

May 30, 2026

exploretavel.com.au

# explore

**HOT  
DEALS**

Save up to \$13,000  
a couple on a nine-  
night Alaska  
cruise

## CRADLE IN THE CLIFFS

Chasing the dawn of humanity in Dordogne, France

**WELLNESS** A women-only Bali escape **TWO WAYS FOR WINTER** Falls Creek vs Thredbo

## COVER STORY



# In the land of *Cro-Magnon man*

In south-west France, ANABEL DEAN explores the prehistoric riches of the stunning Dordogne, with much feasting along the way.

**L**ES Eyzies-de-Tayac is waiting out the weather hunched beneath limestone cliffs. The shops are shuttered, streets slick with autumn drizzle, but there's no risk of melancholy in this unassuming corner of the Dordogne.

The Vézère Valley holds UNESCO designation as one of the world's densest concentrations of prehistoric cave art. More than 7 million artefacts from the Palaeolithic era - 400,000 to 10,000 years ago - are crammed into the archives at the National Museum of Prehistory in Les Eyzies.

Forgetting the weather, I step inside, expecting to feel the dull weight of stones and bones in countless cabinets beyond the life-sized woolly mammoth at the entrance. Instead, I team up with formidable guide Estelle Bougard to draw the whole chronicle of human existence from shards created before there was even a word for 'art'.

We stop in front of a glass wall containing a reindeer antler scarcely bigger than my thumb carved as an exact likeness of an extinct steppe bison 15,000 years ago. Someone small-handed, perhaps by firelight, sculpted the beast turning back upon its own spine, nostrils flared, hairs so finely incised they're virtually impossible to see with the naked eye. It's electrifying.

"The most famous object in the whole museum," whispers Bougard. "One of the great artworks of prehistory."

Bougard moves on to a teardrop-shaped flint spearhead about the size of my knuckle. It's another pinnacle of Palaeolithic expression: "This is the birth of human imagination itself. Here is the moment when beauty is created for its own sake and no longer just for practicality," says Bougard.

These scrapings are the starting point for understanding modern human beings: homo sapiens. Us. We are specks at the epicentre of

prehistoric France, in a region honeycombed with caverns and rock shelters etched with bestial art, but the revelations that began with the discovery of Cro-Magnon remains in 1868 - here in Les Eyzies - have not stopped. Prehistoric chambers still lie beneath limestone cliffs, entrances collapsed or flooded, reclaimed by creeping vegetation.

Mercifully, the descendants of Cro-Magnon cave-dwellers have refined culinary options considerably over the years. It's time to investigate the offerings of this proudly gastronomic region.

Few French landladies will bring an unbidden jug of fresh milk with tea made from leaves, not bags, in a pot and this afternoon's delight is just the prelude to something even better at rustic Hotel Le Centenaire.

The restaurant is not yet Michelin-starred but must be a contender: fresh oysters, foie gras, magret de canard with truffle sauce, sarladaise potatoes, a cheese board spanning every corner of France. The bill, when it finally comes, is worth every euro.

Morning dawns clear with an open road ribboning through forests bound by legend and lore in a deeply rural swath of south-west France.

A few kilometres away, in Tursac, Maison Forte de Reignac puts a different complexion on human progress. The castle is half-carved into steep overhanging limestone shelters occupied for more than 20,000 years but the 14th-century

facade (with windows added in the 16th century) disguises a dwelling larger than first appears. Most poignant is, perhaps, the medieval torture exhibition, not for the faint-hearted, with original implements designed to scrape flesh and shatter bones elucidated on small boards outlining horrifying detail.

Initial indifference shifts quickly and I'm stepping out sooner than anticipated. "Yes, 10 minutes is enough," remarks the attendant. "Take your soul and your spirit away from here."

More gentle diversions spool along the car window heading into the tiny Pecharmant appellation where Chateau Terre Vieille is a winemaker's dream.

Germe Morand-Monteil, the chateau's founder, is a beguiling vigneron tending vines on land salted with Palaeolithic tools spanning 60,000 years of history. He was 10 years old when he unearthed his first Neolithic axe. His father recognised the gravitas of the discovery, let the weight of it sink in, then told his boy: "Someone held this thousands of years ago exactly as you're holding it now."

The scatterings of prehistory still surface in the dirt beneath

Monteil's feet. At times, his Stone Age passion eclipses his devotion to wine and there are scores of flints lined in rows under glass in his shadowy cellar. He lifts a scraping tool and marvels aloud at a society that changed so little for 300,000 years.

"In the last 200 years..." he shrugs, trying to find the right words in English. "Well, today, we leave nothing for the generations to come."

We cross the courtyard to step into his high-ceilinged manor house where he opens several plummy reds, offers goat cheese and charcuterie, gestures to a seat beside the stone fireplace. There are mushrooms to gather, chestnuts to collect, but we share the heart-warming essentials of civilised repose as lunch stretches well into the afternoon.

There's a persistent invitation to pull over beside the Dordogne River, constantly teasing as





**Clockwise from bottom left:** A bison carved from antler 15,000 years ago; the National Museum of Prehistory in Les Eyzies; Fete des Bastides in Monpazier square; prehistoric cave art of the Vezere Valley; Eyrygnac gardens; Monpazier's butcher at Fete des Bastides; cheese platter at Hotel Le Centenaire. **Pictures by Anabel Dean; Getty Images, supplied. On the cover:** La Roque-Gageac in the Dordogne. **Picture by Getty Images**



## TRIP NOTES

**Explore verdict:** Fascinating medieval bastide towns studded with prehistoric cave art and good food.

**Getting there and around:** Fly to Bordeaux (or Bergerac) for a drive along narrow, winding roads into the Dordogne/Perigord region (under two hours). Hire a car. Villages are spread wide and public transport is limited.

**Staying there:** Hotel Chateau de Maraval near Sarlat dates back to the medieval period with classic stone towers and fortified walls revitalised as a four-star hotel in Cenac-et-Saint-Julien. Le Vieux Logis in Tremolat, Dordogne, set in a former 16th-century priory and tobacco farm. [chateaudemaraval.com](http://chateaudemaraval.com); [vieux-logis.com](http://vieux-logis.com)

**Good to know:** The Fete des Bastides in late October transforms sleepy medieval towns into vivid historical pageants worth timing your trip around.

**Explore more:** [dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr](http://dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr); [www.bastidesenfete.com](http://www.bastidesenfete.com)



updating vine-clad suites that look directly onto terraces with linden trees spaced like chess pieces. The enterprise radiates an unhurried charm and proves to be an ideal base for hopscooting between my next two destinations.

Bastide towns Domme and Monpazier spent the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) glowering at each other across the valley: one English, one French. Domme sits high on a cliff overlooking the Dordogne River, while Monpazier, a "model" bastide, is famous for its remarkably intact central market hall and arcaded square.

Both medieval strongholds are transformed into a historical pageant with the Fete des Bastides in late October and this is the key attraction that brought me to this region of France in the first place.

Monpazier glows in brilliant sunshine upon arrival. The town square bustles with raucous folk in tunics and wimples, seated at wooden trestle tables, tucking into bowls of roasted chestnut soup and platters of thickly oozing sausages. I join them with the single-minded focus of one who takes historical re-enactments seriously.

The butcher spooning garlic confit onto my plate speaks of the sanglier (wild boar) taken by hunters with permission from his own land. "This explains why your sausages are so good," I garble, stuffing the last delicious bite into my mouth. He grins. "Encore?"

## THREE MORE MUST-DO'S IN DORDOGNE

**1** Eyrygnac gardens in the heart of the Perigord Noir is a masterpiece of French topiary maintained by the Sermadieras family for more than 500 years. [eyrygnac.com](http://eyrygnac.com)

**2** The village of Belves gives a glimpse into centuries of underground living where cave homes have been

carved directly into the limestone cliff beneath the town's main square (inhabited from the 13th century until the 1950s).

**3** Grotte de Maxanges offers exceptional concentration of rare eccentric crystal concretions discovered only in 2000. [maxange.com](http://maxange.com)

From Monpazier, the road winds north-east toward Domme, perched high on its lofty outcrop. The tangle of narrow medieval lanes are crowded in summer but, in October, tourism is tethered by oncoming winter.

It's a quieter walking trail from shops flaunting regional delicacies (truffles, tartines and vin de noix) towards the weathered ramparts that survived the Hundred Years' War. My guide is dressed in a leather-clad medieval French version of Xena, the warrior princess.

In the mid-13th century, as conflict between French and English forces intensified, residents found safety within fortified towns like Domme. The ramparts still command sweeping views of the Dordogne Valley, a pretty patchwork of fields and woodlands, but it's getting darker and starting to rain so we shelter inside the tower beside the main gate.

With daylight almost extinguished, devotional images are leaping out of the darkness in torchlight, more than 800 etchings scratched into stone by archers keeping watch where we stand now. Xena's light beam finds Christ on the cross; St. Peter with his keys to paradise; sun and moon, flower and crest, and then something even finer. It's a small figure, face worn smooth over centuries, ribs and loincloth carved with extraordinary tenderness.

Time holds still, connects faith and fear, hands to hearts. "This is medieval graffiti," explains Xena.

"It isn't saying 'I am here.' These are etchings of soldiers showing allegiance to the King or to God. It's prayer, perhaps, or protection."

For centuries, moss colonised the crevices and rain hammered through gaps in the tower. Now the council has embraced its heritage obligations in a strategic bastide town with a ferocious past of constantly shifting control between English and French.

Conflict fostered distinct national identities, difficult to discern today, but there's a version of the medieval world materialising in a village hall tonight. The French may have pushed the English out of almost all their continental territories, but they're back here now, for the Fete des Bastides.

A cow revolves slowly on a charcoal spit outside the school gymnasium as the sun sets behind Domme's ramparts. The banqueting hall is scattered with hay and I'm seated next to a man with an accent thick as creme fraiche pouring generous tumblers of wine.

Locals garbed in homespun medieval tunics tuck into bowls of milky leek soup. Like the rest of them, I surrender to Domme, sharing bread with strangers while imitating a far less comfortable era.

In a way, it's another artefact preserved. Humans leaving their marks as proof of endurance across the ages. Remember this. Remember me.

*The writer was a guest of Dordogne Perigord Tourism.*

it winds in and out of the frame, past chateaux cresting hilltops and farmhouses bounded by dry-stone walls. About 20 minutes from Pecharmant, in Tremolat, Le Vieux Logis is keeper of a different inheritance story as one of France's first Relais and Chateaux hotels.

In 2019, facing their final years and childless, previous owners Bernard and Madeleine Giraudel gathered together staff members who had collectively worked at the hotel for more than 100 years. "If we're not here tomorrow, this is yours," they said. No sale, no negotiation, just "sign here" on the land title. The French might call it un coup de chance, a stroke of luck, the sort of serendipity written into one of Martin Walker's Bruno detective novels set here in the Dordogne.

The four new owners of the stone-built 17th-century priory run the hotel collaboratively now, making improvements as necessary,