



# MAN'S FIRST MASTERPIECE

Cave paintings dating from 36,000 years ago are being re-created in a €55 million tourist attraction in the Gorges de l'Ardèche.  
**John Malathronas** put on his hard hat to explore the project



A few kilometres from the village of Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, the hub of the Gorges de l'Ardèche, lies France's most ambitious tourist project for decades – a €55 million replica of a prehistoric cave, painstakingly re-creating one of the most extraordinary finds of our times. The architects Fabre-Speller wanted the building to be subsumed in the environment, which explains why, to reach it from the car park, I must stroll under the shade of green oaks and saunter through wild boxwood bushes and juniper shrubs.

Like many great discoveries, chance played a big role. On 18 December, 1994, three cavers – Jean-Marie Chauvet, Éliette Brunel and Christian Hillaire – noticed a small cavity 80 centimetres by 30 centimetres in the cliffs of the Cirque d'Estre in the Ardèche *département*. At first, they didn't think anything of it, but on crawling inside the narrow passage, they felt a feeble current of air. Curiosity aroused, they decided to return with a rope ladder. It led them into a chamber with ancient bear bones strewn on the floor and a network of hollows and galleries that included 450 prehistoric paintings of stunning quality.

Not only were the images of the Grotte Chauvet (as we call it now), incomparably original and lifelike, but they were also exceptionally well preserved. Some were so fresh that they could be wiped off the rock with a wet sponge. But the biggest thunderbolt was yet to come: when carbon dating revealed that the paintings were twice as old as those in the Lascaux caves in the Dordogne, archaeologists rose in protest. More charcoal samples were taken, divided in three and tested blindly in laboratories outside France. The results were unequivocal: these paintings were approximately 36,000 years old.

## Artistic revelation

The history of art had to be rewritten. Until then a gradualist theory held sway: humans had started with primitive geometrical patterns and matchstick depictions, eventually reaching higher standards of portrayal. Chauvet threw all this out of the window: our Palaeolithic ancestors were able to create masterpieces and dedicated artists lived among them. Scientists believe that most of the cave paintings were the work of only a few individuals.

The discovery might have excited only a small number of enthusiasts, had the German film-maker Werner Herzog not become involved. He first approached the French government about filming inside the original Lascaux, but those caves were out of bounds. Frédéric Mitterrand, the Minister of Culture at the time and a film-maker himself, suggested to Herzog that he shot inside Chauvet instead. The cave was never going to be open to the public: its preservation was a matter of worldwide importance and the accumulation of carbon dioxide and radioactive radon gas limited human exposure to around 60 hours a year. Herzog agreed, and the resulting 3D film, *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, became the highest-grossing documentary of 2011.

The idea had been floated before, but the success of Herzog's film made it imperative: a replica cave had already been constructed for Lascaux; plans for a Chauvet version about five kilometres from the original developed quickly.

So here I am, the last journalist to be allowed in before the gala opening in April. My minder is Élisabeth Cayrel, who put together the proposal to have the Chauvet cave declared a Unesco World Heritage site, a feat achieved in June 2014. She has already given me the facts, the numbers and the gossip: how the name Caverne du Pont-d'Arc was chosen to distinguish the replica from the Grotte Chauvet after negotiations with Jean-Marie Chauvet to license his name broke down; how a troop of chemists is re-creating the humidity and musty smell of the ancient sealed cave; or how a 3D scan has ensured that the geomorphology of the original has been fully reproduced. With a surface area of 3,500 square metres – around one-third that of the real cave – and 439 reproductions out of the 450 revealed, this is a miracle of both artistry and engineering.

An international team is pulling out all the stops to meet the April deadline. In front of me Karl Slowik, a Polish sculptor, is working on the texture of stalactites and stalagmites. He constructed the resin mouldings in an *atelier* in Paris and is now putting them in place. He has been inside the original cave and is full of superlatives when describing the experience. Artists, I'm told, were hired for their practical ability to reproduce forms and images from memory, the equivalent of listening to a piece of music and playing it by ear immediately.

Panels are hung carefully while workers stabilise them with cement, before the sculptors cover them with their reconstituted calcite, so that everything becomes seamlessly part of the cavern. The further in I venture, the more spectacular the paintings become, for our distant ancestors, just like us, saved the best until last. In the deepest part of the cave – in our case ➡

**FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** Stalagmites in a gallery of the original cave; Workmen install the structure of a mammoth in the new cavern; **BELOW:** Paintings of lions in the original and in the replica







**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** An aerial view of the Caverne du Pont-d'Arc during its construction; Visitors will use gangways to explore the cavern; A plastics specialist creates a geological element; The inner walls of the cave are being re-created as faithfully as possible; **BELOW:** The Pont d'Arc over the River Ardèche

by the cavern exit – lies a monumental composition 12 metres long, composed of 110 figures, mostly lions and woolly rhinos. Despite the commotion and the rumble of cranes and forklifts, I jump when I see the lions in place.

Having watched Herzog's film, I was prepared for the unexpected use of perspective that crops up constantly, but the cave artists went further. Not only is the painting delicate and graceful like a sophisticated watercolour sketch, but the Ice Age painters had adapted the drawings to the natural contours of the wall so that the observer could reconstitute the image one-dimensionally when viewing from the front. Such deliberate distortion is called anamorphosis and the first modern exponent of the genre was Leonardo da Vinci in the late 15th century.

Antoine, the operations manager, is an evangelist for the project. "We are not building a leisure park," he tells me. "Yes, this is culture adapted to mass tourism, but the cavern is not a caricature. We want visitors to sense the weight of centuries and experience the emotion of a visit to the real cave. That's why they have to walk for ten minutes through the same vegetation as the original. That's why, while they wait, they'll hear a soundtrack of forest sounds, and why we want visits to be guided; the creation of feelings is easier in the company of real people.

"What's on offer is a trip into the hitherto unexplored past of humanity. We think of the people living in those prehistoric times as wild and brutish, but with Chauvet we gain an insight of their inner world and their capacity to express a form of culture. What links them with us is our emotional reaction to the beauty of the paintings. This is the essential character of all humanity and that is what we're trying to re-create."

## SAME PLACE, DIFFERENT PACE Paddle and paraglide in active Ardèche

After exploring the interiors of the Caverne du Pont-d'Arc, you have plenty of opportunities to enjoy the great outdoors, as Ardèche is one of the activity hot spots of the Massif Central. Kayaking is particularly popular, especially when it gives visitors the chance to paddle under the glorious natural arch of the Pont-d'Arc spanning the River Ardèche.

Almost every campsite and hotel can arrange kayak rentals or boat trips, but if you want an escorted tour and free introductory lessons try the Base Nautique du Pont d'Arc (tel: (Fr) 4 75 37 17 79, [www.canoe-ardeche.com](http://www.canoe-ardeche.com)) or Loulou Bateaux (tel: (Fr) 4 75 88 01 32, [www.louloubateaux.com](http://www.louloubateaux.com)). Both offer trips from three hours to two days with a chance to spot beavers and wild boar.

Adventure companies abound in and around Vallon-Pont-d'Arc. Face Sud (tel: (Fr) 4 75 87 27 23, [www.face-sud.com](http://www.face-sud.com)) offers activities from gentle hikes and caving expeditions to white-water rafting, canyoning and rock climbing. If you want a different perspective of the Gorges de l'Ardèche, go paragliding with Escapade Loisirs (tel: (Fr) 4 75 88 07 87, [www.escapade-loisirs.com](http://www.escapade-loisirs.com)) or join its Accrobranche activity, a treetop adventure trail that involves climbing rope ladders and sliding along zip wires. It sounds scary, yet it's open to children from two years upwards.

All the companies mentioned have English-speaking guides.



PHOTOGRAPHS: SYCPA/P. ABELLON, SYCPA/SEBASTIEN GAVET, SYCPA, FOTOLIA



## Francofile

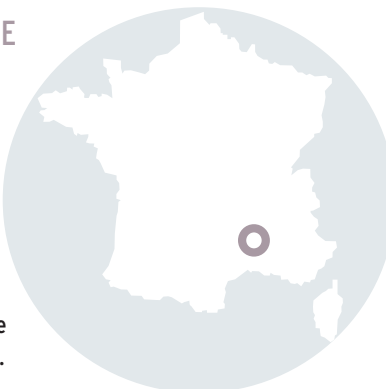
Prepare for a trip back in time in the Gorges de l'Ardèche

### GETTING THERE

**By rail:** The nearest TGV station is at Montélimar, about an hour's drive from Vallon-Pont-d'Arc.

**By road:** The village is around ten hours' drive from the northern ferry ports.

**By air:** The nearest airports are at Marseille (2hr) and Lyon (2hr 30min).



[www.lechelsea.com](http://www.lechelsea.com)  
The best restaurant in Vallon and the only one open all year round.

*Produits du terroir* include melt-in-the-mouth braised pork cheeks (€16). Menus from €21.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Les Lodges du Pont-d'Arc**  
Route du Pont-d'Arc  
07150 Vallon-Pont-d'Arc  
Tel: (Fr) 4 75 87 24 42

[www.prehistoric-lodge.com](http://www.prehistoric-lodge.com)  
Eco-friendly accommodation near the cavern and next to the River Ardèche, featuring large, safari-style canvas tents with all mod cons and stunning views. Half-board and conventional rooms also available. Lodges from €115, rooms from €105.

### ATTRACTION

**La Caverne du Pont-d'Arc**  
Montée du Razal  
07150 Vallon-Pont-d'Arc  
Tel: (Fr) 4 75 94 39 40  
<http://lacavernedupontdarc.org>

The cavern is due to open at the end of April. Admission €13 (10-17s €6, under-10s free), which includes a guided tour of the replica (English available), audio guides and exhibitions. Open all year: April, May, June, Sept 10am-7pm; July-Aug 9am-8.30pm; Oct-14 Nov 10am-6pm; 15 Nov-Jan 10am-5pm; Feb-Mar 10am-6pm.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Le Chelsea**  
45 Boulevard  
Peschaire Alizon  
07150 Vallon-Pont-d'Arc  
Tel: (Fr) 4 75 88 01 40



**TOURIST INFORMATION:** Vallon-Pont-d'Arc tourist office, tel: (Fr) 4 75 88 04 01, [www.vallon-pont-darc.com](http://www.vallon-pont-darc.com);

Sud-Ardèche tourist board, tel: (Fr) 4 75 49 10 46, [www.sud-ardeche-tourisme.com](http://www.sud-ardeche-tourisme.com)