



OVERSEAS

Haven Report

The Béarn, France:
The Good Life On The Plains Of The Pyrenees...



The Béarn, France – La Belle Vie in the bountiful foothills of the Pyrenees

By Lucy Culpepper

Imagine a corner of France so tucked away that even the French find it hard to place on the map. From the Romans to the Renaissance, the Belle Époque to Art Deco, there's history to be enjoyed at every turn. Gorgeous scenery, rolling wooded countryside, friendly people and delicious wines and food too.

More hints? This is the birthplace of a great French king, was the seasonal favorite of royalty of all nations, was once named as “the center of the sporting world,” and was home to the first ever Grand Prix and the Wright Brothers’ flying school.

It’s where Napoleon founded the first national stud farm and the British designed beautiful gardens and parks. Rightly proud of its past, this area has also embraced the present with impressive 21st-century architecture, technology parks, sporting facilities, and a trail-blazing communications infrastructure.

The majestic mountains of the Pyrenees dominate the views and beautiful beaches are just a short drive away...

It all seems too much to believe but the Béarn in the south west of France has it all. Now the Béarnaise want the rest of the world to know about their world...

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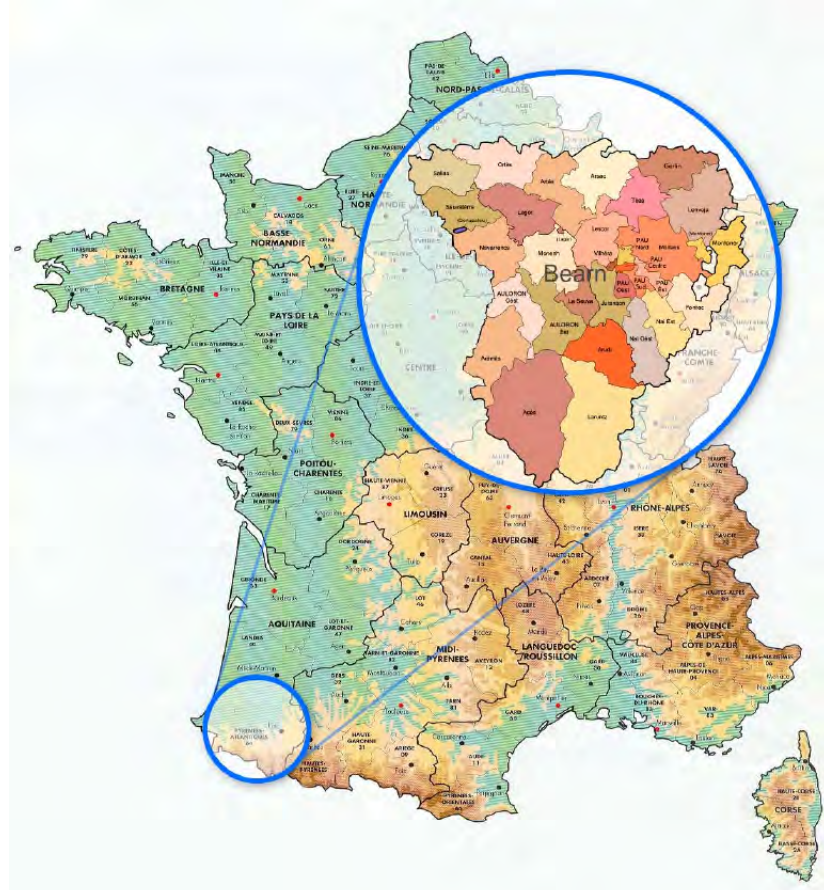
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Where you'll find it

The Béarn (pronounced “bay-arn”) is located in the northwestern corner of the Pyrenees-Atlantic *departement* in the region of Aquitaine in southwest France. The Pyrenees-Atlantiques *departement* is further divided into the Basque Coast (regional capital: Biarritz), Béarn (regional capital: Pau), the Basque Country (regional capital: St Jean Pied de Port), and Béarn Pyrenees (regional capital: Oloron Ste Marie). The Béarn has a population of 350,000 (2006 census).

Bordered by the Landes, the Gers, the High-Pyrenees (Hautes-Pyrenées), the Atlantic Ocean to the west and Spain to the south, the Béarn has been influenced by many cultures yet strongly holds on to its own. There's 3,000 meters between the highest point in the Pyrenees and the lowest on the Plein de Nay, but despite all this variation in geography, the Béarn has a *doux* (or gentle) climate; some rainfall can be expected every month, with highs in April, May, and November of 4.5 inches and lows in July of 2.5 inches. During the winter months, temperatures hover between 32° and 42° F; springtime is mild and summers are pleasant (around 77° F), occasionally hot (86° to 93° F). Having said all that, this winter has been colder and wetter than normal with snow falling in the Béarn on several days, and the previous summer was milder with a two-week period of temperatures around 100° F.

The even precipitation combined with regular sunshine makes this a beautifully-



verdant region and is the main reason behind its success in agriculture (predominantly maize grown for seed) and wine-growing. With the added benefit of an amazingly wide variation of plant life; I still find it surprising to see palm trees swaying alongside pine trees with the snow-capped Pyrenees rising up behind.

Green City

The city of Pau (population 84,000 according to a 2006 census), also known as the “Green

City” or “Garden City” has one of the highest ratios of greenery per square meter per person of any European city. Not only does it have a wealth of greenery, there is also a staggering variation: trees from Japan, the Caribbean, plants from Mexico, the Lebanon, the Mediterranean, Chile, California...this huge variety is in part thanks to the English settlers with their love of gardening and parks, who came here after the Napoleonic wars. You can take a delightful tour through the parks and gardens



View over Béarn toward the snow-capped Pyrenees

of Pau with a bilingual guide from the Pau Tourist Office (See ["Béarn Contacts"](#)).

The mainstays of the Béarnaise economy are the petroleum industry (Total's international research center is in Pau), natural gas deposits at Lacq to the west of Pau, the aerospace industry through the helicopter manufacturer Turbomeca, tourism, and agriculture.



View from the blvd de Pyrenees from Pau

The geography of the Béarn is dominated by two rivers, the Gave d'Ossau and the Gave de Pau, running diagonally across the area—and parallel to each other—from northwest to southeast, with the Gave de Pau lying to the north of the Gave d'Ossau. The two gaves (gave is the local name for a river) feed from the High-Pyrenees and form, in their lower reaches, some of Europe's best salmon fishing. The land to the north of the Gave de Pau is mainly rolling farmland and open countryside with slightly less-attractive villages sprinkled about (with the exception of Morlaas—see ["Two Towns"](#)). To the south of the Gave d'Oloron lie the foothills of the Pyrenees and the spectacular valleys and gorges of the Ossau Valley (famed for its Ossau-Iraty Brebis cheese) and the Aspe Valley—an important part of the Camino de Santiago pilgrim trail (Saint Jacques de Compostelle).

Stunning surroundings

The Pyrenees, unlike the Alps, rise suddenly: one moment you're on the plain, the next winding up the side of a mountain.

Between the two gaves, on the Nay Plain and the Pau Plain, are the main areas of

population, agriculture (mainly maize and wine), light industry, and retail outlets. Yet despite the higher level of human activity, the area is not over-populated or congested. It's a landscape of beautiful, accessible woodlands, the steep slopes of Jurançon wine country, the history-packed Plaine de Nay and its main town of Nay (see ["Two Towns"](#)), and the pretty rolling countryside and ancient towns of the Gaves de Béarn (including the towns of Navarrenx, Orthez, Salies-de-Béarn, and Sauveterre-de-Béarn—all mentioned in the [property section](#) and ["Temps Libre"](#)).

New developments

The upturn in the French economy seems to be reflected in the everyday activities in the Béarn; new buildings are sprouting up around the countryside, construction of new roads continues, people are skiing in their hordes, and eating out continues apace. France never reached the depths of recession that other Eurozone countries have experienced or, as in the case of its neighbor Spain, continue to experience. French people are more cautious, using debit rather than credit cards.

Pau is a university town: with close to 12,000 university students living on and off campus, it has a young and thriving community. It's also a city known for its support of new technologies. There is a *"Cité Multimedia"* on a 12,000-square-meter campus where private and public entities develop new businesses alongside each other. Plus, the presence of Total's Integrated Petroleum Engineering and Research Center helps to keep Pau and the area at the forefront of technological development.

The Lourdes-Tarbes airport (25 minutes from Pau center, over in the next *departement*) has recently been taken over by a new company. Though not in the Béarn, the airport is important for tourism and business development in the area. In a community conference, the new company promised to open up the airport to more low-cost airlines. Currently Ryanair flies in from Stansted (UK), Air France from Paris, and Jetair from Brussels. With the potential increase in the number of flights to the



The Gave de Pau

Where Dumas found inspiration

The *Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, one of the most widely-sold books in Europe, has its origins in the Pyrenees-Atlantic. The young d'Artagnan was a Gascon, while the three musketeers Athos, Porthos, and Aramis were from the Béarn and the Soule and their captain Tréville was from the neighboring Basque country.

It's generally accepted that Aramis, capital of the valley of Barétous in Béarn Pyrenees, inspired Dumas to name Aramis. While the Chateau d'Issac de Portau at Lannes-en-Barétous, gave the name to Porthos and, not very far from there, the village d'Athos-Aspis gave its name to Athos. Finally Captain Tréville was named after the Comte de Tréville, a real-life captain in the King's Musketeers whose chateau, Le Chateau Elizabea de Trois-Villes, in the Basque region, is open to the public as is its "English" park and gardens designed in the 19th Century.

region, property managers and realtors have their fingers crossed that it coincides with an improvement in the world economy. (Note: In the second week of February, the carrier "Bmi Baby" was added, offering a flight from Manchester, England to Tarbes. Watch this space...)

At a cost of €1.15 million, a new autoroute from Pau to Bordeaux is under construction. The new autoroute will

reduce the drive time from two hours 30 minutes (longer at peak times) to one hour 30 minutes. This will open up the countryside between Aquitaine's two principal towns, Bordeaux and Pau, and will certainly have an effect on new building plans in the area. As with all new major construction, it has its detractors, but with building well underway they are unlikely to prevent the autoroute's progress.

The bounty of the Béarn

The name Béarn is thought to come from *Beneharnum*, a Roman city founded in the sixth century and later destroyed by Vikings in 840. The remains are probably the town of Lescar, to the northwest of Pau. Until 1790, Béarn was a former province of France. In 1790, the leadership of France established the "departement" system and did away with the provinces in an attempt to eradicate the powerful provincial rulers and centralize government in Paris.

The capitals of Béarn were Morlaàs (c. 1100), Orthez (beginning the second half of the 13th century), then Pau (beginning mid 15th century).

In the 13th century, the Province of Béarn passed into the control of the County of Foix. The most famous count to rule the area was Gaston Fébus (1331 – 1391), officially Gaston III of Foix and Gaston X of Béarn. Count Gaston Fébus paid homage to his King for Foix County, but refused to give homage for Béarn, which he claimed as his own independent fief. He made Pau the main seat of his rule. Perched up on a cliff top with excellent views over the surrounding land is a strategic site that has been fortified since the 11th century.

Counts and kings

Fébus completed the fortification of many of the towns in the Béarn. The remains of his building program can be seen today at Orthez, Pau Castle, and in Sauveterre-de-Béarn (See "[Temps Libre](#)"). The counts of Foix, rulers of the independent County of Foix, later extended their power to cover

almost the entire Pyrenees mountain range. The last Count of Foix came to the French throne as King Henry IV of France.

Gaston Fébus is considered one of the region's most important historical figures, celebrated in the Béarn with a statue outside Pau Chateau and roads named in his honor in almost every town. He was also the author of *Livre de Chasse*, a classic about medieval hunting.

Béarn was later successively controlled by two important noble families, the Albrets and the Bourbons, Kings of Navarre. Béarn joined the Kingdom of France in 1620 after the death of Henri IV, Count of Béarn and the King of France.

During the Napoleonic wars, the British military hero, the Duke of Wellington and his army passed through Béarn, winning an important battle at Orthez and setting up a garrison in Pau.

Wellington and his men were well received in the area, and many soldiers from Wellington's campaign set up home in the Béarn when they retired. These British retirees built holiday villas in and around Pau, which they rented out when not in residence. Pau became the in place of the 1900s during the "Belle Époque" and led to the 1906 headline in *The International Herald Tribune*: "Pau is the hub of the sporting world." English, Russian, American, and South American visitors spent their winters in Pau playing and practicing golf (Pau golf course, built in 1856, is the oldest golf course on the European mainland), polo, tennis, hunting, salmon fishing, mountaineering, and ballooning.

A tale of two towns

With so many pretty little towns in the region, it's difficult to choose a favorite. But, for me, the towns of Morlaas and Nay stand out. They are a good size; not too big or too small. I've found them very welcoming, they have every facility and service you need, they both have an interesting historical



Béarn's beloved King Henri IV : A quick family tree:

Grandfather: Henri of Albret – Henri II, King of Navarre (1503-1555), married to:

Grandmother: Marguerite of Angouleme (1492-1541), Francois I's sister and a famous writer

Father: Antoine of Bourbon, Duke of Vendome (1518-1562), married to:

Mother: Jeanne of Albret, Jeanne III, Queen of Navarre (1528-1572)

Their Son: Henri III, King of Navarre (1572-1610) who also became – Henri IV, King of France and Navarre (1589-1610) and the first of the Bourbon Kings of France. Henri IV was born in Pau Chateau, legend has it that he slept in a giant turtle shell, on display in the Chateau.

Henri IV is the king who finally bought peace to France after the long Religious Wars from 1562–98. The signing of the "Edict of Nantes" was to give equal rights and political freedom to both religious sides—for a short time. Though Henri had converted from a Protestant to a Catholic, he was in the end assassinated by a Catholic who believed that he had failed to serve as a true Christian.

Pau's magnificent men in their flying machines...

1909—The Wright Brothers formed their School of Aviation in Pau—for a fascinating history of aviation and the importance of Pau in the development of flight, visit the [Pau Wright Aviation Association](#).

1908—The tycoon James Gordon-Bennett, founder of The International Herald Tribune, chose Pau as his home so that he could to pursue his favorite sports of ballooning and fox hunting.

In 1916—The first school of aerobatics formed in Pau, training all the "aces" of WW1. Most of the pilots of the all-American squadron fighting for France received their first training in aerial combat in Pau. From 1912 to 1918, more than 6,000 pilots learned how to fly and to fight there.

center, and they are both set in beautiful, though different, countryside.

Morlaas basics

Morlaas lies 12 kilometers to the north of Pau, up on a ridge (at 350 meters), overlooking the Plain of Pau that runs west-east across the area. To the south are views of the Pyrenees and to the north the undulating wooded farmland that continues on toward Bordeaux, 200 kilometers north of Morlaas. Some 4,121 inhabitants, known locally as Morlanais, live over an area of 1,355 hectares. The town is connected by bus and road to Pau city center and is five kilometers to the region's main motorway and 15 kilometers to Pau airport.

After the Roman city of Beneharnum was destroyed by the Vikings in 840, Morlaas became the capital of the ancient province of Béarn. During that time, it even had its own mint. Money from Morlaas was a sought after commodity and was used in the Navarre region, Aragon, and Italy.

Morlaas remained the capital until the 12th century, when Orthez took over.

Since 1154, Morlaas has been on one of the St James of Compostela routes and was one of the original resting points for pilgrims. Today's travelers are welcomed at a small dormitory-style resting place or the municipal campsite.

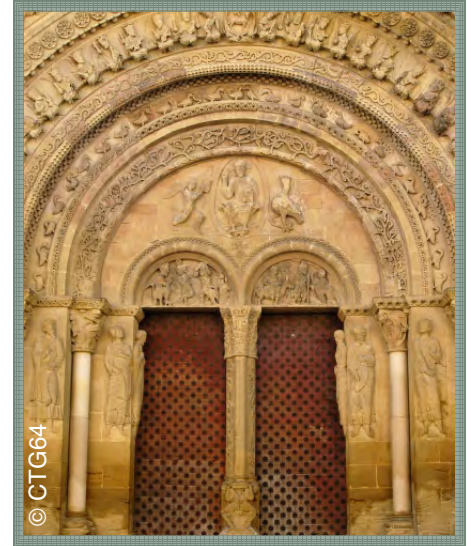
As you drive into the town, off to the right is the main sporting area (rugby and soccer), the open-air market and farmer's market. Onward toward the main high street you pass centuries-old buildings before coming to the steps of the 12th-century Romanesque gateway of Ste. Foy church. To the side is the main square surrounded by ancient buildings that now house the post office, the Mairie's office, and the town hall.

Rags to riches

During the 18th-century, Morlaas fell on hard times and became cut off from the rest of the region. The locals, in an attempt to improve the economy, turned their hand to cabinet-making, eventually becoming sought after for their skilled work.

The 19th century marked a turn in Morlaas' fortunes when it became a renowned fox-hunting center, attracting horsemen from around the world. With the outbreak of war the "sport" ceased. Today the fox is represented by two people, who depart early in the morning, carrying a garment sprayed with a synthetic fox odor. The hunt pursues the pseudo-fox around the Morlanais countryside. Horse riding is one of the most popular pursuits here; you will see many stables in the area where you can livery or "rent" a horse.

The Mairie of Morlaas recently began a cultural and architectural renovation program; the town has been cleaned, ancient monuments restored, and open spaces cleared. And there is a lot of open space in Morlaas; to sit quietly in the summer shade, to watch the locals playing boules, and places to rest while the world whizzes by. Just a few kilometers outside



The intricate details above the door of Morlaas church

the center of the town is the Lahitau Forest where you can walk freely along the trails.

Amenities and services

You'll find everything you need for daily living, including three large supermarkets, a medical center with family doctors, radiologists, blood analysis, physiotherapists, dentists, and podiatrists. There's a veterinary center, an animal protection center, schools, banks, bakeries, butchers, newspaper shops, and florists. Morlaas has a very active community center offering classes in classic dance, jazz, rock and salsa, sewing, embroidery, walking, swimming, tennis, photography, and guitar...there's something for everyone and every age.

The Mairie organizes shows and movies throughout the year; the big treat in February was a performance by the Biarritz Ballet Corp performing Tchaikovsky's Suites.

A general market selling everything from sheets to screwdrivers takes place every two weeks and a farmer's market is held every Saturday. At the farmer's market, you can buy locally-grown organic fruit and vegetables, homemade breads, Brebis cheese, jellies, locally-cured meats, and, when in season, *cepes* (wild mushrooms), chestnuts, cherries, and apples.

I found a number of properties for sale in Morlaas; the majority are what's called "neo-béarnaise" that is copying the Béarnaise architecture of old but built in the 1960s, 1980s or more recently. Go here to read my full report on the [property market](#). There seems to be fewer exceptionally-old properties in this area, unlike in the west of the Béarn.

Onward to Nay

Pronounced locally as "nigh" (rhyming with "high") and by non-locals as "nay" (rhyming with "hay").

Marguerite de Moncade, Viscountess of Béarn, founded this "Bastide" town in 1302. The main square, with its pretty houses surrounding it, was the center of the Bastide and is now the location of the town hall (*Mairie*) and covered market.

"Bastide" was the name given to a new town built around a central square, often with ramparts as there are in Nay, and created to improve trade and development of housing and, in the event of war, to be a "safe house" for the growing population. The huge church of St Vincent, constructed between the 15th and 16th centuries, has been a protected National Monument since 1945.

Over its long history, Nay has suffered its share of disasters from a huge fire that destroyed most of the village in 1534 to pillaging during the Religious Wars between French Catholics and Protestants (Huguenots) from 1562 to 1598. Amongst the Protestants who emigrated was one Sir Olivier, ancestor of the celebrated English actor, Sir Laurence Olivier.

Nay is in the southeastern corner of the Béarn, 20 kilometers from Pau, and is the principal town on Nay Plain (Plaine de Nay). The town lies on the banks of the Gave de Pau (river), with the old town nestling into the hills that rise toward the Pyrenees. As you climb up away from the river, the views down over the rooftops toward the Plain, with the Pyrenees just to the side, are truly breathtaking.

A history of hats

On either side of the river you'll notice a small canal, evidence of Nay's industrial past when it was a textile center. The hydraulic power of the Gave de Pau was harnessed as early as the 12th century when the first hat-makers established themselves making the Turkish Fez. The hat-making industry developed through the years and the story, retold at the Beret Museum in Nay, goes that a local family of hat-makers (the Blancs) met the Duchess of Orleans, at nearby Betharam, who was wearing a beret. So they decided to start making berets in Nay. At the beginning of the 19th century, the town was at full production and, by 1900, it was turning out one million berets. But don't let that put you off: Nay is no dirty industrial town. All that remains from those years are the canals, the pretty mill, and the Berchon beret factory building (undergoing redevelopment by the Mairie). However, the berets are still in production at the Nay Museum where you can watch them being made and buy just about any style you can think of (See "[Temp Libre](#)").

Gaze up to the rooftops in Nay and you'll see elaborate lintels and architecture—a mark of the wealth brought to the town by the textile industry. Within the *bastide* is the 16th-century, Maison Carrée; a three-story Florentine-style mansion built by a local cloth merchant.



Nay's Indoor Market

By the 19th century, Nay had outgrown its left bank, and the Claracq bridge was built leading to the expansion of the right bank which now houses the majority of new buildings, the swimming pool



Nay rooftops

complex, medical center, and schools. Nay is now home to 3,500 inhabitants. It is a town where you can't fail to miss the seasons; the commanding Pyrenees together with the rushing Gave de Pau remind you constantly of the forces of nature. Each time I have visited, whatever the season, there are always people out and about, chatting on street corners, sitting in the park, shopping at the covered market where local produce is sold or at the weekly market that wraps itself all around the town. It's a town with a welcoming feel.

Lots to do

Nay has associations covering just about every activity and interest from sewing to skiing, walking to yoga. There's also a large number of different dance clubs, a theater group, and an active historical society. Although there isn't a movie center, there is a "movie-bus" service to Lourdes, and recitals are held at the Maison Carrée; in March, there is a performance of Fauré, Debussy, Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn's music for just €10 (US\$12.54).

As with Morlaas, Nay has every type of commerce needed for daily living, including a large supermarket, a medical center with family doctors, radiologists, and podiatrists. There's a veterinary center, schools, banks, bakeries, butchers, newspaper shops, florists...and a large number of interesting restaurants.

Nay is well connected with a train service into Pau and Lourdes (from the village of Coarraze just five minutes from Nay center—where you'll also find a 14th-century chateau). It lies just 15 kilometers from the A64 autoroute (taking you east to Toulouse and west to the Atlantic Coast) and is a 30-minute drive to Tarbes-Lourdes airport. For hospitals, medical specialists, etc., you can choose between Pau and Lourdes both about 25 kilometers away.



Nay canal side homes

Nay has a number of properties for sale ranging from ancient stone barns to modern apartments. Several properties are available for rent in and close to the center. (See "[Properties for sale and for rent in the Béarn](#)").

For short stays, you'll find B&B's within driving distance of Pau, Nay, and Morlaas. B&B's are a great way to get to know about an area quickly; you have all the knowledge of the owner at your disposal! Here are a few worth checking out:

[Clos-Mirabel.com](#) - in the Jurançon area
[Sendets](#) - close to Morlaas
[Coarraze](#) - close to Nay
[Haute de Bosdarros](#) - close to Nay
[Gelos](#) - close to Pau

Béarn's bread basket

The Pyrenees-Atlantic departement is the second-highest producer of foie gras in France (after the Landes to the north). If you're a fan, don't miss the foie gras museum at Nay (See "[Temp Libre](#)"). Or you may be like Roger Moore (otherwise known as James Bond) who finds the whole thing repulsive and even boycotts major distributors in the UK.



There is a lively café scene in Nay

In September, you can watch, and be part of, the great "Transhumance," the moving of sheep from the Pyrenean summer pastures to their winter lowland valleys. These sheep produce milk to make the famous Ossau-Iraty Brebis; apparently Aristae the son of Apollo was Brebis' creator, making it one of the first cheeses ever made. The result is a delicious smooth cheese with a slightly nutty flavor that is produced across the Basque-Béarn region. You can follow a marked route through the area and visit the shepherds and producers during July's "open door" events. Brebis is eaten on its own with a black cherry or blueberry jam (jelly).

Cepes—not the white mushrooms found in most supermarkets—but the beautiful curly varieties of all colors are collected in woodlands at the beginning of fall. Signs go up along the roads advertising them for sale, and restaurants have all manner of dishes made with them. I suppose it takes a certain amount of trust in the chef to eat a large dish of sometimes slightly gritty yet delicious weird-looking mushrooms. I've never yet had a bad dish.

Wine and meat

Béarn is a relatively-unknown *appellation* and spreads over three French *départements* (the Haute-Pyrénées, Pyrénées Atlantique, and the Gers). Béarn is an unusual appellation in that none of its three areas are connected; instead they are separated by miles of corn fields, cow pastures, and woodland. The wines include white Jurançon and red and rosé Béarns. Vines were introduced to Béarn 2,000 years ago by the Romans; Gallo-Roman mosaics

symbolizing vines have been found in the Jurançon area. Other varieties grown in the area are Madiran, in the northeast corner of the Béarn, and Béarn-Belocq. In the 14th century, the Princes of Béarn and Navarre introduced the term "*cru*," a measurement based on the value of a parcel of vines. This was the first attempt in France to classify wines. In 1553, at the baptism of Henri IV, the infant Prince had his lips rubbed with garlic and moistened with Jurançon wine. It was said that the wine gave him "a vigor and ardent spirit that never left him."

Beef, produced from the Blonde d'Aquitaine breed, features on many restaurant menus. I'm told it's delicious served with foie gras. Other typical Béarnaise dishes include Garbure Béarnaise, curly Kale, mixed root vegetables, and white beans cooked in duck fat; *Poule au pot Béarnaise* (chicken cooked in the oven with vegetables and herbs), plus plenty of duck and beef dishes.



The local Brebis cheese has a slightly nutty flavour

Health care in the Béarn

Since moving here 12 months ago, I have consulted with two family doctors, a kinesiologist, a radiographer, a gastro-intestinal surgeon, and various nurses; all were efficient, friendly (ok, not the surgeon!), and worked to a very high standard.

At the moment, I have private insurance; we pay € 350 (US\$439) per month for a



The snow-capped Pyrenees rear up from the plain

family of four with a €40 (US\$50) deductible. We generally pay €22 to €25 (US\$27 to US\$31) out of pocket per visit for a doctor/dentist/specialist. A surprise appendectomy was fully covered and paid for directly by the insurance company. After my hospitalization, a nurse came to our home for six consecutive days to administer an injection, check dressings and, after the tenth day, to remove the stitches. Each visit cost €6 (US\$7.52). I am currently researching the pros and cons of applying for a *carte vitale* for my family.

There is a large CPAM hospital in Pau and also Lourdes. (Though not in the Béarn, Lourdes is closer for residents from towns and villages, such as Pontacq, on the eastern side of the area.) Pau also has a number of private clinics. (See “[Béarn Contacts](#)” for details). If you have private insurance, you can go to either hospital. Generally speaking, the care is

the same; a private clinic/hospital will have private rooms.

There are many general practitioners-family doctors in the area. Of those, a large percentage speaks some English. (Again, see “[Béarn Contacts](#)” for details).

Dentistry and therapy

In my limited experience, French dentistry is ok, but not as good as in the U.S. Your dentist will do the hygiene/cleaning work as well as check-ups and actual dental work. (See “[Béarn Contacts](#)” for details of English-speaking dentists in the area).

Kinothérapie is a form of therapy to treat muscular, ligament and joint pain, using massage, stretching, and mobilization exercises. It is popular throughout France and is used by all from sports people to sedentary folks. Many insurance companies include “kino” as an option. There is a large center in Morlaas.

Homeopathic treatment is also popular in France; you will find most small towns have a resident homeopath. Pharmacies are everywhere and advertized with a green cross. They sell prescriptions and other over-the-counter medication, herbal and homeopathic remedies. Para-pharmacies sell general medical supplies and over-the counter medicines but not prescriptions.

Living “La Belle Vie”

The French are renowned for paperwork and seem to be proud about that fact; so be prepared for lots of forms, duplicates, and what seems like an intrusion into your personal life. (In fact, they may just be more upfront about data collection than other countries.) A large dollop of patience and a soupcon of good humor are required. But always, remember to start every conversation with: “Bonjour Madame/Monsieur,” even if that is the sum total of your French. It really is worth it. If you don’t, you will instantly be treated with less respect...really, it’s true.

Every town and most villages will have a local administrative office, mayor, plus admin staff known as “Le Mairie” (pronounced “merry” and not to be confused with *mari*, meaning husband and pronounced “marry!”). When you first move, go and introduce yourself, find out what’s on offer; even the smaller villages in the Béarn have a hall (*salle polyvalente*) where you may find sewing classes, yoga, over 60s gym, quilting, walking groups...

You can go to the Mairie for help regarding your immediate environment (i.e. garbage collection, dirty pavements, tree too high). And, depending on the Mairie, you can also get help with paperwork, i.e. when buying a house, changing driving licenses, etc. If you need the services of a cleaner, gardener, painter, or plumber, the Mairie should have a list of people they can recommend.

The story behind the sauce

Béarnaise sauce (*bair-nayz*) is named after the Béarn region; and was first served at a Paris restaurant called Le Pavillon Henri IV in honor of his highness. A Béarnaise sauce is a hot sauce made of clarified butter, egg yolks, tarragon, shallot, chervil, peppercorns, and white wine and is typically served with steak.

Delicious locally-sourced food

Look out for signs reading “l’Assiette de Pays;” these are dishes offered by restaurants and cafés that are cooked with locally-grown products. I saw an “Assiette” in Nay of grilled duck with baked apple and Brebis cheese with black cherry confiture for just € 7 (US\$8.77).

Paying for services

When we first moved to France, I was told by various expats not to set up direct debit payment whenever possible. Why? It's very difficult to extricate yourself from contracts. Lots of paperwork and persistence is required and even then you may have to wait a full year before a cancellation is accepted (insurance companies are permitted by law to renew your contract if you do not send them a written notice of cancellation within 20 days of receiving their renewal notice). So I pay for almost everything either online with a credit card or by posting a check. So when you set up a bank account (find out how [here](#)), be sure to request a check-book and never, ever write a check when you do not have funds in the account. It's illegal. Your account could be closed for up to five years, and you could be reported to the Bank de France, the national banking authority.

Using your credit card

Generally speaking, the French use a card called *Carte Bleue* for shopping; this is a debit card not a credit card. When you open a bank account, you will be asked if you would like one. I would advise you get one; some smaller shops do not accept credit cards at all, almost all have a € 10 minimum, and, if you run out of gas, the



Nay is home to hat manufacturing as can be seen in local fashions

only way of filling up the tank if the station is closed is with a *Carte Bleue*! We were caught out once with this, but were lucky enough to have a customer in the queue behind us who was happy to pay for our gas with his card in return for our cash.

Setting up internet service

The Béarn has high-speed internet service (using fiber-optic technology). Pau is one of France's internet development sites, so is one of the first places to benefit from new technologies, and, to the best of my knowledge, internet service is available throughout the area. France Telecom owns all the telephone lines (though you can request a "debundling" from the phone line if necessary).

It's all pretty straightforward—unless, of course, you don't speak French...and then it's mind-boggling! If language is a problem, one telecom company offers competitively-priced services to English-speaking expats in France: [Teleconnect](#).

Before you can avail of an Internet service, you will need to provide a copy of your rental contract or house-purchase documents. If you speak French, then it's just a question of trawling through the various websites such as Orange, SFR, Free, Darty, and choosing the service you require.

Our monthly phone/internet service with SFR is about € 40 (US\$50.16) and includes: all local phone calls, all calls to just about any overseas country for any length of time, broadband service (+WiFi). Use of the movie rental service via the internet connection is extra.

The main French cable TV company is [CanalSat](#) which is € 20 (US\$25.08) monthly for the first year and shows a large selection of shows in English.

Snail mail

La Poste, the national-owned French post office, has branches in every town. You will also find stamps at some supermarkets and *tabacs* (where you can buy newspapers, tobacco, magazines, and lottery tickets).

Mail delivery, to and from the U.S., takes about five days, one day within France, and two or three days to most other European countries. Your mail will be delivered each morning by a mailman or lady in a little yellow van or riding a yellow bike. Or you can rent a mailbox for about € 75 (US\$102) per year which includes La Poste's new e-mail alert service—you receive e-mail notification when there is mail in your box.

Meeting other expats

Although Pau is sometimes called "The English City," the English of that title settled here during and after the Napoleonic Wars. They were generally well-received and left their mark on the architecture, gardens, and parks that flourish in Pau.

When I ask the expats I meet, "Why did you move here?" their answer invariably is, "Because of its position: one hour from the sea, one hour from the mountains, there's lots to do in between, the people are friendly, and there's virtually no crime."

As mentioned earlier, Pau is the location of Total's Integrated Petroleum Engineering and Research Center. Experts from the oil and gas industry spend on average three years in Pau, usually with their families. This positive historical connection has, I believe, helped make Pau and the Béarn very open-minded to expats in general.

One active Anglophone club in the region is called "Anglophones Pau-Pyrénées." They organize outings, walks, parties; provide advice for new expats, and send out a monthly newsletter. (See '[Béarn Contacts](#)') International English-language newspapers are in Pau, while two newspapers in English, published in France, for expats are also more widely available (*The French Paper* and *Connexion*).

Buying books in English? The easiest way is to buy online at [amazon.co.uk](#). The French version ([amazon.fr](#)) has some titles in English and does not charge for shipping.

Language of the Béarn

Today the everyday language of Béarn is French. Many people speak some English but, and this is so important if you are coming here with only a smattering of French to your name, the Béarnaise people are friendly, helpful, and tolerant of any effort to speak in their language. Many people speak Spanish...

Historically both the Gascon language and the Basque language are indigenous to this region. Gascon is a dialect of the Occitan language, more closely related to Catalan (from Catalonia in Spain) than it is to French. Basque (Euskara) is only spoken in the Basque regions of France and Spain. Béarn people call their language “Béarnaise,” mainly to distinguish it in name from Gascon—spoken in Gascony, a region to the north--because of their distinctive histories. However, there’s no unified Béarnaise dialect; the language even differs throughout the area.

It’s unusual to hear Béarnaise or Occitan spoken, though there are schools in Pau where you can learn it. A poll conducted in Béarn in 1982 indicated that “51 per cent of the population spoke Gascon, 70 per cent understood it, and 85 per cent expressed a favorable opinion regarding the protection of the language.” Since then, the numbers of Gascon speakers is thought to have dropped dramatically, despite activists’ efforts to restore it to everyday life. An elderly neighbor of



The local game of ‘pelota’ also called ‘Basque ball’ is popular

mine spoke to me in Béarnaise the other day: it sounded like a mixture of French, Spanish, and Catalan which, given its background, makes perfect sense...the lack of teeth didn’t help my understanding but we had a lovely chat with lots of hand and arm signaling!

Temp libre – Free time

Walking enthusiasts will find endless possibilities among the well-known GR routes (Grandes Randonnées) including the GR10, GR65, the routes of Santiago de Compostela (Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle), which pass through several points in the Béarn, and the Henri IV route from Bisanos (close to Pau) to Lourdes. There are also easy woodland walks throughout the Béarn; private land is generally well marked.

The Béarn is an outdoor sport enthusiast’s dream come true. The endless choice is one of the reasons many expats and French citizens come here. And if a sport isn’t available in the Béarn it will be in one of the *departements* either side of it. There’s everything from horse riding to surfing, canyoning to golfing, kayaking to parachuting; skiing to leisure hiking (with a donkey if you’d like); *pelota* to fishing (*pelota* is a court sport played with a ball using your hand, a racket, a wooden bat or a basket, against a wall or, more traditionally, with two teams face to face separated by a line on the ground or a net).

From piste to spa

It’s just 75 minutes drive from Pau to the ski slopes of the Pyrenees including La Mongie, Cauterets, and Artouste. The French ski school (Ecole de Ski Français runs classes from all the ski resorts). A one-

Soizic’s story

Six years ago, Soizic was living in the UK with her husband and two young sons. She is from Brittany; her husband is English. Soizic was teaching French at an English school and her husband ran an art gallery. After seven years, they started to feel a change would be good for them. At the time, the economy was on the up; if they sold in the UK they could pay off their mortgage and buy a property, outright, in France. Soizic had heard from friends, who wanted to buy property in France, that it was a bureaucratic nightmare – if you didn’t speak French. So during a school vacation, they traveled to southwest France. Unsure which area to focus on, they simply drove around and quickly fell in love with the Béarn and in particular the area around Nay. They made an offer on a house, it was accepted, and they drove back to England, packed up, and started out on their new life in France. Soizic started her agency out of their new home and quickly made good contacts with the expat community...even though she is French, her life had been very Anglo-centric, so it was easy for her to build a strong rapport with English-speaking expats already in the area and those visiting. She now has an agency in Pontacq, providing all the services you would expect and need when moving to a new area (See “[Béarn Contacts](#)”).

hour lesson plus ski equipment, plus a lift pass, is just € 25 (US\$34).

If you prefer to watch your sport, no problem; professional basketball matches are played most weeks at Pau’s Palais de Sport, there are weekly rugby and soccer matches at the Stade de Hameau, canoeing/kayaking competitions at the National water sports center on the Gave de Pau (Pau boasts two Olympic canoeists), horse jumping/eventing (there is an international course in Pau), motor racing (Pau was the first place to coin the term ‘Grand Prix’)...

Getting to the Béarn

Arriving by air:

The region is served by two airports, one in Pau and the other in Tarbes (in the next *departement* but only 25 minutes from Pau). There is also an airport at Biarritz (one-hour drive from Pau) and at Toulouse (two hours' drive). All airports have car hire facilities. (See “[Béarn Contacts](#)” for more airport information.)

Trains:

There are connections between Pau (or Tarbes, 25 minutes east of Pau) and Orthez, Bayonne, Biarritz, Saint Jean de Luz, Hendaye, and Spain. The site www.voyages-sncf.com is the national railways networks booking site for all travel in France. A one-way ticket to Paris on the high-speed train costs between €75 and €90 (US\$94 to US\$153).

Traveling by rail is a relatively stress-free and fairly inexpensive way to travel through the region (and on into other European countries if you wish). The company “Rail Europe” has an informative website with a helpful map section (www.raileurope.com). You can purchase a “Railpass” from them so there are no language difficulties buying tickets at stations. For the best prices, buy your ticket before you leave for Europe.

Car:

Car rental agencies are at all the local and international airports or you could hire a private taxi-guide (See “[Béarn Contacts](#)”) French drivers, on the whole but excepting Parisians (who are in a league of their own), are no different to most other nationalities. Speed limits are strictly controlled by radars and occasionally a gendarme (policeman) will step out from behind a bush to zap you. Speeding and other traffic offenses are subject to on-the-spot fines and points on your license.

United States citizens 18 years and over are allowed to drive in France on a valid US driver's license for one year from the time of receiving a residency permit. After a year, the U.S. license must be exchanged for a French one (organized by the Mairie) or you have to take the French driving test—to be avoided! This will depend on which state your license was issued in. A helpful website for more information is: <http://geneva.angloinfo.com/countries/france/exlicence.asp>

United States visitors on a holiday visa may use a valid U.S. driving license; an international driving license is recommended but not essential. EU citizens can drive indefinitely using their own license.

If after all that exercise you need some R&R, the area is also renowned for its thermal spas. At Salies de Béarn ([Properties](#)) the water is 10 times more salty than seawater and is enriched with 26 oligo-elements. Some French health insurance companies include thalasso-therapy (treatment with salts) in their policies.

More on places of interest in and around the area [here](#).

Shopping in the Béarn

Smaller towns have supermarkets and all the general everyday stores. For something

special, head to Pau's Château district or the chic roads such as Henry IV, Joffre, Latapie, and Barthou where you'll find all the top names in fashion from Chanelle to H&N, galleries, and knick-knack stores. There are two indoor shopping centers in Pau, and, just to the south east, in Lons-Lescar, is one of Europe's biggest retail zones. Pretty ugly but everything is there from Home Depot-style to sporting goods stores.

Remember, though, France comes to a halt at lunchtime; noon to 2 p.m. shops are shut, workmen down tools, offices close, but the big supermarkets stay open—a good time to grocery shop as it's less crowded. Most

shops do not open on Sundays, though a few supermarkets have special permits allowing them to open on Sunday morning. If a small store opens on Sunday, it will most likely close on Monday.

Organics

French supermarkets have a very good selection of own brand and independent brand products. There are also several organic-only stores (e.g. l'Épicerie Verte). Most supermarkets no longer provide grocery bags, so go equipped with your own reusable bags which you can buy from most supermarkets. You will not be helped with packing. Also remember that French shopping carts can only be used with a one-euro coin or a small plastic token which you can ask for from the help desk of the store (“un jeton pour le chariot s'il vous plait”—a token for the cart please). For more on shopping costs, see “[Cost of Living](#).”

Religion

Most villages and all towns will have at least one church of the Catholic faith. Pau also has Anglican, Baptist, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish religious centers. ■



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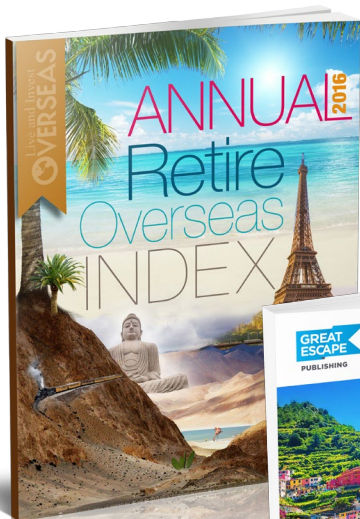
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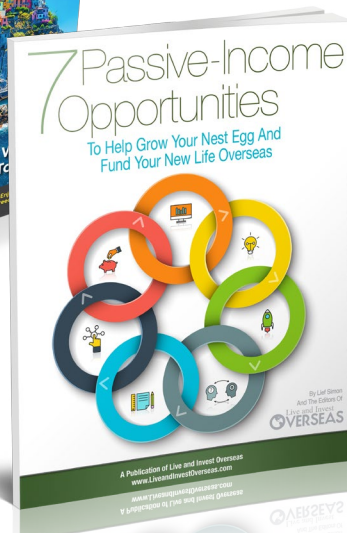
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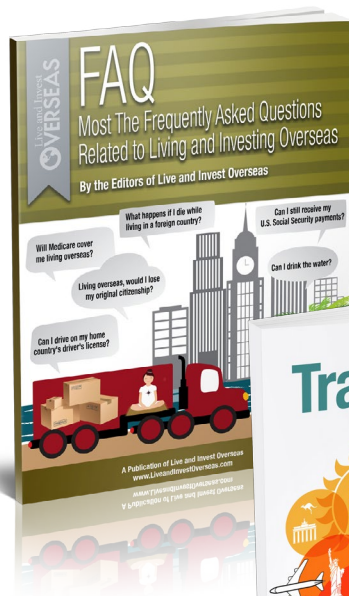


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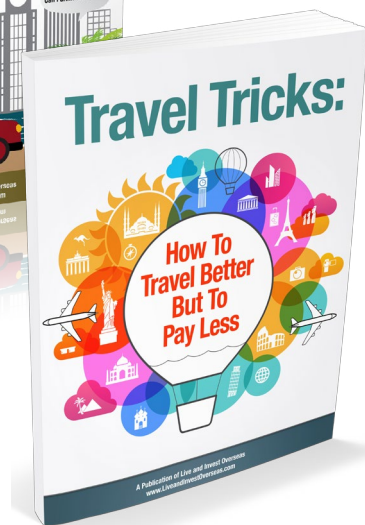


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