

OUTDOOR TRAVEL



WALKING IN THE DORDOGNE, SOUTH WEST FRANCE

A journey re-visited by Graham Hodgson

Twenty-six years after our first visit to France, we are back on a kind of journey of reminiscence to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary and my wife's 70th birthday.

We have returned to the Departement du Lot (also called Quercy) where, in 1991, we spent a week hiking from village to village, enjoying French food, scenery, culture, language and wines for the very first time in our lives -- an experience we have never forgotten.

We have returned to France a number of times in the interim, but now we are back for another self-guided hike in the Lot, hoping our now septuagenarian bodies will cope with some 80 kilometres of trails over the week.

We will be walking between 12 and 20 kilometres per day from village to village, carrying just a day pack with water (maybe wine), a picnic lunch and cameras while our luggage gets transported to a pre-booked hotel for each night's stay.

We will also be armed with maps and route notes, and following the many marked and unmarked tracks and quiet back roads that typify hiking in France.

But first, we start our journey back to the Lot in Cahors, the departmental capital. With a population of around 25,000 it is by far the biggest town in a department said to have the lowest population density of any area of France.

The Lot sits some five hours by train south-west-ish from Paris in the high limestone plateau in the middle of the country. Rivers – the Dordogne, the Lot and the Cele – run east-west through the department, carving deep gorges through the soft limestone over the millennia to eventually empty into the Atlantic beyond Bordeaux.

Cahors is on a 'peninsula' formed by one of the many loops of the serpentine Lot River, and its charming old town is flush with narrow laneways, ancient buildings and monuments, churches, restaurants, shops and homes.

On our first night there we dine at a tiny restaurant close to our hotel and have the set menu - foie gras, confit du canard (duck) and crème brûlée. A red wine is served – Cahors malbec. I message a friend in Australia: *"We are in the Lot. I think I've died and gone to heaven"*.

The three-course menu, we discover, is ubiquitous at every restaurant in the area. Add in Rocamadour cheese, a creamy round of goats milk cheese served as appetiser, in salads, warmed in mains or with the cheese platter and you have the perfect meal for around 20 euros per person.

Cahors red wine is usually 100 per cent malbec grapes and so dark it is almost black. I'm smitten.

The Lot River provides a plethora of activities outside the town – boat trips up and down the river for an hour or so, excursions to St Cirq Lapopie, a village perched on a limestone cliff above the river, and day-long cruises with lunch (Rocamadour cheese included, of course).

Cahors also is on one of France's Caminos de Santiago de Compostella, the pilgrim trails through to Santiago in Spain, so we spend a couple of days pretending to be pilgrims hiking the trail both ways from town.

Then, we travel north, just 40 minutes on the InterCity train to Souillac where we will start our self-guided hiking tour.

Souillac is on the Dordogne River, and has a pretty pedestrian-friendly old town and a fascinating museum with an astonishing collection of automata – mechanical moving puppets and marionettes from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This is the launching pad for our hiking tour over the next six days to St Cere, eastwards from here through some of France's recognised "*most beautiful villages*", including Loubressac, Autoire and Rocamadour and via some spectacular and dramatic scenery.

But, there's a physical price to pay to enjoy "*beautiful villages*" and "*dramatic scenery*" on foot, and we find that such reward requires effort, at times more than considerable effort. Nevertheless, we complete each day's walk – usually taking longer than the route notes suggest -- with an elevated sense of accomplishment.

"*We did it*", we congratulate ourselves each day, hiking in to the next village with our pre-booked hotel in sight. Time enough for a sight-seeing walk around the village, maybe a pre-dinner drink, then a satisfying three or four-course dinner.

Can you have too much foie gras, confit du canard, crème brûlée and Chateau Haut-Monplaisir Cahors malbec wine? Probably not.

Along the way there are many highlights:

- Standing on the top of a cliff overlooking the Dordogne River, with breath-taking vistas across limestone cliffs and over the river to lush farmlands with a farmer's tractor hay-cutting in the far distance.
- Wriggling in to deep caves with evidence of pre-historic settlements (our route notes wisely suggesting we take a torch with us that day).
- Sitting trail-side with our backs against a centuries-old drystone wall for a picnic lunch of baguettes, prosciutto, cheese, fruit and a half-bottle of malbec.
- Inspecting a 5000-year-old dolmen (Neolithic stone burial tomb), just off the trail in the middle of a paddock.
- Walking through a tiny village (more a collection of farm houses) named Latrielle; my wife grew up on a street named Latrielle and we take photos for her 94-year-old mother back home in Australia.
- Being fussed over by the madame of the hotel in Loubressac when we arrived hot, fatigued and probably dehydrated after an unseasonably hot and high humidity day on our longest day's hike from Rocamadour.

Rocamadour was also a highlight. This pilgrim town dating back to the 12th century, built impossibly into the limestone cliff above a small river, has a number of churches and chapels clustered above the main, narrow street in the town below.

Complete your pilgrimage by climbing the final 226 stone steps from the main street up to a small plaza and the chapels. Serious pilgrims climb the steps on their knees. Not us, but when we arrive in the plaza there are small groups of tourists listening to their tour guides and we hear a hymn being sung.

Then up the steps comes a group of people singing a rousing hymn – in German, no less – completing what for them has no doubt been a considerable pilgrimage, judging by their hiking sticks, stout boots and serious clothing.

Believer or no, one can't deny the emotion of the moment.

And that, in many ways, encapsulates our return journey to the Lot – a pilgrimage, a physical challenge at our age, an achievement, a reward to ourselves.

At its centre, the region's history, scenery, villages, food, wine, culture, language and people have combined to ensure endless tales to regale friends and family for many years to come.

Travellers' Checks

Active holiday specialists Outdoor Travel based in Bright, Victoria, has a wide range of guided and self-guided walking and cycling tours in Europe, including the Dordogne Valley and Historic Rocamadour self-guided walk.

Contact: Outdoor Travel Pty Ltd Tel: (03) 57 501441

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FRANCE – THE DORDOGNE VALLEY & HISTORIC ROCAMADOUR

8-days / 7-nights self-guided inn-to-inn walking holiday



This 8-day self-guided moderately graded walking tour offers an opportunity to explore a fascinating region of France. The “*Dordogne*” refers to both the French *Departement* and to the river that rises in the mountains of the Massif Central flowing westwards to meet the River Garonne at Bordeaux. This is one of the longest rivers in France and one of the most beautiful. Before it was named “*Dordogne*”, the area was known as “Perigord” taken from “Petrocaurii”, the name of the tribes of Gauls who inhabited the region 2000 years ago.

This walk allows you to traverse a landscape with a history going back over 50,000 years. When early man first arrived in the region – leaving his exquisite and world renowned cave paintings at nearby Lascaux – he undoubtedly found a green and pleasant land with good hunting, shelter and a favourable climate. Perhaps the living was easier then than in medieval times when history records dominant warlords, marauding armies, crippling taxation and plague. There are many castles, churches and historical monuments in the region.

Here today, apart from some excellent walking routes, gastronomy is king and the duck and goose are very much the mainstay of the rich cuisine. Foie gras appears on most menus and in shops – it is the fattened liver of either duck or goose with a rich buttery taste – but if you don’t like the sound of the foie gras then look out for magrets, which are juicy duck breasts, often accompanied by a truffle sauce, another specialty in the region. And of course, there are some superb local wines to enjoy....

Departs: Daily on demand – from mid-April to the end of October 2017

Cost from: \$1415 per person (twin share) Single supplement \$350 Solo Traveller Supplement: \$390

Grade: Moderate walking in a rolling countryside. Walks of 4 - 6 hours a day of 14 - 20km

Tour includes: 7 nights’ accommodation in 2 or 3-star hotels, 7 breakfasts, 5 dinners, luggage transfers on walking days, detailed route notes (in English) and maps, local support

Not included: Meals not mentioned, drinks with dinners, personal expenses, transport to the start or from the end of the walk.

Extra nights of accommodation can be arranged (at extra cost) in Souillac or St Cere – ask us for details.

Suggested itinerary:

Day 1: Arrive in Souillac

Arrive Souillac early to allow time to explore the narrow streets of the fascinating old town and the 11th Century Romanesque church.

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Day 2: Souillac to St Sozy walking distance @ 18km, with 320m of ascent, 4hrs 45mins

Leave Souillac following the trail through the woods above the Dordogne with magnificent views of the many picturesque small farms and villages below. Take a riverside path from Blanzaguet to St Sozy and explore some of the interesting caves on your way to Meyronne.

Day 3: St Sozy to Rocamadour walking distance @ 14km, with 250m of ascent, 4hrs

Walk across the valley gently ascending steadily onto the "Causse" de Gramat, a high limestone plateau. Follow a pleasant trail through green and fertile countryside to the village of Rocamadour – clinging to the side of a narrow gorge – an important stopping point for pilgrims on the way to Santiago on the Way of St James.

Day 4: Explore Rocamadour free day or optional circular walking route

Free day to relax and explore the medieval town of Rocamadour and its seven religious sanctuaries. There is much to see both in and around Rocamadour. Dinner is at your own arrangement tonight.

Day 5: Rocamadour to Loubressac walking distance @ 20km, with 280m of ascent, 5hrs

Walk cross the limestone plateau to Alvernac, where there is an opportunity to taste the local spring waters. Continue through the Combe Molière valley and visit the subterranean cave system at Padirac. In the afternoon pleasant sandy paths lead you on to the village of Loubressac.

Day 6: Loubressac to St Cere walking distance @ 16km, with 420m of ascent, 4hrs 45mins

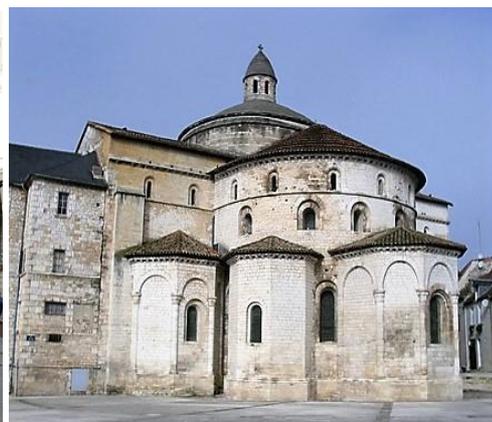
Follow the edge of the rocky plateau descending to the charming village of Autoire, nestled in a gorge, with many fine old houses. The trail continues past the Château de Presque to the village of St Jean-Lespinasse. On the way to St Céré, stop to visit the elegant Château of Montal.

Day 7: Explore St Cere free day or optional circular walking route

Free day to relax and explore the pleasant old market town of St Céré. There is an optional local walk in the surrounding hills. Dinner is at your own arrangement tonight.

Day 8 Departure

Tour ends after breakfast in St Céré.



Ask about our self-guided walking tour of the **Vezeze and Dordogne** valleys, starting from Les Eyzies on the banks of the Vezeze. The village is surrounded by the dwellings of Cro-Magnon man and prehistoric caves with wall paintings including the world-famous caves of Lascaux. Walk through fortified bastide villages, past towering limestone cliffs, along quiet rivers and on ancient tracks through forest. Spend two nights in the beautifully preserved medieval town Sarlat-le-Caneda, where you can wander the twisting streets, take the lift to the top of the Sainte-Marie bell tower, on Saturday browse the market stalls of the region's largest market.

Outdoor Travel offer a wide range of self-guided inn-to-inn or guided, centre-based walking holidays in most regions in Europe. Other walks in France include Provence, Burgundy, the Alps, Riviera Coast, Canal du Midi, the Pyrenees, in the Auvergne and following in the footsteps of R.L. Stevenson in the Cevennes.

In France, Spain & Portugal we offer the **Camino de Santiago** pilgrimage route and in Italy the **Via Francigena** – the pilgrim's *Road to Rome*, **Tuscany**, **Umbria**, **Lake Como**, the **Alps** or **Dolomites**, the **Amalfi Coast** or the **Cinque Terre** coast. Ask about walks in Croatia, Austria, the Alps or Bernese Oberland in Switzerland, in Bavaria, Germany or in England where the **Coast-to-Coast** walk is challenging and popular.

Contact Outdoor Travel for more itinerary details and reservations

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