

# The land before time



**Jon Bryant** stood under his first prehistoric menhir on a camping holiday to Carnac at the age of three. Since then he's never looked forward

**P**rehistory is a strange place to visit, not least because there are no answers. No one knows how France's giant standing stones were carried and raised. We don't understand what cave paintings mean, why stone circles were erected or what dolmens were used for. For me, it's all about the setting, the joy of the search through French countryside and the final touch and smell of the grey granite... and for all those things, there's nowhere more overwhelming than Carnac.

Older than Stonehenge, Carnac, on the south coast of Brittany, dwarfs any other prehistoric site in the world and what's more, it's only a tiny part of what was going on there 4,000 years ago. Over the centuries, thousands of menhirs and dolmens have been removed for quarry, pushed over and buried by farmers, and even lifted out of the way to make a new road network.

It's all very upsetting for Howard Crowhurst, a renowned expert who lives near Carnac and has spent the last 20 years studying the stones (he previously lived in Lascaux, site of the famous cave). He shows me a new and very unattractive house, built not 20 metres from the Erdeven stones north of Carnac. "It completely destroys the natural alignment," he says, "and interrupts the light of the summer solstice."

"What is incredible about Carnac is the size of the stones and the scale of it all." Some 200 km<sup>2</sup> covered in standing stones, dolmens, circles and alignments. "It defies imagination. And also there's the subtlety of it all. Not just the engravings, but the careful placement of the stones in lines or quadrilaterals that are so accurate, even modern equipment cannot compete with them in geometrical precision."

He maintains that there are no serious hypotheses as to how ancient man placed the big stones there. Pointing to one of the three giant blocks in Erdeven, he explains; "Lugging this up a hill would have taken 3,000 men. The disparate population of the area (estimated at around 0.8 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) just couldn't have supplied that many

people. And at that time there wasn't the vegetation to use large trees as rollers."

Carnac's stone alignments start at the hamlet of Le Ménéac where the grey menhirs criss-cross through the village, forming parts of garden walls, one end of a washing line or a garden shed. Further north there's Crucuno, a perfect quadrilateral in massive grey rocks that lies along the cardinal points and east of the town, Le Mont-Saint-Michel, a giant burial mound.

## Mysterious menhirs

Of course, prehistoric Brittany is not just Carnac. The largest menhir in Western Europe (at almost double the size of its runner-up) is in Locmariaquer, just down the coast. The 21-metre block of granite now lies broken on its side. It was moved there from across the peninsula, presumably by Neolithic man, although no one has any idea how they could have done it. It weighs 350 tons. Hoisting it up using an earth ramp (much like the pyramids in Egypt) and levers possibly... but transporting it from several kilometres away without the manpower or tree trunks available? Another prehistoric mystery.

Once standing, the great menhir was smoothed over using quartz hammers. Nearby, clues indicate there would have been 18 other menhirs, all erected around 4,500 BC. None remain. Crowhurst has a collection of old photographs of many megalithic structures that are no longer there. "There were even local Breton demolition teams who would proudly remove all the stones from a dolmen for building materials." The Belle Île lighthouse is made out of removed menhirs.

Elsewhere in France, megalithic sites are left relatively undisturbed. Megaliths are shown on Michelin maps by a chubby pi sign and most are not even mentioned in local guide books. Sometimes I found a huge standing stone on my way to see another, neither of which were on a map.

Even given the obsessive nature of many menhir and dolmen trackers, one man's 40

metres is another man's 400. "Half an hour's walk from the poplar forest trees" or "In the middle of the oblong field that rises up on the left" is as accurate as a description gets. Being honest, I located only about three-quarters of what I set out to find. The Dolmen de Lamalou, north of Montpellier, was even marked on a big road atlas, but I never found it. I should have used the sun.

Having located the beautiful almond-shaped menhir down a side turning just east of Ganges in the Gard, I spent an hour looking in vain for its eight other partners in what was meant to be a dense field of standing stones. I had given up when a stone tip miraculously appeared in the top corner of my camera frame while I was photographing the gigantic almond. My children found the rest, clambering over the out-of-bounds stones as if they were in a Neolithic playground; my dog was also very helpful. Dogs have fantastic radar for locating something solid sticking out of the ground so he was useful for the more obscure obelisks hidden in the middle of forests.

Among the herds of ginger-coloured cattle in the Gard's hilly wilderness are a surprisingly large number of menhirs, ▶



**LEFT: The menhirs at Le Ménéac criss-cross through the hamlet ABOVE: Howard Crowhurst with one of the standing stones about which he is so passionate**



dolmens and stone circles. If you stay in the Hôtel le Causse near the Cirque de la Navacelles in Blandas, you can spend a whole day walking from one menhir to the next. Each one gives off a different air. One by the roadside at Le Landre is the face of a gnarled witch while up the road another looks like a three-metre slab of nibbled cheese. Stones around Blandas are mostly on private land. You're meant to stay behind the fence but the sight of a tantalisingly perfect stone circle across a freshly ploughed field is often too much to resist.

We held up the barbed wire fence and made a dash for it only to hear a tractor in a distant top field change gear quickly. The farmer probably didn't even see us but we've never squealed louder or ran faster. The photos are all blurry, the lunch was dropped halfway back, my shoe came off and my daughter's jeans were ripped on the fence but it was definitely worth it to be momentarily inside the Cromlech de Mercoulines and touch the lichen-covered greyness of a perfect stone circle.

Stone monuments weren't always so fenced off. It's hard to find a postcard of a dolmen ('stone table' in Breton) printed before the 1960s, that isn't being sat on, leaned against or used in some way at a family get-together.

The Pierre de la Fée dolmen in Draguignon is right next to a cottage and overlooks a housing estate. There are signs nearby saying 'No ball games' and there is a little car park for visitors. When I visited, there were some chickens clucking between

the standing stones and dogs lying under them. The slabs, erected around 2,500 BC, are covered in lovers' initials and carved hearts. The dolmen was really just part of the community and most locals may never have even heard of it.

The same goes for France's largest dolmen, the Grand Dolmen de Bagneux, down a side street in a suburb of Saumur in the Loire. It is one of France's most majestic (and heaviest) monuments yet astonishingly it is up for sale.

It was 'inherited' by the current owners but after ten years of caring for it and opening it to the public, they have had enough. "We are looking to sell it because it's not financially viable," says Sylviane

Normand the owner. "My husband has had to go to Paris to find work and so I'm stuck here with the dolmen."

Bought by her husband's grandmother 60 years ago, the vast stone monument is more than 20 metres long, three metres high and takes up their entire garden. "The problem is we can't come up with a price. The professionals don't know what it's worth and so if someone is interested, we can discuss a figure."

## Dolmen for sale

As you walk along Rue du Dolmen, it's hard to believe that behind the garden gate of number 56, is a 5,000-year-old burial chamber. Early postcards show it once stood in the middle of fields, but today it is surrounded by houses, garages and brick walls. "Saumur council doesn't want it and neither does the state," says Normand, "so we'll have to wait for an English angel."

Because of their shape and stability (the capstone alone in Bagneux weighs 109 tons), dolmens all over France have taken on various uses as bus-stops, chapel roofs, town square bandstands and market stalls. One near Gennes, the Dolmen de la Madeleine, used to be the village bread oven. Another in Saint Germain in the Charente has had its stone sides replaced by Romanesque columns to form a shrine – the Dolmen de



**TOP: The standing stones at Carnac are older than Stonehenge LEFT: The gnarled face of a witch can be seen in le Menhir du Landre RIGHT: Ginestous almond menhir**

The dolmen was  
really just part of the  
community and most  
locals may never even  
have heard of it





Périssac now forms part of the war memorial in Esse and another section was dragged away (reputedly it took 18 horses) to form a bizarre, multi-tiered tomb in Confolens cemetery.

Dolmens tend to be big, brutal, misunderstood monuments. Some may have been tombs, others, centres of worship, but they are not graceful. For prehistoric subtlety and the beginnings of art, you need to go underground into France's caves.

On 14 September, 1940, four teenagers and their dog, Robot, were playing in the woods near Montignac in the Dordogne when Robot suddenly disappeared down a hole. The boys ran over to where he had been and heard his distant barks echoing underground. After climbing down into a cavern, they could just make out a painting of a bison on the wall. The boys swore to take the secret to their graves.

By the next morning, people were already heading down to Lascaux from Paris to inspect the cave. What they had discovered was the 'Sistine Chapel' of prehistoric art, a series of caves whose walls

were covered in stunning polychromatic figures. More than 2,000 depictions of hypnotically beautiful horses, ponies, bison, cattle and stags are shown with a subtlety and perspective that did not appear in art again until the Renaissance.

### Mesmerising experience

Within a decade, thousands of visitors were walking through the Great Hall of Bulls, as it became known, and breathing over the hunting and running scenes in the Axial gallery. They did not realise it at the time but the excessive amount of carbon dioxide being produced was destroying the delicate mineral pigments and the cave was finally closed to the public in 1963. Twenty years later, two of the caverns were replicated 200 metres away and today visitors can walk through Lascaux II. It is still a mesmerising experience.

Lascaux and the entire Vézère valley is now a Unesco World Heritage Site boasting 25 separate caves and three types of prehistoric art: painting, charcoal drawing and sculpted rock.

Of the painted caves, only one is still open to the public – the Font-de-Gaume – and even then only while the atmosphere inside remains stable. Of the drawing caves, the Grotte de Rouffignac is the most magnificent with 150 mammoths, bison, horses and a hairy rhinoceros, and there's an electric train to take you round the eight-kilometre cave.

Of the sculpted walls, the Abri de Cap-Blanc is astonishing. Railway builders inadvertently destroyed some of the animals' feet before they realised what they had unearthed. It's difficult to believe these horses, bison and reindeer, all intersecting each other along different planes yet floating in the same space, were created by simple flint tools 15,000 years ago.

The Périgord area has 60 of France's 170 cave art sites. It's partly due to the geology – large holes in rocks – and partly

**ABOVE LEFT: The menhir in Locmariaquer is the largest in Western Europe**

**ABOVE RIGHT: Drawings from the Lascaux caves remain an enigma to this day**



## TOP TEN FRENCH PREHISTORIC SITES

- 1 Carnac alignments
- 2 Lascaux caves
- 3 Niaux caves
- 4 Filitosa carved menhirs in Corsica
- 5 Locmariaquer
- 6 Gavrinis dolmen
- 7 Le Grand Dolmen de Bagneux in Saumur
- 8 Barenez cairn at Plouézoc'h in Finistère
- 9 Champ Dolent menhir at Dol-de-Bretagne
- 10 Vallée des Merveilles



because the area has been little touched by agriculture, but mainly because since the discovery of Lascaux, people have been searching hard to find new caves. Cussac cave was only found in 2000; archaeologists are calling it the 'Lascaux of engraving' but it's not open – yet. Locals also know about other caves that they don't talk to outsiders about. There are a lot of secrets in the Périgord besides the recipe for *foie gras*.

Eminent French prehistorian, Dr Jean Clottes, has recently written a book examining why hunter-gatherers went deep into French caves expressly to decorate them, while deep caves everywhere else in the world were places of fear and shunned.

Like the stones of Carnac or the Locmariaquer menhir, cave art is all part of the prehistoric enigma. Clottes has no explanation why they painted there. Was it purely for aesthetic reasons? A story book? Part of a hunting magic or worship? Interesting too that there are never any representations of the sea or land, never any vegetation or images of the sun, moon or stars... everything just floats.

The most plausible theory today, reckons

Clottes, is that "ancient people had a shamanic religion and created art within its framework." Deep caves were where people could interact with spirits, and the hands held against rocks and sprayed with pigment may have allowed them some kind of access into this spirit world.

Hand stencils appear often, usually with bent-over fingers, all over French cave art. They are there at Chauvet in the Ardèche, Gargas in the Hautes-Pyrénées and Pech-Merle in the Lot but the most celebrated are in the Cosquer caves in Cassis.

### Tragic discovery

However intrepid I have been, I have never made it to the Cosquer caves. They are 37 metres under water. Their discovery was part of a tragedy. Local deep-sea diver Henri Cosquer had visited the caves in the 1980s but did not see the paintings until 1991. He declared his discovery after three divers died in the cave after getting lost in the flooded chambers. Cosquer can still be seen, pootling around the harbour and looking out to sea on Cassis' quayside, no doubt wondering what else might be out there. So much has

vanished. For every deep cave, there would have been simple rock shelters open to the elements painted in the brightest of red and yellow ochres. Only one in France remains visible, at Campôme, in the Pyrénées Orientales. Early humans would have carried on their day-to-day lives at the foot of such painted scapes, a bit like prehistoric wallpaper or Paleolithic stucco.

You could travel around France for a year and still not see every prehistoric site. Menhirs are everywhere; outside the door of Le Mans cathedral, on a plateau above Collobrières in the Var. The Champ Dolent menhir is over nine metres high and appears out of the blue on the Normandy border.

As regions go, Provence probably has the fewest prehistorical sites in France. However, it possesses one of the most unique; the Vallée des Merveilles in the hills far above Nice. The best way to visit is on a daytrip in a 4x4 jeep or on an organised seven-hour hike. The figures of devils, flailing hands and dislocated humans scrawled into the rocks look as if the art is from another planet. Much is reproduced at the museum in Tende nearby but the 4,000-year-old

## FRANCOFILE

### TOP MUSEUMS

#### Musée d'Archéologie Nationale

Château-Place Charles de Gaulle  
78105 Saint-Germain-en-Laye  
Tel: (Fr) 1 39 10 13 00  
www.musee-antiquitesnationales.fr  
The country's leading archaeological museum is just north of Versailles.

#### Musée de Préhistoire James Miln – Zacharie Le Rouzic

10 Place de la Chapelle, 56340 Carnac  
Tel: (Fr) 2 97 52 22 04  
www.museedecarnac.com  
Near the centre of the old town, the Carnac museum has one of the largest collections of ancient objects in Europe.

#### Musée de Paléontologie Humaine de Terra Amata

25 Boulevard Carnot, 06300 Nice  
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 55 59 93  
www.musee-terra-amata.org  
An authentic location as the site of the first human 'hearth'.

#### Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon

Route de Montmeyan, 04500 Quinson  
Tel: (Fr) 4 92 74 09 59  
www.museeprehistoire.com  
Norman Foster-designed and the largest of its kind in Europe.

#### Musée National de Préhistoire

1 Rue du Musée, 24620  
Les Eyzies-de-Tayac  
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 06 45 45  
www.musee-prehistoire-eyzies.fr  
Set in a château overlooking the village, the museum is one of France's best.

#### Musée des Merveilles

Av. du 16 Septembre 1947, 06430 Tende  
Tel: (Fr) 4 93 04 32 50  
www.museedesmerveilles.com  
An extensive library and many activities for children throughout the year.

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Full details of all museums, hotels and trips to visit France's prehistoric sites are available from [www.franceguide.com](http://www.franceguide.com)

*Cave Art* by Dr Jean Clottes, £45, is published by Phaidon Press. The photos and explanations are excellent.



ABOVE: The village of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac in the Dordogne has a fascinating museum

scratchings remain slightly unnerving, looking as if they were done in tortured desperation. Provence's Calès caves are a fascinating discovery too. One hundred metres up a steep incline from the village of Lamanon, you arrive at a windswept green moonscape, a perfect place to have a precarious picnic. There are a few triangular warning signs during the ascent but nothing to prepare you for the sheer cliff edges, stone cauldrons hiding 30-foot drops and rocks so slippery you need to be a frog or a woodlouse to walk across them. Green signs guide you round the caves, inhabited right up until the 16th century.

## The first hearth

Lamanon's other claim to fame is Europe's largest plane tree with a 23.5-metre circumference. Lamanon also has a prehistory museum. It's like most French prehistory museums, full of glass-topped cabinets with haphazard displays of knapping tools, flints, sepia photographs of men posing with axe-heads and perhaps a diorama of an angry-looking Neanderthal poking a spear into a stuffed and dusty boar.

The same Neanderthal man faced me on the first floor at the Musée de Terra Amata in Nice. A new block of seafront flats was about to be built in 1965 and the ground was being flattened when the bulldozer driver noticed something shiny sticking out of the earth. He got out of the cab and examined it. It turned out to be part of a rhino skull that had been cut by tools and burnt. For archaeologists, it signified the

world's first undisputed 'hearth' – a place where people brought things back to cook in their own 'home'. Construction of the holiday flats continued but the mayor of Nice acquired the ground floor, which became the Terra Amata museum.

Two French prehistory museums are particularly magnificent. In Quinson, the museum was designed by Sir Norman Foster and dominates the village. A giant mammoth greets you at the entrance, and they have flint and firemaking activity days. The other fabulous museum is in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac in the Dordogne. The village has a population of just 900 but its museum is a fantastic combination of high-tech displays, proper explanations of who, what, when and where, and an acknowledgement that there's not much why or how.

France is very proud of its prehistorical sites and many are left encouragingly unguarded. Apart from failing to locate some sites or stones, there was the odd disappointment. "Is this it?" chanted my children at the dolmen just outside Ménerbes. It is so tight to the roadside that it's better to pretend you haven't made a special four-hour round trip to see it – I was saved by the village's corkscrew museum.

Although prehistoric man erected these incredible monuments for his own purposes, none of which we know for sure, each has attracted its own legend and what's important is that they are now being re-discovered by future generations to marvel at France's ancient history. [👉](#)