

WeekendTravel

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Dordogne: deeper underground

The vast riches of France's Dordogne Valley are found not only above the surface but also below

It's an amazing memory for me — after the call, my life changed completely.” As the world welcomed the new millennium, Olivier Caballero was an IT student in Bordeaux. Like most teenagers relishing newfound freedom, he attended as many parties as lectures. Then, one day, his father, Angel, telephoned with extraordinary news: at his quarry near Sarlat, he had spotted a fissure in a rock that led him into a subterranean wonderland. For Olivier, the revelation would prove life-changing.

“I initially thought Papa had found a hole, but after arriving home, I realised the magnitude of his discovery: he had found a cave, dating back 60 million years.”

Angel ultimately decided that the cave would be more profitable than a quarry and made an offer to his sons: to launch a new tourist attraction together.

“I never imagined working in a cave, but at the same time, I realised that IT wasn't for me. When my father offered it to my brother, Cyril, and me, we accepted.”

Olivier recalls two years of “titanic work” to create an exhilarating but safe destination for visitors. Experts describe Grotte de Maxange as a masterpiece of nature, and understandably so. Thousands of rare calcite concretions — or eccentrics — emerge in all directions to



A prehistoric carving made from reindeer antler of a bison in the Musée National de la Préhistoire Déclic & Décolle

form an underground constellation. Their gravity-defying shapes, delicate textures and sparkling purity are breathtaking.

Another nod to the cave's lifespan is the scratch marks visible in one of the chambers, left by cave bears, who didn't survive the Ice Age.

Although the cave has been designated a national heritage site and received two stars in the Michelin Guide, Olivier states that it's the visitors' reactions that highlight the significance of their discovery. Currently, 200 metres of cave are open to the public, but he adds that there's definitely “more treasure” waiting to be uncovered — and while the excavation isn't strenuous, it's time-consuming. “We have plans. It's only the beginning of Grotte de Maxange's story.”

France's Dordogne Valley has earned a distinguished reputation for its vineyards, châteaux and fortified bastide towns and villages, along with its gastronomic delights such as truffles, foie gras and Périgord walnuts. But behind the surface, there are additional secrets to be uncovered, and not just at the Grotte de Maxange.

With its tall, golden-hued stone buildings and large wooden halle, the medieval village of Belvès is recognised as Les Plus Beaux Villages de France — one of France's most beautiful villages. However, passers-by

might be forgiven for overlooking a series of underground dwellings hidden beneath the market square, which contain ancient doorways, ladders, wall carvings and furniture. These compact spaces, all formed side by side, were inhabited by peasants from the 13th to the 18th centuries.

“Half of our visitors come to the dwellings on purpose,” Heritage officer Loïc Leymergie says. “The other half has learned about them by accident when they visit Belvès.”

Although six metres underground, Loïc suggests that the former residents' physical health was probably not much different from that of the peasants above, given the opening onto the ramparts, which provided some ventilation. However, he imagines their mental health was likely affected by the cramped conditions and lack of light.

Belvès has a history marked by turbulence, enduring multiple sieges during significant periods such as the Hundred Years' War. In the Second World War, underground spaces in the region were used to store weapons; because the entrance to these troglodytic dwellings wasn't discreet (it's located near the fortified gate in the corner of the square), Loïc says they weren't good places to hide people or armaments.

Like Grotte de Maxange, the full extent of these dwellings hasn't yet been fully realised. While eight rooms are open for visitors, there are actually 11 in total. After decades of discussion, the local authorities have finally approved breaking the road above to excavate these unexplored areas.

Twenty miles north of Belvès in the Vézère Valley, I arrive at another troglodytic dwelling, albeit with a different destiny. With its ochre-coloured façade embedded into the rock, concealing rooms carved out on multiple levels, Maison Forte de Reignac is the only fully furnished cliff castle open to visitors in France today. Not that it started with such a lofty status.

The remarkable site has evolved through successive civilisations. It has been inhabited since prehistoric times, initially by hunter-gatherers and, centuries later, by medieval lords, who transformed it into a noble residence. Over the centuries, the area has faced many threats, including large carnivores, barbarian invasions, wars and the constant danger of looters. Besides offering strategic vantage points, the cliffs also protected residents — any attack could come only from the front.

Local Jean-Max Tournon has a particular interest in developing the region's unique tourism sites, such as the nearby troglodytic city of Roque Saint-Christophe. He purchased Maison Forte de Reignac from the municipality of Bordeaux in 2005 and describes the property as vibrant and full of soul; for him, it represents architectural perfection.

“Each room tells a story,” he reveals, “that of the ingenuity of the builders, the strength of the inhabitants, and the unbreakable bond between man and nature.”

Jean-Max says he aimed to preserve the site while reconstructing its vast and varied history. Along with setting up a prehistoric museum to showcase its early years, he furnished the living quarters to give visitors an idea of the daily life of the local lords in the Middle Ages. “We wanted it to be visited as if entering a secret.”



From clockwise: Monpazier, one of the Dordogne's bastide towns; Grotte de Maxange; troglodytic dwellings in Belvès



A short drive south is another former castle, also carved into the cliffs. Together with an adjacent modern building, it forms the National Museum of Prehistory in Les Eyzies. Not only does the UNESCO World Heritage Site contain one of France's most important Palaeolithic collections, but it also acts as a centre for the many extraordinary discoveries made in the region.

Here, I meet Estelle Bougard, PhD, who says the glass wall in the new building allows visitors to appreciate the cliff's many layers of rock that serve as a record of past environments and life.

As we admire the life-sized reconstructions of prehistoric humans and extinct animals and study displays featuring items such as stone tools, she shares insights into the evolution of the earth over millions of years. Despite her talent for sharing knowledge concisely, some of the information she presents is difficult to grasp, such as the discovery of ‘Lucy’ in Africa in 1974, whose skeleton is believed to be an incredible 3.5 million years old.

One of the most significant artefacts in the museum is

Factbox

- Domhnall was a guest of the Dordogne-Périgord Tourist Board (tourismeperigord.com).
- Additional activities include wine tasting at Château Terre Vieille (chateauterreveille.com), exploring the gardens of Eyrignac (eyrignac.com) and visiting bastide towns and villages, including Domme, Belvès and Monpazier.
- Accommodation and dining suggestions include Domaine de Rochebois (domaine-rochebois.com), Château de Maraval (chateaudemaraval.com), Hotel du Centenaire (hotelducentenaire.fr) and Vieux Logis (vieux-logis.com).

a prehistoric carving made from reindeer antler, dating back to 20,000-12,000 BC. Amusingly, it depicts a beleaguered bison licking an insect bite. Estelle explains that its findspot was in Abri de la Madeleine, the nearby prehistoric site discovered in 1863 by two passionate amateur archaeologists, Edouard Lartet and Henry Christy. There, the skeleton of a three-year-old child, dating to 10,190 BC, was also found, buried with 1,500 exquisite shells.

Estelle reveals that Abri de la Madeleine wasn't the only remarkable 20th-century discovery in the region. France has numerous caves with ancient art, but the most famous are those in Lascaux, uncovered in 1940, which contain over 600 detailed paintings of animals, human figures and abstract signs dating back about 17,000 years. The most renowned section of the cave is The Hall of the Bulls, where bulls, equines, aurochs, stags and a bear are depicted.

The collective work of many generations, they were created using red, yellow and black colours derived from a complex array of mineral pigments. Sadly, they have been closed to the public since 1963 due to rapid deterioration, but replicas can be admired.

One of the fortunate few who visited the original caves was Spanish icon Pablo Picasso, who groused that “we have learned nothing in 12,000 years”, implying that modern artists have not exceeded the skill and expression of our prehistoric predecessors.

When I ask Estelle why our ancestors created these paintings, she explains that “there's always an intention with cave art”, adding that they could have been a celebration of past hunting successes, an expression of self or something related to spirituality — a mystical ritual to improve future hunting endeavours. Having spent so much time underground during my trip to the Dordogne region, I wonder whether the poor ventilation in prehistoric caves, combined with the lack of external stimuli, caused hallucinations among the creators. Without ‘artist statements’, we may never know for certain.

