

Grotte de Pech-Merle, France: Pre-Historic Caves to Explore

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There can't be many places in the world that you can visit, where you can see the impact that man made on the planet tens of thousands of years ago. The Grotte de Pech-Merle in the Dordogne area of France is one such place that can lay claim to that fact.

This part of southwest France is literally packed with prehistoric caves, showcasing how life was thousands of years ago. As such, it was a tough choice to decide which of the caves to visit, although the help of my invaluable guidebooks gave me a shortlist to pick from. One that had attracted me from the start was the Grotte de Pech-Merle, although my concern with it was that it has strict limits on the number of people who can visit it. It's a maximum of only 700 people a day, with no more than 25 in each group that is taken on a guided tour. Another concern was its location. It's not exactly close to civilisation, although I had no idea from what I could see on the maps exactly how winding the road would be to get there!

Eventually, after much internal debate with myself, I decided to head to Pech-Merle and we arrived just after 12.30pm. What I'd failed to notice on the website were the opening times of the ticket booths, with tickets on sale from 9:30 am until 12:00 pm and then from 1:30 pm until 5:00 pm, with tours running until they reach their maximum of 700 people. Fortunately, when we got there, the sign that greeted us told us that they did still have availability and we were able to get on the first tour of the afternoon.

Before we headed into the caves we first visited the nearby museum, which showcases some of the finds made inside the grotto and gives you some of the history to this place. The caves were discovered by two determined young boys, who had made a number of excursions inside despite explicitly being told not to. The caves' presence had been known for a few years, but it was in September 1922 that 15-year-old Andre David and Henri Dutertre, who was then just 16, finally stumbled upon the prehistoric area of the caves. The caves were then extensively surveyed, with electricity supplies put in, so that the caves could be opened to visitors.

At the start of our visit, we learnt the stark reality of the damage that those visits were doing to the caves, hence the strict limits on the number of people allowed inside here. Our guide explained that there were fears that, eventually, the Grotto would have to close to the public

in the same way that the caves at Lascaux, in the same region, had had to close. There, an exact replica was created, but somehow, in my research, that didn't appeal at all, as I wanted to see the real thing.

The tour lasts for 45 minutes and is delivered predominantly in French, although our guide spoke English well enough to point out a number of highlights in that language. Booklets are provided in a wide variety of languages, including English, and to be honest, if you're not a French speaker, you don't miss much on the tour.

This is a relatively easy tour, with remarkably few steps around the caves, apart from those to get inside and out again. That surprised me, as I had heard from relatives about other caves in the region where you practically need oxygen supplies on hand, as there are so many steps! Instead, the place is filled with ramps, although how on earth they laid the concrete for those without damaging the fragile environment, I cannot even begin to imagine! You only see around a third of the caves, which stretch for more than a mile underground.

These caves were originally carved out by an underground river around 60 million years ago. These were then inhabited by prehistoric man between 25,000 and 10,000 years ago, until they were blocked up by a rockfall at the end of the Ice Age.

Today, you visit a number of different underground caverns, with many of them covered with imaginative drawings from all that time ago. When we entered, I will admit to feeling slightly sceptical. I knew that there would be drawings of horses, fish, bears, and mammoths, but I thought it would be a case of looking at them and desperately trying to work out what you were seeing. Not a bit of it! The images were immediately clear to everyone and it was fascinating to learn how some were created with flint engraving tools, others the result of paint being spat from the mouth on to the cave walls. It certainly gives you a good idea of the animals that these people encountered all that time ago. It was a fascinating experience to see things that had been created so long ago, still looking remarkably fresh today. Of course, you can't touch them or photograph them, but all the same, to stand there and see them was a very humbling feeling. Suddenly you realise how old the world is and how small we all are in that.

The final chamber you go into gives you a close-up view of the Frieze of the Spotted Horses. It's about 13 feet long and the actual shape of the rock was used to depict one of the horses. They're drawn back to back and are decorated with an amazing 252 spots and six negative hand prints. They're a real work of art, but despite that, there are fishes drawn over these in red. Tests have shown that the images of the fish

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are younger than those of the horses, so the experts known which was created first. Both are beautiful, but it's a shame they had to go on the same spot.

Although the cave paintings are undoubtedly the highlights, the stalactites and stalagmites are also well worth seeing here. These things were literally about ten feet high in places, an amazing achievement when you consider that they take about 100 years to grow even a third of an inch! In the Hall of Discs, the limestone has crystallised over many years into circles that look like huge discs, about nine feet wide. Perhaps one of my favourite sights were stones that looked like marbles, having been perfectly shaped by water over thousands of years.

It's not just nature's wonders or human additions to the caves that you find here. Bear scratchings have been found here, along with bones from wolves and even tigers. I guess they roamed the whole world all that time ago!

The Grotte de Pech-Merle is open every day from early April until the end of October. It is located close to the village of Cabrerets. The admission fee for adults is €8, while children aged 5 to 14 years old are €4.50. Children under the age of 5 are free, although I'm not sure that this would be suitable for youngsters, as it is dark and can be scary down there. The caves are particularly busy in July and August and booking by phone in advance if you're visiting during those times is recommended. You can find out more about the caves at <http://www.pechmerle.com/>

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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