



Les Landes: The wild corner of France where they leap bulls and waves for fun

The rough-hewn concrete arenas that dot Les Landes – filled to the brim with spectators on sultry August nights – [...]



Up and over: The course landaise consists of teams of young men who must leap over, swerve past or dash from charging bulls. Points are awarded for courage and flair. (Photo: Lucy Milmo)



By Cahal Milmo

January 16, 2018 11:25 am (Updated July 17, 2020 3:22 pm)

The rough-hewn concrete arenas that dot Les Landes – filled to the brim with spectators on sultry August nights – are proof of the extent to which the citizens of this idiosyncratic region take pride in their tempestuous relationship with nature.

In other parts of France, small town gatherings are likely to focus on orthodox gallic pleasures such as petanque or a *vide greniers* – those community bric a brac sales that translates with charming accuracy as “*empty your attic*”.

Tag-teams

But in Gascony, the southernmost corner of the French Atlantic coast, people come together to cheer an altogether different spectacle – young men running headlong at charging bulls before, at the last possible moment, launching themselves into a somersault over a half a tonne of snorting, raging bovine.



Welcome to the “toro défi” or “course landaise”, a sweaty palm-inducing extravaganza played by tag-teams of young men who take it in turns to sprint away from, swerve in front of or launch themselves (in much the same manner as the ancient citizens of Crete did) over a creature that is, to say the least, none too pleased to see them.

The result is pulsating – not least because each pause between the teams is an excuse for a local oompah-oompah band in the stands to raise the rafters as the clock races past midnight and the “écarteurs” twist their bodies into ever-more balletic feats of courage with little air between flesh and horn.

Taming of a landscape

Unlike the Spanish corridas, the bull comes to no physical harm and its proponents insist that the animals, bred from a long lineage of fighting bulls, are doing only what comes naturally.

But the défi, witnessed by your writer and 500 others from toddlers to nonagenarians in an artfully fading arenas in the coastal town of Vieux-Boucau, is emblematic of the wider story of how the natives of Landes have battled for centuries to tame the landscape and the sea which remorselessly pounds its beaches.

Until the 19th Century, the vast majority of this département now renowned for its hauntingly beautiful pine forests was swamp and poorly-drained heathland (the meaning of the word *lande* in French). The hardy few that inhabited this harsh environment used it for sheep grazing and tended their flocks wearing stilts so as not to sink into the boggy soil.

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Shepherds

The stilt-walking shepherds faded into folkloric obscurity from the 1850s onwards when the vast pine plantations which now cover some 3,900 square miles stabilised the soil and allowed the flourishing of industries from paper mills and joinery to the more recent arrival of tourism.

The Landes and the wider region of Aquitaine is a secret that the French have generally preferred to keep to themselves. While the foreign hordes fight it out in the likes of Provence, the Cote d’Azur or Brittany, the locals quietly slip down the motorways to the Atlantic coast.

Once there, they congregate in places such as Moliets-et-Maa, one of a chain of villages and small towns in the Landes some 150km south of Bordeaux where the rustic Landes architecture of timber-framed houses melds with campsites and villas built into the fragrant embrace of the *pinhadar* – the Gascon dialect word for the pine woods.

Luxury villas

La Clariere Aux Chevreuils is one such place. A collection of spacious luxury villas knitted into tranquil knolls and hillocks less than a mile from the dunes where guests’ needs are taken care of to the extent that fresh baguettes and croissants are delivered to the site every morning.





The villas at La Clariere aux Chevreuils are set in a pine woodland on a private development. (Photo: Madame Vacances)

Similar complexes dot the locality, fading in and out of the woods with cycle trails running for dozens of miles and a procession of markets where local produce is abundant.

The result is a place with a tight centre of gravity where visitors need not stray far and people commute to the beach and vegetable stalls by bicycle.

Surfboards

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And where stilt-wearing shepherds have been replaced by locals and visitors alike permanently attached to their surfboards.

The one feature of this coastline that its human inhabitants have not be able to tame is its waves. Much of the time, the sea is energetic but peaceable – waves generally no higher than a metre or so. But at others it is nothing other than savage.

On the beaches watched by eagle-eyed lifeguards, the power of the sea at low tide – when the waves are uninhibited by shelves of sand that absorb their fury – is such that bathers are officially advised not to enter the water.

But such dramatic was is also the reason why the beaches at Moliets and beyond regarded as offering some of the finest surfing in Europe with the endless expanses of sand and breakers to cater for all talents.

'Sphinx, seabird, snake'

Surfing lessons are thereby plentiful at around 30 euros per two hour session and, in keeping with spirit of the *defi de toro*, students are encouraged to exhibit a certain zen fearlessness and shape their bodies to match their foe – in this case by attacking the surf with the aid of a few yoga poses.

As Vincent, an instructor with the Surf School Du Golf on the Plage des Lieges, put it: “You are only doing ‘sphinx’. You need to also do ‘seabird’ and the ‘snake.’” Such, apparently, is the secret to staying upright on a surfboard in Les Landes.

Whatever the visitor’s tastes, this furthest-flung corner of France accommodates them with an uncompromising celebration of its surroundings and traditions. Roadside boutiques selling foie gras abound while advertising hoardings for supermarkets promote meat from bulls killed across the nearby Spanish border in corridas.

You say chichi, I say churros

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Such delicacies may not be to the taste of all but they are a fraction of so much else that comes out this region – sampling is practically compulsory of the delectably artery-clogging “*pastis landaise*”, a buttery yeast cake flavoured with orange flower, vanilla and rum.






Beach snack: After an afternoon battling the surf, a portion of a chichis – the French answer to churros – is a welcome relief. (Photo: Cahal Milmo)

Above all, the Landes echoes with reminders of a place where nature and humanity like to test each other's strengths before sharing an embrace.

And it needn't all be challenging. After an hour or so battling with the waves on the main beach in Moliets et Maa, head for La Gourmandise – a neon-lit seaside snack dispensary and ask for a dozen “chichis”, sugar-encrusted sticks of deepfried batter known elsewhere as churros and served with a dipping pot of molten Nutella.

It may not have the authenticity of jumping over a rampaging steer or the charm of cycling through a silent forest but a more indulgently rewarding way of spending four euros would be hard to find. 

Travel essentials

Access the region from Biarritz (Ryanair), or Bordeaux (Ryanair, easyJet, British Airways), or by rail to Dax via Paris and Bordeaux.

A week's stay, commencing 18 August 2018, at Villas La Clairière aux Chevreuils for a family of four staying in a three-bedroom villa with a terrace and private pool costs from £738 pp (£2,952 total) through Summer France (020 3475 4756, summerfrance.co.uk).

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