

CITY TOUR MAP

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• Respect nature: take a bag to carry away your garbage, respect the flora and fauna.

• Respect the local population: the trails are closed to motor vehicles. Keep dogs on a lead. Respect private property.



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Coeur Sud-Ouest
Marciac Madiran St Mont

BONNE VISITE

CITY TOUR

Marciac



Distance : 2.4 km



Difficulty : easy



1h30

Marciac, a royal bastide founded in 1298, will surprise you with its combination of heritage, artistic discoveries, and jazz, as the town reveals itself, the narrow streets winding around the central square.



Before begining ...

The birth of Marciac :

The Act establishing the bastide town of Marciac was signed in Toulouse on August 15th, 1298, by the representatives of the abbey of La Case Dieu, and by the Count of Monlezun-Pardiac, for the French King Philippe Le Bel, who was keen to establish his power over a region recently acquired by the Crown. Moreover, Marciac was a swampy area and a brigand's den: it was time to "clean up" the place.

At the end of the Gascon wars, the name of Guichard de Marsiac, seneschal of Toulouse, was chosen by the king (in gratitude for his faithful services) hence the name of the "bastide": Marciac. A month later, on the 14th of September 1298, Marciac received from Philippe Le Bel its customs, which defined the rules of life for the inhabitants.

At that time, Marciac had a fairly large rampart, more than 1,700 metres in circumference, with 8 tower gates and 44 turrets, most of which have now disappeared. An extract from the Act of Pareage, in Latin, was engraved in the town hall square in 1997.

Did you say "bastide" ?

Marciac is one of the 500 "bastide" towns that were built in the south-west of France between the 12th and 14th centuries to unite and protect the population. This urban boom was the result of regional planning by the royal authorities, who created the bastides (from the Occitan "Bastir"). It had agricultural, urban, and economic ambitions.

Generally built according to the same plan: a mediaeval village, square or rectangular in shape, with a market hall in its centre - a place for living and trading, parallel and perpendicular streets, surrounded by a rampart to protect the inhabitants. Marciac can be described as a "Royal bastide". Its layout is representative of the Gascon model with a regular plan.

1 Departure from the tourist office

The tourist office is located under the arcades that surround the central square



In the Tourist Office, you can discover the exhibition of Madeleine Doubrère's Watercolours and visit the Natural History Museum.



The cows' careers last around twelve years and they spend their retirement in the campo, pampered by their "ganadero" (breeder). Each race is preceded by a parade in which the cuadrilla presents itself to the sound of "La marche Cazerienne".

11 La lampe mère

Stop in front of this wall niche of the vast mansion on the corner of the "rue Morlas" and the "rue Saint-Justin". This cast-iron box had something to do with public lighting: with the arrival of electricity in 1906, most of the elements of this "mother lamp" disappeared, particularly the cord that ran from this box and allowed the lamplighter to lower the oil lantern suspended from a wire stretched between the two facades.

Back at the tourist office.

The miracle of the chapel of Notre Dame de la Croix

In 1655, at the time of the plague, when Marciac was reporting many deaths every day, Marie Dinguidard (a family still present in Marciac) went to fetch wood for her neighbours and while she was collecting dead wood, the Virgin Mary appeared to her and said: "You must build a chapel here if you want the plague to disappear". Marie returned to the square and went to the local councillors to tell them what had just happened. As she was getting on in years and no longer had all her wits about her, they didn't really listen to her. Through her persistence, Marie won her case and a small altar dedicated to the Virgin was built at the foot of the present chapel, and indeed the illness quickly subsided. This small building can still be seen as you approach the chapel. It was not until a little later that the construction of the Notre Dame de La Croix chapel began. Unfortunately, it was plundered and burned down several times. The chapel you see today dates from the 19th century. It was never really finished, as the bell tower should have been much higher and more majestic than the 4-sloped roof we see today.

9 Notre-Dame Assomption church

Built between the 14th and 18th centuries, its architecture is strongly inspired by the Holy Trinity: 3 naves with 3 bays each, 3 apses for the choir, 3 ogival bays illuminating the central apse, 3 Gothic portals with triple voussoirs and 3 arcades decorating the porch. With its 86 metres high, it has the tallest bell tower in Gers and is built in the Gothic style, an early style for the period and the region. The current vault dates from 1869, as the one built in 1450 was destroyed in 1579. It has three naves and a pentagonal choir with sculptures from the 14th century, but still in the Roman tradition.

In the centre of the gate is a statue of the Virgin and Child. On the tympanum, there is a representation of the crucifixion of Jesus with 2 musician angels at his side. Above there is a representation of Jesus Christ after his ascension to heaven, sitting on a throne and showing his hands with the scars of his Passion.

Inside, on either side of the altar, is an angel. On the tabernacle is an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the left is the chapel of Saint Mary and the pulpit, and on the right is the chapel of Saint Joseph.

10 The Bullrings

The bullring of Marciac is in the shape of a horseshoe, with the stands forming the base. The track is surrounded by a fence called the "talenquère". We have found archives of the "course landaise" back to the 1840s and 1850s, indeed, it is a real tradition for us. The "course landaise" is an extreme sport, an art that goes hand in hand with festivities, without killing the animal. It reveals the Gascon character: courage, panache, challenge...

The actors of the race are:

- The "écarteur"(spreader): he stands in the middle of the ring and, with his arms raised, provokes the cow to charge. Standing still, he waits until the last moment to dodge the cow and get her as close to his body as possible.
- The jumper: a real gymnast, he somersaults over the cow as it rushes towards him.
- The tailgater: he is the spreader's guardian angel. He channels the cow and protects the spreader as best he can.
- The trainer: brings the cow, and places it into an attack position and sends it towards the spreader. These men make up the cuadrilla, which usually consists of 6 or 7 spreaders, 2 jumpers, 2 trainers and a tailgater.

And let's not forget the cows, which are reared in the wild, almost in freedom, and come into the ring at the age of 3 or 4. Each animal has a name that is well known to the actors and the public. Some even become stars.



2 The Town hall square

This square has long been the centre of community life. It is the largest square of the 500 bastides of the south-west of France (measuring 130x75m)/ with a length of 130m and a width of 75m. A hall, supported by 35 pillars, was home, from 1345, to the butchers and the weekly market on wednesday morning, on the ground floor. The first floor housed the town council and archives, and from 1789, the school. You can only imagine what the smell was like in those days, when slaughterhouse standards did not exist. The hall was destroyed in 1871, due to dilapidation (partly burnt down). 35 chestnut trees were planted where the pillars once stood, but unfortunately, they had to be removed in 1990 due to sickness.

The square is now empty, which facilitates the installation of stalls on market days, and of the vast stage and velum during the Jazz in Marciac festival. Since 1997, the locations of the old pillars are marked by partition extracts of the "Marciac Suite" of Wynton Marsalis. From the square, looking to the left of the Town Hall, you can see the house of the Abbot of Case Dieu, with its beautiful carved stone façade and its mullioned windows.



3 The city hall entrance

Enter the lobby of the City Hall and discover the first map of the Bastide, the signature of the Act of Pareage and the engraving of the original square with its wooden hall. There are also scenes of life, photos of the bullring and of the square Chevalier d'Antras. A box hanging on the wall starts up automatically when you arrive and projects a few minutes of animated film telling the story of Marciac and its festival (in french).

4 The blue path

From the arcades, take the little "Passage du chemin bleu" and cross the former courtyard of the Abbot de la Case Dieu's house. Note the width of the personal protective wall, which shows the importance and wealth of the abbot, co-founder of the bastide. Thanks to the staircase, the lookouts could access the top of the wall and warn of any danger.

 When passing by, take a stop in front of Madeleine Doubrère's works (from Marciac and pupil of Blanche Odin)



5 Rue des Lilas

Exit the Lilas street and head towards the Augustinian cloister.



Not to be missed: two art galleries on this street. Notice the blue discs on the floor, part of the "Itinéraires Bis", an artistic trail, which leads to art galleries and other art installations.

6 The Chevalier d'Antras's square

The square has changed a lot compared to the photos and engravings seen at the town hall. The low walls have fallen, and the trees have been cut down; in fact, the roots of the plane trees were running under the foundation stones of the church's front wall. The trees had to be cut down and the foundations rebuilt before the wall collapsed. This allowed a clear view of the façade of the Augustinian cloister, the porch and the bell tower.

7 Couvent des Augustins

The burnt-out and looted church is now home to the village hall, cinema and the Territoires du Jazz museum.

Pass under the porch and look up to see the keystone decorated with the town's coat of arms. The lilies are a reminder that we're in a royal bastide, and the two keys (power and fidelity) recall the deed of betrothal between the abbot and the king.

The convent dates back to the 14th and 15th centuries: it housed Augustinian monks, members of the mendicant orders, who didn't live in seclusion, but amid the population, which enabled them to beg and live off the generosity of local residents and merchants. It's a small convent, but very richly decorated.

The stones of the wing still standing were sold by the town hall after the separation of Church and State in 1905. As the commune did not have the financial means to maintain all the religious buildings, the wing was dismantled stone by stone and transported by train and then by ship to the other side of the Atlantic. They now adorn the Hearst Castle of Saint Simeon, near San Francisco (US). Wandering around the streets of the village, however, you can still see stone sculptures, here and there, in the middle of modest facades. Nowadays, the first thing that catches our eyes, just after the porch, is the evocation of the cloister. This monumental sculpture in wire mesh is the work of Alain Lacoste. Although the material does not allow the details of the sculptures in the capitals to be reproduced, this evocation takes up the exact dimensions of the cloister. The low walls were built after the archaeological excavations which made it possible to reveal the exact layout of the old cloister. These excavations have also led to the discovery of many monks' tombs. Continue past the cinema, through the passage leading to the L'Astrada, to discover the huge chimney of the monks' refectory. The room was greatly reduced during the renovations. You have to imagine a large, long room that could accommodate all the monks. Given the number of wooden stalls in the church, there must have been around fifty of them at the most.

8 L'Astrada

On the other side is the square of L'Astrada, a concert hall with 500 seats and a large stage for all kinds of performances (circus, dance, music, comedy, theatre...).

L'Astrada means destiny in Occitan. This scene was born in the wake of the jazz festival. After more than 20 years of using the village hall once a month in winter for jazz concerts, it was time to create a real stage with perfect acoustics and excellent comfort. There are around fifty shows every year between October and June, with concerts twice a day during the festival. It is now an established national stage. You'll also notice the bronze statue of Wynton Marsalis, patron of the jazz festival, created by Daphné Dubarry.

The story of the Jazz Festival :

In 1977, Guy Laffitte (saxophonist) and Bill Coleman (trumpet player), both from the Gers by heart, met at Guy Lafitte's house for a private concert with their neighbours and friends. These neighbours and friends include people from Marciac, in particular Claude Muller (president of the Marciac Youth Centre) and Jean Louis Guilhaumon (current president of Jazz in Marciac and mayor of Marciac). Given the success of the evening, they decided to organise a concert in Marciac to raise funds for the youth centre.

And so, on 13 August 1978, the first jazz festival was organised in the Marciac bullring, with the participation of Claude Luter (clarinettist) and amateur groups from the region. It was a great success, in 1979 three evenings were offered and little by little the festival grew, attracting more and more of the great names in jazz. In the early years, the furniture factory was cleared of its machine tools to make way for music. Then a 2,000-seat circus tent was set up in the rugby stadium, followed by larger and larger tents until the current one, which can seat 6,400 and stand 11,000. In 1989, the Jazz in Marciac association took over from the Youth Centre, devoting itself 100% to organising the festival during the summer and developing an off-season programme of one jazz concert a month from September to June.

