



With the grandeur of Paris, plus its own bohemian charm, Bordeaux is a top-class destination.

# Bordeaux, France—A Less-Expensive Alternative to Paris

Barbara Diggs

I'm strolling along Bordeaux's handsome promenade as it curves along the left bank of the Garonne river, trying to imagine how the area must have looked before its glamorous makeover some 15 years ago. It's hard to believe that this bright, tranquil esplanade was once an eyesore of a port, filled with grimy buildings and rusting warehouses. Today, as cyclists zip by and couples sip glasses of garnet-red wine on waterside terraces, my imagination has to work overtime to conjure a vision of this grungy past.

The Bordeaux area, in southwestern France's Aquitaine region, is well known for its rolling vineyards and world-class wines. But now the city itself is coming into its own. Formerly called "Sleeping Beauty" for having slumbered for decades under a soot-covered exterior, the exquisitely scrubbed and refurbished city is attracting more attention than ever before.

The Enlightenment-era limestone buildings dazzle in Bordeaux's urban center and the spacious cobblestone squares, once clogged with traffic, are now largely car-free. A slew of modern restaurants and bistros, headed by young, ambitious chefs, have popped up through-

out the city, putting Bordeaux on France's gastronomic map. A sleek tramway, built only in 2003, snakes around the city, tying farther-flung areas to the center. But it's remarkably easy to walk everywhere.

So impressive is the city's transformation that in 2007 UNESCO designated both the port and the center as protected World Heritage sites. In 2015, a poll created by European Best Destinations

## BARGAIN HUNTING AT THE QUINCONCES ANTIQUE FAIR

If you're in Bordeaux in spring or fall, time your visit so that it coincides with the immense, month-long antiques fair at the Places des Quinconces. The fair is the oldest and largest one in the Aquitaine region and features some 200 stalls. As always, it's a hunt for true bargains, but I came across some great finds. My favorite was a gorgeous set of six brushed silver liqueur glasses in a velvet-lined box for just \$55. For the fair's next date, see: [Bordeauxquinconces.com](http://Bordeauxquinconces.com).

saw Bordeaux voted the premier tourist destination in Europe. The area has become more attractive to potential transplants, too. In a recent poll, 56% of Parisians polled ranked Bordeaux as the number-one place they'd move to if they relocated. And many are actually making the move.

Rosanna DeCiccio, a Canadian native who lived in Paris for over a decade before moving to Bordeaux in 2017, says that she and her husband chose Bordeaux for a different lifestyle. "Paris was getting more and more chaotic, noisy, and polluted. We wanted to spend less time working to pay for expenses and more time enjoying family life," she says. Even better? "It's cheaper than Paris in every aspect, including transport, entertainment—and especially restaurants."

If you've fantasized about living in Paris but brushed it off as too big, busy, or expensive, you may want to give living in or around Bordeaux some thought. Here's why.

## Big City, Relaxed Pace

It wasn't until I arrived in Bordeaux that I remembered that "Little Paris" is another nickname for the city. The 18th-century architecture in the center—stately limestone buildings with double-storied French windows and wrought-iron balconies—will be a familiar sight to all who know the City of Light. But Bordeaux is a significantly smaller city than Paris, and Bordeaux's more sedate pace is palpable.

That's not to say Bordeaux is sleepy. With a population of 234,000, the city is the sixth-largest in the country. When you're in need of cultural stimulation and company, the historic center is the place to be. Its pleasant mixture of narrow cobblestone streets, wide boulevards, and classical squares hums with people of all ages. "I love how there is a very innovative and creative energy here that is making the city very trendy, charming, and easy to enjoy," says Hannah Delvallé, a U.S. expat who moved to Bordeaux nearly a year ago. "There is always an interesting event, workshop, class, concert, or social gathering going on. Just about something for everyone, it seems."

For those who crave the buzz and atmosphere of Paris, you'll want to head to the central neighborhood of Les Chartrons, which you can think of as Bordeaux's answer to Paris's boho Marais neighbor-

hood. This area was once the center of the city's wine trade. But today it's a hip jumble of warehouses and stone *hôtels particuliers* (mansions) whose array of boutiques and restaurants will delight shoppers and brunch addicts alike.

And grocery shopping, always a delight in France, is even more so in Bordeaux. Try the 18th-century covered market, *Marché des Capucins*, just west of the city's Saint-Jean railway station, for fresh fruit, vegetables, meats, regional cheeses, and just-landed seafood at excellent prices. (Oysters from nearby Arcachon are a specialty, at around \$5 for a half dozen.) Two pounds of tomatoes go for around \$1 in season, and a pound of grey mullet costs just \$2. It's open Tuesday to Sunday from 6 a.m. until 1 p.m., and you can also eat there at one of the on-site restaurants serving market-fresh *plats du jour* from around \$10.

Antique hunters should head to Rue Notre Dame, where you can find numerous galleries offering everything from gilt-framed, 19th-century oil paintings to armchairs made almost entirely of fur and antlers, to the precious bargain that you *really* want. In particular, Le Village gallery, with two stories of stalls, is a favorite spot among both locals and tourists. After you've shopped yourself to exhaustion, check out the lunch menu at the brasserie Les Nouveaux Chartrons, where you can get a three-course meal for just \$15.74.

Real estate in Chartrons and other central areas is pricier now than in earlier years, thanks in part to the influx of Parisians (much to the dismay of the locals). But it's still less expensive than comparable neighborhoods in Paris. In 2018, the average squarefoot price for an apartment in Paris is approximately \$981; in Bordeaux it's \$467. Central Bordeaux is best for those who would be happy with just a small foothold in the city. A tiny, mint-condition, serviced *pied-à-terre* of just 180 square feet in Les Chartrons is currently on the market for \$65,685. But typically, you'll pay at least \$200,000 for a one-bedroom condo of 400 square feet in top condition. Rent for a fully furnished, one-bedroom apartment will cost around \$1,300 a month.

If you only visit places like Chartrons, you'll think that all of Bordeaux has a big

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## BORDEAUX VINEYARDS

Proximity to Bordeaux's extraordinary vineyards is one benefit the city has over Paris, hands down. Vineyards have been in the area for some 2,000 years, thanks to the ancient Romans, who brought grapevines when they conquered the Gauls back in the first century AD. Since there are some 7,000 wineries in and around Bordeaux, it's safe to say that you can spend many years learning about the wines' varieties and selecting a favorite or two. While the legendary wine estates of Lafite, Latour, and Margaux capture the lion's share of attention, you can find

excellent wine and better value at some of the lesser-known châteaux. For example, try Château Beaumont in Cussac-Fort Médoc, an enchanting 19th-century estate that's often praised for its wonderfully vibrant and harmonious Haut Médoc (Merlot), some of which are "undervalued" at \$13 a bottle. (See: *Chateau-beaumont.com*.) Château Olivier, in Léognan, is also known as a phenomenal-value wine for the price, especially for its white blend "Pessac-Léognan." Its best-value wines range from \$15 to \$24. (See: *Chateau-olivier.com*.)

city's energy and buzz. Once you leave the center, however, Bordeaux has the feel of a large town. The streets are quieter, and tree-lined blocks are common. Rosanna, who lives in the Saint-Bruno area, only a 10-minute bike ride from the center, selected this area for its slower pace, space, and greenery. "Because the buildings are only two stories, I can see the sky," Rosanna says delightedly. "Most of the year you even can see the sunrise or sunset."

Other Bordeaux areas with green spaces include Caudéran and Bouscat, which lie on the outskirts of the city. In Caudéran, which is popular for its 18-hole golf course (\$45 green fees), you can get a 540-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment with a balcony starting from \$216,000.

### Copious Culture

Like most French cities, Bordeaux places a high emphasis on culture and the arts. Although the city's cultural offerings can't compete with those of Paris—no other French city compares—Bordeaux is home to a dozen or so museums. These include the sublime Museum of Decorative Arts, which shows off Old World French grandeur and modern designs in a splendid 18th-century mansion (entrance: \$6).

Unsurprisingly, many of the city's museums relate to wine. The city's newest claim to fame is the Cité du Vin. This huge, interactive space for wine lovers honors the world's favorite form of grape in every

possible way, starting with the museum's futuristic swirling-wine-in-a-glass design. There you can learn about the history of wines from every region of the world, develop your abilities to sniff out the different aromas found in wine, or even sit down at a laid dinner table to learn about wine pairing from a holographic wine master.

Bordeaux is also home to numerous annual festivals, a number of which, again, are related to wine. But the Agora Biennale, a festival of art, architecture, design, literature, and photography, has become an increasingly popular event since its inception in 2004. There's also the famous jazz festival in Saint-Émilion, an international film festival, and countless other smaller events that keep the residents entertained.

### Excellent Travel Opportunities

For me, the biggest pull of Bordeaux is the city's fortunate placement in the region. From Bordeaux, you have easy access to numerous lakes, beaches, and countryside. When the weather turns warm, locals enjoy the sandy beaches and bright blue bay of Arcachon (also home to the highest sand dune in Europe and a massive oyster farm), which is a 50-minute, \$4 train ride away from the city center. Less than 90 minutes' drive away are the stunning ancient towns and hills of the Dordogne, where you can hunt for truffles, canoe or kayak down the Dordogne river, hike through deep green forests, go castle-hopping, or spend simply years exploring France's legendary prehistoric sites. And if in the end you long for Paris, after all, a mere three hours on a high-speed train will get you there. ■