

The Origin of Art

By Kevin Bonnaud

The first masterpieces of humans ever made are to be found in the Ardeche Gorges nature reserve, a hotbed of cave art in France. Since April 2015, a million visitors have admired drawings and paintings created 36 000 years ago.

Pictures: Pont d' Arc Cavern



Since the original Chauvet Cave, a UNESCO world heritage site, is not open to the public, tourists can see an exact copy at the Pont d'Arc Cavern. From the outside, the cavern is an imposing grey concrete-block building in the middle of an oak forest. But as soon as they pass through a dark corridor, people are awe-struck by the beauty of the place. "You see red hands and palm prints, contours of mammoths drawn with iron oxide, which produces a reddish-orange colour," says tour guide Valerie Jugnon.

On the pathway, there are reproductions of large animals. The bones of many different species were found in the original cave, including mammoths, lions, woolly rhinoceros and bears. Those creatures are typical of the Aurignacian period, the most ancient civilization of the Upper Palaeolithic. In the deeper part of the cavern, black charcoal drawings are strikingly accurate, with amazing depth and perspective. "Look at this drawing of a mammoth with the illusion of a second mammoth behind it," Jugnon points out. The drawings make use of the wavy relief of the cave wall.

A Miraculous Cave

Our tour aims to convey the emotions felt by the three French explorers when they discovered the real cave in 1994. Their discovery pushed the beginning of art history back thousands of years. A natural rockslide 21 000 years ago made sure that the art work was beautifully conserved.

Valerie Moles, prehistorian in charge of cultural mediation recalls her first and only visit into the real cave. "You have the impression that you are entering a supernatural world. The concretions are shining and sparkling, the soil is full of crystals. Then you have the shock of your life when you see the black paintings. To see engravings with small chips of clay still sticking out, made 30 000 years ago, leaves you speechless. It feels like the artists were just here and the drawings were created yesterday. That's very disturbing," she told hiEurope.

The Cavern, a Piece of Art (itself)

The cavern, the largest in the world, is a reproduction of the original cave to the nearest millimetre. "Some elements that were hidden behind a rock were moved to be more visible by the public," explains Fabrice Tareau, director of the Pont d'Arc Cavern. The drawings were all re-created by hand. "The only way to imitate these artists' gestures was to make the stronger brushstrokes also," Tareau adds.

The early days of humanity can be further explored in the nearby Aurignacian Gallery, an interactive museum which explores

these prehistoric artists, their environment and way of life. Life-size figures, objects and animals show what daily life in the caves must have been like. For those who want to experience cave-life themselves, they can learn how to make fire, do an initiation to cave painting and modelling or attend a prehistoric camp. Art lovers may also visit an exhibit featuring the works of painters, sculptors, ceramists, glassmakers and photographers who were all inspired by the cavern.

TIPS



La Bastide d'Iris Hotel

To Stay

La Bastide d'Iris Hotel (4 star) is an elegant, well-decorated, quiet 1.5-hectare property with pool in the town of Vagnas, near the majestic site of the Gorges of the Ardeche and 14 km from the cavern.
<http://www.labastidediris.com/hotel-en>

To Visit:

- Pont d'Arc Cavern
<http://en.cavernedupontdarc.fr/> - audio guide in Chinese.
- Ardeche Gorge tourist trail from Vallon Pont d'Arc to Saint Martin d'Ardeche (35km).