

The stunning medieval limestone village of Saint-Cirq-Lapopie sits high above the meandering river Lot

Whole Lot of love

Justin Postlethwaite explores two of the Lot *département's* most extraordinary locations, Saint-Cirq-Lapopie and Rocamadour »

IMAGE: © LOT TOURISME/CRT MIDI-PYRÉNÉES/D VIET



Above and below: Taking a stroll around Saint-Cirq's ancient streets; Adeline at Lou Pastis Quercynois

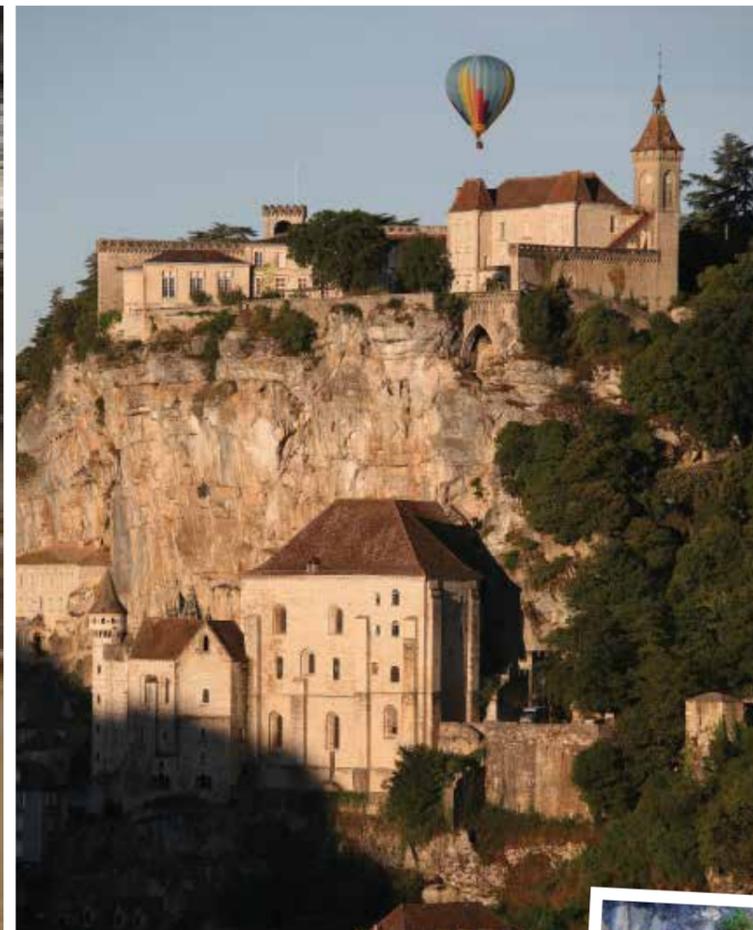
The anticipation was high and the autumn fog low as I approached the most vaunted of the Lot *département's* six Plus Beaux Villages de France, a medieval beauty 35kms east of Cahors that's perched 300 feet above the mighty twisting river of the same name. The omens were good for my debut visit to Saint-Cirq-Lapopie which, over the years – nigh on five centuries, as it turns out – has earned many plaudits, from architectural aesthetes, history lovers and, more recently, tourists. The increasing number of the latter is largely thanks to the village securing first place in a national TV competition to find 'France's Favourite Village' in 2012.

Although visitor figures have rocketed, my early, post *petit-déj* arrival meant that I was one of only a handful of intrigued devotees on parade. The locals hardly boost the numbers – there are only 217 residents. After a guided tour that was Monty Pythonesque in its absurdity – as he dispensed historic facts and figures, my enthusiastic young guide cagily points out buildings rendered invisible by the fog – I decided to wait for the mist to lift before attempting the obligatory panoramic photos of this jewel of the Causses du Quercy Regional Natural Park.

Heading downhill, out of the village, I met Adeline, a local *salon de thé* owner and the queen of *pastis*. However, this doesn't mean that she can out-drink anyone who challenges her as, in this corner of the Midi-Pyrénées, *pastis* consumption is rather more sedate and means only one thing: cake.



"I head to the north of the *département* to tick off another French 'bucket list' village: historic Rocamadour"



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Left to right: Pilgrims, tourists and even hot-air balloonists explore the religious relics and atmosphere at Rocamadour; A quaint scene at Saint-Cirq-Lapopie

Pastis du Quercy is an artery-alarming, buttery and sugary treat bound in filo pastry with an apple filling and perhaps a splash of local booze. It's a kind of strudel with a French accent and certainly not a treat for calorie counters. As I enjoyed coffee with a warm wedge of this crunchy, sticky *petit plaisir*, Adeline explained the lengthy process involved in its creation.

You need a very large table – think decorator's or ping-pong – on which to stretch and roll out a huge, thin rectangle of pastry, onto which you dot fruit slices and sprinkle sugar before forming it into a sausage shape in a snail-style circle to bake. It's a two-person job and *Pastis du Quercy* has been made with pride and passion by Adeline's family for over 20 years. >>

GET YOUR GOAT: ROCAMADOUR CHEESE



If you haven't heard of Rocamadour – or, heaven forbid, ever recognised a photo of it – there's a chance you will have at least heard of its celebrated AOC (*Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*) goat's cheese.

En route to the village, why not drop in to buy a few samples from Alain Lacoste, who has been producing the good stuff for 30 years with the help of his 150-strong herd of alpine goats. The tried and tested way of devouring this creamy fresh cheese is simply grilled on baguette toasts with a well-dressed salad, accompanied by a full-bodied glass of Cahors red.

● Ferme Lacoste, Les Alix, 46500 Rocamadour; +33 (0)5 65 33 62 66



By then the views from the imposing Gothic church over the Lot Valley were suitably impressive. It was easy to see why this fortified feudal village was so vigorously defended by tactically-astute seigneurs, warring 16th century French religious groups and even the English – one of its gates is called La Porte des Anglais. Next to the church are the remains of the century château-fort, first built in the 10th century by Oldoric, Viscount of Saint-Cirq. From there, in the bright mid-morning sunshine, it was only the coaches full of eager visitors which were threatening to invade...

ROC' OF AGES

The next morning, I headed to the far north of the *département* which borders the Limousin, to tick off another French 'bucket list' village. Historic Rocamadour isn't on the *Plus Beaux Villages* roster but it does form an exclusive list of perhaps two – with Bonifacio in Corsica – when it comes to French villages of precarious placement and remarkable visual impact.

It has plenty in common with Saint-Cirq, not least its gravity-defying location, seemingly clinging for its very existence on the edge of a cliff high above a river – a tributary of the Dordogne. Part of Rocamadour's structure owes itself geologically, like Saint-Cirq, to its limestone Causses du Quercy setting (*see the boxout below left*) and it too has an almost shockingly low number of residents – 40 in winter, 630 in summer. »

Suitably sated, I emerged from Adeline's quaint, vintage-styled café, Lou Pastis, to be greeted by one of the finest views in all of France. As the last fluffs of fog and cloud drifted away, Saint-Cirq Lapopie slowly revealed herself against a pure *azur* backdrop. I headed back into the village and stepped back in time...

Among the narrow *ruelles* and beautiful stone and wood houses, I spotted reminders of the former trades upon which the village's initial wealth was founded. The industrious tanners and coppersmiths may be gone but some wood-turners (*roubinetaires*) – who numbered 38 in 1810, when the village was a hub for wine cask-making – remain and now ply their trade in the name of tourism, crafting toys and gifts. Keep an eye out for the red flags around the village, which denote artisans in residence.

“Among the narrow *ruelles* and beautiful stone and wood houses, I spotted reminders of the village's former trades”



From top:
The church at Saint-Cirq Lapopie; A fresco in Rocamadour; Exploring the small village of Rocamadour

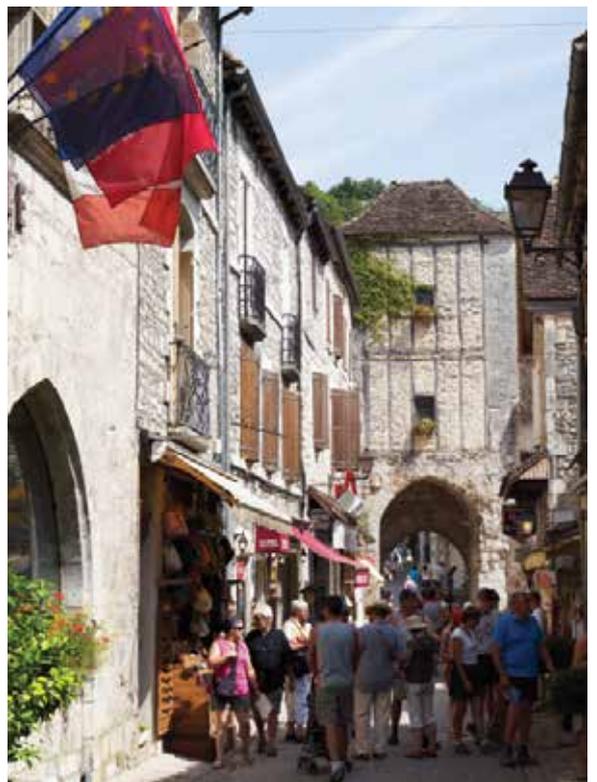
THE WILD & WONDERFUL CAUSSES DU QUERCY



In addition to Saint-Cirq-Lapopie and Rocamadour, the Causses du Quercy Regional Natural Park has plenty more to explore, including the historic Pech Merle caves near the confluence of the Lot and the Célé. There you

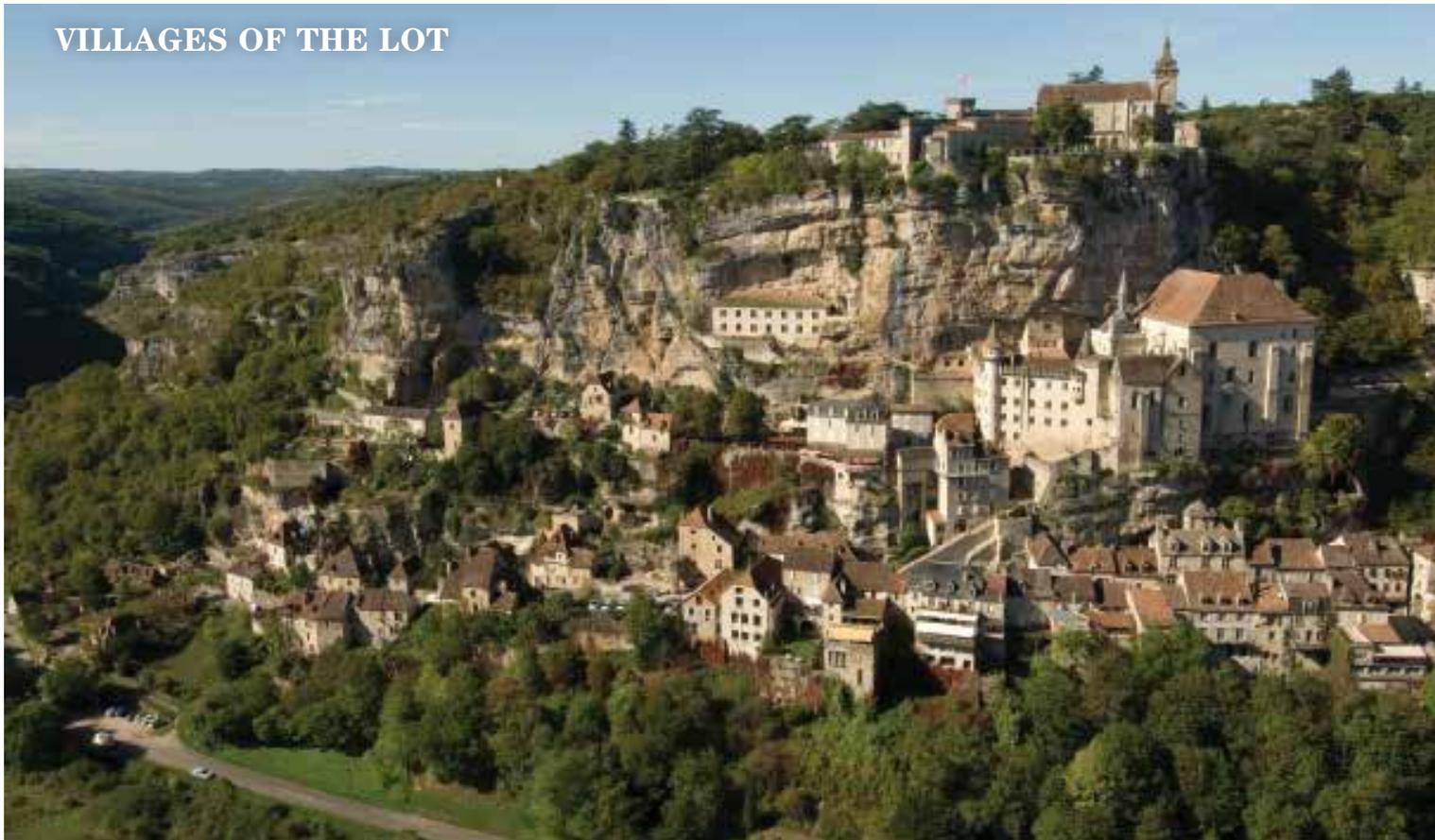
can explore an underground world of seven caverns adorned with prehistoric paintings and engravings dating back more than 20,000 years. Thanks to its unique geological make-up, the region is heaven for outdoors lovers, with endless cycling and walking trails as well as horse-riding and canoeing options.

● For more information visit www.parc-causses-du-quercy.fr



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VILLAGES OF THE LOT



From top: Rocamadour, one of France's most visited and sacred sites; The 'Black Madonna'

Of course, when some of the one million annual visitors descend during peak season, Rocamadour feels a little less deserted, and also loses some of its spiritual calm... Early autumn felt like a good time to be there, with fewer pilgrims, less packed pathways and easier opportunities to capture moments on camera.

No matter how familiar you feel Rocamadour is (the village must surely rank among the most commonly photographed sites in France), witnessing its majesty first hand – from above, below or within – is little short of astounding. While many arrive via the hairpin bends of the Alzou Valley below – all the better to witness the village appear instantly, in all of its rock-hugging grandeur – I entered at the top of the village, near the Tourist Office, where you need to park.

“Witnessing Rocamadour in all its majesty first hand – from above, below or within – is little short of astounding”

Locals describe the four-tiered village thus: “houses above the stream, churches above the houses, rocks above the churches, the castle on the rocks”. However, I worked backwards, descending from the castle, via a pathway dotted with small worship shrines. The basilica of Saint-Sauveur and the crypt of Saint-Amadour (after whom the village is named) both feature on UNESCO's World Heritage List, while the site's most prized religious relic is the wooden 'Black Madonna' which is kept in the Chapel of Miracles.

The village's status stems from the golden age of the Saint-Jacques de Compostelle pilgrimage route, namely the 12th to 16th centuries. Back in the day, pilgrims would have displayed their devotion by climbing the 216 steps up to the main chapel on their knees, but thankfully these days there's a lift! Rocamadour's allure to those seeking spiritual comfort remains compelling – this is one of France's most holy of places and I spotted groups from many countries exploring the chapels in silent awe and reverence.

Leaving the village via the twisting road below, I enjoyed the famed view one more time and decided that the Lot has so many blessings to count. 



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Your at-a-glance guide to travel, accommodation, where to eat and official information in the Lot



GETTING THERE

Flybe has scheduled services to Bergerac from Southampton, Manchester, Leeds-Bradford, Belfast, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Exeter and more UK airports. For more information, visit www.flybe.com.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Hotel Terminus** in Cahors, the Lot's capital, is a comfortable and stylish Art Deco gem and the adjoining restaurant, Le Balandre, offers a fine dining experience. 5 avenue Charles de Freycinet
Tel: +33 (0)5 65 53 32 00
www.balandre.com

WHERE TO EAT

Enjoy a slice of *pastis*, at the **Lou Pastis Quercy**.
Grand Route, St-Cirq-Lapopie
Tel: +33 (0) 5 65 35 30 30
www.lou-pastis.fr
If you're in the eastern Lot, drop in for a lovely lunch at Carjac's **Allée des Vignes**.
32 Boulevard du Tour de ville, 46160 Cajarc
Tel: +33 (0)5 65 11 61 87
www.alleedesvignes.com

CONTACT

Lot Tourism Board
www.tourisme-lot.com