

# Footnotes to Niaux and Footsteps to Get There

Old World Archaeologist - July 2000

by George Rohrer

When I congratulated the editor of our journal upon the fine production of the March 2000 issue, I mentioned that I had listed half a dozen caves on the front page and abandoned them. A reader also noted this and expressed curiosity about the location and character of the caverns.

George graciously invited me to fill the gap and follow up with pertinent information. May I be forgiven for the bits of autobiography included in the narrative.

## Lascaux

The Cave of Lascaux in the Valley of the Dordogne was discovered in 1940. Lascaux was popular from the very beginning and is one of the most familiar names in decorated caverns. It attracted thousands of visitors for more than twenty years.

My wife and I were privileged to visit the cavern in 1957, once guided by one of the boys who had made the discovery and once with another of the discoverers as guide.

Prehistorians were shocked to find algae growing under the paint in several places. The cave was closed in 1963 and measures were taken to eliminate and control the problem.

There are no plans to reopen the cave.

## Altamira

The paintings in Altamira in Northern Spain were discovered in 1879. Don Marcelino de Sautuola, who owned the property, was accused of employing an artist to paint the pictures. He died in 1887 without having the authenticity of the art generally accepted.

The main hall with its twenty-four polychrome figures of bison and other animals on the ceiling was called the "Sistine Chapel of Prehistory" by the great prehistorian the Abbé Henri Breuil. The cave is still open but visitation is strictly regulated.

## Grotte Cosquer

The Grotte Cosquer on the Mediterranean coast between Marseille and Cassis was discovered by Jean Cosquer, a diving instructor. One day he found an opening thirty-six meters below the level of the sea. During the next few years he kept exploring the watery blackness until one day he emerged into an air pocket 175 meters from the entrance. During subsequent visits his light gradually revealed the presence of cave paintings.

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It is not surprising that few people have been to the cave. It requires the qualities of a diver and a prehistorian with diving skills and much coverage to risk the muddy passage.

Members of the Alliance Française of Raleigh, North Carolina were treated to a slide lecture by Jean Cosquer in 1995.

## Grotte Chauvet

In 1995 the French Ministry of Culture announced the discovery of the magnificent Grotte Chauvet. The cave is located in the rugged Ardèche region in southeastern France.

Three experienced spelunkers exploring the area first came upon the passage that led to the huge cavern. The discoverers were careful not to disturb the paintings or the bones and footprints on the floor. The engravings and paintings include some animals that have never been seen in any other cave. Many have been dated at 30,000 – 32,000 years BP, older than any other art yet found.

A Chauvet stamp was announced, but was never issued because of a legal dispute.

The public will not be admitted in the foreseeable future if ever.

## Rouffignac

The Cave of Rouffignac is ten kilometers southeast of the village of Les Eyzies. On the fourth of July two directors of museums of prehistory had arranged to visit the cavern, and I was invited to tag along. The wife of the man who farmed the property drove us in a truck to the entrance of the cave.

Rouffignac is a very large cavern on three levels. Because of the great number of mammoths pictured inside it is called the “Grotte des Mammouths.”

At a gathering in the farmhouse for a snack after the three hour visit I commented that this had been a grand way to celebrate my national holiday. (Fête Nationale). One of the men quipped “Oh. Today is the fourteenth (le Quatorze) in America.”

The cave had not at that time been opened to the public. Since then a track has been installed with an electric car to accommodate visitors.

## Pech-Merle

The huge cave of Pech-Merle is seventy-five kilometers south of Les Eyzies. Eighty meters from the present entrance the visitors come to the “Black Frieze” with the outlines of twenty-five animals. On the opposite wall are beautifully painted animals that have been copied on postcards and posters.

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In one room may be seen ten well-defined human footprints in the hardened clay.

The cave and its museum are near the two of Cabrerets.

## Font-de-Gaume

Font-de-Gaume is one of the numerous caves and shelters clustered around the village of Les Eyzies in southwest France acclaimed the “Capital of Prehistory.” Since the closing of Lascaux it has been much visited by tourists.

The paintings were discovered in 1901 and like those of Altamira were suspect for years.

The cave is reached after a steep seventy-foot climb. Once inside, the visitor must squeeze through a narrow passage called the “Rubicon”. Of the nearly 200 paintings and engravings the most familiar is the pair of reindeer. The male on the left is nuzzling the face of the kneeling female. Unfortunately the group is much faded and not nearly so clear as on the cancellation or the precanceled stamp Scott 1722.

Among the critics who regarded the paintings of Font-de-Gaume and Altamira as fakes was Emile Cartailhac, professor of Prehistory at the University of Toulouse. The Abbé Henri Breuil and several other believers persuaded Cartailhac to go with them into Font-de-Gaume. They showed him where several concretions and stalactite formations had covered parts of the paintings. The professor was finally convinced and one year later published his famous recantation “Mea Culpa d’un Sceptique”.

After a visit to Font-de-Gaume and other caves in the region it is gratifying to return to Les Eyzies for relaxation and a superb dinner in the Hotel Cro-Magnon.

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