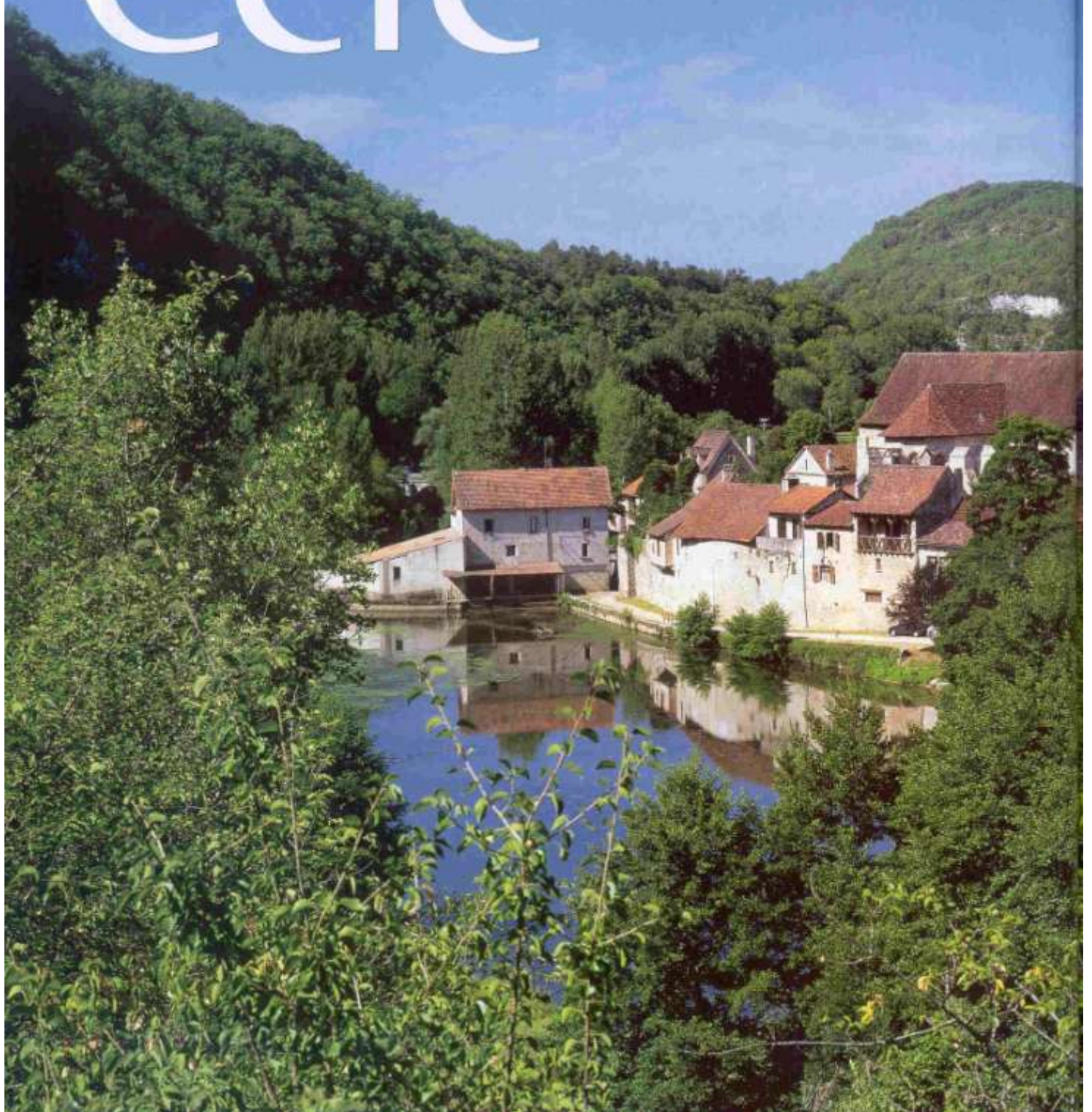


Secret Célé



The Dordogne can be packed out in season, but along the banks of the River Célé in the Lot you'll find a more tranquil France.

JANE GIFFORD
discovers river life



PHOTOGRAPHS ON THIS PAGE: JANE GIFFORD

Everyone loves enjoying spring and summertime along the Dordogne—and quite rightly so. But sometimes, with its beauties and obvious attractions, it's difficult to get far from the madding crowd. Those in the know, however, escape the busiest of times for the leafy tranquillity of the River Célé where the real, slower pace of France can be found.

The Célé rises from the western edge of the Massif Central and, like all rivers in this region, it's a precious source of water in an otherwise parched limestone landscape. Here, the hills swallow streams whole, starving the stony pasture of moisture to form subterranean rivers, which course out of sight through hidden ▶

LEFT: The Benedictine Abbey at Marcihac-sur-Célé sits deep in the Lot countryside

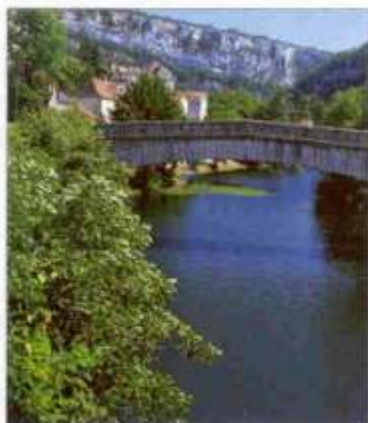
TRAVEL THE LOT



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ON THESE PAGES: JANE OXFORD



ABOVE: Juicy summer fruits make a colourful display in Marcilhac-sur-Célé
ABOVE RIGHT: The gate house of the historic priory at Espagnac-Sainte-Eulalie
RIGHT: A wisteria-clad cottage by the side of a country road in the Célé Valley
BELOW: An elegant stone bridge crosses the languid River Célé at Cabrerets





Looking across to the lovely village of Sauliac-sur-Célé where the river wends its way below steep wooded hills into the distance

gullies and caverns. They pour again into daylight at the foot of cliffs, swelling the few larger rivers, like the Lot and the Dordogne, that have succeeded in forcing their way through the rock. Following the Célé from its source, the first town of any size on its banks is Figeac. The site is very ancient, with its roots deep in the pre-Roman past.

A monastery was founded here in 753AD, followed by an abbey in 838AD. Figeac lies on the pilgrim way to both Santiago de Compostela in Spain and nearby Rocamadour, and the town and religious community here flourished and prospered as a result. More recently Figeac's most famous son, Jean-François Champollion, also had strong links with the past. Born here in 1790, Champollion was largely responsible for deciphering the ancient Egyptian

hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone. He left behind a dictionary and grammar of ancient Egyptian which has become the foundation for modern-day Egyptology. There is a museum dedicated to his life and work.

A CLEAN SWATHE

The real charm of the Célé begins for me at Espagnac-Sainte-Eulalie where the river starts to cut a long series of loops which run for about 40 kilometres through a gorge that grows ever narrower and steeper until the Célé finally joins the Lot at Condouché. The quiet road (the D41) follows the river the length of the

valley and, being completely level, it makes a pleasant cycle ride even if you aren't usually the sporty type.

The Célé's banks are thickly lined with trees and wild flowers which all but conceal the rapid shallow waters. An elegant but simple arched stone bridge cuts a clean swathe through the undergrowth revealing the small medieval village of Espagnac-Sainte-Eulalie, dominated by the slender timbered tower of the old priory.

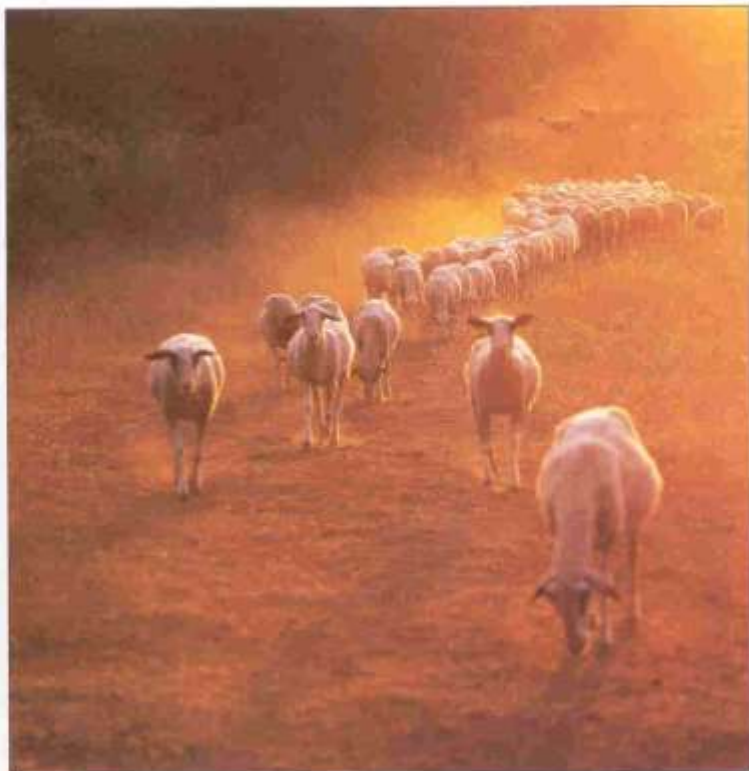
Since the 12th century the priory has often been swamped by the river and it is now a ruin. You can sometimes get a good lunch in the ruined cloister in the grounds ▶

The real charm of the Célé begins at Espagnac-Sainte-Eulalie where the river cuts a series of loops through a gorge



PHOTOGRAPHS THIS PAGE: JANE GIFFORD

ABOVE: Tasting the delicious apricots at the sunny market in Marcilhac-sur-Célé
RIGHT: Sheep approaching as the sun slowly sets on the *causse* de Gramat



beneath the tower if you are lucky, but opening times are erratic, according to the whim of the owner.

SANCTUARY

Downriver at Marcilhac-sur-Célé there is a much larger Benedictine abbey from the same period as the priory at Espagnac. It is also ruined but still impressive. In the 12th century Marcilhac Abbey owned a small sanctuary—Rocamadour—which was largely overlooked. The religious community at Tulle took advantage of this neglect and set themselves up instead at Rocamadour.

The discovery of the body of Saint Amadour in 1166 and the prosperity which accompanied the consequent pilgrimage began a long argument over ownership. The bishops of Cahors and Bourges mediated in the dispute and eventually the Pope himself became involved, with the

final result that Marcilhac had to concede Rocamadour to Tulle in return for a large pay-off. Although its prize possession was lost, Marcilhac Abbey was enriched and the buildings here are correspondingly grand for what is otherwise a remote and unassuming location.

There is a weir and small hydro-electric power station at Marcilhac-sur-Célé so the river runs deep and still. The perfect reflection of the abbey buildings in the water is one of the most memorable sights on this stretch of the river. There is a small weekly market at Marcilhac and good camping and boating within the abbey ruins, along with apartments to rent. There is also a museum and several places to eat, as well as a baker's and a small general shop. Because the Célé remains a relatively quiet backwater there are otherwise very few places to buy provisions.

The perfect reflection of the abbey buildings in the water is one of the most memorable sights on this stretch

Between Espagnac and Marcilhac the village of Saint-Sulpice is built up the steep side of the gorge. From the church square there is a good view over the valley and of another of the region's specialities—a *château troglodyte*. The small *château* is truly well-defended by the terrain, built high up on a seemingly inaccessible part of the cliff, way up above the road. Only the front of the building is visible, the rest is excavated deep into the rock itself. The building is today a private home and it still commands a position which must keep away all but the most intrepid visitors.

Architecturally, Cabrerets is the most well-known of the Célé Valley's secrets. Firstly the River Célé is relatively open here and it is joined by the much smaller River Sagne, so the setting is beautiful. Secondly, towering above the river is *la falaise de Rochecourbe*. There is only a narrow strip of land between the cliff and the river. The road hugs the riverside and tucked in tight at the foot of the cliff is a row of three-storey medieval houses dwarfed by the immense sheer face of rock above. The ruins of an ancient

castle have tumbled to the base of the cliff to one side, known either as le château du Diable or des Anglais! On the other side, the 14th-15th century château de Gontaut-Biron dominates the village beyond the cliff.

PREHISTORIC

It is worth leaving the river at Cabrerets to make a three-kilometre detour up to the plateau above to visit la grotte de Pech Merle. Geologically, the cave system is interesting enough to justify the journey but more impressive still are around 500 prehistoric cave paintings which cover the walls of some of the chambers. They depict mammoth and bison, spotted horses and aurochs, human figures, the outlines of human hands and a large fish. There is also another cave system open to the public, la grotte de Bellevue, above Saint-Sulpice. The high plateau itself, known as le causse de Gramat, is also worth seeing.

Starved of water by the porous limestone and baked by the sun, it is dry and dusty in contrast with the lush valley bottom. Intensive agriculture has no place up here, so the rough pasture and scrubby oak and juniper woodlands are rich with wild flowers which in turn attract many butterflies—swallowtails and blues are particularly common.

The *causse* here is mostly only suitable for grazing by mournful-looking sheep with long floppy ears and black patches over their eyes. When the weather is hot they have a habit of huddling together with their heads facing inward and their necks bent down. This allows them to take advantage of the relatively cool shade of their bodies. You will therefore sometimes find your way blocked by a solid rank of sheep bottoms without a head in sight.

WATER MILL

A further three kilometres downriver from Cabrerets is la fontaine de la Pescalerie. At the base of the cliff below the level of the road is a small group of medieval buildings, one of which appears to be a water mill. In summer there is no immediately ▶

HOW TO GET THERE

By air: Ryanair flies to Rodez-Marcillac Airport, about 54km from Figeac.

By rail: Take Eurostar from London Waterloo to Paris Nord, then transfer to Paris Austerlitz and take the train to Figeac. Journey time about 11hrs 30mins.

WHERE TO STAY

Camping

Saint-Sulpice

15 April-30 September, animals accepted

Tel: (Fr) 05 65 40 64 64

Gîtes

Gîtes d'Étape Communal

46160 Marcilhac-sur-Célé

Tel: (Fr) 05 65 40 61 43

HOTELS

Hôtel Château du Viguier du Roy****

Rue Droite (Émile Zola)

46100 Figeac

Tel: (Fr) 05 65 50 05 05

A sumptuous historic monument with courtyards, gardens, cloisters, and library all open to guests. Expensive but a great choice for a special treat. Activities such as golf, canoeing and tennis can be arranged.

Auberge de la Sagne**

Routes des Grottes de Pech Merle

Cabrerets

Tel: (Fr) 05 65 31 26 62

Friendly inn with small open-air pool and restaurant. Leisure activities all arranged from here.

To find the perfect place to stay, go to www.francemag.com and click on FRANCE HOTEL SEARCH



WHERE TO EAT

Cahors wine is made principally from the Auxerrois grape variety. There are numerous vineyards on the terraces of the Lot Valley where you can taste the wines on offer. There are many local delicacies in the Lot including *foie gras*, quercy lamb, truffles and walnuts. Rocamadour goats' cheese is one of the oldest traditional products of the Lot. Awarded AOC status, Rocamadour can be eaten young or mature and is best appreciated with a glass of ruby red Cahors wine.



PHOTOGRAPH: JANE GIFFORD

Restaurant Lou Bolat

Tel: (Fr) 05 65 30 29 04

Only a couple of kilometres upriver from Condouché, where the Célé joins the Lot, is the picture perfect medieval village of Saint-Cirq-Lapopie. It is always busy with tourists so be prepared for the crowds—but it's worth it. Restaurant Lou Bolat is located at the top of the site close to the parking and the view over the ancient tiled roof-tops from the vine-covered dining terrace and bar is unrivalled. Lunch menu is priced from 18-30€ and features local specialities like hot goats' cheese pan-fried with walnuts and a large variety of duck dishes.

Loic Escribe—Pâtissier-Chocolatier, Glacier, Confiseur

Tel: (Fr) 05 65 30 20 36

Halfway down the steep streets is the shady square—la place du Sombrol. The tiny café of master sweet, chocolate, ice cream and pastry-maker Loic Escribe is opposite the drinking water fountain. It is not cheap—expertly prepared artisanal goodies seldom are in France—but the desserts and confectionary are exceptionally good.



PHOTOGRAPH: CRT DE MIDI-PYRÉNÉES

FRANCOFILE

AROUND THE REGION

The Célé Valley is in the *département* of Lot in Midi-Pyrénées. It's an area of varied landscapes and is rich in history, culture and gastronomic tradition. There are many activities to get involved in too—from walking and hiking along the footpaths of the *causses* du Quercy national park to canoeing and swimming in the Lot, Célé and Dordogne rivers.



ATTRACTIONS

Musée de L'Insolite

Bertrand Chenu
Liauzu Orniac
46330 Cabrerets
Tel: (Fr) 05 65 30 21 01

Weird and whacky sculptures and social comment courtesy of M. Chenu, who is happy to undertake commissions if you fancy an unusual keepsake to remind you of your time in the Célé Valley.

Musée de la Maison du Roy

Le Bourg
46160 Marcilhac-sur-Célé
Tel: (Fr) 05 65 40 68 44
Small museum of sacred art housed within the beautiful setting of the medieval abbey ruins. It also doubles up as a tourist centre with plenty of free information to take away and friendly multi-lingual staff to help with enquiries of any sort. Also provides information on the best place to hire canoes and bikes.

Musée Champollion:

Rue des Frères Champollion
46100 Figeac
Tel: (Fr) 05 65 5031 08
The museum in Champollion's place of birth is currently closed for refurbishment and extension until 2007 when it reopens with a major exhibition about Champollion's life and times and the history of world language. There is a

facsimile of the Rosetta Stone by artist Joseph Kosuth in la place des Écritures.

La grotte de Pech Merle and Centre of Prehistory

Near Cahors
Exceptional prehistoric cave paintings and cave system on several levels with impressive geological features. There are wall paintings, carvings and even prehistoric footprints on show. Cave visits between 9.30-11.30 and 13.30-16.15. Allow two hours for a tour.

Rocamadour

Nestling beneath an overhanging cliff, Rocamadour's golden stone houses and chapels seem as though they are piled on top of one another. This extraordinary town is well worth a visit as there are numerous historic churches and chapels due to the town's ecclesiastical past.



FRANCOFILE PHOTOGRAPHS: (RT) DE MIDI-PYRÉNÉES

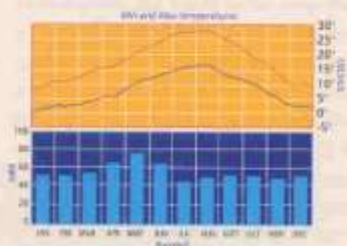
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Bureau de Figeac
Tel: (Fr) 05 65 34 06 25

Bureau de Marcilhac-sur-Célé
Tel: (Fr) 05 65 40 61 43

CDT du Lot

107 Quai Cavaignac
46000 Cahors
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 07 09
www.tourisme-lot.com



PHOTOGRAPH: I.M.E. GIFFORD

Appropriate carvings at Marcilhac-sur-Célé

obvious water source, but in winter you cannot fail to notice that above the mill a river is issuing directly from the rock. This water, which fell as rain on the plateau above, has travelled through dark labyrinths within the solid rock to burst again into daylight through a fault here in the limestone. During the wet season, when this subterranean river is in spate, it hurls itself from the confines of the ground and roars as it tumbles down the mill race. It only has a short run of freedom before it is once again engulfed, this time by the Célé.

ONE MORE SURPRISE

Up to this point the Célé Valley has provided a pleasant and varied visual feast of medieval architecture, shady river banks and sheer cliffs with plenty of opportunity for walking, biking, camping and boating. We have climbed up the cliffs and strolled about on top of them and we have even ventured deep inside. But the Célé Valley has one more surprise to come before opening on to the Lot.

Hemmed in tightly between the river and overhanging rocks you will round a bend and be greeted, not by a river this time, but by a car driving out of the rock face. There are a couple of bicycles and a very oddly dressed person is abseiling down to the road. A sign says 'Historical Monument in Process of Classification.'

You have entered the surreal world of sculptor Bertrand Chenu. This is la musée de l'Insolite (Museum of the Unexpected), home to over 800 crazy and thought-provoking works. It really is worth the small entrance fee to go inside; Monsieur Chenu is happy to discuss his pieces, which make an irreverent but amusing and unexpected end to our journey.



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