

# The Lot's got the lot!

Richard Hill samples the sights and culinary delights of France's River Lot and its environs.

**A**RUISING the navigable 65km of the River Lot, is cruising through centuries of history. As early as the 13th century small boats were already navigating

between Quercy and Aquitaine. The river, essential for the local economy, gave access to the sea and opened up new markets for towns like Cahors and the riverside villages. At that time, the Bishop of Cahors, and the King of England, collaborated to develop the river. Weirs were constructed across the often treacherous waters to form navigable pounds. Water mills and castles are evidence of intense activity that marked the birth of a community of shipwrights, sailors, coopers, carpenters, ropemakers or inn keepers.

But, the River Lot was always a difficult and dangerous river to navigate. Innumerable accidents, deaths and wreckage's forced action to improve the navigation. "There are few rivers whose navigation is more commercially profitable than the Lot" said a 17th century report. Consequently, in 1664, an ambitious programme of lock building was started.

One of the most spectacular sections of the river, is between St.-Cirq-Lapopie and Douelle, an area north-west of Toulouse. Springing from the Lozere hills, the Lot flows through this area before finally flowing on to the Garonne. The river meanders wildly throughout most of its course, alternating between hills and flatlands.

St.-Cirq-Lapopie is a village almost clinging to the cliffs, high above the river. The whole village is classified as an historical monument. Its name first

appears in the 8th century. Many of the houses here date back to the 13th and 14th century, the latter part of which, during the 100 year war, the village was conquered and re-conquered three times. Richard the Lion Heart attempted to conquer the village, but could not due to it's key strategic position. Up until the last century, over 3000 people lived here. Then there were only two ways of getting to the village, by wading a shallow causeway across the river, or via a precarious pathway carved into the cliff face. Now, the village, home to just 24 people, is just about accessible by road. The 16th century church holds the most prominent position and draws a focal point in the village and from the river far below. Access from the river is difficult via steep and winding roads, paths or steps. The trek though, is certainly worth the effort. The atmosphere and beauty of St.-Cirq-Lapopie is remarkable. In common with other villages in the valley, the village has a square, the *Place du Sombrol*, off which lead narrow streets, all steep, either up or down.

The houses are constructed in local

stone which merges them into the landscape. It's difficult to tell where natural rock ends and man-made monument begins. During the season, there are many traditional craft workshops here, shops, a tourist centre and art museum. In 1950, surrealist artist Andre Breton made his home here.

Below the village, adjacent to the lock, is a beautifully restored 14th century water mill, the *Moulin d' Aulanat*. As with the numerous water-mills in the area, it is likely that the flour milled here was taken by boat, to the Caribbean where it was baked into bread for slaves.

Downstream, near *Écluse de ganil* (lock), the towpath is carved into the rockface for 700 metres. Engineered between 1841-43, 10 men lost their lives when their boat, overloaded with rock spoil, overturned and capsized.

In heavy rain, the river here has an unusual characteristic. At the confluence of the Lot, the Célé and the shunt canal, three colours merge in the water. Red from the Lot, grey from the Célé, and green from the canal. The effect is particularly vivid when viewed from the cliffs above.



TOP: 14th century restored water mill at Moulin-De-St.-Cirq.

RIGHT: St.-Cirq-Lapopie, a community of 13th and 14th century buildings form an impressive sight above the River Lot.

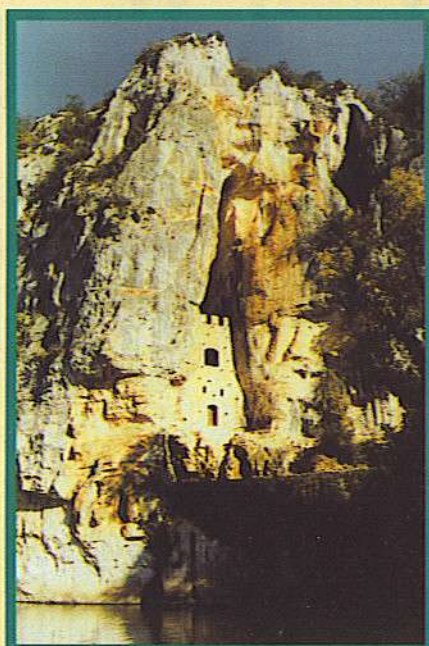


Further downstream, just before reaching Bousièz, is a castle like fortress built into the rock face, behind which are numerous interlinking caverns and caves. There is substantial evidence that these caves were used as shelters in prehistoric times, and the castle, the *Château des Anglais* (English Castle) was used during the hundred year and religious wars.

Apart from information available in tourist guides, there is much fascinating history to be told by the residents. Pierre Cazes has lived here all his life, and is proud of the rich heritage. Pierre is the seventh generation of the Cazes family to work the river Lot. "I love it here," he says. He is rightly passionate about the valley, and knows much of its history. Pierre owns a fleet of eight cruisers, which he operates from Bouziès, and is happy to share his family history with visitors.

Vers is a village overlooked by cliffs, along which runs an aqueduct. In England we are perhaps more familiar with an aqueduct as a bridge carrying a canal over a river or railway. But this is an aqueduct in the full meaning of the word, a duct for carrying water. Tourist literature refers to this aqueduct as Roman. Locals call it a Celtic aqueduct, for although built in Roman times it was built by Celtic people. The aqueduct was used to carry water to the town of Cahors. Construction started in 1AD, and took over 400 years to build. The aqueduct follows the contours of the cliffs and hills, and is so precisely engineered that over it's 33km (20 miles) length, it has a fall of just 50 metres (160 ft). There is a small museum in the village, with a diorama of the entire route, and sections of the aqueduct can be seen in the cliffs above the village.

Near Vers, the Roman Chapel *Notre-Dame de Velles*, bears witness to the devotion of ancient mariners. This chapel has been used by sailors and boatmen for



tions for a mighty wooden capstan, which was used to haul, or retain lighters passing through. At all such weirs, a deep channel was left, through which boats travelling downstream could 'shoot'. Pierre Cazes explained that centuries ago, boats would have been built upstream, collect their cargo en route downstream, and because of the difficulties in travelling upstream, the boats would be abandoned or destroyed at their destination.

Later, capstans were installed, to allow boats to be hauled through the flash locks, back upstream. Up to 20 men were needed to wind the capstan, to haul each boat through against the strong currents.

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TOP: Cliffs downstream of Ganil Lock near St.-Cirq-Lapopie. A 700m towpath is hewn into the rockface known as Chemin De Halase.

CENTRE: Chateau Des Anglais at Bouziès, used during the 100 years war.

BOTTOM: Cruisers moored at Vers with early morning mist rising over the river.



centuries and still hosts a service for them on the 15th August each year.

Downstream, near *Ecluse de Galessie*

(lock) stands a low rocky outcrop known as the *Tustal* rock. Carved into the surface of the rock are remnants of the founda-



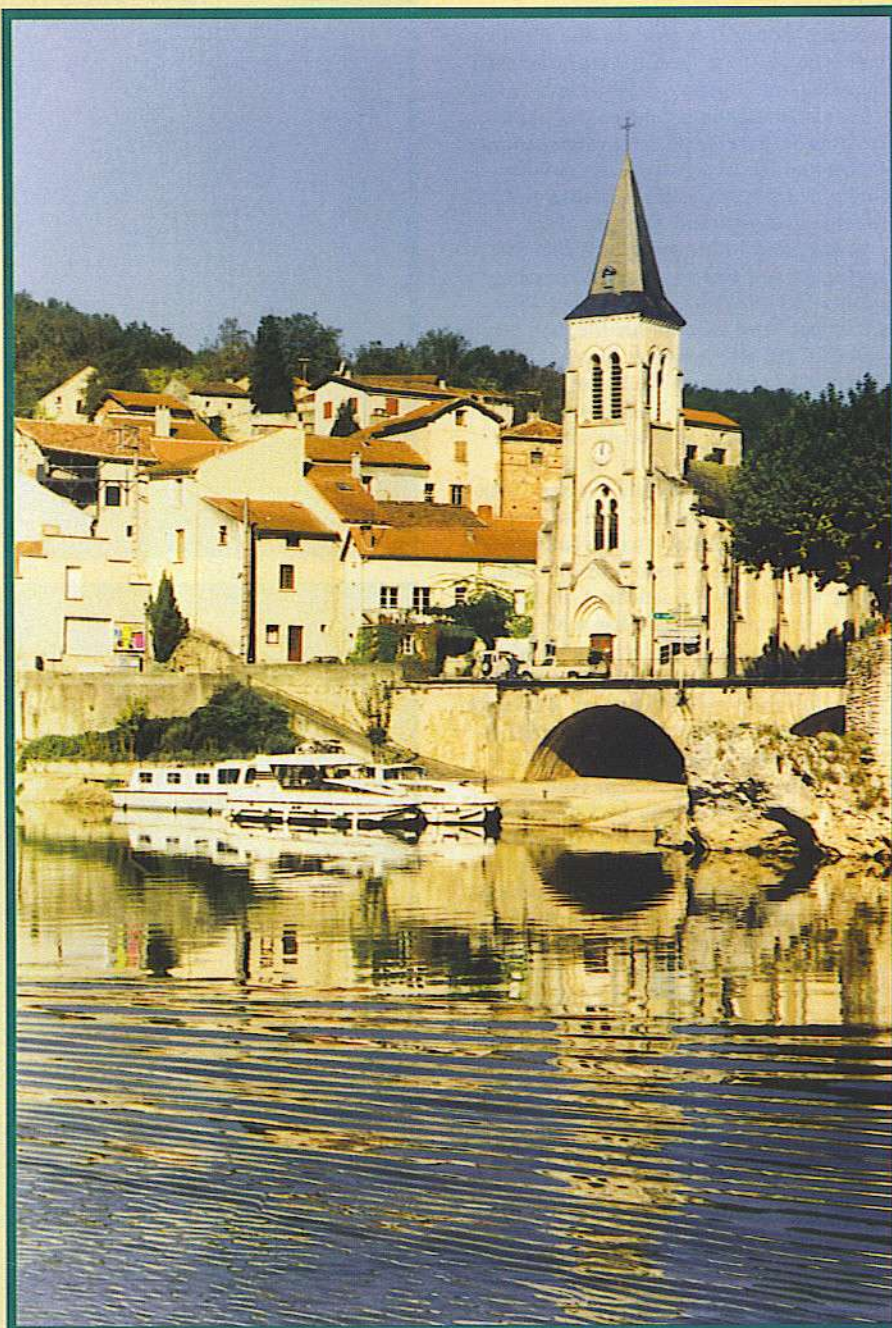
## ◆◆◆ CRUISING IN FRANCE

Established on a waterfront terrace, downstream of Vers is Savanac. The château here, decorated with gothic windows, is believed to be the best example of retreats built in the Lot valley in the 13th and 14th centuries. Further downstream, the village of Laroque-des-arcs gets its name from the passage of the aqueduct mentioned earlier. This old port was protected by a château which stands on an isolated rock overlooking the river.

The next port on the river is the impressive Cahors. In 700BC, according to Pierre Cazes, the Celts called the place *Cadourques*, meaning 'The persons that live near the beautiful river'. Through the evolution of language over the centuries the name became Cahors.

Cahors deserves a lot of time, which it amply repays. In addition to the many attractions in the town, there are over four thousand hectares of vineyards, producing the famous dark red, full-bodied Cahors wine.

The newest wine producing plant here is the *Domaine de Lagresette*. The vineyards are more than five centuries old, but the winemaking facility, with its state-of-the art winemaking equipment, was built in 1992. It is owned and operated by the entrepreneur, Alain-Dominique Perrin, Chairman of Cartier International. It was his passion for high quality wine, and his love for the region that prompted him to rejuvenate the 55 hectares of vineyards and invest in a multi-million franc winemaking facility. The three storey processing plant is built almost entirely underground. Hand-picked, the grapes are sorted manually, de-stemmed and crushed at the top level before going on for fermentation and maceration in giant stainless steel tanks on the floor below. At the lowest level the wine is aged in new oak barrels in an impressive wine cellar over 55 metres long, before being blended and bottled. Visitors who have a passionate enthusiasm for wine are welcome to visit.



The tradition of Cahors wine is among the oldest of the French varieties. It has been noticed and appreciated from the origins of Roman emperors. Through the centuries it has become renowned as one of Cahors specialities and known as the *Black Wine*.

*Black Gold* is another of the regions specialities. The truffle. One of the most expensive foods in the world, pigs were traditionally used to hunt the truffle at harvest time. At the *Station d'Expérimentation sur la Truffe*, The Truffle Research Station, at Le Monat near

**TOP:** The beautiful village of Laroque-des-Arcs upstream of Cahors.

**LEFT:** Moored in Cahors, this boat is a replica of a floating mill which would have been moored in strong currents to mill flour.







UNION INTERPROFESSIONNELLE DU VIN DE CAHORS

Cahors, Pierre Sourzat works with trained Labradors. There are over 200 trees on this 1 hectare (2.5 acre) site, and during the harvest season, which runs from November to March, Labradors *Indiana* and *Darius* are kept busy locating the delicacies lying just beneath the surface. Truffles are a fungi, found usually on the roots of oak or hazel trees, which retail in the UK at around £300 per kilo (£140 per lb).

Nearby, at Lalbenque, the truffles are sold in a market, unique to both the region and the product. Every Tuesday, buyers and vendors gather to trade truffles. The truffles are carefully examined, but none may be sold until 2.30pm when the trading bell sounds. Deals are conducted in secret, prices negotiated on paper, eavesdroppers excluded. A deal is struck if the buyer accepts the paper on which the price is written.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, Cahors was one of the most thriving medieval commercial cities in the western world. One of Cahors most impressive features is the 14th century *Pont Valentré* - The Devil's Bridge. Started in 1308, it was one of three towered bridges that provided fortified protection for the city, by land or water. During construction, according to local legend, the architect, having difficulty finishing the bridge, entered into a pact with the devil. In return for assistance completing the project, the architect promised to give to the devil the soul of the first being to cross the bridge, but sent a donkey. The devil, cheated, tried to tear

down the bridge, and on a corner of the central tower, the Devils Tower, he can still be seen trying.

Near the bridge is moored a replica of a wooden 'floating' water mill, which would have been anchored in fast and strong currents. The water turned the paddles, which powered the milling machinery.

A few kilometres downstream from Cahors, is Douelle. In the middle ages this was the most important port between Cahors and Fumel. From here Cahors wine was transported to Bordeaux. The docks and boatyards were alive with the sound of carpenters, coopers and ropemakers.

The Lot valley has an immense amount to offer the boat cruiser. The river has played such an important part in its history, it is the natural choice for touring

the area. At every village and town along its banks, the history and flavour of France comes alive. It is a magnificent region for gastronomy, the wines of Cahors, the cheese of Rocamadour, Quercy farm-raised lamb with truffles, walnuts and foie gras.

It is planned to restore 220km (137 miles) of the River Lot to navigable condition. The sights described here offer glimpses along 45 km (28 miles) of the currently navigable 65 km (40 miles) of river. A short journey, but one to take time over, like a good French wine. J.

**TOP:** An aerial view of the Lot wrapping and winding its way around the vineyards near Douelle which can be seen in the bottom left hand corner.

## ◆◆◆ THINKING OF GOING?

### TRAVEL FACTS

(Telephone numbers shown include dialling code from UK)

**Tourist Centre** - Toulouse, Dongon du Capitole, 31000, Toulouse. Tel: 00 33 5 61 13 55 55.

**Tourist Centre** - Cahors, Departmental Committee of Tourism in the Lot, P.P. 7 107, Quai Cavaignac, 46001, Cahors. Tel: 00 33 5 65 35 07 09.

**Waterways** (French equivalent of BW), Voies Navigables de France (VNF), 8 Port Saint Etienne, 31079, Toulouse. Tel: 00 33 5 61 80 07 18.

**Cruiser Hire:** An up-to-date list of cruiser hire firms can be obtained from: Le Syndicate National des Louers de Bateaux Plaisance, Port de la Bourdonnais, Paris 7.

### Boat hire on the River Lot

Bouziès - Les Bâteaux Safaraid 00 33 5 65 30 22 84.

Bouziès - Nicols (Pierre Cazes) 00 33 5 65 24 32 20.

Cahors - Baboumarine 00 33 5 65 30 08 99.

Douelle - Crown Blue Line 00 33 5 68 23 17 51.