

THE FLAVOURS OF FRANCE

In the second installment of their Wining and Diving series, the Frogfish Photography team visits France for a tour around the wine regions and some diving on the Cote D'Azur

Photographs by NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN (AND CAROLINE'S MUM!)

"Le Village (Fourmigue) is an abandoned 1960s film set. A miniature village sunk deliberately to use as a film set - although it never did get used - including houses, shops, hotel and even a tiny Roman amphitheatre!"

France is just on our doorstep, is very easy to get to using a wide range of transportation, and has great wine and lovely diving. It is perfect for the UK diver that wants to do a diving trip with a difference. We chose to take our van, loaded with tanks, dive gear, camera equipment, a dog and Caroline's mum, too. We did, of course, still make sure that we had enough room to bring back some wine. That is the beauty of this trip - no flight baggage allowance limits! We crossed the Channel using the shortest crossing route for the sake of our dog, who is a bit of a wimp, from Dover to Calais. Our ten-day trip was to take in the wine regions of Bordeaux, Bergerac, Languedoc, Burgundy, Madiran and Champagne, so there was plenty of tasting to do. Our diving was done on the Cote D'Azur with Diamond Diving.

On arriving in Calais, after a five-hour drive down from Manchester and a 90-minute ferry crossing, we decided to continue on for about three hours, heading south. We were using the wonderful Chambres D'Hotes accommodation books to locate suitable places to stop. You can get a book that lists these guest houses, by region, cost and whether they take pets, and so you can decide while you are driving along and book ahead. Many are situated in old farmhouses, chateaux or vineyards, and include breakfast in the deal.

Our first stop was in Argentan, where we stayed with a couple that had done up a 17th century farmhouse beautifully. After all that driving, we took a taxi into the village to enjoy a proper French dinner, with plenty of wine and the local aperitif. But this was just a stopover to get us nearer our first destination proper - Canon Fronsac. Fronsac is one of the lesser-known areas within Bordeaux. It is situated near St Emillion, but is less expensive, both to stay over and to buy wines. We visited a lovely vineyard at the very top of this region, with outstanding views of the valley. They had an excellent range of both younger and older vintages at very reasonable prices.

The next morning we were sent to visit an organic estate in Pomerol. Pomerol is a more-famous appellation and the wine prices reflect this, but the wine is truly fabulous. They are deep, tannic, complex wines that go perfectly with a hearty meal. Tasting wine at breakfast time, while you are steadily driving south towards the diving, means that someone needs to volunteer to drive!





About to go diving with Diamond Diving



Loading up the van with the spoils of our trip

Our lunchtime saw us revisiting a vineyard we had last visited some 13 years ago, and where we bought the wine for our wedding. Chateau Montdoyen is a lovely place, in the quiet town of Monbazillac, which is famous for its sweet wines. But don't let this put you off, they have some stonkingly good reds, that would rival any Bordeaux, but for half the price. They are also organic and have been working on increasing the insects on the vines by building insect houses along the edges, assisting the bat population that roost in their cellars and even encouraging deer to graze on the grass planted to increase nitrogen in the soil. It was a lovely place to have a glass of white wine, along with our packed lunch of a baguette and local cheese, before heading south once again. We also found time to visit old friends in the Madiran region of France, which is heading near to the Spanish border. A great time to relax and stay out of the car for a couple of days, with everyone able to have a glass or two! Then we headed east towards Antibes.

The town of Golfe Juan is situated between Antibes and Cannes. So it might have been better planning had we not arrived during the Cannes Film Festival and just before the Monaco Grand Prix! However, we were not there to spot the stars, we were there to go diving. We met up with Alex and Noemie from Diamond Diving to do our very first dives in the Mediterranean Sea. It was a glorious day, sun shining and flat-calm seas. However, the currents had changed direction a little, and the promised 20 degrees C water temperature had, in fact, dropped to 16 degrees C at best. So our choice of 5mm wetsuits, instead of drysuits, might have

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been a mistake. Actually, our first dive was over 60 minutes, which just shows how much we enjoyed it, finding the cooler water no reason to end the dive early. Our first dive was on Le Tombant du Vengeur (Ile de Ste Marguerite), which offers a seagrass plateau to descend onto and then a wonderful wall dropping vertically from 10m to 40m. The wall was covered in corals, sponges and pink gorgonians. It was a slow, relaxing dive looking for nudibranchs, which were plentiful in the first, shallower parts of the wall. We also saw black-faced blennies on every rock and plenty of scorpionfish. We surfaced up to the RIB, which has a handy ladder, and into the sunshine to warm up like basking lizards.

After a pleasant lunch on the wharf, we went back in for a second dive. La Grotte de Miro (Fourmigue) is a short, five-minute boat ride from the harbour. It is perfect for a shorter afternoon dive, as we chose to stick on the main pinnacle for our dive. At the bottom of the pinnacle, at about 18m, there is a swim-through and small cave, right through the centre of the rocks. The rock walls are covered in orange corals and in the middle is a statue of Commandant Yves le Prieur, inventor of the first self-contained regulator, and co-founder of the first-ever leisure diving club in 1938 - a true piece of diving history. While we were diving, Caroline's mum was looking after Paddy (our dog) and exploring the beach and local cafes along the front. We all met up after the dive and went out for dinner. There are plenty of places for divers to eat, drink and talk through the day's diving, and some of the set menus are very good value, especially as it was fine French fare.



Wine in barrels

Our second, and alas last, day of diving was to be as good as the first. It was hot, with no wind to upset the conditions. We were joined on the first dive by a producer and a composer who had been at the Cannes Film Festival, who wanted to try out diving for the first time. They had a perfect day for it. We dropped into the water first to go and do our own thing, while the instructor looked after the new recruits. Le Grand Boule (Cap d'Antibes) is a more-sloping wall site, without the sheer drop from our first dive the day before, but offered even more life. We saw several species of nudibranch, blennies, wrasse and octopus and ended the dive in schools of damselfish in the shallows. Again the deeper part of the dive, at around 30m, had pink gorgonian corals hanging from the rock walls. On our return to the surface it was great to see the beaming smiles from the two that had just completed their first-ever dive. Our final dive with Diamond Diving was our favourite! Le Village (Fourmigue) is an abandoned 1960s film set. A miniature village sunk deliberately to use as a film set



BEST TWO WINES

Chateau Pey Labrie, Canon Fronsac, 1989
Chateau Montdoyen, Tout Simplement, 2008
Currently neither is available in the UK, but Chateau Montdoyen should be soon if we can help it!



- although it never did get used - including houses, shops, hotel and even a tiny Roman amphitheatre! Marine life has now taken over, living in luxury in shallow water. It is a dive site that we already want to go back to, with ideas for more images we would like to get.

Diamond Diving is a small, family-run centre situated just a few yards from the seafront. They have three instructors all qualified as PADI instructors, plus they have the French Brevet d'Etat (French CMAS instructors recognised with a government ticket allowing you to make a living as a diving instructor), however they concentrate on the PADI system as the English-speaking client base is a niche market. Alex is a Course Director, offering quality courses all the way up to IDC level. A small retail shop on site means that you can purchase or rent any equipment you have not brought with you. Diamond Diving are open all year round for diving here, although in the winter you would need to check conditions first. We stayed in a lovely Chambres D'hotes on the hill, with magnificent views of the bay, but there are plenty of options for all budgets, so long as you book in advance. It depends on season, but Diamond Diving has partner hotels with good room rates for a twin/double with breakfast included, which vary from low-season rates of €45 in the one star to high-season rates of €120 in the two star. The friendly, bi-lingual staff at Diamond Diving will take away all the stress of organising a diving trip to France, so you do not have to worry about the standard of your spoken French,



Part of the underwater film set abandoned in the 1960s

DRINK, AND DIVE SAFE

Please be aware that we are not suggesting that you drink alcohol before diving. You should be very careful to make sure that you are not dehydrated (which can be caused by alcohol consumption) and not intoxicated before you go diving, as this may lead to serious injury.

We always left at least 24 hours between any wine tasting and any diving that we did on this trip.



Caroline on the reef



Caroline surfacing to the RIB

and they can even help you with visiting some local vineyards once you are finished diving.

There is plenty to do for any non-divers in the family, too. This trip is great for those looking to go away with non-divers and relatives. Great beaches, watersports, local markets and the wonderful Picasso museum all enhanced the visit to the area. We could have even gone to the Grand Prix!

On our return leg, we were due to be doing another dive at a site called Etang de Thau, but forces of both nature and incident were against us. On our drive to the dive site, which is about three hours from Golfe Juan, we lost our passports! We lost them by accidentally dropping them out of the car door while negotiating a toll. Two hours later, when we reached for our documents to find the address of the dive site, we discovered this disaster. It was Caroline's mum who realised what had happened, and it all worked out in the end, with us having to drive back to collect them, and then drive all the way back again! So by the time we got there, it was too late to dive, the wind was stirring-up the water, and to be honest we needed a drink! We stayed in the village of Pomerols (not to be confused with Pomerol) and after a couple of glasses of the excel-

lent local wine, decided we would dive the next morning instead. Alas, the wind picked up even more and made this very shallow dive impossible. We will have to go back again next year, having seen some awesome stuff on photographs taken by a friend who was there a few weeks before us! The good news was that we visited a co-operative vineyard with some great drinking wines at about five euros a bottle, so we stocked up the car instead!

We were now on our final leg heading home. We set off north and stopped in Beaune, where we ended up in a classic car rally and visited the famous hospital there. Our final stop was in the Champagne region, staying with the owners of a vineyard producing some great fizz - we managed to squeeze a couple more bottles into the car and then headed back to Blighty.

This is a trip that covers a lot of miles in the car. It takes you through wonderful countryside where you see the real France and its wonderful wine-growing tradition. We were really surprised by how good the diving was, and would recommend it to anyone wanting to go on a diving and driving trip in Europe. ■

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