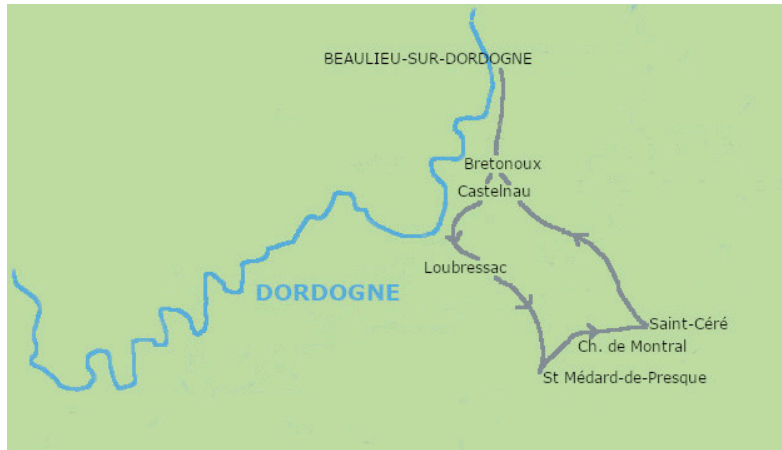


## 8 – THE DORDOGNE REGION: 3



Thursday, 4 June

Although the weather did not look very good this morning, I decided to go off on a tour that Annie had recommended. I left at about half past nine and cycled along the main road to Bretenoux. Although it was a little cool and cloudy, the temperature was just right for cycling. After I had passed through Bretenoux, I stopped by the nearby château of Castelnau to have a look at it. The threatening clouds hanging overhead gave the place an eerie feel.



*Castelnau*

I now approached the mountains, which meant that I was obliged to push the bike and walk. As the morning wore on, the clouds overhead began to disperse and the sun made a welcome appearance. Up and up I climbed,

looking down over spectacular views of the valley below and the surrounding lush scenery. From up here I could see the château of Castelnau standing proud on top of its hill, its dull red stone in sharp contrast to the lush greenery all around it. At one time it must have been alive with people, but now it stood lifeless and crumbling.



*Loubressac*

Soon I arrived at a spot that offered a dramatic view of Loubressac, my first destination: a tiny town with a little château perched on the top of a hill. Here the air was clear, the surrounding countryside was fresh after the previous day's rain, and hardly a sound was to be heard. Loubressac, when I reached it, turned out to be both a fascinating and pretty place. As in most of these charming French villages, colourful flowers could be seen everywhere – either in pots or planted in gardens. The curious little château was being rennovated and was therefore closed to the public. The church, on the other hand, was open and had an attractive interior with painted details highlighted in gold.

In an alley beside the church, the sound of a car horn rudely shattered the quietness of the sleepy village. It was the postman; he had stopped to deliver

letters to a nearby house and to an old lady who came hobbling out of her front garden. I noticed that, as in other villages, many of the inhabitants seemed to be elderly, friendly and polite.

The rustic architecture here was very pleasing. I ambled around the few tiny streets and then, tantalized by the smells of cooking somewhere, made my way to a restaurant in the main square. Here I enjoyed a huge meal for just 25 francs. The service, however, was a little careless; undoubtedly this was due to the number of workmen present and the fact that I was one of the last people to arrive. I had soup, an *entrée* of cheese pastries, a main dish of meat and cauliflower, then cheese and fruit. With this I drank a glass or two of basic table wine and some water. I arrived at the restaurant shortly after midday and staggered out at two o'clock.

Feeling quite stuffed and slightly tipsy after the wine, I sat down under a tree in the square to recover. I then moved off at half past two and cycled to the next village, Autoire, where I was greeted in the usual manner by the vociferous barking of dogs. In the fields nearby, cowbells clanged tunelessly – though one or two had a pleasantly musical ring. Here the houses were bigger; once again the local architecture was interesting to behold and the interiors looked dark, though cosy. Ivy grew on the walls and the gardens were full of flowers. Only a few people were to be seen here, though more could be heard inside the houses. The local church was closed; when I paused to admire it from the outside, I could hear the sound of a little river nearby. I walked along it in the shade of the trees in order to see a nearby waterfall, passing by an elderly woman who was cutting long grass with slow strokes of a scythe. From her I received a broad smile and a carefully enunciated greeting: '*bonjour*'. An old man sitting on a chair by his hall door wished me a polite '*bonjour monsieur*'.

Still a little tipsy after the wine, I returned from the rather unexciting waterfall and, after I had paused to watch a squirrel run up a tree, I walked back to where I had left my bicycle. Just as I expected, the bike – which was unlocked and still had my bag attached to the carrier – was still there.



*Saint-Médard-de-Presque*



I now cycled along a very narrow and little-used country road to get to the next village, Saint-Médard-de-Presque. This turned out to be a rather uninteresting place compared to the other villages, but the surrounding farms and fields looked exceptionally beautiful in the afternoon sunshine.



*Château de Montral*

I then found myself on a main road, where I noticed a signpost pointing to Les Grottes de Presque. As I had seen none of the grottoes here, I decided to take a look. As I made my way uphill, yet another spectacular view of the mountains and valleys appeared. I arrived to find it too late to visit the grottoes and so I made do with enjoying a fine view of the Château de Montral, which was at the other end of a nearby valley.



*Saint-Céré*

Continuing on the main road, I now dropped down into the valley and cycled to the next town, Saint-Céré. This I found too modern and noisy for my liking, though there were a few fine old buildings in it. I bought some brown

bread, ambled through some of the streets, and had a quick look at the ruined and rather uninteresting château on top of a nearby hill. In one of the squares were some very old timber and stone buildings of unusual construction. The church was rather stark and clinical inside.

After a quick look around, I cycled off along the main road to Bretenoux and returned to the hostel at about eight o'clock, passing through the by now familiar farmland near Liourdres. Back in the hostel I met a French student of art and architecture who was on his way to Portugal. I had my evening meal sitting on the steps of the nearby Penitents' Church and chatted to the lad, who was very pleasant. He too was keeping a diary. He kindly gave me his address in Paris if ever I needed accommodation there.

Annie arrived later, attended to the French lad and then to me, for I had decided to leave on the following morning. I payed her 102 francs for my accommodation in the hostel and gave her my telephone number in case she ever came to Ireland. We then wished each other goodbye, for she had to be up at six o'clock the following morning in order to pick more strawberries. She had been doing this job all during the week. Indeed, the area was rich with strawberries; I had seen rows and rows of them growing under long plastic covers.



Friday, 5 June

I woke at about seven and was delighted to discover that it was a fine summer's morning. After breakfast with the French lad I set off on the bicycle at half past eight. It was the ideal time to leave, for it was not too hot and the air was delightfully fresh. As a market in the town centre blocked my route, I crossed the bridge and took the main road to Bretenoux. Although I made good speed along this road, I probably added extra mileage to my journey

back to Sarlat. Nevertheless, I decided not to rush and in general to take the minor and more picturesque roads along the Dordogne valley.

At Puybrun, on the northern bank of the river, I cycled through the familiar farmland, which I enjoyed seeing once again, for the scenery hereabouts looked really fantastic in the early morning sunshine. I then crossed the river again to the beautiful little town of Carennac, slowing down to admire it anew, then followed the river to nearby Mézels.



*Mézels*

Next came Floirac, another pretty village, then a scenic route uphill, which meant that I had to dismount and walk for a while. After a bit of confusion over bridges, I made my way to Creysse, which turned out to be a very picturesque village with an unusual old church. Like all the surrounding villages, it was sleepy and only a handful of people were out and about.



*Creysse*

I was lucky this morning, for all the roads were lined with trees that offered some cool shade. I now passed through Saint Sozy, crossed a bridge and went through Meyronne, which was quite pleasant. On the south side of the river again, I headed down to Lacave, where I found more touristy grottoes and a magnificent old château built precariously on a rock overlooking the Dordogne. As I was now becoming rather hungry (it was approaching midday), I quickly made my way to the next village, Pinsac, north of the river. In order to get to it, I had to push the bike uphill along another dramatic scenic route.

In Pinsac I found the one and only restaurant, which was attached to a small hotel, and sat down for a meal that would cost me 25 francs. Once again I requested a *demi-pichet* of *vin ordinaire* and some water. Fortunately the meal here was not so heavy. It started with cold meat and *crudités*, followed by the main course: *steak au beurre* with *pommes frites*. As usual, the steak was undercooked and was hard to chew. For the final course I opted for some fruit: an orange and a banana. As I had been diluting the wine up to this point and still had some left in the carafe, I polished it off neat. It suddenly went to my head and for the life of me I could neither think nor see straight. Although I had refused an offer of coffee, I now called for a cup, which I hoped might sober me up. As it had little effect, I staggered out of the restaurant feeling dizzy and disorientated.

I have no idea how I managed to make it to my next stop, Souillac, but I did! There, in the noisy town centre, I changed £30 into local currency and posted off my last film but one. I then returned to the bridge, crossed the river again to the south side and continued my journey along the quieter and more picturesque roads. When I arrived at the little hamlet of Saint-Julien, I telephoned the shop in Sarlat where I had hired the bike and asked the lady if I could hold on to it until Sunday evening. As I could not, for the shop would be closed, I said that I would return it on Saturday (the following day), as planned. However, as soon as I had put down the receiver, I decided that there was not much point in holding on to the bicycle for just one more day, and so made up my mind to return it today and head northwards to Dijon, on my way back to Paris.

In order to get to the shop in Sarlat by six o'clock, I now left the scenic route, crossed over the river again and took the shortest main road to the town. Cycling the last few kilometres of the journey in the heat, pushing slightly uphill and racing against time, proved to be quite exhausting. I made it on time and returned the bicycle. As I had paid the lady 130 francs and as the hiring only came to 105 francs, she gave me the change.

Once out of the shop, I left, walked wearily up the road and began to hitch for a lift to Brive, where I had decided to stay the night in the youth hostel. This would be cheaper than staying in a hotel in Sarlat, and it would knock off a little of the following day's long journey. I had thought of getting myself to Ussel this evening, but gave up the idea when I realized how far away Brive was!

I got there in a series of three lifts, the first from a pleasant man who was involved in local politics, the second from an almost silent couple, and the third from a young man who kindly left me at the youth hostel. This turned



out to be a very large and plush establishment. Not surprisingly, I was shocked at the price of staying here; as I was obliged to hire a sheet, I had to pay 30.50 francs. I managed to avoid paying for breakfast by saying that I would have to leave early on the following morning.

After a welcome cup of tea and a bite to eat, I went to the nearest telephone and tried to ring home, but there was no answer. I returned, had a shower and sat down to write my diary. Later a chap from Portugal arrived and we chatted together in French.



Saturday, 6 June

I woke at about half past six this morning; having had a quick and simple breakfast of my own making in the kitchen, I left an hour later with a French lad who had the key of the gate. I then walked to the main road to Tulle, where I started hitch-hiking. After half an hour I got a lift that only brought me a short distance. As there was little traffic today and as most people were heading off in packed cars for the long weekend, I had to be content with several short journeys from local people. One of them, between Tulle and Ussel, was in a noisy little buggy with no doors, which was driven by a cheerful and chatty fellow.

I eventually got a good long lift from a pleasant young man who was off to a wedding in Moulins. As we approached Clermont-Ferrand, the scenery changed a little for the better as we began to see the snow-topped mountains of the Massif Central in the distance.

After the very large and uninteresting town of Clermont-Ferrand, the scenery became flat and boring. As the heater was on in the car, I soon became drowsy and fell asleep. The driver went on, non-stop; he had been



driving from Toulouse, starting at 7.30 this morning, and had not stopped for a break once. At lunchtime he gave me a sandwich (he had two in a bag) and during the journey he whiled away the time playing cassette tapes, some of which were of rather noisy music.

When the journey ended, he left me on the main road to Autun and wished me *bon voyage*. A middle-aged couple then picked me up and drove me to the little town of Digoïn, where the man told me I would find plenty of traffic. In the town centre I bought a bottle of ginger ale, some cheese and bread, then returned to the main road. This time two elderly men picked me up. They were quite comical and were interested to find out all about me. They apologized for only being able to bring me a short distance, but to compensate for this invited me to join them in a country pub, where they treated me to a cool glass of beer. They drank white wine and clinked their glasses with mine, wishing me the best of luck on my journey.

We then set off again and the two old fellows left me at Gueugnon. From here I got a lift from a young couple to Montceau-les-Mines, and from there a man in a van full of electrical equipment drove me to Chalon-sur-Saône. Here I arrived at a huge toll route and was ordered off it by gendarmes, who came along in a car and demanded to see my passport. I had to go back to the entry to the road before the ticket booths, where there was very little traffic.

I now held up a sheet of paper with the word 'Dijon' written on it and soon a very respectable couple in a large, luxurious car stopped and drove me there. We had a very long and interesting conversation during the journey. As the husband and wife had travelled far and wide, they were quite cosmopolitan. When we approached Dijon, clouds appeared and it turned very dark. Unsurprisingly, it began to drizzle rain as we entered the large town.

This very hospitable couple, who would not let me pay for the toll, now very kindly brought me to their simple but neat home, where they gave me a glass of good Burgundy wine to taste, and some sweet biscuits to go with it. The wine was certainly excellent. Afterwards, the wife produced a bowl of delicious ripe cherries, picked from a tree in their garden, and encouraged me to help myself.

Finally they wished me the best of luck and the husband drove me to the huge youth hostel in the town. This curious place was like a mixture of a hotel and a hospital. I got a bed for the night for 20 francs without any trouble and, in the small bedroom, I chatted to a French chap and two Americans who were cycling around France.

After a quick snack of bread and cheese, I telephoned the Hotel Pratic in Paris to cancel my reservation for a room on Monday 8th, then tried to telephone home, but to no avail. I then went out for a walk down a long uninteresting street, and returned to write my diary in the foyer before bed.