

## At home on vacation, sampling the Dordogne

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SARLAT, France - It was a cool, early summer morning in southwestern France and the Sunday market in the hilltop village of Saint-Geniès had just opened for business. In a small parking lot behind the stone church, white vans and long tables offered up the region's bounty: bowls of green and black olives, bottles of walnut oil, prunes, foie gras, and jars of duck confit.

While my husband, John, darted off to take pictures, I raced around to gather ingredients for dinner. We had rented a farmhouse for two weeks in the Dordogne, in part, to buy and cook with ingredients unavailable back home. Our retreat near the town of Sarlat would enable us to live like locals and save money. With the sagging dollar, we would avoid the inflated cost of hotels and restaurant meals.

"Madame, try some cheese," said a seller in French, extending a slice of Cantal on his knife. Cut from a huge, craggy round with a brown, lunar-like rind, the cheese tasted like butterscotch, hay, sweet cream, and dried mushrooms. I bought a wedge for our cheese plate, along with an ivory disc of young Cabecou, the region's velvety, rich goat cheese. Having decided on escalopes of veal as the main course, I purchased some golden yellow girolle mushrooms and a bunch of leeks to saute in walnut oil and serve over the meat.

A tuft of mâche and some sliced tomatoes and fennel would compose our salad, dressed with more walnut oil, walnut vinegar, and chopped toasted walnuts. Yes, we were in walnut land.

Toward the back of the market, I spotted several spice cakes as big as hat boxes. "Go ahead," said the young man, nodding to the sample plates. I tried several, then bought a large slice flecked with dark chocolate. "Keep it wrapped in plastic, and it will last for several weeks," said the seller. The cake would be our dessert, along with tiny, scarlet strawberries, so ripe, I was warned, they'd spoil overnight. Now, all we needed was a great bottle of local wine.

Seventeen years ago on our honeymoon, we fell in love with this picturesque pocket of France that the locals call Périgord. Besides the duck and walnut-rich cuisine, we were taken with the area's soaring cliffs, deep gorges, and lush valleys filled with orchards, nut trees, and small farms. Named after the two rivers (Dore and Dogne), the Dordogne belongs to the larger region of Aquitaine, which extends from the Gironde estuary in the north to the Spanish border in the south.

On that initial visit, we vowed to return, only instead of staying in hotels, we'd rent a house. So last spring, after reading an advertisement to rent a quiet, renovated farmhouse with a pool, two bedrooms, and country kitchen just outside the village of Marquay, we contacted the American owner, worked out the dates, and mailed off our deposit.

"Renting lets people feel a sense of place at a deeper level," says Judith Lit, a documentary filmmaker from New York, from whom we rented the farmhouse she named Gaurenne. "At a hotel, you're usually in a town and mingling with people who are used to interacting with tourists. But in the countryside, the exchanges are more authentic. You can make friends with people in the village," even if you don't speak French. The locals are extremely welcoming and most speak a smattering of basic English.

Indeed, one of the most rewarding aspects of our stay was our hourlong walk into Marquay each morning to share coffee and conversation with cafe owners Valerie and Patrick. We also fell in love with the most affectionate cream and rust-spotted dog. We had met the dog our first morning and from that day forward, our little friend would greet us at the edge of town, wait while we had coffee, and then escort us back to the farmhouse. Not long after our arrival, when we asked Valerie whether she knew the dog's name, she beamed and replied, "Oh, that's Maize. She loves to take tourists around. We call her the mayor of Marquay."

After Maize had seen us home, we'd head off on our daily adventure. We always began with a trip to an open market to buy ingredients for dinner. We would park our rented car on the edge of whichever village was hosting the day's market, then fill our straw bag with fruits, vegetables, cheese, bread, and whatever fish, meat, or game bird looked too good to resist. We would stow our perishables in a small cooler in the car, then lunch at a local cafe, after which we would go exploring.

In addition to the area's natural beauty, the Dordogne has myriad cultural and historic treasures, including more than

150 prehistoric sites and 50 decorated caves. Hunters came to the Dordogne and dwelled in shelters in the region's limestone rock faces. The public can visit many of these caves, including the famous Grotte de Lascaux and Lascaux II, known as the "Sistine Chapel of prehistory." One afternoon, we toured the Magdalenian era Grotte de Font-de-Gaume in the market town of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac (which also has a great wine store). After climbing up a craggy dirt path, we followed our guide into the damp, winding cave, where in the glow of her flashlight, we saw an impressive array of bison, deer, and horse drawings.

Other afternoons we walked around enchanting medieval towns and castles. At Château de Beyna, whose Russian owner is slowly restoring the once crumbling structure, we saw the oil-lit guard-room, massive 13th-century kitchen, and oratory decorated with Gothic frescoes. At the 13th-century Château de Castelnaud, we saw its fascinating collection of ancient weapons, including wooden catapults, then stopped at the nearby walnut museum.

Certainly, one of the draws of the Dordogne is its abundance of culinary artisans, many of whom we visited. At Moulin de la Tour, in the tiny village of Sainte-Nathalène, we watched men in cobalt cotton trousers stone-grind separate batches of almonds, walnuts, and hazelnuts into thick, golden nut oil. We visited a fruit liqueur maker, a foie gras producer, and the goat cheese farm La Borie d'Imbert, near the historic town of Rocamadour, where we petted goats and sampled cheese.

Some days we simply spent the afternoon at Gaurenne, happy to enjoy the sun, pool, and serenity of our rented home.

"One of the advantages of renting," said Lit, "is that unlike a hotel, you have the whole house to yourself. Lots of guests have told me they had great plans for their stay, then spent much of their vacation sitting on the terrace in total privacy." While there wasn't housekeeping or room service on demand, we had Lit's "Black Book," a treasure-trove of information about the house and area (including the contact information for a friendly caretaker, who lived nearby), along with Lit's favorite places to dine, market, shop, and visit.

The average price per day of renting the farmhouse was less than what we would have paid for one night at a three-star hotel in the area (no meals included). We also saved on our rental fee because we rented from an American, who charged us in US dollars. Plus we worked directly with the owner, avoiding the cost of a rental agent.

"I've never felt so relaxed in my life," John said shortly after we had arrived at Gaurenne. And the morning we said goodbye to our village friends, I realized I had never felt so at home on a vacation.

Victoria Abbott Riccardi can be reached at [variccardi@rcn.com](mailto:variccardi@rcn.com). ■