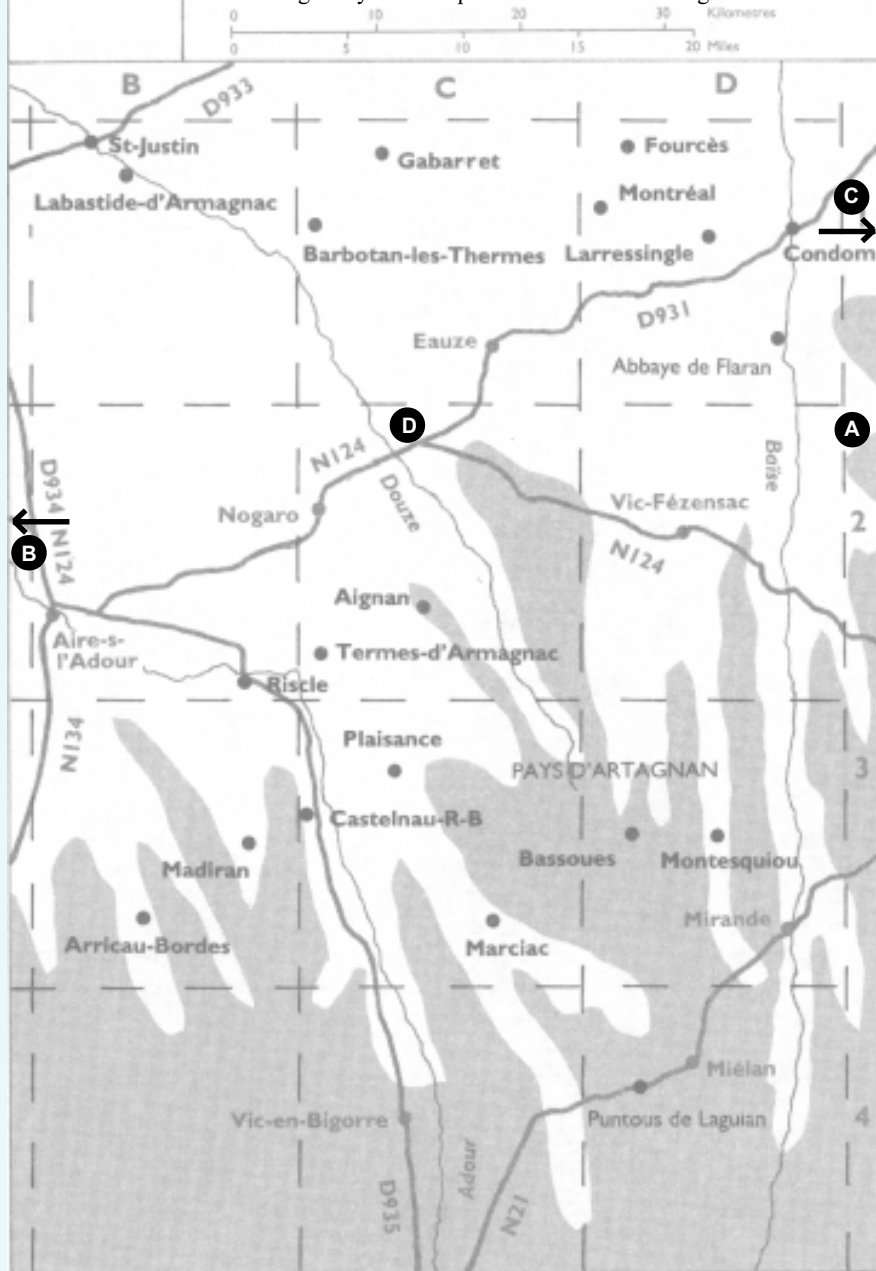


38

Gers: Artagnan, fire water, *bastides* and Dudley Duncan.
Perched Montréal. Circular Fourcès. Football-pitch
Larressingle. Cyclist' chapel. A cathedral-sized organ.



This is the land of Armagnac – the *pays* where the most heart-warming of brandies is distilled from wine made from white grapes. This is also the heart of Gascony, where locals joke that the crows fly over the region upside down so they can't see how poor the area is below.

What is arguably true is that Gascons are friendly, helpful, proud, and fiercely independent. Much of map 38 is the western half of the *département* of Gers, a deeply rural landscape of gentle, curving hills; sleepy river valleys; vineyards and fields of maize; *bastides* and *castelnauds* (*castelnaux*); and few tourists.

I'll try to get under the skin of self-effacing Gers. Let's have a taste of Armagnac first – a name synonymous with Gers. (The 'G' is spoken like a soft 'J' and the 's' is not silent; so, 'Gers' rhymes with 'chairs'.) Armagnac ('blazing water' or 'fire water') was made long before Cognac. Ageing is the key: distilled once, the velvety-smooth brandy, with a long-tasting aroma, develops its unique character in barrels, made from the local black oak, for up to 20 years or longer.

Where can you buy Armagnac and learn more about the brandy? Where better than the Ecomusée de l'Armagnac at the Château Garreau, south of **Labastide-d'Armagnac** (B1). (Use the D626 south-east; in half a mile or so turn right and head south for two miles.) The museum, housed in two 17th-century farms, tells the story of Armagnac over the centuries (open every day except Sun a.m. – Apl to Oct; closed all Sun – Nov to Mar). You can buy Armagnac and *floc* (an *apéritif* of Armagnac and grape juice). Alternatively, seek out the Château de Cassaigne, south-west of **Condom** (D1) – a serene, handsome stone structure where Bernard Faget produces a superb range of brandies; ask him to show you his 16th-century kitchen with an open fire and 'thumb-print' brick roof.

This is also a land of fortified *bastides*, mainly built by the English and French during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). Most have a regular layout of grid patterns with streets laid down at right angles to each other. Any modern-day planner would feel at home in the *bastides* conceived 700 years ago. *Castelnauds* (*castelnaux*) were also fortified but these villages grew fungus-like, clustered around a château or church and often perched on a small hill (*puech*).

Seek out some *bastides* on the top of map 38. **St-Justin** (B1), a 13th-century *bastide*, is easily missed. Find the north-east corner of the village; a typical small *place*, arcaded on three sides, and with an eye-catching six-sided, tiled, cone-shaped tower. Walk the lane off the square and past the church, a *rue fleurie* with an intriguing balcony/museum and ramparts to the east. **Labastide-d'Armagnac** (B1) is a 13th-century *cité médiévale*: an arcaded square, some arcaded side streets, fortified church, and red brick, stone and half-timbered (*colombages*) houses. See also Le Temple des Bastides, a 17th-century Protestant church, which evokes the theme of *bastides*.

Don't miss the perched *bastide* of **Montréal** (built in 1289) with a square, arcaded on three sides, and fortified Gothic church (D1). An even older site (to the south-

west) is the remains of the 4th-century Villa Gallo-Romaine de Séviac where colourful mosaics are protected by open-sided, tile-roofed barns (open Easter to Nov). The varied finds on the site are housed in a museum at the tourist office in Montréal (open July/Aug). Detour north to the most magical of *bastides*, the circular 14th-century version at **Fourcès** – built by the English (D1): the mix of arcades, towers, tiny lanes, medieval houses and ancient bridge over the Auzoue is a sumptuous thrill. **Larressingle** (D1) is another fascinating spot. Tagged the ‘Petite Carcassonne du Gers’, the football pitch-sized, 13th-century polygonal fortress, with a minute 13th-century *église* at its heart, is another show-stopper.

Your detour east leads you to **Condom** (D1) – the capital of Armagnac. There’s a Musée d’Armagnac (closed Tues and also Sun from Oct to May); no less than seven *églises*; a 16th-century cathedral and flamboyant Gothic cloisters; and old streets. The 12th-century Cistercian **Abbaye de Flaran** (D1), south of Condom, is an inspiring mix of Romanesque *église*, 14th-century cloisters and handsome stone carvings, columns, capitals, arches and roofs. There’s also a Musée des Chemins de St-Jacques-de-Compostelle (the abbey was on one of the pilgrim routes to Spain) and a garden of medicinal plants. (Closed Tues Oct to May.)

Something different is the small, chic spa of **Barbotan-les-Thermes** (C1): walk the smart central street and rest awhile in the cool gardens to the north, across the road from the thermal baths. Just south of the spa the Lac d’Uby has a beach, facilities like tennis and mini-golf, and a children’s playground. **Gabarret** (C1), to the north-east, is renowned for its 15th-century half-timbered and small red brick Maison du Gabardan, which houses paintings and sculptures and evokes many aspects of local life.

South now to the heart of map 38, to countryside called **Pays d’Artagnan** (C3/D3). Why? Alexandre Dumas, in his legendary and heroic work, *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (a tale of Artagnan, the archetypal, swash-buckling, quick-tempered, hard-drinking Gascon), based his epic on the earlier works of an unknown writer, Gatien de Courtilz de Sandras (*Mémoires de Monsieur d’Artagnan*). The names of Béarn hamlets were used for three famous characters: Aramits for Aramis; Athos for Athos; and Lanne, just west of Aramits (all three west and south-west of Pau, itself south of C4). Lanne was the home of Monsieur de Porthau, who gave his name to Porthos. Both works, both extravagantly exaggerated, were based on the life story of Charles de Batz, born in 1615 at the Château de Castelmoré, north-east of **Aignan** (C2: Castelmoré, privately-owned, is on Michelin maps, beside the D102).

Pays d’Artagnan stretches from **Aignan** (C2) and **Riscle** (B2) to **Marciac** (C3) and **Montesquiou** (D3). This is hilly country with river valleys running south to north between the high ridges. Start your touring at **Bassoues** (D3), a *bastide* with a fearsome 14th-century *donjon* (keep); but beware, there are over 200 steps to the top. To the west are two further *bastides*: the sizeable version at Marciac (C3), famed too for its August jazz festival; and Beaumarchés (C3), built in 1298 and

the site also of a 14th-century Gothic *église*. A trio of *castelnauds* deserve your attention: Montesquiou; L’Isle de Noé, east of Montesquiou; and Tillac (D3), to the south of Bassoues.

Other sites merit a mention. **Termes-d’Armagnac** (C2) is the site of a fearful and impregnable 13th-century tower, on a crest above the right bank of the **Adour** and with fine views of the Pyrénées. There’s also a Musée du Panache Gascon with exhibits based on various Gascony themes. **Plaisance** (C3), a deadbeat place, is the home of a glorious, cathedral-sized organ, built by Daniel Birouste. I’ve told his story before and how the town has benefited from the stupendous efforts of both Daniel and Bertrand Lazerme, the organist. Each year many concerts are held. For details write to Ars Organorum, 32160 Plaisance. To the south-west, at Mazères, across the Adour, is a fortified Romanesque *église*, noted for the interior’s fine capitals.

Leave the Pays d’Artagnan and detour south to **Puntous de Laguian** on the N21 (D4). By now you will be well aware of the Pyrénées wall lining the entire length of the southern horizon. The Puntous is the best site to study the range: an observation table, created in 1928, details all the peaks; what a pity about the odd oversized tree.

West now to the hills on the Adour’s left bank. Start at **Castelnau-Rivière-Basse** (C3). Relish the views and enjoy the attractive fortified church on its cliff-top site. **Madiran** (B3) also has a handsome fortified *église*. In the undulating hills are the vineyards from which grapes are used to make the super deep-coloured Madiran reds and the quality whites called Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh. The finest examples can be bought from Alain Brumont (in the ‘o’ of Maumusson-Laguian: B3); Jean-Marc Laffitte, just north-west of Brumont’s *domaine*; and at the Château d’**Arricau-Bordes** (B3). In an elevated position the stately, golden structure, surrounded by vines, is a majestic sight.

I’ll end with two unusual sites. South-east of Labastide-d’Armagnac (B1) you’ll spot the Chapelle Notre Dame des Cyclistes, an isolated tiny chapel dedicated to cyclists; there’s also a nearby Maison des Cyclistes, crammed full of cycling odds and ends (p.m. mid Apl to mid Oct; also a.m. July/Aug). Even more intriguing is the Notre Dame du Rugby at Grenade-sur-l’Adour (west of B2). Cross the Adour on the D11 and, just before the D52, take the steep lane to the left, by the statue of the Virgin Mary. The perched chapel is dedicated to players and has four stained-glass windows on rugby themes (one a scrum).

The inspiration for the chapel came from the stained glass window in St-Francis’ church at Dudley, dedicated to the memory of Duncan Edwards who, in 1958, when only 21, was one of the Manchester United players killed in the Munich air crash. I was quietly thrilled to discover the chapel. I was educated at Dudley Grammar School and Duncan, born in 1937, like me, was both a schoolboy contemporary of mine and one of my footballing heroes. Life is full of surprises: agreed?