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## Unwinding in 'la France authentique'

**The "real" France of the Perigord region is rural, picturesque and family-friendly - far from the madding roar that Paris can become.**

PAMELA GRINER LEAVY  
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SARLAT, FRANCE - Tourists fed up with crowded boulevards, overpriced, cramped hotel rooms and tourist trap cafes in oh-so-urban Paris will find a different world in Southwest France's Perigord region.

About six hours from Paris by comfortable TGV fast train, the area boasts prehistoric caves - possibly the best in Europe - mountains with green landscapes reminiscent of western North Carolina, and the winding Dordogne River, custom-made for lazy canoeing.

However, don't commit the cultural faux pas of describing the remote, castle-rich Dordogne River area as la France profonde, meaning rural France. That can rankle Perigord residents, as one hotelier explained:

"La France profonde is a general name, rather pejorative, used by urbans to describe people who are not educated. Therefore the term is not the best to describe this region," said Isabelle Ginioux. She owns Le Branchat, a large B&B in Sagelat that is a scenic 20-minute drive from Sarlat, the region's main city.

Ginioux, her husband, Richard, and daughters Louise, 8, and Clara, 5, live on 10 acres of woodlands and vineyards. They provide six bedrooms and suites for guests in their home.

"I would rather talk about la France pittoresque or la France authentique," said Ginioux, a flight attendant for more than 14 years with Air France and AOM airlines and formerly a Paris-based manager for Leading Hotels of the World.

Authentic food ranks high in France and fermes auberges, working farms that serve homemade regional cuisine such as duck and goose, are popular with locals and tourists.

The nearby village of Belves, for instance, features a night market/restaurant in July and August where people shop for fish, local produce, fruit and bread, and then watch as it is cooked for them. Shoppers dine there for about 25 euros (about \$30.60 U.S.) per person for two courses, dessert, wine, music - and the opportunity to meet other people.

Then there's the historical sideshow that should impress even the jaded traveler weary of touring stately mansions. Cliff-hugging overlooks on winding narrow roads offer dramatic views of the region's hundreds of castles and chateaus.

One is the feudal castle at Beynac, which dates to the 12th century. The castle was captured by Richard the Lionhearted of England in 1189 and was kept by him until he was killed during the siege of Chalus in Limoges.

Located in the village of Beynac, the castle was featured in the 1999 movie *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*. Johnny Depp fans may recall that Beynac was one of the French sites used for the riverboat scenes in the 2000 movie *Chocolat*.

Also in the region is Chateau des Milandes, home of the late American entertainer Josephine Baker. A legend in France, Baker went to Paris in 1925 and achieved star billing at the Folies Bergere.

During World War II, Baker joined the Resistance and in the 1950s lived at Chateau des Milandes, where she adopted babies of all nationalities, calling them her "rainbow tribe."

Americans are currently in the minority at Le Branchat. The past (but now improving) dollar exchange rate with the euro and negative France-U.S. relations have meant a decline in American visitors during the past three years.

However, fewer Americans could be welcome news to U.S. travelers who desire a more international experience. Le Branchat hosts mostly Europeans and Australians, but the guestbook also lists travelers from South Africa, Israel and Japan.

Bucking the American travel trend earlier this summer were Susan and Jim Pendergraft of Largo. With 6-year-old daughter, Savanna, the Pendergrafts bypassed Paris, deciding to tour the Perigord and stay at Le Branchat.

Their home stay in a French *chambres d'hotels* offered a child-friendly atmosphere and the opportunity to interact up with a French family, including their dogs and cats, says Susan Pendergraft.

Savanna's parents were able to supervise her swimming in the Le Branchat pool while they sampled the area's cheese and sourdough baguettes. The adults especially admired area gardens.

"All the flowers were in bloom and poppies were to be seen everywhere," said Susan Pendergraft. "It's easy to travel with children. Teach them a few words of the language and try to organize farm stays or bed and breakfasts that welcome children or who have children themselves."

- Pamela Griner Leavy, formerly of St. Petersburg, is a freelance writer now living in Paris.

## **IF YOU GO**

**GETTING THERE:** Many airlines offer connecting service from Tampa to Paris. Toulouse International Airport is the closest international airport to the Sarlat area.

SNCF trains serve Toulouse 2 hours from Le Branchat, Sarlat (20 minutes from Le Branchat) and LeBuisson (10 minutes from Le Branchat). You can shop for tickets before leaving the U.S. by going to Rail Europe's Web site, [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com) That company is also offering a two-day France Railpass, not available from SNCF.

Five TGV (high-speed) trains run daily, about a 6-hour trip between Paris' Gare Montparnasse station and Sarlat, some with changes in Bordeaux, Libourne or Souillac. Connections can be made from Sarlat

to LeBuisson.

Train reservations can be made through travel agents, purchased at Gares and SNCF offices across Paris, or by accessing the English-language site on [www.sncf.com](http://www.sncf.com) Seasonal rates vary, but be sure to mention if two people are traveling together or if a person is over 60, which may merit discounts.

A car is necessary for touring the Perigord region. Rental agencies serve Sarlat and Toulouse.

STAYING THERE: Le Branchat Chambres D'Hotes, 24170 Sagelat, France. [www.lebranchat.com](http://www.lebranchat.com) 011-33-5-53-28-98-80. E-mail [lebranchat@lebranchat.com](mailto:lebranchat@lebranchat.com) or [info@lebranchat.com](mailto:info@lebranchat.com)

Rates: Three bedrooms with private bath and French continental breakfast, 53-138 euros per night (about \$64 to \$167). Three gate cottages rent from 359-1,369 euros per week (about \$434 to \$1,656). Mastercard and Visa are accepted.

ONE MORE THING: When reading about the region, you may find it referred to as "la France profonde". The travel staff at Rick Steves' Europe Through the Back Door Inc. headquarters in Edmonds, Wash., use the term in tour books and tour group itineraries to describe some of France's remote areas. A spokeswoman for Steves says the term is not derogatory but means the part of France that many tourists do not seek out.

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