

Rocamadour, France: Stunning Views

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Some views in the world are so stunning that when you see them, words almost fail you. They're also often special because of their uniqueness, and that's very much the case with one French town we visited on our recent road trip.

Our route wound through the Dordogne region of France, well known for its wines and its prehistoric caves, but it's also home to some of the country's most beautiful villages. One of those is the ancient pilgrimage center of Rocamadour. The first thing we discovered as we drove towards the town is that it's really in the middle of nowhere. The roads that lead here snake round and round, with breathtaking hairpin bends that reduce your speed to no more than a crawl.

By the time we rounded the last bend and finally saw Rocamadour laid out in front of us, we had been starting to wonder if it would be worth the drive to get here. The answer was immediate as soon as we both saw the town come into view. Yes! What's so magnificent about it?

Rocamadour looks as if it's growing out of the steep cliffs behind it. The village is built on a series of different levels, with the main thoroughfare at the bottom. Looming over that is the main church, and above that is castle. Looking at it, you can't begin to fathom how it was originally constructed.

We stayed the night in a hotel that was literally just a couple of minutes' walk outside the entrance to Rocamadour. Although there are hotels inside the medieval village itself, these come with a word of warning. When we first arrived, we thought it would be really fun to be able to drive along the main street, which is only open to deliveries for the shops and restaurants or those staying at hotels inside, but we quickly changed our minds. All it took was a walk along the main street, and we could see how the cars were parked, often three deep. Watching one vehicle reversing out of a space, and nearly hitting another was quite an experience. Suddenly, we were very glad that we were a little way outside of Rocamadour.

You certainly won't starve or get bored here. The main road, Rue de la Couronnerie, is lined with shops and restaurants. We enjoyed browsing the various offerings at all the shops, as they had some lovely, unique items. Many served up regional specialities, including wines, cheeses, and the famous foie gras. As for the restaurants, some are attached to the various hotels, while others stand alone. Like many in France, they tend to offer both a la carte menus and set meals of either two or three

courses at pretty good rates, presumably because of all the competition in the area.

The main street is also home to the 15th century town hall, and medieval houses dating from a century earlier. We entered through the Figuiers Gate, and as we walked along, we came to the much more picturesque Salmon Gate. At the other end of the village is the Hugon Gate, and all are imposing stone remnants of days gone by, reminding you of the history of this place. The only thing missing today from these points of entry are the fortified gates that would have stopped attackers in years gone by.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Rocamadour is its history. The place grew up as a place of pilgrimage, but no-one is quite clear as to why pilgrims began to come here in the 9th century. It was hundreds of years later before the statue of the Black Virgin and her child arrived in the village, which was believed to have miraculous powers. Accounts dating from the late 12th century tell of the hundreds of miracles carried out by the statue. Today, she sits in the Chapelle Notre-Dame, with dim lighting to help preserve her. It's quite eerie to see her looking down on you as you enter this church and to think about all the people who travelled from far and wide to see her.

Once news of these miracles spread, more and more pilgrims came to the village, with numbers heading into tens of thousands. To show their dedication, they would ascend the 224 steps of the Grand Escalier (staircase) on their knees, to reach the church and visit the Black Virgin. The stairs still stand today, and we saw some very weary visitors making their way up. As we've learnt over the years, it's much easier to come down than to go up, so we took the modern mode of transport here. There's an elevator that runs from the main shopping street up to the church above, and it's a fascinating ride, with the shaft literally cut from the surrounding rock. From there, you get some superb views across the Alzou Valley below.

The Chapelle Notre-Dame is not the only sight to see up here. Almost next door is another chapel, Saint-Michel, which really is carved into the cliff. I don't think either of us had ever seen a building created like this. The beauty is that the way this was built has helped to preserve the chapel since its construction in the 11th century. This really is a rich area for religious buildings, as it's also home to the Saint-Sauveur Basilica, which also uses the sheer cliff face as one of its walls.

Looking down over all of this is the village's castle, which was established to protect the shrines from attack from the west. Having driven into Rocamadour from this direction, how on earth an attacking

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army would have invaded across such a huge valley, I have no idea, but I guess they had much more determination back then.

This is very much a place to linger and enjoy the beautiful scenery, which is everywhere, either looking up towards the church and castle above or down on the shops and restaurants below. Although tricky to reach, what you see when you get to Rocamadour makes the effort all worthwhile.

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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