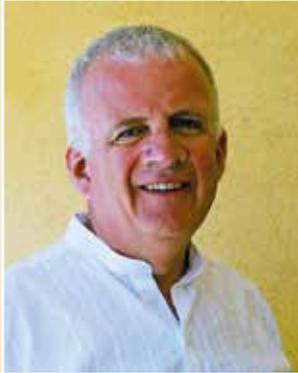


# **CYCLING THE CANAL DE LA GARONNE**



#### **About the Author**

Declan Lyons has spent many years cycling and touring in the south of France and has written a guide to cycling the Canal du Midi from Toulouse to Sète. He has travelled the routes included in this guide many times over the past two decades and the Canal de la Garonne forms part of his own regular route from the Channel to the Mediterranean. Declan is an advocate of cycle touring – taking time on his cycles and relishing the nature, history and daily life all around. He has toured the region between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean extensively by bike and packs much of what he has learnt into his guides.

#### **Other Cicerone guides by the author**

*Cycling the Canal du Midi from Toulouse to Sète*

# **CYCLING THE CANAL DE LA GARONNE**

**FROM BORDEAUX TO TOULOUSE**

**by Declan Lyons**

**CICERONE**

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### Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website ([www.cicerone.co.uk/783/updates](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/783/updates)), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to [updates@cicerone.co.uk](mailto:updates@cicerone.co.uk) or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: *Moulin de Loubens (Stage 2)*

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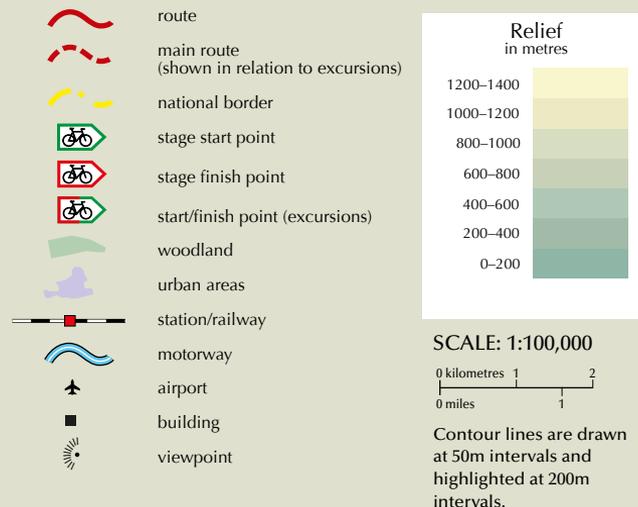
## ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

| Stage       | Start                 | Finish                                 | Distance            | Climb | Page |
|-------------|-----------------------|--|---------------------|-------|------|
| Prologue    | Bordeaux              | Lacanau Océan                          | 135km               | 220m  | 46   |
| Stage 1     | Bordeaux              | Sauveterre-de-Guyenne                  | 59.1km              | 166m  | 58   |
| Stage 2     | Sauveterre-de-Guyenne | Marmande                               | 41km                | 209m  | 68   |
| Stage 3     | Marmande              | Buzet-sur-Baïse                        | 40.4km              | 102m  | 86   |
| Stage 4     | Buzet-sur-Baïse       | Agen                                   | 30.6km              | 50m   | 100  |
| Excursion 1 | Pont de Thomas        | Port-Sainte-Marie and Clermont-Dessous | 20km (round trip)   | 91m   | 112  |
| Excursion 2 | Écluse l'Auvignon     | Nérac                                  | 28.4km (round trip) | 448m  | 118  |
| Stage 5     | Agen                  | Moissac                                | 45km                | 55m   | 123  |
| Excursion 3 | Pont Auvillar         | Auvillar                               | 10.5km              | 60m   | 138  |
| Stage 6     | Moissac               | Montauban                              | 37km                | 75m   | 142  |
| Stage 7     | Montauban             | Toulouse                               | 43km                | 95m   | 154  |



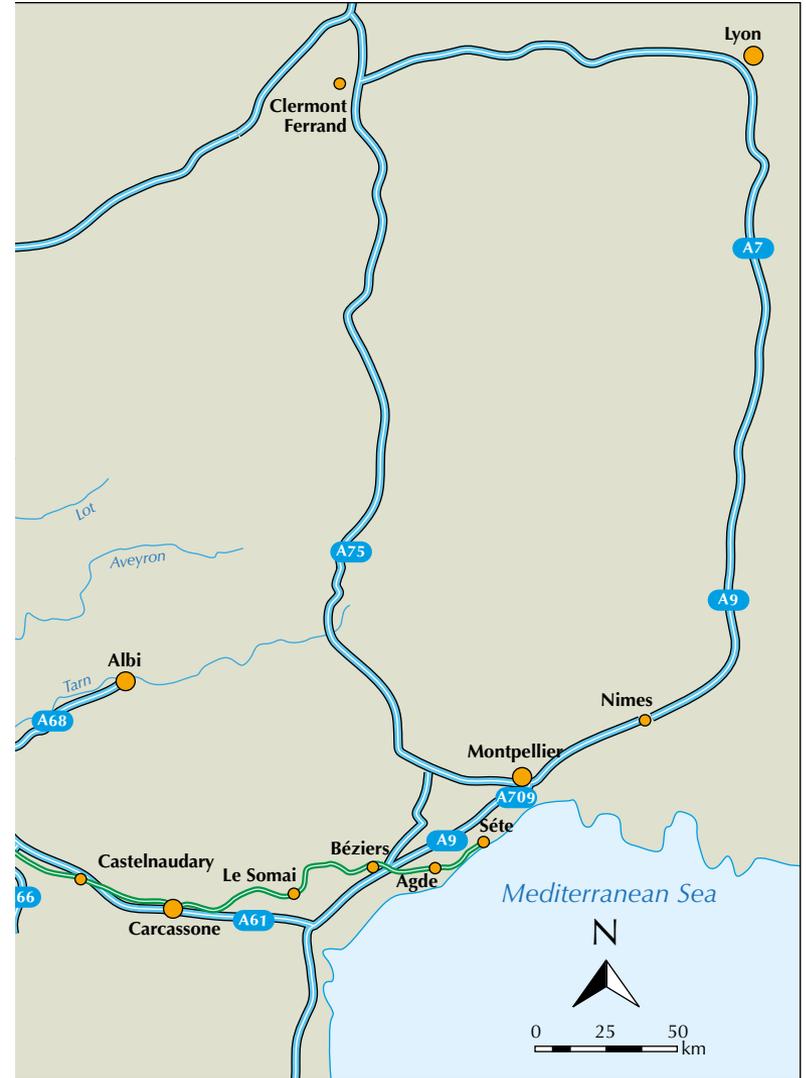
Bordeaux lake is a good place for picnicking (Prologue)

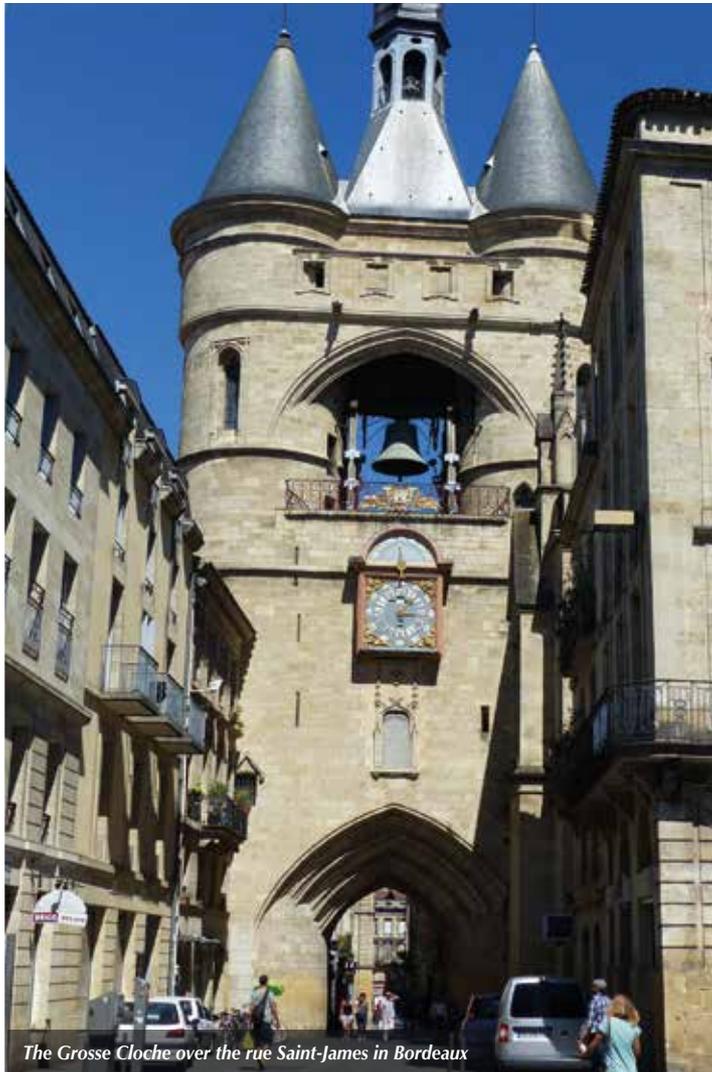
## Symbols used on route maps



## Acknowledgements

Very many thanks to the staff of Voies Navigables de France (VNF) and the people working in local and regional tourist offices for the valuable help and information that they supplied. Special thanks go to my wife Mary and son Oscar for their support and encouragement while I was both cycling and writing. Mary accompanied me on part of the route and her help then was of great value. Thanks too for the help and guidance from the Cicerone team, especially Lesley and Jonathan Williams, Hannah Stevenson and Andrea Grimshaw, and Stephanie Rebello, editor.





The Grosse Cloche over the rue Saint-James in Bordeaux

## INTRODUCTION



The Garonne canal is at the heart of this cycle ride

The Bordeaux region is a cycling paradise of long traffic-free stretches of cycle track with gentle climbs through forests, vineyards, farms and medieval villages. The Garonne canal is at the heart of this. Its 193km asphalted towpath from Castets-en-Dorthe to Toulouse is a dedicated cycle path for most of its length. Occasionally, it uses roads but these are minor with little traffic. Both Bordeaux and Toulouse are cycling cities with a network of tracks that allow you to explore them with ease.

To reach the canal this guide uses another dedicated cycle path

to get from Bordeaux to Sauveterre-de-Guyenne; a gentle climb along a converted railway track to this lovely *bastide* town. Minor roads are then followed from Sauveterre-de-Guyenne to the canal.

This guide also includes a prologue from Bordeaux to Lacanau on the Atlantic coast. It follows an old railway line that has been converted to a cycle track which passes through the extensive forests of Les Landes. This allows you to recreate in part a route from the Atlantic to Toulouse. In all, over 490km of cycle routes are described ranging from small detours

or longer excursions. They offer you the chance to explore and savour the region to the full. The cycle tracks are specified as departmental roads from which motorised vehicles are excluded meaning that they are maintained to a high standard.

The region between Bordeaux and Toulouse is steeped in history and culture. The soil is fertile and produces an abundance of fruit, vegetables and cereals. Its grasslands feed cattle and sheep. People have populated it since pre-historic times. Its rivers allowed early settlers access the interior; they settled on the riverbanks and eventually villages and towns sprang up.

The area has been invaded and fought over frequently. The Romans were among the first to conquer it and the ruins of their occupation are scattered across the Garonne plain.

Others followed in quick succession each leaving their mark on the architecture and culture of the region.

The original purpose of the Garonne canal was to complete Pierre-Paul Riquet's dream of linking the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea. The idea for some form of canal system had been around since Roman times to obviate the need to circumnavigate the Iberian Peninsula. Riquet instigated the creation of the Canal du Midi from Toulouse to Sète in the 17th century. Prior to this, goods were shipped from Bordeaux to Toulouse by the Garonne river. This was a dangerous stretch of water: there were rapids and shallows – particularly in summer – and floods and high waters in winter. The journey from the sea inland was obviously

### CANAL DE LA GARONNE

The canal runs parallel to the river and thus its original name, Canal latéral à la Garonne. It is also known as the Canal de la Garonne and the Canal de Garonne. You will see signs for the Canal entre deux mers (canal between two seas) which refers to the two canals: Canal de la Garonne joining Bordeaux to Toulouse and the Canal du Midi from Toulouse to Sète. For simplicity, this book uses the English translation, Garonne canal, for the canal from Bordeaux to Toulouse.

Canals need a constant and steady supply of water to work effectively, and the Garonne river provides this for the Garonne canal. The Brienne canal brings river water to the Port Embouchure in Toulouse where it feeds the Garonne canal. The Canal du Midi also opens into this port and so some water from its source, the reservoir in St-Ferréol, contributes to the Garonne canal. The water supply is augmented through the subterranean Laboulbène channel in Agen.

### THE CANAL'S CONSTRUCTION

In the 17th century, Louis XIV recognised the commercial and economic security benefits of linking the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The journey around the Spanish and Portuguese coast, through the Straits of Gibraltar, was long and perilous. Cargo ships were attacked by pirates, while winter storms sank them. Roads were poor and could not cope with increasing volumes as manufacturing and trade increased. Work began on the Canal du Midi in 1666 and was completed in 1680. It proved to be a great success and continued to operate commercially into the mid-20th century. Despite the difficulty in travelling between Bordeaux and Toulouse, social and economic instability meant that was not until the 19th century that the idea of the canal connection was seriously considered. Jean-Baptiste de Baudre was the bridge and roads engineer chosen to oversee the building of the canal between Toulouse and Castets-en-Dorthe. The project began in 1839, building the canal in stages. The works were completed on 12 March 1856 when the canal's full length was declared navigable.

Despite competition from railways, canal business grew. It was an efficient means of transporting raw materials and agricultural produce such as wood, grain and wine. One advantage it had over the railway was stations were not required to make a stop. As you cycle along you will

against the flow which made it arduous. Heavy rains often made the journey downstream difficult and sometimes treacherous. The Garonne canal overcame these problems and ensured a reliable passage for goods between the two seas.

The Garonne river is always close to the canal. The canal passes close to villages and towns built on the river's banks. The Tarn, Baïse and Lot are major tributaries of the Garonne and you will come close to or cross these on the route. Near Moissac it borders the River Tarn. The canal extension from Montech to Montauban also links to the Tarn.

### REGIONS OF THE CANAL

The route passes through two of France's administrative regions: Nouvelle Aquitaine with Bordeaux as its capital or prefecture and Occitanie whose administrative capital/prefecture is Toulouse. These administrative regions were created in mid-2016 and so you will find maps and signs referring to the previous regions: Aquitaine and Midi-Pyrénées.

The regions are sub-divided into departments. Each French department is numbered alphabetically. They are usually named after a river or rivers running through it. The route passes through: Gironde (33), Lot-et-Garonne (47), Tarn-et-Garonne (82) and Haute-Garonne (31). You will see signs along the route marking the beginning of each department.

notice plenty of small harbours or jetties where barges used to stop to load and unload goods.

The canal passed back to state control in 1898. The Voies navigables de France (VNF), the French waterways company, now manages it. Apart from horse, cow and mule-drawn barges,

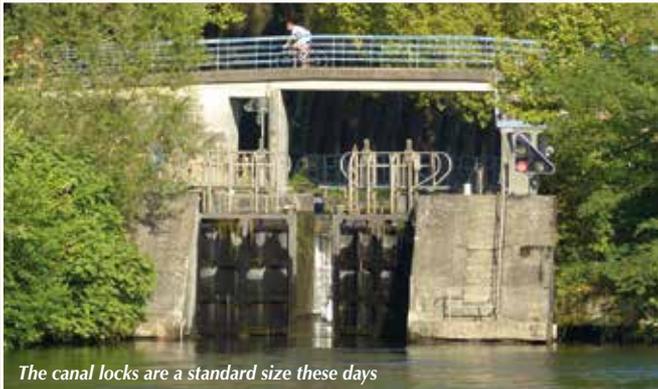
steam-powered boats also plied the waterway. Diesel power took over after World War II. Today's cycle path follows, in the main, the original towpath used by horses. There was commercial traffic on the canal up until the 1970s. It is now used for recreational boating and cruising.

### LOCKS AND BRIDGES

The canal locks are all a standard size and were lengthened and automated in 1973. They are now 40m long allowing them to take a barge of 38.5m. A water slope to avoid the locks near Montech was built in 1974.

The locks are numbered in descending order from 53 at Castets-en-Dorthe to one at Lalande. The numbers are given in brackets in the text. There is a blue sign over the door of each lockkeeper's house giving the name and number of the lock and the distance to the previous and next ones. The locks are often combined with a road bridge and these are referred to as bridge/locks in the text.

Most bridges have a sign giving their name and the distance from Toulouse. It is marked 'PK' which stands for Point Kilométrique (kilometre point). This guide uses some of these as reference points. Some of the modern bridges do not have a sign and there are none near Toulouse.



*The canal locks are a standard size these days*

### HISTORY

People have lived in the region between Bordeaux and Toulouse since prehistoric times and traces of their pottery and other artefacts have been found along what was to become the route of the Garonne canal. Artworks created by Cro-Magnon man were discovered in caves at Prignac-et-Marcamps, north of Bordeaux, and archaeological findings suggest that the caves were occupied for almost 60,000 years stretching from 80,000BP (before the present) to 25,000BP. Some evidence points to people of Basque origin being among the early settlers in Aquitaine. They were also the first settlers of Toulouse. It was much later that the Celtic Volcae-Tectosages people spread throughout southwest France in the last six centuries BC and ruled the area around Toulouse. The Celtic Bituriges Viviscila tribe established the port of Burdigala on the

banks of the Garonne and this evolved into the present-day Bordeaux.

The Romans entered the region in 121BC to subdue the rebellious Celts along the Mediterranean. Julius Caesar annexed the province following the Gallic Wars 58–60BC. Toulouse, known as Tolosa, was already a flourishing town when the Romans invaded. They relocated the town from the mountains to the plain and built it on a Roman model. It grew in wealth and status and was one of the major cities of the western Empire. A further contribution of the Romans was to promote the development of agriculture and viticulture. After their departure further occupations and conquests followed.

### The Cathar Crusade

The crusade against the Cathars was one of the major historical events in the region. The Cathar belief had

*Roman ruins in Castelculier (Stage 5)*



## PROLOGUE

*From Bordeaux to the Atlantic*

|                          |                                       |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Start</b>             | Le Miroir d'Eau (water mirror)        |
| <b>Distance</b>          | 135km                                 |
| <b>Accumulated climb</b> | 220m                                  |
| <b>Path</b>              | Road and dedicated asphalt cycle path |
| <b>Map</b>               | IGN TOP100 145                        |

This optional stage is a 135km round trip visiting the Atlantic Ocean, west of Bordeaux. It follows the route of an old railway line which was asphalted over and turned into a cycle way. It passes through Bordeaux's outskirts, skimming around Bordeaux lake. It visits small towns and villages and travels through the wild and lonely forests of Les Landes (meaning heath or moorland) before reaching the Atlantic Ocean at the seaside town of Lacanau. The wildlife, both botanical and zoological, is rich and varied in the vast forest and the relatively poor and boggy soil. You may spot native red squirrels, martens, foxes, deer and wild boar as well as more common rabbits and mice. At night you will hear the whirring of nightjars and the hooting of owls.

If you prefer to break the route over two or three days, you could stay in Lacanau Océan or in the chambres d'hôtes near Salaunes – book in advance.

For the map showing the route leaving the centre of Bordeaux, see Stage 1.

◀ The prologue begins at the paddling pool, Le Miroir d'eau, in front of **Place de la Bourse**. Cycle downriver towards the sea – away from the stone bridge – on the riverside cycle path. There are stalls selling freshly squeezed orange juice here in summer and it is well worth trying. At H14 hangar building (easy to spot), 1.6km from the start, take the slope to your left to a cobbled area. Veer left and come to the main road running along the quays, **Quai des Chartrons**. Cross at the traffic lights and take the road straight opposite you, the Cours de Medoc. There should be cycle signs for Royan and Lacanau.

Use the cycle path on the right, most of which is separated from the road by kerb stones and paving, cycle through four crossroads and several other junctions to reach a large roundabout at **Place Ravezies**. Follow the cycle track as it veers to the right. ▶ Stay on the cycle path and cross two large roads and take the road following signs for Bordeaux lac. There are cycle signs for Royan and Lacanau. Use the cycle track that runs through the pavement. You reach a major junction 4.2km from Bordeaux centre with a cycle track to Bruges to your left. Cross the major road in front of you following the signs for Royan and Lacanau. The track is tree-lined in a few hundred metres.

The path splits. You take the left path for Lacanau. Turn immediately left beside a park. **Le Lac** is to your right with **picnic tables** and plenty of shade. You pass the entrance to the beach, a **toilet block** and the sailing centre. The path slopes right and passes under a motorway. Continue beside the motorway. This stretch is noisy but large concrete bollards separate you from the road.

The square is surrounded by large modern buildings.

*Cycle downriver along the quays*





A sign for the town indicates you have reached **Eysines**. Cross a small road and then larger road and cycle past suburban houses. Reach a larger road where the path continues on the opposite side but slightly to the right. Pass under a road bridge 14km from Bordeaux centre. In 3km cross two busy roads with **shops** and a **bistro** on the corner of the second. Pass beside the bistro and later a chocolaterie, patisserie and boulangerie which also serves snacks. Cross another road and reach the old station at **St Médard-en-Jalles**, 18km from Bordeaux. There's a **water tap**, a **toilet block** and a small **shelter**.

The **station** has been converted into a restaurant. There is an old steam train, in a state of some disrepair, with a carriage behind stranded on a length of track outside the station building. It dates from 1913 and is a Couillet locomotive.

### ST MÉDARD-EN-JALLES

The town centre is 1km north of the station. It is suburban town with a rapidly growing population – currently around 28,000. It has **restaurants**, **cafés**, **shops**, a **hotel** and the usual other services.

Remains suggest that the town was occupied since Roman times. In the 17th century it became a centre for gunpowder production when six powder mills were established. These were not too successful: many explosions punctuated the early years of the mills' operations and one of the first owners of these mills, Monsieur Jehan Dupérier, died in one. The state took them over on the owner's death and they were developed into a royal gunpowder factory. The town became a centre for military industry as a consequence and the tradition continues to this day. It is a centre for the nuclear weapons industry with the Centre d'Achèvement et d'Essais des Propulseurs et Engins (CAEPE), which develops and tests propulsion systems, being one of several defence companies based nearby. The town was also a centre for washerwomen who laundered linen from the hotels and big houses in Bordeaux.

The church in the town centre dates from the 11th century and is a national monument. It is dedicated to Saint Médard who was a bishop in Soissons in northern France but his following spread throughout the country. The bell tower dates from the 14th century and houses two bells cast in the 19th century. Graves of the Merovingian, the early Frankish people



The town hall

sculpture of a salamander, the town's emblem, on a grass patch between the church and the town hall.

believed to be the first kings of France in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, were found in front of the church suggesting that it has been a religious centre from that time. The town hall is attractive with a small park close by. One of the town's more distinctive features is a large

Leave the station and follow the path past a fenced-off military zone with a road to your left. You continue through suburbs crossing small roads. The real forest begins 22km from Bordeaux. There's a sign for Salaunes (6km) and Lacanau Océan (44km).

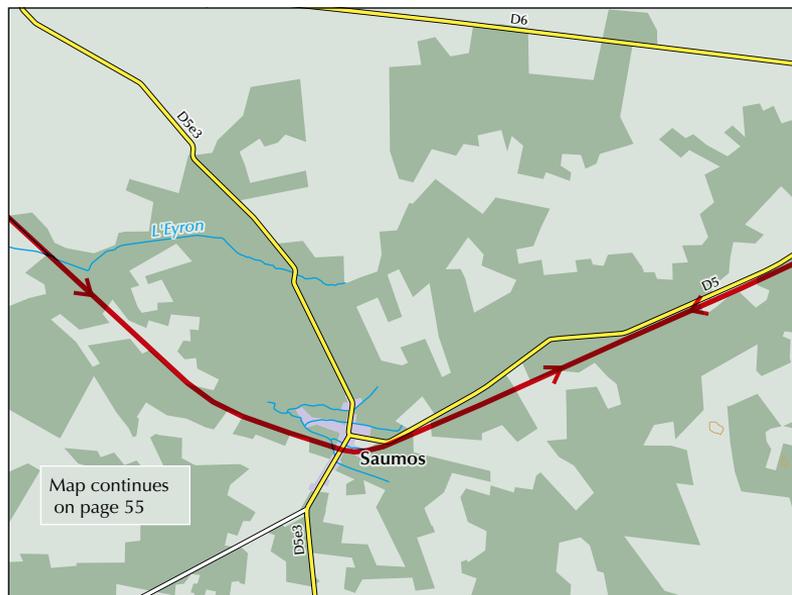
Cycle through pine forest with the occasional field or open space. Reach an oak glade with **picnic tables** and an old, but working **water pump** with the village of **Salaunes** on your right. ▶

There is a sign for Sainte-Hélène (5km) and Lacanau (38km) as you leave the village. Cross the D107E1 and skirt around a saw mill. Cross two further roads as the track straightens again. There are two **chambres d'hôtes**, 2km to the left from the next junction. There are no signs for these on the cycle track. Stelia Composites is on the corner at the next junction. There is a sign for another **chambre d'hôtes**, La Forestière, at the next junction. The path goes behind houses in **Sainte-Hélène** village nearly 34km from Bordeaux. Turn right to enter the small village with basic services.

The village, dating from the 16th century, has a church, shop and restaurant with a bar.



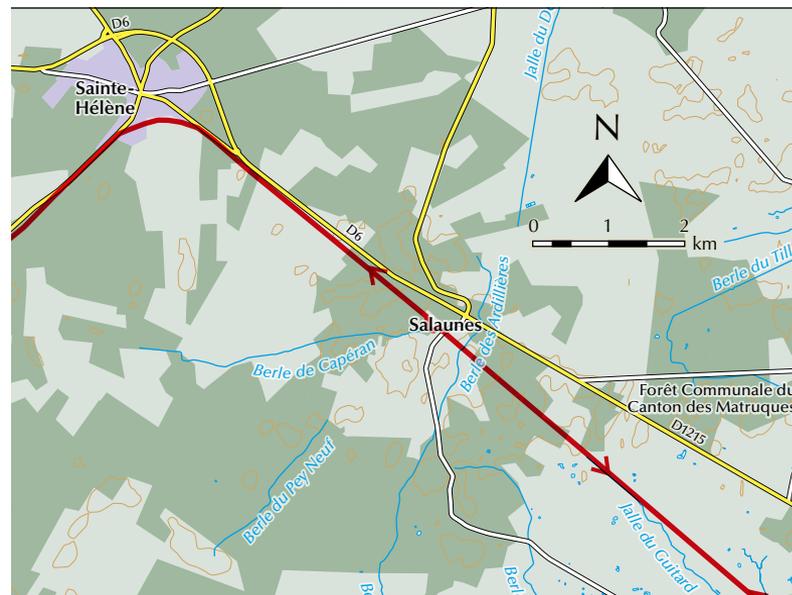
Église Saint Amand in Salaunes



The path swings left. There is a **public toilet** with a **tap** and **shelter** in a green area. At the next junction there is a sign for Saumos (9km) and Lacanau (32km). Over the next 4km pass a Pension Cheveux and cross a largish drainage canal before arriving at **Saumos**.

The small village of **Saumos** has a simple church, Église Saint Amand, which dates from the 12th century. Its bell tower has space for two bells but there is only one. It was built on the Camino de Compostela pilgrimage route under the protection of the Knights Templar. There is **shelter**, **tap**, **picnic tables** and a children's play area. The station house, part of the old station, is private and in good repair.

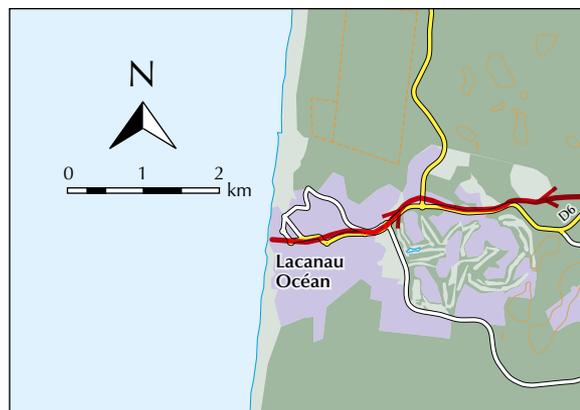
Cross the busy D5 with care. The path runs alongside a canalette or drainage system called a *craste*. Pass signs



for Lacanau Ville (6km) and Lacanau Océan (19km) and then ride through an oak woodland with the Craste de l'Eyron to your left. There is a sign for le Porge at the next junction where you cross the busy **D3**. The signs show that you are within 2km of Lacanau Ville. ▶ Continue straight towards Lacanau and come to a bridge over the **Canal de la Berle**. Cross another bridge over a smaller *craste* and enter the town suburbs. There is a **shelter** in a grassy area beside a car park. Come to a sign for La Coustevre straight on, Lacanau Ville to the right and Lacanau Océan to the left. Here turn left onto Avenue du Lac to go towards Lacanau lake and Lacanau Océan.

**Lacanau Ville** is a busy tourist town with supermarkets, shops, cafés, restaurants, laundrettes, etc. St Vincent's church is in a square opposite the town hall. The church was rebuilt stone by stone in the

There is a cycle track to the left in 1km (this is the D807 going to the Lege, Cap Ferret, le Porge and Arcachon Bay).



second half of the 18th century. The materials came from an old church in Talaris, which was threatened with flooding. The church has four gilded statues of St James, the Blessed Virgin and the child Jesus, Bishop Saint Valère and Saint Vincent. Lacanau is on the Compostela pilgrimage route. There is a **toilet block** to the right as you face the church opposite a restaurant.

Follow a busy road towards Lacanau Océan. Reach **La Bicyclette Jaune** (the Yellow Bike) restaurant. Turn sharp right – the route is still shared with traffic. The harbour is to your left and Lacanau lake beyond it. There is a large park with a beach, childrens' playground and trees offering shade to the left and holiday homes and **camping** to the right. In a kilometre take a cycle path to the left. (There is no sign on it.) In 100m see a sign for Lacanau Océan (11km) and Le Moutchic (6km). Cross a bridge over a river. Come to a T junction following signs as you turn left and then in 100m right. The road is wide but with little traffic. In 400m turn left onto a dedicated cycle track following the signs. This is a lovely stretch of mixed forest ending after 1.4km when the path runs beside the busy **D6**. Cross a large canal, **Canal des Étangs**, before





*The beach at  
Lacanau Océan*

This is a small holiday village with a hotel, restaurants, cafés, waterpark and camping in season.

Note a statue of a mariner on top of a tower on your left. He faces the Police Municipale station on your right.

a roundabout on the road beside you. Cross the main road at its exit from the roundabout. The path swings left and rises slightly. It joins a road (61.5km from Bordeaux) and **Moutchic village** is to the left. ◀ Turn right following signs for Lacanau Océan (5km) and le Huga (3km) onto the D801 dedicated cycle track. Pass through oak woods before rejoining pine forest. Pass under a road bridge in 700m and a couple of hundred metres later at a junction come to a sign for Lacanau Océan (4km) and le Huga (2km), both straight on.

Continue through trees beside a road gradually diverging from it. Cross a busy road and go through two pipe-like tunnels and cross another road. Veer right beside the D6 and follow the path beside the road until the two merge. ◀ There are **public toilets** on your right after a bus stop. Come to a roundabout. The ocean is straight ahead through a pedestrianised street. You are 67.5km from Bordeaux: reverse the route to return to Bordeaux.

## LACANAU OCÉAN

Lacanau Océan is a traditional seaside holiday town. It's busy and packed with visitors in summer. There are lots of new buildings, and **shops**, night-clubs, bars, **cafés**, **restaurants**, **hotels**, **campsites** and services. The beach is long and magnificent. Great waves roll in from the Atlantic making it popular with surfers. There is a surfing centre with a number of surf and kayaking schools. The **tourist office** is in the centre of the town in Place de l'Europe. A statue in the centre of the square created by a local sculpture, Dominique Pios, is entitled *Manueta la fille de l'alize et de la vague* (Manueta the daughter of the wind and the wave). It is an easy town to explore, the only difficulty being the crowds in high season. And this can come as a shock following the quiet of the forest.

Lacanau Ville and Océan are at the centre of a network of cycle paths and those interested may wish to explore more of the surrounding countryside. There is a path to Arachon Bay in the south and others to Maubisson, Cartens and beyond to the north.



*The main street in Lacanau Océan*