

Les Plus Beaux Villages de France

by Mick Austin

Over time, some 32,000 villages have shaped the French countryside into how we know it today. And those villages that are members of the association Les Plus Beaux Villages de France (The Most Beautiful Villages of France) all share the same passion and ambition.

That is to make the exceptional quality of their heritage known and recognised and to invite us to share in their history, their land, their culture and their inhabitants.

Today the association includes 156 villages spread over 21 regions and 69 départements, all aiming to “avoid certain pitfalls such as villages turning into soulless museums or theme parks... to reconcile villages with the future and to restore life around the fountain or in the square shaded by 100-year-old lime and plane trees.”

Although the Deux-Sèvres does not, as yet, have a village on the list there are plenty in the nearby départements for you to explore.

CHARENTE (16)

Aubeterre-sur-Dronne On the borders of Charente and Périgord, Aubeterre clings to a grassy cliff on the banks of the Dronne. The monolithic underground Church of Saint Jean and the Romanesque Church of Saint Jacques, with its stunning façade, are evidence of the village’s religious past. Pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela used to stop there.

Don’t miss: Specialist shops including a leather worker and potters.
More info: www.aubeterresurdronne.com

CHARENTE MARITIME (17)

Ars-en-Ré At the westernmost tip of the island of Ile de Ré and easily spotted thanks to its church steeple. Its 40-metre high black and white spire still serves as a landmark for sailors. The village grew up around the salt marshes in the 11th Century and 60 salt workers still farm the Fier d’Ars salt marshes today.

Don’t miss: Church of St Etienne, L’Huitrière de Ré oyster farm.
More info: www.iledere-arsenre.com

La Flotte A pretty little fishing and yachting port on Saint-Martin-de-Ré, with its rounded, 200-metre long jetty built in 1840. Peaceful, flower-decked streets with low-roofed houses whose sparkingly white walls provide a luminous background to the green or blue shutters.

Don’t miss: Fort de la Prée, Maison du Platin (life on the island), remains of the Cistercian abbey of the Châteliers.
More info: www.laflotte-iledere.fr



Aubeterre-sur-Dronne © Cobber17



Ars-en-Ré © Pepper



La Flotte © PHGCOM



Mournac-sur-Seudre © Cobber17

All images for this article are sourced from Wikimedia Commons

Mornac-sur-Seudre An old fishing and commercial port which today focuses more on oyster farming and the salt produced by its marshes. A classic example of a Charente coastal village, with its white-painted houses with green or blue shutters that are often hidden by hollyhocks.

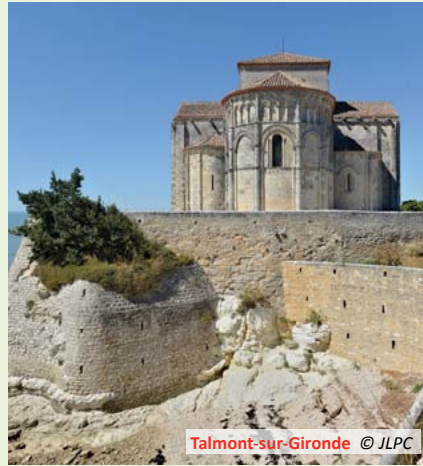
Don't miss: Church of Saint Pierre, the marshes and its oyster farming, craftsmen selling jewellery, leather, painting and pottery.

More info: www.tourisme-mornac-sur-seudre.fr

Talmont-sur-Gironde Just 15kms south of Royan, Talmont sits on a rocky peak overlooking the Gironde estuary. It still has its original bastide (fortified) layout, built in 1284 by Edward 1, Duke of Aquitaine. Towering above the village, the magnificent church of Sainte Radegonde is still protected by ramparts. In the village, whitewashed houses and blue shutters peep out behind hollyhocks

Don't miss: History and fishing museums.

More info: www.talmont-sur-gironde.fr



Talmont-sur-Gironde © JLPC



Belvès © Mossot

DORDOGNE (24)

Belvès A medieval town perched on a rocky spur above the Nauze Valley in Périgord Noir, it boasts seven bell towers. Despite wars and invasions, the town has managed to preserve superb relics from its history.

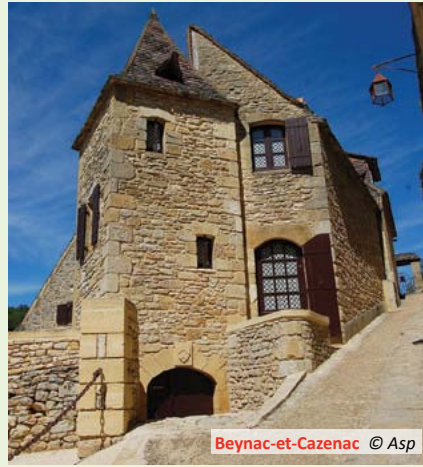
Don't miss: Cave dwellings, The Castrum and the Organistrum Museum and hurdy gurdies!

More info: www.perigordnoir-valleedordogne.com

Beynac-et-Cazenac Lies 10kms south-west of Sarlat, on the banks of the Dordogne, and boasts an imposing castle, once besieged by Richard the Lionheart, around which are built 'lauze' stone slab-roofed houses with creamy façades.

Don't miss: Beynac Castle, the Archaeological Park and La Causerie Médiévale (history of the Périgord told through tapestry).

More info: www.sarlat-tourisme.com/en



Beynac-et-Cazenac © Asp



Castelnau-la-Chapelle © Steve Bennett

Castelnau-la-Chapelle Overlooks the confluence between the Dordogne and Céou rivers in an exceptional landscape opposite the beautiful villages of Beynac-et-Cazenac and La Roque-Gageac. Well known for its two castles, the medieval one superbly restored with its Museum of War in the Middle Ages and the Milandes castle. The village itself and its typical Périgord architecture is also worth discovering.

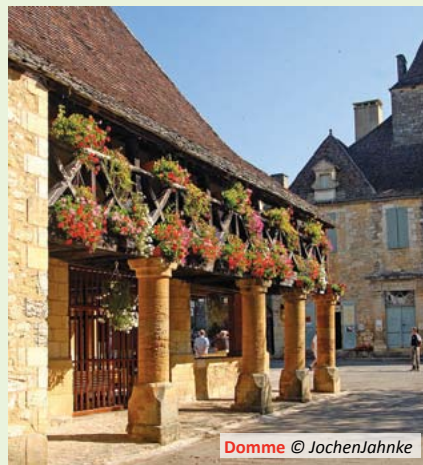
Don't miss: Gardens of Lacoste castle, Museum of Périgord Nut.

More info: www.tourisme-ceou.com

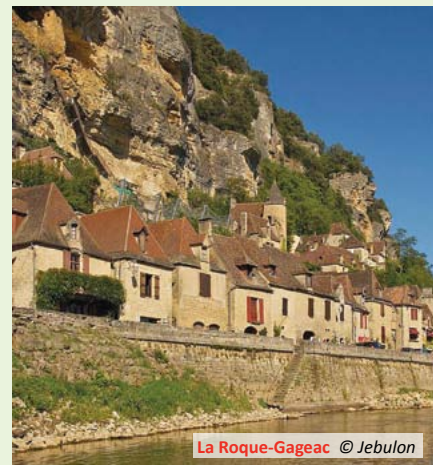
Domme Perched on a breathtakingly high cliff for an exceptional view of the Dordogne valley, this creamy-stoned bastide boasts a successful combination of architectural, natural and gastronomic heritage typical of Périgord Noir.

Don't miss: Church of Notre Dame de l'Assomption, Templars' Tower, Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions.

More info: www.perigordnoir-valleedordogne.com



Domme © JochenJahnke



La Roque-Gageac © Jebulon

La Roque-Gageac In Périgord Noir at the foot of a south-facing cliff, the creamy stone houses with their 'lauze' stone slab or brown-tiled roofs are mirrored in the waters of the River Dordogne where the famous 'gabares' (traditional flat-bottomed boats) laden with goods used to travel in the 19th Century.

Don't miss: Troglodyte fort built in the cliff face, exotic gardens and Ferme Fleurie garden.

More info: www.sarlat-tourisme.com

Limeuil Situated where the rivers Dordogne and Vézère meet. It lived through Viking invasions and the 100 Years' War but today only three fortified gates are left to bear witness to those times. A bustling river port of old, the medieval village with its stone-built, dark-tiled houses so typical of Périgord Noir is now a charming, refreshing place in which to stop.

Don't miss: Saint-Martin's church, the castle grounds.

More info: www.limeuil-en-perigord.com



Limeuil © Symac



Monpazier © G069

Monpazier Labelled a 'Grand site national', it has no less than 32 listed buildings and is regarded as the prime example of a bastide among the 300 in south-western France. An outstanding fortified village founded by Edward 1 of England in 1284.

Don't miss: The Bastideum (interactive museum about Monpazier's heritage and architecture), Church of Saint Dominique.

More info: www.monpazier.fr

Saint-Amand-de-Coly Close to Sarlat and Lascaux, it stands comfortably between two small wooded valleys. Its 12th Century abbey is considered the most beautiful fortified church in Périgord.

Don't miss: La Maison du Patrimoine (heritage museum) and a guided tour of the abbey-church.

More info: www.saint-amand-de-coly.org

Saint-Jean-de-Côle The River Côle, a beautiful river spanned by a medieval bridge, runs through a village that boasts ochre-walled houses with brown-tiled roofs. Its history is linked to the 12th and 15th Century Chateau de la Marthonie, which overlooks the pretty Place Saint-Jean, and to the priory whose old Romanesque-Byzantine style church has an original layout.

Don't miss: Guided tour of the village, Church of St John the Baptist.

More info: www.saintjeandecole.fr

Saint-Léon-sur-Vézère Halfway between Lascaux and Les Eyziez, this former flourishing port on the River Vézère nestles in typical Périgord countryside. The village is well guarded by its castles – the Manoir de la Salle at the entrance to the village, Château de Clérans above the river and Château de Chabans, jewel of the Côte de Jor – and hosts the Music Festival of the Périgord Noir in its beautiful 12th Century Romanesque church.

Don't miss: Buddhist study and meditation centre, dinosaur park, cave dwellers' site and fossil museum.

More info: www.saint-leon-sur-vezere.fr

HAUTE-VIENNE (87)

Mortemart This delightful village is in Limousin country and has grown up around a castle built in the 10th Century by Abon Drut, Lord of Mortemart. It was destroyed by order of Cardinal de Richelieu and all that remains today is the tower keep and a few rooms that host exhibitions. While the Carmelite and Augustinian convents bear witness to the village's religious past, the old covered market and leading citizens' houses serve as a reminder that Mortemart was also a prosperous commercial centre.

Don't miss: The Dukes' castle, Carmelite convent.

More info: www.mortemarttourismelimousin.fr

MAINE ET LOIRE (49)

Montsoreau Lies between Anjou and Touraine and has the River Loire as its setting. The 15th Century castle made famous by Alexandre Dumas' novel La Dame de Montsoreau is reflected in the waters of this legendary river. All around, flower-decked streets with slate-roofed, white tufa houses and green pathways lead to the Saumur vineyards.

Don't miss: Church of Saint Pierre de Rest, Le Saut-aux-Loups mushroom farm.

More info: www.ville-montsoreau.fr

VIENNE (86)

Angles-sur-l'Anglin On the borders of Berry and Touraine, it gets its name from the Angles, the Saxon tribe that invaded England in the 5th Century, and from the river that separates the upper part of the village from the lower one. Its reputation has been established over the past 150 years thanks to its 'jours' – a form of hand-made, drawn-thread embroidery. The village is also famous for its 15,000-year-old Magdalenian sculptures of the 'Witches' Rock'.

Don't miss: Jours d'Angles embroidery workshop, the stronghold, Museum of the Witches Rock.

More info: www.anglesuranglin.com

VENDEE (85)

Vouvant Embraced by a loop of the River Mère and standing behind a well-preserved fortified wall. The origin of the village is linked to the legend of the Fairy Mélusine, an ancestor of the Counts of Lusignan, who is said to have given the village a castle overnight. The keep, called Mélusine Tower, is all that remains of that building and it watches over the village's whitewashed houses.

Don't miss: Church of Sainte Marie, Nef Théodelin exhibition chamber, Mélusine tower and house.

More info: www.tourisme-sudvendee.com



Saint-Amand-de-Coly © Pymouss



Saint-Jean-de-Côle © Traumrune



Saint-Léon-sur-Vézère © Père Igor



Mortemart © Nitot



Montsoreau © Manfred Heyde



Angles-sur-l'Anglin © JochenJahnke



Vouvant © ChrisSampson87

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitefortwo.com.