

## Bordeaux, France: More Than Just Wine

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Think of the name Bordeaux, and for me, what immediately comes to mind is wine, particularly the red variety. With names such as Medoc and Bourgeois produced by vineyards surrounding the city, it's only natural to think that, but as we discovered on our first visit to Bordeaux, there's so much more to the place than that.

The city was built on a curve of the River Garonne, and has actually been a capital of France on three separate occasions in the past: in 1871, and then again during the First and Second World Wars. Each time, it gained the title when the then government moved there due to German invasions. It was a suitable place to govern the country from, having undergone major developments in the 18th century.

That's the main beauty of this city, the fact that so much survives from those major developments. The whole riverfront is lined with grand buildings from that magnificent era, but none more so than in the Place de la Bourse, where the 18th century buildings there housed Bordeaux's stock exchange. Centred around a beautiful fountain, the buildings form a glorious semi-circle, looking out at the river beyond.

Today, that view is very different to what those working at the stock exchange would have seen all those years ago. Much of that is down to the appearance of Bordeaux's newest tourist attraction, the Mirror of Water. It was added in 2006 and is a genius addition to the waterside. Essentially, it's a set of slabs, with a water supply underneath it, so that a variety of water effects can be created. One minute, you may have a haze of water over the slabs, giving you some stunning reflections of the beautiful buildings at Place de la Bourse, while the next minute, you may see the smoke effect, which is fascinating. It's certainly much appreciated by both tourists and locals, with the place packed when we visited. I guess the fact that the temperatures were into the 90s probably explained that!

Just a little further along the river banks is the start to what's called the Esplanade des Quinconces, which was first laid out in the 19th century. Today the trees that were planted there cover the area in shade, which was very welcome during our visit. Although much of this is still open, with statues dotted around, it's also part of the one of the various tram routes around the city, which only opened in 2003, but has been much extended since then.

At the top of the esplanade is the beautiful Monument aux Girondins,

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a lovely fountain crowned by its very own statue of Liberty, who is breaking free from her chains. Celebrating the French republic, this has various sets of sculptures around the base of the fountain, all showcasing chariots of horses and their passengers.

Head west from this and you'll quickly come across the Grand Theatre, the focal point of the Place de la Comedie. Standing there, I couldn't help but think that those staying in the hotel opposite had a magnificent view from their bedroom windows. Perhaps that's the place to stay if we ever return here in the future.

Built in the late 18th century, the Grand Theatre is how you'd hope every theater in the world could be, as going to see a performance here really would be a night out. It's a very opulent building, with columns at the front, complete with statues on top, and a suit for gentlemen and dresses for ladies would not be out of place at all here! Today you can enjoy ballet or opera performances, although we visited before the beginning of their season, so were only able to glimpse the beauty of this place in the tea rooms they have here. Let's just say that enjoying tea here would have been a very expensive treat!

From here, we wandered through the city, enjoying the silence, as our visit had coincided with a car-free day. On the first Sunday of every month, cars are banished from the center of the city, and while it made navigating and finding a parking space a nightmare for us at the start of the day, we reaped the benefits later on. There was something very special about being able to stand in some of the main shopping streets and just hear the sounds of people walking around talking to each other and the occasional cyclist. Perhaps it's something other cities should try out?

Our next stop took us further out of the city, although this was still a pleasant walk. Bordeaux is certainly very easy to get around, both on two feet and via the expansive tram system. Had it not been for the fact that we were staying in a hotel very much on the outskirts of the city, with no public transport close at hand, we could easily have left the car at home for the day.

The city's main cathedral is Cathedrale Saint-Andre, which dates back to the 11th century. It's an imposing structure and we could tell when we were getting near, as the main tower dominates the skyline. Perhaps best of all, it's in the middle of a huge square, of the kind for which France is rightly known, dotted with cafes all around. We were able to get a very reasonably priced lunch in one of these cafes and just take in the scenery all around us.

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At the end of the square is another building well worth having a look at, although you can only access it once a week, on Wednesday, for guided tours. The Palais Rohan was originally built as the residence for the Archbishop Meriadec de Rohan, which explains where the name comes from. Today it has perhaps just as important a role, as it's now home to the city hall.

Bordeaux is a beautiful city and a real joy to explore. In fact, thanks to a major restoration project in the 1990s, more than 350 of Bordeaux's buildings have now been classified as historic, with the UNESCO World Heritage Site covering nearly half of the city. It means everywhere you look, you see imposing buildings and boulevards from France's rich history. Although Paris is the place you must often think of whenever France is mentioned, Bordeaux has been a worthy substitute capital city in the past and gives every visitor a chance to glimpse the history and architecture of a beautiful city and country.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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