

# THE DORDOGNE

by Anthony Gardner

Sebastian Faulks, Dan Brown, Esther Freud – the cockney bookseller had gathered an impressive stock in the shadow of the Bishops' Palace at Issigeac. Among the nearby fruit and vegetable stalls, British voices discussing arcane varieties of lettuce almost drowned those of indigenous shoppers. It was as if the Hundred Years War had never been lost, and this south-western area of France – Eleanor of Aquitaine's dowry when she married the future Henry II – was still as much a part of England as Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

Why the Dordogne has attracted so many expatriates is easy to understand. The countryside with its chestnut woods, meandering rivers and wildflower meadows is picturesque; the food is seductive; and around every corner there is another mossy-tiled farmhouse of beautiful yellow stone waiting to be revamped. Only the weather is a little too close to home.

'C'est le temps pour les escargots,' said the chef at La Leotardie cheerfully as rain spattered down. This comfortable eighteenth-century château near Bergerac was home for the first part of our week-long guided tour; each day had a designated theme, and today's was cookery. By the end of the morning we had learnt the secret of authentic poule au pot and stripped an unfortunate acacia tree of its flowers, to be turned into fritters. We ate them in a cavernous dining-room under the glazed eyes of a magnificent stag and a disgruntled-looking wild boar.

Ruthlessness is the name of the game in Dordognais gastronomy, and restaurant-goers are treated much the same as geese fattened for foie gras (a local speciality). To escape without eating five courses is almost impossible: one *patron* stood over us like a jailer until every last morsel had been devoured. Exercise is an essential antidote, so it was a relief to wake the next morning to perfect walking weather: warm and sunny with a steady breeze.

Wine being the day's theme, our route ran between two vineyards. At Clos d'Yvigne we met Patricia Atkinson, whose book *The Ripening Sun* has made her something of an expatriate pin-up; at Château Richard another British

wine-maker, Richard Doughty, explained the stringent rules governing his sweet Saussignac. Later in the week Minette Constant, an effervescent Master of Wine, conducted a formal tasting, including a delicious vin de lune – so named because the grapes were originally picked by moonlight to cheat the seigneur of his tithe.

Since most of our group were over 60, the walking was undemanding: our longest stint, across country to the town of Monpazier, was six miles. The success of any such holiday depends largely on its leader, and in James Tamlyn – an Englishman who has lived in France for eighteen years – we found a guide brimming with knowledge and enthusiasm. As we strolled past fields of flax and meadow clary, he picked out the calls of orioles and hoopoes, pointed to hen harriers and black kites whirling in the distance, and crouched to examine whichever of the region's two dozen orchids lay sprinkled in our path – the fly, asparagus and hellebore orchid among them.

Monpazier, with its sloping square, shady arcades and ancient covered market, is an especially picturesque example of the *bastides* which characterise this part of France. Though often described as fortified towns, they were designed in the aftermath of the bloody Cathar crusades to be quite the opposite – settlements without defending walls whose inhabitants could trade without interference from feudal lords and the Church. Sadly, the coming of the Hundred Years War would revive the vogue for battlements.

From Monpazier we walked through woods scented with pine and wild mint to Château Biron, a romantic stronghold whose elegant eighteenth-century loggia commands a wonderfully pastoral panorama. But it was Marqueyssac, a rocky outcrop rising 600 feet above the River Dordogne, that gave us the deepest sense of a chivalric landscape, as we looked out towards the nearby châteaux of Castelnaud, Fayrac and Beynac.

Marqueyssac impresses first with its topiary, which surrounds the eighteenth-century house in swirling abstract shapes. But this is merely an *amuse-gueule*: the plateau, half a mile long, encompasses promenades, rockeries, pools, belvederes, a chapel and a sculpture garden. As we followed the Cliff Walk past groves of laburnum and holmoak, green lizards darted

across our path and a family of goats hustled through the undergrowth.

Enchanting at any time, the gardens are particularly worth visiting on evenings in July and August, when the paths are lit with candles.

Our day was made doubly memorable by a visit to Lascaux. The original cave has long been closed to protect its paintings, but a convincing replica has been created nearby. However familiar the great bulls and horses are from photographs, to see them en masse and following the contours of the rock is astonishing. The question of how men living 17,000 years ago could have created works of art barely equalled until the Renaissance is one of history's great enigmas.

Our second base, in the neighbouring district of the Quercy, was Le Vert, a charming manor-house hotel with an excellent restaurant near Mauroux. As we drove south, a change of architecture was immediately apparent: yellow stone gave way to white, while the roofs became flatter, with jutting Roman tiles. The countryside was less populated, and rich in neatly planted fruit trees.

Unfortunately, the weather also changed, with the rain becoming so heavy that any plans for ambitious walks had to be forgotten. We found ample compensation, though, in an expedition to the Romanesque abbey at Moissac, whose beautifully carved tympanum and cloisters spoke across the centuries with extraordinary eloquence. Later we visited a small church at Pervillac whose fragile wall paintings were a far cruder yet almost as moving declaration of Christian faith.

Another discovery of the holiday was the custom known as *faire chabrol*. Just as you are about to polish off your soup, someone appears with a bottle of wine and splashes it generously into the bowl to create an even more delicious mixture. It is an apt metaphor for a region where every village and vista seems to hold an unexpected, idiosyncratic extra.