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DORDOGNE

THE AREA OF FRANCE YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU SHOULD LOVE



Two hours away from Bordeaux in the southwest region of France lies Dordogne, a lesser-known area of the country that possesses a certain, shall I say, *je ne sais quoi*.

Reminiscent of the Ozarks and the Buffalo River area, Dordogne looks a bit like Northwest Arkansas, just with a handful of medieval castles and cliff dwellings thrown into the scenery.

Protected by its relative inaccessibility,

the region of Dordogne is full of unspoiled beauty and sites unlike anywhere else in France. Adorned with prehistoric cave paintings, rock-sculpted villages, and the best foie gras in Europe, it's an easy area to fall for.

Traveling with my husband for our fifth wedding anniversary, we wanted this trip to be a relaxing one. Our last trip to Europe was a whirlwind. We spent every other day in a new country or town, shared bunks

with strangers in hostels, slept on trains, saw a thousand pieces of famous artwork, climbed just as many tower stairs, picnicked for almost every meal, and well, had the time of our lives.

For this trip we wanted an equally memorable experience, but at a more relaxed pace. This time, rather than a month of backpacking around the continent, we picked one country and decided on a two-week road trip through France.



France's "most adorable town," La Roque-Gageac, as seen from the seat of a canoe

From sunset picnics on the steps of Sacré-Cœur in Paris, to château hopping in the Loire Valley, to vineyard views and some of the world's best wine in Burgundy, Alsace and Champagne, there was much to love about this trip to France, but perhaps the most memorable spot was Dordogne.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN DORDOGNE:

Prehistoric cave art put Dordogne on the map, but there's so much to explore in Dordogne outside of those famous cave walls. During our too short three-day stay, we took a lazy canoe ride down the Dordogne River, explored sleepy medieval villages, shopped one of France's most historically significant markets, picnicked on a riverbank beneath an 11th-century Romanesque church, toured a handful of castles, and were undeservingly spoiled at our charming bed and breakfast, La Tour de Cause, which only made our stay in Dordogne that much more memorable.

For three unforgettable days well spent in France, here is my suggested Dordogne itinerary:



DAY ONE

If it's a Saturday or Wednesday, start your day in Sarlat-la-Canéda for a culinary tour at the bustling outdoor market located in the architecturally and historically rich downtown. Sarlat has been an important market town since the Middle Ages, and the market here is one of the best we've experienced in all of Europe thus far. Browse the stalls and pack your basket with strawberries, goat cheese, white asparagus, truffles (in season November-February), foie gras and pâté (duck and goose livers), dried sausages, local wines (try the Malbec), and anything with walnuts, especially the walnut liqueur.

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From Sarlat, head to the nearby Périgord Aventure et Loisirs to begin your scenic day on the water.

While there are many great stretches of the river to canoe, we found the nine-mile stretch from Vitrac to Beynac to be quite enjoyable. A fast-flowing river, this stretch of the Dordogne only takes about two hours at a relaxed pace in the spring or fall, or around two and a half hours in the summer.

On this canoe ride you'll enjoy views of lush forests and towering limestone bluffs, castles and riverside villages that are too picturesque to not stop and explore. When you reach La Roque-Gageac, pull your canoe ashore and spend some time walking around town. A strong contender on all of the "cutest towns in France" lists, there's not much to see in La Roque besides the town itself. Slowly walk the old cobblestone lanes and take it all in. High above town you'll see stone dwellings that were built for protection against Viking river raids. Long after the Vikings were tamed, French soldiers used these fortifications as barracks while fighting against England in the Hundred Years' War.

From La Roque it's a 30-minute paddle to the next stop, Château de Castelnaud, a beautiful medieval castle atop a hill about a 25-minute walk from the water. If you have time, the steep hike through town is lovely. Otherwise, save your energy and come here later by car. Castelnaud is well equipped with weaponry and artifacts from the Hundred Years' War, and is a great site for children. Plus, it offers breathtaking views of the river and the surrounding area below.

From Castelnaud, it's about another 30 minutes to the next and last stop of your journey, the well-preserved medieval village of Beynac. Just as pretty as La Roque, the town is worth taking the time to explore, but the main attraction here is the mighty Château de Beynac. Nestled 500 feet above the Dordogne River, Château de Beynac was also a significant defense post for the French during the Hundred Years' War, and having been recently restored, will give you a glimpse into what life might have looked like during that time. Though a bit more



sparingly decorated than Castelnaud, Beynac still evokes a memorial medieval feel.

After you finish exploring Beynac, catch the shuttle back to your car and enjoy a sunset dinner at one of the several restaurants along the river in your favorite, newly discovered town.

DAY TWO

No trip to Dordogne would be complete without touring some of the area's famous caves. Start your day in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac at the Prehistory Welcome Center for a good introduction before setting out to explore the first cave of your choice. Choosing your caves will take some planning ahead, as only some caves accept reservations and your choice might be booked solid weeks in advance.

The first cave we visited, Lascaux II, is an exact replica of the area's most famous cave, Lascaux. Just feet away, the original cave was closed to the public in 1963 to help preserve the art. After being discovered in 1940, changes in the environment caused by human visitors did more damage to the art in the 15 years it was open to the public than in the estimated 17,000-20,000 years prior. This cave is most famous for The Great Hall of

the Bulls, a section of the cave which depicts colorful paintings of horses and stags, as well as the largest painted animal discovered so far in cave art, a 17-foot-long bull.

Another memorable cave worth visiting is Grotte de Rouffignac, which offers a slightly different cave experience than others in the area. Here you'll ride a small train down a giant subterranean riverbed, where you'll see 13,000-year-old engravings and drawings of mammoths, bison and horses, as well as some eerie prehistoric bear burrows and giant claw marks decorating the walls.

Both caves were fascinating, and visiting them was a highlight of our trip.

DAY THREE

If you're really interested in the cave art, spend your third day exploring another cave or two; otherwise, there are several other great options to fill your time.

Wine lovers might enjoy a trip to Saint-Émilion, a quaint wine-making town just outside of Bordeaux, or to Cahors, the birthplace of Malbec wines.

Or, you could do what we did, and take a scenic drive through the eastern portion of the region for postcard-perfect views and a quick trip back in time. The crooked pedestrian lanes, peaked rooftops, half-timbered walls, and quiet town squares of Carennac, Loubressac, Autoire and Martel were almost enough to make us forget all of our plans and spend the rest of our trip right there in that perfect corner of France we had so quickly come to love. ■

To learn more about Jennifer's travels through Europe and the U.S., you can follow her on Instagram @JNDoss or check out her blog, www.thedailydoss.com