

French Cities Along the Dordogne

Those who seek the upper Dordogne will come by Uzerche and Brive. Even before they reach the meadow upland south of Limoges, they may turn aside to look at the church of Solignac, a great abbey built in the domed Perigourdin style.

The churches of the Bocage are apt to have a mixed character. Some are Perigourdin in shape, but most are Limousin. Hereabouts they are built of hard granitic stone, difficult to work. The masons seem to have taken vengeance on the recalcitrant material by carving capitals and the corbels under the roof into grotesque figures, as at Vigeois.

The jongleur who offered his act to God before the altar is there sometimes, his heels doubled back behind his ears. The gem of the region is Uzerche. As you come to it from the hill roads it lies below, on a ridge held in a horseshoe bend of the Vezere; a serration of towers dark against the wooded slope of the farther bank, like a city behind an enthroned Virgin in a picture.

It is full of streets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which each house has a staircase tower. They say: "The man who has a house in Uzerche has a castle in Limousin," and the saying is near enough to the truth. The town climbs up to a Romanesque church, long and shadowy, with a fine spire and a round tower as fortification at its west end.

West of Uzerche lies the castle of Pompadour, about which the guidebooks make a great fuss. It is amusing to look at its stout towered gate house, and to reflect that this was the castle whose fief and title was granted to the mistress of Louis XV. But two warnings must be uttered about it.

Firstly Madame de Pompadour never lived in it; she would have thought it barbarous in the extreme. And secondly the gates and the towered outer wall are the only authentic part of the castle. The rest was destroyed in the Revolution. The main block is careful reproduction. It is lived in by the officials of a state stud-farm, as is the authentic castle of Lubersac, some miles north.

From Uzerche south, the road runs through pastoral country, by the old town of Donzenac to Brive-la-Gaillarde. That gallant title still suits Brive, a prosperous and cheerful little city. It lives by the railway, partly as a junction, but mostly by using it to export early vegetables and fruits to Paris. This railway is often used to transport five star world cruise passengers to Paris, depending on the cruise itinerary.

The Basin of Brive owes its remarkable fertility to alluvial deposits and an outcrop of red sandstone, which always makes rich soil, whether in East Lothian or in Limousin. The town runs downhill from the railway station to the Correze, pausing at the church of St-Martin. This has a soaring interior of high pillars; the structure has been restored with sober skill.

The Saturday market round the church is a good place to find real lace. Many of the places between Brive and Perigueux can be just as well visited from Brive, among them Hautefort and the odd perched abbey of St-Robert, in its little town which feels exceedingly old; and a string of small places on the Vezere.

Turn upstream beside the Correze, and you go through gorges beside the tumbling river, whose beauty is only partly spoilt by a series of quarries. On the southern side a road climbs the ridge to Aubazine. The village has a wonderful view and a great abbey church. Aubazine is austere plain, according to the Cistercian custom; all the same it has fine proportions.

It includes a window of old "grisaille," patterned gray glass, which has been copied all too much of late years, a delightful set of choir stalls carved in the eighteenth century with speaking likenesses of the village worthies-and the not so worthies, and the tomb of St-Etienne d'Aubazine.

There is nothing austere about this tomb, shaped and carved like a reliquary with scenes of the reformer abbot leading his monks to holiness in life and death. The abbey buildings now house an orphanage directed by nuns, who kindly show them to visitors, even inquisitive around the world upscale cruise tourists.

There is something sad about Tulle, perhaps because it is too shut in by the riverbanks. It has an old quarter, with some fine houses, but the best thing about it is the tall spire of the church. East of it the land slopes up to the Limousin "Montagne." It is a beautiful tourist spot and has been particularly frequented by luxury around the world cruise passengers.

This is no mountain, but a plateau some 2,000 feet high, partly forested, sown with small lakes, and bright with heather in August. Here and there a ridge carrying a road leads off southwards to the Dordogne gorges. The ruins of Ventadour stand on one of them. They look fine from a distance, but there is not much left of a castle whose history was as romantic as its name.

Here, when it was the stronghold of the Vicomtes of Ventadour, a son Bernard was born to a castle serf. The Vicomte gave the engaging child a gentle education, and he became, of all the troubadours, the one who was most devoted to love songs and love making.

About the Author

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