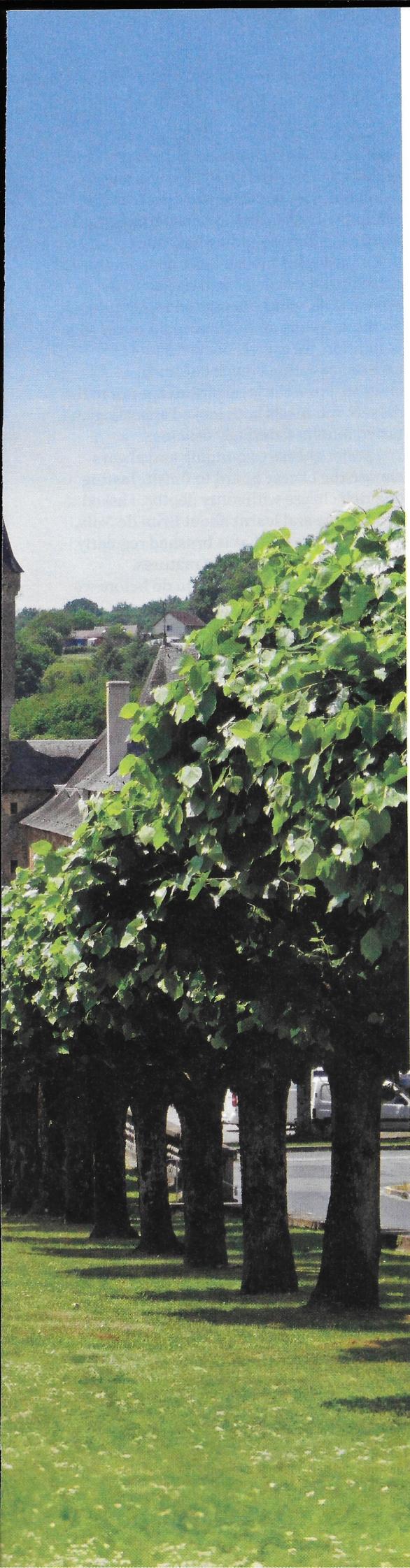


Taking it easy

Exploring the French Périgord Vert at less than a tortoise's pace

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki





US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...
and her husband, Anthony, explore beautiful places in their Blue Bus whatever the season. Carol is a keen walker, fair-weather cyclist and improving birdwatcher



A 2021 Devon Firefly on a Ford Custom Transit SWB 2.0-litre. This is our third Devon Conversions campervan and we love the layout that packs so much into a sub-five-metre van

LEFT An avenue of trees leads to the château at Jumilhac

We've never been 'on-trend', so adopting slow travel isn't a fashion statement, but it does give us chance to connect with the countryside, stumble on little-known towns and immerse ourselves in the heritage, landscape and food. In France's Périgord Vert or green Périgord we became so mellow, tortoises were travelling faster!

Driving less than an hour between budget campsites and walking and cycling from our campervan were good for our finances and also our wellbeing.

The Périgord is a historical region in the Dordogne department and the sparsely populated Périgord Vert in the north is named for its abundant woodlands and meadows. Characterised by steep-sided river valleys, farming and quality fresh produce, the Périgord Vert deserves to be explored, unhurriedly.

You are never far away from a château in the Périgord and our first campsite was in the grounds of one. The towers of Château Le Verdoyer peaked over the trees across a lake as we drove through the lush countryside. With views across meadows from our pitch, a walking map and a daily baguette, we were happy to stay a while.

On our first morning we sauntered into nearby Saint-Saud-Lacoussière and joined neighbouring British motorhomers for coffee in the village café before picking up the River Dronne circular walk.

Thanks to waymarkers, the route finding was easy along tree-lined tracks and minor roads between sleepy hamlets and pools hopping with frogs.

This countryside undulates like corrugated cardboard and we enjoyed having the flower-rich meadows with cattle and blossom trees buzzing with insects to ourselves. Reaching the River Dronne, we climbed out of the valley on a stony path gushing with water and into dark conifers, just as a pair of deer bounced away.

Back in Saint-Saud-Lacoussière, the vibrant colours of stained glass in the church windows caught my eye. While I was lost in the abstract images of the early twentieth century windows, Anthony pressed a button and the silence was broken by a recorded history in English of the church. ▶

"We enjoyed having the flower-rich meadows with cattle and blossom trees buzzing with insects to ourselves"



ABOVE Attractive Bourdeilles

BELOW INSET The bas-reliefs in the abbey caves in Brantôme

Perhaps the only downside of this flourishing landscape is ticks. Part of our evening routine was checking for these tiny parasites and, like monkeys, we helped each other reach those difficult-to-see places! Not all ticks carry disease, but they itch and we remove them with our trusty tick lasso. Day one's tick score was two all!

Every small town and village we visited had at least one well-maintained waymarked walk. From Le Verdoyer we tackled challenging hikes and short strolls, each one uncovering something different; an old mill, a disused railway line or the communal bread oven.

In Champs-Romain, we descended to the Dronne where the river gurgled and tumbled over boulders along a wooded V-shaped valley. We navigated an overgrown riverside

path, returning on lanes dotted with roadside orchids. In this rural area there was always wildlife and we watched woodpeckers and sandpipers and heard an unusual and mystifying flute-sounding bird call.

Le Verdoyer Château has a restaurant with a fixed-price evening *menu du jour* in the French style, which focuses on local seasonal produce. As one of the three main meals was vegetarian, we eagerly booked a table to experience eating French cuisine in a château. From the local pineau aperitif to the dessert, our meals both looked appealing and tasted mouth-wateringly delicious.

I prefer cheese to pudding and always choose the cheese board to finish. Tasting one rich cheese with nutty depths, I asked what it was and learnt about Brun de Noix, a Périgord cheese that is brushed regularly with a walnut liqueur as it matures.

There was one last thing to do before we left Le Verdoyer. Noticing Saint-Saud-Lacoussière has a free public weighbridge, we rolled our campervan onto the scales to calculate how much French food we could bring home!

Just half an hour's driving took us to Brantôme en Périgord. The Périgord Vert's tourist hub, this enchanting town is the opposite of peaceful Le Verdoyer.

The hefty guidebook the campsite receptionist handed over made the usual French tourist tax more than worthwhile. We had maps for four walking routes and inspiring cycling circuits, as well as information on attractions to make the most of our stay.

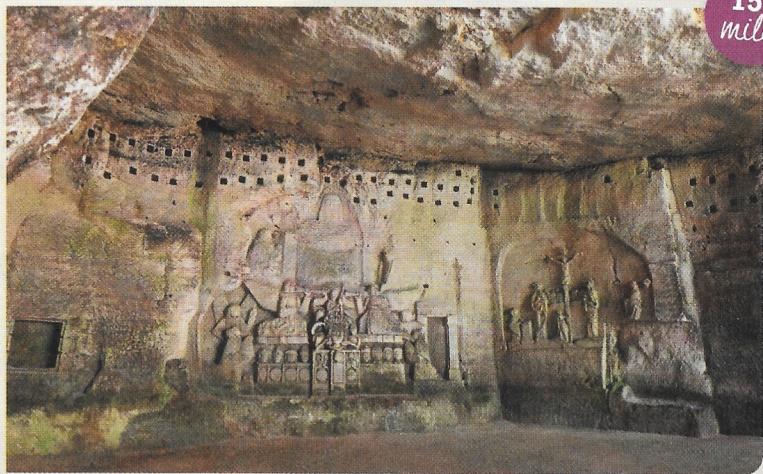
Crossing the River Dronne to the town, we joined the throng window shopping and photographing every picturesque corner. Having visited Brantôme Abbey previously, this time we paid to see the adjacent *grottes de l'abbaye* (abbey caves). ▶

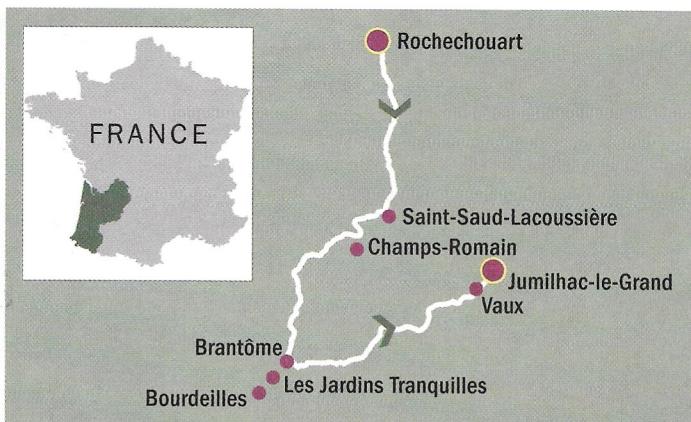
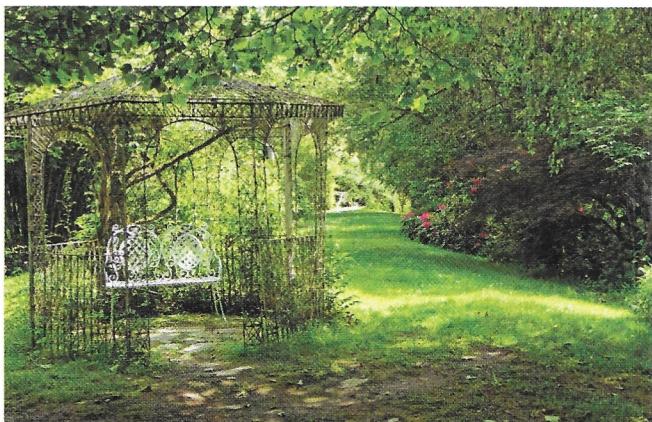
THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Morecambe to the Périgord Vert area via St-Malo and back. This part of the tour represents 155 miles of a total trip of 1,549 miles. We spent 15 days touring around the Périgord Vert, with 13 nights on sites in May. This was part of a 46-night tour

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg (€29)	£25.73
Ferry costs Return ferry Portsmouth to St Malo with cabin	£680
Site fees (€221)	£196.04
Attractions Two adults; Brantôme Abbey Caves, Les Jardins Tranquilles & Jumilhac Château (€49)	£43.47
Total costs	£945.24





Sheltered under the limestone escarpment, this network of caves reveals the eighth century origins of this religious site. Nesting boxes for pigeons are carved into the rock and a healing spring flows from a rock face, but the highlight is the monumental and intricate bas-reliefs around the back wall of an excavated cave. The largest depicts the last judgement with the Grim Reaper holding a scythe taking centre stage.

Les Jardins Tranquilles, 12 acres of riverside arboretum and gardens, is just two miles from Brantôme. We cycled and, leaving our bikes by the entrance, had to shout over the growl of a hedge trimmer as we paid our entrance fee to the English owners!

We all saw the funny side of the clamour in a place that claimed tranquillity and, apologising, they offered a compensatory free drink. The owners encourage garden picnics and we took ours to a bench by the shallow River Dronne, where rafts of white-flowering water-crowfoot rippled in the current.

Tranquillity restored, we explored the water features, specimen trees and flower beds before taking up the drink offer. The friendly couple joined us and we discussed expat life and the unique British sense of humour. We made them laugh, so hopefully did our bit to stave off homesickness!

Cycling further along the valley, we found Bourdeilles, where a château rises over the River Dronne and sought-after cottages with blue shutters lined the riverbank, their flourishing gardens tumbling down to the river. We peered through the gates of the château's fortifications, but opted to have a beer in the café under the walls and soak up the relaxed vibe.

France was heating up and, awake early, I crept out of the 'van with our laundry bag. Reaching the only washing machine, I was frustrated to find someone had got up even earlier! The culprit was another British woman and I forgave her as we chatted until her wash finished and campers began to stir.

ABOVE Les Jardins
Tranquilles near Brantôme
BELOW Jumilhac's château
and its rose garden

The guidebook led us along well-trodden woodland paths and deserted lanes that teemed with butterflies. Near La Claperie we quietly contemplated the horror of war at the Monument des Fusillés, which commemorated resistance fighters, Jews and a child all executed by the Nazis on 26 March, 1944.

The Chambon circuit was longer and took us on shadowy paths lined with crumbling limestone walls. From a disused watermill we climbed up a sunny lane where orchids jostled with other flowers for attention and we loitered, identifying the different species.

Having breakfast outdoors on Friday morning, we greeted neighbours setting off with shopping bags. "Are you off to the market?" I asked. "Yes, no doubt we'll return





INFORMATION

A useful guide to the Périgord area

guide-du-perigord.com

The Parc Naturel Régional Périgord-Limousin information

pnr-perigord-limousin.fr

Tourist information for the area north of the Dordogne

northofthedordogne.com

Les Jardins Tranquilles near Brantôme en Périgord

lesjardinstranquilles.com

Information and history about Château de Jumilhac

chateaudejumilhac.com

with more tat," they replied, grinning.

If you think Brantôme is busy on Saturday to Thursday then visit on a Friday and you'll meet a wall of shuffling shoppers negotiating the market stalls. We grabbed a coffee before tackling the stalls and avoided buying stuff, but couldn't resist the local strawberries.

Sitting in the sunshine by the 'van, we were entertained firstly by chasing red squirrels in the trees and later by a cluster of French men attempting to fill up a motorhome by lashing a belt around the push-button tap so it would flow continuously.

Lazily getting up in search of something stashed in a high cupboard, I encountered a mob of ants! While Anthony checked for organised ant lines marching into the Blue Bus, I cleared every cupboard in turn, sweeping out smatterings of ants and wiping vinegar inside to deter further infestations. With no obvious ant train, Anthony began picking through the piles of paraphernalia around the 'van. Before long he was checking eBay to see if any of the kit we hardly use was sellable!

The smell of vinegar fading, we left Brantôme for nearby Jumilhac-le-Grand, which turned out to be our favourite place in the Périgord Vert. On a steep-sided river valley, Jumilhac is surrounded by high

plateaus of orchards and green pastures where Limousin cows languidly chew.

The small town is exquisite, with a turreted château perched above the river and a couple of shops and cafés. Combine this with an idyllic campsite and a pitch overlooking the River Isle, where deer paused for a drink, and you have happy slow travellers.

The family-run campsite sold us a photocopied leaflet that had been through the copier a few too many times! However, we were hopeful that with waymarkers on the ground and phone mapping apps we couldn't go wrong!

We began with the 12km (eight miles) Plateau du Guet circular hike. On the first of our regular coffees in the village café, we tried to understand the fast French of the locals and slowly translated the instructions for the route's starting point. Giddy with that achievement, we dropped down into the River Isle gorge and didn't notice we were following the red, rather than orange, waymarkers!

As we climbed uphill through woodland we heard the strange flute-like birdsong we had encountered at Le Verdoyer. Standing in a grassy copse, we hopelessly searched the branches for a glimpse. Frustrated, I recorded its song and sent it to a birdwatching friend who easily identified ▶

ABOVE Monumental buildings in Brantôme

WE STAYED AT

Camping Château Le Verdoyer, 24470 Champs-Romain, Nouvelle-Aquitaine

0033 553 569464 verdoyer.fr

27 April – 27 September

Two adults, pitch and electric: From €19 with ACSI (£16.85)

Camping Brantôme Peyrelevade, 46 Avenue André Maurois, 24310 Brantôme en Périgord, Nouvelle-Aquitaine

0033 553 057524

camping-dordogne.net

30 April – 21 September
Two adults, pitch and electric: From €17 with ACSI (£15.08)

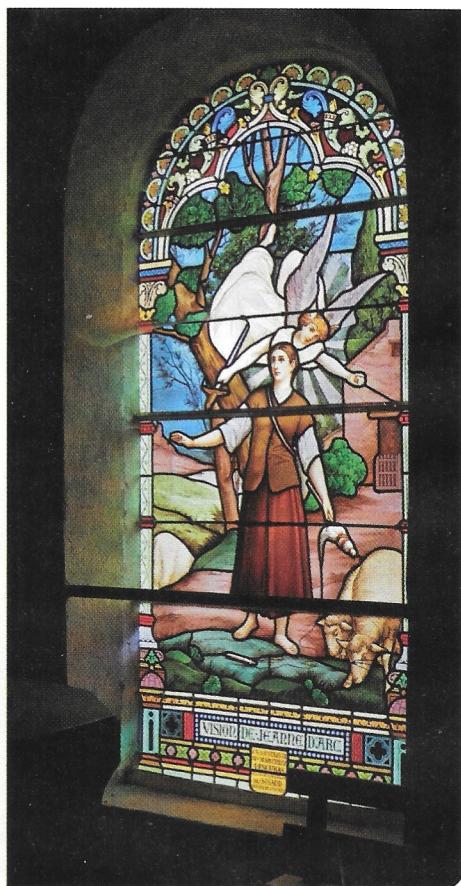
Camping La Chatonnière, 285 Allée de la Chatonnière, 24630 Jumilhac-le-Grand, Nouvelle-Aquitaine

0033 553 525736

chatonniere.com

25 March – 23 September

Two adults, pitch and electric: From €15 with ACSI (£13.30)



the elusive golden oriole.

Reaching Vaux, I was coveting each of the hamlet's red-roofed stone cottages, when Anthony realised we had been following the wrong colour waymarkers!

We had to lose all the height we had gained, descending to the river before tackling an almost vertical lane on the other side to the high plateau where rows of apple trees unfolded into the distance. Eating our picnic, we were horrified to see dozens of ticks on our bare legs.

After a tiring day, feasting on campsite takeaway pizza in the evening was a treat. Our delicious sundown pizza, liberally piled with vegetables, was accompanied by a French red, a welcome breeze rustling through the trees and the comforting sound of crickets.

Our route finding improved now we were keeping tabs on the waymarkers' colours. In the heat, we were grateful for cool woodland on Le Tour du bourg walk which wound through copses of chestnut trees. We returned to Jumilhac on lanes joining pretty farmhouses and down the avenue of trees that gives a stunning vista of Jumilhac's château.

The longest walk was 16km (10 miles) and named for the fields of corn we meandered around. From pretty hamlets to wide-open views across upland meadows, it

TOP TIPS

Expect to pay a tourist tax of €1 or €2 a night on top of the campsite overnight fee

We found Locus Map (Android only) and Komoot (Android and Apple) very useful on this trip. These are free, but use data. With the paid version you can download maps to use offline

Les Jardins Tranquilles has a car park, but it might not be suitable for larger motorhomes

was superb and we kept moving so the ticks didn't have time to hook on!

On our last day we stepped into the past, paying to visit Jumilhac's château. An English leaflet was invaluable in describing the transformation this fairytale château had undergone, from a defensive castle to an elegant Versailles-style pleasure palace.

The rooms reflected this remodelling as we wandered from modest medieval chambers up an elegant stone staircase to a luxurious wood-panelled seventeenth century salon adorned with paintings and an elaborate fireplace. The kitchen glowed with rows of polished copper pans and moulds. We finished on a walkway above the courtyard where we could appreciate the château's extravagance of turrets.

We left the Périgord Vert with local honey, cheeses, apple juice, beer, vegetables and sweet ripe strawberries, having spent two weeks slowly exploring an area smaller than our home county of Lancashire. You could spend years in the Périgord Vert and never walk every country lane or path, but slow travel was the perfect way to scrape below the surface.

It had been paradise for an active holiday and we drove away with a profound affection for the area and its wildlife, history and gastronomy. **mmm**

ABOVE LEFT Boat trips are available in Brantôme

ABOVE RIGHT Joan of Arc in stained glass