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DOWN THE *enchanted* ISLE

FROM STUNNING CASTLES TO DEEP TUNNELS, ROMAN REMAINS TO SAPID FOOD, HEIDI FULLER-LOVE DISCOVERS A HOST OF TREASURES WHEN SHE TRAVELS THE FAST-FLOWING ISLE RIVER FROM PÉRIGUEUX TO LIBOURNE

Okay, so it's only 90 kilometres from Périgueux to Libourne, but I'm doing it the hard way: kayaking along the Isle River through gastronomy-loving Dordogne, then biking the rest of the way through the seafood-eating department of la Gironde

L'Isle starts right up in the Massif Central Mountains, in the Haute Vienne department famed for its mediaeval castles and fine porcelain. A tributary of the mighty Dordogne River, L'Isle is about 255 kilometres long, but only about 87 kilometres of that distance is navigable.

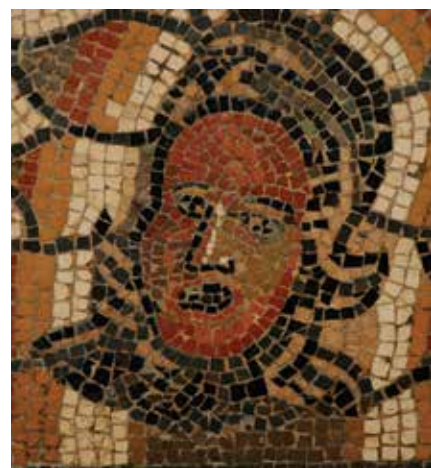
I arrive in Périgueux the day before the start of my trip, so I have time to tour this charming city founded 2000 years ago by four Celtic tribes known as the Petrucoces. To get a handle on Dordogne's capital, I hop on a little train that leaves from the Boulevard Montaigne and

jiggle through narrow alleys, past Renaissance houses, trendy shops and glorious mediaeval churches, to the Vesunna museum.

Designed by Jean Nouvel, the architect responsible for Paris' fabulous Fondation Cartier, with its floor-to-ceiling windows the museum is like an immense glass box containing a fabulous collection of roman statues, household items, jewellery and kitchen utensils set out amongst the remains of two Gallo roman villas that were discovered on this site in 1959.

After my visit I join one of the museum's *gustatios*, or tasting sessions, where I sample a glass of sticky, sweet hydromel, a sandwich lathered with disgustingly fishy garum and other dishes that were popular here in Périgueux a few millenniums ago.

Back in the 21st century I shop for presents – truffles, foie gras and chestnut honey — in





Food lovers shouldn't miss

The annual Salon International du Livre Gourmand held in Périgueux in November: www.livre-gourmand.com



the triangle of streets behind the place Saint-Louis, then head out to the Ferme St Louis for dinner. In this lovely rustic restaurant housed in one of the city's stunning medieval buildings, I stuff myself with foie gras, followed by meltingly tender confit de canard and a big plate of pungent local goat's cheeses, then comfort myself that I need all those the calories for the following day's adventure.

Up early the next day, I head out to meet the guys from Périgueux Canoë Kayak. Owner Jean Pierre, who waits for me by the river bank, tells me that L'Isle has very marked seasonal fluctuations with very high levels in winter and very low levels at the height of summer. Luckily, it's late spring so, apart from a nippy northeast wind that's making the flap of my rain Mac fly into my face, I've picked the right time to travel.

Mist covers the river like a grey cape, but it's rising by the time Jean Pierre pushes my kayak out into centre stream and waves goodbye. Soon the sun is shining and the last golden tongues of mist lift away from the water like magical smoke.

Paddling to keep myself midstream I pass beneath tall plane trees lining grassy banks where plump, beaver-like coypu – used here to



Gastro starred supping

Renowned for gourmet food, the Dordogne has plenty of speciality dishes, including a sauce flavoured with Madeira and truffles that was invented here in Périgueux, and is used to make dishes a la Périgourdine. Truffles are used in plenty of dishes too: look out for truffles stuffed with foie gras and truffe à la cendre, where the expensive fungi is trussed in slices of bacon and slung into the hot ashes of an open fire to cook.

One of the country's largest walnut producing regions, Dordogne is also famed for walnut cakes, walnut wine and walnut oil – for a fitting finale to any meal order a few slices of the local La Trappe cheese cured in walnut liqueur.

make a rich pate – brush their whiskers or plop into the water and paddle ahead of me. From time-to-time I meet a lock or a waterfall and have to get out and walk my lightweight kayak around these obstacles, but the scenery is idyllic, so I'm happy to take my time.

Around midday I reach Saint-Astier, a small town built around a tall clock tower that derives its name from Astérius, a 6th century hermit who once performed miracles here. Tying my kayak to a tree, I scramble up the bank and follow a winding path through a cluster of red tiled houses to meet local guide Myriam, who will take me to see the town's famed tunnels.

Globally renowned since the 1850s for its lime, or chaux, used for everything from building houses to sterilising corpses, the ground beneath St Astier is a warren of mining passageways, where Myriam leads me in spooky candlelit gloom as she tells me about the harsh lives of the men who used to mine this white substance.

Glad to be back above ground again, I hunt down a boulangerie and buy crusty baguettes filled with camembert and a cream-filled croissant aux amandes and have a delicious picnic on the riverbank.



Linger in Libourne?

Known as the Gironde region's wine making capital, Libourne, situated at the meeting point of the Isle and Dordogne rivers, was once a fortified town and large parts of the 14th century walls still remain. Just half an hour's drive from Bordeaux, Libourne makes a great base for visiting the local vineyards of Pomerol and Saint-Emilion. Seafood is king here so make sure you try specialty dishes like mouthwateringly tasty prawns stuffed with anise and foie gras de canard.




Back in my kayak I head for Neuvic. The river is wider now and around each bend there are pretty vistas of limestone houses, surrounded by fields of grazing cows. At Neuvic I visit the hamlet's pretty Renaissance castle packed with 17th century furniture and frescoes, then I wander through the town's cobbled streets, stopping to admire the bright-coloured window of Lominé, a bakery where they've been making marshmallow guimauve for more than a century.

The following morning I paddle on to Mussidan. The next town along the river, Mussidan is a stopover on the Vezelay branch of the Jacques de Compostelle route and the cobbled streets are filled with pilgrims wearing hobnail boots and buying fat strawberries and homemade onion tarts in the town's busy morning market.

Leaving my kayak in Montpon-Ménéstérol – a town that's been nicknamed La Capitale

de l'Orgue because all the churches have pipe organs – I set off to cycle the last leg of my trip to Libourne. Following tiny back roads, I cycle along country lanes fringed with tall grasses and grazing cows, occasionally catching glimpses of the L'Isle glittering in the distance. It's a beautiful, warm sunny day so I stop off at St Seurin, a pretty hamlet full of crumbling stone houses overlooking a pink-water-lily-strewn stretch of the river, for another picnic.

At Coutras I cross the L'Isle one last time and then I'm whizzing down into Libourne. I'm near the sea now and there's a brisk briny, breeze which cancels out the river's muddy scent. Here at Libourne, where the L'Isle joins the mighty Dordogne before heading out to sea, I say a last regretful goodbye to this enchanting river that led me on my three-day journey. 



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Voulez-vous y aller?

HOW TO GET THERE:

Perigueux is about an hour's drive from the city of Bordeaux. There are no direct flights to Bordeaux from Australia, but you can transit from Gatwick in the UK, Amsterdam or Paris.

WHERE TO STAY:

Chambres d'Hôtes Le Caldero, 52 Avenue Georges Pompidou, 24700 Montpon-Menesterol. Tél: + 33 (0)5.53.82.45.82
Château des Reynats: www.chateau-hotel-perigord.com
Comfort Hotel Régina: www.comfort-perigueux.fr
La Tour du Vieux Port: www.latourduvieuxport.fr

WHERE TO EAT :

La Table d'Eugenie, place de l'Eglise, 24400 Sourzac. Tél: +33 (0)5 53 82 45 23
Le Faim Gourmet, 40 Rue Fonneuve, 33500 Libourne. Tél: +33 (0)5 57 24 92 65
La Ferme St-Louis, 2 rue St Louis, 24000 Périgueux. Tél: +33 (0)5 53 53 82 77

USEFUL WEBSITES:

Vesunna museum: www.perigueux-vesunna.fr
Dordogne Périgord Tourisme: www.dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr
Office de tourisme de Périgueux: www.tourisme-perigueux.fr/en
Périgueux Canoë Kayak: www.perigueuxcano.org
The Mountainbike Hire Company: www.themountainbikehirecompany.co.uk
St Astier caves: www.c-e-s-a.com
Neuvic castle: www.chateau-parc-neuvic.com