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GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC

L'INCROYABLE AVENTURE SOUTERRAINE

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PRESS KIT

THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: A UNIQUE GEOLOGICAL SITE



LAETITIA DE MÉNIBUS-GRAVIER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

“

When you descend the **103 metres down into the Gouffre de Padirac**, it's first and foremost to explore the geological formation unlike any other that I've had the privilege of protecting and opening to visitors from around the world for the past 15 years.

Wandering through the underground limestone passages shaped by Jurassic sea sediment, then traveling down the subterranean river that flows through the heart of the karst rock is an unforgettable experience!

Listening to a boatman share geological and speleological facts in the middle of the **Lac de la Pluie** while gazing at the **Grande Pendeloque**, a 60-meter stalactite, and enjoying the silence of the underground world are unique pleasures offered by this extraordinary place.

Not to forget the incredible **Salle du Grand Dôme**, an incredible 94-metre chamber that could easily fit the Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral!

Over **130 years ago**, **Édouard-Alfred Martel** gathered the courage to explore this gaping chasm that, according to legend, had been formed when Satan himself stamped his foot on the ground... **130 years and 25 million visitors** later, the **Gouffre de Padirac** is not so much something to visit as something to experience!

I have always been enchanted by the **Gouffre de Padirac**, which is a symbol of human courage and curiosity. It is now my aim to ensure it becomes better known beyond the borders of France by stepping up efforts and increasing financial investments, which will help extend visitors' experience with cultural activities and a focus on our archives.

Come and discover the mysteries of France's leading underground natural heritage site in the heart of the beautiful region of Occitanie, just a stone's throw from the renowned Rocamadour pilgrimage destination. Are you ready for this incredible subterranean adventure?

”

THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: KEY FIGURES



1889

DISCOVERED BY
ÉDOUARD-ALFRED MARTEL



42 km

LENGTH OF THE PASSAGES
MAPPED TO DATE



94 m

HEIGHT OF THE VAULT
IN THE SALLE DU GRAND DÔME



MAXIMUM CAPACITY

8000

VISITORS PER DAY



150

EMPLOYEES EQUIVALENT
TO 49 FULL TIME POSITIONS



1 hour 30 min.

DURATION OF THE TOUR

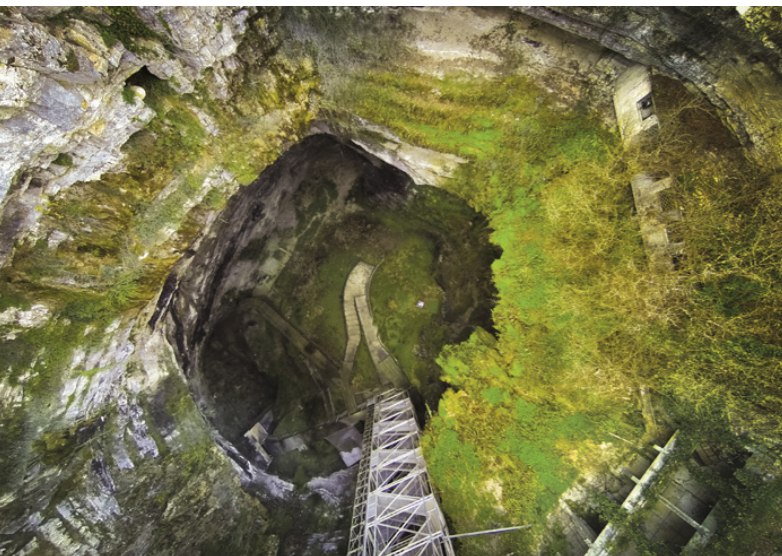


503,000

VISITORS IN 2019



THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: AN EXCEPTIONAL SUBTERRANEAN WORLD

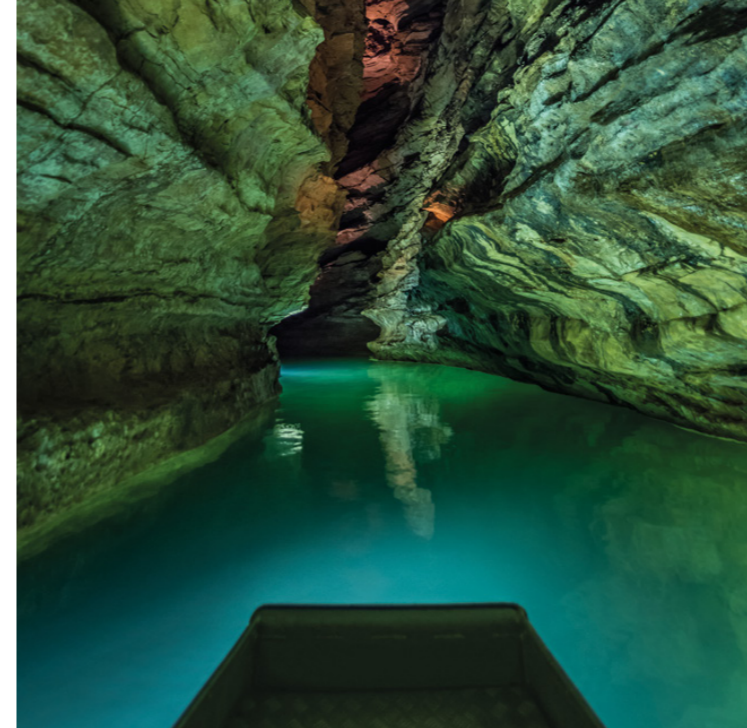


A NATURALLY FORMED CHASM

The **Gouffre de Padirac** experience begins with a **75-metre** descent into the centre of a naturally formed circular chasm measuring **33-metres in diameter**. The **207 steps** of the Eiffel Tower inspired staircase and the three lifts running down the chasm's karstic rock walls make it clear to visitors that their adventure will take place far below the surface!

42 KM OF PASSAGES EXPLORED, 1 KM OF THEM OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

The geological mysteries and intertwined passages at the Gouffre de Padirac have long attracted speleologists from across the globe. Walking **several hundred metres** among giant stalactites and stalagmites, visitors will explore a section of the **42-kilometres** of passages sculpted out of the rock over thousands of years of erosion.



NAVIGATING ALONG THE RIVIÈRE PLANE

Next you will board a boat and travel along the tranquil subterranean river from one part of the chasm to another, guided by a knowledgeable boatman and surrounded by vertical fissures carved into the stones over the ages. The profound silence of this subterranean world is broken only by drops of water sliding down the sides of the **Grande Pendeloque** and dropping into the **Lac de la Pluie**. It's a breathtaking sight!

KARSTIC ROCKS, WITNESSES TO GEOLOGICAL HISTORY

In the Quaternary Period, infiltrating rainwater carved fissures into the immense limestone plateau of **Les Causses du Quercy**. Ever since, chemical and mechanical erosion has continued to form not only passages but also geomorphological structures resembling limestone flowers, alabaster water fountains, stacks of plates, drapery and lace as well as more traditional stalagmites and stalactites, like the **75-metre Grande Colonne**.



THE UNIQUE PILE D'ASSIETTES STALAGMITE

The Gouffre de Padirac's iconic **Pile d'Assiettes** ("stack of plates") formed as drops of water fell onto the rock **dozens of metres** below, releasing limestone deposits several centimetres around the point of impact. The resulting calcite crystals stacked one atop the other is a karstic wonder that took centuries to form.

THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: A PLACE FOR KNOWLEDGE



THE PADIRACOTHÈQUE AND ITS OPEN-SOURCE ARCHIVES

Our Padiracothèque media library is composed of **130 years** of unique archives gathered since the **Gouffre de Padirac** was discovered in **1889**. A true gold mine that is constantly being expanded, it is available to professionals, students and history lovers alike, revealing the splendours of this uncommon cultural and historical heritage site via photos, drawings, postcards, maps, posters and other media.

THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC'S HIDDEN SIDES

The Gouffre de Padirac served as a hiding place for inhabitants of the region during the **Hundred Years' War** and the French Wars of Religion, but it wasn't until the late **19th century**, following severe flooding, that it became possible to access the passages from the bottom of the chasm. Once **Édouard-Alfred Martel** had courageously explored the **Gouffre de Padirac**, other expeditions followed, led in particular by Guy de Lavar in the **20th century**. Two new expeditions in 1996 and 2014 revealed even more of the immense underground network. But exploring this aquatic labyrinth with its many geological curiosities is still the privilege of only a lucky few authorised scientists.



MAKING LEARNING FUN: "C'EST PAS SORCIER"!

Teachers and students can take their field trips to another level with a **series of fun educational sheets** offering information organised into five sections to suit different class levels. They can also enjoy educational media designed in partnership with **Fred Courant**, head writer and host of the French children's web series "**LEsprit Sorcier**", that reveals more secrets of this unique geological site.



WORKSHOPS TO FURTHER YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Since 2017, a scientific and cultural outreach team has been organising **fun educational workshops** to help both the young and the young at heart learn more about the site (available upon request).

ENJOY OUR BOATMEN'S STORIES!

Along the **500-metres of the narrow underground river**, your boatman will enthral you and the other passengers with stories of the geological formations as he propels your boat safely through the narrow, low-visibility passages to the landing point using special rowing techniques. At the same time, working behind the scenes, our technicians handle maintenance tasks, including ensuring that all **600 lightbulbs** in the **Gouffre de Padirac** are in working order.



THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: A NATURAL HERITAGE SITE TO PROTECT



THE WATER CYCLE

From one ocean to another, there's just one cycle! The water cycle begins with the evaporation of sea water. Cooled by the atmosphere, it condenses, forms clouds, then drops down onto the vegetation on the ground. The raindrops infiltrate through the soil and the rock to create small underground streams that eventually sculpt through the limestone and form the larger river. The river continues its path until the main karst spring, the **Fontaine Saint-Georges**, which itself flows into the **Dordogne** River before ending its journey in the Atlantic Ocean. You will see the water cycle at work from your boat.

A REFUGE FOR BIODIVERSITY

The sections of the **Gouffre de Padirac** that are closed to visitors are an invaluable refuge for wildlife. At least eight species of **bats**, three of them endangered, have made the caves their home, but the river is the part with the most impressive range of wildlife, including **Niphargus**, a blind, white cave shrimp, and **Bythinella padiraci**, a tiny 3-millimetres, aquatic snail native to **Gouffre de Padirac**. These two species are iconic examples of the site's very unique biodiversity.

PROTECTING A UNIQUE SITE

This exceptional site needs to remain protected, and as the site operator, doing so is one of our top priorities. Nestled in the heart of the Lot region, the **Gouffre de Padirac** is a natural treasure unlike any other in France. It has been spared from damage from human activities so far because most of the surrounding areas are dedicated to livestock raising.

No mechanised transport is used in the passages – the boats are propelled solely by the muscle power of our agile boatmen, who have received training in navigating the river with only minimal contact with the rock walls of the chasm. Our goal is to limit our presence and leave as little a trace underground as possible.

For example, with a view to protecting the site's natural development, we regularly clean the moss that grows near light sources to preserve its original characteristics.

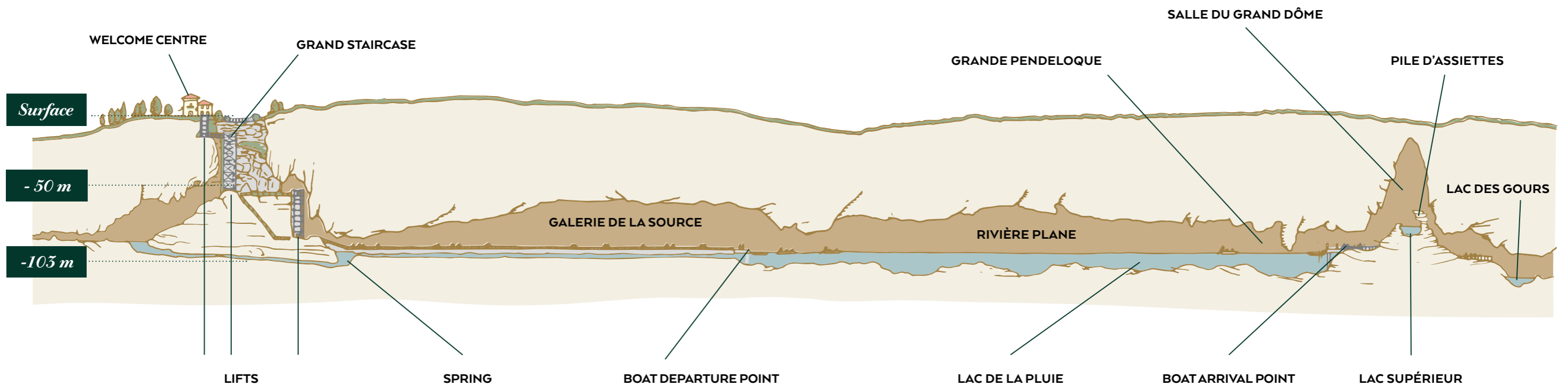
We constantly monitor the chasm and clear certain parts when necessary. We remove the tree roots that grow on rocks to ensure they do not become destabilised.

Furthermore, the **Gouffre de Padirac's** operating company does not allow any speleological explorations apart from those with purely scientific purposes.

Our efforts to protect the site also involve inspecting the water quality often to ensure it is not polluted by runoff from surface water.



EXPLORING THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC



Your exploration of the **Gouffre de Padirac** begins with a descent down the 207 steps of the stairway (lifts also available). **103-metres** below the surface, the tour continues in the **Galerie de la Source** with its rocky walls polished by centuries of erosion.

A few hundred metres farther, you'll reach the boat departure point, where you'll be greeted by a boatman who will take you on a tour along more than **500-metres of the Rivière Plane** with a stop at the mysterious **Lac de la Pluie**. During this tour, you'll see the **Grande Pendeloque**, a majestic stalactite that is **60-metres long**.

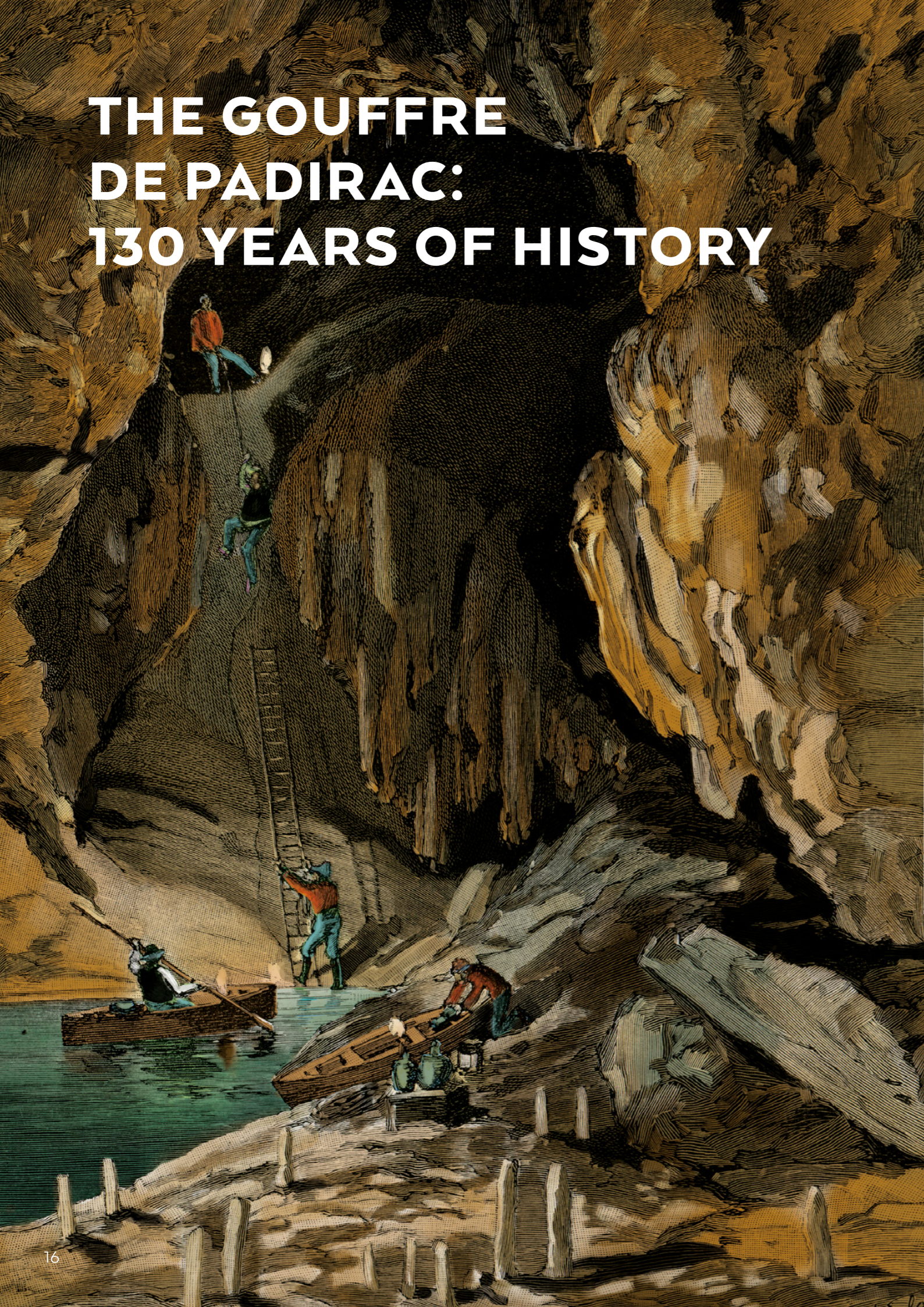
You'll reach a large **rocky cavity**. The adventure continues from this point through the most beautiful chambers of the Gouffre. After making your way through a narrower part of the passage along the **Grande Colonne**, a monumental **75-metre** calcite flowstone, you'll arrive at the **Lac des Gours**. Here, the calcite has formed gracefully curved weirs and magnificent mirrors of water, which account for the still waters of the **Rivière Plane**.

After climbing some fifty steps, you'll reach the imposing **Salle du Grand Dôme**, a veritable underground cathedral with a **94-metre** vault. Here, you'll see the imposing **Pile d'Assiettes**, which seems to have been placed above the tranquil **Lac Supérieur**, the last stop on your journey. You'll see daylight at the end of the tunnel!



**THE GOUFFRE
DE PADIRAC:
AN ADVENTURE MORE
THAN 130 YEARS
IN THE MAKING**

THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: 130 YEARS OF HISTORY



ÉDOUARD-ALFRED MARTEL, A "BENEFACTOR OF HUMANITY"

The **Gouffre de Padirac**, an extraordinary geological curiosity, was first explored by **Édouard-Alfred Martel** in 1889. The founding father of **modern speleology** and a pioneer in the exploration and conservation of the subterranean world, Martel became known as a "**benefactor of humanity**" in recognition of his discoveries and research.

On that **9th of July**, Martel and his team climbed down into the centre of the Earth using a **75-metre** cable, armed only with candles, hemp ropes and rope ladders. They successfully reached the bottom but soon realised they couldn't go much further due to the water level in what they would later name the **Rivière Plane**. The team turned around and climbed back out of this "**Trou du Diable**". But the next morning, **Martel's** spirit of adventure drove him to return, this time equipped with a magnesium lamp and a canoe, and it wasn't long before he discovered the astonishing wonders of the chasm's rocky cavities.

1889



Stunned by the beauty of this exceptional natural treasure, he decided to share his discovery with the world. A twist of fate soon led to his meeting with **George Beamish**. Heir to a wealthy brewing family, the Irishman happened upon a collection of documents related to Gouffre de Padirac that **Édouard-Alfred Martel** had forgotten in the backseat of a hansom cab. George Beamish decided to back Martel's project and together they founded the "**Société d'Exploitations Spéléologiques de Padirac**" in 1898, with the goal of "opening access to the chasm, caves and underground river and offering tours to visitors".

1898

But **George Beamish** was not to see their dream become reality, as he died before the site could be opened. It was his son, **William Beamish**, who would contribute to the **Gouffre de Padirac's** development as an attraction. The family's multigenerational commitment continued over the decades and in 2005, his great-granddaughter **Laetitia de Ménibus-Gravier** took the helm, becoming the fifth generation to manage the site. She launched a project that would mark a turning point in the Gouffre de Padirac's history: enhancing this exceptional geological formation's image and attractiveness.

2005



THE SOCIÉTÉ D'EXPLOITATIONS SPÉLÉOLOGIQUES DE PADIRAC

Founded in 1898 by **George Beamish**, the company that operates the site, the Société d'Exploitations Spéléologiques de Padirac, has been run by the same family for five generations. In 2005, **Laetitia de Ménibus-Gravier**, the great-granddaughter of the founder's son, **William Beamish**, took over the role of CEO with the aim of modernising this exceptional French site. Under her direction, the site now offers visitors a cultural and artistic experience going far beyond a simple tour and ensures that this natural wonder is "available to everyone and for everyone."

With a view to **highlighting the cultural heritage** of this natural underground site, she is committed to putting scientific and cultural information within easier reach, giving visitors access to educational tools and digitised archives via the **Padiracothèque** media library as well as providing ongoing support to charitable associations and sponsoring high-achieving adventurers.

In 2019, for the **130th anniversary** of the **Gouffre de Padirac's** discovery, she launched a project aimed at remodelling the architecture and landscape of the visitor centre. For this, she called upon the expertise of world-renowned architects. This large-scale project will diversify the site's offering with the creation of an information centre, guest accommodations and educational workshops. The goal is to make the site a European standard-setter among cave and chasm sites.

Every year, the **Gouffre de Padirac** will offer an eclectic line-up of cultural events, including photo and sculpture exhibitions and concerts. Don't miss them!



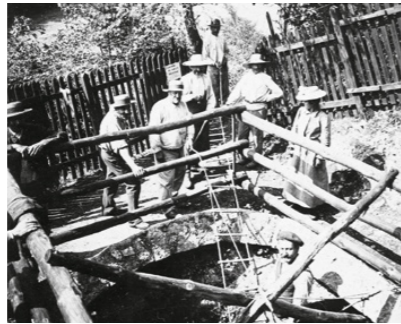
A CHASM WITH A RICH HISTORY

1889
9TH-10TH JULY



Édouard-Alfred Martel, a lawyer by training, climbs down into the abyss known at the time as the "**Trou du Diable**" equipped with heavy rope ladders, cables and candles.

1898
APRIL



Construction works to make the **Gouffre de Padirac** accessible to the public begin.

1898
1ST NOVEMBER



The **Gouffre de Padirac** opens to the public for the first time.

1899



A record! The Gouffre de Padirac is visited by **6,000 people** this year.

1901



In **1901**, electricity is installed under the supervision of engineer **Roumazeilles**. In **1906**, the **Gouffre de Padirac** acquires its own electric generator.

1930



Always on the move! The works continue with the installation of the **first lift** to make accessing the chasm easier.

1938



Édouard-Alfred Martel, the founder of modern speleology, dies at the age of 79. Over his lifetime he explored over 1,000 caves, published a large number of works, wrote many scientific articles and traveled the world.

1939



The "**New Padirac**" officially opens! Under the impetus of **William Beamish**, who has noticed the growing demand for tourist attractions, the number of yearly **visitors** to the Gouffre de Padirac reaches **100,000**.

2005



Laetitia de Ménibus-Gravier becomes CEO. She represents the **fifth generation** to manage this family business.

2017



The Gouffre de Padirac receives **480,000 visitors** this year.

2018



An episode of "**C'est pas Sorcier**" hosted by **Fred Courant** is filmed in the Gouffre de Padirac.

2019



This year marks the **130th anniversary** of this unique site's discovery. A record-breaking **503,000 people** also visit the site this year!



THE GOUFFRE DE PADIRAC: A KEY DRIVER OF THE REGIONAL ECONOMY

The **Gouffre de Padirac**'s attractiveness translates to significant economic influence in the region, both in terms of the jobs it creates and the spending it encourages.

Over the past **13 years**, the subterranean site's earnings have more than doubled, reaching **7 million**, and its economic influence benefits the region as a whole: **60%** of our visitors come to the area first and foremost to visit the **Gouffre de Padirac**. But **for every euro spent** at our site, **3 more is spent** locally. This attractiveness therefore impacts the entire region, since each visitor spends an average of 35 euros while in the area.

The **Gouffre de Padirac** also boosts the local economy by generating **304 direct, indirect or induced jobs every year**, including **150 individuals employed** directly by the Société d'Exploitations Spéléologiques de Padirac (**equivalent to 49 full-time positions**).

This has a magnifying effect that can also be seen at regional level, since every full-time position at the Gouffre de Padirac creates the equivalent of six full-time positions in the region.

This economic influence is due in large part to an increase in operations in other tourist sectors: **22%** of our visitors opt to spend the night at a nearby hotel and **19%** camp nearby, mainly during the high season, and the average stay is 6.5 nights. The **Gouffre de Padirac** is clearly an attractive site in more than one way!





**THE DORDOGNE VALLEY:
A HISTORICAL
AND CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNLIKE ANY OTHER
IN FRANCE**

THE DORDOGNE VALLEY: A REGION FULL OF HISTORY



ROCAMADOUR: AN ANCIENT PILGRIMAGE SITE

Not far from the **Gouffre de Padirac**, the clifftop village of Rocamadour will enchant you with its mysteries. Built at various elevations along the **Alzou Canyon**, this village of **630 inhabitants** is home to caves decorated with prehistoric paintings, the witnesses to an ancient way of life. And for the past thousand years, it has also been a major pilgrimage destination. After entering through the **Porte du Figuier**, climb the stairs of the **Grand Escalier** and explore the esplanade of the Sanctuaire, where you will see the statue of the **Black Virgin** nestled in the **Notre-Dame chapel** before continuing on towards the **magnificent Saint-Sauveur basilica**. A little farther on, you'll see crypts, chapels and a château, the wonders of this regional treasure of French heritage.



A LAND WITH DECORATED CAVES, CHÂTEAUX AND CLIFFTOP MEDIÉVAL VILLAGES

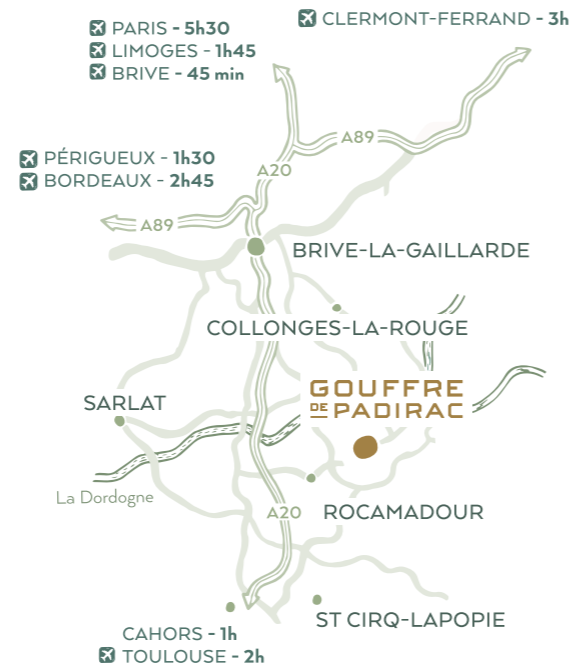
Mainstays of the **Dordogne Valley**, the châteaux will take you on a trip back in time! From the medieval "**Tours de Merle**" (12th century) to the **Château de Vassinhac** (16th century), where author Colette once lived, to the **Château de Castelnaud-Bretenoux** overlooking the **Pays des Quatre Rivières** region, this historical heritage is surrounded by nature. You will undoubtedly also want to explore the five villages that have been included in the official list of the "**most beautiful villages of France**" – Autoire, Carennac, Loubressac, Collonges-la-Rouge and Curemonte – or the many decorated caves and their magical ambiance.



A FEAST FOR THE EYES AND THE STOMACH TOO

In the intimate setting of a guesthouse, the authenticity of an inn or with a stroll in one of the colourful markets, you'll experience the region's amazing culinary heritage. **Périgord walnuts**, melon and artisanal lamb from **Quercy**, **Rocamadour** goat cheese, **Glanes** wine, truffles, foie gras, chestnuts, "**croustillot**" and confits all await you among this region's other culinary treasures. After offering you a dazzling display of history and nature, the **Dordogne Valley** will win over your taste buds!

ENJOY YOUR TRIP!



AUDIO GUIDE PROVIDED WITH EACH TICKET PURCHASED, AVAILABLE IN 6 LANGUAGES FOR ADULTS & 4 LANGUAGES FOR CHILDREN



TO PRESERVE THE INTEGRITY OF THE SITE AND FOR HYGIENE REASONS, ANIMALS ARE NOT ALLOWED (EXCEPT GUIDE DOGS)



NO FILMING OR PHOTOGRAPHS ALLOWED BEYOND THE BOAT DEPARTURE POINT



FREE CAR PARKS VERY CLOSE TO THE RECEPTION BUILDING



LAST ADMISSION: **1 HOUR 30 MINUTES** BEFORE THE SITE CLOSES



NOT ACCESSIBLE TO PEOPLE WITH REDUCED MOBILITY



THEMED GUIDED TOUR GIVEN BY A BOATMAN (EXTRA CHARGE)



BOUTIQUE/BOOKSHOP
SPECIALTY FOODS



ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS
AND RECREATIONAL AREA



SHADED PICNIC AREAS, SNACK BAR
AND RESTAURANT ON SITE



SET MENUS FOR GROUPS AVAILABLE
(BOOK IN ADVANCE)



DURATION OF THE TOUR
AROUND **1 HOUR 30 MINUTES**

ONLINE TICKET SALES

www.gouffre-de-padirac.com



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