

Pau, The Historically British Gateway to the Pyrénées



Nestled at the edge of the Pyrénées, the lively Béarnaise capital of Pau was once a favourite haunt of the British aristocracy for good reason. It combines a timeless French charm and elegance with history, gastronomy and opportunities for outdoor activities as well as enjoying spectacular, sweeping views of the mountains.

On a clear day, from the famous Boulevard des Pyrénées, which the locals call ‘the most beautiful view on land’, it feels as if you can see the mountain peaks stretching all the way from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

Pau has a rich cultural past and has been a popular town with foreign visitors for centuries. The city was the birthplace of Henri IV and later became a favoured resort of the British aristocracy during the 19th century, who left behind them a legacy and influence that endures today.

Pau is the prefecture and the second city of Aquitaine, but it is also the capital of Béarn and the gateway to the Pyrénées National Park. Pau also enjoys a very privileged geographical position with the mountains on its doorstep to the south and rolling hills and vineyards of the Jurançon and Madiran wine regions to the north, while the Atlantic coast is within easy reach.

Pau blends city comforts, cultural and historic interest with beautiful and dramatic surrounding countryside and some of the best-loved food and wine in France.

It is easy to while away the day in Pau doing nothing more than enjoying the views, making the most of the café terraces that dot the city, wandering the narrow streets and enjoying the architecture of the timber-framed facades in the old town, and relaxing into the laid-back atmosphere.



Pau is also famous for its Chateau that dominates the town and for its royal history. This imposing yet elegant fortress stands proudly at the heart of the old town and is famed as the birthplace of King Henri IV, one of France's most beloved monarchs. The castle's history stretches back to the Middle Ages, with renovations blending medieval fortifications with Renaissance additions. Inside, visitors can wander through ornate state rooms, beautifully preserved salons, and the king's birth chamber.

The château also houses a museum of Béarnaise history, showcasing paintings, furniture, tapestries, and artefacts that tell the story of the region's identity and its link to the French crown. Outside, the castle gardens offer panoramic views over the city and to the mountains.

Much of Pau's cultural history is tied in with the British who first discovered Pau in the early 19th century, drawn by its mild climate, clean mountain air, and beautiful setting between the Pyrénées and the Atlantic. In the early 1800s, British officers and aristocrats who had fought in the Peninsular War (1808-1814) passed through southern France and were captivated by Pau's views, remarkable surroundings, and genteel pace of life. Around 1815 to 1820, a small British colony began to form, and this soon grew into one of the largest expatriate communities in continental Europe.



The British community transformed Pau into a fashionable spa and sporting resort and by the mid-19th century, Pau was described as the winter capital of the English in France. The combination of altitude, sunshine, and clean air also made it popular for those with delicate health much like the Riviera or Davos later on. The British came to Pau for its climate, scenery, and lifestyle, and ended up transforming it into one of Europe's earliest resort towns.

The legacy of the British still shapes Pau's character today and can be seen in the architecture, sporting calendar and cultural imprint. The British built elegant villas and townhouses, often in a mix of Victorian and Anglo-Norman styles. Many of these still grace the Quartier du Château and the Boulevard des Pyrénées area.

Pau also became home to the first golf club on the European mainland, founded in 1856. The Pau Golf Club, which still exists today, is one of the most atmospheric golf courses in France thanks to its setting amongst rolling manicured parkland and oaks set against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. Inside the walls are lined with memorabilia from the British founding era and the club proudly celebrates its British origins.

The British also introduced horse racing to Pau, founding the Hippodrome du Pont-Long, which is still in operation just outside the city. Pau is one of the most horse mad cities in France and each year hosts one of the big three-day events, *Les 5 Etoiles de Pau* at La Domaine de Sers. It is the only CCI five-star eventing competition held in France and usually takes place in October.



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The British, however, didn't just bring fox hunting, golf, and high society to Pau; they also helped establish Pyrénéan mountaineering, combining the curiosity of scientists with the culture of adventure and wonder at the natural world. The British were, in many ways, the first to treat mountain climbing as a sport rather than an act of science or necessity.

While the Swiss Alps drew early Alpine pioneers, Pau's proximity to the Pyrénées made it a natural base for those seeking lesser-known peaks and romantic wilderness.

For the British in Pau, mountain excursions became a fashionable pastime combining health tourism with scenic exploration. Illustrated travel journals from the 1850s describe parties leaving Pau in carriages or on horseback to 'take the air' in the high valleys. The mountains were seen through the lens of the Romantic movement: sublime, dangerous, and spiritually uplifting.

Artists and writers, many of them British, captured the dramatic scenery in sketches and watercolours and these accounts helped introduce the Pyrénées to the English-speaking world through travelogues and illustrated journals.



In the 1840s to the 1860s, a number of British travellers and sportsmen began climbing the high mountains of the Pyrénées from Pau, hiring local guides to help them. These climbs combined scientific curiosity with Victorian notions of health, endurance, and masculine virtue. Some of the first notable ascents were by Henry Russell-Killough.

He was born in Toulouse to Irish parents, raised partly in Pau and is often called the father of Pyrénéan mountaineering. Educated in Britain, Russell made hundreds of ascents in the Pyrénées, most notably the peak of Vignemale (3,298 m), which he climbed over 30 times. His eccentric passion led him to build caves in the mountain so he could 'live close to his beloved peak'. Russell's writings, such as *Souvenirs d'un Montagnard* (1908), combined the romanticism of Byron with the scientific observation of the Victorian age.

Edward Whymper (better known for the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865) also explored the Pyrénées early in his climbing career, drawn by the same landscapes that British expatriates in Pau admired.



Autumn can be spectacular with a whole spectrum of colours from the green of the plains to the reds and yellows of the trees and the white-capped peaks of the mountains. Pau is also known for its palm trees, which thrive in the climate with temperatures often around 20 degrees in the middle of winter.

Pau may be less known than many of France's cities and without the high-energy buzz of say Lyon or Nice, but that is exactly its charm; there is time to pause, take a break and drink in a mountain view that stretches from horizon to horizon.

Life here moves at a slower pace along its cobbled streets, grand boulevards and on its quiet café terraces, with the Pyrénées forming a stunning backdrop. There is a mix of cultures and history that have blended over the centuries to create a relaxing and interesting vibe, making Pau a gem of a city to explore for a few days and the perfect stopping-off point for exploring the Pyrénées and the rest of southwest France.

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Local Spots in Pau

Le Café du Boulevard is a classic terrace café right on the Boulevard des Pyrénées, but tucked slightly away from the main bustle, it is perfect for people-watching and a great place to enjoy a glass of Jurançon while taking in the Pyrénées panorama.

The Maison de Jurançon Wine Bar is a small, friendly wine bar specialising in local Jurançon wines. Knowledgeable staff will guide you through tastings of dry and sweet varieties and you can ask for tasting pairings with local cheeses and hams and saucissons.

The Café du Palais near the historic Château de Pau is very popular with locals, particularly known for its pastries, coffee, and relaxed atmosphere. Ideal for a morning coffee before exploring the château.

La Table de Jeanne is a small bistro hidden in the old town. It offers authentic Béarnaise cuisine in a warm, comfortable atmosphere and is popular for the duck magret or the garbure (local mountain soup) paired with a regional wine.

Le Club is a stylish bar tucked behind the main streets, popular for evening aperitifs when locals stop by after work.

The Jardin du Château is a small, hidden garden within the Château de Pau with quiet corners and benches offering panoramic views of the Pyrénées.

Les Halles is Pau's indoor market, a sensory delight of local cheeses, charcuterie, fresh produce, and baked breads and pastries as well as regional specialties.

Getting there

Pau has its own airport and is well-connected by both train and by motorway while Toulouse international airport is just over two hours away. Bordeaux is 2.5 hours and Biarritz, o on the Atlantic coast, is 5 hours. The nearest ski resorts are Gourette or Artouste, bot both just over an hour's drive.

Published: May 30, 2026 by *Nadia Jordan*