





JANE GIFFORD

Jane Gifford has written and photographed numerous articles on gardening, natural history and travel themes. In 1992 she photographed and co-authored Wilderness Britain? with David Bellamy. She designed and photographed the 1994 International Kodak Calendar. Her current book is The Celtic Wisdom of Trees. She works in France as often as she can



BANK ON A DREAM

JANE GIFFORD falls under the charm of the river either side of Cahors and discovers a quiet gentle, rural landscape between Puy-l'Évêque and St-Cirq-Lapopie that's ideal for nature-lovers

THE RIVER LOT GLIDES BY, FAST, green and simuous, carving loops around immaculately preserved medieval towns along in way. Houses take their chances on the river's fertile flood-plain or avoid its reach stacked up on limestone promontories. Some hang tight to the sides of steep gorges, but all are lured to be as close to the water's edge as they dare.

Held in the river's embrace, many of us first fall under the spell of the Lot inside the walls of Cahors. Eventually, steeped in admiration, and infiltrated to its very heart. They are inseparable. The town is part of the river and the river part of the town.

The surrounding landscape has been shaped the same way by the river. Rich soil, the promise of fish and the prospect of travel have drawn settlers to its banks for thousands of years. Vines, orchards, pasture and woodland were carefully tended by the Gauls along these fertile banks long before Cahors was built. They still are. On the unyielding stony high thousand years of traditional farming have made the landscape around Cabors a paradise for the casual wildlife spotter.

'Une suprise a chaque pai'is one of the Lot's slogars. And for those nature-levers who have never visited this gentle, rural and lesser-known part of south-west France, there really is a surprise at almost every step because it is the wild flowers of the region which make up so much of its charm. If you're in the mood for nature, follow the river and escape for a while

Goats and sheep graze the unyielding stony high ground much as they always have. Cows graze the lush lowlands. Wild pigs still forage

having shopped, eaten and finally had enough of bustling narrow streets, stylish boutiques and elegant restaurants, we inevitably wander to the banks of the river. There we sit, watching the water slip by.

Protected on all sides by a generous loop of the river, Cahors is caressed by the Lot and ground goats and sheep graze much as they always have, while cows graze the lush lowlands. Wild pigs still forage in the woods. The memory and ways of our ancient Celtic ancestors live on in this landscape, where valleys are called 'combes' as they are in Devon and Cornwall, and in the Welsh word 'cwm'. Two into the countryside. The English who have settled along the river either side of Cahors all seem to say the same—the countryside here takes them back to their childhood before intensive agribusiness robbed the British countryside of so much of its treasury of wild flowers. That's why so many people are now



choosing to escape the rigours of life elsewhere to settle here. Indeed the number of people falling under the spell of the place is growing so rapidly, that those more pioneering Brits who have settled in the wilder landscape upriver of Cahors, now refer to towns and villages in the more gentle landscape down around the turn of the 18th century in an attempt to dispel the ancient cults that still persisted, hundreds remain. The Dolmen Circuit down-river of Cahoes between Prayisac and Castelfranc is a pleasantly shaded woodland walk which takes you past many of these old stone relics on the high, dry limestone plateau

oracle in the local dialect. These are small, one-person, domed stone shelters with a single door and no windows, built from the loose limestone which litters the ground. They provided shelter for all corners, particularly wood-pigeon hunters.

Much more well-known are the pigeomiers.

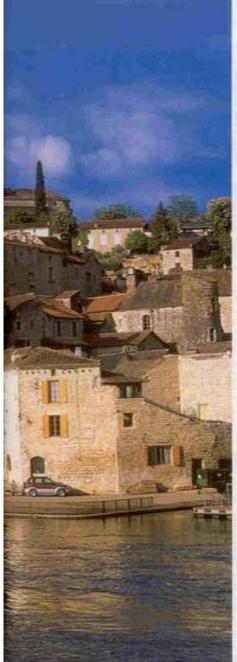
Down-river of Cahors, between Albas and Puy-l'Évêque, judas trees are a peculiarity of the area. In full flower, they brighten the stony hillsides

down-river to the west as 'Kensington'.

You will often chance across prehistoric stone circles, dolmen and standing stones in this part of the Lot Although many were knocked characteristic of the area, known as le ausse. All have their tales to tell of the Lock ancient past.

Here there are also other stone curiosities peculiar to the region known as gariottes, or These are stone towers (see page 68) built to house the pigeons themselves—but not for their meat so much as for their droppings which provided the farmer, and especially the

TRAVEL THE LOT







LEFT: The pretty town of Puy-l'Évèque perches at the water's edge TOP RIGHT: A vibrant Violet Bird's Nest Orchid, one of the Lot's treasury of wild flowers SOTTOM RIGHT: A gariotte, a simple stone shelter, on the Dolmen Circuit down-river of Cahors between Prayssac and Castelfranc

vinture, with a valuable source of fertiliser. The high ground here is otherwise nutrient-poor. In early sammer, orchids, now rare or extract in England, are commonplace. Many are named after the creatures their flowers resemble monkey orchids, man orchids, lady orchids, bee and fly orchids. Others are more familiar such as fragrant, pyramidal and green-winged orchids.

The countryside along this stretch of the River Lot is a casual nature spotter's paradise. Amble across the hills between St-Martin-Labouval and Sauliac-sur-Célé in early summer and you will see wild flowers in their hundreds. Exotic swallowtail butterflies and small blues flutter and skim over these species-rich limestone pastures which are kept short by the grazing of mournful-looking, black-eyed sheep. The River Célé is a tributary of the Lot and is itself well worth a visit.

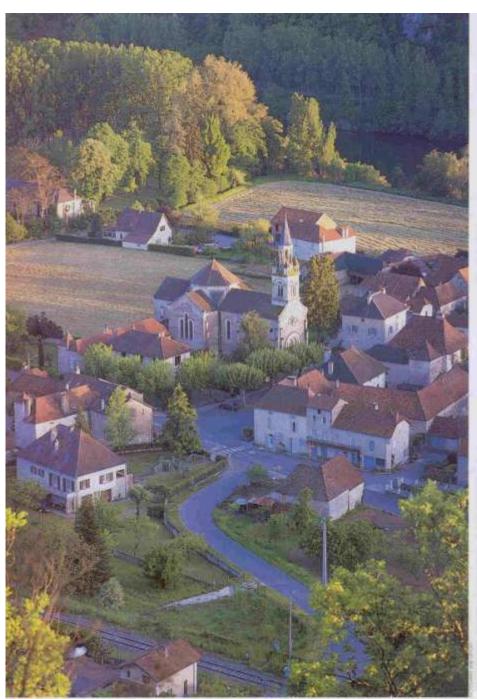
Above the fragrant jumper and oak scrubland of le cause—kites soar in expansive clear blue skies, Hares are a common sight running ahead of you on quiet lanes fringed with scabious and aquilego.

Down-river of Cahors, between Albas and Puy-l'Évêque, judas trees are a peculiarity of the area. In full flower, they brighten the stony hillsides with sudden splashes of carmine pink. Here in the valley bottoms the landscape is more mellow. Lady orchids stand in groups around the walnut groves. They grow well over a foot tall. Their blood-red and white flowerheads are often far bigger than your hand. Woodpeckers drum our their rhythms in shady oak woods where slight brown deer with tan numps startle then dissolve among the trees.

At dusk the deer can be heard barking, announcing nights so bright with countless galaxies, that a little star-gazing is a must to the somantic soul. There is so little light pollution, especially up-river, east of Cahoes, that even the least poetic amongst us will be tempted out, glass in hand, to spot a few familiar constellations.

There are many excellent regional wines to choose from the full-bodied, deep-red bottles which form the lifeblood of Cahors. The best

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ABOVE: St-Martin-Labouval is surrounded by wooded hills packed with wild flowers

of it is grown on the stony high ground of le snase—the higher and stomer the ground the more prized the resulting wine.

There is also a rosé which, drunk chilled, makes a great summer tipple. Consumed en plein air with local walnut bread, cabéca-small round velvety goat cheeses-and perhaps some local pdté de foie gras, the wine of Cahors is especially delicious. Try the succulent local prunes for dessert. They are nothing like their shrivelled English consins.

Other regional specialities include tender lamb reared on the high, herb-rich pasture; precious truffles and earthy, wild mushrooms such as aper from the local woods; strawberries, fragrant and glossy; asparagus, green and white, which melt in your mouth; walnuts, of course, and le cassoulet, a stew made of goose, mutton, pork and beans. There are also all manner of delicacies derived from every part of the duck and goose imaginable-some definitely not for the faint-hearted such as stuffed gizzard and szomach.

Puy-l'Évêque is a busy market town downriver from Cahors where all such local delicacies can be found. The river here is still dominated by the keep of the town's 12thcentury castle that Richard Cœur de Lion once took for his own and jealously guarded for the English crown. Whether mooching for

delicacies around the market stalls of Puyl'Évêque or relaxing with a summer picnic, perched high on the cliffs to the east at St-Cirq-Lapopie, you will soon fall under the charm of the region. Small wonder that Sous le channe du Lor is another of the slogans chosen by the region to advertise itself to the rest of the world. Falling under its spell is so easy to do. @

IANE GIFFORD

HOW TO GET THERE

By air: Flybe operates three flights a week to Bergerac from Bristol and Birmingham. For more details, visit www.flybe.co.uk. Ryanair flies to Bergerac daily from London-Stansted. For more details, visit www.ryanair.co.uk Flybe flies daily to Toulouse from Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol and Southampton. Tel: 0871 700 0535; www.flybe.com easyJet flies daily to Toulouse from London Gatwick.Tel: 0870 6000 000; www.easyjet.com BMIbaby operates a weekly service between Cardiff and Toulouse, flying on Saturdays only, and offers four flights per week from Nottingham East Midlands to Toulouse. Tel: 0870 264 2229; www.bmibaby.com

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel Restaurant Chartreuse, Saint Georges Tel:(Fr) 5 65 35 17 37 Spectacular views of the river Rooms 65€ menus from 45€ Hôtel Restaurant Claude Marco Lamagdelain Tel:(Fr) 5 65 35 30 64 Four rooms with dinner in a vaulted cellar Rooms 95-145€:menus 30€ - 70€ Hostellerie de Goujounac Goujounac Tel:(Fr) 5 65 36 68 67 Old coaching inn in a quiet and unspoiled medieval village. Rooms from 45€ - 55€: menus 13€-50€ la Metairie Basse Sauliac-sur-Célé Bed and breakfast in a traditional farmhouse. Rooms from 38F Tet (Fr) 5 65 31 38 45 email:richeesman@wanadoo.fr

WHAT TO DO

River trips Société de Navigation et de Tourisme 297, rue Saint-Géry 46000 Cahors Tel: (Fr) 5 65 35 98 89 Guided tours of Cahors Tel: (Fr) 5 65 30 16 55

Le-petit-train-de-cahors@wanadoo.fr www.petit-train.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Office de Tourisme Cahors 46000 Cahors Teb (Fr) 5 65 53 20 65 www.mairie-cahors.fr

CONTACTS

EXPLORE WITH A WALK

Puy-L'Evêque, Prayssac and Cajarc are attractive towns well-served with shops and eating places. Go early in the morning for the best pick of local specialities in the street markets and kit yourself out with a picnic and large-scale map of the area (Serie Bleue, I.G.N.). Everywhere there are plenty of well-marked footpaths to follow.

From Puy-L'Évêque drive or hike down-river to Duravel then follow lanes north-west over the hills through unspoilt countryside to the Chateau de Bonaguil. Walk around the beautifully preserved 13th-century medieval castle. In a secluded valley surrounded by rolling wooded hills and pasture, Bonaguil is a romantic surprise. It is built on a solitary rocky outcrop and comes suddenly in to view as you drop down off le causse. You can eat well and there is an ancient warehouse filled with curiosities and antiques where you can buy arts and crafts from excellent local artists.

Explore the River Célé, a tributary of the Lot

which cuts a deep gorge through the hills on its way to join the main river at Conduché. At Cabrerets a row of medieval houses is dwarfed at the foot of La Falaise de Rochecourbe, hemmed in between sheer cliff and river. A subterranean river pours from the cliffs themselves at La Fontaine de la Pescalerie. Work up an appetite ambling upriver to Marcilhac-sur-Célé and check out its 15th-century Benedictine priory. You can eat in the village.

Not far up-river from Conduché is Saint-Cirq-Lapopie. The whole of this lovely little medieval town is a national monument. No obvious signs of modernity are allowed here so you get a unique impression of the past; the view over the jumble of tiled roofs and across the river is spectacular.

On the Causse de Gramat above Cabrerets is La Grotte de Peche Merfe. Leaving the hills for the cool of the caves can be a relief in the full heat of the summer and you will be treated to some of the best prehistoric cave paintings in France. For places to eat followed by a stroll through the countryside, try the French publication Promenades Gourmandes www.promenades-gourmandes.com

Horse riding: Club Hippique du Quercy 117, ch.du Club Hippique 46000 Cahors. Tel: (Fr! 5 65 35 20 61

Water-skiing: Cahors Sport Nautique Base Nautique de Regoord 46000 Cahors

Vineyard tours: La Maison du Vin 430 avenue Jean Jaures BP 61, 46002 Cahors Tel: (Fr) 5 65 23 22 24

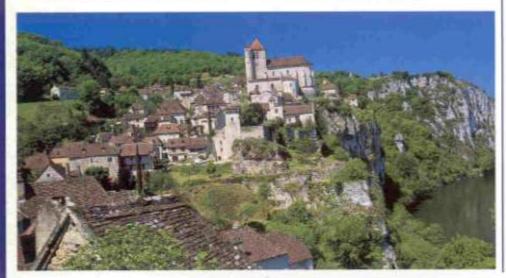
Guided tours of Cahors: Tel:(Fr) 5 65 30 16 55 Le-petit-train-de-cahorsiïwanadoo.fr www.petit-train.com

Cultural Centres: Grenier du Chapitre Rue Saint James 46000 Cahors Tel: (Fr) 5 65 23 07 50

La Chantrerie 35, rue de la Chantrerie 46000 Cahors Tel: (Fr) 5 65 36 58 28

Museums: Musee du Vin de Cahors Chateau de la Coste 46700 Grezels. Tel: (F) 5 65 21 34 18 Musee de la Resistance Espace Bessieres 46009 Cahors

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 22 14 25



SIX THINGS YOU MUST SEE OR DO

- Wander around Puy-L'Evêque, a bustling medieval market town on the River Lot
- Visit Saint Cirq-Lapopie, a national monument and beautiful and medieval town
- Along the River Célé, the cliffed river gorge: La Fontaine de la Pescalerie.
- subterranean river: Marcilhac-sur-Célé, a 15th-century Benedictine priory

 Take time in Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, a perfectly preserved medieval town in a dramatic setting
- See the prehistoric cave paintings at La Grotte de Peche Merle Malk the ridge ways which run across le causse above Albas