

My wife and I have been holidaying in France on and off since the early 1970's. For the past 7 years we have rented a gîte in the Lot region in Southwest France.



The Sanctuary

The village of Rocamadour is on the eastern edge of the area, across the border from the Dordogne into the Lot department, and is one of France's most important tourist destinations. Each year the small village of Rocamadour (population around 600), in the Parc Naturel Régional des Causses du Quercy, receives more than a million visitors. Why so popular?

Firstly because Rocamadour is an important pilgrimage destination, and has been for 1000 years. Built on the site of a shrine to a Madonna, the shrine became famous for its healing powers, and soon became a stop on the pilgrimage path to Santiago de Compostela

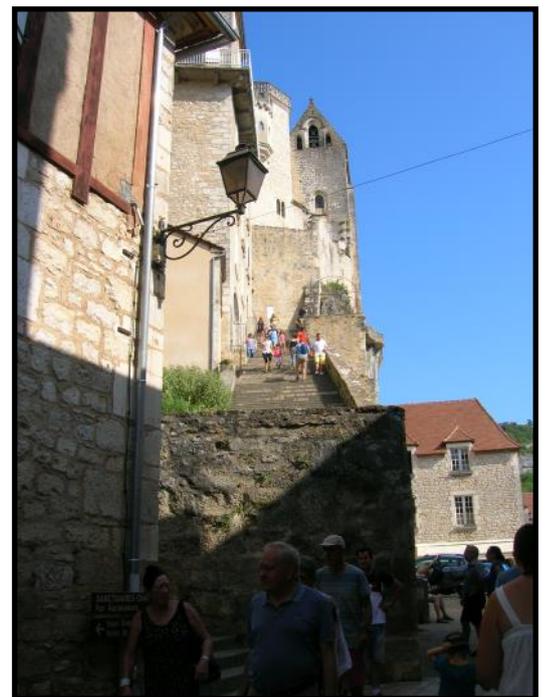
The second reason is because of the beautiful and dramatic setting of the village, climbing up a cliff side. The 216 steps that make up the Great Staircase separate the lower town from the complex of religious structures that are set halfway up the cliff. The Sanctuary made of 8 chapels is built around a central courtyard. In days past pilgrims climbed the steps on their knees as a way of penance! However today's visitors have the benefit of two lifts. These link the lower town via the Sanctuary to the Chateau at the top.



Main shopping street

The best way for tourists to arrive is to park your car at the very top car park and use the lifts.

Although there are many restaurants and shops bear in mind they cater for tourists and a lot of the items for sale are typically tourist tat!



Today's visitors climbing the 216 steps

Conques, listed as one of the most beautiful villages of France, is about 55 miles southeast of Rocamadour in the Aveyron department in the Massif Central. Conques sits on the edge of the gorge of the River Dourdou, in a beautiful setting surrounded by mountains and forests. The approach from the south is along an especially attractive stretch of river.

Although the main sights in Conques are the Abbey and its treasury there is a lot to see elsewhere in the town. You will come across most of the highlights as you walk through the village. There are various places of interest including the stone gateways, the communal bread ovens (which still work), the convent, castle and fortifications.



The Abbey

that of the church. The large number of windows are also a symbol of status as taxes were levied on the number of windows and so only rich people could afford to have lots of windows. In the centre of Conques, parts of the original town walls and gates survive, sealing in the

The castle of Conques has a tall octagonal tower. This reaches slightly higher than the octagonal tower of the Abbey and was built like this by the original owner in an attempt to put his importance higher than



Medieval houses

narrow village streets (many of which are cobbled) and with many medieval houses spread out across the hillside - almost all the houses seem to have great views into the valley below.



Main street

Conques has its origins, like many of the beautiful villages of France, in ancient pilgrim paths. Conques was soon a major stop-off point on the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela.

As is usual in these village there are plenty of places to partake of refreshments, but not so much of the tourist tat found in Rocamadour.