

# Indulge Your Passions



**Loving wine, fairy-tale castles, and medieval villages on a river cruise in southwest France.**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

*W*

We stood on the cobblestoned square looking up at the bell tower, its cupola splitting the sun into shards of light. The guide on our river cruise had suggested we climb it. Just 196 steps, he said. Could we manage?

My husband turned the key in the old lock at the base of the belfry and up we went, around and around the narrow stone steps spiraling inside the 15<sup>th</sup>-century tower. Panting with effort and anticipation, we emerged on a balcony, archways framing an incredible view. I slipped my arm around his waist as we stood staring at the russet tile roofs on buff-colored buildings stacked on terraces below. Just beyond them, acres of green rolled to the horizon, vineyards producing some of the world's finest wines. "I could live here," he said.

Saint-Emilion was just one of the storybook towns we explored on AmaWaterways week-long Taste of Bordeaux cruise on the waterways of southwestern France. We hiked through vineyards, biked on back roads, toured chateaux, and tasted wine — lots and lots of fine wine.

## A LAND GOOD FOR GRAPES

The Bordeaux region, with the Pyrenees on the south and the Atlantic Ocean on the west, contains a mix of soils and microclimates — terroir, we were told — producing world-class wines in 60 appellations. Two main rivers, the Dordogne and Garonne, course toward the ocean joining to form the Gironde Estuary. For 50 miles it flows, café au lait-colored currents mixing fresh and saltwater with twice-a-day tidal bores. Some 8,000 wineries dot both sides, turning out simple table wines to prized premier cru. Red wine accounts for 82 percent of the production.

Grapes have grown here since Roman Emperor Augustus ruled Aquitania, but it was Eleanor of Aquitaine who made the wine famous. One of the most beautiful women of Western Europe during the High Middle Ages, she patronized poets and philosophers and drew up a code for love that fueled her reputation as a coquette. She married the future King Henry II of England and Aquitaine remained part of England for 300 years. Wine from the region — called claret in England — grew so popular, profits from its sale became the chief source of revenue for the English sovereigns.



## BORDEAUX BY RIVER CRUISE

AmaWaterways provides an ideal means for exploring Bordeaux. Board the *AmaDolce*, one of the line's 23 vessels, unpack and let it take you to ports around Aquitaine, often docking right in town. With a maximum of 144 passengers, the ship doesn't feel crowded. Meals are included with open seating in the main dining room or by reservation at the Chef's Table specialty restaurant. Complimentary soft drinks, beer and, of course, wine, come with lunch and dinner.

The cruise begins and ends in the city of Bordeaux, largest metropolitan area in Aquitaine with a population of 250,000. Along with a Gothic cathedral, public squares, and gardens, you'll want to see La Cité du Vin. This wine museum opened in 2016 in an unusual glass building shaped like a decanter. An observation deck on the eighth floor wraps around a wine bar.

You'll find plenty of opportunities to sample wine in other ports on your own or on included excursions by motor coach, on foot, or bicycle using the *AmaDolce's* fleet of two-wheelers. Five ratings of difficulty help you choose a tour to match your level of fitness.

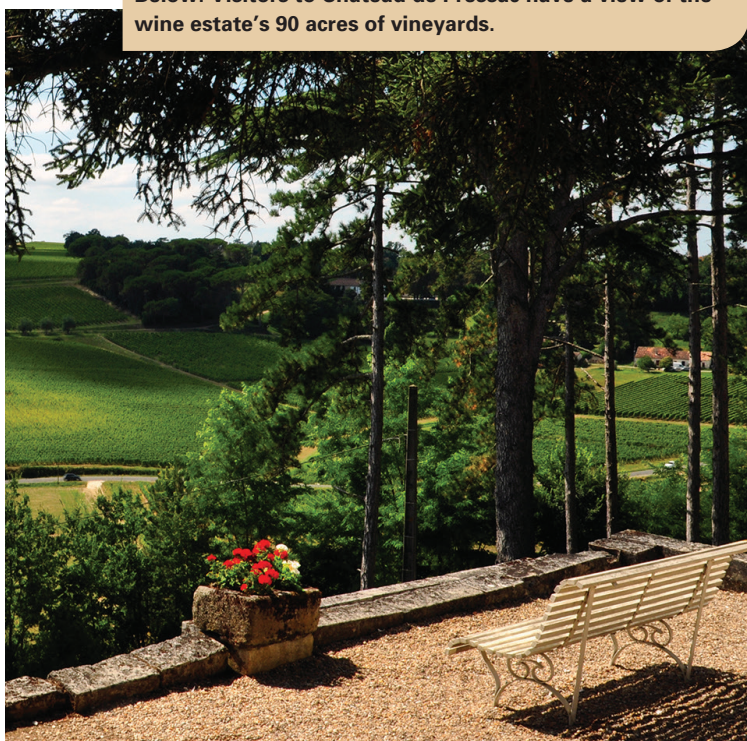
An excursion from Pauillac travels through Medoc and Haut-Medoc vineyards producing some of the world's most famous wines: Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, Latour, Mouton-Rothschild, and Margaux. It stops for a tour and tasting at a grand cru wine estate.

U.S. expat Lori Westmoreland entertained our tour group at

**Left: Marie Bourdillas of Chateau la Monge pours a tasting during a wine festival in Bourg.**

**Right: Those who climb the bell tower at Saint-Emilion are rewarded with a view of the village and surrounding vineyards.**

**Below: Visitors to Chateau de Pressac have a view of the wine estate's 90 acres of vineyards.**



Chateau Leoville-Poyferre on a walk across the grounds and down into a chilly cellar stacked with barrels. The wine is a blend of four grape varieties, principally cabernet sauvignon and merlot, she said. Medoc's maritime climate protects grapes from frost and the gravelly soil heats up in summer to ripen the low-hanging fruit. In the tasting room, she schooled us in the subtle flavors and aromas of three vintages we happily sampled.

You'll taste a rare and very different wine in the Sauternais region. The golden, sweet liquid accounts for only 2 percent of Bordeaux production. High humidity causes a fungus, a "noble rot," to form on the skin of the grapes creating a chemical reaction that gives Sauternes a full-bodied flavor pairing well with foie gras.

## CASTLES AND MEDIEVAL VILLAGES

Wine tasting is a must in chateaux around Saint-Emilion. Steep streets are paved with cobblestones, ballast left behind by ships returning to England filled with wine. The largest monolithic church in Europe lies underground, chiseled by monks from solid bedrock at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

"Carved out of rock" translates as the French word Roquetaillade, the name of a castle 35 miles south of Saint-Emilion that's a major cultural attraction in Bordeaux. Though its fortifications date back to Charlemagne, it's the 14<sup>th</sup>-century castle that garners most of the attention. It has been in the same family for seven centuries, and five family members still live there. One of them, Vicomte Sebastien de Baritault, guided our group, pointing to windows

that replaced arrow slits where archers once fought off intruders.

Bright copper pots hung from stone walls in an ancient kitchen the vicomte said his family still uses.

Lovers of medieval history and architecture find many other sites to amuse them on trips ashore. A walking tour through the village of Cadillac visits a 16<sup>th</sup>-century chateau that later became a notorious women's prison and mental institution. In Blaye, you can tour a 17<sup>th</sup>-century citadel on foot or take a bike excursion around the fortress and into the countryside, wheels spinning past rows of grape vines flanking country roads in fields resembling bolts of green corduroy.

Chateaux dot the countryside around Bordeaux. Many, like the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Chateau Boutinet, lie in ruins. Owner Nathalie Escuredo led us on a hike through her vineyards. As we walked, she told us her story, a love story really. She had been a Bordeaux tour guide who became so enamored with wine she decided to attend school to study oenology (the science and study of winemaking).



There she met her future husband. In 2011, they bought the wine estate where they've nurtured their children along with their grapevines.

She wrapped up our visit with a wine and tapas tasting, passing around photos showing her love for her family, her land, and her wine. One day the couple hopes to turn the crumbling chateau into a bed-and-breakfast, perhaps with a cooking school to indulge another of their passions. When and how will be subject to the whims of the wine world, she said. "Dreams, you know, they have no deadline." •

*Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor from Western Springs, Ill.*

Left: *AmaDolce* docks at Bourg. The Taste of Bourdeaux cruises will begin in March and continue through mid-November.

## BEFORE YOU GO

AmaWaterways recently was named River Cruise Partner of the Year by AAA. The seven-night Taste of Bordeaux cruise has departures from March 28 through Nov. 14 this year with optional pre-tour in northern Spain and post-tour in Paris and the Loire Valley. Cruise fares range from \$3,099-\$3,999 per person. Contact your AAA Travel agent for details. A list of offices is found on page 6 in this issue or call (877) 510-8702.

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