

La Roque St Christophe

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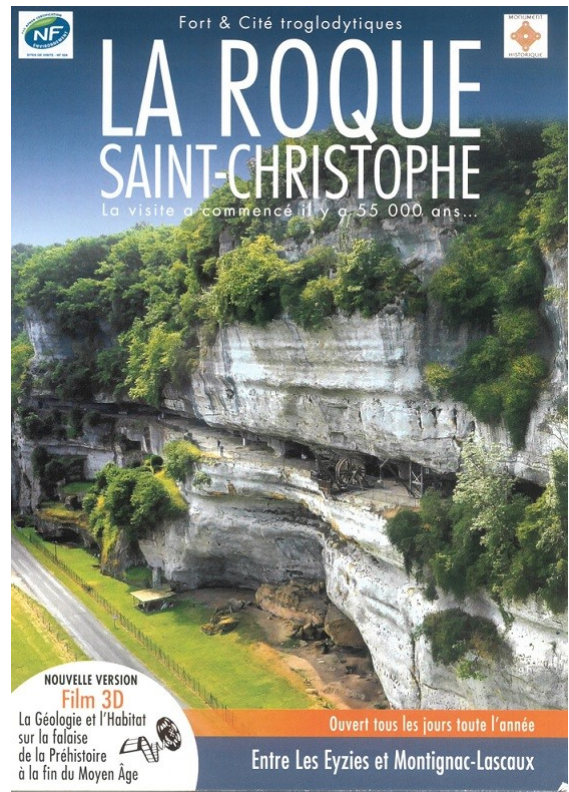
In the March edition of this Journal, I described visits in January this year that my teenage son, Luke, and I made to Neolithic cave art sites in France. Two of those cave art sites, Lascaux 4 and Grotte de Font-de-Gaume were in valley of the Vézère River, a tributary of the Dordogne. For our visit, I had also researched whether there were other locations in the Vézère valley that were cave sites which might be of interest to us.

As I noted in my earlier article, many of those that I had thought might be of interest were the subject of their fermeture annuelle, their annual winter shutdown. However, I discovered one unusual site, La Roque St Christophe, which proclaimed on the web that it was open every day of the year (www.roque-st-christophe.com). As La Roque St Christophe was reasonably close to La Fissandie, the restored 18th-century farm outbuilding where we were to base ourselves, we decided to allow a day for a visit to this site.

On the appointed day, we set off in much the same fashion we had done during the previous week or so of wandering around the back roads of rural France, a process which had followed several seven or eight hour drives along sections of high-speed French autoroutes.

In our meandering along these B, C or D class roads, I had been faithfully and docilely following the instructions of the woman who lived in the dashboard and who gave driving directions in a Teutonic voice (reminiscent of the tone I imagined would have been used by a German concentration camp guard during WW2). Hitherto, she had guided us faithfully and accurately (at least for the very great part) since we had first been united with her in Geneva some three weeks and many thousand kilometres earlier.

On this day, however, as we tried to navigate the labyrinth of minor roads that lay between La Fissandie and



La Roque St Christophe, our guiding voice went feral, resulting in us finding ourselves, on two or three occasions, being instructed to follow roads that slowly tapered into nothing better than what, in Australian parlance, would be described as fire trails.

The reason for this, we later discovered, was that there had been a landslide several months earlier which had blocked the otherwise traditional and conventional tourist route leading from our abode to La Roque St Christophe. However, having had to retreat from several of these false starts, recourse to “cartographer Google” on my phone took us in the correct direction and delivered us accurately to our destination!

La Roque St Christophe is located close to the bank of the Vézère River some seven hundred metres to the west of the D706 regional road along a smaller offshoot, the D66.



The location near the Vezere River

An impressive limestone escarpment rises some 40 m or so from the lushly grassed (but narrow) floodplain with the D66 (following the river) being bordered by fenced paddocks containing contentedly grazing cows (the paddock on the river side being 60 m or so wide, with a similarly grassed but narrower paddock to our right to the base of the escarpment). The width of these paddocks gradually decreased as we drove toward the carpark.

During the last hundred metres or so, the road passed through a pinch point between a 3 m or so high limestone outcrop about half the size of a tennis court on our left (between us and waters of the Vézère) and the limestone of the escarpment immediately on our right. This forced the road to narrow to a single lane over this distance with no passing bay. Although, in the traffic circumstances in which we were visiting, this was unchallenging, I hesitated to think of the potential chaos in peak tourist season as the un-rectified landslide meant that this road was the only way in and out for this site.

As I observed in my March article, my son and I were travelling in the depths of European winter, which meant that, in this portion of the French countryside, there were frosts on the ground lasting until the middle of the day and the occasional remnant snowdrifts from a heavy fall which had occurred some weeks earlier.

We arrived at the carpark at La Roque St Christophe late in the morning. The carpark had been designed in anticipation of substantial tourist visitor numbers (we were

subsequently told at the visitor centre that there were frequently up to 500 people on site during peak summer holiday season in July/August of each year). The car park was clearly designed to cater for this with multiple tourist coach bays and spaces for several hundred cars. At the time of our arrival and departure, ours was the only vehicle to be seen. We had the site to ourselves!

There are three aspects of La Roque St Christophe that are of interest to a visitor. The first is the highly defensible physical layout of the two primary habitation gallery levels. The second is the history of human habitation of the site. Finally, there is what a visitor can now observe to give a (limited) glimpse of those past human activities.

The primary aspects of the site are two long horizontal galleries running some 50 or 60 m in the face of the escarpment. The lower of them is some 15 m above the floodplain while the upper gallery is about 10 m above that. The lower gallery is much longer than that above. These galleries are described in the visitor materials on-site as having been formed in the long past by glacial erosion. As later described in a little more detail, the galleries have been subject to human modification, modification (with two exceptions) largely confined to shaping out the back wall of the galleries. Although there has also been, during the first half of the last millennium, habitation at the floodplain level, this occurred for a comparatively short period in the overall history of habitation of the site.

The two galleries are generally some 3 m or so high at their outer lips tapering only slightly to be generally, 2.5 m high at the back wall. The main, lower gallery is some 8 to 10 m wide. Although the floor is somewhat uneven, it is not significantly so. The unevenness may have been addressed, at least during the more recent period of habitation, by earthen packing to create level floors in the various structures erected within the galleries (as later described).

I earlier noted that the site is highly defensible, a position immediately obvious upon arrival. A sloping ramp and stairs, some 50 m or so long, leads from the car park to the late 20th century Visitors' Centre (a building at which the entrance fee of €9.00 (€6.50 student) is collected and the usual postcards, trinkets and baubles are available to be purchased).



Looking west along the main gallery and the floodplain

Visitors pass through this Centre, exiting onto a narrow ledge only some 2 m or so wide. This ledge passes through a stone wall with a postern sentry gate, an opening only a metre or so wide. This gate was the first line of defence for the mediaeval inhabitants of the site. This gate is some five or 6 m below an element of the lower habitation gallery permitting defenders to rain rocks and other projectiles down on those who might seek to breach the gate.

Beyond the gate, for tourist access (and replicating the access of the 16th century), there is a wooden platform cantilevered out from the cliff face as the ledge leading from the small gateway has, by here, disappeared. For modern visitors, there is now a wooden stairway leading upward from this platform to the first gallery level. In the past, a similar but less sophisticatedly engineered stairway would also have been available to inhabitants.

In the very distant mists of history, footholds had been carved into the rock by much earlier inhabitants to enable them to climb to this lower habitation level. This physical approach layout meant that, until the advent of the (comparatively) modern siege weapons of the mediaeval era, the inhabitants of the site could reasonably regard themselves as living in an impregnable fortress.

There are, however, two significant human modifications to the site.

The first is that, originally, the lower gallery was not continuous. At a point where there was a slight bowing out of the face of the escarpment, past inhabitants have laboriously picked out a tunnel some eight or ten metres long, little more than a metre or so wide and 2 m high, to connect what had been, on the far past, two quite separate habitation spaces. No information exists as to when this construction might have occurred but it is to be inferred that metal tools would have been necessary for this construction activity to have taken place. However, the thus connected gallery further from the primary entrance had also been continuously used from earlier times as there were, apparently, hand and footholds in the rock face indicating that access had been available before the digging of the tunnel.

The second significant human modification to the site was the carving of a flight of stairs out of the rock at a less vertical element of the face between the two levels. This is now described on the tourist material as the “Grand Staircase”.

This access to the upper level is not presently used and there is no other general access to that upper level. The visitor experience is therefore confined to the main gallery level. However, the Grand Staircase can readily be observed (including a “very tasteful” plastic reproduction of a Neanderthal hominid looking out across the Vezere River from the upper level!).

I now turn to the habitation history of La Roque St Christophe. The material provided at the site is limited, but explains that there has been evidence of human habitation discovered showing occupancy of the terrace level was from approximately 50,000 years BCE or a little longer. There is no present physical manifestation of this occupancy able to be observed on the site although there are diorama elements in one section of the lower terrace reproducing what has been imagined to be a simulacrum representing aspects of that early habitation.

There were books in the Visitors’ Centre available for purchase, but the interpretive material concerning this aspect of the site past was limited to short elements of a well-produced audio visual display shown on a screen just outside the Visitors’ Centre as customers exited the site. Visitors were not encouraged in any fashion, to my recollection, to view this audio visual presentation before entering the site.

There was also a location toward the centre of the main terrace where a screen was also installed with a sign indicating that the audio visual presentation could also be



The Grand Staircase with my son in the foreground and the “tasteful” Neanderthal statue at the upper end

watched at that point. Unfortunately, this system was malfunctioning during our visit. As the audio visual presentation was informative of the habitation history (particularly that of the 15th and 16th centuries), it would have been quite helpful to have been able to view it at this point rather than on departure from the site.

Nonetheless, the evidence is that the site was inhabited continuously from those very early times until 1588 when it was sacked as part of the Wars of Religion then sweeping France. The Wars of Religion were caused by a theological dispute between the King of France, the Pope and the forces of the state supporting them (on one hand) and the Huguenots, a theologically less orthodox group who were Protestant followers of John Calvin and who were thus rejected by the Catholic Church.



As was made clear by the audio visual presentation and as could be seen from the remnant elements along the lower terrace, the development of habitation on the site during the 15th and 16th centuries was extensive and sophisticated. As a specific example, the workings visible on the rock outcrop at the pinch point on the access road demonstrate that a sophisticated guarding structure had been constructed for defensive purposes (see photograph at foot of previous page).



The audio visual presentation incorporated an artist's impressions of what the structures had looked like toward the end of the habitation period when it fell in 1588 (reproduced left from the site's web site).

In addition, the range of activities undertaken for the supply of food through a small on-site abattoir complex and by an on-site smithy provides testimony to a degree of sophistication in the habitation toward the end of its life as a settlement.

The remnant evidence of a small church which had been incorporated in the structures toward the middle of the lower terrace was a poignant reminder of the theological conflict which had ultimately led to the destruction of this settlement and its abandonment as a human habitation.

Finally, there were two reproductions of mechanical structures which had been used to raise supplies from the floodplain to the lower terrace. These reproduction structures, as the limited interpretive material on them explained, were authentic replicas reconstructed from historic records detailing how those materials had been raised during the final habitation period of the site.

The site was an unusual experience for us and certainly an interesting digression from the main purpose of our visit to the Dordogne region, being to go to Lascaux and Grotte de Font-de-Gaume.

However, I would not suggest that a visit to La Roque St Christophe would warrant, in itself, visiting this region.

