

A large glass of Bordeaux with a slice of Biarritz

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Everyone associates Bordeaux with just wine, and yes they do produce some 700 million bottles of red wine a year, which English wine snobs call claret. But what of the actual place, being quite fond of a glass or two we thought it may be worth a visit, it was.



Bordeaux: Place de la Bourse

Just an hour's flight from Gatwick takes you to one of the loveliest cities in South West France, situated on the river Garonne.

We booked a BA Fly/Drive trip, surprisingly the same price as our usual orange aircraft but with the benefit of free luggage and free drinks, and booked into the **Mercure Cite Mondial**. This is a smart modern hotel in the Chartrons area, a very trendy location, almost on the river. The breakfast on their seventh floor restaurant was one of the best we have had in a long time and has a great view of the river and the city.



Bordeaux: Old Town

The old town is a UNESCO World Heritage site and much to our surprise the all the city is quite lovely. Just 20 years ago the whole place was rundown; the river was hidden by dingy warehouses, as it was once a major port. Today it has been totally regenerated with wide open boulevards, the honey coloured 19th century buildings have been cleaned and the riverside opened up.

One of the first areas to be renovated and pedestrianised and still the place to go on a Friday and Saturday evening, is the St Pierre district in the heart of Old Bordeaux. The star of the Bordeaux show is the river which winds round the city in a great arc. They have built a fabulous quay with cafes, restaurants and very trendy bars, it's where the smart set eat, drink and stroll.

We had dinner in the excellent gay run **La Cigale** restaurant, run by two very friendly, good-looking guys, cosy and very reasonable. The new hi-tech tram system is very cheap and the best way to see the city. There are apparently 376 listed historic monuments; we saw a few, all the famous shops are

there, lovely squares and parks and being there during the June heat wave certainly added to the overall experience.



Bordeaux: Le Quai des Marques

Bordeaux is still being developed, but today it is a well-groomed and good mannered French city which compares itself with Paris, that may be a step too far but it is certainly worth a visit.

From there we drove to Biarritz just two hours down one of the most boring roads in France, and there are plenty of them. The A63 is a long, straight, utterly featureless road but gets you where you're going quite quickly.



Biarritz, is a 20 century town made fashionable in the 1930's by frequent visits by the Duke and Duchess of Windsor is now a relatively quiet seaside resort on the Basque coast. They opened the first casino in 1901 and for some time the town became very popular with the beau monde, film stars and minor European royalty. Today it has a sense of faded gentility. It became known as the Queen of Seaside Resorts, today it's more the Queen Mother.

To be honest it was a disappointment, yes it has several large lovely surfing beaches, some very grand buildings and hotels and lots of shops but not a lot else. There is however a lot of great restaurants in the buzzy, trendy Halles district. Being in the Basque country the food is based on the famous pintxos. Fantastic and great fun.



The receptionist at the very uninspiring **Mercure President Hotel** we stayed in was disarmingly honest and said we should go to Bayonne, a short drive away, so we did. Google Biarritz and you will get dozens of references to Bayonne and there's a good reason.



Bayonne

Bayonne is a truly magnificent medieval city and well worth a visit. The narrow streets and squares of the perfectly preserved old town are mainly pedestrianised and great to wander around. The city is famous for cured ham, expensive but delicious we even brought some home. Bayonne is also known as the chocolate capital of France. It is also the capital of the Pays Basque, the signs are confusing as the Basque language is almost impossible to understand but most are also in French. In Basque welcome becomes ongietorri Baiona or in French Bienvenue à Bayonne, it does get a bit baffling.

Biarritz and Bayonne are just ten minutes and many centuries apart, and quite fascinating in their own ways.

<http://www.bordeaux-tourism.co.uk>

<http://tourisme.biarritz.fr>