

A day trip to Saint-Émilion, a medieval town in wine country, offers many unique views, such as this winding street viewed through a vine-covered archway.



A tram glides through Bordeaux's historic city centre as skateboarders and pedestrians go about their daily routine.

A symphony of movement

Bordeaux offers the appeal of Paris on a smaller scale

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LYNN HADRALL

The gentle ding of an advancing train tells pedestrians to clear the tracks. People, bicycles, skateboards and scooters make way for the electric tram that glides into the historic centre of Bordeaux. It passes and within seconds the bustle of street life spills over the tracks again.

I watched this symphony of movement and I marvelled at the soothing flow of

life in this French city, where an opera house, palatial hotel and busy pedestrian boulevard intersect.

Inspired rail transit is just one reason beyond wine to visit this old port city. Bordeaux traces its beginnings, and the wine industry, to Roman times. It has a turbulent history of invasions stretching from Huns and Visigoths to Vikings. France and England sparred there for sovereignty. The city prospered in part on the slave trade.



Today, Bordeaux is a cosmopolitan capital with the appeal of Paris but on a smaller, livable scale. Former merchant mansions along the shore of the Garonne River provide living, eating and retail space. There's a massive new soccer stadium and a stunning new shrine to wine. Electric trams run through the historic centre without unsightly overhead cables, a costly option matching the city's designation as a UNESCO site. All this plus shopping, food, museums and the potential for day trips to wine country. It's why several travel sites, such as Lonely Planet, picked Bordeaux as a top destination to visit in 2017.

I've been fortunate to experience Bordeaux in the fall and in the spring, visiting tourist sites and lesser-known attractions. I'm impressed that the city pays special attention to aesthetics in developing old dock lands. Here are a few treats to be savoured on a Bordeaux vacation.

Public spaces

I love visiting cities that invest in public spaces. Bordeaux has gone a step further by adding interactivity to many open spaces.

Miroir d'eau is a massive reflection pool in front of the Place de la Bourse, a key piece of waterfront redevelopment.

You can cool down on a hot day by running through its water streams or basking in its mist. It juxtaposes modern urban design against the grandeur of Versailles-style buildings that are well preserved.

Parks and neighbourhood squares offer abundant green space and spots to enjoy a baguette and cheese.

Enter Jardin Public through its golden gates to enjoy quiet time by the pond and towering trees. The English-style park covers 11 hectares and dates back to 1746.



History you can climb

For a view of Bordeaux from on high, climb the 233 steps of Tour Pey Berland next to the Cathédrale Sainte-André. The bell tower was built beside the cathedral to protect the cathedral from bell vibrations.

Another impressive view is from the top of La Fleche, a bell tower dating from the 15th century. It's billed as the second tallest bell tower in France with a viewing area 47 metres high. Not that long ago you could view about 60 naturally mummified bodies there. Visiting author Victor Hugo is among many to reference the macabre Saint-Michel mummies. In 1990, the mummies were given a more dignified resting place in a corner of La Chartreuse cemetery. You can now view video in the tower about the Mummies of Saint-Michel.

Reminders of military fortification dot the city and provide more opportunities to walk through history. The Cailhau Gate offers a view 23 metres above the river. The structure was dedicated in the 15th century to French King Charles VIII. The Grosse Cloche has an older pedigree, dating to the 13th century. The bell was rung regularly to mark special events up until the French Revolution. It was produced in 1775 and is rung just a few times a year now.

Food

For a different dining experience, head to the Bastide Quarter on the right bank of the Garonne (by car, tram or water taxi) to see how Bordeaux is regenerating old buildings and space.

Your destination is Darwin, a trendy area that's a short walk from the Stalingrad tram stop. The rehabilitation project with an environmental focus started as a local business incubator. Office space and eateries now occupy the warehouses of a former military barracks. The Magasin General restaurant and food market bustles. You can browse

Magical streetscapes, like a view of the Porte Cailhau, await you around every corner in Bordeaux.



ABOVE: Old meets new at the world's largest reflection pool, across from historic Place de la Bourse.

RIGHT: The Grosse Cloche dates to the 13th century. The 1775 bell weighs 7,800 kilograms.

Medieval streets offer sweet delicacies, like macarons, but also tricky footing. Be sure to wear good shoes if you visit Saint-Émilion.



different sections – epicerie, fromagerie, snacks – in an open concept setting with picnic bench seating.

Outdoor benches are placed near an intriguing wooden structure that connects two buildings. As a visual reminder of energy conservation, this art piece has streaming lights indicating electricity consumption at that moment.

Walk around the complex to see skateboard parks, temporary housing modules known as tétrodons, and chicken coops. There's talk of more development at this spot, which provides a stunning view of old Bordeaux across the river.

You know a restaurant is good when there's only one thing on the menu and locals still line up for it. L'Entrecôte, a steakhouse in the city centre, is renowned for serving one main course on a set menu with a salad and fries. It's a simple formula and highly successful based on reviews I got from locals who are willing to wait for a table.

Peppone, on Cours Georges Clemenceau, specializes in pizzas and pastas. I got a streetside table early one evening. Lineups later at night are to be expected. The fresh pasta was divine, the dessert platter even more so.

You can't leave Bordeaux without trying a canelé. This rum-flavoured pastry originated here and can be found on breakfast, lunch and dessert menus. Patisseries specialize in original flavours and new variants. Locals are quick to recommend that you sample these little fluted cakes that feature a caramelized crust and chewy interior. Take a few home for gifts.

Shopping

Bordeaux is a shopper's dream with high-end designer stores, funky independent boutiques, large department stores and street markets.

Rue Sainte-Catherine is said to be the longest outdoor pedestrian shopping street

in Europe. I don't doubt it after walking the full length. It's a lively street scene with chain stores, boutiques and larger department stores such as Galeries Lafayette.

You can get a welcome tax refund on purchases made in one store if your total bill there is more than 175 Euros. If you plan to make large purchases or get gifts, it makes sense to do it in one place. The store fills out the paperwork (you will need to show your passport at the store) and you file for the refund at the airport customs office on your return flight home. This is easier to do from a smaller airport such as Bordeaux compared to the lineups you can expect at customs offices in Paris airports.

High-end designer stores are clustered on Cours de l'Intendance, near the city centre, and on nearby side streets with inner malls. French brands mingle with international labels on the wide, elegant boulevard. It's worth a visit even if you are only window shopping.

Smaller neighbourhoods feature lovely boutiques. One of my favourite shopping walks is Rue Notre Dame in the Chartrons district, near the waterfront. This is where wine merchants built beautiful limestone buildings in the 18th and 19th centuries. They now house apartments, funky boutiques, antique stores, bistros and cafes. For truly French purchases, drop by Do You Speak Français?, a concept store that only sells goods made in France.

To stroll the waterfront while shopping, head to the Quai des Marques, a pedestrian promenade along the Garonne River. You will find discount retail outlets and coffee shops plus views of the river and its bridges. You'll be joined by joggers who are running eight kilometres between the bridges, cyclists and skateboarders. There may be a cruise liner docked nearby.

Sports

If you can't see a soccer game while in Bordeaux, you can get an insider's tour of

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The Monument aux Girondins is the towering centrepiece of a massive city square known as Place des Quinconces. While quadric horse-fish spray water from their noses, the nearby transit hub offers affordable quick transit for the area.

the world class Nouveau Stade (also known as the Matmut Atlantique because of the sponsorship). It's an impressive structure that hosted games for the 2016 European championship.

The stadium was built in 2012, designed to reflect French elegance. The sparkling white edifice has unimpeded views of the field and space for 250 journalists in the media area. Our tour lasted about 90 minutes and we had access to locker rooms

and training areas as well as private boxes, the presidential suite and the field. We sat in the President's chair, reserved for the most senior official at a game.

Our tour was in French, but English tours are offered if booked in advance. Tickets are available through Bordeaux-tourism.co.uk or stop by the tourism office in the city centre.

I was thrilled to learn that there is a professional hockey team. The Bordeaux

Bulldogs play at the 3,200-seat Mériadeck arena. They have a faithful fan base and a team that features seven Canadians, including the captain. It was fun to watch hockey in France. Instead of hot dogs we had sweet and salty popcorn and macarons. Cheerleaders performed on the ice to fire up the crowd. We got used to hearing the announcer bellow "But!" rather than "Goal!"

You don't have to see a professional sports match to experience the fitness scene in Bordeaux. You can watch a neighbourhood game of pétanque, a lawn ball game similar to bocce. You can also watch skateboarders on the waterfront park, rent a bike or take leisurely strolls along the boulevards.

Garonne River and its bridges

City planners have turned the Bordeaux riverfront into a place where people congregate for evening walks or special events. There was a food festival this spring and a circus last fall.

I love the river but had to get used to its muddy brown tinge. Locals say this is because Bordeaux is where fresh water meets salt water. Unfortunately, your river pictures will never feature crystal blue water.

Bridges reflect old and new. The Pont de Pierre, a stone bridge with 17 arches, seems ancient while the high-tech Pont Jacques Chaban-Delmas bridge nods to the future. The Chaban-Delmas lifts its centre section like an elevator to allow cruise ships into the port.

Signs alert residents and drivers when the bridge is scheduled to lift.

Transit utopia

I rode the electric train (known as the tram) all around Bordeaux. It's quiet, fast and I love the little bell. There are three transit lines with a fourth under construction. You get tickets at the station stops. I found a 10-trip ticket worked best. One ticket is good for an hour with transfers to buses or the water taxi.

The tree-lined Place des Quinconces is the transit hub and not far away is the imposing Monument aux Girondins, a fountain commemorating those who fell in the French Revolution. It's one of the largest city squares in Europe. The bronze quadriga horse-fish will make you smile as they spout water from their noses. They represent happiness.

Roundabouts are common in France. Drivers and pedestrians use them effectively. It was good to see drivers stop for pedestrians at busy roundabouts and I got

used to driving around them.

It's just a one-hour flight to Bordeaux from Paris. The Bordeaux train station provides links to nearby cities such as Toulouse, also worth a visit.

Let's not forget the wine

The Cité du Vin celebrates the region's storied wine history. The massive building on the waterfront in an industrial area is an architectural gem. Guides will tell you it was designed to have perpetual movement and resemble a decanter.

The museum features permanent and temporary exhibitions, special events, workshops and guided tours. You can also take a self-guided tour. Interactive features are abundant.

The Buffet of the Five Senses invites you to "indulge in the sensory experience of wine tasting." You stick your nose in a funnel and guess the aroma associated with some

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La Cité du Vin rises from the old industrial lands to offer wine connoisseurs and neophytes a cultural centre that celebrates wine.

wine tour at a nearby chateau. I toured the 17th century Château de Ferrand, a winery owned by just two families in 300 years. According to our tour guide, the court of Louis XIV was known to party there. Current owners are descendants of Baron Bich, founder of the Bic company. And, yes, you can buy a Bic pen in the gift shop.

A tour includes walking through the vineyards, visiting the cellars and learning about the wine-making process. You get to taste wine at the end of the tour.

The nearby medieval town of Saint-Émilion is a charming daytrip. You can climb the Tour du Roy (King's Keep) for a grand view of the village. It dates back to the 13th century.

Step outside for a panoramic view of the city and surrounding area.

Day trips

Outside Bordeaux, you can be in wine country in less than 30 minutes. Book a

wines. There were familiar smells (roses, honey comb, lemon) but some had me scratching my head (pencil shavings).

Expect to spend most of a day at this tribute to all things wine. The top floor has a wine sampling bar. The ceiling is a mass of bottles. (There's grape juice for children).

Some wineries allow you to visit underground storage cellars for free. When it's time for lunch, you can eat outdoors in the shadow of a church that appears to have been carved out of the rock beneath it. Wear good walking shoes (old stone streets are slippery) and bring a sweater. Wine caves are chilly.

Lesser known spots of interest

When Nazi Germany occupied Bordeaux in the Second World War, they built a massive concrete submarine base, la base sous-marine. German U-boats were stationed there starting in 1942 to fight in the war for the Atlantic.

The building's original purpose is dark and menacing. Today it's used very differently as a place to celebrate creative arts. You can tour it for free if a temporary exhibition is

IF YOU GO

Useful websites for planning your trip:

Bordeaux-tourism.co.uk

Matmut-atlantique.com

Laciteduvin.com

Ca.france.fr

running on the inside. Otherwise you can walk around the outside.

From inside you feel the overwhelming scale of the bunker with its multiple docking bays. It has a roof more than nine metres thick and it covers a total area of 43,000 square metres. It's easy to see why the city has repurposed it rather than trying to demolish it.

A small memorial honours the memory

of 6,000 labourers, mainly Portuguese and Spanish prisoners of war, who were forced to build it.

Another less publicized site is the Centre Jean Moulin, a museum about the French Resistance and the experience of Bordeaux residents during the Second World War. Exhibits seem tired and there's little English translation, but photographs, maps and artifacts evoke the atmosphere of that time. There's even a boat on the top floor with newspaper clippings explaining how it arrived there. Admission is free.

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Bordeaux has worked its charm on me, embracing change while not forgetting its past. You can see and do a lot. Or you can relax in a café and watch those quiet trams glide by. You could even stroll to the whimsical carousel in the heart of the old city, to find yet one more way to get around. 🍷

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