

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Flowers and birds in the Dordogne History and geography notes

Around Castang

- A *laverie*, an ancient stone structure designed for communal washing and stock watering.
- An ancient *pigeonnier* or dovecote is in the field opposite the end of the Castang drive. A beautiful building but in poor repair.
- An *abreuvoir* in the woods – a sign on this stone structure across the course of a stream says: “*Les vanes amovibles servaient de régler la hauteur de l'eau*” – movable dropboards used to regulate the flow of the water – and they also held water in it for livestock.
- In Lagrave there is a restored walk-in oven.

Le Bugue is a pretty town on the Vézère river. Honeyguide visits on market day, Tuesday morning.

Limeuil has long been admired for its beautiful situation, where the rivers Dordogne and Vézère meet, and for its chalk cliffs which make a remarkably well-defended position.

At the end of the Paleolithic Period, about 10,000 BC, the ‘Magdaleniens’ were the first people drawn towards the confluence of these rivers, full of fish and protected by a favourable position. Archeological excavations in 1909-1913 revealed many chalk layers with animal drawings of great quality, and allowed prehistorians to advance the theory of a Magdalenian school of art in Limeuil.

On this same terrace, the first Gallic fortress was built behind a solid wooden wall. However this was taken by Julius Caesar's Legions who built an oppidum to establish the “Pax Romana” in the surrounding area, as can be seen from the remains of Roman Villas in the valley.

Between the 8th and the 11th centuries the fortress was rebuilt when the much-feared Vikings came up the rivers to plunder the area, especially the rich abbeys such as Paunat.

Because of its strategic position, Limeuil later became a feudal fortress controlling the region; but it also became the center of the rivalry between the English

and the French during the Hundred Years War. Being at one time on one side, then on the other, Limeuil suffered greatly due to the war.

In the 19th century, Limeuil was at the height of its economic glory, due to its river traffic. The role of the barges on the two rivers was vital, transporting the goods and materials for the craftsmen and creating work for the shopkeepers. In 1881, Limeuil had 80 craftsmen (carpenters, barrel-makers, wheel-makers.) out of a total population of 800. The river Dordogne was an essential artery, the barges taking chestnut wood from the Auvergne down to Bergerac and Bordeaux, where it was used to make barrels. Soon the railways came along in competition with the waterways causing Limeuil to decline, along with its workers and craftsmen.

[Adapted from www.limeuil-perigord.com]

Beynac

In 1214, on return from a crusade against the Albigensians, Simon de Montfort took possession of Beynac, whose seigneur (estate owner) was a friend of Raymond de Toulouse, and razed its defences. The Hundred Years War found Beynac in the French camp. In 1360, the Bretigny treaty transferred it by right to English rule but eight years later it returned to the fore of the fighting on the side of Charles V. The English were never able to capture the citadel.

The castle was totally protected by the sheer drop on the side facing the river and its northern defences were reinforced around 1598. A double surrounding wall, two rows of moats and two barbicans were built. From the top of the tower there is a breathtaking view over the whole of the valley and the surrounding Châteaux of Castelnaud, Fayrac, and Marqueyssac.

On the edge of the cliff is the stone-roofed Romanesque castle chapel, the location of the famous scene from the 1978 version of “*Les Misérables*”.

[Adapted from www.francedirect.net/beynac.php]

Gouffre de Proumeyssac, also known as the Crystal Cathedral. The sparkling, crystal-like appearance comes from chemicals dissolved in rain that leaches through the limestone, covering pottery sold as souvenirs and some attractive formations of stalagmites and stalactites. There are some unique crystal structures, a spectacular underground crystal cavern with attractive stalagmites and stalactites. The traditional method of reaching the inside of the cave, being let down through the original swallow hole in the top in a hanging basket, as was usual at the end of the 19th century. A more typical guided tour option starts with a slightly corny light and sound show, but it's short and the commentary from a guide in French or through earphones with a choice of languages is good. Well worth seeing.

Outside there are a shop and bar, a large shady area with picnic benches and children's play equipment. www.perigord.com/proumeyssac

Grotte de Font-de-Gaume

Since its discovery in 1901, dozens of polychrome paintings have been found in the tunnel-like Grotte de Font-de-Gaume. Only two hundred people are allowed to tour the cave each day; advance booking, several days ahead in peak season, is essential.

The **cave** was first settled by Stone Age people during the last Ice Age – about 25,000 BC – when the Dordogne was the domain of roaming bison, reindeer and mammoths. The cave mouth is no more than a fissure concealed by rocks and trees above a small lush valley, while inside, it's a narrow twisting passage of irregular height in which you quickly lose your bearings in the dark.

The first painting you see is a frieze of bison, at about eye level: reddish-brown in colour, massive, full of movement, and very far from the primitive representations you might expect. Further on a horse stands with one hoof slightly raised, resting.

But the most miraculous of all is a **frieze of five bison** discovered in 1966 during cleaning operations. The colour, remarkably sharp and vivid, is preserved by a protective layer of calcite. Shading under the belly and down the thighs is used to give three-dimensionality with a sophistication that seems utterly modern.

Another panel consists of superimposed drawings, a fairly common phenomenon in cave painting, sometimes the result of work by successive generations, but here an obviously deliberate technique. A reindeer in the foreground shares legs with a large bison behind to indicate perspective.

Stocks of **artists' materials** have also been found: kilos of prepared pigments; palettes – stones stained with ground-up earth pigments; and wooden painting sticks. Painting was clearly a specialized, perhaps professional, business, reproduced in dozens and dozens of caves located in the central Pyrenees and areas of northern Spain.

[From www.roughguides.co.uk/]

Roque St-Christophe is the largest and oldest cave dwelling site in Western Europe.

Half-way between les Eyzies and Montignac-Lascaux, in the valley of the river Vézère rises the high cliff of La Roque St Christophe. This wall of limestone, one kilometre long and eighty metres, high is pierced with a hundred rock shelters and long overhead terraces. These natural cavities were occupied by man in prehistoric times. Later on they were altered and became a fortress and a city in the Middle Ages. A visit to La Roque St Christophe gives you a clear idea of the lifestyle of our troglodyte ancestors over thousands of years.

From www.sites-en-perigord.com/uk/sites/roque-saint-christophe.html More information: www.roque-st-christophe.com/

The visit to Font de Gaume is included in the holiday price. The tour of the Gouffre de Proumeyssac or a visit inside the troglodyte city of Roque St-Christophe are optional extras.

Gorge d'Enfer

This is presently closed for visitors but is included here for completeness in case visiting becomes possible in the future. The cliffs on either side of the Gorge d'Enfer (Hell's Mouth) are deeply undercut, forming magnificent overhangs known as *abris* which were, in prehistoric times, used as dwellings. There are three main *abris* in the gorge, the most important of which, the *abri des Poissons* is closed off at the moment for the sake of a unique prehistoric carving in its roof – of a fish. The other two are easily accessible and very impressive and provide a cool, shady habitat ideal for maidenhair fern. Ancient hornbeam woodland has a rich ground flora.

Cliffs near Gorge d'Enfer

Above a picnic site are holes once the home of cave dwellers. Troglodytes here in a network of caves in the area had rapid system of signalling to warn of the impending arrival of Vikings on the river, and something similar was put into action by the Resistance during the second world about German troop movements.