



Cave Art of France

Prehistory in the Dordogne

12–19 July 2023 (MJ 795)

8 days • £3,310

Lecturer: Dr Paul Bahn

Encompasses some of the most important Prehistoric caves in Europe including the new facsimile Lascaux IV, Pech Merle and Niaux.

Great art, whatever its function or the ‘artist’s’ intention, in an area of outstanding natural beauty and charming villages.

Led by Britain’s leading specialist in Prehistoric art, Dr Paul Bahn.

Visiting the Ice Age decorated caves of Europe may be a pilgrimage, in homage to the region’s artists of 30,000–10,000 years ago, or it may simply be curiosity. But while one’s interest may have been triggered by books, television or lectures, there is simply no substitute for seeing the sites themselves, some of humankind’s greatest artistic achievements in their unusual, evocative and original settings.

In addition, the caves of the Périgord and Quercy are in regions of outstanding beauty, famed for their wine and cuisine. Four nights are spent in the capital of Prehistory, Les Eyzies, a village filled and surrounded by famous Ice Age dwellings, its spectacular limestone cliffs giving it one of the most beautiful and striking landscapes in the world.

Whatever your motivation or interest, a visit to an Ice Age cave is a tremendous privilege. After more than a century of research, we still only know about 400 such sites in Eurasia, and only a small fraction of these are open to the public, because of difficulties of access or conservation concerns. As such, they constitute a very limited and finite resource, and yet visitors can approach these original masterpieces extremely closely, an experience unparalleled in major art galleries.

Unlike a visit to the Louvre or the Prado, in entering a cave you are seeing the images precisely where they were created, you are standing or crouching just where the artists did. In many cases the journey to the cave entrance and the route through the chambers give your experience a sense of immediacy, purity and vividness. Entering a world far removed from one of commerce, of art-dealers and of critics enhances a feeling of connection with the artists. There is nothing like a stalactite dripping on your head to remind you that you are in a pristine and natural setting.

Itinerary

Day 1. Take the Eurostar at c. 9.15am from London St Pancras. Change stations in Paris and continue by TGV (high-speed train) to Bordeaux. Overnight in Bordeaux.

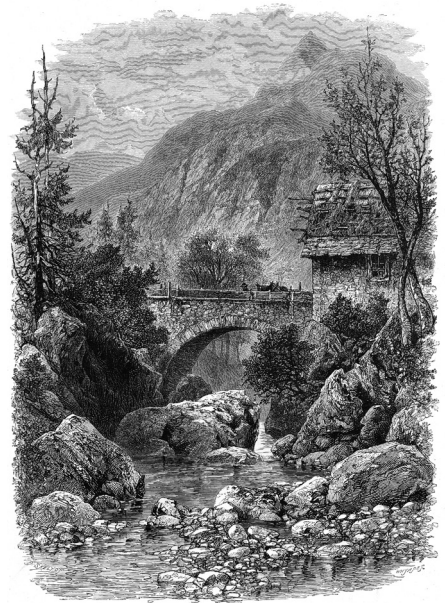
Day 2: Bordeaux, Pair-non-Pair. The Musée d’Aquitaine provides a perfect introduction to the archaeology and art of the Ice Age in southwest France; a particular highlight is the ‘Venus of Laussel’ bas-relief carving. The cave of Pair-non-Pair is small but filled with wonderfully deep engravings of animals – and with no electrical installations provides a more authentic experience. Continue into the Dordogne to Les Eyzies for four nights.

Day 3: Les Eyzies. The National Prehistory Museum, now housed in an ultra-modern building at the foot of the cliffs, has one of the world’s greatest collections of Ice Age material. The Abri Pataud is the best possible way to see what a major Ice Age excavation site looks like, while the small museum next door still has a carving on its ceiling. Font-de-Gaume is one of the greatest of all Ice Age decorated caves, with remarkable polychrome bison and other animals, skilfully placed to take full advantage of the rock shapes.

Day 4: Lascaux. Two facsimiles are now the public’s only chance to see the wonders of Lascaux, the most famous and most beautiful of all decorated caves. Lascaux II was the world’s first cave facsimile, opened in 1983, and there is now a new, enlarged and more complete replica, Lascaux IV, created in 2016. The park at Le Thot contains many of the animal species which were familiar to Ice Age people: aurochs, bison, horses, deer and ibex, as well as a robotic mammoth.

Day 5: Rouffignac, Cougnac, Cap Blanc. Rouffignac is a unique experience; a decorated tunnel-like cave so vast that one travels around it by train. Its art is hugely dominated by drawings of mammoths. The Grotte de Cougnac is one of the most beautiful of all decorated caves, not only for its art, but also and especially for its natural formations of stalagmites and stalactites. Cap Blanc is the greatest sculpted frieze from the Ice Age that is open to the public.

Day 6: Pech Merle, Cahors, Toulouse. Pech Merle is among the greatest of the decorated caves. It is huge, with spectacular natural formations and a wide variety of artistic



Wood engraving c. 1890.

techniques, including the famous spotted horse panel. Some free time is spent in Cahors on route to Toulouse, where two nights are spent.

Day 7: Niaux, Toulouse. The tour ends with Niaux, a fitting climax as the long walk into this Pyrenean mountain leads one to the ‘Salon Noir’ with its stunning drawings of bison, horses and ibex, and extraordinary acoustics.

Day 8. Free day in Toulouse; suggestions include the Musée Saint-Raymond and the cathedral. Catch the evening flight to London Heathrow, arriving c. 7.15pm.

Please note this tour departs from St Pancras station and returns to Heathrow airport.

Lecturer

Dr Paul Bahn. Archaeologist and Britain’s foremost specialist in prehistoric art. He obtained his PhD at Cambridge and is a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and a corresponding member of the Archaeological Institute of America. He led the team which discovered Britain’s only known Ice Age cave art at Creswell in 2003 and his books include *Prehistoric Rock Art*, *Journey Through the Ice Age* and *Images of the Ice Age*, which won Archaeology Book of the Year in the Current Archaeology Awards for 2017.

Cave Art of France
continued

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,310 or £3,110 without Eurostar, TGV or the flight.

Single occupancy: £3,590 or £3,390 without Eurostar, TGV or the flight.

Included: train travel by Eurostar from London to Paris (Standard Premier) and TGV from Paris to Bordeaux (first class); flight (Euro Traveller) from Toulouse to London with British Airways (Airbus 320); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 5 dinners, with wine or beer, soft drinks, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Accommodation. Mercure Bordeaux

Centre (all.accor.com): centrally-located, 4-star hotel. **Hotel Le Centenaire, Les Eyzies** (hotelducentenaire.fr) a small 4-star hotel in a former coaching inn with a good restaurant.

Grand Hotel de l'Opéra, Toulouse (grand-hotel-opera.com) a central 4-star hotel in a converted 17th-century convent, set back from the Place du Capitole.

How strenuous? There is a fair amount of walking on uneven and sometimes steep and slippery ground and caves are not well lit. Sure footedness is essential. It can get very damp and cold inside the caves. This tour is not suitable for people who suffer from claustrophobia. Average distance by coach per day: 69 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 18 participants.