

A visit to some show caves of France – 2019

Greg Middleton

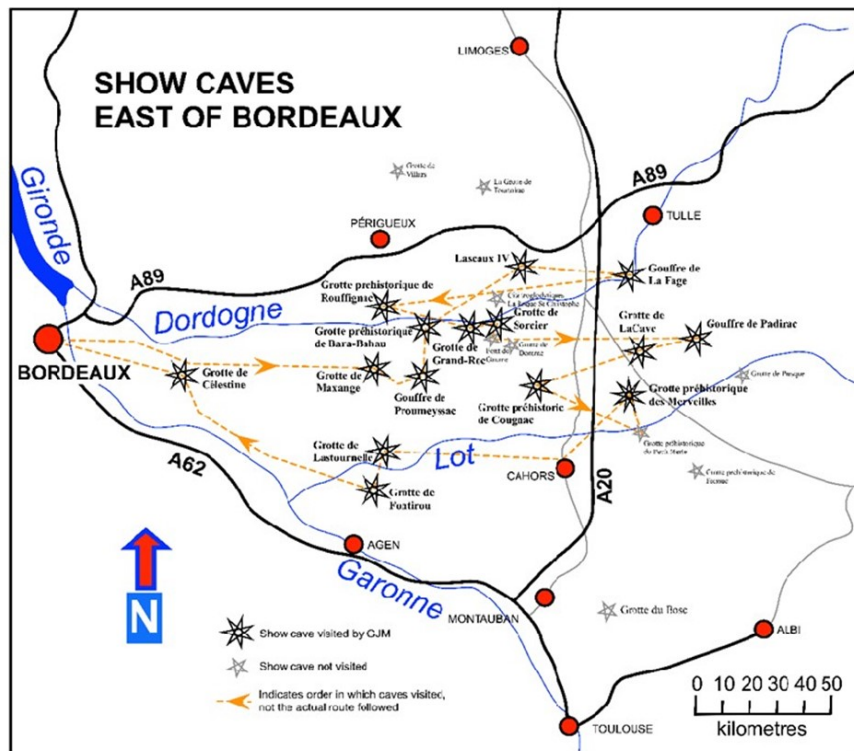
Why France?

In 2019, I was booked on a cruise through the Northwest Passage, above Canada, with the French cruise line, Ponant. As the cruise started with a charter flight from Paris to Greenland, I had to be in Paris on 24 August. So, I took advantage of the opportunity to visit a few French show caves – of which I understand there are over one hundred.

East of Bordeaux

I chose Bordeaux as the starting point for my trip. Fig. 1 shows my driving route from there and the caves visited.

On 16 August, I flew to Bordeaux and drove east, stopping the first night in St Jean de Blaignac.



Locations of show caves east of Bordeaux and the order in which they were visited.

On the morning of 17 August, I drove to **Grotte de Maxange**.

One is supposed to book tours 24 hours in advance, but I got a ticket for a tour 10 minutes after I arrived. Cost was €8.90 (about AUD15). An informative young guide handled the tour well. Although nearly all of the party was French, he provided some interpretation in English. They A card was also provided, describing the main stops, in English. The cave was opened from a building stone quarry in August 2000 and was made accessible to visitors in April 2003 after major excavation of sediment from the main passages. The cave's website immodestly claims: "the caves of Maxange, masterpiece of nature, offer the magic of a spectacle of eccentric concretions unique in the world. Maxange is today recognized as one of the most beautiful concretion caves in France" (<http://lesgrottesde-maxange.com/?lang=en>). Perhaps surprisingly, this claim proved to be justified.

The collections of helictites are extraordinary for both their number and size. There are also a few fine stalactites.



Large parts of the cave are adorned with helictites



Photo 1. Reverse of entry ticket—featuring the cave's signature speleothem, 'The Parrot'.

The unusual name is a combination of the first name of the original quarry owner, Maximilien (Caballero) and his son, Angel, who actually made the discovery.

The lighting is fair to good and is reasonably new. The pathways are serviceable, being compacted sediment. Many French caves do not allow photography, but this one does! My overall impression was favourable, having had no expectations of a cave of which I had never heard.



Helictites are the feature of the cave
 – some are remarkably large.

A 15 minute drive north from Maxange was the **Gouffre de Proumeyssac**. This appears to be a big operation, including a surrounding 'Parc'.

Two tours were offered, the standard walking tour, through a tunnel (€10.60) and one involving being lowered 50 m into the cave's main chamber in a basket/'gondola' (€18.90). I could not get a ride in the basket, so took the normal tour. It was made clear that photos were not allowed.

We had an extremely voluble young guide who spoke only in French. Quite a long tunnel gave direct access to about the middle of the gouffre where there was a balcony with quite a good view of a well-decorated chamber. I couldn't resist sneaking a shot of a notable decoration on the far side. We then walked down lower and right around chamber. Souvenirs were set out so they would be coated with calcite from dripwater.



Main chamber, Gouffre de Proumeyssac

The lighting was basic but well-placed and effective. Music was played with the lowering of the 'gondola' (which was promoted as a 'son et lumière'); we saw this twice from different sides of the chamber. Some of the pathway is cut through flowstone.

The use of the 'gondola' has been a feature of the cave since it was opened in 1907; many early postcards feature it.



2. - Gouffre de PROUMEYSSAC, près Le Bugue (Dordogne)
 à MM. GALOU, FRANCÉS et SOULIÉ
 Descente du Gouffre

Postcard showing the Proumeyssac gondola
 in the early 20th century

Leaving Proumeyssac, it was a 7 minute drive to **Grotte préhistorique de Bara Bahau**. As the next cave tour was not until 17:20, I bought a ticket (€7.20) and waited. I looked around the small gift shop, where I was able to buy some postcards and a set of colour slides! (I haven't seen slides for sale at caves for many many years, so these are real collectors' items!) Photographs are not allowed in this, or any other French caves designated as historic heritage. The tour was conducted, in French, by a middle-aged woman but she did her best to give me some information in English. This is quite a small, single-chambered cave with several large excavations up to 15 m deep to enable sediment studies. The cave was evidently inhabited though the "drawings" the occupants executed are not all very convincing.

In 1951, Norbert Casteret was the first to recognise many incised lines as art (he had to use a lot of imagination).

The Magdalenian engravings date from the Upper Palaeolithic (17,000 to 12,000 years ago). They depict various animals.

Lighting in the cave is kept fairly low (presumably to protect the artwork) and is carefully directed over the engravings.



Head of 'auroch', large extinct cattle – from a 35 mm colour slide.

This is a very low-key operation and not one of the major art caves of France but nevertheless interesting. It's surprising how many of the smaller caves like this one continue to operate.



Engraving of a so-called 'feline horse' – from a 35 mm colour slide.

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The building complex housing the International Centre for Cave Art, including the most complete facsimile yet of Lascaux Cave, Lascaux IV

On 18 August, I drove to the village of Montignac to visit perhaps the most famous cave art site there is, **Lascaux**. As Sieveking & Sieveking described it (1962, p. 89):

Lascaux is the finest painted cave in France, and among its animal paintings are some of the best examples of Palaeolithic draughtsmanship in existence. The entrance to the cave was blocked in antiquity so that none of the paintings has deteriorated and the cave walls have not been defaced by modern explorers.

Lascaux Cave was found by four boys in 1940. Although its importance was quickly recognised, World War II prevented the cave being opened until 1947. Unfortunately, “with more than one million visitors in 15 years, its fragile natural equilibrium was soon upset. The installation of air conditioning in 1958 could not prevent the development of the ‘green disease’ caused by algae, and the ‘white disease’ linked to calcite.” (St-Cyr & Feruglio 2017, p. 33). As a result, the cave was closed to the public.

After it closed in 1963, requests for visiting Lascaux arrived by the thousands. In 1972 the French government decided to build a partial [40%] replica of the cave. Work began on Lascaux II in an abandoned quarry 350 m from the original cave. From 1983, the visitors returned in droves (St-Cyr & Feruglio 2017, p. 95).

In 2012, the General Council of the Dordogne decided to share Lascaux with those who could not visit even the replica. “It was the first time that anyone had thought of making a cave travel.” (Retout 2017). The result was ‘Lascaux III’, a 1000m². exhibition featuring reproductions of those parts of the cave not shown in Lascaux II, which first opened in Bordeaux and went on to Chicago, Houston, Montreal, Brussels, Paris (where I visited it in August 2015), Geneva, South Korea and Japan.

To meet better the expectations of an ever-increasing number of visitors, work on a new facsimile, representing 90% of the famous cave, began about 2012 and opened in the International Centre for Cave Art in December 2016, at the foot of the hill containing the original cave.

“Lascaux IV” as it is known, is housed in a huge complex on the edge of Montignac. Apart from the stunningly accurate reproduction of the cave, there is a “Workshop” displaying a number of elements of the model to help the visitor understand how it was constructed, a theatre showing films on cave art, an art gallery, a very large giftshop, a restaurant and a reception area where entry tickets are sold.

I arrived in time to book into the 12:30 tour, which took about an hour. We had an extremely good English guide, Joseph, who demonstrated a keen interest in, and knowledge of, the cave. The facsimile is quite remarkable, visitors really feel they are walking through a cave – and the art is fabulous. Although it’s only a reproduction, photography is not permitted; probably to try to keep tour groups moving, but it is very frustrating for those who like to photograph caves. Fortunately, photography is permitted in the Workshop where most of the art is displayed again and one is free to wander at will. The total experience is superb.



Engraved horses under the Great Black Cow are exposed by UV illumination of the panel

I could not get a place in a tour until much later in the day so I decided to see if I could find the original entrance. I walked up to a lookout over the Vézère Valley but could find no sign indicating where the original entrance was. I was aware that the cave was closed to ordinary visitors but I thought that at least one would be able to see the entrance. I noticed an area surrounded by a high security fence with a World Heritage sign. Peering through the fence and hedge, I could just make out what I am sure is the original entrance (from my knowledge of historic photos). This is as close as I was going to get to the most famous cave art site there is.

After a couple of hours gazing at these amazing ancient artworks I tore myself away. I bought the obligatory postcards plus an unusual souvenir – a €0 ‘banknote’ featuring some of the bulls. I then drove up the hill to the ‘old’ Lascaux II.

It was hardly any easier to see the entrance to Lascaux II as the ticket barrier prevents you getting close (unless you are on a tour). I left Lascaux with a slight feeling of disappointment but feeling I had got as close as possible to the original and very impressed by the latest recreation and associated interpretation.

From Montignac I drove to **Gouffre de la Fage**, a 44 km trip but it proved not an easy cave to find.

It is a smallish operation and I was surprised to find the cave is self-guided. I was not at all impressed by way it is being operated. After you buy your ticket (€8.50), you walk down about 20 m into the pit which provides access. At the bottom of the shaft, the main part of the cave has developed horizontally.

There is no supervision of visitors whatsoever. I saw a guy climbing way off the track and in another place, you were invited to play being a caver and to walk across gours and calcite floor. There has been very bad vandalism (many broken stalactites) but it is difficult to know when this occurred (perhaps before it opened as a show cave; it has been known since the 1890s). The discoverers prevailed upon the father of speleology, Edouard Martel, to help them explore it in 1891-92. Apparently he remarked (in translation): “the crystalline ornamentation is much more beautiful there than in many too vaunted cavities.”



‘The Black Stag’ with finely drawn antlers



Figure of a man, but with a bird-like head, and below him a bird, apparently on a stick. They are confronted by a bison. The human figure is the only one at Lascaux and one of few in French art caves

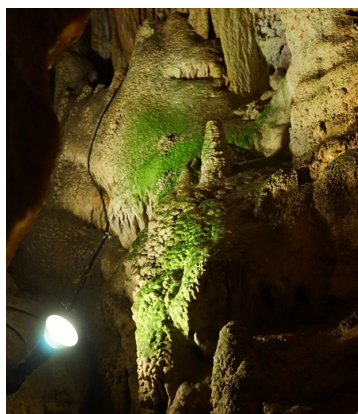
As I had seen in “Lascaux III”, the various main panels are set up and illuminated so that you can see where over-drawing has occurred. As you stand before the panels the lights are changed in sequence, revealing the original artwork below.

The cave is more extensive than I expected and very well decorated despite all the accessible stalactites being broken.



Large stalagmite in First Gallery

Paths are concrete and lighting is functional rather than aesthetic. Information concerning bats is given through bat-shaped signs affixed to the floor. This unusual presentation hasn't worked; most of the signs are not seen by visitors and many are muddled, making reading them impossible.



Serious lampenflora at Gouffre de la Fage

Lampenflora is a serious problem because the lights are on continuously. After I had completed the tour, the woman in ticket office asked me what I thought of the cave – so I told her how I thought this cave should not be

self-guided and that the amount of lampenflora was atrocious. She said the owner could not keep it open if he had to pay guides throughout the year. (Apparently it is guided only on busiest days of summer.) I was not impressed.

One thing the owner does do is display a sign showing the location of many other caves in the region. I saw this at some other caves.

On 19th I drove to **Grotte préhistorique de Rouffignac**. Arriving at 10:15, I was able to buy a ticket for the 10:30 tour (€7.80).



The entrance to Rouffignac Cave provides very easy access. The ticket office and shop are in the entrance passage.

According to Sieveking & Sieveking (1962 pp. 122-124):

“The Rouffignac Cave is well known because of the controversy over the authenticity of its paintings, which followed the announcement of their discovery in 1956. The paintings were described in July of that year but the name and the location of the cave were kept secret. This naturally aroused the interest of the press, and the cave was soon found by an enterprising reporter. Other papers then published inter-views with local historians and speleologists denying the authenticity of the paintings and claiming they were executed by members of the Resistance during World War II. Indignant denials followed and the resulting press campaign did nothing to settle the question.

“In September 1956 Rouffignac was inspected by a group of professional archaeologists, the majority of whom pronounced in its favour ... but unfortunately the evidence is largely circumstantial.

“Rouffignac resembles a modern tunnel, since, unlike most of the other caves, it has an almost perfectly flat floor, and a semicircular domed roof. This appearance is accentuated by the light railway which has been laid through the cave to take tourists to the small decorated galleries, nearly a mile from the entrance.”

Strangely, the modern guidebook (Odile & Plassard 1995) makes no mention of the controversy over the authenticity of the cave's artworks. The large entrance passage, with the ticket desk and gift shop, displays prominent chert nodules in the walls and roof; these are evident throughout the cave.

I paid (€1.50) to rent a visual guide in English. This was most informative and probably provided the best interpretation I experienced at any of the caves I visited. I walked a short way to the gate, then another 100 m to the electric train. No photos were allowed inside but I snuck one of the train.

The train carries tourists quite a long way through the almost flat, large tunnel. There is graffiti everywhere but it is difficult to see in the limited light. (The cave was first documented in 1575 and visitors were brought in by locals for over 350 years before anyone noticed the Palaeolithic art!) The train stopped a number of times to enable us to view engraved and painted art on the walls.

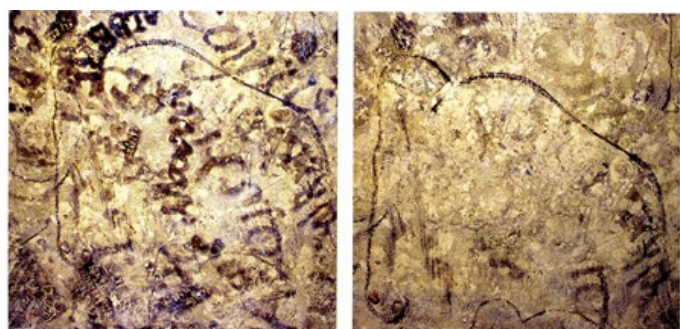
As Odile & Plassard (1995 p. 10) explain :

The artists had to adapt their technique to the type of surface, although they deliberately restricted themselves to two art forms, viz: drawing and engraving. The drawings are all outlined in black and were produced by rubbing a piece of manganese dioxide directly onto the wall or roof. The methods used in engraving are more varied. Depending on the hardness of the base medium, there are lines made with flint chisels or with a bone or wood tool, while in the soft chalk, many of the lines were drawn with the fingers.



The most complete mammoth (of 157) in the cave, drawn with fingers – from a post-card

Our guide/train driver seemed very knowledge-able, though he spoke entirely in French (the rented audio device more than made up for this). At the end, we got off the train and walked a few steps to view a gallery of animals – the ‘Great Ceiling’. The lighting is subtle and just on the artwork (no doubt to protect the art from the sort of problems that affected Lascaux, and so you can’t see much graffiti). The headlight on the train gives low light as you move through the passage.



A mammoth on the ‘Great Ceiling’ showing pre-1956 graffiti (left) and the result of 1989 cleaning (right) (from Odile & Plassard 1995, p. 29)

Next on my list was the Grotte de Grand Roc – a cave opening from what is indeed an impressive high rock face . I bought my ticket for the next tour (€8) and had to wait only a few minutes.

The tour was conducted by an older woman whose English was perfect (but who assured me she was Dutch) and who had a good knowledge of caves. A sheet was provided in English which gave some background and basic cave-related facts. Apparently, in 1922, an archaeologist working on a site below, noticed water trickling from a small hole about halfway up the cliff face.

It took him two years to cut his way into the cave and until 1927 to make the cave accessible to visitors.

The narrow, low, cave passage is extremely well decorated with a profusion of helictites and crystals which could easily gain for this cave the title of ‘Jillabanan of the North’ (for those familiar with Yarrangobilly Caves).

Unfortunately, the path has had to be cut into flowstone and the roof cleaned of stalactites in places (many of which are regrowing). Fine nylon mesh is used to protect speleothems which allows for reasonable photography provided light does not shine on the mesh.



A profusion of speleothems surrounds the narrow pathway. Nylon mesh provides protection

One particularly striking speleothem is a stalagmite to which a piece of stalactite has become attached at right angles. Naturally, they term this ‘The Cross’. (One can’t help wondering if superglue was involved.)

The cave’s ‘signature’ speleothem is a helictite said to resemble a statue in The Louvre of the Greek goddess of victory, Athena Nike, also known as ‘Winged Victory’.

Lighting is ordinary with little attempt to conceal it (though admittedly there’s not a lot of room).

From Grand Roc I set out for Grotte préhistorique de Font de Gaume, but a road sign diverted me first to **Grotte préhistorique du Sorcier** (aka Grotte de St Cirq from the nearby village). I only had to wait about 40 minutes for a tour which gave me time to look around some adjacent cliff dwellings and a small museum.



Medieval excavated cliff dwellings adjacent to Grotte du Sorcier.



The engraving of a male figure known as 'Le Sorcier'. One of only a handful of human figures in all the art caves of France.

The tour of the small chamber was conducted (in French & English) by an informative female guide who did quite well, considering how little she had to show. The engravings are small and indistinct. A mirror is used to show those at the back, including the so-called 'sorcerer' which is very indistinct. As no photos are allowed this image is from a postcard which shows the figure more clearly than you can see it in the cave.

While it is not mentioned at the site (which is World Heritage listed), Sieveking & Sieveking (1962 p. 127) comment: "This engraving is claimed to be a Perigordian [Upper Palaeolithic]. In fact, the realistic drawing of the face suggests that it could belong to mediaeval or later times."

There are also a few animals. A sign on the door to the cave (translated) reads:

"This cave contains 28 prehistoric engravings dated between 15 and 17,000 years ago. Some of these works are visible, but the cavity being of modest dimensions, certain engravings remain inaccessible to the general public."

I then continued on to the Grotte de Font de Gaume but found it fully booked for the day, as was the nearby Grotte de Combelles, both pre-historic art caves. The number of visitors on tours to these caves is limited to 13 and 7 respectively and there are only a few tours per day. People queue up early each day to get tickets for these caves. The official website (<http://www.lascaux-dordogne.com/en/patrimoine-culturel/historic-site-and-monument-caves-and-shelters-containing-rock-art/grotte-de-font>) advises:

"Font de Gaume, a prehistoric cave, is one of the most incredible Palaeolithic sites in the world still open to the public. It reveals more than two hundred painted or engraved representations of bison, horses, mammoths and reindeer, of which many are polychrome. Grotte des Combarelles is a major site for the Magdalenian culture. Horses, bison, aurochs, lions, reindeer, and more: over 800 engravings and drawings of Quaternary Period fauna reveal themselves throughout the cave."

I drove on to **Grottes du Roc de Cazelle** – a formerly inhabited cliff face with lots of tableaux - scenes with statues demonstrating life in the megalithic etc., some of which are in small caverns. One small cave 'The White Cave', about 25 m long, is included, with tunnels out to the cliff face. A sign in the cave says (in translation):

"This natural cave 25 m long served as a refuge for a large part of the population of the city who came to protect themselves in this large cavity in case of danger. They found a mild temperature there, they collected the water that oozed from the ceilings, food could be stored and ... a cave like this constituted an indestructible refuge."

It is hardly worth visiting this site just for this cave.

Another roadside sign lured me into seeking the **Grotte de Bernifal**, of which I had no prior knowledge. Sieveking & Sieveking (1962 p. 48) describe this cave as being about 60 m long with three small rooms containing “some very fine engravings, comparable with those at Les Combarelles”, difficult to decipher human hand stencils, “a natural shape changed by engraving into a schematic human figure”, a mammoth frieze of 3 or 4 mammoths, a deeply engraved horse and other animals.

I walked some 875 m on an indifferent track through forest but, on reaching the entrance at 17:40 found that the last tour had been at 17:15. This cave looks as though it is privately owned. It is difficult to see how the owner/operator can be making much out of it.

My plan for the next day began with **Gouffre de Padirac**. I arrived at 09:10 and realised this is a serious operation! I joined a huge queue to get tickets, then noticed there were ticket-vending machines. I tried to buy the last ticket for the 10:30 tour but the machine refused to accept both my credit cards. I talked a woman behind me in the queue into buying a ticket for me – I paid her €20 for a €14.50 ticket. I was very relieved at getting a ticket at all and went to look over the impressive pit nearby.

Padirac is a significant cave, not just because of its size, but also its history.

“The discovery of the Gouffre de Padirac is inseparable from the development of discipline, modern speleology, and to the career of one man, Édouard Alfred Martel (1859-1938). The often heroic explorations of this visionary, along with the development of unique facilities, reveal the hidden side of a region of France – the Causse de Gramat, limestone plateau in the Massif Central. Today, Padirac is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe, especially as the natural beauty of the underground site has been entirely preserved” (Dubrana 2013).

The Gouffre (or shaft) was the subject of legends going back to ancient times (including that it was an entrance to hell and that after the Hundred Years’ War the son of Edward III had thrown a fabulous treasure into the abyss) but it had never been descended until, at the urging of artist Gaston Vuillier (who wrote “this famous hole inspires immense fear among the peasants. I am sure that you will find an underground river at the bottom of it”) on 9 July 1889, Martel and three colleagues made the descent and found the river.

Well, that’s the usual story but Dubrana (2013) notes:

“In the 16th century Maleville & Rochemonteix wrote that ‘the inhabitants of this country brought out of this chasm some excellent salt-petre, descending using extremely dangerous machines.’ Around 1865, two local figures, Murat and Salvagnac, descended into the chasm in a large basket attached to a cord, although they did not discover the underground river.”

Martel, however, continues to be celebrated as the discoverer and is commemorated with signs and a bronze bust

in the cave. There is a Martel Association which ensures he is not forgotten. France has even produced a postage stamp with the slightly comical image of Martel with a candle mounted on his hat as well as a series of 4 showing scenes in Padirac.

Martel continued to lead expeditions to explore the river until, in September 1895, he was involved in a boating accident. He had explored over 2 km of the underground river but at the turn of the 20th century he decided it had become too dangerous and he forbade further expeditions (Dubrana 2013). Not content with exploration of the cave, he also championed its opening to the public. With the help of the local priest he convinced the local landowners to sell him the land over the cave. With the financial support of George Beamish, an Irish beer baron, he obtained the funds to open the cave and he set up the Société Anonyme du Puits de Padirac – though as a lawyer he was unable to be a director. The first paying visitors descended into the cave in November 1898.

The 130th anniversary of Martel’s descent was being celebrated as I visited the cave.

About 50 people filed into the building for the 10:30 tour. Each was provided with an audio device which delivered quite good interpretation at various points along the route (in your choice of language). You then walk down the series of stairs (or take the lift) to the bottom of the shaft and then into the cave proper. From the bottom there is a dramatic view back up.

Once in the horizontal part of the cave, you descend to the river passage which you walk along for a while before embarking on small boats in which you are paddled about 500 m.

Although photography is allowed in the rest of the cave, it is forbidden during the boat trip. The largest single stalactite is to be seen here, ‘La Grande Pendeloque’ (The Great Pendant) – it features on one of the stamps.

Alighting from the boats, you walk a little further along the stream before ascending into the highly decorated Grand Dome.

On the way you pass the beautiful Lac Supérieur with its strange ‘Pile d’Assiettes’ (pile of plates).

The Grand Dome is crammed with massive, active flowstones. From the Grand Dome you return to the river, take a boat back and retrace your steps to the lift which returns you to the surface, in the gift shop.

The lighting is well done, making photography comparatively easy. The pathway, apart from the entry stairs, is virtually all concrete but this is inevitable given when it was developed and the number of visitors (25 million people have done the tour!) This is certainly a most impressive cave - and an equally impressive show cave operation.

**Flowstones from the
Grand Dome on next page**



Some of the massive flowstones that crowd parts of the Grand Dome in the Gouffre de Padirac

Next on my list was the strangely named **Grotte de Lacave**. It turns out the village is named 'Lacave' (= the cellar) so they just named the cave after it. They actually call it 'Les Grottes de Lacave' but I suspect that's just to make it sound more impressive; there only appears to be one show cave.

The cave opens directly onto a main road which is convenient but makes parking problematic. You take an electric train through a tunnel below the cave (not through the cave as publicity suggests) and then lots of stairs or an elevator up into the cave itself, where you walk to left and right.

The cave is large and surprisingly well decorated.

Norbert Casteret apparently described it as "The synthesis of French caves"; it's not bad but this is something of an overstatement. The guided tour is fairly standard, with some excellent displays of flowstone and gours. There are a number of large pools ('lacs') which make for good reflections but if not entirely artificial, they are at least 'augmented'.



Flowstone and gours. Pools feature strongly, though largely artificial

From Lacave, I drove the 30 km to Grottes de Cougnac where I had to wait for the 17:15 tour. It seems this is a true case of 'grottes' as there is an 'archaeological' cave and a 'geological' cave - both are included in the tour price (€8.80).



Sign with images from the 'archaeological' cave

As photos are not allowed in the 'archaeological' cave, I had to make do with signs and postcards for my record of the cave.

A young woman conducted our tour, first through the 'mineral' or 'geological' cave - which I would rate 'just above average', and then through the separate 'prehistoric cave' - this actually contained better speleothems but no photos are allowed.

The art consists of a few scattered drawings on smooth patches of wall between speleothems - in fact, this was the first case I had seen on this trip where there were significant speleothems and art in the same cave. Motifs include a symbol like a bird, ibex with curved massive horns and two humans - both with spears through them.

Sieveking & Sieveking (1962 p. 67) describe them as "the most interesting paintings at Cougnac". They consider the figures "seem deliberately to be very roughly drawn, in contrast to the accurate and life-like animal drawings in the cave." They rate the cave (only discovered in 1952) as "The most important painted cave found since 1945".

The pathway in both caves is entirely on natural surfaces, with handrails only here and there. Not a lot of speleothem damage is evident. Lighting is just functional - it is generally not well placed nor is all of the wiring hidden.

Next morning (21 Aug.) I drove to **Grotte préhistorique de Pech-Merle**, arriving about 10:15, but found the cave tours booked for the rest of the day and the next day. I had a good look through the small museum and gift shop, and around the site.

Sieveking & Sieveking (1962 p. 45) say Pech-Merle is “less well preserved than Lascaux or Cougnac – but containing some of the more exciting and unusual paintings.” In summary, “Horses resembling Lascaux ‘Chinese’ horses and elegant black line drawings of mammoths and wild cattle. Hand stencils. One of the finest painted caves” (p. 110).

Displays in the museum compare the figures of wounded men at Pech-Merle and Cougnac, concluding “they are characteristic of the art in Quercy [region]. They suggest a link between the two great sanctuaries and show that some of the Pech-Merle paintings are contemporary with those at Cougnac.

The museum also contains photos and drawings of other art from the cave, among the more famous of which are ‘The Spotted Horses’.



The Spotted Horses’ of Pech-Merle
(photo in the museum)

A sign at the site says “At the beginning of the 20th century, speleology was in its infancy. Going underground was unusual and risky, particularly in view of the rudimentary equipment and lighting available. The courage and tenacity of a 16-year-old shepherd, André David, culminated in the discovery of the large cavern containing the paintings of Pech-Merle in September 1922.” An artificial entrance provided easier access to the cave from December 1923 and the first visitors entered the cave in 1926. The cave is now entered through a gift shop.

Disappointed at not getting into Pech-Merle, I drove on to **Grotte préhistorique des Merveilles**, L’Hospitalet, Rocamadour, fully expecting it to be fully booked, too, but I was able to get a ticket for the 11:15 tour (€7.50).

The tour was conducted entirely in French (but I was provided with an illustrated information sheet in English). Our group of about 40 was split in two before entering the cave. Our sub-group was shown the art sites first. To make out the images here requires a great deal of imagination. As Sieveking & Sieveking (1962 p. 122) put it “All the paintings are faint and difficult to perceive”. One example will give an indication of just how difficult. A post-

card on sale at the office identifies a blurry image as a ‘hyena’. The information sheet provided (Anon. n.d.) included a drawing of what is definitely the same black painting, but labelled an ‘elk’.

This single-chambered cave has a fair growth of speleothems. Most of the path is on natural surfaces with a few concrete steps. Lighting is perfunctory, though generally hidden, with detailed lights on the artwork.

Next morning I drove back towards Bordeaux to **Grotte de Lastournelle**, near Sainte Colombe de Villeneuve. I arrived at 10.15 and was able to get on the 10:30 tour. There were about 12 others on the tour (all French speakers) but the guide conducting the group gave me occasional information in English.

This is a small cave which appears to have formed along an old stream course.

There are quite a few reasonable speleothems but nothing outstanding. An unusual feature is a well shaft sunk into the cave by a local farmer in 1878 which you can look up from below. It could never have yielded much water unless the cave flooded significantly.



Looking up well dug by farmer in 1878

Rudimentary lights are installed in the cave (a mix of older incandescent and LED) but I was told they are not used on morning tours “to preserve the cave” (presumably from lampenflora, some of which is evident). They were not well placed and would be unsightly when illuminated. The operators provided each guest with an LED torch – not great for photography but adequate for finding the way through the cave. Much of path is on natural surface with apparent cement stabilization (plus handrails where needed).



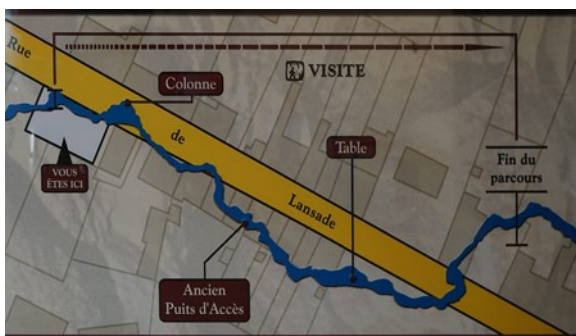
A simple bulkhead light fitting; functional but not aesthetic – with lampenflora

From Lastournelle, I drove to **Grotte de Fontirou** with some difficulty due to few signs and my GPS not listing it. Despite the problems I arrived at 11:55 and paid €8 for the 12:10 tour. I was lent some notes in English.

The cave is said to have been found by a farmer digging a well after his cow fell into it in September 1905. Our group was guided by a person who is probably the owner. The floor has mainly been excavated (a lot of limey mud has been dug out) with cement stairs and iron handrails. Lighting is adequate and carefully placed (advertised as new, LED). Speleothems are not superabundant but many are of good size and quality. A pit leads down to a small stream at the lowest point of the cave.

Next morning, I drove to **Grotte de Célestine** in the village of Rauzan. I met the staff and bought a ticket (€6.50). Although they don't normally permit photography, in view of the fact that I had come so far to visit, they agreed to let me take photos in the cave.

The cave has an interesting history. It was discovered in 1845 when the owner of the shop above decided to sink a well. By chance he was directly above the cave and broke into it (see 'Ancien Puits d'Accès' on plan below). As the town had no reliable water he was able to sell water from the stream. He also constructed a spiral stone staircase 13 m down into the passage and conducted cave tours.



Plan of toured part of Grotte de Célestine under streets of Rauzan

In 1930, the first owner died and the purchaser of the shop ceased running tours and closed the cave. Apart from sheltering resistance fighters in WWII, the cave was closed for 65 years.

In 1994, the town council decided to investigate reopening the cave. Investigations took place over the next 7 years - all relying on access via what had become a private house and the stone staircase. To recognise the owner for tolerating these continuing intrusions, the council named the cave in her honour, Célestine.

The present staircase was installed in 2001 from the new ticket office and tours recommenced in 2002. (Information from *The Celestine Cave*, 6 pp. note sheets provided by the cave operators.)

For the 11:15 am cave tour, a group of schoolkids and I were fitted out with thigh length boots and bash hats with lights. Our young guide took us from the ticket office/gift shop by a spiral staircase into the streamway passage below. The tour is almost all conducted in this

small stream, as shown in blue on the earlier reproduced plan.

The first feature encountered is the Grand Column, the cave's signature speleothem. Further along, the bottom of the old stone staircase is passed and then 'La Table', a stone table built by the cave's original owner. It is said he used to come here with friends to dine, drink wine and play cards. The cave is cool in summer and warmer than the outside temperature in winter. The table is on a small natural bridge and above the normal flow level so the friends could keep their feet out of the cold water.



Tour group wading through stream, Grotte de Célestine

Beyond La Table, the tour returned to the streamway and continued for another 50 metres or so before turning back down the passage.

The generally narrow passage contains a few large speleothems, including flowstone features, a number of gourls and some patches of straws and stalactites. For a stream passage, it is quite well decorated. Some deliberate breakage evidently

occurred in the early years.

The lighting is minimal (visitors generally have to rely on the small headlamps provided) and apparently all waterproof - the cables lie in the streambed. Overall the experience was a pleasant one. The staff, and especially the guide we had, were certainly quite enthusiastic and proud to show their cave and recount its history.

From Rauzan I drove back to Bordeaux from where I caught the TGV to Paris. Next day, I flew to Greenland to begin an almost cave-free cruise of the north. It had been a most enjoyable and interesting, if somewhat rushed, tour of the show caves of the Dordogne and Lot regions. The art caves are certainly the speleological highlights of this part of France.

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