

Travels with Anzie: October 2021 – Southern France Dordogne Region

The Dordogne Region lies east of Bordeaux. Its main river is the Dordogne, 370 miles long. The region is famous for its prehistory, geology, castles, food and wine. And, in our opinion, one of the most beautiful regions in France. The riverbanks are replete with history. In the days beginning with Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) who married King Louis VII of France. Two years later she left Louis to marry Henry II of England. Richard the Lion Heart was her favorite son. The territory was a battleground between England and France. One can see magnificent castles on either side of the river. Often the castles on one bank were owned by British, while those on the opposite bank were French property.

Prehistory

The area is touted by its inhabitants as “The Cradle of Civilization”. Of course, other regions of the world make the same claim – Mesopotamia, for instance. Nevertheless, substantial evidence bears witness to Dordogne’s claim. Neandertal bones have been discovered that date back 400,000 - 40,000 years, along with countless stone tools showing a good deal of talent and creativity.

Speaking of creativity, the caves at **Lascaux** are filled with drawings of animals: hairy mammoth, stag, bear, wolf, wild boar, bison, horse, rhinoceros, among others. Even a man, albeit with the head of a bird. They are done in black and colors approaching raw sienna reddish. Their paint tools included brushes using hair of wild boar and a hollow reed through which they blew pigment. A feature that astonished me was the artists’ attempt at shading, showing their awareness of light and dark. One might even identify fundamental perspective in drawings of one animal in front of another.

<https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=lascaux+paintings&qpv=lascaux+paintings&form=IGRE&first=1&tsc=ImageBasicHover>

The current “caves” are an amazing reproduction of the original. Why? Back in the early ‘60’s, after the original caves had been open to the public for only 15 years, management noticed that the drawings were deteriorating due to the effect of the carbon dioxide in the breath of those thousands of tourists. It took almost 10 years to construct the replica caves. Originally my mind was made up: “I don’t want to see no stinkin’ replica. It’s either the real thing or forget it!” Well, I’m glad I changed my mind. I certainly couldn’t determine that I was looking at an imitation. By the way, these

drawings were done by Neandertal's replacement, Cro Magnon. There have been three reproductions of the caves. We saw the newest Lascaux IV, which sure seemed real to us. See the link <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lascaux> and link to photos below.

<https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=lascaux+cave+paintings&qpvt=lascaux+cave+paintings&form=IGRE&first=1&tsc=ImageBasicHover>

The **Museum of Prehistory** in Les Eyzies displays a magnificent collection of bones and prehistoric tools. Tools are showing up each year. Each time the local farmers plow their fields more tools rise to the surface. Videos of how these tools were made are shown. "Flintknapping" was the technique that resulted in a sharp edge.

The museum exploded another myth that most of us hold in common. The Neandertals were not knuckle-draggers. They stood and walked upright, and actually had a larger cranium than modern humans. Also not many of them lived in caves; after fire was discovered and became "domesticated", people could not keep a fire in a cave. Fires had to be outside so that people could breathe properly and not smell like smoked hams. <https://leseyziesdetayac.info/national-prehistoric-museum>

Instead, the museum describes the Palaeolithic era: the history of the Neanderthals, who vanished 50,000 years ago, and of the Cro-Magnon man, who lived in socially structured groups, buried his dead and made objects that had a symbolic meaning. "*Neandertal Café*" by anthropologist Bebee Bahrami is an excellent and readable book on the Neolithic period.

Caves

Are everywhere. The French term is "grotte". Also used is "gouffre", which means "chasm" or "abyss". A "cave" in French is a cellar. We explored only two grottes. We visited several caves, as in wine cellars.

The first Grotte we visited was **Rouffignac**. Here we boarded a train for a one kilometer(3/4 mile) journey down a total of 180 feet below the surface. Along the way we saw marks made by bear claws, bears who hibernated in the grotte. When they awakened in the springtime, they sharpened their claws on the walls before they left. Strangely, the deepest cavern is where we saw animal drawings, done in charcoal. There are 130 drawings. Why would our predecessors travel so far and so deep to do their artwork? Nobody seemed to know. Forced us to wonder how the age of these charcoal drawings is determined.

<http://www.grottederouffignac.fr/index.php/en/guided-tour>

The second grotto was under the village of **Domme**. Domme is an impressive village in its own right, named one of the Most Beautiful Villages in France. A walled city or “Bastide” cresting a high cliff, the view of the river valley, farmlands and distant hills begs to be painted. We entered the cave, the longest in the region and down, down we went. Finally we noticed stalactite needles on the ceiling – thousands of them. Then the stalagmites rising from the ground, sometimes meeting up with the stalactites. How do we remember which is which? Stalactite – Ceiling. Stalagmite – Ground. After almost a kilometer, we reached the outside and were able to travel back to the town-level in a glass elevator.

<https://www.francethisway.com/most-beautiful-villages.php>

We asked the question: How fast do stalactites and stalagmites grow? The consensus is one inch every 200 years. This rate may change a bit depending upon the proportion of limestone (calcium carbonate) in the water. At any rate, it makes the history of the U.S. a mere pinprick on the line representing the history of man, let alone the history of the world.

The **Gouffre de Proumeysac**. “Gouffre” is a “chasm”. Also known as the Crystal Cathedral, this is a huge room about 200 ft. high and 200 ft. wide. You descend many steps to arrive at a gallery overlooking the room and the pool at the base. The light is dim; then the light goes out, and you’re in the darkest of darks. Then the place explodes with light and music. Yes, it’s a show; but it’s a good one. Suddenly, from a hole in the top of the dome, you see a cage descending. Inside are people, people who have paid an extra \$10. So they didn’t have to climb those steps.

You descend more steps to get to the base of the room. Gazing upward the height of the room is awesome. You see the various formations. Then you see trays of cups and bowls constantly pelted with cave water from above. You note that a patina of cave stone has formed on the vessels. These are available for sale in the gift shop. So much for “one inch every 200 years”. <https://www.gouffre-proumeyssac.com/le-gouffre/>

We asked, Why do some caves have stalactites and others like Lascaux not? Turns out that Lascaux has layers of clay between layers of rock, and water can’t enter! The geological formations that I found awe-inspiring, and a trifle scary, were the limestone cliffs that actually overhung the roads on which I was driving. One formation is **La Roque St. Christophe**. It overlooks the river Vézère, borders the highway and contains a long ledge under an overhang in which Troglodytes were alleged to reside as far back as 400,000 years – Neandertal, Cro-Magnon and even into the Middle Ages. The slit in the rock is high enough that it protected the inhabitants from raiders or animals.

What with the view, the security, the ability to build fires with ample ventilation, this had to be a location for an upper class Troglodyte. For more info, please control/click on

<https://www.northofthedordogne.com/roque-saint-christophe.php>

Geology

We've already discussed the prevalence of limestone. In the Dordogne the limestone is honey-colored. All the buildings are made of it. As you drive down the road amid so much green, honey-colored rock will peek out at you giving a vivid contrast to the greenery. Dordogne is more cattle and farm country than vineyards. The limestone, soft enough to have been sculpted by flowing waters, makes for unique, unusual rock formations -- much like the hoodoos of Utah. On our next trip here we must canoe or kayak these rivers.



A farmhouse in the Dordogne

The Dordogne River boating is limited to canoes, kayaks and tour boats owned by a company that is grandfathered in. The boat is an excellent way to view the countryside, as you can see if you control/click the following:

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/WAeQn6Vse57xXGb38>

Castles

There are many, usually perched on a promontory overlooking a town. Back in the feudal days the lord of the chateau ruled the town and surrounding area with his "serfs"

doing his bidding. Of course things have changed. Many of the chateaux are now the property of the town and open to tourists.

You've heard of **Josephine Baker**? She was an American singer/dancer in the '30's and 40's who moved to Paris where she had great success. She bought a chateau in the Dordogne, **Chateau des Milandes**, in Castlenaud. She was very popular in France, and did well financially, for a while. Unable to bear children, she adopted 12 of various nationalities. She also did important work as a spy during WWII. Using invisible ink written on sheets of music, she transmitted enemy locations in North Africa. General Charles de Gaulle awarded her the Legion d'Honneur, the highest honor in France. . In August 2021 the remains of American-born singer and dancer Josephine Baker were re-interred at the Panthéon Memorial in Paris, the only woman to receive this honor. Her chateau is open for tours.



Castle where Richard the Lionhearted lived his final years

Food and Wine

Bergerac is one area of great wines. One of our literary heroes, Bruno, chief of police of the fictitious town of St. Denis, by the author Martin Walker, introduced us to Monbazillac, a superb white dessert wine. Another great white dessert wine in the same area we discovered reading the book, "Grape Expectations", by Caro Feely. We visited the Chateau Feely winery in Saussignac and met Caro and her husband Sean. They were in the middle of hand-picking their crop with the help of guests who come every year because they love the process. Bear in mind that Caro's book will make you think twice, thrice, ten times about getting into the winery business. Yet, they're still in

it. As the old saying goes: How do you make a small fortune? Start with a large one and buy a winery.

The food. I've eaten so much duck that, I swear, I've developed a waddle. Duck confit, magret, paté ... so many ways to treat a dead duck. Not to mention the foods I never eat at home: chicken gizzard, cuttlefish. Must be the fresh air, or the wine. Everything goes well with the wine.

Lastly, the places we stayed. Our first place in Dordogne was **Les Vitrolles**. Located in near Limeuil (another Beautiful Village of France), this is an ancient chateau. We stayed in one of the out-buildings. It was end-of-season, so we were the only guests. It's amazing how much you miss modern conveniences when they're not available. TV, for instance. And Wi-Fi. We had to walk to the office and sit outside to be in Wi-Fi range. And we had to rent the sheets!!

Les 2 Tours in Siorac. The owners, Vincent and Annick were wonderful. Our room was tastefully decorated in Syrian cloths with all the necessities. Breakfast exceeded expectations. Our computer broke. Vincent oversaw the repair. We left a whole bag of stuff. Vincent sent it to us. As far as we're concerned, they walk on water.



A much better breakfast than we ever served at our B&B!

A la Prochaine,

Chuck et Anzie

<https://about-france.com/tourism/river-dordogne-area.htm>