

FRANCE'S ICE AGE ART CAVES

There is no country in the world that competes with France when it comes to caring for its pre-historic cave art sites and presenting them for public viewing. Most of these jewels of Europe's Paleolithic Era have slept peacefully and well preserved behind rock falls that sealed them for thousands of years. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries archaeology became a science and cave hunting became a recreational pastime continuing to this day.

Seeing images in books or on DVDs offers no clue to the enormous efforts of Early Man to produce the engravings or paintings we so admire. The limestone cave entrances were mainly small and hard to reach, tunnels deep inside could be crawling height or as tall as cathedral ceilings, and the interior temperatures were consistently cool.

Once inside, the area was pitch black but for the equivalent of a small animal fat lamp's flickering light which had better not go out! Tools, ochre for red paint, and possibly wood for a fire to create the black charcoal used in many drawings had to be carted along, usually for hundreds of metres before a suitable space was chosen for the artwork. And then there was the danger of the cave bears, Paleolithic giants of the species that occupied Europe until 15,000 years ago.

Contrary to public perception, our ancestors did not use caves as dwellings and they were every bit as intelligent and creative as we are today. We are rightly astonished at the ability



Cognac Cave combines stunning back-lit chambers of stalactites and stalagmites with Ice Age cave paintings. Photo credit: Alison Gardner

and anatomical accuracy of these early artists over tens of thousands of years and hundreds of cave sites in France alone. They etched and painted deep into a "grotte" (cave) barely lit by the feeble flame of a stone oil lamp, perspective and shadows on the wall continually changing. Was it merely a Picasso urge that drove them on or was there a spiritual dimension to these creations? Why are there only a few humans and no scenery represented in their art over millennia, and yet so many animals? For fascinated visitors, these are compelling questions.

France's Ice Age caves that are open for viewing are mainly 25,000 to 10,000 years old and

clustered in the Dordogne/Lot region and the Midi-Pyrénées. Though they have been modified to accommodate visitors to walk safely and upright, the caves still provide graphic evidence of how uncomfortable and even perilous many of the stone engravings and paintings would have been to execute. Where the work is located in some cases, artists would have had to lie down or crouch, or conversely build a scaffold and climb high up a dark wall to accomplish their artwork. Artists often used irregularities

Pick of the Grottes

Niaux, www.ariège.com/niaux, has 2 km of cave galleries for good walkers and an impressive Prehistoric Art Museum. Pre-booking is mandatory.

Pech Merle, www.pechmerle.com, has remarkably preserved images of horses, mammoths and bison among the oldest in Europe at 25,000 years.

Font de Gaume, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Font_de_Gaume, with 17,000-year-old animal paintings and engravings is the best example of multi-colored painting besides Lascaux.

Rouffignac, www.grottederouffignac.fr, offers an easy guided train tour to view 250 animal figures painted and engraved.

Lascaux II, www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/fr/00.xml, is a reproduction of two of Lascaux's most densely-painted galleries.

Cognac, www.grottesdecognac.com, combines breath-taking displays of stalactites and stalagmites with paintings 25,000 to 14,000 years old.





Dating to 17,000 years ago, Lascaux Cave has a dazzling display of animals and a multitude of geometric symbols. Photo credit: jj Brochard/CRTA

of the wall, both concave and convex, to add startling three-dimensionality to their images. When our guides switched off the electric cave lights and played small flashlight beams from different angles, the art danced off the walls!

France is very protective of its Ice Age caves and the Ministry of Culture has no hesitation in closing to the public those caves whose art is too fragile to sustain. Some caves, such as Font de Gaume, are getting close to the end of their public access, so do not delay if you want to see the real thing and not a replica like Lascaux II. Other cave sites restrict tours to small numbers; for example, the fragility of Combarelles cave allows entry to only eight people per day.

Quite a number of cave sites are on privately-owned land and operate as businesses, with monitoring by the government to ensure that the heritage is protected. Rouffignac Cave, near Les Eyzies, is a case in point, offering a mini-train tour of its 250 painted and engraved animal figures, riding deep into the cave system before the art is even revealed.

The original Lascaux Cave, with art dated at 17,000 years, is the best-known cave in the world. Because of measurable deterioration after its discovery, it was closed to the public. In 1983 the replica cave site Lascaux II opened, the result of 11 years of painstaking work by 20 artists and sculptors using the same methods and materials as the original cave painters. Up to 2,000 tickets are issued per day, making this worthy attraction very crowded in the summer and the art work and exhibits, especially in the tunnels, difficult to appreciate.

Visiting caves where our human ancestors have so graphically left their imprint is exciting tourism for travelers from every walks of life and many countries. Sturdy footwear and warm clothing should be part of each cave explorer's wardrobe, regardless of season, because caves are a cool 6 and 10 degrees C. year round. There are age restrictions on young children.

Neither are most cave tours friendly to people with disabilities except the mini-train tour



Near Tarascon-sur-Ariège in the Midi-Pyrénées, Niaux Cave has 2 km of painted galleries.

Photo credit: CRT Midi Pyrénées–Dominique VIET

at Rouffignac. Entrance fees are a modest €6-10 (US\$8-13) for most sites, with reductions for students, children and groups. Some caves offer tours only in French; some offer one English tour a day or only during the summer season. Open hours change with each season, and some caves are closed for the winter.

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her *Travel with a Challenge* web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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