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Expedition Details

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Trace the footsteps of early humans as we explore the cradles of civilization in southwest France and on Spain’s northern coast. On an expedition designed with paleoanthropologist Donald Johanson, examine carvings and cave paintings that illustrate life up to 40,000 years ago. From the Dordogne to Basque Country, stay in beautiful medieval towns that dot these long-inhabited landscapes.

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your country hotel in the Vézère valley, and gather this evening for a welcome reception and dinner.

Hotel Le Centenaire or Hotel Villa Romaine (D)

Day 3 — Prehistoric Sites of the Vézère Valley

Set out with Christine Desdemaines-Hugon, one of the world's leading experts on Paleolithic art and author of *Stepping Stones: A Journey Through the Ice Age Caves of the Dordogne*, on an excursion to the majestic sculpted frieze of horses and bison at Cap Blanc. Then see other local finds on a guided tour at the National Museum of Prehistory. After lunch on your own in the nearby town of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, end the day with a visit to either Font-de-Gaume, home to more than 200 polychrome paintings, or Rouffignac Cave, known as the “cave of a hundred mammoths.”

Hotel Le Centenaire or Hotel Villa Romaine (B,D)

Day 4 — Sarlat/Lascaux II

Travel to picturesque Sarlat, whose original halftimbered, golden-stone buildings and narrow cobbled streets make it one of the best-preserved medieval towns in France. After time to explore on your own, gather for a unique “prehistoric” lunch, made with the ingredients once used by the Neanderthals. In the afternoon, join archaeologist Isabelle Castanet for a visit to Castel-Merle, a complex of prehistoric stone shelters more than 300 feet long, excavated and preserved by several generations of the Castanet family. Meet prehistory expert Denis Tauxe for a private, behind-the-scenes visit to Lascaux II, a painstaking recreation of the two primary chambers of the original Lascaux cave, whose famous paintings have been off-limits to visitors since 1963 to prevent deterioration.

Hotel Le Centenaire or Hotel Villa Romaine (B,L,D)

Day 5 — Pech Merle/Toulouse

This morning, venture into the spectacular natural galleries of Pech Merle, an enormous cave system filled with prehistoric art and artifacts dating back 25,000 years. See rare representations of human figures, engraved or spotted animals, and a mammoth drawn using the natural contours of the rock. The cave floor displays children’s footprints preserved in the ancient clay more than 12,000 years ago. Following lunch on your own, continue to the lively university town of Toulouse.

Grand Hotel De L'Opera (B)

Day 6 — Basque Country/Santillana del Mar, Spain

Drive southwest into France’s Basque region, stopping in a picturesque village for lunch in a traditional Basque restaurant. In the afternoon, enter the Isturitz and Oxocelhaya caves with local prehistory specialist Aude Labarge and meet with the archaeological site director, Christian Normand. Used by human beings for more than 80,000 years, these superimposed caves have yielded tens of thousands of artifacts, including flutes, sculpted reindeer horns, and whale-bone tools. Cross into Spain this afternoon and trace the Bay of Biscay to the Cantabria region. Check into our charming hotel, a manor house situated in the heart of the medieval village of Santillana del Mar.

Parador Santillana Del Mar (B,L,D)

Day 7 — Puente Viesgo Caves

Come face-to-face with some of the oldest artistic representations in human history on a visit to the caves at Puente Viesgo, part of the Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain World Heritage site. Recently identified as the oldest cave artwork in the world, the paintings in El Castillo cave date back at least 40,800 years. Explore the nearby Las Monedas cave—the longest in Puente Viesgo—and later, delve deeper into the prehistory of the region on a visit to the Altamira Museum.

Parador Santillana Del Mar (B,L,D)

Day 8 — Hornos de la Peña Cave/Bilbao

Continue our exploration of Cantabria's World Heritage-listed caves at Hornos de la Peña. Here, large-scale naturalistic engravings depict horses, bison, aurochs, goats, and other animals, as well as an unusual anthropomorphic figure with a human-like arm and a tail. After lunch at a local restaurant, transfer to Bilbao, the largest city in Spain's autonomous Basque Country. Explore the city on your own this afternoon, and if you wish, stop in at the world-famous Guggenheim Museum located just a short walk from our hotel.

Hotel Miró (B,L)

Day 9 — Atapuerca/Bilbao

Today we are joined by renowned archaeologist Dr. Ana Cristina Pinto-Llona, an expert on the origins of modern humans. Ana is a two-time National Geographic grant recipient for her work in the Asturias region of northern Spain, and also spent several years excavating at the Atapuerca archaeological site. Visit Atapuerca, where the oldest known hominin fossil remains in Europe have been unearthed. Return to Bilbao and celebrate your prehistoric adventure at a festive farewell dinner.

Hotel Miró (B,L,D)

Day 10 — Bilbao/U.S.

After breakfast, transfer to Bilbao Airport for your flight home.
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