

Take a stroll in... SAINT-JEAN- DE-CÔLE

On the banks of a small river in the *Périgord Vert*,
Alison Hughes explores a village that combines
medieval charm with a thriving community life ➤➤➤



VILLAGE

The centre of Saint-Jean-de-Côle
in Dordogne, with the parish
church, the market hall and
the Château de la Marthonie



Appetisers of foie gras accompanied by a cool glass of apple juice made for the perfect snack during my wander around the *Plus Beau Village* of Saint-Jean-de-Côle, in the north-eastern corner of Dordogne. The village is a favourite with local artists who are inspired by its roofs and ochre-walled houses, as well as the château and medieval bridge.

As with many villages in France, its origins are religious. An Augustinian priory was established on the banks of the River Côle at the beginning of the 12th century and the Château de la Marthonie dates from the same time, although it has been rebuilt down the centuries. The present owner, Pierre de Beaumont, a descendant of the La Marthonie family, recounts a story of when the late Queen Mother paid a visit. Asked why so much renovation work was still needed, he replied (I'm sure with a twinkle in his eye) that it was the fault of the English, who had destroyed most of the château during the Hundred Years War. The Queen Mother is reported to have said: "Nothing to do with me. I'm Scottish."

Most of the surviving priory buildings and the château date from the 15th to the 17th centuries, but the tower on the far left, which is now joined to the main building by a series of arches, has remnants from the 12th century. The 'pepper-mill' tower that faces the main square is older than the square towers that overlook the terrace and gardens.

On entering the village square there are three things that strike you: the unusual shape and ➤➤



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Château de la Marthonie with the peppermill tower (centre); A cross near the market hall; The Église Saint-Jean-Baptiste and the attached market hall; The hump-backed bridge over the River Côle; Ceramicist Ona Volungeviciute; The À Table restaurant; The oldest house in the village; **LEFT:** Alleyways and flowers; **BELOW:** A tower within a tower



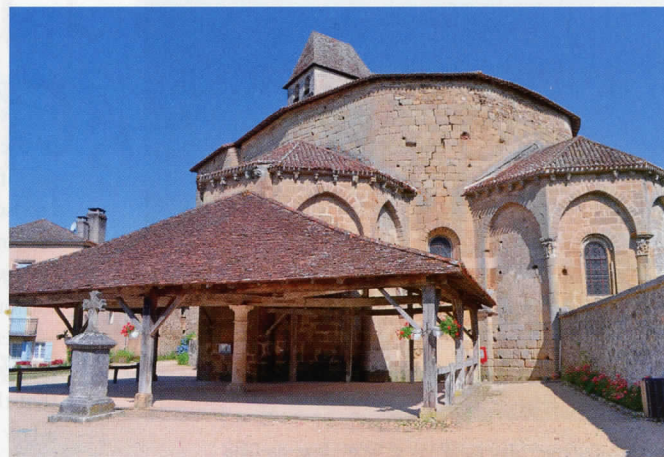
SAINT-JEAN-DE-CÔLE AT A GLANCE

Stay the night at... Le Manoir d'Elles (tel: (Fr) 5 53 62 54 04, www.hotel-restaurant-manoir.fr), a paradise on Earth a few kilometres away, in Saint-Romain-et-Saint-Clément, run by the Pim family. You could be forgiven for thinking that men are forbidden here, given that the five bedrooms and two suites are named after celebrated women and copies of *Famosa* (the magazine for women in Périgord) are much in evidence, but in fact the name was the idea of Catherine Pim's husband. Originally Le Manoir d'Elles was run exclusively by women, with Mme Pim looking after the hotel side and her daughter Léopoldine in the kitchen. Now the whole family is involved, with the son and husband taking care of 100 or so goats and 60 hectares of land, but the name has remained. Strawberries and walnuts

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALISON HUGHES


FASCINATING FACT

Saint-Jean-de-Côle won the prize for the most beautiful roofs in France in 1975.



(Périgord is renowned for both) are served at breakfast, along with the croissants and coffee. The restaurant's menus are based on fresh organic ingredients, many from the *manoir's* vegetable garden. Meals are served on the terrace overlooking a wooded valley. Sheep graze peacefully and ducks swim on the pond below. The swimming pool is the icing on the cake. Rooms from €85, breakfast €9, menus from €25.

Stop for a coffee at... La Perla (tel: (Fr) 5 53 52 38 11) on the main square, opposite the château gates and the church. The tourist office is just to the right, so pick up all the information you need and enjoy a coffee or a light lunch on the terrace while planning your visit.

Stop for a traditional Périgordian lunch at... À Table (tel: (Fr) 5 53 62 18 90), run by the artist Catherine Aerts and her husband, and sit under the

shady plane trees with a view of the hump-backed bridge and the old mill. Meals are served all day. Try the local apéritif *Basilou*, which is made from white wine and basil - deliciously refreshing served chilled - and take a couple of bottles home from the adjoining boutique.

WHERE TO VISIT

- The Atelier de Création de Catherine Aerts (tel: (Fr) 5 53 55 33 77) is on the same premises as her restaurant. Catherine's creations (collage and her popular 'cloud' lampshades) are on sale here, alongside other local arts and crafts.

- The Atelier de Ona Volungeviciute (tel: (Fr) 5 53 52 66 94) is run by the Lithuanian-born artist, who settled in the village in 2007 with her Canadian husband. Ona is interested in old techniques of creating and firing pots. She often uses the reddish clay found

by the river bank and fires her pots in a pit in the garden.

- The Château de la Marthonie is lived in by the present owner M. de Beaumont, but the grounds are open to the public, and you can also visit the entrance hall with the 'grand escalier'. Tickets from the tourist office.



TOURIST INFORMATION:

Saint-Jean-de-Côle tourist office, tel: (Fr) 5 53 62 14 15,

www.saintjeandecole.fr; Périgord Gourmand tourist office, www.perigordgourmand.com; Dordogne-Périgord tourist board, www.dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr

GETTING THERE: Alison travelled from Portsmouth to Caen with Brittany Ferries (tel: 0330 159 7000, www.brittanyferries.co.uk). Single fares from £105 for a car and two passengers. Saint-Jean-de-Côle is a six-hour drive from Caen. See page 23 for more travel details.



ABOVE: The roof-tiled buildings of Saint-Jean-de-Côle

orientation of the church and the fact that the market hall is attached to it. The strange orientation is due to the fact that the church was built for the priory rather than the parish, with the entrance on the far side and not on the village square. Originally the church had a dome similar to the one in the departmental capital of Périgueux, but this collapsed several times and was replaced by the roof we see today, which explains its rather 'flat' look. The reason why the market hall is attached is a mystery, but the most popular anecdote concerns a feud between the village priest and the mayor. The rooftiles in characteristic tones of reddy brown are another feature of the village and contrast with the cooler tones of the stone and the pale blue shutters.

Saint-Jean has always been a major crossing point over the River Côle between Nontron and Thiviers, and the medieval hump-backed bridge, now a listed monument, remained in use until the construction of the new road bridge in the last century. The old bridge is made of quartz that is still mined in the nearby quarry.

This tiny village of just 350 inhabitants is attractive in the original sense of the word – people are drawn to it. Ceramicist Ona Volungeviciute and her husband fell in love with the village, leaving their native lands to set up home in the former presbytery just across the bridge; artist Catherine Aerts and her husband turned their holiday home into their main residence a few years ago; a Belgian couple are in the process of renovating *le vieux moulin* with the intention of making it a working mill again.

The incomers have had no problem integrating with the active community scene, which includes *fêtes* and the annual *Les Floralties* flower festival (being held on 7-8 May this year). In the summer, concerts are held in the church every Thursday; street theatre comes to the village, and the tourist office organises treasure hunts for children (complete with princess and knight costumes).

Although steeped in history, this is definitely not a 'museum-village' – it is an active community that welcomes visitors to share and enjoy its lovely setting. If there were a prize for the friendliest village Saint-Jean-de-Côle would be a strong contender. 🍷

IN THE AREA

Saint-Jean-de-Côle is in the *Périgord Vert*, the most northern of the four Périgord areas, and gets its name from the verdant landscape, a mixture of oak and chestnut forests and pastureland. It is part of the Périgord Limousin regional natural park – a reminder that nature doesn't recognise man-made borders and that the Limousin region is just a few kilometres to the north.

Start a tour of the area at Brantôme, 20 kilometres west of Saint-Jean-de-Côle, and take the D675 to Nontron, and then the D707 to Thiviers, with a detour to the Château de Puylaugue and Villars en route.

Brantôme is located on the River Dronne, which makes an island of the town centre; six bridges link it to the rest of the town. The Benedictine abbey (*pictured below*) is set into the rockface and was heavily restored in the 19th century; a grotto behind the abbey has rock sculptures showing Judgment Day and calvary (tel: (Fr) 5 53 05 80 63, www.brantome.fr).

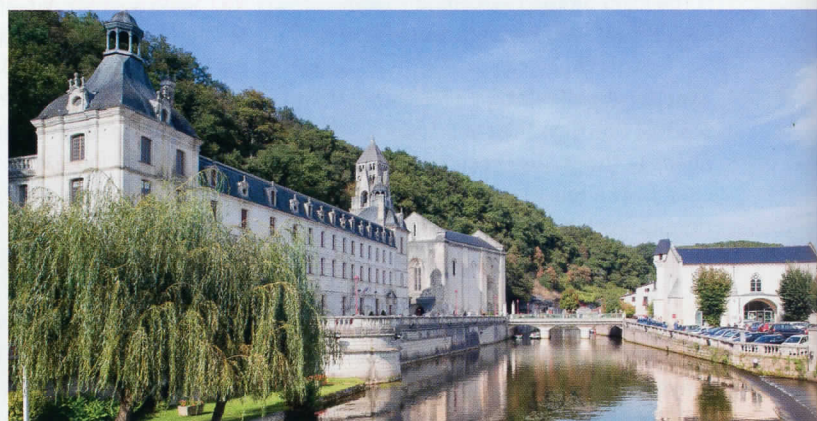
About 20 kilometres to the north, the town of Nontron has become an artistic centre with its *Pôle Expérimental Métiers d'Art*. Based in the town's château, it aims to encourage new artists and craftspeople as well as preserving traditional crafts. Events, exhibitions and workshops are held throughout the year. Nontron has a tradition of knife



production that stretches back 500 years, and you can visit the workshop where they are made (tel: (Fr) 5 53 56 25 50, www.tourisme-nontron.fr).

Returning south, stop at the Renaissance-style Château de Puylaugue (*pictured above*) near Villars. It was built for the same family who lived at the château in Saint-Jean-de-Côle and is said to have inspired many of the Loire châteaux. A backdrop of oak forests contrasts with vistas of the grounds and meadows at the front (tel: (Fr) 5 53 54 82 18, www.puylaugue.monuments-nationaux.fr/en). Go further back in time at the Grotte de Villars and see cave art dating from 17,000 years ago (tel: (Fr) 5 53 54 82 36, www.grotte-villars.com).

The excursion ends at Thiviers, which is home to a foie gras museum tracing the history of this regional speciality back to the Romans. It also celebrates geese and ducks through the ages (www.maisondufoiegras.jimdo.com). Thiviers sees itself as the capital of foie gras, hosting a *fête de l'oie* every July with prizes, parades and a market (tel: (Fr) 5 53 55 12 50, www.thiviers.com).



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