

Before the Louvre

Prehistoric art in French caves made accessible

Over the course of 6 million years or so, the River Ardèche carved dramatic, curving cliffs and a spectacular natural arch out of limestone mountains in southern France. The forces of erosion excavated numerous caves in the sheer walls overlooking the gorge.

Around 35,000 years ago the local residents ousted the cave bears that inhabited these natural shelters and proceeded to make them their own. They turned one of these caves into a prehistoric, underground Louvre, covering the walls with images of lions, bears, horses and other contemporary wildlife. It was discovered 23 years ago



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by a group of French explorers. The Chauvet-Pont d'Arc Cave was named after the leader of that group, Jean-Marie Chauvet.

The cave art is considered so significant that the French government moved quickly to preserve it, and the United Nation's cultural arm, UNESCO, named it a World Heritage site in 2014. If you thought it was hard to go to France and explore underground cave art before these protections were enacted, it's now almost impossible.

While you can't actually crawl on your belly through narrow rock passageways to see the art in person, you can take a virtual tour online at archeologie.culture.fr. The website also has a virtual tour of the other famous French cave-art at Lascaux.

The Chauvet tour is set up like Google Street View. You can pan from side to side and up and down

to explore all the walls, floor and ceiling. You also can follow arrows to zoom from one chamber to the next. Clickable dots on points of interest along the way bring up descriptions and close-up photos of the various works of art and natural features.

The Lascaux tour is a video fly-through. You can't control the direction and pace of the tour like in Chauvet, and it doesn't have the information dots along the way. It's still an impressive experience that will leave some viewers feeling claustrophobic as the camera weaves through the narrow passageways.

In addition to the virtual tours, the sites have sections detailing the history and geology of the caves. Some of the writing comes off as being a little stilted because it's translated from French and it assumes a level of understanding of scientific and archaeological terms.

There are plenty of high-quality photos and videos of the cave art and the natural art of the subterranean rock formations. Unfortunately, the videos are in French. My browser translates the French subtitles, but it can't do it fast enough to make them readable. Again, for the claustrophobic, some of the videos of cavers squeezing through the tight passages will cause anxiety.

If you go to France you can visit replicas of the caverns made from high-resolution 3D-scans, complete with cool, damp cave-like conditions. But if you can't make the trip, visiting the websites is the next best thing.

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