

Mysterious Prehistoric Cave Art Exhibitions in the Dordogne

The stunning Dordogne valley lacks little when it comes to attractions for tourists: lush river valleys, picture-postcard rustic villages, medieval castles and chateaus – they all have made it one of France’s hottest travel destinations for a long time. But there is another reason why it seduces tourists and artists, writers and historians alike.

Go to the Vezere Valley in the Dordogne region of central France and you will find a hotbed of relics of our ancient past. Between Montignac and Les Eyzies you can find as many as fifteen caves within twenty five kilometers. Many cavern walls bear mysterious paintings left behind by our cave-dwelling ancestors from as far back as 12,000 years ago.

Thankfully, the region is still one of France’s best-kept secrets. And it is exciting to watch as scientists dig up stories about the caves.



The Rouffignac Cave, Vezere Valley

This cavern contains one of the world’s oldest exhibitions of paintings, hidden in a deep recess with a 3 foot high ceiling. The recess is called the Great Ceiling, and the name’s got nothing to do with its diminutive height: on the ceiling, there are over 60 excellent outlines of horses, mammoths and ibex.

Scientists say these were made by a mere half dozen women and men as they lay on their backs. They date the caves to 12,000 years ago, a figure that is awe-inspiring when you consider how artistic the images are. The artists had an idea of perspective, using bulges and hollows on the cave walls to create images that moved when light fell on them.

The cave art may have been the work of Cro Magnon man, the earliest Homo Sapiens who survived the Ice Age in Europe. A little train takes tourists from the entrance to the cave to the Great Ceiling, past figures of black rhinos and bear claw scratch marks so they can crane their necks to see them for themselves. And also wonder why they were drawn.

We don’t know why the images were drawn; perhaps it was some shamanic ritual to help the shamans into a trance. At any rate, it is certain that art has been important to the people for long time.



Lascaux II

The same can be said for the other caves, like the one at Lascaux II. This is a replica of the original Lascaux cave that was discovered in 1940. Lascaux was closed to the public in 1963 after the environment inside changed and crystals and algae began to grow on it. Inside the replica, there are copies of over 600 colored mammoths, deer and horses painted on the walls of the original cave.

Visitors can also view tools the artists would have used and the hollowed out stones which carried candles. And they can marvel at the early innovations. Juniper bark provided the wicks for the candles, which didn't damage the paintings because it burns with white smoke!

But for visitors who want to visit original colored paintings, there is cave at Font-de-Gaume.



Grotte de Font-de-Gaume

Only eight people are allowed into the cave at a time, but the rewards are worth waiting for. This is the only cave in France where you can view colored prehistoric paintings in their original. You may find yourself having to squeeze through the tight corners and tunnels of the cave. But there is a certain rare image of a male reindeer nuzzling a kneeling doe that is a must-see, which reveals how much the artists knew not only about the behavior of animals but also about their anatomy.

There are several other caverns and caves in this part of the country. Many are World Heritage Sites that preserve important parts of our prehistory. A notable one among these would be the startling horse friezes of the Abri de Cap Blanc.

Abri de Cap Blanc

The walls of this cave were perfectly shaped for the cave art that some prehistoric artists chose for it – a bas relief of running horses. The horses sculpted into the rock appear to be in frenzied motion. A body of a young woman, who scientists believe may have been the artist, was discovered in the cave.

Many visitors to the Dordogne would be fascinated by the glimpse into our past that these caves offer us. And after all that spelunking, there are biking lanes to explore, rivers to canoe, truffles, walnut oil and Bergerac wines to taste from the wineries of the Vezere plains.

The region offers visitors the coveted 'good life', and they may even be persuaded to stay on, like the cave men and women did so many thousands years ago!

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