

La.bonne vie



Sheila Reid gets a taste for the good life on a relaxing break near medieval Bergerac

‘Your brakes are your best friend,’ yells Aymée, our guide, as we zoom along a country lane on electric

bikes. The sun is shining in an azure sky and a light breeze rustles the vines growing on one side of the road, while cows munch grass in a field on the other – bliss. It’s my first time on an E-bike but I’m a keen cyclist and, once I master the different levels on the electronic pad, ranging from one for flat to five for steep, I get carried away, click the pad to five for a hill ahead and only see the stop sign at a junction just in time.

Forgetting my ‘best friend’ and that I’m on the top setting, I try to stop with my feet. But the bike has a mind of its own and we both end up in a ditch. My companions are full of concern but I’m laughing – no harm done except a scraped calf and bruised pride! ‘It’s all part of the fun,’ I grin.

Back on board, I cross the road, switch on the throttle and race up the hill to our

destination, Le Domaine du Siorac in Saint-Aubin-de-Cadelech, a 30 hectare family vineyard that has been producing white, red, rosé and sweet Bergerac wine for 200 years. We sample some while feasting on a simple but delicious picnic of bread, cheese and charcuterie, before cycling back to the GoodTurn Cycles shop, notching up 18km. GoodTurn Cycles is a not-for-profit company set up by an American philanthropist, which takes on unemployed youngsters, such as Aymée, to give them work experience and life skills. Aymée balances work with studying tourism at college.

A PEACEFUL SETTING

I’m on a break in the Dordogne area of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region in southwest France, staying at La Palanque, a family-owned gîte (holiday accommodation) complex, just outside the fortified town of Eymet. As it’s only 30 minutes from Bergerac airport, it’s ideal for a short break. Set in 10 hectares, La Palanque was a former equestrian training centre, dating back to Napoleonic times. It has been transformed into five luxury gîtes – the original exposed brickwork has been

preserved, but they have all mod cons, including comfy beds, barbecue area, air conditioning and wood-burning stoves. Majestic poplar trees form a backdrop and a river meanders by on the perimeter of the estate. A pâtisserie breakfast is included and, if you want a break from cooking, hosts Josh and Mariana will order in dinner from the local butcher. As the gîte is only a 10-minute walk from Eymet, a car isn’t really necessary and, if you want to explore the area, you can always book a guided tour. We’re balancing activities with sightseeing to make the most of our trip.

Back at La Palanque, we chill out on loungers beside the 25m heated pool – great for keen swimmers – before a massage with Zoe, who’s also a Pilates teacher. The Swedish deep-tissue massage really works on my muscles that have been aching from cycling.

After a peaceful night’s sleep (the only sounds are owls hooting) in gîte Mimosa – their names are inspired by trees growing on the estate – we start the next day with a meditation session with Sarita. She also teaches us a Tibetan meditation we can do at home: focus on your heart and breathe through your heart, calling up the energy of gratitude. Feeling relaxed, we join Zoe’s weekly Pilates class in La Palanque’s barn, attended by locals and guests alike. As we work on balancing exercises, clams, table-top toe tapping and hip circles with the barn door open, I look out at a 250-year-old oak tree full of twittering birds. I feel back to nature and wish I could always do Pilates in such a lovely setting, instead of in my usual, sweaty local gym!

ANYONE FOR CAVIAR?

Our sports over for the day, it’s time for sightseeing. Tour guide Chris appears with his minibus to whisk us off for lunch at the gourmet Bistro d’en Face in Bergerac and a wander round the old town. Sitting outside in the sun, tucking into steak and chips, and gazing at the gabares (traditional skiffs) on the Dordogne river is a magical experience. Replete, we set off for a tour of Bergerac’s medieval buildings (Catherine de Medici stayed in one), shops, cafés and two statues of the town’s most famous son, Cyrano de Bergerac, complete with enormous nose! Afterwards, we wind down with a dip in La Palanque’s pool and a tasty ordered-in coq au vin dinner in our gîte, accompanied by local wine.

The mist is rising over the river as we stroll up to the barn for an early morning yoga session with Lizzie on our last day,

but any chill is soon dispelled as we warm up in preparation for an energetic sun salute.

Feeling limbered up for the day, we hire Chris to take us to some more attractions and, eschewing the ubiquitous chateaux, we drive to a caviar farm at Neuvic sur l’Isle. The 20 hectare farm is home to 130,000 sturgeon, which live in freshwater ponds beside the Isle river and produce four tons of caviar a year. While you can view – and even touch – the males, the females are secluded to avoid stressing them out; their eggs (caviar) are retrieved when they’re seven years old. We are shown the fine art of eating caviar by our guide: always use a plastic spoon (metal spoons break the eggs); and eat your spoonful in three parts to get the best taste experience. It’s a nutty taste – and washed down with a glass of bubbly, it’s a decadent holiday treat!

ENRICHING CULTURE

That evening, we stroll into Eymet to have dinner at Andine, a Peruvian restaurant, before joining a torch-lit tour of old Eymet. Two knowledgeable British residents guide us round the town, bringing its history to life by showing us the castle, church, convent and various buildings, some lovingly restored.

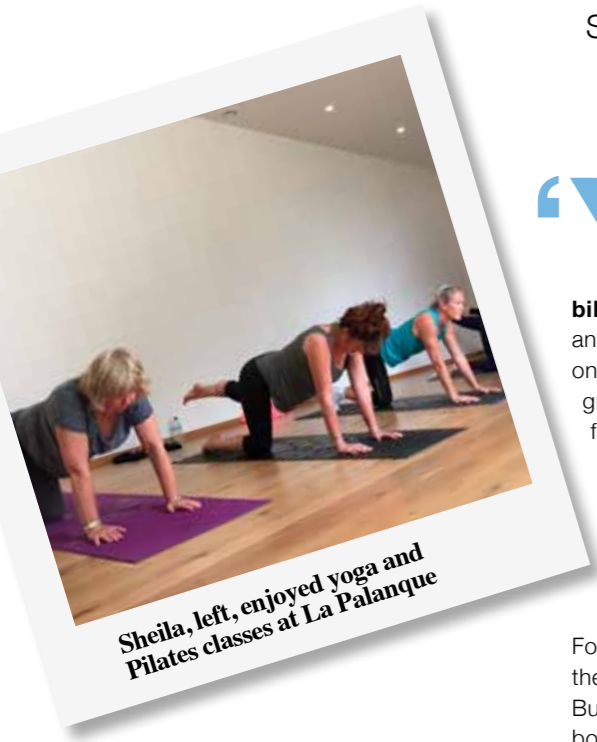
As we say goodbye to La Palanque the next day, we reflect that this corner of the Dordogne is steeped in history, attractions, activities and vineyards – and that we’ve only scratched the surface. Well, there’s always next year... ■



You'd struggle not to relax in this quiet, leafy, rural location

FACT FILE

- A week at La Palanque costs from £700 per gîte for seven nights’ B&B for four adults sharing; inclusive bespoke three-day activity breaks cost from £350 per person based on four adults sharing; lapalanque.com. To book tours with Chris, visit minibus47.com. To hire electric bikes, visit goodturncycles.fr. To book Pilates or a massage, contact La Palanque. To book yoga, email yogalizzief@gmail.com. To book meditation, visit solhenge.com.



Sheila, left, enjoyed yoga and Pilates classes at La Palanque

