

ARVAPV sortie Grotte de Villars 15 08 2024 by Richard Dismore

We registered fairly late for this event due to the changeability of the weather. I had also left it a bit late to prepare the Woody which had been parked still wearing the old plaque from the 3 Chateaux en fête sortie on 27th April and bearing evidence of its inundation during the orage on the homeward journey, best forgotten. Three full days of dépannage of the fuel system, the ignition, and total TLC of the coachwork and mechanics transformed the vehicle and raised the spirits. The closing date was 10th August and our inscription was posted on Tuesday 6th. By Wednesday 14th we still had no confirmation but a quick email to the Secretary of our club, 3Vi de Montpon, Danièle, resulted in a phone call of comfort confirming our inscription. Meanwhile, on Tuesday 13th, I had mentioned to our neighbour, Julian Pichereau, that we were on the event in case he wanted to be a spectator at the finish point of Vendore. I sent him the inscription papers by email to give him the details and the following evening he phoned me to say that he had telephoned the organisers and they allowed him to make a late entry with his ancient Toyota Land Cruiser 4x4.

It was a nominal early start before dawn at 06h30 and to Julian and Adeline's credit the family with 2 small children were ready at that time but we were still doing last minute essentials so we rendezvoused at the Saint Aulaye Champ de Foire at 07h00 after they had obtained some cash at the money machine.

Equipe "Chenaud" Had a fabulous pre-rally rally of 76 km to the start point at the Grotte de Villars in the cool of the morning at an average speed of 63 kmhr, allowing us time to appreciate the beautiful route ascending from an altitude of 45M at Chenaud to 192M at the meeting point, uphill all the way. The route was via Riberac, Lamboudie, Coutures, Tour Blanche, crossing into the Parc naturel regional Perigord- Limousin, then Champenac de Belair, through Villars to the parking at the caves. We definitely went the "pretty way" and were rewarded by super scenic views, close sightings of Chevreuil relaxed in their natural forest habitat, and a herd of goats so white that they looked freshly laundered in contrast to a bunch of black and dark brown sheep encountered later on. The arrival time was from 08h00. We parked at 08h45, team Pichereau were in good shape having enjoyed the run and the children were excited with expectation.



This allowed us plenty of time to register, fit our plaques, take photographs, have a coffee and viennoiserie, have several conversations, and get into the queue for the second cave group visit scheduled for 09h30.







It is a steep downhill hike to the cave entrance through beautiful parkland. At the entrance the highly competent guide gave us a briefing on the history of the cave.

It was discovered by a team from the Périgueux speleo-club in the early winter of 1953. The dark passage into the unknown was revealed by a light mist coming out of the ground indicating a moist chamber below. The 4 speleologist discoverers cleared the passage and gained entry to a magical world comprising a tangle of galleries and chambers stretching over 13 kilometers and several levels. Five years later, in December 1958, a new discovery found numerous prehistoric paintings hidden beneath a protective covering of calcite. In 1959 part of the Grotte de Villars was opened to the public after being declared a national monument. Our tour was along 900M of tunnels and reached a depth of 40M from the surface. The temperature in the cave was 13 degrees, almost constant all year round and we were glad of our jackets and fleeces. In ancient times when bears inhabited part of the caves, it was 7 degrees. Nothing prepared us for the magnificence of what we were to see. Photographs were interdit so the following images were provided by the caves site.



The concretions are formed by water. In the past, there was an underground river at Villars. Now, as rainwater runs over the rocks, it picks up limestone in a slightly different form, calcite. All kinds of different concretions are found in the Grotte de Villars. They can be spectacularly white or, more grey, beige or even pink. They vary from sparkling, translucent to opaque, and the lighting accentuates their very, very

slow progression. It's estimated that stalactites, stalagmites and the like grow by around 3 millimetres a year. Imagine the time it took to create such geological forms! Some columns are hundreds and hundreds of thousands of years old...

As we walked along, the guide illuminated certain areas, dramatizing the visit with simple, beautiful lighting effects that reflect the forms created by nature. On the ceilings, we saw "fistulas", concretions also known as macaroni, which are extremely fine and full of holes! When they become blocked for various reasons, they become classic stalactites. At the lowest point we assembled on a walkway in a large cavity for a top notch son-et-lumière show as only the French know how. Commencing in the pitch dark It began with a simulation of water rushing through the cave, thunderous lightening crashes, followed by cave bears galloping in front of our eyes, whose impressive claw marks could be seen a little further on, finishing with a scintillating light show highlighting the massively beautiful formations in the chamber.



Before surfacing, the guide drew our attention to the rock paintings residing behind a layer of calcite! Over 19,000 years old, the cave was too cold and damp for habitation, but rather was a place of passage and, presumably, of expression. We could discern a horse, a bison standing in front of a man horns lowered, each threatening the other, somewhat reminiscent of bushman paintings twice as old as these that we had seen at Tsodilo hills in Botswana where they were hunting Eland in similar scenes. These were created using crushed manganese mixed with grease and applied with a finger or hairbrush.

All too soon it was over and the stiff pull uphill to the car-park was too much for us in one go, however a rest on one of the wooden benches halfway up enabled us to gather our senses and regain our breath, allowing us to contemplate the lush forest and the Cro-Magnon exhibits in the adjacent garden area. The shop through which the exit was routed, was resplendent with all manner of speleo exhibits and minerals and rocks for sale, interesting to browse but not for us to buy. We set off on the rally to Vendoire with the first group but very quickly got into difficulties with the so-called routebook, missing a key turn in Villars. The main problem was that the schedule relied on odometer readings and ours doesn't work. Those who did have one didn't use it either. We and a long column of followers were pulled up by a motorcycle marshal after 17km and asked to do a demi-tour go back to the Grotte to join the next group. The tailback cars did so but we declined as we had fuel limitations and elected to go our own route using the map backed up by the GPS. This took us through Brantôme, Vieux Mareuil, Mareuil and into the southern end of Vendoire by a really scenic route. This confused the car-park marshals and later the man on the public barrier, but it was all good natured and we were let into the centre of town to park in the main street. Strangely we were the first to arrive and managed to bag the most shady parking. The rest of the rally arrived in dribs and drabs over the next hour while we were ensconced in the buvette/ lunch area enjoying a fragrant white wine based Apéro.

The food was to die for. Quite the best we have had for a long time at a fête. The starter was Charentais melon with jambon, the main course was a generous slice of braised ham with a baked potato dauphinoise accompaniment, Camembert followed and it was rounded off with a generous slice of tarte au pommes. A bottle of chilled Rosé d'Anjou helped it all down.



Famille Pichereau were able to join us halfway through our meal having enjoyed their rally.

At his point most of the cars were parked, a few of the starters at the Grotte seemed not to arrive and the ranks were swelled by some cars that were not on the rally. It was a good show. I particularly liked the fiat 1200 Farina cabriolet of Danièle and Gérard from Our club 3Vi.



We then put up our fiches historique and technique on the Woody and displayed the picture of an original in its natural habitat parked amid American steam locomotives in its primary role of station shuttle (Hack) hence the origin of the name Station Wagon. This was carefully studied by many people including the compère/ master-of ceremonies of the show. He asked me if we had entered the concours d'élégance to which I replied no and we did not have any suitable clothes. After a long discussion he prevailed on us to enter on the basis it was only the car to be judged by the panel and I reluctantly agreed.







The concours involved a drive past, a stop in front of the judges, an interview and I gave a bit of the cars exotic history to spice it up. The woodwork had a special bling to it as I had spent half a day cleaning, oiling, waxing and polishing it.

Once the cars had gone over the block ranging from a pea green Renault 4L, a growling Ferrari, immaculate Charlstons in assorted colours, and several American barges, there was a break in proceedings while the Sapeurs et Pompiers rendered assistance to a poor member of the public who had collapsed on the sidewalk just near the panel. The MC came across to us twice to make sure we would stay and then finally we were lined up. The grey Renault Juvaquatre Dauphinoise first, followed by the Fiat 1200 cabriolet, and us bringing up the rear. When the prize-giving eventually got under way, they presented 3rd place for the Renault, 2nd place for the Fiat and the Woody was declared the winner! The president of the ARVAPV and the Prefect of the département loaded me up with more goodies than I could carry. We received a barquette of regional delicacies including an impressive bottle of red wine, a huge coffee machine and a Dordogne/Pérgord trophy from the Prefect.





The Woody rewarded us a reliable 37 km trip home arriving with famille Pichereau faithfully following, both of us dog tired and just a litre or three of fuel left in the tank after a trouble free 167km round trip. Truly a day to remember and the Grotte de Villars, an unmissable experience if you have not visited there.