

Bangle

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flash fiction:

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

*Deeper Underground:
Exploring Périgord and
Limousin Through History
& Terroir*

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EXPLORING PÉRIGORD AND LIMOUSIN THROUGH HISTORY AND TERROIR

Q. What does a Limoges cheese shop have in common with a 43km cave system near Bergerac?

A. The answer lies underground.

More accurately, clues to this conundrum can be found in a tenth century cellar while nibbling on Compté, tome mixte and Saint-Jouvent goat's cheese by candlelight. The Maison du Fromage is the only cheesemonger in the Limousin region to offer a cellar-based gastronomical experience where you can sip Vincent Bliard champagne while sampling local cheeses at peak humidity. This charming cheese vault once served as a refuge during the French Resistance. Never has an underground bunker been so well-stocked with such impeccable essentials.

Okay, but what does that have to do with caves, apart from the fact that the French word for cellar is cave?

Well, around 150km further south lies another subterranean marvel: the awe-inspiring Gouffre de Padirac. This is no ordinary hole in the ground, but a gaping chasm which inspired local legends long before the explorer Édouard-Alfred Martel secured the necessary funding to descend further into its depths, revealing one of France's most spectacular geological wonders.



Extensive archaeological research has since found evidence that the cave system also provided shelter during the Hundred Years' War. You see, in the Limousin and Périgord Noir regions of France, there's a profound connection between gastronomy, history and terrain. There might not be any cheese maturing in the darkness at the Gouffre de Padirac, but there is an exclusive stash of Cahors Malbec.

What's more, a hundred metres below the surface, the cave's extraordinary formations begin to resemble the region's finest produce: morel mushrooms, truffles, pickles, paté and even waffles. With the French word for waffle (gaufre) sounding remarkably close to gouffre (chasm), you'd be forgiven for making a gaffe on that front, especially since the café on site serves a range of waffles, including one slathered in chestnut jam (confiture de châtaignes).

Just saying.

Emerging into daylight brings a peculiar version of the bends. Fortunately, relief awaits in Fairytale Land, locally known as Le Pays des Contes de Fées, where sweeping panoramas and storybook castles provide the perfect antidote to so much time spent underground.

If you're craving a counterbalancing dose of vertigo, head to the nearby medieval village of Rocamadour, improbably built into a 150-metre-high cliff face over the Alzou canyon. Home to the Chapelle Notre-Dame, and its miracle-working Black Madonna statue, this breathtaking cité religieuse is UNESCO-listed, and pilgrims once climbed its Great Staircase of 216 steps on their knees before reaching the sanctuary.

At the cliff's peak stands the fortified Château de Rocamadour, built to watch over the sacred city below. Sadly, you can't book a room in this particular castle, but the Château de la Treyne - just twenty minutes away - offers the next best thing. More intimate than imposing, this 20-room hotel feels boutique despite its unquestionable luxury, with each suite boasting its own distinct personality. From the light-filled turret room, La Prison Dorée, to the rich, theatrical Gothique, there's a vibe for every variable.

After a thimbleful of locally made walnut liqueur, you'll feel right at home, ready to enjoy canapés and fizz by the fireside and explore regionally sourced Michelin-starred fare from head chef Stéphane Andrieux. Stéphane's stand-out crousti-moelleux (literally "crunchy-soft") has the dimensions of a chocolate sponge cake and the consistency of a thick Spanish omelette with a biscuity lid. Served with rosé champagne, pear marmalade and Petrossian Royal Daurenki caviar, this was unlike anything I've ever eaten. Then came the region's celebrated foie gras, served with a violet-laden drop of Château Mondazur, and rounded off with a palate-cleansing sorbet, coffee-chocolate délice and the most gloriously indulgent Parisian Mess.





Église Saint Nicolas

Loath to leave the château, we found consolation in the nearby village of Trémolat, wandering through the fortified monastery church, the Église Saint Nicolas, before checking into Le Vieux Logis, another exceptional Michelin-starred Relais & Château property.

Time seemed to slow down the moment we arrived; immediately, I wanted to extend my stay. Le Vieux Logis the sort of place that makes you believe you could write an uplifting novella about serendipity, human connection and shared purpose, and on hearing the hotel's own story - passed from its owner to its devoted staff - I began to suspect that novel may already have been written.

That's the charm of quite a few of the Relais & Château properties in this region, which are so often run by passionate couples whose skill sets combine the required culinary expertise with the practical day-to-day running of an historic hotel. Close to Limoges airport, with convenient links to Stansted, La Chapelle Saint Martin is another one of these unique homes-from-home.

Run by Gilles Dudognon - the youngest chef ever to earn a Michelin star (back in the eighties) - alongside his extremely charming wife, Aude, and son Henri, this stunning hotel also has a separate twelfth century poolside annex, sleeping up to 16 guests.

And if you find the Maison du Fromage calling on your way through Limoges, be sure to drop in on the newly opened leather museum in Saint-Junien, where La Cité du Cuir offers an extension exploration of the history of artisanal leather-making in French tanneries. You could easily spend a full day here, so allow plenty of time, not forgetting the shop, where there are some very unique gifts to be found.

Ultimately, Périgord and Limousin provide a captivating study in contrast. Moving seamlessly between subterranean shelters and towering cliffside sanctuaries, artisanal boutiques and Michelin-starred fine dining, you'll find lore and land are perfectly intertwined.

www.relaischateaux.com/gb/



Le Vieux Logis