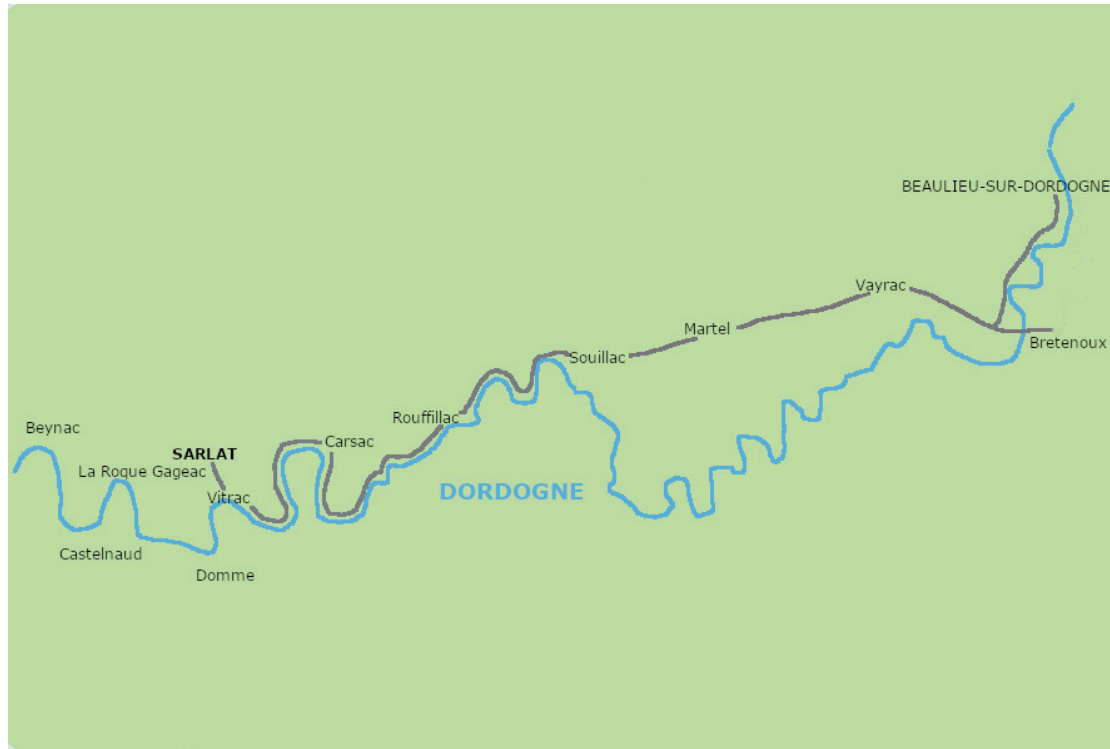


6 - THE DORDOGNE REGION: 1



Thursday, 28 May

As it was cloudy this morning when I woke, I did not get up until nine o'clock. Just after I had washed, the lady of the house tapped on my door and presented me with a complimentary breakfast of coffee and some sweet bread. She explained that as she was about to go out and would not have time to tidy my room, she was giving me breakfast by way of an apology. I was very grateful and sat down to enjoy the simple meal – though I was still hungry afterwards!

As the weather seemed to be fine enough, I decided to go off for another long walk, and this time I headed for Domme, a small town by the Dordogne river, south of Sarlat. I left the guesthouse at ten o'clock, bought some bread and set off along the main road to Vitrac, which I discovered was quite a picturesque village. I reached its little grocery shop just before it closed at midday and bought two bananas, two apples and some milk. This would have to do me for the rest of the day, for the grocery shops were only open during the morning as today was a public holiday.

I then sat down on a low wall to rest and eat my simple lunch of bread, cheese, a banana, an apple and most of the milk. The milk, which was of the long-lasting variety, had quite an unpleasant taste.



Domme

I then crossed the Dordogne and walked to the fascinating town of Domme, which is perched on top of a hill overlooking the spectacular valley. Although the old buildings had great charm, the effect was spoilt by the presence of so many other tourists (many of whom were English) and ubiquitous souvenir shops. Unfortunately it began to rain heavily soon after I arrived. I sheltered for a while in a dark little church, then moved from porch to porch in an effort to dodge the rain. I eventually ended up sitting in the shelter of one of the stone gateways into the town, watching the rain and nodding off asleep.



Domme

Knowing that I could not stay here forever, I eventually moved off and, giving up my plan to see some more of the neighbouring towns, I plodded along the road and hitch-hiked a lift back to Sarlat. I was first brought to Sénac and then from there to Sarlat by a Middle Eastern man whose French I could not understand at all.

Back in Sarlat I bought some postcards, returned to the guesthouse (which was now empty) and, after I had eaten something, wrote some postcards and brought my diary up to date. As the weather cleared up and the sun began to shine, I went out for a walk after I had finished writing. Again I left the town, returning to the countryside, and climbed up into the surrounding hills. With the scent of rain-washed grass in my nostrils, I looked out over the patches of mist that had formed in the valleys, listening to the sound of the crickets and the song of the birds. When I reached the top of the hill that I had been climbing, I returned quickly to the town in the gathering dusk.

In Sarlat I rambled once again around the narrow alleyways of the old quarter. I then sat on a wall facing the main square and the town hall, watching the tourists and people dining outside the various restaurants. The church clock struck eleven at an uneven tempo, with a long gap between some of the rings. Moments later the harsh-sounding bell of the town hall clock rang out the time in an equally erratic manner.

Enchanted by the dramatic illumination of the wonderful little town, I wandered around once again, then finally returned to the guesthouse and went to bed.

Friday, 29 May

I woke this morning to the sound of rain, though by the time I was ready to leave, it had stopped and the sun was shining.



Beynac

Soon after ten o'clock I arrived at the main road to Beynac and began hitchhiking. After a short wait, a young man picked me up in his car and brought me to the town. I was immediately bowled over by the sight of it: a collection of small yellow buildings clinging to the sheer face of a cliff that was bathed

in the early morning sunshine, and a castle at the very top of the prominence. It looked just like a scene from a fairy tale.



Beynac

Like a true tourist, I took out my camera and began to photograph the place, taking care to exclude the hotels and restaurants. It was obvious that this extraordinary place was very commercialized, though it was quite understandable that visitors would very much want to see it.

Pulling off my jumper, for it had by now turned very warm, I set about climbing up to the castle. Walking up the steep and winding pathways proved to be hard work, but it was well worth the effort. Outside the rustic stone houses grew masses of colourful flowers, either in tiny gardens or in window boxes. Here and there could be heard the cackling and crowing of hens. Each little alleyway had its own particular charm; at every turn there was something different to be seen.

I eventually reached the top and discovered a car park full of coaches and hordes of tourists emerging from what looked like a rather uninteresting castle. I decided to avoid such a tourist trap and so, after I had enjoyed gazing down at the splendid view from beside a little church, I made my way back down through the fascinating village, this time going a different way. I encountered many English visitors and spoke to a middle-aged couple as I returned to the road.

Finding a grocer's shop, I bought a can of beer, then walked to a shady spot by the river that offered a magnificent view of the town through the trees. I sat down here to eat my simple lunch of bread, sausage meat, a tomato and an apple, all washed down with the beer. Shortly afterwards, a group of French cyclists came along and lunched nearby.

By the time I had walked to my next destination, Castelnau, I was fatigued. I sat on a bridge facing a high hill with a castle perched on the top and a little town clinging to its side. Although the sun had disappeared behind a bank of clouds, it still remained hot. As soon as I set off once again to explore this pretty little town, the sun came out to cheer up the place – and to boil me. Slowly and painfully I clambered up the narrow pathways, stopping to draw breath and to admire the little gardens all bright with flowers, and to

watch the local women attending to their plants. They wore simple clothing and wide sun hats. It was obvious that the pace of life here was slow and relaxed. From what I could see, the interiors of the houses looked simple; no doubt they were pleasantly cool during the summer.



Castelnaud

At the very top I found a ruined castle and a wide expansive view of the Dordogne valley that included the winding river and the surrounding large tilled fields. Here and there were farmhouses, and in the distance could be seen the town of Beynac. I then made my way down to the river by a different route, now gazing at the hillside and the little town with its pretty church. After another short rest on the bridge, I set off and headed for the next town, La Roque Gageac.

Reduced to a slow and relaxed pace by the heat of the sun, I now had plenty of time to drink in the beauty of the surrounding countryside. On both sides were ploughed fields of tobacco and maize; beside the farmhouses stood little shelters made of wire mesh and with tin roofs, in which cobs of corn were being stored. In the furrowed brown earth of the fields, tiny leaves of newly-planted crops shone in the bright sunshine. Here and there the landscape was dotted with clumps of trees and various old buildings. Men and women worked slowly in the fields and stopped to wish me '*bonjour*'. Clumps of colourful flowers grew in the ditches by the roadside: poppies, buttercups, huge daisies, bluebells, and wild red roses. Despite the noise of passing traffic, the countryside was tranquil and the air was filled with the sound of birds and crickets. Although so much walking was very tiring, I was in a blissful mood. It was only now that I was beginning to appreciate in full the French countryside, its way of life, and the people's love of food and drink. I began to feel thirsty and longed for a glass of red wine of the Périgord region, and also a rest beside the fast-flowing river with a view of a castle before me.



La Roque Gageac

This eventually materialized when I reached La Roque Gageac. Initially the town struck me as being rather grim and uninteresting, especially as there was no sunshine. Here the rocks were sheer, and the buildings and the castle were of the same dull colour as the rock. However, by the time I reached the far end of the town and the sun had come out, I then had my ideal view: the river, the castle reflected in the water, the sheer rock faces and the picturesque old buildings. However, I still felt that Beynac was more beautiful. I sat on the low wall by the river, in the shade of a tree, and drank in the scene as I watched some young people canoeing in the river. What a splendid idea! I wondered how one could hire a boat. I had seen some rowing boats here and there earlier in the day.



La Roque Gageac

After I had gazed around to my satisfaction and eaten a banana, I went into a little restaurant, where I discovered that what I had thirsted for – a glass of red wine – was the cheapest drink available. When I ordered one, I was asked if I wanted ordinary or superior wine; I chose the latter. I was delighted to sit

down in the cool interior of the restaurant, to relax, and to sip my wine while gazing out of the window at the river. A very large man, his suit flapping about him, then entered, sat down, studied a newspaper and ordered a glass of beer. Several other French people came in for a quick drink. I stayed for a while and, before I departed, had a look at the newspaper that the man had left behind.

I left by about six o'clock and continued towards Domme. The sun had now disappeared behind the clouds and it was a little cooler. As the road suddenly became busy and uninteresting after I had passed Domme, I stuck out my thumb to get a lift. A car stopped and the friendly and chatty driver drove me all the way to Sarlat. Out of curiosity I asked him why so many place names here ended with *-ac*. He did not know, but thought that a local dialect might have had something to do with it.

Back in Sarlat I enquired at the train station about hiring a bicycle and was told that there would be no problem doing this. I then set off to find an affordable restaurant; for the first time I felt the desire to indulge in some proper French food. Although tired after all the walking, I was in a relaxed and pleasantly drowsy mood after today's beer and wine.

As a cheap restaurant that had been recommended to me was not serving food in the evening, I went to a tiny bar and restaurant in the old quarter, where I discovered that I could have a good meal at a reasonable cost. Feeling quite fatigued by now, I sat down and ordered a starter of *crudités*, a main course of an omelette *aux omelettes* with chips, and a dessert of stewed apple. I washed down the meal with a glass of red wine and afterwards asked for a small cup of black coffee. The bill came to 22.80 francs, which I thought was excellent value.

To finish the day, I sat on the wall by the main square and then returned to the guesthouse, which once again I found empty. I had left a note on the door, requesting to stay longer; the lady had written '*d'acord*' (*sic*) to signify that this would be all right. After I had telephoned the youth hostel at Brive to establish that the one at Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne would be open, I had a shower and settled down to write my diary. It had been a very enjoyable day.

Saturday, 30 May

I woke – if that was the right word, for I had hardly slept at all – to a fine morning, with the sun blazing from a clear blue sky. I had decided to hire a bicycle today and head off eastwards along the valley to the youth hostel at Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, where I would stay for a while, all being well. I had a shower and then began to pack my belongings. The lady of the house then knocked on the door and invited me to come downstairs for breakfast.

This time I was treated to breakfast in her dining room. The lady sat down beside me and chatted to me while I drank a large bowl full of *café au lait* and ate toasted rolls with butter and jam. She was on her own this morning and it seemed as though she was glad of some company. She very kindly complimented me on my spoken and written French, then told me about the little place that she had. She explained that it was not a hotel but a private house with rooms that she used for accommodating students and the like. She

agreed with me that accommodation in France, and in this area in particular, was too expensive, especially for just one person. I had quite a long and interesting chat with her in her cosy dining room, then paid up, said goodbye and left.

Before I had left, the lady had told me of a bicycle shop nearby where I could hire a bike. I quickly found it and spoke to a very chatty lady. Her husband fetched a fairly good lightweight racing bicycle from the basement and, while the lady got everything in order, I went off to change some more money. The first two banks could not help me but the third one did, without any bother at all.

I returned to the shop, where the lady was busy talking to other customers and left me waiting. At last I managed to adjust the handlebars and saddle to my liking, paid a deposit of 130 francs, and finally left the shop at about eleven o'clock. So much for my early start! As soon as I had secured my luggage to the carrier at the back, I set off in the boiling heat, glad to escape from the busy little town.

Avoiding the main road, I managed to make my way along some narrow country lanes and dropped down to Montford by the river. The château on the hill looked splendid in the sunshine but I did not stop to examine it, for I needed to buy some provisions in the next village, Carsac – already I was feeling hungry! I reached this beautiful little village, with its tree-lined square, just before midday when the shops were due to close. Here I bought bread, orange juice, fruit and pâté. I then cycled on to a shady spot, where I stopped for lunch, which I ate sitting on a bridge.

At about one o'clock I set off again, my luggage now secured better to the carrier and with my trousers rolled up, my socks off and my sandals on. Later I removed my shirt and cycled in my vest as it had become so hot. Free-wheeling downhill against a slight breeze was always very welcome. As I was aiming to reach my destination by this evening, and as the journey would be long, I pushed on at a reasonable pace, only stopping when it was necessary. I continued to follow the river, passing woods, hills and countless fields, many of which were bright with poppies. People wearing wide hats worked slowly and methodically in the farms.



Souillac

Although the scenery was excellent, I got the feeling that I had left the best of it behind in the region that I had visited during the previous day. Gone were the spectacular towns clinging to the sides of hills; the towns that I now passed were more conventional and modern. However, many had interesting old town centres and churches, notably Rouffillac, Peyrillac, Cazoulès, and the larger and more modern town of Souillac. This last town had an unusual stone church with domed roofs near its main square.

The journey from Souillac to Martel became very difficult as most of it was uphill and some of the roads looked as though they were heading downhill, but were not. By the time I reached Martel – a lovely little town with grey stone houses and a fine church – I was feeling very hot, exhausted and extremely thirsty. I therefore stopped and found a cheap café, where I sat down to drink some very welcome cool beer to the accompaniment of a noisy pinball machine that was in use. While looking out of the window at the square, I listened to a group of young fellows chatting. After a short while some very good-looking girls arrived and all of them went through a solemn and silent ritual of kissing nearly every lad in the café on the cheeks three or four times, depending on how close the friendship was. I found this custom, which I had noticed was quite common in this region, fascinating. During the ritual conversation stopped, and all one could hear was *kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss*.



Martel

After I had drunk my beer and rested, I consulted my map and set off once again. Leaving Martel, I began to freewheel downhill and then, after a sharp descent with a series of hairpin bends, I found myself back in the valley by the river, heading for Vayrac. Just before I reached the town of Bretenoux, I crossed a bridge over the Dordogne, stopped to rest by the water's edge and ate some bread and pâté as I was now feeling hungry. Some men appeared, wished me *bon appetit* and set off in a boat. I looked at my map once again and discovered that it was not necessary to continue to Bretenoux by taking the main road to Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne; instead, I could skirt the river by cycling along a minor road from Liourdres. This I did and found myself in some really excellent and picturesque countryside, away from the *autoroute*

and the traffic. The scenery looked idyllic in the evening sun, and it was obvious that the pace of life here was very relaxed. Tired by now, I proceeded slowly, stopping now and then to admire the views.



The youth hostel at Beaulieu

I finally arrived at Beaulieu at about half past seven and soon found the charming youth hostel. An old building made of stone and timber, it overlooked the river and was situated in a small square in the old quarter of the town. Unfortunately the peace of the beautiful location was marred by the presence of a coach bus and a large group of German students who had invaded the place. I searched for a free bed and at last found one, much to my relief, upstairs in a separate dormitory. I then looked around for the young lady in charge of the place and eventually found her. She welcomed me kindly and told me that I could stay as long as I liked as the Germans would leave after just two nights. As I was now feeling ravenously hungry, I asked her for directions to the cheapest restaurant.



Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne

I found the place easily, went in at about half past eight and asked to see the menu. I chose the cheapest meal, priced at 30 francs, and sat down in the empty dining room. I started with a big bowl of soup; next came an *hors d'oeuvre* of *crudités* with eggs, followed by a main dish of chips, some rather tasteless meat and lettuce, and the meal finished with a choice of cheeses and a dish of stewed apple. With the meal I drank some *rosé* wine from Anjou and, after I had finished, I asked for a cup of strong black coffee. The bill came to 37.50 francs, but to my horror I discovered that I only had 32.50 francs in my pocket. I offered to fetch some money immediately, but the lady in charge told me that there was no need to worry, for I could pay her the balance on the following evening. I apologized profusely and was escorted out, for the restaurant was closed to the public by now.

I then wandered through the narrow streets of the charming old town centre and eventually found my way back to the hostel. There I chatted with a pleasant American girl and then a very kind French couple, who gave me a bowl of herbal tea. This I accepted gratefully, for I felt quite thirsty again. I discovered that the young wife had once stayed in Delgany, near Dublin, for a year some time previously; she had gone there to learn English and to work as an *au pair* girl.

I eventually said goodnight to her and her husband, and retired to bed at about midnight.