

France

Bordeaux from the back of a black cab

Tristan Rutherford

enjoys a tour of the vineyards and châteaux in a London taxi

Antoine's London taxi looks like your typical black cab. However, its true purpose is revealed when you ride inside. His assistant, Virginie, flips down a passenger seat to reveal a bevy of 100ml wine-filled vials. These tasters can be sipped now or slipped into your carry-on luggage for the plane home. Antoine's "banter" doesn't concern London politics. Oh no. As the taxi bowls through morning mist and blackening grapes, he keeps up a wine-buff patter that lights up the fairytale châteaux we pass.

We're taking a tour of Bordeaux with a company called Wine Cab, which has three former London taxis. Ours is a 1996 Carbodies Fairway. Wine Cab's USP is that it gives insider access to Bordeaux's dizzying array of 7,000 châteaux, from little-known grand crus up to Château Margaux. My request is to visit three top-drawer vineyards, then spend the night in a château. Virginie turns over maps of Médoc and Sauternes until she reaches Saint-Émilion. With its heavy concentration of vineyards, it ticks all the boxes.

Château Cheval Blanc is a premier grand cru classé vineyard that I wouldn't stand a hope of visiting solo. Vintages sell for a minimum of €500 (£430) per bottle. James Bond drinks it in *Never Say Never Again*. Our taxi putters past the Pétrus

estate to park alongside a veritable showroom of Audis and BMWs. Heads turn. We're riding the coolest vehicle in the lot.

Under the guidance of the vineyard's owner, Bernard Arnault, the chairman of LVMH and France's richest man, the new cellar building looks like a spaceship styled by Louis Vuitton. A concrete top floor contains a roof garden that regulates the temperature in the cellar below. Here six curvy lines of vats contain several million euros' worth of wine apiece.

Antoine, Virginie and I are offered glasses of the 2011. Each sip is a €20 tongue explosion. If I could afford it I'd drink nothing else. Antoine, who's driving, spits out most of his. Virginie, who wishes to stay sober, leaves half of hers. Come on, guys. I could have taken that home for my dad.

After Polaroid selfies outside Cheval Blanc (Antoine gives these to guests as a memento) we zip next door to Château La Dominique. Here the French architect Jean Nouvel has shaken up stuffy Saint-Émilion by installing a giant red cuboid cellar in the middle of the estate. Its sides are clad with stainless steel blades. These reflect the surrounding vineyards in hues of Bordeaux ruby, scarlet and crimson. After a cellar visit we lunch on top of the red cube on platters of charcuteries régionales (£14) and carpaccio de boeuf (£16). The 360-degree panorama distils the essence of Bordeaux: Disney-like mansions, valleys of vines and Mercedes minivans packed with Chinese tasting parties.

"OK, we go," says Antoine, revving the engine. The joy of chauffeured transport is that you can stop where you please for patisserie, vineyard strolls or wine shops. "Or for a sleep under a tree," says Virginie. Some British like to buy wine cases directly from the châteaux, she explains, a process often cheaper than buying from a cave in town. For an extra fee, an oenologist can accompany your tour. Wine Cab has few French clients but this should change when the two-hour TGV arrives from Paris in July. Alluringly for Brits, Bordeaux will then be less than a six-hour train ride from London.

We zip pass the estate of Pomerol and park in the medieval confines of Saint-Émilion itself. This is a town built on booze. Countless wine shops chalk up prices for the best vintages: Cheval Blanc 2010, €1,033 a bottle; Mouton Rothschild 2010, €648; Pétrus 2010, €3,999. Vines creep up to the edge of the stone ramparts. Who wouldn't cash in when fertile local land can fetch €1 million a hectare?

Then Antoine guides us into a 15th-century cloister for a cheeky surprise. He pulls out three plastic goblets and cracks open a bottle of 2014 Cuvée Hortense Prestige "to keep us fuelled". Very nice of him. After a sip of two, we take a guess-the-smell test. Jars are produced with whiffs of rubber, blackcurrant or chocolate, though I guess leather, strawberry and orange.



It's a longer drive to our final port of call, Château Prieuré Marquet, a perfectly symmetrical mansion, where Antoine and Virginie bid me goodbye. In 2016 the château opened five super-cool guest rooms. Each is adorned with accoutrements from the owner's favourite designers: Gio Ponti, Christian Lacroix, Philippe Starck. To get to breakfast you walk past a 16th-century staircase, a 1920s billiard table and a 1968

The Wine Cab at Château d'Agassac in the Haut-Médoc, Bordeaux

Fiat 500. Teenagers can sleep in a decommissioned double-decker London bus.

The managers, Sergio and Palmira, offer me one last tasting in the cellar. Beneath wooden beams, this year's harvest bubbles and ferments in shiny vats. I'm the first Brit to try not-in-the-shops vintages from here and surrounding vineyards. Who knew a black cab could transport you to Elysium and back? It sure beats King's Cross.

Need to know

Tristan Rutherford was a guest of Wine Cab, which charges from £377 a day for up to three people (wine-cab.com)

Where to stay

Rooms at Château Prieuré Marquet (prieure-marquet.com) start at £207

How to get there

From July 2, a new high-speed Paris-Bordeaux service will cut the journey to about six hours from London. Tickets cost from £110 return (eurostar.com)

SMALL GROUP TOURS

MOROCCO

4 nights from £515

EARLY BOOKING OFFER SAVE UP TO £50

THE 'VJV' RIAD

- Enjoy a stay at the traditional Angsana Riad Blanc in old Marrakech
- Visit Koutoubia Minaret, Majorelle Gardens, Bahia Palace, Dar Si Said Palace Museum, the souks of the old medina and Medersa Ben Youssef

GREECE

11 nights from £1845

1 DINNER INCLUDED

GRAND TOUR OF GREECE

- Discover Greece's cultural heritage & complex history exploring the cities, temples & theatres of classical Greece & ancient Macedonia
- Staying in Athens, Nafplio, Olympia, Delphi, Kalambaka and Thessaloniki

020 3733 4829 | vjv.com/times

ABTA ABTA No. V1661

Facebook Twitter Google+ Pinterest