

## FRANCE - THE DORDOGNE, THE VÈZÈRE AND ROCAMADOUR

8-days / 7-nights moderate to challenging inn-to-inn guided cycling



The Dordogne Valley in southwest France is renowned as one of the most beautiful places in France, and the Périgord Noir, where our cycling tour is based, is perhaps the most beautiful part of the Dordogne. Picturesque hilltop villages built of golden stone, arid limestone plateaux or *causses* rising between lush green river valleys, and subterranean grottoes and caves full of fantastically-shaped mineral formations all feature on our itinerary. We visit the village of Rocamadour, one of the Grand Sites of France, in an astounding location clinging to a cliff above the gorge of the river Alzou. The Dordogne and Vézère valleys are dotted with the remains of Stone Age settlements and cave art sites including Lascaux with its 17,000-year-old depictions of aurochs, horses and other animals. This was also a major battleground in the Hundred Years' War between England and France in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries, explaining the many castles and *bastides* or fortified villages.

The Dordogne is blessed with a cuisine that has become synonymous with 'typical' French cooking. Its famous duck and goose dishes, including the celebrated foie gras, magret (duck breast) and confit, are much sought after. Walnuts, truffles, goat cheese (cabecou or Rocamadour), and wild mushrooms including cèpes and chanterelles also figure in the cuisine. The wines are sometimes underrated, but don't dismiss the inky, robust reds from Cahors in the south, made mostly with the Malbec grape; the rustic, early-drinking red and white Bergerac wines; the sweet dessert wines of Monbazillac and Saussignac; and the full-bodied ruby red Pécharmant wines which match well with the region's charcuterie, duck and goose dishes.

The cycling on this tour is moderate to challenging, with a number of hills to climb – nothing too rugged, but it would be well-advised to do some training, particularly uphill, before this holiday.

**Cost from:** \$3040 per person, twin-share. Single room supplement from \$735

**Departs:** 13<sup>th</sup> June; 18<sup>th</sup> July; 15<sup>th</sup> August; 5<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2020

**Grading:** Moderate to challenging - average daily distance 50-60km over undulating and hilly terrain.

**Includes:** 7 nights' accommodation in carefully selected 2- and 3-star hotels (all rooms with private bathrooms), breakfast and dinner daily, wine-tasting at vineyards, route notes, luggage transfers, cycle tour guide, hire of quality multi-gear hybrid touring bicycle with helmet, lock, panniers and water bottle, transfers from/to Angoulême station at start/end of tour.

**Not included:** Lunches, drinks, entrance fees at local attractions, personal expenses.

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**Suggested itinerary:** *please note weather and road conditions, group interests and the decision of the tour guide will influence the final route taken each day*

### **Day 1: Arrive at Angoulême or Les Eyzies**

Meet at Angoulême station for the transfer to your hotel, or make your own way to the hotel at Les Eyzies. Home to the National Museum of Prehistory and surrounded by archaeological sites, the remains of Stone Age settlements and significant cave art sites, Les Eyzies makes a justifiable claim to the title 'capital of prehistory.' The famous caves of Lascaux, the Cro-Magnon rock shelter where the earliest skeletons of *homo sapiens* were discovered, and the polychrome cave paintings in Font-de-Gaume are nearby.

Our usual hotel is a family-run property in a converted mill on the banks of the river Beune and we are well looked after by our hosts. Dinner tonight in the hotel restaurant which specialises in Dordogne cuisine, including duck and foie gras, using local ingredients such as truffles and escargot.

### **Day 2: Les Eyzies to Beynac**

**cycling @ 60km**

Our route takes us over undulating terrain. We follow the Vézère River to Limeuil where it meets the Dordogne. Limeuil is a beautiful bastide town, and the confluence of the rivers is a great place for a swim. We may also visit the Gouffre de Proumeyssac, a huge cavern with spectacular stalactites and stalagmites. In the afternoon we follow the Dordogne River along quiet roads and past the châteaux of Beynac and Castelnaud facing off across the river. Josephine Baker, the dancer, singer, civil rights activist and French Resistance supporter, lived for a time at the Château des Milandes and those interested in her life can tour the château.

We end at Beynac, a picturesque village beside the Dordogne dominated by the castle set high on the cliffs. The castle was once the seat of Richard the Lionheart and is worth a look if you have the energy to climb the steep 'Basketmakers' path. We stay in a charming 2-star family-run hotel in a building of honey-coloured stone. The food here is very traditional, a superb place to further our discovery of typical Dordogne cuisine.

### **Day 3: Beynac to Payrac**

**cycling @ 50km**

Not a long day, but a challenging one, with a couple of steep climbs. Soon after leaving Beynac we pass La Roque Gageac, an amazing town, originally a prehistoric fort, built into the side of a cliff beside the Dordogne. We also get our first decent hill on the way up to Domme, which sits above the river and has famous panoramic views. Known as the 'Acropolis of the Périgord', it is surrounded by a medieval wall, and is one of the best preserved bastide towns. From Domme to Payrac we go cross-country on tiny roads and see barely a soul. We pass Domme-Sarlat airfield, an ostrich and emu farm that sells foie gras (not ostrich foie gras), and fields of tobacco plants. The swimming pool and sauna at our hotel in Payrac are welcome and well-deserved.

### **Day 4: Payrac to Loubressac**

**cycling @ 45km**

Today we leave the valleys and climb to the limestone causses to Rocamadour, one of the most spectacular towns in France, clinging to the side of a cliff hundreds of metres above the Alzou Gorge. Founded as a 13<sup>th</sup> Century hermitage it still plays an important role for pilgrims on the Way of St James to Santiago de Compostela, with a shrine to the Black Madonna and the relics of the hermit St Amadour.

The afternoon is easier riding and if time permits we visit the Gouffre de Padirac, a massive cavern leading to an underground river and stalactite and stalagmite formations. Then just a final push to Loubressac which sits on the edge of the causses and has beautiful views across the Dordogne and Bavé valleys.



### **Day 5: Loubressac to Gluges**

**cycling @ 50km**

We begin the day with an easy downhill ride into the small town of St Céré. Twice a month on Wednesdays there is an extensive produce market here – great for picnic fodder. Out of St Céré we pass the huge ruined castle at Castelnaud and arrive back at the Dordogne. We follow the Dordogne downstream to Carrenac, rated by some as the most beautiful village on the Dordogne, and a great place for a picnic.

After Carrenac we have another easy ride as the road twists and turns as it follows the Dordogne valley. We cross and re-cross the river and pass the spot where the underground river from the Gouffre de Padirac enters the Dordogne. We pass several minor châteaux on our way to Gluges, where the pool catches the late afternoon sun and offers a perfect end to the day.

### **Day 6: Gluges to Sarlat-la-Caneda**

**cycling @ 60km**

This stretch of the Dordogne cuts through the limestone causses offering rides past spectacular gorges and cliffs. Our route criss-crosses the river, using back-roads to avoid some unseemly hills, although the terrain is still undulating. There is the option to canoe downstream to Pinsac, ideal on a sunny day. This stretch of the river is home to kingfishers and herons. After lunch we follow less known backroads with some steep-ish climbs from Souillac to Sarlat-la-Caneda, entering the town on a cycle path built on a disused railway.

Our hotel is just a five-minute walk from *Vieux Sarlat*. The town is so well preserved that it also rates three stars from Michelin. During this week you could be forgiven for imagining that Michelin give three stars away like confetti. But if you look at their guidebooks for other regions, you can see that there are hardly any sites awarded three stars. The Dordogne valley really is that good. Tonight we enjoy probably the finest gourmet food of the week, and certainly the finest desserts, at a traditional restaurant in the heart of Sarlat.

### **Day 7: Sarlat to Les Eyzies**

**cycling @ 35km**

Our last day and there are some hills. On leaving Sarlat we turn onto quiet country roads that lead to the hilltop town of Marquay and beautiful views across the Vézère and Beune valleys. Descending to the Vézère we pass the Abri de Cap Blanc with its sculptures and the prehistoric fort at La Roque St Christophe. This village which dates back some 50,000 years is carved out of overhanging galleries in a limestone cliff. Our final destination Les Eyzies is another few kilometres away with our hotel on the banks of the Beune River.

### **Day 8: Departure day**

Tour arrangements end after breakfast at our hotel in Les Eyzies. There is an optional early-morning transfer to the train station in Angoulême if required.



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