

FRANCE

June 2005

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LOT OF LOVE

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Front cover: St-Cirq-Lapopie
Photographer: Jane Gifford





BANK ON A DREAM

JANE GIFFORD falls under the charm of the river either side of Cahors and discovers a quiet gentle, rural landscape between Puy-l'Évêque and St-Cirq-Lapopie that's ideal for nature-lovers

THE RIVER LOT GLIDES BY, FAST, green and sinuous, carving loops around immaculately preserved medieval towns along its way. Houses take their chances on the river's fertile flood-plain or avoid its reach stacked up on limestone promontories. Some hang tight to the sides of steep gorges, but all are lured to be as close to the water's edge as they dare.

Held in the river's embrace, many of us first fall under the spell of the Lot inside the walls of Cahors. Eventually, steeped in admiration, and

infiltrated to its very heart. They are inseparable. The town is part of the river and the river part of the town.

The surrounding landscape has been shaped the same way by the river. Rich soil, the promise of fish and the prospect of travel have drawn settlers to its banks for thousands of years. Vines, orchards, pasture and woodland were carefully tended by the Gauls along these fertile banks long before Cahors was built. They still are. On the unyielding stony high

thousand years of traditional farming have made the landscape around Cahors a paradise for the casual wildlife spotter.

'Une surprise à chaque pas' is one of the Lot's slogans. And for those nature-lovers who have never visited this gentle, rural and lesser-known part of south-west France, there really is a surprise at almost every step because it is the wild flowers of the region which make up so much of its charm. If you're in the mood for nature, follow the river and escape for a while

Goats and sheep graze the unyielding stony high ground much as they always have. Cows graze the lush lowlands. Wild pigs still forage

having shopped, eaten and finally had enough of bustling narrow streets, stylish boutiques and elegant restaurants, we inevitably wander to the banks of the river. There we sit, watching the water slip by.

Protected on all sides by a generous loop of the river, Cahors is caressed by the Lot and

ground goats and sheep graze much as they always have, while cows graze the lush lowlands. Wild pigs still forage in the woods. The memory and ways of our ancient Celtic ancestors live on in this landscape, where valleys are called 'combes' as they are in Devon and Cornwall, and in the Welsh word 'cwm'. Two

into the countryside. The English who have settled along the river either side of Cahors all seem to say the same—the countryside here takes them back to their childhood before intensive agribusiness robbed the British countryside of so much of its treasury of wild flowers. That's why so many people are now



choosing to escape the rigours of life elsewhere to settle here. Indeed the number of people falling under the spell of the place is growing so rapidly, that those more pioneering Brits who have settled in the wilder landscape upriver of Cahors, now refer to towns and villages in the more gentle landscape

down around the turn of the 18th century in an attempt to dispel the ancient cults that still persisted, hundreds remain. The Dolmen Circuit down-river of Cahors between Prayssac and Castelfranc is a pleasantly shaded woodland walk which takes you past many of these old stone relics on the high, dry limestone plateau

azels in the local dialect. These are small, one-person, domed stone shelters with a single door and no windows, built from the loose limestone which litters the ground. They provided shelter for all comers, particularly wood-pigeon hunters.

Much more well-known are the *pigeonniers*.

Down-river of Cahors, between Albas and Puy-l'Évêque, judas trees are a peculiarity of the area. In full flower, they brighten the stony hillsides

down-river to the west as 'Kensington'.

You will often chance across prehistoric stone circles, dolmen and standing stones in this part of the Lot. Although many were knocked

characteristic of the area, known as *le cause*. All have their tales to tell of the Lot's ancient past.

Here there are also other stone curiosities peculiar to the region known as *gariottes*, or

These are stone towers (see page 68) built to house the pigeons themselves—but not for their meat so much as for their droppings which provided the farmer, and especially the



LEFT: The pretty town of Puy-l'Évêque perches at the water's edge **TOP RIGHT:** A vibrant Violet Bird's Nest Orchid, one of the Lot's treasury of wild flowers **BOTTOM RIGHT:** A gariotte, a simple stone shelter, on the Dolmen Circuit down-river of Cahors between Prayssac and Castelfranc

vintner, with a valuable source of fertiliser. The high ground here is otherwise nutrient-poor. In early summer, orchids, now rare or extinct in England, are commonplace. Many are named after the creatures their flowers resemble—monkey orchids, man orchids, lady orchids, bee and fly orchids. Others are more familiar such as fragrant, pyramidal and green-winged orchids.

The countryside along this stretch of the River Lot is a casual nature spotter's paradise. Amble across the hills between St-Martin-Labouval and Sauliac-sur-Célé in early summer and you will see wild flowers in their hundreds. Exotic swallowtail butterflies and small blues flutter and skim over these species-rich

limestone pastures which are kept short by the grazing of mournful-looking, black-eyed sheep. The River Célé is a tributary of the Lot and is itself well worth a visit.

Above the fragrant juniper and oak scrubland of *le causse*—kites soar in expansive clear blue skies. Hares are a common sight running ahead of you on quiet lanes fringed with scabious and aquilegia.

Down-river of Cahors, between Albas and Puy-l'Évêque, judas trees are a peculiarity of the area. In full flower, they brighten the stony hillsides with sudden splashes of carmine pink. Here in the valley bottoms the landscape is more mellow. Lady orchids stand in groups around the walnut groves. They grow well over

a foot tall. Their blood-red and white flower-heads are often far bigger than your hand. Woodpeckers drum out their rhythms in shady oak woods where slight brown deer with tan rumps startle then dissolve among the trees.

At dusk the deer can be heard barking, announcing nights so bright with countless galaxies, that a little star-gazing is a must to the romantic soul. There is so little light pollution, especially up-river, east of Cahors, that even the least poetic amongst us will be tempted out, glass in hand, to spot a few familiar constellations.

There are many excellent regional wines to choose from the full-bodied, deep-red bottles which form the lifeblood of Cahors. The best



ABOVE: St-Martin-Labouval is surrounded by wooded hills packed with wild flowers

of it is grown on the stony high ground of *le causse*—the higher and stonier the ground the more prized the resulting wine.

There is also a *rosé* which, drunk chilled, makes a great summer tippie. Consumed *en plein air* with local walnut bread, *cabécis*—small round velvety goat cheeses—and perhaps some local *pâté de foie gras*, the wine of Cahors is especially delicious. Try the succulent local prunes for dessert. They are nothing like their shrewd English cousins.

Other regional specialities include tender lamb reared on the high, herb-rich pasture; precious truffles and earthy, wild mushrooms such as *apros* from the local woods; strawberries,

fragrant and glossy; asparagus, green and white, which melt in your mouth; walnuts, of course, and *le cassoulet*, a stew made of goose, mutton, pork and beans. There are also all manner of delicacies derived from every part of the duck and goose imaginable—some definitely not for the faint-hearted such as stuffed gizzard and stomach.

Puy-l'Évêque is a busy market town down-river from Cahors where all such local delicacies can be found. The river here is still dominated by the keep of the town's 12th-century castle that Richard Cœur de Lion once took for his own and jealously guarded for the English crown. Whether mooching for

delicacies around the market stalls of Puy-l'Évêque or relaxing with a summer picnic, perched high on the cliffs to the east at St-Cirq-Lapopie, you will soon fall under the charm of the region. Small wonder that '*Sous le charme du Lot*' is another of the slogans chosen by the region to advertise itself to the rest of the world. Falling under its spell is so easy to do. 🍷

JANE GIFFORD

FRANCOFILE

HOW TO GET THERE

By air: Flybe operates three flights a week to Bergerac from Bristol and Birmingham. For more details, visit www.flybe.co.uk. Ryanair flies to Bergerac daily from London-Stansted. For more details, visit www.ryanair.co.uk. Flybe flies daily to Toulouse from Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol and Southampton. Tel: 0871 700 0535; www.flybe.com. easyJet flies daily to Toulouse from London Gatwick. Tel: 0870 6000 000; www.easyjet.com. Bmibaby operates a weekly service between Cardiff and Toulouse, flying on Saturdays only, and offers four flights per week from Nottingham East Midlands to Toulouse. Tel: 0870 264 2229; www.bmibaby.com

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel Restaurant Chartreuse, Saint Georges
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 17 37
Spectacular views of the river
Rooms 65€; menus from 45€

Hôtel Restaurant Claude Marco Lamagdelain
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 30 64
Four rooms with dinner in a vaulted cellar
Rooms 95-145€; menus 30€ - 70€

Hostellerie de Goujounac Goujounac
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 36 68 67
Old coaching inn in a quiet and unspoiled medieval village. Rooms from 45€ - 55€, menus 13€ - 50€

la Metairie Basse Sauliac-sur-Célé
Bed and breakfast in a traditional farmhouse. Rooms from 38€
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 31 38 45
email: rjcheesman@wanadoo.fr

WHAT TO DO

River trips
Société de Navigation et de Tourisme
297, rue Saint-Géry
46000 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 98 89

Guided tours of Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 30 16 55
www.petit-train-de-cahors@wanadoo.fr
www.petit-train.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Office de Tourisme Cahors
46000 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 53 20 65
www.mairie-cahors.fr

CONTACTS

EXPLORE WITH A WALK

Puy-L'Évêque, Prayssac and Cajarc are attractive towns well-served with shops and eating places. Go early in the morning for the best pick of local specialities in the street markets and kit yourself out with a picnic and large-scale map of the area (Serie Bleue, I.G.N.). Everywhere there are plenty of well-marked footpaths to follow.

From Puy-L'Évêque drive or hike down-river to Duravel then follow lanes north-west over the hills through unspoilt countryside to the Chateau de Bonaguil. Walk around the beautifully preserved 13th-century medieval castle. In a secluded valley surrounded by rolling wooded hills and pasture, Bonaguil is a romantic surprise. It is built on a solitary rocky outcrop and comes suddenly in to view as you drop down off le causse. You can eat well and there is an ancient warehouse filled with curiosities and antiques where you can buy arts and crafts from excellent local artists.

Explore the River Célé, a tributary of the Lot

which cuts a deep gorge through the hills on its way to join the main river at Conduché. At Cabrerets a row of medieval houses is dwarfed at the foot of La Falaise de Rochecourbe, hemmed in between sheer cliff and river. A subterranean river pours from the cliffs themselves at La Fontaine de la Pescalerie. Work up an appetite ambling upriver to Marcilhac-sur-Célé and check out its 15th-century Benedictine priory. You can eat in the village.

Not far up-river from Conduché is Saint-Cirq-Lapopie. The whole of this lovely little medieval town is a national monument. No obvious signs of modernity are allowed here so you get a unique impression of the past; the view over the jumble of tiled roofs and across the river is spectacular.

On the Causse de Gramat above Cabrerets is La Grotte de Peche Merle. Leaving the hills for the cool of the caves can be a relief in the full heat of the summer and you will be treated to some of the best prehistoric cave paintings in France.



For places to eat followed by a stroll through the countryside, try the French publication *Promenades Gourmandes* www.promenades-gourmandes.com

Horse riding:

Club Hippique du Quercy
117, ch. du Club Hippique
46000 Cahors.
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 20 61

Water-skiing:

Cahors Sport Nautique
Base Nautique de Regourd
46000
Cahors

Vineyard tours:

La Maison du Vin
430 avenue Jean Jaures
BP 61, 46002 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 23 22 24

Guided tours of Cahors:

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 30 16 55
Le-petit-train-de-cahors@wanadoo.fr
www.petit-train.com

Cultural Centres:

Grenier du Chapitre
Rue Saint James
46000 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 23 07 50

La Chanterrie

35, rue de la Chanterrie
46000 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 36 58 28

Museums:

Musee du Vin de Cahors
Chateau de la Coste
46700 Grezels.
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 21 34 18
Musee de la Resistance
Espace Bessieres
46009 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 22 14 25

SIX THINGS YOU MUST SEE OR DO

🏞 Wander around Puy-L'Évêque, a bustling medieval market town on the River Lot

🏰 Visit Saint Cirq-Lapopie, a national monument and beautiful and medieval town

🚶 Along the River Célé, the cliffed river gorge : La Fontaine de la Pescalerie,

subterranean river : Marcilhac-sur-Célé, a 15th-century Benedictine priory

🏞 Take time in Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, a perfectly preserved medieval town in a dramatic setting

🕒 See the prehistoric cave paintings at La Grotte de Peche Merle

🚶 Walk the ridge ways which run across le causse above Albas