

Les Eyzies - place for prehistory and relaxation

By DAVID WILLINGS

Prehistory has never been the same since Hollywood became interested in it. If Raquel Welch were to be eaten by a dinosaur or meet a fiery death from a volcano the scriptwriter would have lost his job. Huge prehistoric men, mammoths the size of a tank are all part of prehistory Hollywood style.

Mammoths were certainly no bigger than a young elephant and prehistoric man was possibly no bigger than four foot six. There is evidence of human habitation in France from about 500,000 BC onwards. How did these people live and how did their way of life evolve? This is to me anyway one of the most exciting detective stories; let me say it again as an occupational psychologist.

Around the area of Les Eyzies clues abound. The greatest prehistorian in France, if not in the world, was the Abbé Breuil. It is fitting that a section of the National Museum of Prehistory at Les Eyzies should be dedicated to his memory.

I think the Museum is the place to start. Not only its exhibits but its wall charts are instructive. It would be difficult not to come away with some ideas on how to organize and present information. Again this is not a place for a quick visit. If you just race around the place as most tourists seem to do you will come away with a confused kaleidoscopic impression. Take a notebook and read the wall charts. Digest one set of data before moving on to the next.

Certainly the decorated implements of the Upper Palaeolithic era are things of beauty by the standards of any time. But the axe heads and other implements of the Middle Palaeolithic era (100,000 BC) are worthy of your attention. It was in this period that man was developing new techniques. The Co-Director of the Museum, Madame Guichaud, considers

that sometime in the transition from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Middle Palaeolithic era "creativity exploded into the world". Those rather drab looking axe heads represent man's "urge to beautify his techniques".

But I fear I am preaching. The caves with which this area is honeycombed are not to be missed. The Abbé Breuil considers that people did not live in these caves. The paintings with which the walls are decorated represent some sort of religious symbolism and the people came there for some ritual. It is too easy to write this off as the natural conclusion of a Priest. Man is a religious animal; he is also a creative one. Certainly they kept their animals in the entrance of some of the caves. Did they live in them? We shall never know. They may have sheltered there. "I can believe", a tourist asserted, "they kept their animals there but you will never convince me that men lived down there." No one will ever convince me that anyone but a 20th century Englishman could look after his animals better than he looked after himself.

The Cave of Font de Gaume is only a short walk from the centre of Les Eyzies. There is an admission charge and it is customary to tip the guide, often a graduate student working his way through the course. I am sure my readers will agree that this alone is worth a generous tip. There are some excellent paintings of bovines. Experienced cavers may go down to a lower chamber where there is a painting of a tiger.

At Cougnac the artist or artists have made use of the configuration of the cave walls to add shape to their paintings. There is also a human representation. What this signifies is a matter for heated debate and not worth going into here. The view of the valley from the

area near the entrance is also breathtaking.

La Mouthe which is a few miles outside Les Eyzies has some fascinating paintings. It is on a private estate and the owner is understandably rather tired of tourists. It is easy to miss and of course he has a vested interest in you missing it. I sympathise with him but I cannot bring myself to cross the English channel let alone the Atlantic and not see this place. But please don't give him any further cause to be sick of tourists. He would be quite within his rights to close the place to the public and this would be a great loss.

Rouffignac is popularly known as the Cave of a Hundred Mammoths. Discovered in 1956 by Louis René Nougier and authenticated by the Abbé Breuil this cave has one of the widest varieties of paintings in the region. Visitors are taken down by electric train; a modern addition to the place I need hardly add. I always feel in Rouffignac that I am in a magnificent underground Ca-

thedral. In the entrance to the cave a Palaeolithic burial site was discovered. We already knew that Palaeolithic man ceremonially disposed of his dead but this skeleton had another interesting feature. Two molars had been extracted. They had been clearly extracted when the person was alive because the cavities in the jawbone had filled in. Palaeolithic man learned to extract teeth without breaking the jaw; an art which must have been lost for several thousand years after that era.

Palaeolithic man also made needles out of bone. At the laboratory of prehistory in Les Eyzies they have been trying to work out how this was done. We still don't know.

Change some currency before you go to Les Eyzies. They must have a bank somewhere but I have been there every summer for the last four years and I still haven't found it. The Hotel du Centre is excellent value for money. For 48 francs a night I got a room which would cost at least \$20

here. As in the rest of the region the food is expensive but good. Even if you can't afford to stay at the Hotel du Centre put aside 25 francs or so and have a meal there. Les Eyzies itself is a delightful town and the climate is normally most pleasant. It gets a bit crowded in July and August, May and June are by far the best months to visit the Dordogne. The Museum closes on Tuesdays. I have been asked to give my impressions of Les Eyzies. It would take two pages to do this. I cannot see how anyone can come away from the place without being sensitised to the challenge of the origins of man.

There are plenty of areas near the town where you just absorb the sun and the landscape. This summer I was sitting by the river smoking my pipe and doing precisely this when a squeal of brakes interrupted my complete relaxation and a feminine voice declared "Honey. I must get a picture

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