



OF CASTLES AND CAVES

A ROAD TRIP THROUGH THE DORDOGNE REVEALS AN IDYLIC FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE

BY MARY AND CHARLES LOVE

“The landscape is epic and open, with soft rolling hills, lush and green ... one of the most beautiful and ravishing places I’ve ever been. It’s home to caves with the earliest petroglyphs known to man and castle strongholds that defended France from England for centuries.” —Anjelica Huston

Actress and film director Anjelica Huston penned these words about France’s Dordogne region (also known as the Périgord) in her 2014 memoir.

She had traveled to this part of southwestern France with actress Drew Barrymore in 1998 to make the movie *Ever After*, an adaptation of the Cinderella story.

Huston’s enthusiasm—matched by that of a close friend of ours who also visited the Dordogne—inspired us to make our own trip there last spring. Not having time to plan it ourselves, we engaged Emilie Thyebaut, co-owner of the travel company France Just For You,

to draw up an eight-day, customized itinerary. She booked our car and accommodations and presented a detailed plan that would make the best use of our time.

After a two-hour drive from Bordeaux, we arrived in the Dordogne, known as “the Valley of 1,000 castles.” Here was a fairytale setting of multi-turreted castles and châteaux, sturdy Romanesque churches and historic villages, many perched upon and cascading down steep

cliffs. We would be exploring a small part of the Dordogne, Périgord Noir, an area where the Dordogne and Vézère rivers come together.

The rivers have carved out serpentine valleys, now blanketed with oak forests and walnut groves. The region’s fertile soil supports a rich variety of agricultural produce—grapes, strawberries, mushrooms, truffles (the best in the world) and more. Périgord’s fattened geese are the source of prized foie gras, a

product found in gourmet shops in every village.

Emilie booked us at two B&Bs: La Belle Demeure, a former 18th-century coach house

owned by Philippe Vidal and Richard Godfrey, and Béchanou, a restored farmhouse in the Vézère Valley run by Dominique and Jean-François Charlet. Both served dinner with advance notice—an arrangement the French call *table d’hôte*.

At La Belle Demeure, where we spent our first three days, our hosts helped us unwind from our long journey. By a fire in their cozy living room, we enjoyed a sparkling Kir Royale, made from Philippe’s home-made blackcurrant liqueur. Dinner, prepared by Richard, was a culinary tour of the Dordogne. The appetizer was foie gras served with toasted gingerbread and Richard’s onion marmade—

an unforgettable combination of flavors. Philippe gave us a lesson in the proper way to eat foie gras: “You never spread it; you cut it, then simply place it on the toast.” The main course featured duck confit, white asparagus, Sarlat-style potatoes (fried with a bit of duck fat) and a full-bodied Pécharmant, an excellent red wine produced in the region.

Our guide for a day, French photographer and world traveler Béatrice Mollaret, arrived at the door of La Belle Demeure the next morning sporting a leather jacket and colorful scarf. She knew the region well, and, thankfully, offered to drive. Navigating the Dordogne’s web



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This unique, family-operated tour company, run by Emilie and Guillaume Thyebaut, organizes customized, self-drive trips through France’s most fascinating places. 888-316-3979 (toll free from the U.S.), france-justforyou.com.

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of narrow roads, she took us to more historic villages than we could have possibly visited in a day: Cadouin, Domme, La Roque-Gageac, Castelnaud, Beynac, Limeuil, Monpazier and more. After her whirlwind introduction, we were ready to explore on our own for the rest of the week.

Like other travelers from around the world, we were eager to see the Dordogne's prehistoric cave art. The Vézère Valley, a UNESCO World

Heritage site, features both troglodyte villages and limestone caves decorated by artisans who lived over 10,000 years ago.

Who knows what inspired those prehistoric men and women to work in the cramped, shadowy recesses of these caves? Although the paintings at Lascaux are now closed to the public (to prevent deterioration), visitors can still view cave art at Font-de-Gaume (the last cave with original polychrome paint-

ings still open to the public), Les Combarelles (rock carvings) and Rouffignac (carvings plus black and white paintings).

What a haunting connection to the past to see such works in the same shadows where prehistoric artisans toiled! The paintings inside the caves, as well as the artifacts carved in stone and reindeer horn on display at the Museum of Prehistory in the town of Les Eyzies de Tayac, showcase the skills of talented artisans. With crude tools,

5. An iconic Dordogne vista.

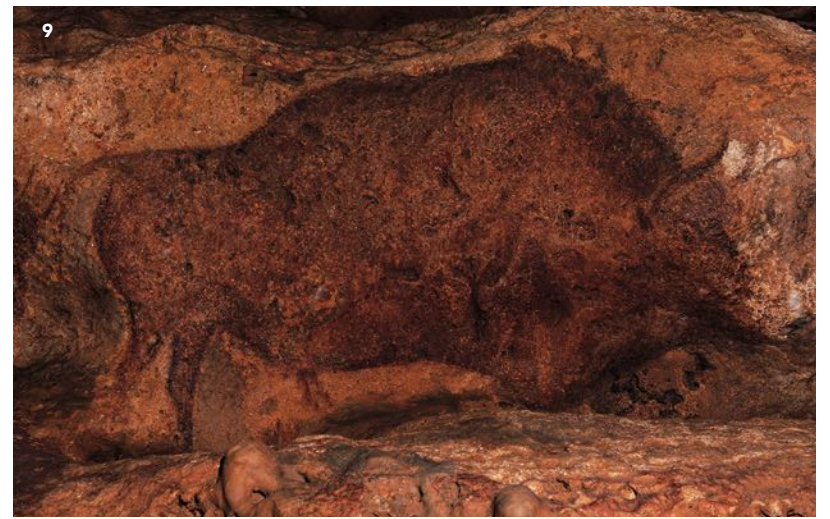
6. Foie gras with mushrooms.

7. Truffle hunting.

they rendered the details and accurate proportions of animals—bison, horses, reindeer, mammoths and more.

Sarlat

The medieval town of Sarlat, capital of Périgord Noir, features a maze of narrow,



© Olivier Huard / Centre des Monuments Nationaux

pedestrian-friendly streets lined with boutiques and sidewalk cafés. The promenades lead to squares with beautiful churches and French Renaissance buildings constructed of golden stone. Given the town's beauty, it wasn't surprising to learn that only Nice and Paris have had more feature films shot in their locales.

Shopping in Sarlat's medieval center is a refreshingly authentic experience. Small shops sell wine, paper, crafts and gourmet

items, like walnut cakes and wine, truffle oil and canned duck confit.

Saturday is market day. *Degustation* (tasting) is the primary activity as street vendors encourage crowds to sample fresh produce and handicrafts. The aromas of fresh breads, pastries, cheeses and sausages are altogether intoxicating. Bowls filled with a colorful mix of olives or tapenade compete for attention with endless displays of fresh chesses, vegeta-

bles and fruits. Handcrafts are also marketed: leather goods, pottery and more.

Châteaux and Gardens

The Dordogne has its fair share of ornamental gardens, complete with elaborate topiary and decorative fountains. One of the most impressive is Eyrynac Gardens, near Sarlat. Its meticulously pruned greenery includes over 300 topiary sculptures and 50,000 yew, hornbeam, box and ivy plants. Blending with the

8. Château de Losse.

9. Prehistoric cave art at Font-de-Gaume.

10. Olives in Sarlat's market.

greenery are hundreds of seasonal flowers: tulips, narcissus, hyacinths, hundreds of white roses, to name just a few.

We also visited the magnificent Château des Milandes, former home of legendary African-American singer and



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dancer Josephine Baker and now privately owned and run as a museum.

Baker, born into poverty in 1906, was originally from St. Louis, Missouri. Victimized by racism in America, she moved to Paris in the mid-1920s and achieved fame as a provocative singer and dancer. The French, in fact, embraced her.

During World War II, Baker performed for the troops, aided the resistance movement and earned the French Legion of Honour for her services. She fought against racism in America but was not fully accepted as an artist until her performance at Carnegie Hall in 1973. She died two years later and became the first American woman buried in France with military honors.

The palatial château overlooking the Dordogne River has become a testament to Baker's life. Inside, we viewed memorabilia, including photos, films and some of her lavish costumes—all a wonderful tribute to this woman of talent and courage.

Truffle Hunting

The Dordogne is world renowned for its truffles, a kind of fungus that grows on the roots of oak and hazelnut trees. The most flavorful (and costly) is the Périgord black truffle, the *tuber melanosporum*.

Emilie arranged for us to meet Carole and Edouard Aynaud, owners of a truffle plantation in the small hamlet of Péchalifour. After Edouard taught us the fundamentals of identifying, growing and appreciating quality truffles (he warned to avoid food seasoned with the less desirable Chinese variety), we went on a truffle hunt with his intelligent border collies, who romped ahead with

their noses to the ground. When they sniffed a truffle beneath the soil's top layer, Edouard pulled them away, then dug up the treasure with a small tool.

What a pleasure to stroll in the countryside on a sunny day with energetic dogs as companions! Truffle production, however, is such a lengthy and labor-intensive process that, as Edouard confessed, few young people today have the patience to carry on this farming tradition.

Epilogue

On our final evening in the Dordogne, we lingered in the picture-perfect village of Saint-Leon-sur-Vézère, listed as one of the most beautiful in France. Not far from Béchanou, where we were staying, the village is situated in a curve on the Vézère River. A lovely 12th-century Romanesque church with a two-story bell tower nestles among clusters of honey-colored houses connected by small alleyways. The riverbanks, bordered by willow trees, are favorite places for picnickers and others to relax in the village's tranquil atmosphere.

A dinner of duck confit at La Poste, the village's best restaurant, ended with a delicious gâteau aux noix (walnut cake). Relaxing on the restaurant's terrace, we decided that a journey through the Dordogne is the perfect getaway—an exploration of a remarkably unspoiled and tranquil rural "heaven" that's rich in history and natural beauty.

As American novelist Henry Miller once wrote: "The Dordogne is a sacred spot ... a paradise that gives me hope for the future of the earth itself. It will live on, just as dreams live on, and nourish the souls of men."



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