Paddling Through the Perigord

A Gourmand's Guide to Canoeing Southern France

by Paul Hoobyar

OUR THIRD DAY ON THE Vézère River River in Southwestern France found us once again approaching a village at midday with no food in our canoe and the local grocery stores and boulangerie closed for the noon-to-two lunch break. Our lack of cultural synchronicity gnawed at our stomachs and our temperaments.

We carried few of the food stuffs on board that normally accompany a multi-day paddle trip in North America. After all, this was France, and the thought of buying fresh chèvre and brie, baguettes and croissants, and the succulent local strawberries in the riverside towns over-rode any ideas of carrying Mountain House or jerked fruits and meat along. But the national nooner was proving to be a major obstacle as my wife, Bonnie, and I trudged along the hot cobblestone streets of Saint Léon in frustrated silence.

As we were about to blow our budget at one of the open cafés, the sole grocery store opened its doors for the afternoon. Scurrying around, we bought enough meat, cheeses, fruits and wine for a picnic lunch and dinner.

As I stepped out of a small patisserie with my arms wrapped around a huge loaf of country bread, the unexpected sound of string instruments tuning up inside the town's medieval church surprised me. A local, lounging on the stone wall outside the church, told us a 12-piece ensemble was inside preparing for the music festival to be held later in the summer. We spread our tarp under the shade of a willow tree between the church and the river. The 600 year-old limestone walls of the church glowed, sunlit, as the spare strains of a melodious Bach concerto flooded the warm air.

Only a half hour before, we had been another couple canoeing on the brink of matrimonial disaster. Now, we were a scene from Renoir, of lovers picnicking by the river. Cottonwood down floated lazily through the warm air, sparrows and starlings flitted over the river, and the church's acoustics broadcast the woodwinds' and strings' chorus across the water. Over a local bottle of Bergerac red wine, Bonnie and I exchanged knowing smirks that said, "Can you believe this?"

No wonder canoeing has become popular in the past decade on meandering valley streams such as the Vézère and the lower Dordogne. Most of the riverborne vacationers are British, German or Dutch. To cater to this growing market, canoe liveries have sprung up in several towns.

Canoeing on either river in July and August can be as crowded as a boat ride in Central Park. Europeans tend to take their vacations in July and August and many head to the southwest, making these rivers overly crowded during the mid-summer months. As a tourist officer at the main Vézère put-in said, "in July you leave Paris to find Paris in Montingnac." But late May through June finds these rivers little used by vacationers, with greater water flows, less litter, and a more relaxed ambiance along the banks.

The Vézère River is promoted by local canoe rental organizations as an intimate, safe river with outsized 14th century castles along its banks and sites of pre-historic and medieval dwellings carved into its limestone cliffs. It's a muddy, flat river devoid of any real challenge, but it just happens to meander through one of the most beautiful and historic valleys in the world.

Exercise was hard to come by in a canoe on the Vézère, and the gourmet calories available in the villages didn't burn off along the way. For touring, however, canoes are ideal vehicles in the Vézère Valley because they enforce a rhythm and pace on your vacation which relaxes you as no rental car or cow-herding bus or train can.

There was so much to do along the banks of the Vézère, strolling in quaint towns, trying excellent restaurants or visiting Cro-Magnon and medieval ruins; some days we paddled only three kilometers and didn't get on the water until three p.m.

From the Vézère River we visited the Cro-Magnon sites in the *pays de l'homme* (country of man). The town of Les Eyzies, about half-way through our Vézère trip, first struck us as a tourists' nightmare with its caveman statue and forests of souvenir stands lining the sidewalks. Restaurants charged inflated prices compared to nearby towns. But overlooking the town is the National Museum of Prehistory, filled with artifacts unearthed at nearby archaeological sites. Also, just outside of town is a cave called "Font de Gaume," which shelters some of the best artwork of early man.

The skill of the artists who painted these 14,000 year old representations of bison, horses and elk is humbling. Life-like figures, vibrant orange and red pigments and the artists' use of the rock-walled contours for shoulder muscles of the bison, or a crack for the outline of a head or nose converged into a stunning art form.

THE DORDOGNE (of which the Vézère is a tributary) is a bigger volume river with swift clear water and pulse-quickening rapids for open canoeists. Some of the Dordogne's rapids are caused by old dam sites, not surprising for a river continuously used by man since the last ice age.

On our five-day Vézère trip, we spent nights at developed campgrounds, or bivouaced along the bank. We had planned to do the same on the Dordogne, but we postponed that trip twice due to heavy rains. The poor weather eventually forced a pleasant change in our plans.

Two other couples had joined us to canoe the Dordogne. One couple was experienced at river running, but Christian and Eliane, who live outside of Bordeaux, had brought marginal raingear and had no canoeing experience. We sat in the restaurant at the Camping du Saulou campground, drinking expresso coffee and eating croissants, contemplating the rain and our next move. Eliane was also pregnant, all of which made us ponder the wisdom of starting a canoe trip in such dismal weather.

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Kayaker at Chateau de Clerans, an elegant 16th century castle near the village of Saint Leon.

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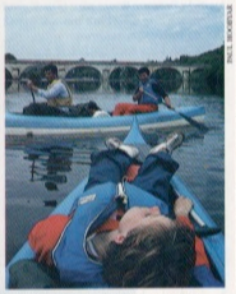
Traveling France by canoe is a participant sport on land as well as water.



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As we approached the take out at Souillac, we put time on hold, and let the river take its course.

The rain and wind subsided that afternoon and our French companions urged the group to put on the water. The air temperature dropped sharply before we got off the bank, and a mist hung three feet off the river shrouding the river ahead of us in eerie fog. Eliane, who spoke little English, shared a canoe with me and repeatedly cried, "trés mysterieux!" as she watched the ghosts of white egrets and fishermen appearing out of the mists.

The 16 kilometers of river from the campground to Beaulieu were rural and gorgeous, without houses or chateaux near the water. A couple of class II rapids tugged on our gunnels as we paddled through them. The continuous gradient whisked us to the town of Beaulieu in three hours, and we camped on an island campground connected to the 12th century town by bridge.

After the tents were up and the soup was on the stove, the skies suddenly darkened and lightning forked across the canyon upstream of us. Margo, one of the other group members, began counting the seconds between the lightning flashes and the booming thunder. "Seven seconds!" she shouted above the gathering wind. "Six seconds!" came the next report. When she yelled "four seconds," the wind blew at a gale force, knocking over our bags and threatening to tear the rain tarp from its grommets. The skies turned to lead 50 feet above the river and horizontal sheets of rain slammed down the canyon. The crowns of cottonwood trees in camp whipped back and forth in tortured agony while the trunks popped and creaked. Branches began crashing down around us and the car campers who shared the campground with us jumped into their vehicles and drove into town, fearing windfallen trees.

We scurried around as we grabbed our food, stove and any gear not spiked down, and ran into the local bathhouse for shelter. Puddles grew in the dirt roads and quickly became rivulets of running mud. As the trees continued to groan and the lights went out in Beaulieu, six soggy paddlers with drenched hair plastered to their skulls toasted a Bergerac Rouge wine to their good fortune at eating dinner in a concrete-walled French bathhouse.

The gale blew itself out before nightfall, but the rain settled in for a steady drumming until morning. The next morning's paper headlined the storm as a "Mini Hurricane" and recorded 60-mile-an-hour winds with serious damage to surrounding towns. Nobody in our group was in a hurry to get on the water the next day, and we ate breakfast in a local pub before packing up our wet bags and tents.

Windfall trees made channel-wide sweepers the next day as we headed downstream from Beaulieu. That afternoon we bucked strong headwinds and nasty looking skies as we paddled with one eye over our shoulder watching the weather. By noon, we had agreed to ignore our budgets and search out an inn at the town of Carennac, since by now our clothes and gear, if not our spirits, were soaked.

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End of day one, and the beginning of our adventure.

Three-and-a-half hours out of Beaulieu we paddled into a side channel that flowed past the town of Carennac.

A concrete mill race had been constructed in the channel upstream of town, and the current raced down the high-walled ramp around a blind corner in front of us. Berry vines climbed up the high, abrupt banks, making scouting impossible from the bank. We paddled our boats back upstream and tied them up on the bank. Traipsing across a sheep farm, we met some local men who chuckled at our dampened looks, but who warmly reassured us that the narrow channel provided safe passage to the center of town. We scouted the bottom end of the mill race from the road, climbed back in our canoes and sped down the ramp to town.

Once inside the "Hotel des Touristes," the proprietress made the six of us feel quite welcome, mud and all. We had been paying the equivalent of between four and six dollars per couple to stay in the campgrounds, and when she told us it would cost us about 11 dollars per couple to stay at her inn, we all laughed at our folly. Why bring all the camping gear, when we could have hot showers and clean sheets each night for not much more money?

We ate dinner that night in the hotel's restaurant and left the next morning after a leisurely stroll around town. The skies were still threatening, and rain fell after we portaged our canoes back to the main river, but we knew that at the next town, Meyronne, there was a hotel and restaurant.

In the afternoon sunlight, Meyronne sat like a red-tiled white ship on the left bank. It is a small, quiet village and its one inn is three centuries old. The bed we had that night felt like it was three centuries old, as well. The mattress was lumpy and formed a big crater in the center, but the food, once again, was outstanding. With a break in the weather, we enjoyed eating in the window-lined dining room and on the terrace overlooking the river.

The following morning a dense, white fog masked the river and valley below the surrounding limestone cliffs. The steps leading down from the hotel to the riverbank evaporated in the fluff, and the sky above sparkled azure in the crisp, morning sunlight. By lunch, the sky was slate grey again, and a drizzle forced us into a a black-oiled, corrugated tin tractor shed for shelter. We stood around in a circle and ate one last river meal as we listened to the rain drumming on the tin roof. I mulled over the grimy tools and old, hand-crank, diesel pump while the rest of the group talked animatedly about what time we could meet next year to do it again. For me, this was one of the best river vacations I had experienced, and I, too, planned on returning next year, *sans* camping gear. ■

Paul Hoobyar is a contributing editor for Canoe. He was assisted in making this trip by Scandinavia Airlines.

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