



highway TO HEAVEN

A leisurely road trip from Bordeaux to Limoges
promises long lunches, sojourns in châteaux and a ticket
to happiness, writes *David Leser*.

PHOTOGRAPHY ANTHONY LANNERETONNE

ON THE ROAD

The restaurant at
Château de la Treyne
in Lacave. Opposite:
Château de Mercuès.





I'm swimming in a field of merlot. Not literally, of course, although given how much "vin du jardin" I'll be drinking tonight it's not that far from the truth. What I mean is I'm swimming in a 20-metre pool set in a vineyard above the city of Bordeaux, surrounded by merlot vines, birdsong and the pealing of church bells.

Bumblebees kiss roses in a garden beside me. Soon I'll retire upstairs to my hotel suite, one of 18 designed by starchitect Jean Nouvel in the style of an old tobacco-drying barn, and dress for dinner prepared by the hotel's starred chef.

Our hotel, Le Saint-James, is in the commune of Bouliac, the "balcony of Bordeaux". It's our first stop on a week-long drive through south-western France following a *route du bonheur*, a road of happiness, devised by the luxury hotel group Relais & Châteaux. The trip will take us from the foothills of Bordeaux, the regional capital of Aquitaine, into the spectacular Midi-Pyrénées, then north to Limoges. Already I can sense a certain kind of valour will be needed if I'm not to return looking like a force-fed goose.

The odds are against me from the start, even as the bread and truffle butter arrive and before Le Saint-James' chef, Nicolas Magie, rolls out his five-course dégustation: onion sorbet with bacon cream, roast scampi with cucumber sorbet and green melon, sea bass and white asparagus from the pine forests of the Landes, followed by Quercy lamb in blackcurrant sauce. There's a soft cow's milk cheese from Chaource, an apple ice with celery and cucumber



and, finally, a dark chantilly chocolate with vanilla cream and sponge cake, matched with a '66 Les Bas Armagnac.

"We are focused on gastronomy," says maître de maison Anthony Torkington, who arrived here three years ago with Magie. "Customers come to Saint-James to find happiness and well-being."

This could well be the official proclamation of the week and, truth is, I'm both completely predisposed and ill-prepared for what is to follow. Within 12 hours of dining like Sun Kings at Le Saint-James we're driving through the department of Lot-et-Garonne, a patchwork of meadows, vineyards and grain fields framed by the rivers Lot and Garonne – to a five-star hotel and its two-star restaurant in the fortress town of Puymiroir.

At this point I adopt a variation of a motto I once heard: "If your arteries are good, eat more foie gras. If they are bad, drink more vin du jardin. Proceed accordingly."

On y va.

In 1978 Michel Trama, an Algerian-born former scuba-diving champion, decided to sell his small bistro in Paris and move to Puymiroir. "I came here unconsciously," he says. "I didn't know much about cooking so it was books, books, books, copy, copy, copy."

The village, 150 kilometres south-east of Bordeaux, had seen better days by the time Trama and his wife, Maryse, arrived. Only 750 people lived here and, apart from its medieval ramparts and necropolis, the most exciting thing about Puymiroir was its equidistance



from the World Heritage-listed town of Saint-Émilion to the north-west and the Malbec-producing region of Cahors to the north-east.

The Tramas bought the auberge in Puymiroir's main street and Michel began studying the techniques of the great chefs Auguste Escoffier and Michel Guérard. In 1981, just over two years after opening his eponymous restaurant, Trama was awarded his first Michelin star. A year later he received his second, by which time the couple had acquired the house next door, owned in the 13th century by the Count of Toulouse, Raymond VII.

Today the house is a tribute to the power of the hereditary rulers of southern France and to the style of famed interior designer and tastemaker Jacques Garcia, and the hotel's Baroque elegance is a perfect complement to Trama's cooking and exemplary produce. "The first quality of the chef," he says when he joins us on the restaurant terrace, "is to choose the best product. I am just the servant of the product."

We start with a ratatouille sorbet, then follows thinly sliced foie gras dressed in argan vinaigrette. The reinforcements arrive next: ravioli with prawns in a tangy Asian-informed sauce, tagliatelle in a cream of bacon and truffles, and roast pigeon and carrots in orange and cumin. There's a tear-shaped chocolate dessert – la larme de chocolat aux griottines – followed by local cheeses, but I falter at the fifth course. Despite the quality of the bird and Trama's 35-year working relationship with his pigeon producer from Palleville, I have no room for *le pigeonneau* and I'm forced to leave half on my plate.



This town has obviously seen far worse in its bloody history, but an insult is still an insult and I fear I've just affronted one of France's finest chefs. "You didn't like my food last night," Monsieur Trama declares when we meet the next morning.

"No, Monsieur Trama. I loved it. There was simply no room. You must understand... *mon estomac était trop plein*."

The chef walks away, leaving me to contemplate my breakfast foam of scrambled eggs. Here, too, I stumble, unable to finish. Worse, I compound these affronts with an even greater faux pas at lunch. I ask for my steak *bien cuit*, well done. It arrives somewhere between *saignant* (bloody) and *à point* (medium rare).

Touché, Monsieur Trama, touché.

To reach our next destination at Château de Mercuès we drive north-east from the ramparts of Puymiroir to the Midi-Pyrénées, into the heart of the Lot, every rise and fall along the way a revelation. Known as "the land of marvels", this department is dotted with medieval villages suspended on cliff faces, orchards bursting with apricots and cherries, oak forests bearing black truffles, walnut groves and fields of lavender and, of course, the Lot River wending its untroubled way from the Cévennes in south-central France, through lamb and foie gras country, into the Garonne.

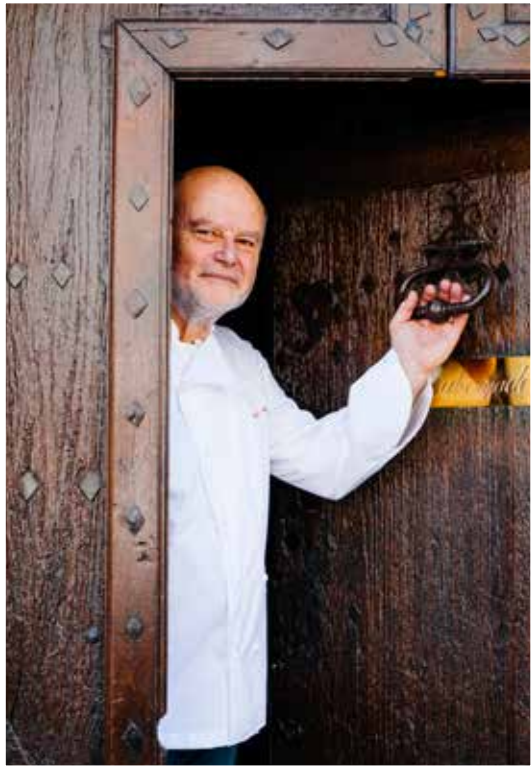
If true abundance is to be found anywhere in the world it's here, and if there's a place to stay that might befit such plenitude it's Château de Mercuès, a once>

DRIVING FORCE

Above: chef Nicolas Magie of Le Saint-James and the hotel itself.

STAR QUALITY

Clockwise, from top left: Michel Trama's auberge; Trama's preserves; sea bass with morels and white asparagus at Le Saint-James.



remained virtually uninhabited until the 1905 law of Separation of Church and State when it was placed under the control of the French government.

In 1950 Château de Mercuès was turned into a hotel and in 1959 a Relais & Châteaux hotel with 24 rooms and six suites, each with a fit-out inspired by an epoch of French history and connected over seven floors by a maze of corridors and stairwells (and a 20th-century lift).

Edith Piaf stayed here; so, too, Charles de Gaulle, before becoming President of the Fifth Republic. “From Château de Mercuès you can see history coming at you,” he declared from the bishop’s top-floor stronghold.

Château de Mercuès is also one of the finest wineries in south-west France, owned by the Vigouroux family whose expertise in producing the famous Cahors malbec “black” wine dates back to 1887. The vineyards of the Cahors region had barely survived war with the English, wars between Protestants and Catholics, and the devastating phylloxera outbreak of the 19th century but they flourished anew under the Vigouroux eye. The scion, Georges, bought the château in 1983 and began the revival of one of the oldest vineyards in Europe.

In the Romano-Byzantine cellars beneath the château gardens, we’re shown old wooden barrels and stainless-steel tanks in which some of the greatest malbecs in the world are produced, including the aromatic Le Vassal de Mercuès 2012, the beautifully aged Château de Mercuès Icône Wow 2009 and the rich and full-bodied 2006 Château de Mercuès Malbec 6666.

We try each as the festival of food unfolds, starting with chef Julien Poisot’s amuse-bouche of slow-cooked pig’s feet. It’s followed by gnocchi stuffed with duck liver and black Lalbenque truffles; roast pike-perch and beetroot panache; golden-brown veal sweetbreads with mash, laurel sauce and more Lalbenque truffles; and a soft white-crustéd Brillat Savarin cheese with still more of those Lalbenque truffles. The château is only 32 kilometres north of the village of Lalbenque, famous for its annual truffle festival.

The meal ends with an Honduran chocolate mousse with creamy praline and, not wanting to repeat my performance with Monsieur Trama, I manage to eat everything on my plate before returning to my tower to sleep the slightly perturbed slumber of the overfed.

A word on happiness. A six-course meal in a bishop’s summer residence with wine and food from the surrounding fields is one obvious – and highly privileged – path to happiness. Another is the joy of discovering historic villages on the drive north-east from Château de Mercuès into the Dordogne Valley.>

FRENCH LEAVE

Restaurant and hotel Michel Trama. Opposite, from top: chef Michel Trama; Trama’s burger de foie gras; Château de Mercuès; the Baroque interior at Michel Trama.

A six-course meal in a bishop’s summer residence with wine and food from the fields is one obvious and privileged *path to happiness*.



We stop at the village of Rocamadour. It's known for its goat's cheese but famous for its wooden Black Madonna statue, venerated by tens of thousands of pilgrims each year, many of whom climb a grand staircase to the vast World Heritage basilica and chapel at the top of the cliff face.

Less than an hour later we're in La Roque-Gageac, considered one of the most beautiful villages in France and, yes, call me a hopeless romantic, but I'm already plotting a long writing sabbatical here – perhaps in the stone cottage we see in a garden, from where I'll have a kingfisher's view of the long flat-bottomed boats that drift down the Dordogne.

Our next destination is Château de la Treyne, a fortress dating back to the 14th century, set in 120 hectares of forest and parkland overlooking the Dordogne. Close to the village of Lacave, it's one of more than a thousand castles between here and Bordeaux and, having become a château expert during the past six days, I'm hard-pressed to imagine a more inviting one.

"Some castles are like museums," says owner Philippe Gombert, who also happens to be president of Relais & Châteaux. "But this is an easy-living castle. We want people to be happy and comfortable here."

Within minutes of being shown my room, I reconsider my decision to move to La Roque-Gageac. Instead, I'll take up residence in my master suite, with its ceiling traced in Gothic woodwork, golden bath and electric windows.

This was once a 16th-century lair for Pierre de la Ramière, Lord of La Treyne, the French Huguenot leader and friend of King Henry IV. Centuries later, in World War II, a large part of the Louvre's Egyptian collection was kept here before the German occupation of Paris. The treasures were spirited out of the museum by curator André Chamson, who later joined the Résistance and went on to become director of the National Archives. In my overindulged state, I can't help thinking that had history been more benevolent it would have been him being honoured here tonight in the Grand Salon instead of me.>

CHÂTEAU IN THE AIR

Château de Mercuès. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Mercuès chef Julien Poisot; La Roque-Gageac on the bank of the Dordogne; a suite at Château de Mercuès; Poisot's cod flakes with mashed herb potatoes and trout eggs.



La Roque-Gageac, one of the *most beautiful villages* in France, has a kingfisher's view of the Dordogne River.



CRUISE CONTROL

From below: Philippe and Stéphanie Gombert; Rocamadour, famous for its Black Madonna; Stéphane Andrieux's green asparagus and truffled poached egg. Opposite: Château de la Treyne in Lacave.

Chef Stéphane Andrieux has prepared green asparagus with a truffled poached egg, followed by millefeuille of Limousin beef and foie gras with potato purée and red wine, roast Quercy lamb with gratin dauphinois, and coconut and strawberry mousse matched with a glass of Muscat de Rivesaltes and, finally, 10 cheeses served on a tray almost the size of a barnyard door.

"All our products come from within 120 kilometres from here," Gombert explains later. "Because the aim of all our Relais & Châteaux properties is to find harmony between where you are and what you find on your plate. That is how we share with our guests what is beautiful and good in life."

The beautiful and the good must inevitably come to an end and it does for us on the outskirts of Limoges, the city in the western foothills of the Massif Central, known for its exquisite porcelain.

Our lodgings are at La Chapelle Saint-Martin, once the private residence of a 19th-century porcelain manufacturer and owned since 1970 by the Dudognon family, who bred Limousin cattle before turning their attention to vintage cars and hotel management.

Today the property is run by Gilles Dudognon and his wife, Aude, and to say that Gilles is something of a celebrity in Limoges is like saying the French love their cheese. He's a collector of art and vintage cars, the owner and chef of La Chapelle Saint-Martin, and owner of several other properties in Limoges, including a former Carmelite convent that has been turned into a restaurant now specialising in wood-fired beef.

The Dudognons are frantically busy when we arrive. Monsieur Dudognon is preparing food off-site for 500 guests at the opening of a porcelain exhibition in Limoges tomorrow night. They're catering a Moroccan dinner for 50 elsewhere in town, and preparing a cocktail party for 220 in a few days' time.

La Chapelle Saint-Martin feels deserted and, despite Madame Dudognon's protestations to the contrary, it appears we have come at a less-than-opportune time.

This is a blessing in disguise, however. When the first two courses of dinner arrive – trotters with slices of foie gras, and foie gras in a cranberry pistachio sauce – I'm able to pass both to photographer Anthony Lanneretonne without being observed. He eats double portions of both, before declaring that he, too, is unlikely to ever eat foie gras again.

But this is another dimension to happiness: an Australian and a Frenchman extending the bonds of fraternity over dinner, but then – at least in my case – having the liberty to finally say *non, ça suffit*. Enough is enough. **CT**

THE ROADS TO HAPPINESS

Relais & Châteaux was founded in France in 1954 by two music-hall artists, Marcel and Nelly Tilloy, who, during World War II, bought a hotel restaurant in the Rhône Valley called The Cardinal. They convinced seven of their hotelier and restaurateur friends to create an association based on shared values of quality, lifestyle and gastronomy, and to open their properties to the discerning wayfarer under the slogan of "La Route du Bonheur".

There are 530 properties in the group Relais & Châteaux in 64 countries, each with its own routes du bonheur, or suggested driving itineraries – from castles in Spain and cottages in England to riads in Morocco and ranches in the United States.

The *Gourmet Traveller* team undertook the route du bonheur in style, in a **BMW 640d Gran Coupé** with TwinPower turbo technology (to get technical, this combines high-precision direct fuel injection with continuously adjusting camshaft positions for both the intake and exhaust valves). In terms of dynamics, comfort, technology and design elegance, it would be hard to imagine a more innovative or luxurious form of transport through the fields of south-western France. The car features a Connected Drive navigation package, Dakota leather trim, electrically adjustable seats (including memory function), two-zone automatic climate control, heated exterior mirrors, an iDrive operating system with touch controller, state-of-the-art suspension technology and carbon-dioxide emissions said by the manufacturer to be the lowest carbon-dioxide emissions for a car this size. We like.

THE FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth to Paris via Singapore, with a direct flight daily from Singapore to Charles de Gaulle Airport, singaporeair.com. Trains from Paris to Bordeaux take 3 hours and 15 minutes; flights leave Paris Orly. Our route du bonheur, a 690-kilometre round trip, starts at Le Saint-James Bouliac, just out of Bordeaux. Relais & Châteaux has 64 routes arranged by destination and theme. relaischateaux.com

STAY

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