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Where the truffles and troglodytes mix

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Where truffles and troglodytes mix

Dordogne region of France is rich in prehistoric attractions

MIKE GREHAN
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
SARLAT-LE-CANADA, FRANCE

The skeleton of the 16-year-old girl lay curled by the remains of the campfire in the cave, as if she had fallen asleep by the fire to keep warm — 15,000 years ago.

We imagine her as she must have looked when she was alive. What did she dream about? Did she dream of anything beyond her basic daily necessities of food, clothing and shelter, beyond her family and life based in a large cave?

Perhaps she had artistic inclinations, although it was usually the hunters who carved horses, lions, bees and giant reindeer straight into the limestone cliffs.

Why did she die so young — although in those days life was probably close to middle age?

Here in this pre-history-rich area of southern France, a three-hour drive from Bordeaux, we are visiting Cave Blanc, discovered in 1909, it is the only site of prehistoric sculptures in the world open to the public.

At this and similar sites like the troglodyte (cave-dweller) village of La Madeleine above the Vez River, the evidence and depictions of life many thousands of years ago are kept real. It's easy to feel as if you are back in time. It's a feeling of being transported back into the past.

Even when we visit the cave, there are only "a" few thousand years ago, they too evoke a link with those who lived in the Middle Ages.

We imagine coming in from a hard day of hunting or fishing, readying our swords into the wooden slots at the end of sturdy wooden tables in the kitchen area before sitting down to a hearty meal carved from something large roasting in front of the giant fireplaces.

Now we are visiting Château de Beynac, an imposing 13th-century fortress dramatically situated atop a towering limestone cliff where Richard the Lionheart and the Byzantine family waged a war. Somewhat the "geiger" sign by the sharpened stakes crowning the outside walls seems unnecessary.

The tour has been a delight — and so because I endured it is now fairly quickly while climbing up to visit ancient churches and castles.

While I usually do some research into areas I plan to visit, occasionally I simply choose an itinerary that looks interesting — probably to an area I haven't visited yet — and take with no knowledge or expectations of what I will see and do.

This was one of those occasions, a tour organized by the Harvard Alumni Association (thanks to my association with its president, Mike Grehan), to visit the Dordogne region of France, a place rich in prehistoric attractions.

Dordogne, the region, is known for its limestone cliffs, rock art, cave paintings and troglodyte villages, as well as its ancient history.

Some of the earliest human settlements were made in the area, and the region was inhabited by the Romans, who left behind evidence of their presence.

The area is home to some of the most beautiful sites in France, including the famous troglodyte villages of Les Eyzies and Les Eyzies-de-Tayac-Sireuil, which are located on a limestone plateau.

The region is also known for its truffles, which are hunted and sold at high prices, and its wine, particularly the reds from the Bergerac and Cahors regions.

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