also displayed here. The extensive renovations provide excellent wheelchair access.

One of the finest collections of French paintings outside Paris hangs in sumptuous

galleries linked by grand stone staircases at the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Fine Arts Museum; ☎ 02 51 17 45 00; 10 rue Georges Clemenceau; adult/child €3.10/1.60; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed & Fri-Mon, to 8pm Thu), with works by Georges de La Tour, Chagall, Monet, Picasso and Kandinsky among others.

Medieval and French Revolution artefacts are among the collections at the **Musée Dobrée** (☎ 02 40 71 03 50; 18 rue Voltaire; adult/student & child €3/1.50; ☎ 1.30-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 2.30-5.30pm Sat & Sun), along with classical antiquities and Renaissance furniture.

Overlooking the river 2km southwest of the tourist office (Feydeau branch), the **Musée Jules Verne** (☎ 02 40 69 72 52; www.julesverne.nantes.fr, in French; 3 rue de l'Hermitage; adult/student & child €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) is a magical place with 1st-edition books, hand-edited manuscripts, cardboard theatre cut-outs, good wheelchair access and some delightful child-friendly interactive displays to introduce or reintroduce you to the work of Jules Verne, who was born in Nantes in 1828. Signs are in French only but Verne's books, such as *Around the World in 80 Days*, are so well known that it's worthwhile visiting regardless. The adjoining park has a pair of life-size **statues**, showing his creation Captain Nemo looking out to sea, and behind him Verne as a small boy with big dreams.

If you're squeamish about reptiles, skip the vivarium packed with live pythons, crocodiles and iguanas at the **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** (☎ 02 40 99 26 20; 12 rue Voltaire; adult/child €3.10/1.60; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon). Prehistory and ethnography collections also figure largely here, including a rorqual (whale) skeleton that takes up an entire room.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Île Feydeau (the quarter south of the Gare Centrale) ceased to be an island after WWII when the channels of the Loire that once surrounded it were filled in after the riverbeds dried up. You can still see where ships docked at the doors of the area's 18th-century mansions – some with stone carvings of the heads of African slaves. There's talk of reverting it to its original river status, though the logistics and the cost of emptying the landfill mean that the project has yet to get the green light.

Still an island (accessed by bridges), **Île de Nantes** languished after Nantes' shipyards closed, but is now being regenerated as a civic and cultural hub. The quirkiest new resident is **Les Machines de l'Île de Nantes** (☎ 08 10 12 12 25;

www.lesmachines-nantes.fr), which creates amazing mechanisms such as a 12m-high mechanical elephant (40-minute rides per adult/child cost €6/4.50) which plods along at 26cm per second, carrying up to 50 passengers. You can also visit the adjacent gallery (adult/child costs €6/4.50), which displays and demonstrates prototypes and projects on the drawing board, including a triple-decker, 25m-high, 80-person carousel with Jules Verne-inspired mechanical sea creatures, due for completion in 2010. Gallery tickets are also good for the workshop, where you can watch these fantastical contraptions being built. Opening hours and elephant departures vary – check ahead.

Back in town, inside the Flamboyant Gothic **Cathédrale St-Pierre et St-Paul** (place St-Pierre), the **tomb of François II** (r 1458–88), duke of Brittany, and his second wife, Marguerite de Foix, is a masterpiece of Renaissance art.

Founded in the early 19th century, the **Jardin des Plantes** is one of the most exquisite botanical gardens in France, filled with flowerbeds, duck ponds, fountains and towering redwoods (sequoias). There are **hothouses** and a **children's playground** at the northern end.

Sleeping

Nantes makes a good weekend break, when hotel rates often drop. Bookings (including weekend packages with freebies thrown in) can be made through www.resanantes.com.

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse La Manu (☎ 02 40 29 29 20; nantes.lamanu@fuaj.org; 2 place de la Manu; dm incl breakfast €17; ☎ reception closed noon–5pm, hostel closed Christmas period; ♿) Housed in an old converted factory with good wheelchair access, this well-equipped 123-bed hostel is a 15-minute walk from the centre. Alas, there's a lock-out from 10am to 5pm. Take tram 1 to the Manufacture stop.

Hôtel Renova (☎ 02 40 47 57 03; www.hotel-renova.com, in French; 11 rue Beauregard; s €35–45, d €45–50, tr €70; ☎) Over six steep mosaic-tiled flights of stairs, this narrow hotel of 24 rooms with original polished floorboards is a simple little one-star place with an absolutely superstar location in the old city.

Hôtel St-Daniel (☎ 02 40 47 41 25; www.hotel-saintdaniel.com, in French; 4 rue du Bouffay; r €35–51; ☎) Peacefully situated overlooking the St-Croix church courtyard in the heart of the old town, this clean, cheery place has a variety of room sizes including some whoppers, as well free wi-fi.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hôtel Pommeraye (☎ 02 40 48 78 79; www.hotel-pommeraye.com; 2 rue Boileau; s €54–114, d €59–114, ste €118–188; ♿) Sleek and chic with shimmering short-pile carpet and textured walls in shades of pale grey, gold, chocolate and violet blue, rooms at this boutique place on the corner of Nantes' smartest shopping street are sized like clothes (M, L, XL, XXL), with prices to match.

Hôtel des Colonies (☎ 02 40 48 79 76; www.hotel-descolonies.fr; 5 rue du Chapeau Rouge; s €54–72.50, d €61–72.50; ♿) Local art exhibitions rotate monthly in the lobby of this central spot featuring cherry-red public areas and rooms fitted out with purple, green and orange feature walls and boxy resin light fittings. Hotel-wide wi-fi's free.

Hôtel Graslin (☎ 02 40 69 72 91; www.hotel-graslin.com; 1 rue Piron; r €82–94; ☎) An unlikely (but very Nantes) marriage of the art deco and '70s eras at this refurbished hotel includes details like velour, eggplant-and-orange wing chairs in the lounge (where wi-fi's free), and the spiffy rooms (wi-fi at additional charge) that feature faux timber and edgy colour combinations like peppermint and bone, plus shag-carpeted rooms in the attic.

Hôtel La Pérouse (☎ 02 40 89 75 00; www.hotel-la-perouse.fr; 3 allée Duquesne; r €86–179; ☎ ♿ ☎) Styled to reflect the city's shipbuilding traditions, a wooden gangway entrance leads to this design hotel's stone-and-wood lobby and 46 rooms with zigzag chairs, canvas sail-like curtains, and glass bathroom basins and wardrobes. Breakfast (€12) includes 17 flavours of jam and freshly squeezed OJ.

Eating

For cosmopolitan dining, head to the medieval Bouffay quarter, a couple of blocks west of the château around rue de la Juiverie, rue des Petites Écuries and rue de la Bâclerie. Breton crêperies abound throughout town. West of cours des 50 Otages, rues Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Santeuil are lined with eateries.

See also the listings under Drinking and Entertainment.

Crêperie Heb-Ken (☎ 02 40 48 79 03; 5 rue de Guérande; crêpes €4.80–17.90; ☎) lunch & dinner Mon–Sat) Dozens of varieties of crêpe (such as a delicious trout-and-leek combo, or honey, lemon and almond for dessert) are made with love at this cosy spot. A sure sign of its authenticity: you can order *lait ribot* (thickened milk) by the *bolée* (drinking bowl) or pitcher.

Crêperie l'Île Mystérieuse (☎ 02 40 47 42 83; 13 rue Kervégan; menus €8-14; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Jules Verne's legacy lives on at this lovely little place serving crêpes with local cheeses and cured hams amid decor such as a hot-air balloon, old-fashioned maps and books lining uneven stone walls glittering with coins.

Brasserie La Cigale (☎ 02 51 84 94 94; 4 place Graslin; breakfast €11, brunch €20, mains €12.20-24.50; 🍷 7.30am-12.30am) No visit to Nantes is complete without a café and cake or an all-out feast at 1890s Brasserie La Cigale – several salons of original gilded tilework and frescoed ceilings, attended by white-aproned waiters. Its name comes from the cautionary fable of the *cigale* (cicada) and the ant, in which the cicada is too busy enjoying himself to plan for the winter ahead (hence the all-work, no-play ant doesn't get billing here).

Le Bistrot de l'Écrivain (☎ 02 51 84 15 15; 15 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; menus €14.50-18.50; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Splashed in shades of red, with wine bottles lining the walls and checked tablecloths, Le Bistrot de l'Écrivain serves authentic Nantaise cuisine like *sandre* (pike-perch) in *beurre blanc* (white sauce), and local Muscadet wines. (For more on Muscadet, visit www.vinsdenantes.fr.)

Un Coin en Ville (☎ 02 40 20 05 97; 2 place de la Bourse; mains €15-19.50; 🍷 lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Flickering tea-light candles, soulful jazz and blues, and cooking that combines local produce with exotic styles, such as Moroccan *tajines* with local leeks and turnips, and a banana crumble made with Lu biscuits set the scene for a romantic meal.

Le 1 (☎ 02 40 08 28 00; 1 rue Olympe de Gouges; lunch menu €17, dinner menu €23; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Legal eagles from Nantes' gleaming 21st-century law court next door lounge in the ultracontemporary bar and dine on fabulous fusion dishes at this spanking-new spot overlooking the Loire. Book ahead for the chef's table, in a small glassed-in room looking into the Paul Valet–designed kitchen (no extra cost). The wine cellar is also a see-through affair, with over 2000 bottles on stainless-steel racks in a glass cool room.

SELF-CATERING

Sardines are sold at street stalls throughout town between March and November.

Stock up on picnic supplies at this huge marketplace, **Marché de Talensac** (rue Talensac; 🍷 7.30am-1pm Tue-Sun). Central supermarkets include **Monoprix** (2 rue du Calvaire; 🍷 9am-9pm Mon-Sat).

MOVEABLE FEAST

Glide along the River Erdre with an ever-changing view of châteaux as you dine aboard **Bateaux Nantais** (☎ 02 40 14 51 14; www.bateaux-nantais.fr; quai de la Motte Rouge, Nantes; lunch €53-86, dinner €58-86; 🍷 by reservation), accompanied by ambient music, local Muscadet wines and chef-prepared regional specialities. There are regular departures in summer; in winter boats operate only when there are sufficient numbers.

Drinking

Nantes has no shortage of lively spots for a drink. Two prime areas are the medieval Bouffay quarter, and the hot new **Hangar à Bananes** (www.hangarabananes.com, in French; 21 quai des Antilles; 🍷 daily until late), a former banana-ripening warehouse on the Île de Nantes. Here you'll find over a dozen restaurants, bars and clubs (and combinations thereof), each hipper than the next, including the stark monochrome **Téo** (☎ 02 40 08 90 28; www.teo-time.com; 🍷 restaurant lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat, bar daily noon-2am), and **Altercafé** (☎ 02 28 20 01 06; www.altercafe.fr; 🍷 noon-midnight Mon, noon-2am Tue, noon-4am Wed-Fri, 3pm-5am Sat, 3pm-midnight Sun, nonstop food service until 10pm daily), where even the beer is organic. Their front terraces face onto the Anneaux de Buren, a permanent art installation of metal rings, that light up at night.

La Maison (☎ 02 40 37 04 12; 4 rue Lebrun; 🍷 3pm-2am) You have to see to believe this trip of a place, decorated room by room like a home furnished in *bad* 1970s taste, playing (what else?) house music – but not so loud that you can't chat with the local students who make it their home from home.

Café Cult (☎ 02 40 47 18 49; www.lecult.com, in French; place du Change; 🍷 2pm-2am Mon & Sat, from noon Tue-Fri) Squeezed inside a darkened half-timbered house and hung with local art, this bohemian place draws a student crowd and sometimes hosts concerts.

Entertainment

Good what's-on websites include www.leboost.com (in French). Tickets for most events are available at **Fnac** (☎ 08 25 02 00 20; place Commerce; 🍷 10am-8pm Mon-Sat).

Le Lieu Unique (☎ 02 40 12 14 34; www.lelieuunique.com, in French; 2 rue de la Biscuiterie), within the one-time Lu biscuit factory (crowned by a replica of its original tower, which you can ascend for

€2), this industrial-chic space is the venue for dance and theatre performances, eclectic and electronic music, philosophical sessions and contemporary-art exhibitions. Also here is an always-buzzing restaurant, a polished concrete bar, and a decadent hammam (Turkish bath) complex in the basement.

Beautifully refurbished, the 1788-built **Théâtre Graslin** (☎ 02 40 69 77 18; place Graslin) is the home of the Nantes Opera.

In a small turquoise-coloured space with an eclectic collection of stainless-steel and brass clocks (none of which show the same time), **Spoutnik** (☎ 02 40 47 65 37; 6 allée du port Maillard; ☎ 5pm-2am Mon-Sat) has regular live independent rock as well as 40 different flavours of vodka and good tap beer.

The six-screen **Cinéma Katorza** (☎ 02 51 84 90 60; 3 rue Corneille) shows nondubbed films.

Shopping

Gautier-Debotte (☎ 02 40 48 18 16; 9 rue de la Fosse; ☎ 9am-7.15pm Tue-Sat) When Jules Verne was a young boy he too was awed by this beautiful chocolate shop's chandeliers, marble floors and circular velvet banquettes where Nantais have waited while their orders were filled since 1823. Handmade specialities include *mascarons* (finely ground chocolates in a dark-chocolate shell) and a rainbow of hard-boiled sweets.

Pedestal statues symbolise traditional Nantais industries inside the ornate three-tiered shopping arcade **Passage Pommeraye**, built in 1843.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aéroport International Nantes-Atlantique (☎ 02 40 84 80 00; www.nantes.aeroport.fr) is 12km southeast of town.

BICYCLE

Detours de Loire (☎ 02 40 48 75 37; www.locationdevelop.com; per day/week €14/57) lets you pick up and drop off bikes along the Loire Valley, including Nantes. Check the website for the current pick-up and drop-off points.

BUS

The southbound **bus station** (☎ 08 25 08 71 56), across from 13 allée de la Maison Rouge, is used by CTA buses serving areas of the Loire-Atlantique *département* south of the Loire River, while the **Lila** (☎ 08 25 08 71 56) bus web

covers the entire Loire-Atlantique *département*. Tickets cost €2/16 per single/10 rides.

Eurolines (☎ 02 51 72 02 03; allée de la Maison Rouge; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat) has an office in town.

CAR

Budget, Europcar and Hertz are right outside the train station's southern entrance.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 36 35; 27 bd de Stalingrad) is well connected to most of the country. Destinations include Paris' Gare Montparnasse (€49.10 to €61.40, 2¼ hours, 15 to 20 daily), Bordeaux (€37, four hours, three or four daily) and La Rochelle (€21, 1¾ hours, three or four daily).

Tickets and information are also available at the **SNCF ticket office** (La Bourse, 12 place de la Bourse; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue-Sat) in the city centre.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The public bus TAN-Air links the airport with the Gare Centrale bus-and-tram hub and the train station's southern entrance (€6, 20 minutes) from about 5.30am until 9pm. For information call **Allotan** (☎ 08 10 44 44 44).

BICYCLE

Nantes' new pick-up, drop-off bicycle system, **Bicloo** (☎ 08 10 44 44 50; www.bicloo.nantes.metropole.fr, in French), has stations all over town, open from 4am to 1am (but you can keep bikes overnight). Rates are just €1/5 per 24 hours/week.

BUS & TRAM

The **TAN network** (☎ 08 10 44 44 44; www.tan.fr, in French) includes three modern tram lines that intersect at the Gare Centrale (Commerce), the main bus/tram transfer point, and a first-of-its-kind 'Busway'. Buses run from 7.15am to 9pm. Night services continue until 12.30am.

Bus/tram tickets can be individually purchased (€1.20) from bus (but not tram) drivers and at tram-stop ticket machines. They're valid for one hour after being time-stamped. A *ticket journalier*, good for 24 hours, costs €3.30; time-stamp it only the first time you use it.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For a full list of free and pay parking areas in Nantes – including access maps – click on

ACROSS THE RIVER

For the cost of a tram ticket, the little **Navibus** (shuttle boat; ☎ 08 10 44 44 44) ferries you across the river from the Gare Maritime tram stop to the villagelike quarter of **Trentemoult**. Lined with fishermen's cottages and ship's captains' houses, this artsy community has an island feel, despite being on the Loire's southern banks. On weekends especially, drop by **La Guingette** (☎ 02 40 75 88 96; 20 quai Marcel Broissard; mains €8.50-11.50; 🍷 lunch & dinner), where locals congregate for board-game tournaments, French tapas and a drink at the boat-shaped timber bar.

www.nantesmetropole.fr/67868597/0/fiche_pagelibre (in French).

TAXI

To order a taxi, call ☎ 02 40 69 22 22.

AROUND NANTES

The classic seaside town of **Le Croisic** (population 4300) centres on a pretty, half-timbered fishing harbour adjoining its old town, where shrimp, lobster, crab, scallop and sea bass are unloaded. From Nantes, an all-day *MétrOcéane* (www.metroceane.fr, in French) train ticket to Le Croisic costs €14.80 and includes public transport throughout Nantes. En route to Le Croisic, the same ticket allows you to stop at **St-Nazaire** (population 68,600), where cruise ships – including the *Queen Mary II* – are built and where Airbus has a factory, which can be toured. Also along this stretch of coast is the glamorous belle-époque resort of **La Baule** (population 16,400), boasting what's purportedly Europe's largest beach.

TGVs also run directly from Paris' Gare Montparnasse to Le Croisic (€57.70, 3¼ hours).

CENTRAL ATLANTIC COAST

The Poitou-Charentes region, midway along the Atlantic Coast, scoops up a pot-pourri of attractions – from the history-rich capital, Poitiers, to the portside panache of La

Rochelle, the languid beaches of Île de Ré, and the eponymous home of Cognac.

POITIERS

pop 87,000

Inland from the coast, history-steeped Poitiers was founded by the Pictones, a Gaulish tribe, and rose to prominence as the former capital of Poitou, the region governed by the Counts of Poitiers in the Middle Ages. A pivotal turning point came in AD 732, when somewhere near Poitiers (the exact site is not known) the cavalry of Charles Martel defeated the Muslim forces of Abd ar-Rahman, governor of Córdoba, thus ending Muslim attempts to conquer France. The Romans built up the city, and there are numerous reminders still evident, such as extensive ruins uncovered when the large Cordeliers shopping centre was built in the town centre about a decade ago. The city's remarkable Romanesque churches are in part a legacy of Eleanor of Aquitaine's financial support.

Poitiers has one of the oldest universities in the country, first established in 1432 and today a linchpin of this lively city.

Orientation

The train station is about 600m downhill (west) from the old city, which begins just north of Poitiers' main square, place du Maréchal Leclerc, and stretches northeast to Église Notre Dame la Grande. Rue Carnot heads south from place du Maréchal Leclerc.

Information

Banks can be found around place du Maréchal Leclerc.

Post Office (21 rue des Écoissais) Changes money.

Tourist Office (☎ 05 49 41 21 24; www.ot-poitiers.fr; 45 place Charles de Gaulle; 🕒 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm & 7-11pm Sun 21 Jun-Aug, 10am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm & 7-10pm Sun 1-17 Sep, 10am-6pm Mon-Sat 18 Sep-20 Jun) Near Église Notre Dame.

Virtual 86 (☎ 05 49 53 63 42; 13 rue Magenta; per 15min/1hr €0.50/2; 🌐 10am-2am) Internet access.

Sights

Strolling Poitiers' history-trodden streets is the best way to get a feel for the city's past. Along the pavements, red, yellow and blue lines correspond with three **self-guided walking tours** of the city detailed on a free city map handed out by the tourist office.

Every evening from 21 June to the third weekend in September, spectacular colours

are cinematically projected onto the west facade of the Romanesque **Église Notre Dame la Grande** (place Charles de Gaulle; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm Sun). The earliest parts of the church date from the 11th century; three of the five choir chapels were added in the 15th century, with the six chapels along the northern wall of the nave added in the 16th century. The only original frescoes are the faint 12th- or 13th-century works that adorn the U-shaped dome above the choir.

Within today's Palais de Justice (law courts), at the northeastern end of rue Gambetta, the vast, partly 13th-century great hall, **Salle des Pas-Perdus** (☎ 8.45am-6pm Mon-Fri), flanked by three huge fireplaces, is a not-so-subtle reminder of the building's history as the former palace of the counts of Poitou and the dukes of Aquitaine.

The 13th-century stained-glass window illustrating the Crucifixion and the Ascension at the far end of the choir of the Gothic-style **Cathédrale St-Pierre** (rue de la Cathédrale; ☎ 8am-6pm) is one of the oldest in France.

Constructed in the 4th and 6th centuries on Roman foundations, **Baptistère St-Jean** (rue Jean Jaurès; adult/child €1.50/0.75; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 2.30-4.30pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar), 100m south of the cathedral, was redecorated in the 10th century and used as a parish church. The octagonal hole under the frescoes was used for total-immersion baptisms, practised until the 7th century.

Seven signed statues by Camille Claudel are the highlight of the **Musée Ste-Croix** (☎ 05 49 41 07 53; www.musees-poitiers.org, in French; 3 rue Jean Jaurès; adult/child €3.70/free; ☎ 1.15-6pm Mon, 10am-noon & 1.15-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, to 5pm Mon-Fri & afternoons Sat & Sun Oct-May). Admission here is also good for the **Musée Rupert de Chièvre** (☎ 05 49 41 07 53; 9 rue Victor Hugo), which displays 19th-century furniture, paintings and art.; it has the same opening hours as the Musée Ste-Croix

Sleeping

In addition to chains such as Ibis, Poitiers has a handful of atmospheric, well-located hotels.

Hôtel Griotte Central (☎ 05 49 01 79 79; www.centralhotel86.com, in French; 35 place du Maréchal Lederc; d €36-53) At the southern edge of this charming pedestrian district of half-timbered houses, this two-star place is a terrific little bargain. It has snug but sunlit rooms with showers or

bath-tubs, and a lift to save you and your suitcases from scaling its three storeys.

Hôtel de l'Europe (☎ 05 49 88 12 00; www.hotel-europe-poitiers.com; 39 rue Carnot; d €52-83) Behind a dramatically recessed entrance, the main building of this elegant, very un-two-star-like hotel with good wheelchair access dates from 1710, with a sweeping staircase, oversized rooms and refined furnishings. The annex has modern rooms for the same price.

Le Grand Hôtel (☎ 05 49 60 90 60; www.grandhotelpoitiers.fr; 28 rue Carnot; s €67-70, d €77-85; ♿) Poitiers' premier hotel lives up to its name. Faux-art-deco furnishings and fittings fill the public areas with character, and rooms are spacious and well equipped. Service comes with all the trimmings including a porter and a lock-up garage (€6).

Eating & Drinking

Prime dining spots tend to be south of place du Maréchal Leclerc.

ourpick La Serrurerie (☎ 05 49 41 05 14; 28 rue des Grandes Écoles; mains €12-17.50, weekend brunch €15; ☎ 8am-2am) Showcasing local art, sculpture and a fantastic collection of retro toys, this mosaic-and-steel bistro-bar is Poitiers' communal lounge-dining room. Its social scene peaks during the weekend brunches, where you have the option of a vegetarian-friendly version or the full posthangover bacon-and-eggs works. A chalked blackboard menu lists specialities like *tournedos* (thick slices) of salmon, sensational pastas, and a *crème brûlée* you'll be dreaming about until your next visit.

Other good dining bets are the atrium-style bistro **La Gazette** (☎ 05 49 61 49 21; 1 rue Gambetta; mains €11-12; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat), and little **La Table du Jardin** (☎ 05 49 41 68 46; 42 rue du Moulin à Vent; menu €9.90, mains €13-18; ☎ closed Sun, Mon & last 2 weeks Jun), serving exclusively seasonal market-fresh produce.

The covered market **Marché Notre Dame** (☎ 7am-1pm Tue-Sat) is right next to Église Notre Dame la Grande; the area out front hosts an open-air market from 7am to 1pm on Saturdays. About 200m to the south, the **Monoprix supermarket** is across from 29 rue du Marché Notre Dame (in the Cordeliers shopping centre).

You'll find the best bars and pubs one block north of place du Maréchal Leclerc along rue du Chaudron d'Or; and around place Notre Dame.

For live music, including jam sessions on Thursdays, swing by **Le Pince Oreille** (☎ 05 49 60 25 99; www.lepince-oreille.com, in French), and for electronica head to the very *hype* **Le Confort Moderne** (☎ 05 49 46 08 08; www.confort-moderne.fr, in French). Programs and cover charges are posted on the websites.

Shopping

Unique shops in Poitiers include **Fabrique de Parapluies** (137 Grand Rue), which has been making umbrellas by hand for centuries, and **Macarons Rannou-Metivier** (30 & 13bis rue des Cordeliers), which makes the local almond-based biscuits with seasonal flavours such as citrus. Behind-the-scenes peeks are possible at candle-maker **Ciergerie Guedon** (☎ 05 49 41 07 43; 113 Grand Rue), and violin-maker **Luthier I Gayraud** (☎ 05 49 60 97 96; 7 place de la Liberté; admission €5; ☒ by reservation).

Getting There & Away

The **train station** (☎ 08 36 35 35 35; bd du Grand Cerf) has direct links to Bordeaux (from €29.70, 1¾ hours), La Rochelle (€20.10, one hour and 20 minutes), Nantes (€25.70, 3¾ hours) and many other cities including Paris' Gare Montparnasse (from €48.20, 1½ hours, 12 daily).

AROUND POITIERS

Futuroscope

Futuristic theme park **Futuroscope** (☎ 05 49 49 30 80; www.futuroscope.com; Jaunay-Clan; adult €33, child under 16yr €25; ☒ from 10am, seasonal closing times vary, closed Jan–early Feb) is refreshingly uncommercial, focused instead on the cinematic technological wizardry of its attractions, as well as lakeside laser and firework shows. To keep things cutting edge, one-third of the attractions change annually. Many are motion-seat setups (some, such as the five-minute roller-coaster-effect **The Best of Dynamic Cinema**, give you a pretty vigorous shake), requiring a minimum height of 120cm. However, there's a new play area for littles (miniature cars and so on).

Other standouts are **The Future is Wild**, where you can 'catch' various creatures in your hands, thanks to virtual-reality goggles and a sensor strapped to your wrist; and a 3-D journey through the solar system at **Destination Cosmos**. Free infrared headsets provide soundtracks in English, German and Spanish.

Allow at least five hours to see the major attractions; two days to see everything. Futuroscope's numerous hotels are bookable

through the website, or directly at the lodging desk. Restaurants in the park span all price ranges up to the gastronomic **Le Cristal** (menus €23–39), serving gourmet fare (succulent fish with beetroot and a seafood-rich sauce) with 'futuristic' twists like strawberries and fairy floss accompanied by bubbling test-tubes of syrup for dessert, plus table centrepieces of frothing dry ice. There are also picnic areas if you want to self-cater.

Futuroscope is 10km north of Poitiers in Jaunay-Clan (take exit No 28 off the A10). TGV trains link the park's TGV station with cities including Paris and Bordeaux; times and prices are similar to those to/from Poitiers.

Local **Vitalis** (☎ 05 49 44 66 88) bus 9 links Futuroscope (Parc de Loisirs stop) with Poitiers' train station (the stop in front of Avis car rental; €1.30, 30 minutes); there are one to two buses an hour from 6.15am until 7.30pm or 9pm.

Marais Poitevin

Within the protected Parc Naturel Inter-régional du Marais Poitevin, these tranquil bird-filled wetlands are dubbed Venise Verte (Green Venice) due to the duckweed that turns its maze of waterways emerald green each spring and summer. Covering some 800 sq km of wet and drained marsh, the marshlands are interspersed with villages and woods threaded by bike paths.

Boating and **cycling** are ideal for exploring the area. Try **Venise Verte Loisirs** (☎ 05 49 35 43

SLEEPING GREEN IN FRANCE'S 'GREEN VENICE'

To get even closer to nature in the Marais Poitevin, choose from one of 10 rooms at the waterside **Maison Flore** (☎ 05 49 76 27 11; www.maisonflore.com; rue du Grand Port, Arçais; s/d/tr/q €48/63/76/85; ☒), which are themed after local marsh plants such as pale-green Angelica and purple-hued Iris. But the environmental connection runs much deeper, with solar hot water, geothermal heating and cooling, and an organic breakfast (€9) of freshly squeezed OJ, Fair Trade coffee and home-made cakes and yoghurt. There's a cosy guest lounge with books and board games, and you can rent boats on the premises.

34; www.veniseverteloisirs.fr, in French; 10 chemin du Charret, Arçais; guided/unguided 'plate' boats per 35 mins from €15/9, canoes per hr from €12, kayaks per hr from €10; ☎ Mar-Nov by appointment) and **La Bicyclette Verte** (www.bicyclette-verte.com, in French; 36 rte de St-Hilaire, Arçais; per half-day/full day from €9/13; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Sep, by reservation Oct-Mar).

Dining is sublime at **Hôtel-Restaurant Le Central** (☎ 05 49 35 90 20; www.hotel-lecentral-coulon.com; 4 rue d'Autremont, Coulon; s €49-76, d €56-123, menus €18.50-41, mains €19-22; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat, hotel & restaurant closed 3 weeks Feb, restaurant only closed 2 weeks early Oct; ☎ ☎). Specialties include crispy eel, sorbet made from angelica, a local herbal plant, and a mouth-watering cheeseboard. Its 13 rooms have artistic touches like pressed-metal bedheads made by a local blacksmith, and free wi-fi.

Sympathetic to this protected area is the environmentally friendly Maison Flore (opposite).

LA ROCHELLE

pop 77,300

Known as La Ville Blanche (The White City), La Rochelle's luminous limestone facades glow in the bright coastal sunlight. Arcaded walkways, half-timbered houses (protected from the salt air by slate tiles) and ghoulish gargoyles are rich reminders of the city's seafaring past. One of France's foremost seaports from the 14th to 17th centuries, early French settlers of Canada, including the founders of Montreal, set sail from here in the 17th century.

This 'white city' is also commendably green, with innovative public transport and open spaces. It's kid-friendly too, with lots of activities for little visitors.

La Rochelle's late-20th-century district of Les Minimes was built on reclaimed land, and now has one of the largest marinas in the country. Unlike the Med with its motor cruisers, the 3500 moorings here are mostly used by yachts, which fill the harbour with billowing spinnakers.

Orientation

La Rochelle is centred on its lively Vieux Port (Old Port). The old city unfolds to its north. The train station is linked to the Vieux Port by the 500m-long av du Général de Gaulle, with the tourist office about halfway between, at the edge of a quarter of brightly painted wooden buildings known as Le Gabut. Les Minimes is 3km southwest of the old city.

Information

There are a number of banks on rue du Palais in the old city.

Akromicro (☎ 05 46 34 07 94; rue de l'Aimable Nanette; per hr €2; ☎ 10am-midnight) Internet access.

Hospital (☎ 05 46 45 50 50; rue du Dr Schweitzer) Has an emergency room.

Hôtel de Police (Police Station; ☎ 05 46 51 36 36; 2 place de Verdun; ☎ 24hr)

Post Office (6 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville) Changes money.

Tourist Office (☎ 05 46 41 14 68; larochelle-tourisme.com, www.ville-larochelle.fr; Le Gabut, 2 quai Georges Simenon; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun Jun & Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-May) Sells the *Pass Rochelais*, offering various discounts for public transport, sights and activities.

Sights & Activities

TOWERS

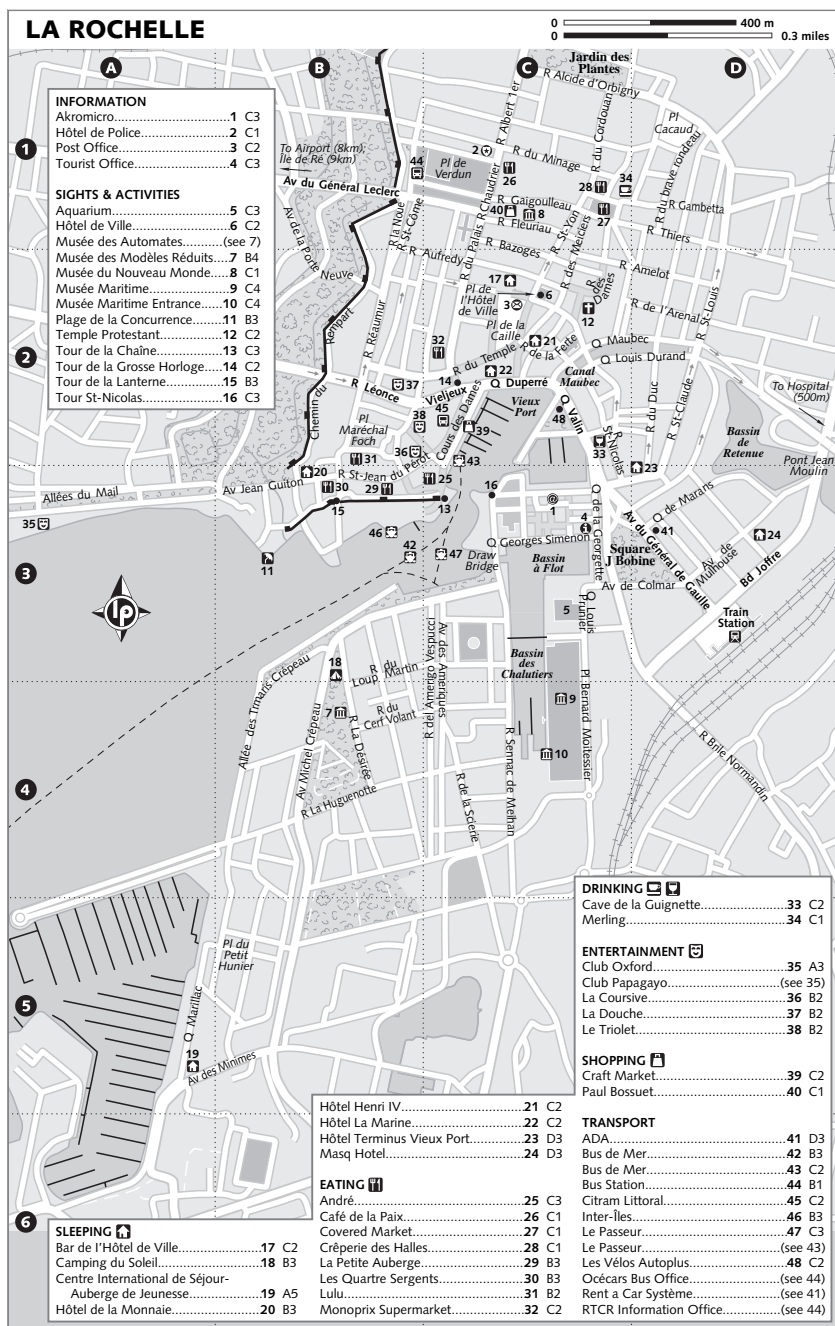
The most economical way to visit the three **defensive towers** (☎ 05 46 34 11 81; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2.15-5.30pm Oct-Mar) is on a combined ticket (adult/18 to 25 years/child costs €10.50/7/free), but there are also combinations if you only want to visit two of the three. Opening hours may vary; check with the tourist office.

To protect the harbour at night in times of war, an enormous chain was raised between the two 14th-century stone towers at the harbour entrance, giving rise to the name of **Tour de la Chaîne** (Chain Tower). There are superb views from the top and a whizz-bang new permanent exhibit about the Canadian voyagers.

Across the harbour it's also possible to climb the 36m-high, pentagonal **Tour St-Nicolas**.

So named because of its role as the harbour's lighthouse (lit by an enormous candle), and one of the oldest of its kind in the world, the conical 15th-century **Tour de la Lanterne** is also referred to as Tour des Quatre Sergents in memory of four local sergeants, two of whom were held here for plotting to overthrow the newly reinstated monarchy before their execution in Paris in 1822. The English-language graffiti on the walls was carved by English privateers held here during the 18th century.

The gateway to the old city, **Tour de la Grosse Horloge** (quai Duperré) is a steadfast Gothic-style clock tower, with a 12th-century base and an 18th-century top. For safety reasons, it's not possible to enter. The tower's grand arch leads to the arcaded **rue du Palais**, La Rochelle's main



shopping street, lined with 17th- and 18th-century shipowners' homes. Two blocks to the east, **rue des Merciers** is also lined with arcades.

AQUARIUM

Colourful tropical fish, sea flora and ominous 2.7m-long bull sharks swim in some 3 million litres of seawater at La Rochelle's 21st-century, state-of-the-art **aquarium** (☎ 05 46 34 00 00; quai Louis Prunier; adult/student & child €13/10, audioguide €3.50; 🕒 9am-11pm Jul & Aug, to 8pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-8pm Oct-Mar), alongside local Atlantic fish and sea creatures. Even non-aquarium visitors can still head to its rooftop café for a meal or a drink while taking in the panoramic city and harbour views.

MUSEUMS

Moored at Bassin des Chalutiers are the two ships comprising the **Musée Maritime** (Maritime Museum; ☎ 05 46 28 03 00; adult/student & child €8/5.50; 🕒 10am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, until 6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep): the meteorological research vessel *France I*, and *Angoumois*, a *chalutier* (fishing boat).

Two treats for kids (and kids-at-heart), both wheelchair accessible, can be visited on a combined ticket (adult/child under 10 costs €11/6.50). **Musée des Automates** (Automation Museum; ☎ 05 46 41 68 08; 14 rue La Désirée; adult/3-10yr €7.50/5; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-Jun) is a small theme-park-style display showing 300 automated dolls from the last two centuries, including a near-life-size recreation of bygone Montmartre in Paris, right down to the Moulin Rouge and the funicular railway. Trainspotters will love the **Musée des Modèles Réduits** (Scale Model Museum; ☎ 05 46 41 64 51; rue La Désirée; adult/under 10yr €7.50/5; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jan-Jun & Sep-Dec), with miniature cars, computer-automated naval battles, and a tootling model railway. In July and August (weather permitting) children under 10 can ride aboard a little train (€2 train only or €1 plus entrance fee).

La Rochelle's role as a departure point for North America is interpreted at the 18th-century mansion housing the **Musée du Nouveau Monde** (New World Museum; ☎ 05 46 41 46 50; 10 rue Fleuriau; adult/under 18yr €4/free; 🕒 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2.30-6pm Sun Apr-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar).

ISLAND EXCURSIONS

Several islands are scattered around La Rochelle, including the nearby Île de Ré (p666), as well as a trio further south.

Accessible only by boat, the tiny crescent-shaped **Île d'Aix** (pronounced eel dex), 16km due south of La Rochelle, has some blissful beaches. Between the Île d'Aix and the larger **Île d'Oléron** (linked to the mainland by a free bridge) is the fortress-island **Fort Boyard**, built during the first half of the 19th century.

Inter-Îles (☎ 08 25 13 55 00; cours des Dames) has sailings from Easter to early November to Fort Boyard (adult/child costs €18/11) and Île d'Aix and Île d'Oléron (each €26/17), plus sailings to Île de Ré (€17/10.50) from Easter to September.

La Rochelle's tourist office also has information about reaching the islands by public and private transport.

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The austere **Temple Protestant** (2 rue St-Michel) was built in the late 17th century, though it became a Protestant church only after the Revolution. After the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, many surviving Huguenots took refuge in La Rochelle before the city was besieged in 1627 by Louis XIII's forces under the command of Cardinal Richelieu.

Small artificial **beaches** near town include Plage de la Concurrence, and Plage des Minimes.

Tours

Flanked by a 15th-century Flamboyant Gothic wall and a resplendent 17th-century Renaissance-style courtyard, the **Hôtel de Ville** (Town Hall; ☎ 05 46 41 14 68; place de l'Hôtel de Ville) has guided tours in French (€/1.50 for adult/child) at 3pm on weekends and school holidays; at 3pm daily in June and September; and 3pm and 4pm daily in July and August. Tours in English are available during July and August (schedules vary).

Summer's wealth of French-language **city tours** (☎ 05 46 41 14 68) includes horse-drawn-carriage tours (adult/child costs €9/6) and night tours (€10.50/7) led by characters in costume, as well as gastronomic tours and bike tours (each €6/4); reservations are essential.

Festivals & Events

Festival International du Film (☎ 01 48 06 16 66, 05 46 51 54 00) Silent classics, as well as new nondubbed films, are screened during the 10-day film festival in early July.

Francofolies (☎ 05 46 28 28 28; www.francofolies.fr, in French) A cutting-edge, contemporary music and performing arts festival held over six days in mid-July.

Jazz Festival (☎ 05 46 27 11 19) October sees jazz fans jive to La Rochelle's jazz festival, which is themed each year according to an artist or genre.

Sleeping

BUDGET

During the warmer months, dozens of campsites open up (and fill up just as quickly) around La Rochelle and Île de Ré. The tourist office has a list of camping grounds outside the town. The closest to the city is **Camping du Soleil** (☎ 05 46 44 42 53; av Michel Crépeau; adult & tent €8.50; ☎ late Jun-late Sep). Take bus 10.

Cut-price chain hotels proliferate in and around La Rochelle, the best being **B&B** (www.hotelbb.com).

Centre International de Séjour-Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 05 46 44 43 11; www.fuaj.net/homepage/larochelle; av des Minimes; dm incl breakfast €16.60-17.50, d incl breakfast €37; ☎ reception 9am-noon, 2-7pm & 9-10pm, closed Christmas period) This popular HI hostel is 2km southwest of the train station in Les Minimes. Nonmembers incur an extra €2.90 per night.

Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville (☎ 05 46 41 30 25; 5 rue St-Yon; d €45-60) This bustling bar with an attached hotel has just nine rooms. Don't expect luxury – rooms are supersimple, but they offer great value for money given the price and proximity to the Vieux Port and the old town.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel Henri IV (☎ 05 46 41 25 79; henriV@wanadoo.fr; 31 rue des Gentilshommes; d €58-95) Housed in a classified late-16th-century building, this hotel is smack-bang in the middle of the pedestrianised old city, a block back from the Vieux Port. Even the cheapies among the Hôtel Henri IV's 24 rooms have satellite TVs.

Hôtel Terminus Vieux Port (☎ 05 46 50 69 69; http://hotelterminus.17-flash.com, in French; 7 rue de la Fabrique; d €60-69) Bedecked with navy-blue awnings, this welcoming hotel has 32 comfortable, freshly renovated rooms whimsically named after the islands offshore from La Rochelle. The pick are the bright, sun-filled rooms at the front. There's also a cheery in-house bar. Free wi-fi; parking's €6.50.

Hôtel La Marine (☎ 05 46 50 51 63; www.hotel-marine.com, in French; 30 quai Duperré; d €60-150; ☎) For captivating views of La Rochelle's iconic towers, try for rooms 1, 6, 9 or 13 in this boutique hotel by the Vieux Port. Each of the 13 rooms is individually decorated with cool, neutral-

toned decor and smart designer furniture. Wi-fi's free; nearby parking costs €6.

Hôtel de la Monnaie (☎ 05 46 50 65 65; www.hotel-monnaie.com; 3 rue de la Monnaie; d €105-120; ☎) Rooms at this epicentral spot are more up-to-the-minute than the vine-draped 17th-century floodlit facade and statue-studded courtyard suggest, with mod cons and good wheelchair access. Parking's €12.

TOP END

our pick Masq Hotel (☎ 05 46 41 83 83; www.masqhotel.com; 17 rue de l'Ouvrage à Cornes; r €115-168, ste €170-250; ☎) La Rochelle's first-ever, new-from-the-ground-up design hotel takes its cue from a chance meeting between owner-creator Michel Dufour and two Balinese brothers, Hindu artists Mantra and Geredeg, whom he commissioned to paint the abstract canvases that hang in all 76 rooms as well as the artistically lit neo-retro foyer. Other conversation pieces include Philippe Starck Carrara marble tables, and Pierluigi Cerri-designed apple-green leather chairs in the breakfast room. A couple of the ultraspacious suites have terraces. Wi-fi's free; parking's €8.

Eating

The port has a plethora of restaurants and cafés, especially on the northern side. In summer, the quays in front of the Vieux Port are closed to traffic from 8pm to midnight Monday to Saturday and 2pm to midnight on Sunday, giving it the ambience of a giant street party.

Away from the tourist crowds, locals' favoured dining areas are rue St-Jean du Pérot and the streets surrounding place du Marché such as rue des Cloutiers.

Most restaurants offer a kids' menu for around €8.50.

Crêperie des Halles (☎ 05 46 27 93 97; 1 rue des Cloutiers; dishes €5-8.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Crowds spill out the doors of this cosy, convivial crêperie tucked behind the covered market. Sweet crêpes and savoury galettes are topped with market-fresh ingredients, and prices are equally convivial.

Café de la Paix (☎ 05 46 41 39 79; 54 rue Chaudrier; menu €19.50, mains €11-18.50; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) A visual feast as much as a dining one, this belle-époque brasserie-bar serves up traditional cuisine like beef, duck, foie gras and fish, as well as breakfasts and afternoon teas amid the splendour of soaring frescoed ceilings and gold-edged arched mirrors.

La Petite Auberge (☎ 05 46 41 28 43; 25 rue St-Jean du Pérot; menu €28, mains €15-17; ☺ lunch Tue & Thu-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) Roasted monkfish with bacon and orange, saddle of lamb with apricots and rosemary, and king prawns in coconut curry sauce with saffron risotto are among the aromatic dishes served at this crisp newcomer. The smart, neutral-toned dining room is tiny, so booking ahead's a good idea during busy periods.

ourpick Lulu (☎ 05 46 50 69 03; 19ter place de la Préfecture; menus €19-35, mains €16; ☺ lunch & dinner) Decorated in striking shades of fuchsia, Lulu is La Rochelle's grooviest new kid on the block, with a hip young team in the kitchen turning out gourmet fare and a loungey vibe that comes into its own during regular piano soirées.

André (☎ 05 46 41 28 24; www.bar-andre.com; 8 place de la Chaîne; menus €32-39, mains €17-30; ☺ noon-4pm & 7pm-midnight) First opened in the 1950s as a small seafood café, André's popularity saw it begin buying adjacent shops. There's now a maze of interconnecting rooms, each with its own individual ambience (like a port-holed cabin) but all serving fish caught the night before.

Les Quatre Sergents (☎ 05 46 41 35 80; 49 rue St-Jean du Pérot; menus €17-42; ☺ lunch & dinner) Set inside a beautifully tiled, historic former greenhouse and still filled with plants today, this is the city's premier address for white-tableclothed elegance and gastronomic French fare such as frogs' legs in creamy Pineau (sweet white wine with a cognac base) sauce.

SELF-CATERING

The lively, 19th-century **covered market** (place du Marché; ☺ 7am-1pm) seethes with stallholders selling fresh fruit and vegetables, fish splaged on beds of ice, and just-killed meat. On Friday afternoons an **open-air market** sprawls across Place Verdun.

In the old city you can pick up staples at **Monoprix supermarket** (30-36 rue du Palais).

Drinking

There's no shortage of places to drink along the main dining strips, but some of the city's best bars (most open to 2am) are sprinkled along the bohemian-feel rue St-Nicolas. On a hot summer's afternoon here, try a glass of Guignette (white wine with tiny bubbles, flavoured with natural fresh fruit) at **Cave de**

la Guignette (☎ 05 46 41 05 75; 8 rue St-Nicolas; ☺ 4-8pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Tue & Wed, 10am-1pm & 3-8pm Thu-Sat).

For fresh-roasted coffee, head to the 1st-floor tearoom of **Merling** (25 rue Gambetta; ☺ closed Mon morning & Sun), which supplies most cafés in town with their brews.

Entertainment

Entry to clubs generally costs around €10 depending on the night. The dual discos **Club Oxford** and **Club Papagayo** (☎ 05 46 41 51 81 for both; complexe de la Pergola; ☺ 11pm-5am Wed-Mon, plus Tue Jul-Sep) are on the waterfront about 500m west of Tour de la Lanterne. Oxford spins techno and house; Papagayo goes for '70s and '80s, with karaoke on Sundays. Further east, **La Douche** (☎ 05 46 41 24 79; 14 rue Léonce; ☺ 11pm-5am Thu-Sun) draws a trendy gay and straight crowd.

Le Triolet (☎ 05 46 41 03 58; 8 rue des Carmes; ☺ 11pm-3am) has been *le cool club* for an older crowd since 1970.

The two auditoriums at **La Coursive** (☎ 05 46 51 54 00; 4 rue St-Jean du Pérot; ☺ late Aug-mid-Jul) host regular concerts and nondubbed art films.

Shopping

Authentic, handmade leather crafts, jewellery, sand sculptures and more are sold by the artists themselves at the waterfront **craft market** (cours des Dames; ☺ daily Jul-mid-Sep, Sat & Sun Easter-Jun). Cognac and Pineau produced by local vintner **Paul Bossuet** (21 rue Gargouilleau) make great souvenirs, not least for their decorative bottles.

BIRDWATCHING IN THE MARAIS D'YVES

An easy 15km drive south of La Rochelle, the **Réserve Naturelle Marais d'Yves** (☎ 05 46 56 41 76; www.marais.yves.reserves-naturelles.org, in French; N137, Yves; ☺ 2-6pm Sun & school holidays plus additional openings during the year) has a free Centre Nature, where you can pop in and peer through telescopes to watch some of the 192-hectare reserve's 250 bird species amid the wetlands (depending on the season, you might see flocks of over 20,000 fill the sky on their migratory path). The website lists various guided walks and cycle rides through the wetlands (available in English), where you'll also learn about the area's 750 species of frogs, flowers and insects.

Getting There & Away

AIR

La Rochelle Airport (☎ 05 46 42 30 26; www.larochelle.aeroport.fr, in French), north of the city centre off the N237, has domestic flights as well as services to London Stansted and Dublin (with Ryanair), Southampton, Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham (with Flybe), London Gatwick and Bristol (with easyJet) and Leeds and Edinburgh (with Jet2).

At the time of research there was no ATM here (though one is planned), so bring euros for transport.

BUS

From the **bus station** (place de Verdun), **Océcars** (☎ 05 46 00 95 15) runs services to regional destinations. See opposite for details on bus services to Île de Ré.

Eurolines ticketing is handled by **Citram Littoral** (☎ 05 46 50 53 57; 30 cours des Dames; ☹ closed Sat afternoon, Mon morning & Sun).

CAR

Inexpensive car-rental companies close to the train station include **ADA** (☎ 05 46 41 02 17; 19 av du Général de Gaulle) and **Rent A Car Système** (☎ 05 46 27 27 27; 27 av du Général de Gaulle).

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 08 36 35 35 35) is linked by TGV to Paris' Gare Montparnasse (€57.60, three hours, five or six direct daily). Other destinations served by regular direct trains include Nantes (€22.30, two hours), Poitiers (€19.30, 1½ hours) and Bordeaux (€23.80, two hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Bus 7 runs from the airport to the town centre (€1.20); schedules are available at www.rctc.fr (in French). A taxi costs about €10.

BICYCLE

The city's distinctive yellow bikes can be rented at **Les Vélos Autoplus** (☎ 05 46 34 02 22; quai Valin; ☹ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm May, Jun & Sep, 9.15am-12.15pm & 1.50-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr). The first two hours are free; after that bikes cost €1 per hour. Child seats, but not bike helmets, are available. From May to September bikes can also be picked up at the Vieux Port (across the street from 11 quai Valin).

BOAT

Le Passeur (tickets €0.60; ☹ 7.45am-8pm, to 10pm Apr & May, to midnight Jul & Aug) is a three-minute ferry service linking Tour de la Chaîne with the Avant Port. It runs when there are passengers – press the red button on the board at the top of the gangplank.

The ferry **Bus de Mer** links Tour de la Chaîne with Les Minimes (€1.50, €1.70 July and August, 20 minutes). It runs daily April to September; at weekends and holidays only from October to March. Boats from the Vieux Port depart every hour on the hour (except at 1pm) from 10am to 7pm (every half-hour and until 11.30pm in July and August).

BUS

Electric buses buzz around town. Local transport system **RTCR** (☎ 05 46 34 02 22) has a main bus hub and **information office** (place de Verdun; ☹ 7.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6.30pm Sat). Most lines run until some time between 7.15pm and 8pm. Tickets cost €1.20.

Bus 1 runs from place de Verdun to the train station, returning via the Vieux Port. Bus 10 links place de Verdun with the youth hostel and Les Minimes.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

A free shuttle bus connects the low-cost Park and Ride (P+R) car park off av Jean Moulin.

TAXI

Call ☎ 05 46 41 55 55 for a taxi.

ÎLE DE RÉ

pop 16,000

Spanning 30km from its most easterly and westerly points, and just 5km at its widest section, Île de Ré is scattered with 10 villages of traditional green-shuttered, whitewashed buildings with red Spanish-tile roofs. Even with the advent of the bridge linking it to La Rochelle, Île de Ré retains an isolated feel. Its name is thought to originate from the Egyptian sun god, Ra, as a combination of the offshore gulf stream and the westerly winds bathe the island in sunshine, particularly in summer (when hotels and campsites fill completely).

Sights & Activities

On the northern coast about 12km from the toll bridge, the quaint fishing port of **St-Martin-de-Ré** (population 2500) is the

island's main town. Surrounded by 17th-century fortifications, you can stroll along most of the ramparts, but the **citadel** (1681), which has been a prison for over two centuries, is closed to the law-abiding public. St-Martin's **tourist office** (☎ 05 46 09 20 06; www.iledere.com; av Victor Bouthillier; ☹ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun May-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) is about 100m on your right, across the port, from the Rébus stop.

The island's best **beaches** are along the southern edge – including unofficial **naturist beaches** at Rivedoux Plage and La Couarde-sur-Mer – and around the western tip (northeast and southeast of Phare-des-Baleines). Many beaches are bordered by dunes that have been fenced off to protect the vegetation.

Criss-crossed by an extensive network of well-maintained bicycle paths, the pancake-flat island is ideal for **cycling**. A biking map is available at tourist offices; in summer practically every hamlet has somewhere to hire bikes. Year-round try **Cycland** (☎ 05 46 09 65 27), which can deliver bikes to the bridge.

Sleeping & Eating

Île de Ré is an easy day trip from La Rochelle; however, if you want to spend longer on the island, each village has a tourist information office with lists of local accommodation options, including campsites. (Pitching your tent anywhere but designated camping areas is forbidden.)

Restaurants throughout the island's villages include elegant seafood places overlooking St-Martin harbour's flotilla of boats. Pick up beach picnic supplies at St-Martin's **covered market** (rue Jean Jaurès; ☹ 8.30am-1pm Tue-Sun) or from a cluster of nearby food shops. You'll also find minimarts in the island's villages.

Getting There & Away

The one-way automobile toll (paid on your way to the island) is €9 (a whopping €16.50 from mid-June to mid-September).

Year-round excruciatingly slow buses run by **Rébus** (☎ 05 46 09 20 15) link La Rochelle (the train station car park, Tour de la Grosse Horloge and place de Verdun) with all the major towns on the island; the one-hour trip to St-Martin costs €5.40. The company also covers intra-island routes.

COGNAC

pop 19,400

On the banks of the River Charente amid vine-covered countryside, Cognac is known worldwide for the double-distilled spirit that bears its name, and on which the local economy thrives. Most visitors head here to visit the famous cognac houses, but it's a picturesque stop even if you're not a fan of the local firewater.

Orientation & Information

Cognac's central, café-ringed roundabout place François 1er, is 200m northeast of the **tourist office** (☎ 05 45 82 10 71; www.tourism-cognac.com; 16 rue du 14 Juillet; ☹ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat May, Jun & Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr), which has free wi-fi. It's linked to the river by bd Denfert Rochereau.

There are banks in the town centre, but nowhere to change money.

Sights & Activities

Half-timbered 15th- to 17th-century houses line the narrow streets of the **Vieille Ville** (old city), which sits snugly between the partly Romanesque **Église St-Léger** (rue Aristide Briand) and the river.

At the southern corner of the leafy **Jardin Public** (Public Park) is the **Musée de Cognac** (☎ 05 45 32 07 25; 48 bd Denfert Rochereau; adult/child €4.50/free; ☹ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar), showcasing the town's history. Admission here also covers **Le Musée des Arts du Cognac** (☎ 05 45 32 07 25; 48 bd Denfert Rochereau; ☹ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar), taking you step by step through the production of cognac – from vine to bottle. Next door, the free **Espace Découverte** (☎ 05 45 36 03 65; ☹ 10am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, to 6.30pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10.30am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr, May & Oct, 2-6pm Tue-Sun Mar & Nov, by appointment Dec-Feb), an interpretive centre covering the history of the Cognac region through to the present day, has some engaging interactive exhibits as well as models and paintings.

See the boxed text, p668, for information on tours and tastings.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Le Cheval Blanc (☎ 05 45 82 09 55; www.hotel-chevalblanc.fr; 6 place Bayard; s/d €46/52; ☹) Miniature bottles of Cognac in the vending machine satiate midnight cravings at this two-star

THE HOME OF COGNAC

According to local lore, divine intervention plays a role in the production of Cognac. Made of grape *eaux-de-vie* (brandies) of various vintages, Cognac is aged in oak barrels and blended by an experienced *maître de chai* (cellar master). Each year some 2% of the casks' volume – *la part des anges* (the angels' share) – evaporates through the pores in the wood, nourishing the tiny black mushrooms that thrive on the walls of cognac warehouses.

The best-known **Cognac houses** are open to the public, and also run tours of their cellars and production facilities, ending with a tasting session. Opening times vary annually; it's a good idea to reserve in advance.

Camus (☎ 05 45 32 28 28; www.camus.fr; 29 rue Marguerite de Navarre; adult from €7, under 18yr free) Located 250m northeast of the Jardin Public.

Hennessey (☎ 05 45 35 72 68; www.hennessey-cognac.com; 8 rue Richonne; adult from €9, 12-18yr €7, under 12yr free; ☹ closed Jan & Feb) Situated 100m uphill from quai des Flamands. Tours include a film (in English) and a boat trip across the Charente to visit the cellars.

Martell (☎ 05 45 36 33 33; www.martell.com; place Édouard Martell; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €7/3/free) Found 250m northwest of the tourist office; last entry is one hour prior to closing.

Otard (☎ 05 45 36 88 86; www.otard.com; 127 bd Denfert Rochereau; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €7/3.50/free) Housed in the 1494 birthplace of King François I, the Château de Cognac, 650m north of place François 1er.

Rémy Martin (☎ 05 45 35 76 66; www.remymartin.com) Two locations: the **estate** (adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €14/7/free; ☹ closed Oct-Apr), 4km southwest of town towards Pons; and, in town, the **house** (adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €25/14/7; ☹ year-round by appointment), for intimate tastings in groups of eight.

The tourist office has a list of smaller cognac houses near town; most close between October and mid-March.

place (with good wheelchair access) 100m west of the tourist office in the town centre. Although the rooms here aren't vast, they're immaculate, well equipped and have wi-fi. Parking costs €6.

Hôtel Héritage (☎ 05 45 82 01 26; www.hheritage.com; 25 rue d'Angoulême; d €68-74) Renovated in striking shades of lime green, fuchsia and cherry red, this wi-fi'd 17th-century mansion in the heart of town proves period elegance and contemporary style don't have to be mutually exclusive. Adjacent to the beautifully restored belle-époque bar, the hotel's restaurant, La Belle Époque specialises in reintroducing long-lost regional classics (*menus* €18 to €29).

La Courtine (☎ 05 45 82 34 78; Parc François 1er; menus €19.50-26.50, mains €14; ☹ lunch & dinner) Set about 2km west of the town centre in lush parklands, you can sit in the dining room or out on the terrace and watch the ducks at this riverside restaurant while dining on them too – with dishes such as roasted duck file in raspberry sauce. The house speciality is *oeufs meurette* (poached eggs in red wine with foie gras).

You'll find an **Ecofrais supermarket** (32 place Bayard) opposite the post office. About 300m

to the north of place François 1er, the **covered market** (57 bd Denfert Rochereau; ☹ until 1pm) is just across from the Musée de Cognac.

Getting There & Away

Angoulême-Cognac airport (www.aeroport-angouleme-cognac.com) is about 30km northwest of town and is connected to London (Stansted) by three Ryanair flights per week. A shuttle to/from Cognac costs €5 one-way (bring euros with you); there's also a Hertz car-rental office here.

Cognac's **train station** (1km south of the town centre, on av du Maréchal Leclerc) has regular trains to/from La Rochelle (€14.30, 1¼ hours).

By car, take the A10 exit EO5 for Pons (from the south) or St-Jean d'Angely (from the north).

Call ☎ 05 45 82 14 31 for a taxi.

AROUND COGNAC

Within a short drive of Cognac are some fascinating towns and villages worth seeking out. Just a couple of highlights include the former Gallo-Roman capital of Aquitaine, **Saintes** (population 26,300), on the River Charente. Dating from the 1st century AD, its Roman

legacies include a double arch that served as the town gate, an amazing overgrown amphitheatre built during the reign of Claudius, and an archeology museum with unearthed statues and even a chariot and harness. Its pedestrianised old town spills over with lively places to shop, eat and drink.

Also straddling the Charente is **Jarnac** (population 5000), the 1916 birthplace of former president François Mitterrand. The house where he was born has been transformed into a museum; he's now buried in the town's cemetery. The waters around Jarnac are prime for fishing.

Situated 7km outside Jarnac, in the hamlet of **St-Même-Les-Carières**, the cosy restaurant **L'Auberge** (☎ 05 45 81 93 03; place de l'Église; menus €23-33, mains €10.50-19.50; 🍷 lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Mon-Sat plus Sun Jul & Aug) turns out solid regional classics like snails in garlic butter.

ourpick **La Ribaudière** (☎ 05 45 81 30 54; Bourg-Charente; menus €40-76; 🍷 lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Mon-Sat) This gastronomic haven is set among orchards overlooking the Charente river, in the tiny village Bourg-Charente (midway between Cognac and Jarnac). Chef Thierry Verrat grows his own vegetables to accompany his seasonally changing, Michelin-starred creations. Despite the bucolic setting, the dramatically modernised, violet-and-peppermint-painted restaurant is anything but rustic, with a geometric '70s-style chill-out lounge, bold contemporary art and TV screens above the outsized, arctic-white tables, where you can watch your meal being prepared in the kitchen via webcam.

Cognac's tourist office has details of these and other areas in its surrounds.

LOWER ATLANTIC COAST

At the lower edge of the Atlantic Coast, the expansive Aquitaine region extends to the Dordogne in the east, and the Basque Country in the south. The gateway to the region's wealth of attractions, set amid glorious vine-ribboned countryside, is its capital, Bordeaux.

BORDEAUX

pop 229,500

The new millennium was a major turning point for the city long known as La Belle Au Bois Dormant (Sleeping Beauty), when

the mayor, ex-Prime Minister Alain Juppé, roused Bordeaux, pedestrianising its boulevards, restoring its neoclassical architecture, and implementing a high-tech public transport system.

Although Juppé was convicted for abusing public funds in Paris in 2004, it was soon water under the bridge for the Bordelaise, and he was re-elected to the mayorship in 2006 and again in 2008. His efforts paid off: in mid-2007 half of the entire city (1810 hectares, from the outer boulevards to the banks of the Garonne) was Unesco listed, making it the largest urban World Heritage Site.

Bolstered by its high-spirited university-student population (not to mention 2.5 million tourists annually), La Belle Bordeaux now scarcely seems to sleep at all.

History

Rome colonised the Aquitaine region in 56 BC; the area 100km east of the Atlantic at the lowest bridging point on the River Garonne he named Burdigala. From 1154 to 1453, after Eleanor of Aquitaine married would-be King Henry II of England, the city prospered under the English. Their fondness for the region's red wine (known across the Channel as claret) provided the impetus for Bordeaux's enduring international reputation for quality wines.

Orientation

The city centre lies between flower-filled place Gambetta and the wide River Garonne, which flows both ways depending on the tides. From place Gambetta, place de Tourny is 500m northeast of here; the tourist office is 200m to the southeast.

Bordeaux's train station, Gare St-Jean, is about 3km southeast of the city centre. Cours de la Marne stretches from the train station to place de la Victoire, which is linked to place de la Comédie by the pedestrianised shopping street, rue Ste-Catherine.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Bradley's Bookshop (☎ 05 56 52 10 57; 8 cours d'Albret; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Tue-Sat, 2-7pm Mon) Stocks English-language books.

Librairie Mollat (☎ 05 56 56 40 40; 15 rue Vital Carles; 🕒 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Great range of travel guides and maps.

INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
Bordeaux Monumental.....	1 C3	Ecologie des Chartrons.....	23 C1	Absolut Lounge.....	45 C3
Bradley's Bookshop.....	2 A4	Hôtel de France.....	24 B3	Bodega Bodega.....	46 C3
Cyberstation.....	3 B5	Hôtel de la Presse.....	25 B3	Café Brun.....	47 C3
Hôpital St-André.....	4 B5	Hôtel de la Tour		Café Pop.....	48 C6
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Librairie Mollat.....	6 B3	Hôtel des 4 Soeurs.....	27 C3	Chez Greg Le Grand Théâtre.....	50 C3
Main Post Office.....	7 A4	Hôtel Notre Dame.....	28 C1	Villa Tourny.....	51 B3
Main Tourist Office.....	8 C3	Hôtel Studio.....	29 B2		
Maison du Tourisme de la		Hôtel Touring.....	30 B2	ENTERTAINMENT	
Gironde.....	9 B3	La Maison Bordeaux.....	31 A2	Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville.....	52 B4
Post Office - Place Gambetta.....	10 A3	La Maison du Lierre.....	32 A2	Centre Jean Vigo.....	53 B3
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CAPC Musée d'Art		Baillardran.....	(see 39)	Antique Market.....	59 D5
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École du Vin.....	(see 16)	Cassollette Café.....	38 C6	l'Intendant.....	62 B3
Galerie des Beaux-Arts.....	14 A4	Champion Supermarket.....	39 B3		
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Musée des Arts Décoratifs.....	19 B4				
Musée des Beaux-Arts.....	20 A4				
Palais Gallien.....	21 A2				
Tour Pey-Berland.....	22 B4				

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyberstation (☎ 05 56 01 15 15; 23 cours Pasteur; per hr €2; ☎ 9.30am-2am Mon-Sat, 2pm-2am Sun)

LAUNDRY

Laundrette (32 rue des Augustins; ☎ 7.30am-9pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES & EMERGENCY

Hôpital St-André (☎ 05 56 79 56 79; 1 rue Jean Burquet) Has a 24-hour casualty ward.

Police Station (☎ 05 57 85 77 77; 23 rue François de Sourdis; ☎ 24hr)

MONEY

Banks offering currency exchange can be found near the tourist office on cours de l'Intendance, rue de l'Esprit des Lois and cours du Chapeau Rouge.

POST

The post offices at 43 place Gambetta and place St-Projet are open from 9am to 12.30pm and 1.30pm to 5pm on Saturday in addition to weekdays.

Main Post Office (37 rue du Château d'Eau)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bordeaux Monumental (☎ 05 56 48 04 24; 28 rue des Argentiers; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct,

10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Nov-Apr)

Specialist tourist office dedicated to the city's history. Free multimedia presentations plus temporary exhibitions with a historical theme (admission prices varies).

Main Tourist Office (☎ 05 56 00 66 00; www.bordeaux-tourisme.com; 12 cours du 30 Juillet; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-6.30pm Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.45am-4.30pm Sun Nov-Apr) Runs an excellent range of city and regional tours; see p672 and the boxed text, p675.

Maison du Tourisme de la Gironde (☎ 05 56 52 61 40; www.tourisme-gironde.cg33.fr; 21 cours de l'Intendance; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Sat) Information on the Gironde département.

Train Station Tourist Office (☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 1-3pm Sun May-Oct, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Nov-Apr) Small but helpful branch of Bordeaux's main tourist office outside the train station building.

Dangers & Annoyances

Bordeaux is generally a safe city, but the train station and its surrounding streets can be dicey, especially at night. Place de la Victoire can become aggressive late at night.

Sights & Activities

On the first Sunday of every month, Bordeaux's city centre is closed to cars, and

attractions often have extended hours. Added events on the day include a **contemporary art bus** (tickets €5; ☎ 2.30-6.30pm), which visits galleries showcasing emerging artists (commentary in French). Reserve through the main tourist office.

CATHÉDRALE ST-ANDRÉ

Lording over the city is **Cathédrale St-André**. A Unesco World Heritage Site even prior to the city's classification, the cathedral's oldest section dates from 1096; most of what you see today was built in the 13th and 14th centuries. Exceptional masonry carvings can be seen in the north portal. Even more imposing than the cathedral itself is the gargoyle, 50m-high Gothic belfry, **Tour Pey-Berland** (adult/student/child €5/3.50/free; ☎ 10am-1.15pm & 2-6pm Jun-Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-May). Erected between 1440 and 1466, its spire was added in the 19th century, and in 1863 it was topped off with the statue of Notre Dame de l'Aquitaine (Our Lady of Aquitaine). Scaling the tower's 232 narrow steps rewards you with a spectacular panorama of the city.

MUSEUMS

Bordeaux's museums have free entry for permanent collections; temporary exhibits cost €5 for adults, €2.50 for children.

Gallo-Roman statues and relics dating back 25,000 years are among the highlights at the impressive **Musée d'Aquitaine** (Museum of Aquitaine; ☎ 05 56 01 51 00; 20 cours Pasteur; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun). Ask to borrow an English-language catalogue.

Built in 1824 as a warehouse for French colonial produce like coffee, cocoa, peanuts and vanilla, the cavernous Entrepôts Lainé creates a dramatic backdrop for more than 700 post-1960s works by over 140 European and American artists at the **CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain** (Museum of Contemporary Art; ☎ 05 56 00 81 50; Entrepôt 7, rue Ferrère; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue, Thu-Sun, to 8pm Wed, closed Mon). The rooftop **café** (brunch €25, menus €20-32, mains €13-21; ☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun) does a fantastic Sunday brunch.

The evolution of Occidental art from the Renaissance to the mid-20th century is on view at Bordeaux's **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Museum of Fine Arts; ☎ 05 56 10 20 56; 20 cours d'Albret; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Mon). Occupying two wings of the 1770s-built Hôtel de Ville, either side of the **Jardin de la Mairie** (an elegant public park), the museum was established in 1801; high-

lights include 17th-century Flemish, Dutch and Italian paintings. Temporary exhibitions are regularly hosted at its nearby annexe, **Galerie des Beaux-Arts** (place du Colonel Raynal).

Faïence pottery, porcelain, gold, iron, glasswork and furniture are displayed at the **Musée des Arts Décoratifs** (Museum of Decorative Arts; ☎ 05 56 00 72 50; 39 rue Bouffard; ☎ museum 2-6pm Wed-Mon, temporary exhibits from 11am Mon-Fri); for your own decorative treasures browse rue Bouffard's antique and homewares shops.

The **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** (Natural History Museum; ☎ 05 56 48 29 86; 5 place Bardineau; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun) has lots of stuffed animals and birds (many of them local), but is really only worthwhile if you're a natural-history nut.

PALAIS GALLIEN

The only remains of Burdigala today are the crumbling ruins of the 3rd-century amphitheatre, **Palais Gallien** (rue du Docteur Albert Barraud; adult/child €3/2.50; ☎ 2-7pm Jun-Sep).

PARKS

Landscaping is artistic as well as informative at the **Jardin Public** (cours de Verdun). Established in 1755 and laid out in the English style a century later, the grounds incorporate the meticulously catalogued **Jardin Botanique** (☎ 05 56 52 18 77; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), founded in 1629 and at this site since 1855.

At the vast square **esplanade des Quinconces**, laid out in 1820, you'll see the fountain monument to the **Girondins**, a group of moderate, bourgeois National Assembly deputies during the French Revolution, 22 of whom were executed in 1793 after being convicted of counter-revolutionary activities.

The facelift of the 4km-long **riverfront esplanade** incorporates playgrounds and bicycle paths.

Pretty **place Gambetta**, a central open area ringed by shaded benches, also has its share of history – during the Reign of Terror that followed the Revolution, a guillotine placed here severed the heads of 300 alleged counter-revolutionaries.

Courses & Tours

The tourist office runs a packed program of bilingual tours, including a wheelchair-accessible two-hour **morning walking tour** (adult/concession/child €7/6.50/5 plus optional wine tasting €3.50; ☎ 10am daily plus extra tour 3pm mid-Jul–mid-Aug)

of the city; a **night-time walking tour** (ticket €15; ☎ varies) taking in the floodlit buildings and monuments; and a **gourmet trail tour** (ticket €22; ☎ 9.45am 1st & 3rd Sat of each month), where you can learn about the region's cuisine the best way there is – by sampling it (four tastings are included in the price). Contact the tourist office for details of dozens of other tour options, including **river cruises** in the warmer months.

See the boxed text, p675, for highlights of wine-related tours including day trips further afield, as well as wine courses. Short **cooking courses** also run periodically and are bookable through the tourist office.

All tours take a limited number of participants; reserve ahead.

Sleeping

Accommodation options are plentiful across all categories. The *Découverte* ('Discover Bordeaux') package is a neat little offering from the tourist office that bundles up two nights at your choice of participating hotels along with free public transportation, a guided city tour, a vineyard tour including wine tasting (both tours in English and French), and a bottle of wine. Prices start at €190 for a two-night package for two people in a two-star hotel; kids under 12 stay for free in their parents' room. Book 10 or more days in advance.

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 05 56 33 00 70; www.auberge-jeunesse-bordeaux.com; 22 cours Barbey; dm incl sheets & breakfast €21; ☎ reception 7.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-9.30pm; ♿) Bordeaux's only hostel is housed in an ultramodern building with a self-catering kitchen, good wheelchair access and foosball,

to boot. From the train station, follow cours de la Marne northwest for 300m and turn left opposite the park; the hostel's about 250m ahead on your left.

Hôtel Studio (☎ 05 56 48 00 14; www.hotel-bordeaux.com; 26 rue Huguerie; s/d €29/35; ♿) Hôtel Studio's private en-suite rooms work out cheaper for two people than a couple of dorm beds at Bordeaux's hostel (though breakfast here is an extra €5 per person). Sure, there are no lifts, and the blue-and-white rooms are pretty plain (with incredibly thin walls – bring ear plugs). But they're comfortable, and some have small balconies and/or TVs.

Hôtel Touring (☎ 05 56 81 56 73; www.hoteltouring.fr; 16 rue Huguerie; s €42-45, d €49-53, s/d with shared bathroom €35/40) Run with pride by a warm-hearted local family, the Touring's rooms are furnished with original 1940s and '50s furniture, like flip-up school-style desks and club chairs, and most have fridges, TVs and telephones.

Also recommended:

Hôtel Notre Dame (☎ 05 56 52 88 24; www.hotelnotredame33.com; 36-38 rue Notre Dame; s €43-48, d €50-55, Suite Notre Dame s/d €55/62; ♿) Spick-and-span 22-room hotel a stone's throw from the riverfront with a lift, wheelchair access and almost-free wi-fi (there's a one-off €1.50 set-up fee).

Hôtel de France (☎ 05 56 48 24 11; www.hotel-france-bordeaux.fr; 7 rue Franklin; d €55-59) Simple but charming hotel in the heart of the city, with welcoming multilingual staff and freshly renovated rooms decorated with Monet prints.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel de la Presse (☎ 05 56 48 53 88; www.hotelde lapresse.com; 6-8 rue Porte-Dijeaue; d €50-113; ♿) Just off the pedestrianised rue Ste-Catherine. Elegant touches at Hôtel de la Presse include

SWEET ECODREAMS IN BORDEAUX

Hidden away in a little side street off the quays in Bordeaux's Chartrons wine merchants district, the brand-new *chambre d'hôte* **Ecolodge des Chartrons** (☎ 05 56 81 49 13; www.ecolodgechartrons.com; 23 rue Raze; s incl breakfast €90-100, d €110-140; ♿) is blazing a trail for ecofriendly sleeping in the city.

Owners-hosts Veronique and Yann have added a solar-powered hot-water system, energy-efficient gas heating, insulation of compacted wood and cellulose, and hemp-based sound-proofing, while preserving the 'soul' of this old wine merchant's house. They've stripped back and limewashed the stone walls, scrubbed the wide floorboards, and recycled antique furniture (including a wooden baby cot). Each of the five guest rooms has a bathroom built from natural materials such as basalt. You can curl up with a book in the lounge, access the island kitchen, and start the day with an organic breakfast, served at a long timber table. Wi-fi's hit-and-miss in parts of the historic building, but it's free.

silk and dried flowers, and guest baskets of fruit and nuts in the rooms. Service is polished and professional.

Hotel California II (☎ 05 56 91 17 25; www.hotelcalifornia33.com, in French; 22 rue Charles Domercq; s/d €52/58) Situated directly opposite the train station. Windows are all double-glazed, and rose motifs and natural light lend a countrified ambience to the rooms, which have BBC and kettles for a late-night cuppa.

Hôtel de la Tour Intendance (☎ 05 56 44 56 56; www.hotel-tour-intendance.com; 14-16 rue de la Vieille Tour; d €58-129; ♿) Wake up to soaring exposed-sandstone walls, stone-laid floors and wood-beamed ceilings at this stylised boutique hotel tucked into a quiet corner of the city. Light-filled rooms have neutral-toned natural fabrics and fibres, limewashed timber panelling and geometric-embossed vinyl, with pebbled bathrooms screened by milky opaque glass.

Hôtel des 4 Soeurs (☎ 05 57 81 19 20; 4soeurs.free.fr; 6 cours du 30 Juillet; s/d from €65/75; ♿ ♻️ ☒) A romantic relic from the reign of Louis-Philippe, Hôtel des 4 Soeurs' sophisticated rooms recall the private home it once was, with stencilled wood panelling, snow-white damask drapes, and old-fashioned chrome bathroom fittings. Try for one of the front rooms overlooking place de la Comédie, such as room 22, where Richard Wagner stayed in 1850.

La Maison du Lierre (☎ 05 56 51 92 71; www.maisondulierre.com; 57 rue Huguerie; d €78-99; ☒) The delightfully restored 'House of Ivy' has a welcoming *chambre d'hôte* feel. A beautiful Bordelaise stone staircase (no lift, unfortunately) leads to sunlit rooms with polished floorboards, rose-printed fabrics and sparkling bathrooms. The vine-draped garden is a perfect spot to sip fresh orange juice at breakfast (from €7.90).

Une Chambre en Ville (☎ 05 56 81 34 53; www.bandb-bx.com; 35 rue Bouffard; d €89, junior ste €99, 6-person apt per week €1300) Within the walls of a former gallery and an adjoining Bordelaise town house, each of these five *chambres en ville* (rooms in the city) is an individual work of art. Burnished chrome kettles let you brew up your own tea and coffee. Une Chambre en Ville is gay-friendly (and all-welcoming).

TOP END

La Maison Bordeaux (☎ 05 56 44 00 45; www.lamaisonbordeaux.com; 113 rue du Docteur Albert Barraud; s €145-195, d €180-230) You'd expect to find a sumptuous 18th-century château with a conifer-flanked courtyard and stable house in the countryside,

but this stunning *maison d'hôte* is right in the middle of the city. Public areas include a library with shelves of books and CDs. A *table d'hôte* is available by arrangement (menus €30 to €150 including wine). Breakfast is included in the price.

Petit Hôtel Labottiere (☎ 05 56 48 44 10; www.chateauxcountry.com; 14 rue Francis Martin; d €180; ☒) Staying in one of just two antique-filled guest rooms in this private heritage-listed 18th-century mansion is like sleeping in a museum (which, essentially, you are). A banquet-sized breakfast/brunch is served in a triple-chandeliered gallery space or the hedged central courtyard. Nonguests can tour the property by appointment (tour prices vary depending on duration); guests receive a free private tour.

our pick Seeko'o (☎ 05 56 39 07 07; www.seekoo-hotel.com; 54 quai de Bacalan; d €180-220, ste €360; ♿) The monochrome lobby of Bordeaux's iceberg-shaped, first-ever design hotel leads to 45 retro-futuristic vinyl-and-leather-decorated rooms (some with circular beds), fitted out by Bordeaux designers. Unwind in the free Turkish hammam, or the 1st-floor Champagne bar (open 6pm to 2am Tuesday to Saturday including nonguests); or rent a bike (€10/15 per half-day/full day).

Regent Grand Hotel Bordeaux (☎ 05 57 30 44 44; www.theregentbordeaux.com; 2-5 place de la Comédie; d €390-460; ♿ ♻️ ☒) Bordeaux finally gained a hotel on par with its prestigious wines with the 2008 opening of this palatial 'urban resort'. Behind its 1779 facade are 150 plush guest rooms conceived by French designer Jacques Garcia – as well as two brasseries, a mini 'fashion avenue' lined with boutiques (Versace et al), plus a gastronomic restaurant and an enormous day spa (all also open to nonguests).

Eating

All that wine needs fine cuisine to accompany it, and Bordeaux has some excellent restaurants. Place du Parlement, rue du Pas St-Georges and rue des Faussets have a plethora. There are also scads of inexpensive cafés and restaurants around place de la Victoire.

Sandwich joints become pricier but offer better quality around the top end of rue Ste-Catherine; you'll also find good ones scattered along rue du Palais Gallien.

See also listings under Drinking, p676.

Cassolette Café (☎ 05 56 92 94 96; 20 place de la Victoire; menu €11.90, dishes €2.60-7.60; ☒) noon-midnight)

ON THE WINE TRAIL

Thirsty? The 1000-sq-km wine-growing area around the city of Bordeaux is, along with Burgundy, France's most important producer of top-quality wines.

The Bordeaux region is divided into 57 appellations (production areas whose soil and microclimate impart distinctive characteristics on the wine produced there) that are grouped into seven *familles* (families), and then subdivided into a hierarchy of designations (eg *premier grand cru classé*, the most prestigious) that often vary from appellation to appellation. The majority of the Bordeaux region's reds, rosés, sweet and dry whites and sparkling wines have earned the right to include the abbreviation AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) on their labels, indicating that the contents have been grown, fermented and aged according to strict regulations that govern such viticultural matters as the number of vines permitted per hectare and acceptable pruning methods.

Bordeaux has over 5000 *châteaux* (also known as *domaines*, *crus* or *clos*), referring not to palatial residences but rather to the properties where grapes are raised, picked, fermented and then matured as wine. The smaller *châteaux* sometimes accept walk-in visitors, but at many places, especially the better-known ones, you have to make advance reservations. Many close during the *vendange* (grape harvest) in October.

Whet your palate with the tourist office's informal introduction to wine and cheese courses (adult/concession €23/20), every Thursday at 4.30pm year-round, where you sip two to three different wines, and sup on cheese straight out of the cellar.

Serious students of the grape can enrol at the **École du Vin** (Wine School; ☎ 05 56 00 22 66; ecole.vins-bordeaux.fr), within the **Maison du Vin de Bordeaux** (Bordeaux House of Wine; 3 cours du 30 Juillet; %8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), located across the street from the tourist office. Introductory two-hour courses are held Friday to Wednesday from 3pm to 5pm between June and September (€25). To really develop your nose (and your dinner-party skills), sign up for one of three progressively more complex two- to three-day courses (from €335/218 per adult/student) scheduled between May and October, including *châteaux* visits.

Châteaux visits are also included in many tours run by Bordeaux's tourist office. The program changes annually, with most tours operating between May and October. Day trips generally start at €72 per adult for those closest to town, and around €83 for areas such as the **Médoc** (p678) or **St-Émilion** (p679), including wine tastings and lunch. Some also incorporate a tour of the city's Chartrons wine merchants district. Separate three-hour tours of the Chartrons district at 9.30am on Saturday and Sunday from April to mid-November cost €10/9.50/7 per adult/concession/child.

For DIY wine trailing, the Maison du Vin de Bordeaux supplies free, colour-coded maps of production areas, details on *châteaux*, and the addresses of local *maisons du vin* (tourist offices that mainly deal with winery visits). A good starting point is Philippe Raoux's **La Winery** (☎ 05 56 39 04 90; www.lawinery.fr, in French; Rond-point des Vendangeurs, D1, Arsac-en-Médoc; 🕒 11am-7pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun, to 8pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug), 23km from Bordeaux. A first for France, this vast glass-and-steel wine centre mounts concerts and contemporary-art exhibits alongside various fee-based tastings, including innovative tastings that determine your *signe œnologique* ('wine sign'; booking required) costing €16 (€29 for rare *grands crus*), and stocks over 1000 different wines. See p679 for a peek behind the scenes, and p677 for wine shops in Bordeaux's city centre.

If you'd rather imbibe than drive, **Bordeaux Excursions** (www.bordeaux-excursions.com) customises private wine-country tours, starting from €190 for one to four people (excluding *châteaux* fees) for a half-day trip.

And to immerse yourself, literally, in the local liquid, at the **Spa de Vinothérapie Caudalie** (☎ 05 57 83 83 83; www.sources-caudalie.com; chemin de Smith Haut Lafitte, Martillac; treatments from €58) you can try a red-wine bath, a merlot wrap or a cabernet body scrub, said to promote blood-strengthening and anti-ageing. The spa is 20 minutes south of Bordeaux next to Château Smith Haut Lafitte, with overnight packages available at the attached hotel. It's best reached by your own wheels; exit the A62 at junction 1.

But even if the wine trail only leads you as far as the supermarket, it's possible to pick up exceptional wines off the shelves from just a few euros – the same wines that command a small fortune at some very flash restaurants around the world.

Fun, friendly and fantastic value, this lively place at the southwestern edge of place de la Victoire serves up *cassoulets* (casserole dishes) cooked on terracotta plates, created from ingredients you tick off on a checklist. There's a good kids' menu (€6) and it's wi-fi'd.

Brasserie Le Noailles (☎ 05 56 81 94 45; 12 allées de Tourny; mains €14.50-29.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) Fronted by a winter garden, this classical French brasserie of dark timber-panelled interior with red-velour booths serves elegant fare, including its signature king prawn salad.

L'Entrecôte (☎ 05 56 81 76 10; 4 cours du 30 Juillet; menu €16.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) Opened in 1966, this unpretentious place doesn't take reservations, and it only has one menu option. But Bordeaux locals continue to queue for its succulent thin-sliced meat (heated underneath by tea-light candles and topped with a 'secret recipe' sauce made from shallots and bone marrow), salad and unlimited home-made *frites*. The only choices are among the desserts (all €5.50), and the house red or rosé.

Baud et Millet (☎ 05 56 79 05 77; 19 rue Huguerie; menus €19-24; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat) Over 250 different cheeses are offered at this cosy, mostly vegetarian (albeit far from vegan) place, with almost as many international wines lining the walls. Serious *fromage* fans should go for the all-you-can-eat cheese buffet.

La Tupina (☎ 05 56 91 56 37; 6 rue Porte de la Monnaie; menus €32-48, mains €19-44; ☎ lunch & dinner) Filled with the aroma of soup simmering inside an old *tupina* ('kettle' in Basque) over an open fire, this white-tableclothed place is feted far and wide for its seasonal southwestern French specialities such as a minicasserole of foie gras and eggs, milk-fed lamb or goose wings with potatoes and parsley. A €16 lunch *menu* is available on weekdays.

L'Estaque (☎ 05 57 54 02 50; quai de Queyries; mains €22-26; ☎ lunch & dinner) Set on stilts, jutting out off the river's eastern bank, the seafood (bass, cod, scampi, scallops etc) and meat dishes (like braised pork knuckle) here can't help but be eclipsed by the magical views of Bordeaux's neoclassical architecture, particularly when the floodlights reflect in the water by night. On weekdays there's a €16 lunch *menu*.

SELF-CATERING

For a taste of Bordeaux (that for once doesn't involve wine!), head to **Baillardran** (☎ 05 56 79 05 89; www.baillardran.com; place des Grands Hommes), which has several branches in town, including

this one in the Galerie des Grands Hommes shopping centre, where you can watch them make *canelés*, a local vanilla-infused fluted cake. In the shopping centre's basement is a **Champion supermarket**. Nearby, you'll find Jean D'Alos' fine **fromagerie** (4 rue Montesquieu; ☎ closed Mon morning & Sun), with over 150 raw-milk and farm cheeses.

On Sunday mornings head to the quai des Chartrons' open-air bio (organic) market; otherwise, stock up at the covered market, **Marché des Capucins** (place des Capucins; ☎ 6am-1pm Tue-Sun).

Drinking

Considering its synonymy with wine, Bordeaux has surprisingly few bars, meaning restaurants and bistros tend to fill the gap.

Villa Tourny (☎ 05 56 44 60 48; 20 allées de Tourny; 8am-2am Mon-Sat) The hottest address in Bordeaux, thanks to its ruby-coloured velveteen banquettes, stylish food (mains €15 to €24.50) and local football stars who hang out here.

Chez Greg Le Grand Théâtre (☎ 05 56 31 30 30; 29 rue de l'Esprit des Lois; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, bar to 2am Mon-Sat) Glitzy retro decor with unusual twists like white-vinyl wall hangings held together with spoons make this a prime dining spot (lunch *menus* €20 to 35, dinner *menu* €35), but it comes into its own after the dinner plates are cleared away.

Bodega Bodega (☎ 05 56 01 24 24; 4 rue des Piliers de Tutelle; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily, bar to 2am) Bordeaux's beloved Spanish bar has two floors of tapas, tunes and trendy types.

Café Brun (☎ 05 56 52 20 49; 45 rue St-Rémi; ☎ 10am-2am) A warm atmosphere and cool jazz makes this bar-bistro great for an evening apéritif.

Absolut Lounge (☎ 05 56 48 80 00; 14 rue de la Devise; ☎ 6pm-2am Mon-Sat) Chill to electro-jazz amid turquoise decor and red lamps while sipping a classic mojito.

Student hang-outs ring place de la Victoire, such as perennial favourite **Chez Auguste** (☎ 05 56 91 77 32; 3 place de la Victoire; ☎ 7am-2am). For a postmodern vibe and cool French tunes, pop into nearby **Café Pop** (Café Populaire; ☎ 05 56 94 39 06; 1 rue Kleber; ☎ 8pm-2am Tue-Sat).

Entertainment

Details of events appear in *Clubs & Concerts* (www.clubsetconcerts.com, in French), available for free at the tourist office.

Concert and event tickets can be purchased from the **Virgin Megastore billetterie** (☎ 05 56 56

05 56; 15-19 place Gambetta; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Thu, to 8pm Fri & Sat, noon-7pm Sun).

NIGHTCLUBS & LIVE MUSIC

Trendy pedestrianised streets like rue St-Rémi are good bets to get the evening started. For zoning reasons, many of the city's late-night dance venues are a few blocks northeast of Gare St-Jean along the river, on quai de la Paludate, such as the dark, atmospheric jazz club **Le Port de la Lune** (☎ 05 56 49 15 55; www.leportdelalune.com; 58 quai de la Paludate; admission varies; ☎ 7pm-2am), which also has a restaurant (*menu* €22; lunch and dinner daily); gigs are posted on the website. Clubs also cluster along the river north of the city centre. Bouncers can be selective but there's normally no cover charge.

Catch regular live bands as well as football on the big screen at the lively **Connemara Bar** (☎ 05 56 52 82 57; 18 cours d'Albret; ☎ noon-2am), which also has free wi-fi, darts, pool and good pub grub.

A mainly gay crowd kicks up its heels at **Bar de l'Hôtel de Ville** (☎ 05 56 44 05 08; 4 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; ☎ 6pm-2am), which often has shows on Sundays.

THEATRE & CLASSICAL MUSIC

Designed by Victor Louis (of Chartres Cathedral fame), the 18th-century **Grand Théâtre** (☎ 05 56 00 85 95; place de la Comédie; ☎ ticket office 11am-6pm Tue-Sat Oct-Jul) stages operas, ballets and concerts of orchestral and chamber music. The tourist office also organises bilingual one-hour guided behind-the-scenes tours of the building (adult/child costs €6/5); tour times depend on performances and rehearsals.

Plays, dance performances, variety shows and concerts (such as French singer-songwriter Renan Luce) take place at **Théâtre Femina** (10 rue de Grassi).

CINEMAS

Nondubbed art-house films are screened at **Centre Jean Vigo** (☎ 05 56 44 35 17; www.jeanvigo.com, in French; 6 rue Franklin), and **Cinéma Utopia** (☎ 05 56 52 00 03; www.cinemas-utopia.org/bordeaux, in French; 3 place Camille Julian).

Shopping

Europe's longest pedestrian shopping street, rue Ste-Catherine, is paved with raised, polished Bordelaise stone, becoming increasingly upmarket as it stretches 1.2km north from place de la Victoire to place de la Comédie.

Galerie Bordelaise (rue de la Porte Dijéaux & rue Ste-Catherine) is a 19th-century shopping arcade. Luxury-label boutiques concentrate within *le triangle*, formed by the allées de Tourny, cours Georges Clemenceau and cours de l'Intendance. An **antique market** (place St-Michel) fills the square on Sunday mornings.

Speciality wine shops include **Bordeaux Magnum** (☎ 05 56 48 00 06; 3 rue Gobineau) and **l'Intendant** (☎ 05 56 48 01 29; 2 allées de Tourny). The latter has a central spiral staircase climbing four floors, surrounded by cylindrical shelves holding 15,000 bottles of regional wine.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bordeaux airport (☎ 05 56 34 50 50; www.bordeaux.aeroport.fr) is in Mérignac, 10km west of the city centre, with domestic and some international services. A taxi from the airport into town costs about €20 (around €25 at night, on Sundays and on public holidays).

BUS

Citram Aquitaine (☎ 05 56 43 68 43; www.citram.fr, in French) runs most buses to destinations in the Gironde.

International bus operator **Eurolines** (☎ 05 56 92 50 42; 32 rue Charles Domercq; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat) faces the train station.

CAR

Rental companies have offices in the train-station building.

TRAIN

Bordeaux is one of France's major rail-transit points. The station, Gare St-Jean, is about 3km from the city centre at the southern terminus of cours de la Marne.

Destinations include Paris' Gare Montparnasse (€66.20, three hours, at least 16 daily), Bayonne (€28.80, 1½ hours), Nantes (€41.60, four hours), Poitiers (€33.90, 1½ hours), La Rochelle (€25, two hours) and Toulouse (€33.30, 2¼ hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The train station, place Gambetta and the main tourist office are connected to the airport (one-way €7) by **Jet'Bus** (☎ 05 56 34 50 50). The first bus leaves the airport at 7.45am Monday to Friday, and at 8.30am Saturday

and Sunday from outside Terminal B (last at 10.45pm daily); the first departure to the airport from the train station is at 6.45am Monday to Friday, and 7.30am Saturday and Sunday (last at 9.45pm daily), with buses at 45-minute intervals throughout the day. The trip takes approximately 45 minutes.

BICYCLE

Bordeaux Scooter (☎ 05 57 59 10 18; bordeauxcooters@wanadoo.fr; 63 cours d'Alsace et Lorraine; 📍 varies by arrangement) rents out bicycles (€11 for 24 hours) and scooters (from €29 per 24 hours).

BUS & TRAM

Urban buses and trams are run by **TBC** (☎ 05 57 57 88 88; www.infotbc.com, in French). The company has Espace Bus information/ticket offices at the train station and place Gambetta (4 rue Georges Bonnac) and at esplanade des Quinconces. Tram line C links the train station with the city centre via the riverside.

Single tickets (€1.30) are sold on board buses, and from machines at tram stops (stamp your ticket on board). Tickets aren't valid for transfers.

Night buses operate until 1.30am on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights; line S11 links place de la Victoire with the nightclub zone on quai de la Paludate.

CAR

City parking is pricey and hard to find. Look for free spaces in the side streets north of the Musée d'Art Contemporain and west of the Jardin Public.

TAXI

To order a taxi try ☎ 05 569 148 11 or ☎ 05 568 199 15.

THE MÉDOC

Northwest of Bordeaux, along the western shore of the Gironde Estuary – formed by the confluence of the Garonne and Dordogne Rivers – lie some of Bordeaux' most celebrated vineyards. To their west, fine-sand beaches, bordered by dunes and *étangs* (lagoons), stretch from Pointe de Grave south along the Côte d'Argent (Silver Coast) to the Bassin d'Arcachon and beyond, with some great surf – see the boxed text, p685. The coastal dunes are enveloped by a pine forest, planted to stabilise the drifting sands and prevent them from encroaching on areas further inland.

Orientation & Information

On the banks of the muddy Gironde, the port town of **Pauillac** (population 1300) is at the heart of the wine country, surrounded by the distinguished Haut-Médoc, Margaux and St-Julien appellations. The Pauillac wine appellation encompasses 18 *crus classés* (see p675) including the world-renowned Mouton Rothschild, Latour and Lafite Rothschild.

Pauillac's tourist office houses the **Maison du Tourisme et du Vin** (☎ 05 56 59 03 08; www.pauillac-medoc.com, in French; La Verrerie; 📍 seasonal hours vary annually), which has information on châteaux and how to visit them.

Sleeping & Eating

From Bordeaux, the Médoc makes an easy and enjoyable day trip. To stay and/or dine under the vines, the tourist offices in Bordeaux and in the Médoc have information, including *chambres d'hôtes* in the area.

Le Pavillon de Margaux (☎ 05 57 88 77 54; www.pavillonmargaux.com; 3 rue Georges Mandel, Margaux; d €70-120) In an old schoolhouse, this welcoming, family-run place has 14 rooms styled according to famous local châteaux. You can taste the family's wines at the on-site restaurant (mains €16 to €20; call to check closing days during mid-November to March), which serves a small but stellar selection of dishes, such as veal escalope with sage and ham, under a canopy of fairy lights.

Le Wy (☎ 05 56 39 04 91; La Winery; 3-course menus €23, discovery menu €63, mains €19-26; 📍 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Gastronomic fare like truffle-infused risotto and foie gras with green apples blends with a relaxed atmosphere (not a white tablecloth in sight) and over 400 different wines by the glass. At La Winery, p675; gourmet picnic baskets are available for €15.

Getting There & Away

The region is best explored by car. The Médoc's northern tip, Pointe de Grave, is linked to Royan by **car ferries** (☎ 05 46 38 35 15; www.ot-royan.fr; per person/bicycle/motorcycle/car one way €3.10/1.60/10/21.90) that operate approximately six times daily in winter and every 45 minutes in summer. The service runs around 6.30am to 8.30pm (7.15am and 9.30pm from Royan, 25 minutes one-way), depending on the season.

Another **car ferry** (☎ 05 57 42 04 49; www.tourisme-blaye.com, in French; per person/bicycle/car/motorcycle one way €3.10/1.60/7.40/13) links Lamarque (between Pauillac and Margaux on the D2) with Blaye, running five to 10 times daily (every 1½

PHILIPPE RAOUX: OWNER, LA WINERY

What inspired you to open La Winery? My family have been wine merchants since 1923; my father operated a wine mail-order business and I previously worked with customers only by mail, phone and internet. So I wanted to create a place where people can experience the wines. We opened in 2007.

Do you make wine yourself? We have four properties in the Médoc, so we have a foot in the production. But it's a tiny part of what we sell here, only 5%, which is different to the way châteaux work in France. It's a new concept. At first our neighbours (the châteaux owners) didn't understand – they're not wine merchants, they're winemakers, it's two different professions. But now they understand and are happy, because we introduce people to their wine too.

How did you come up with the idea of the 'signe œnologique' ('wine sign')? We wanted to invent a tasting process where people could be sure what wines they will like by knowing what qualities they like. It's a blind tasting; people are asked 10 questions and answer with a keypad. Then they can choose wines according to their 'sign', such as 'sensual', which reflects fruity wines.

Are all of the wines here from the Bordeaux region? About 60% are from Bordeaux; 35% are from other regions in France and 5% are foreign.

What's the reaction to foreign wines here? Connoisseurs are open to tasting them, comparing them. But they represent only 2% of wine consumption in France. French consumers are very traditional. Everyone in France knows someone working in the wine industry. Speaking about wine is speaking about family – you do not make infidelity to your family!

What gives Bordeaux wines their reputation? The harmony, the balance...other wines can depend on the season and be too alcoholic, too much colour, unbalanced. But every component of Bordeaux wines is on the same level, whether it's a good year or not. Even if it's not a 'good year', nothing is so bad that you don't like the wine.

Your favourite Bordeaux wine (your properties' wines aside)? St-Émilion Cheval Blanc *grand cru*. It's always fresh – as if it was harvested the day before.

hours June to September). The service starts around 7.30am and ends between 6.30pm and 8pm (until 9pm Saturday and Sunday June to September).

Citram Aquitaine buses (☎ 05 56 43 68 43) link Bordeaux with Margaux (€6.50, 50 minutes), Pauillac (€9.80, 1½ hours) and Lesparre Médoc (€13.10, 1½ hours). In Lesparre, buses depart for Soulac-sur-Mer (€7.60, two hours) and Point de Grave (€8.70, 2¼ hours).

To reach the Médoc by car from Bordeaux, take *sortie* (exit) 7 to get off the Bordeaux Rode (ring road).

Trains run from Bordeaux's Gare St-Jean station to Margaux (€6.80, 50 minutes) and Pauillac (€9.60, one hour 10 minutes) several times a day.

ST-ÉMILION

pop 2345

The medieval village of St-Émilion perches above vineyards renowned for producing full-bodied, deeply coloured red wines. Named after Émilion, a miracle-working Benedictine monk who lived in a cave here between 750 and 767, it soon became a stop on pilgrimage routes, and

the village and its vineyards are now Unesco-listed. Today, although it's definitely a stop on the tourist route, too, it's well worth venturing 40km east from Bordeaux to experience St-Émilion's magic, particularly when the sun sets over the valley and the limestone buildings glow with halolike golden hues.

Orientation & Information

Wear flat, comfortable shoes: the village's steep, uneven streets are hard going. The rocky terrain also make it difficult for travellers with disabilities to get around, but three new trails that allow mobility-impaired visitors to see at least some of the sites are plotted on free maps available from the tourist office.

The pharmacy and most banks are along rue Guadet.

Chai Pascal (☎ 05 57 24 52 45; 37 rue Gaudet;

☎ 11am-11pm, closed Sun in low season) New wine bar with online computers due to have opened by the time you're reading this.

Post Office (rue Guadet) Can exchange currency.

Tourist Kiosk (place de l'Église Monolithe) Summertime kiosk with varying hours (usually 10am to noon and 2pm to 6pm Monday to Friday and some weekends).

Tourist Office (☎ 05 57 55 28 28; www.saint-emilion-tourisme.com; place des Créneaux; ☎ 9.30am-8pm Jul-Aug, to 7pm mid-late Jun & early-late Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.45-6.30pm Apr-mid-Jun & late Sep-Oct, 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.45-6pm Nov-Mar) Stacks of brochures in English and details on visiting over 100 nearby châteaux.

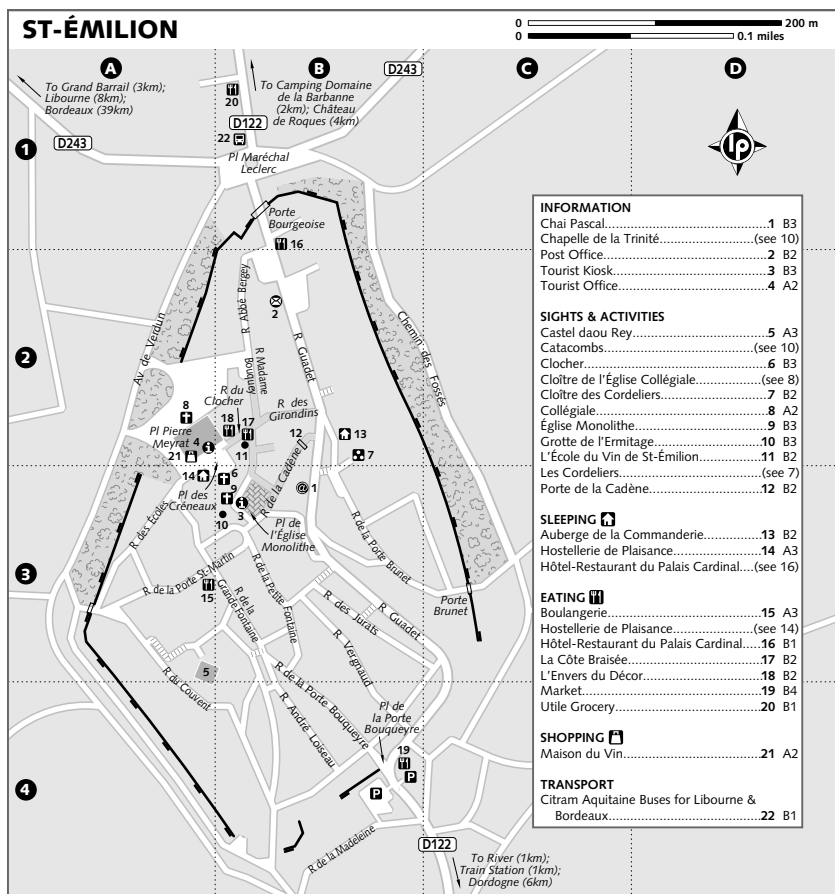
Sights

The only (but highly worthwhile) way to visit the town's most interesting historical sites – many of them concealed beneath the village streets in a labyrinth of catacombs – is with one of the tourist office's 45-minute **guided tours** (adult/student/child incl site entry €6.50/4.10/3.20). Highlights are the hermit saint's famous cave, **Grotte de l'Ermitage**, and the 11th-century church **Église Monolithe**, carved out of lime-

stone between the 9th and the 12th centuries. Tours in French depart regularly throughout the day – call ahead to check English tour times (usually 2pm). It's chilly below ground; bring a jumper.

For captivating views of the hilltop hamlet, collect the key from the tourist office to climb the **clocher** (bell tower; ☎ 05 57 55 28 28; admission €1) above the church. The entrance is on place des Créneaux; it has the same opening hours as the tourist office.

A domed Romanesque 12th-century nave dominates the former **Collégiale** (Collegiate Church), which also boasts an almost-square vaulted choir built between the 14th and 16th centuries. **Cloître de l'Église Collégiale**, the church's tranquil 12th- to 14th-



century cloister, is the venue for special events – see below.

Surviving sections of the town's medieval walls and gates include **Porte de la Cadène** (Gate of the Chain), off rue Guadet.

Within the ruined monastery, **Cloître des Cordeliers** (rue Porte Brunet; admission free; ☞ year-round), the winery **Les Cordeliers** (☎ 05 57 24 58 32; guided cellar tours €4; ☞ tour hrs vary daily) has made sparkling wine for over a century.

The 13th-century donjon known as the **Castel daou Rey** (Tour du Roi, King's Tower; admission €1; ☞ 11am–7.15pm Jul & Aug, variable hrs out of season) has exceptional views of the town and the Dordogne Valley.

Activities

Blind tastings and games (available in English) are a fun and informative introduction to wine tasting at **L'École du Vin de St-Émilion** (☎ 05 57 24 61 01; www.vignobleschateaux.fr; 4 rue du Clocher; tasting courses €29; ☞ 3pm daily Apr–Oct, by reservation Nov–Mar). The adjacent **Maison du Vin** (☎ 05 57 55 50 55; place Pierre Meyrat; classes €17; ☞ mid-Jul–mid-Sep) also offers bilingual, 1½-hour classes starting at 11am.

Eight **hiking circuits** loop, from 4km to 14km, through the greater World Heritage jurisdiction; the tourist office has maps.

Tours

The tourist office organises two-hour afternoon **château visits** (adult/child €9.60/6; ☞ Mon–Sat May–Sep) in French and English. It also runs various events throughout the year, such as **Les Vendredis Vignerons** (Winemakers' Friday; tickets €68; ☞ 11am–5pm Fri Jun–Sep) that combines a day in the vineyards and lunch with a local winemaker.

Festivals & Events

Between March and December, classical concerts are held at various châteaux as part of **Les Grandes Heures de St-Émilion**. Tickets (€28) must be booked in advance; the program is posted on the tourist-office website.

Each year from 10 to 15 October, the **Marché du Gout**, a market selling regional products, sets up in the village cloister. The cloister is also the venue for **free concerts** from May to November; the tourist office has the program.

Sleeping & Eating

The village and its surrounds have some charming boutique hotels. Ask the tourist office for a list of nearby *chambres d'hôtes*, as well as details of its two-day packages for two

(€880) at *chambre d'hôte* accommodation including meals, tours and château visits. Many of St-Émilion's best restaurants are attached to hotels.

VILLAGE CENTRE

Auberge de la Commanderie (☎ 05 57 24 70 19; www.aubergedelacommanderie.com; 2 rue Porte Brunet; d €70–100, apt €135–207; ☞ mid-Feb–mid-Jan; ☑) Inside this hotel's 13th-century walls, rooms are modernised with massive murals depicting a Technicolourised pop-art version of an old black-and-white postcard of the village. Wi-Fi's available, and there's free parking in the private lock-up car park.

Hôtel-Restaurant du Palais Cardinal (☎ 05 57 24 72 39; www.palais-cardinal.com; place du 11 Novembre 1918; s €67–208, d €70–266; ☑) Run by the same family for five generations. The hotel's heated pool is set in rambling flower-filled gardens and framed by sections of the original medieval town-wall fortifications, dating from the 13th century. Gastronomic fare at its restaurant (*menus* €19 to €40, closed lunch Wednesday and Thursday, and closed from December to March) includes the likes of cognac-glazed shrimp and spiced St-Émilion wine plums accompanied by blackcurrant sorbet.

our pick Hostellerie de Plaisance (☎ 05 57 55 07 55; www.hostellerie-plaisance.com; place du Clocher; d €310–520, ste €620; ☞ closed Jan; ☑ ☑) With a spice-coloured bar opening to a wraparound terrace, this intimate gem in the shadow of the bell tower recently expanded to house 17 whimsical rooms. (A glass lift concealed in a gazebo whisks you through the rock face down to the new wing.) Its twin-Michelin-starred restaurant (*menus* €55 to €120; closed Wednesday lunch and all day Sunday and Monday) is now housed in a dining room of eggshell blue and white gold. Start your meal with local caviar and move on to line-caught bass with black-pork belly; or go for chef Philippe Etchebest's 'discovery menu'.

La Côte Braisée (☎ 05 57 24 79 65; www.la-cote-braisee.com; 3 rue du Terre de la Tente; menus €14.50–37; ☞ closed lunch Wed in high season, closed dinner Tue & all day Wed in low season) On a slanting, rocky laneway, this rustic, cavellike restaurant is renowned for its foie gras, either stuffed inside roast duck with local grapes, or pan-fried with caramelised apples. At separate premises, the proprietors rent out five charming guest rooms (doubles €50 to €75); the restaurant acts as the reception point.

L'Envers du Decor (☎ 05 57 74 48 31; 11 rue du Clocher; lunch menus €18-28, dinner menu €28; ☎ lunch & dinner) Warmed by a wood fire in the cooler months, this local favourite serves market-fresh *menus* and opens to a quiet rear courtyard garden.

AROUND ST-ÉMILION

Camping Domaine de la Barbanne (☎ 05 57 24 75 80; www.camping-saint-emilion.com; rte de Montagne; camping €18-28, cabins €54; ☎ Apr-Sep; 🚰) This family-friendly, three-star place is about 2km north of St-Émilion on the D122. There's a five-night minimum for camping in July and August. Cabins, sleeping up to five people, are spacious and well equipped.

Château de Roques (☎ 05 57 74 55 69; www.chateau-de-roques.com; Puisseguin; d €68-108; 🚰) If you've dreamed of staying in a romantic countryside château but your budget – or lack thereof – was a rude awakening, you'll be delighted by this affordable 16th-century place in the vineyards, 5km outside St-Émilion. Its restaurant (*menus* €26 to €33, open lunch and dinner, closed late December to early February) serves foie gras with cognac and jelly made from locally produced Sauternes white wine. Wi-fi's free and there's good wheelchair access. The best road is the D122 (north from St-Émilion) – the château is just near the junction of the D21.

Grand Barrail (☎ 05 57 55 37 00; www.grand-barrail.com; rte de Libourne/D243; d €185-320, ste €510-620; 🚰 🚰 🚰) Grand doesn't even begin to describe this immense 1850-built château 3km from the village, with its decadent on-site spa, stone-flagged heated swimming pool, free state-of-the-art fitness room, wheelchair access and, if you happen to be arriving by helicopter, its own helipad on the front lawns. Undoubtedly the best seat in its restaurant (*menus* €40 to €61) is the corner table framed by 19th-century stained glass.

SELF-CATERING

Boulangeries (bakeries), such as the one on rue de la Grande Fontaine, open to around 6pm. A **market** fills place de la Porte Bouqueyre every Sunday. **Utile Grocery** (☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun May–mid-Sep, 8am-12.30pm & 3.15-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sun mid-Sep–Apr) is a supermarket on the D122, 150m north of town.

Shopping

St-Émilion's sloping streets and squares are lined with about 50 wine shops – one for

every eight of the old city's residents. The best value is the **Maison du Vin** (☎ 05 57 55 50 55; place Pierre Meyrat; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sep-Jul, 9.30am-7pm Aug), which is owned by the 250 châteaux whose wines it sells at cellar-door prices. It also has a free aromatic exhibit and sells specialist publications.

Ursuline nuns brought the recipe for *macarons* (macaroons – almond biscuits) to St-Émilion in the 17th century. Specialist shops around town charge €6 per two dozen.

Getting There & Away

Citram Aquitaine (☎ 05 56 43 68 43) buses to/from Bordeaux's train station run at least once daily (except on Sunday and holidays from October to April) to Libourne (€5.50, 45 minutes); from there you take a **Marchesseau** (☎ 05 57 40 60 79) bus to St-Émilion (€2.10, 10 minutes). On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, there are two direct buses each way between Bordeaux and St-Émilion (€7.60, one hour, 15 minutes).

Trains run three times daily (two on Sunday and holidays) from Bordeaux (€7.70, 40 minutes); the train station is 1km south of the base of the village. (Stations aren't announced on these small trains, so it's easy to miss your stop.) A shuttle service between the train station and the village is expected to start operating in the summer months.

By car from Bordeaux, follow the signs for Libourne and take the D243. Year-round the tourist office rents out bicycles for €10/14.70 per half-day/full day. Call for a **taxi** (☎ 05 57 25 17 59; www.taxi-st-emilion.com).

ARCACHON

pop 11,800

A long-time oyster-harvesting area on the southern side of the tranquil, triangular Bassin d'Arcachon (Arcachon Bay), this seaside town lured bourgeois Bordelaise at the end of the 19th century. Its four little quarters are romantically named for each of the seasons, with villas that evoke the town's golden past amid a scattering of 1950s architecture.

Arcachon seethes with sun-seekers in summer, but you'll find practically deserted beaches a short bike ride away.

Orientation

Arcachon's main commercial streets run parallel to the beach: bd de la Plage, cours Lamarque de Plaisance and cours Héricart

de Thury. Perpendicular to the beach, busy streets include av Gambetta and rue du Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny.

Information

Crédit Agricole (252 bd de la Plage) Only bank with currency exchange.

Le Bistrot du Boulevard (☎ 05 56 83 45 67; 230 bd de la Plage; per 15min €1.50; ☎ 10am-2am) Internet access.

Post Office (place Président Roosevelt)

Tourist Office (☎ 05 57 52 97 97; www.arcachon.com; Esplanade Georges Pompidou; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat, 10am-noon & 1-5pm Sun Apr-Jun & Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat Oct-Mar)

Sights

In the **Ville d'Été** (Summer Quarter) Arcachon's sandy beach, **Plage d'Arcachon**, is flanked by two piers. Lively **Jetée Thiers** is at the western end. In front of the eastern pier, **Jetée D'Eyrac**, stands the town's turreted **Casino de la Plage** – built by Adalbert Deganne in 1953 as an exact replica of Château de Boursault in the Marne. Inside, it's a less-grand blinking and bell-ringing riot of poker machines and gaming tables.

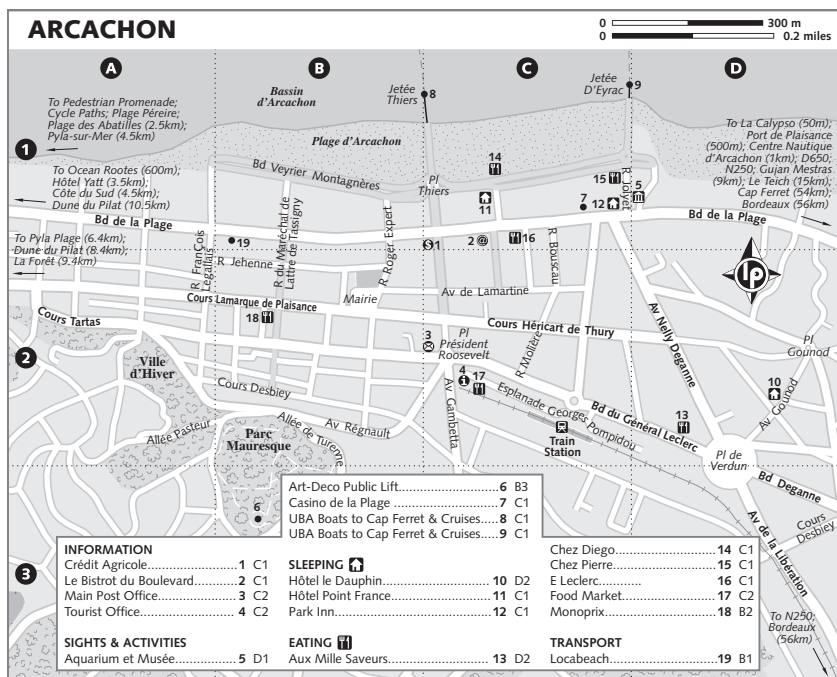
The old-fashioned **Aquarium et Musée** (☎ 05 56 54 89 28; 2 rue du Professeur Jolyet; adult/student/under 10yr €4.80/3.20/3; ☎ 9.45am-12.15pm & 1.45-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.45am-12.15pm & 1.45-6.30pm late Mar–Oct, closed Nov–late Mar), in a wooden shack opposite the casino, has a small collection of fish in floodlit tanks.

On the tree-covered hillside south of the Ville d'Été, the century-old **Ville d'Hiver** (Winter Quarter) has over 300 villas, many decorated with delicate wood tracery, ranging in style from neo-Gothic through to colonial. It's an easy stroll or a short ride up the **art-deco public lift** (admission free; ☎ 9am-12.45pm & 2.30-7pm) in Parc Mauresque.

A tree-lined **pedestrian promenade** runs west from the Plage d'Arcachon to **Plage Péreire**, **Plage des Abatilles** and the **Dune du Pilat** (p685).

Activities

Cycle paths link Arcachon with the Dune du Pilat and Biscarosse (30km to the south), and around the Bassin d'Arcachon to Cap Ferret. From here, a cycle path parallels the beaches north to Pointe de Grave.



The exposed ocean beaches to the south of town generally offer good conditions for surfing. **Ocean Roots** (☎ 06 62 26 04 11; oceanrootsclub@aol.com; 27 av St-François Xavier; ☎ varies) offers lessons and rents out equipment. For more surf spots, see the boxed text, opposite.

Centre Nautique d'Arcachon (☎ 05 56 83 77 42; quai Goslar; ☎ Apr-Sep), 1.5km east of the Jetée d'Eyrac at the Port de Plaisance (Pleasure Boat Port), rents out sea kayaks, and windsurfing and diving equipment, and offers courses.

The tourist office has details of stacks of other activities including **tandem parachuting**, **seaplane flights**, **wakeboarding** and more.

Tours

Les Bateliers Arcachonnais (UBA; ☎ 05 57 72 28 28; www.bateliers-arcachon.asso.fr, in French) runs daily, year-round cruises around the **île aux Oiseaux** (adult/child €13.50/9.50), the uninhabited 'bird island' in the middle of the bay. It's a haven for tern, curlew and redshank, so bring your binoculars. In summer there are regular all-day excursions (11am to 5.30pm) to the **Banc d'Arguin**, the sand bank off the Dune du Pilat (€16/11 per adult/child).

Sleeping

Arcachon has scads of accommodation options. Many are chintzy mid-20th-century time warps, though not without charm.

Hôtel le Dauphin (☎ 05 56 83 02 89; www.dauphin-arcachon.com; 7 av Gounod; d €57-88, tr €64-95, q €71-107; ☎ ☎) Don't miss this late-19th-century gingerbread place with patterned red-and-cream brickwork. An icon of its era, it's graced by twin semicircular staircases, magnolias and palms. Plain but spacious rooms are well set up for families. Parking is free.

Hôtel Point France (☎ 05 56 83 46 74; www.hotel-point-france.com; 1 rue Grenier; s €82-140, d €85-181; ☎ ☎) All 34 rooms at this retro-chic place near the beach have balconies. Rooms facing the sea have knock-out views (some have side views), and exotically themed styling; rooms facing the town side have Jetsons-style moulded-plastic chairs, geometric prints and funky pistachio-tiled bathrooms.

Park Inn (☎ 05 56 83 99 91; www.parkinn.fr; 4 rue du Professeur Jolyet; s €89-172, d €99-183; ☎ ☎) Arcachon's version of this chain is utterly distinctive, thanks to its vivid swirled carpet, candy-stripped curtains and primary-coloured modular furniture. It's a bit like bouncing around in a pre-schoolers' playground. There

are three wheelchair-equipped rooms, wi-fi, and the staff are a pleasure to deal with.

Eating

The bay's oysters (served raw and accompanied by the local small, flat sausages, *crepinettes*) appear on *menus* everywhere.

Aux Mille Saveurs (☎ 05 56 83 40 28; 25 bd du Général Lederc; menus €18-35, tasting menu €45; ☎ closed dinner Tue & Wed low season) In a light-filled space of flowing white tablecloths, this genteel restaurant is renowned for traditional French fare artistically presented on fine china. Seafood aside, specialties include rabbit with thyme and coriander.

La Calypso (☎ 05 56 83 65 08; 84 bd de la Plage; menu €25; ☎ closed Wed & Thu Sep-Jun) Beneath beamed ceilings, with a cosy open fire flickering in the chillier months, this is an amiable place to tuck in to specialties like sole stuffed with crab, honey-glazed duck, and a delicious *bouillabaisse arcachonnaise* (fish soup) made from local sea critters.

The beachfront promenade between Jetée Thiers and Jetée d'Eyrac is lined with restaurants and places offering pizza and crêpes, plus a couple of standout places serving seafood: **Chez Diego** (☎ 05 56 83 84 46; bd Veyrier-Montagnères; menu €36, mains €19-44; ☎ lunch & dinner), and the smart black-and-white affair **Chez Pierre** (☎ 05 56 22 52 94; 1 bd Veyrier Montagnères; menus from €19, seafood platters €20-48).

SELF-CATERING

Pick up fresh picnic supplies at the **food market** (☎ 8am-1pm) adjacent to the train station.

Supermarkets include **E Leclerc** (224 bd de la Plage; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun) and **Monoprix** (46 cours Lamarque de Plaisance; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-7.30pm Mon-Sat).

Getting There & Away

Frequent trains between Bordeaux and Arcachon (€9.90, 50 minutes) coordinate with TGVs from Paris' Gare Montparnasse.

Getting Around

Free electric Ého buses A, B and C loop around town. Buses can be hailed anywhere along the route; the tourist office has maps.

Locabeach (☎ 05 56 83 39 64; www.locabeach.com, in French; 326 bd de la Plage; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm) rents out mopeds from €25/39 per half-day/full day, and bicycles per half-day/full day from €7/10.

To order a taxi, call ☎ 05 56 83 88 88.

SURF'S UP: TOP SURF SPOTS ON THE ATLANTIC COAST

France's Atlantic Coast has some of Europe's best surf. Autumn is prime time for riding the waves, with warm(ish) water temperatures, consistent(ish) conditions and few(er) crowds. The biggest swells tend to roll in around Biarritz (p694), but the waves along this stretch of coast are mighty *malade* (sick)!

- Hit the beaches south of Arcachon around the **Dune du Pilat** (below).
- Take a lesson in the mellow waves at **Soulac-sur-Mer**. Reserve through Soulac's **tourist office** (☎ 05 56 09 86 61; www.soulac.com; 68 rue de la Plage; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.15pm Mon-Sat year-round plus Sun Apr-Oct), or check out www.soulac-surf.com (in French). Beginners lessons start at €32.
- Watch the pros contest August's **ASP** (Association of Surfing Professionals; www.aspeurope.com) event at **Lacanau-Océan**.
- Paddle out from the tip of pine-forested **Cap Ferret peninsula** (below).
- Other hot spots (but don't let on we told you!) are **Le Porge-Océan**, **Montalivet** and **Hourtin-Plage**.

And for the best wave *away* from the coast, longboarders can attempt the **mascaret** (bore; mascaretgronde.free.fr), a tidal wave travelling inland from the Gironde Estuary. The best place to pick it up is St-Pardon (you'll need boots to get in).

AROUND ARCACHON

Dune du Pilat

This colossal sand dune (sometimes referred to as the Dune de Pyla because of its location in the resort town of Pyla-sur-Mer), 8km south of Arcachon, stretches from the mouth of the Bassin d'Arcachon southwards for almost 3km. Already the largest in Europe, it's spreading eastwards at 4.5m a year – it has swallowed trees, a road junction and even a hotel.

The view from the top – approximately 114m above sea level – is magnificent. To the west you can see the sandy shoals at the mouth of the Bassin d'Arcachon, including the **Banc d'Arguin bird reserve** and **Cap Ferret**. Dense dark-green pine forests stretch from the base of the dune eastwards almost as far as the eye can see.

Take care swimming in this area: powerful currents swirl out to sea from the deceptively tranquil *baïnes* (little bays).

SLEEPING & EATING

The area's swag of seasonal campsites are listed at www.campings-bassinarcachon.com.

La Forêt (☎ 05 56 22 73 28; rte de Biscarosse; campsites €16-34; 🕒 Apr-early Nov; 🏠) A well-run, three-star campsite, 'the forest' has shady pine trees and spotless amenities.

Hôtel Yatt (☎ 05 57 72 03 72; www.yatt-hotel.com, in French; 253 bd Côte D'Argent, Moulleau village; d €45-105, tr €60-105, q €70-115, mini-sté €80-135; 🕒 closed mid-

Nov-week before Easter; 🚰 🚰) Built in 1950 and renovated with a designer's eye (backlit floor-to-ceiling woodcut panels, floating blond-timber floors, funky yellow bath towels), this hip hotel in the café-clad Moulleau fishing village, 400m north of Pyla-sur-Mer, is footsteps from the jetty and the beach. Wi-fi's free.

Côte du Sud (☎ 05 56 83 25 00; www.cote-du-sud.fr; 4 av du Figuier; d €59-130; 🕒 closed Dec-early Feb; 🚰) This chic little beachside boutique hotel has eight exotic rooms inspired by a spectrum of continents, with details such as rattan ceilings, seashells, cacti and stainless-steel basins. This airy restaurant (*menus* €23 to €30) specialises in – what else? – seafood.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Cycling is the most popular way to reach the dune from Arcachon (see opposite).

Local bus company **Baia** (☎ 08 10 20 17 14; www.baia-cobas.fr, in French) has daily buses from Arcachon's train station to the Pyla Plage (Haïtza), 1km north of the dune (adult/child one-way €1/0.50). From mid-June to mid-September, buses continue south to the dune's car park at the northern end.

Cap Ferret

pop 6392 (peninsula)

Hidden within a canopy of pine trees at the tip of the Cap Ferret peninsula, the tiny village of Cap Ferret spans a mere 2km between the tranquil bay and the crashing Atlantic surf. It's

OYSTER TASTE TEST

Oysters from each of the Bassin d'Arcachon's four oyster-breeding zones hint at subtly different flavours. See if you can detect these:

Banc d'Arguin – milk and sugar

Île aux Oiseaux – minerals

Cap Ferret – citrus

Grand Banc – roasted hazelnuts

crowned by its 53m-high, red-and-white **light-house** (☎ 05 57 70 33 30; adult/child €4.50/3; ☹ 10am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 2-5pm Wed-Sun Oct-Mar), with interactive exhibits and stunning views from the top.

Federation Française de Surf member **Surf Center** (☎ 05 56 60 61 05; 22 allées des Goëlands; ☹ approximately Jun-Sep) rents out boards and offers lessons for all levels; information is also available from the **tourist office** (☎ 05 56 60 63 26; www.lege-capferret.com, in French; 12 av de l'Océan; ☹ 10am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 3-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm daily Jun & Sep). The outlying office can be reached on the same telephone number and the website during the rest of the year.

SLEEPING & EATING

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 05 56 60 64 62; www.fuaj.org; 87 av de Bordeaux; dm incl sheets & breakfast €13.80, camping €6; ☹ Jul & Aug, reception 8am-1pm & 6-9pm) This ultrabasic summertime youth hostel is a 500m stroll from the beach.

Hôtel L'Océane (☎ 05 56 60 68 13; www.hotel-oceane.com, in French; 62 av de l'Océane; d €49-94, tr €117, 5-person ste €158) Some of Hôtel L'Océane's coir-carpeted, marine-coloured rooms open to private breezy decks or a communal timber-decked patio. There's a clutch of cafés and pizzerias mere footsteps from the hotel.

La Maison du Bassin (☎ 05 56 60 60 63; www.lamaison-dubassin.com; 5 rue des Pionniers; s €100-200, d €120-230, apt €300; ☹ closed Jan-early Feb) Four dreamy rooms the size of suites are situated in a separate annex of this quixotic hideaway, while cosy rooms in the main house have details like a muslin-canopied sleigh bed, or a curtained bath-tub in the centre of the room. Its chocolate-toned contemporary restaurant, Le Bistrot du Bassin (*menus* €25 to €39, mains €17 to €34), has a wi-fi'd bar area.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Les Bateliers Arcachonnais (UBA; ☎ 05 57 72 28 28; www.bateliers-arcachon.asso.fr, in French) runs ferries from Arcachon to Cap Ferret (adult/child return €11.50/8), year-round (check Arcachon departure jetties beforehand). In the warmer months seasonally operating lines include ferries linking Cap Ferret and the Dune du Pilat, and Cap Ferret and Moulleau. Schedules are posted on the website and available from tourist offices.

Cap Ferret is a scenic drive around Bassin d'Arcachon or, to drive here directly from Bordeaux (71.8km) take the D106.

Gujan Mestras

pop 15,367

Picturesque oyster ports are dotted around the town of Gujan Mestras, which sprawls along 9km of coastline.

You'll find the **tourist office** (☎ 05 56 66 12 65; www.ville-gujanmestras.fr, in French; 19 av de Latre de Tassigny; ☹ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) at the western edge of town in La Hume.

Flat-bottomed oyster boats moored to weathered wooden shacks line the largest port, **Port de Larros**, about 4km to the east. The small **Maison de l'Huître** (☎ 05 56 66 23 71; adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☹ 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat year-round plus 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Sun Jun-Aug) has a display on oyster farming, including a short film in English. Locally harvested oysters are sold nearby and served at seafood restaurants with waterside terraces.

Gujan Mestras' train station is on the train line linking Bordeaux with Arcachon.

Le Teich Parc Ornithologique

Just 29% of the shallow 155-sq-km Bassin d'Arcachon is under water at low tide, attracting 260 species of migratory and nonmigratory birds each year. Committed to their preservation is the idyllic **Parc Ornithologique** (Bird Reserve; ☎ 05 56 22 80 93; www.parc-ornithologique-du-teich.com; adult/child €6.80/4.80; ☹ 10am-8pm Jul & Aug, to 7pm mid-Apr-Jun & early Sep-mid-Sep, to 6pm mid-Sep-mid-Apr) situated in Le Teich, 15km east of Arcachon. Le Teich's train station, 1.2km south of the park, is linked with Bordeaux and Arcachon.

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