Dolly's Dordogne

Exploring the *bastide* villages of south-west France at the wheel of a motoring icon proved a great adventure for **Carolyn Boyd**

The unmistakeable whirr of the Citroën 2CV cranks up a notch as my husband puts his foot to the floor. The road straightens out ahead of us towards the next village, but I can hardly see straight, such is the bounce of my trampoline-like seat and the vibrations of the car. Yet my smile is so broad while we plough into the oncoming breeze that my lips are glued to my teeth and although my forehead is burning from the sun through the open roof, I am grinning with sheer hedonistic joy.

It is early September and we're here in the Dordogne, the most French of French regions, exploring it in the most French of French cars. This might all sound too clichéd to the dedicated Francophile, but it is extremely good fun… for a passenger, at any rate. My husband Toby and I have rented the car, a restored cherry and cream-coloured Dolly that originally rolled off the production line in 1990, for a couple of days during a week-long holiday. Although it is usually the much-cherished sole 2CV in Cross Channel Sports Cars' fleet of many marvellous vehicles, it is now our trusty steed in which to dart between the *bastide* villages that pepper the countryside along the departmental border between Dordogne and Lot-et-Garonne.

As we bounce our way towards Issigeac, bound for its Sunday morning market, sunflowers in the fields around us bow their weary heads after a summer of standing proud. The rust-coloured roofs of *dordognais* farmsteads flash by, and the geese and ducks potter in the gardens, oblivious to our little driving adventure. 'Click-clack, click-clack' goes the indicator when we approach the junctions, careful not to roll backwards when one of the frequent hill starts is necessary. Issigeac is buzzing as we pull up towards the centre, with tourists and locals wandering unconcerned in the road, and we park on Rue de la Gare, winding the roof back over the '*dedeuche*' to keep it safe.

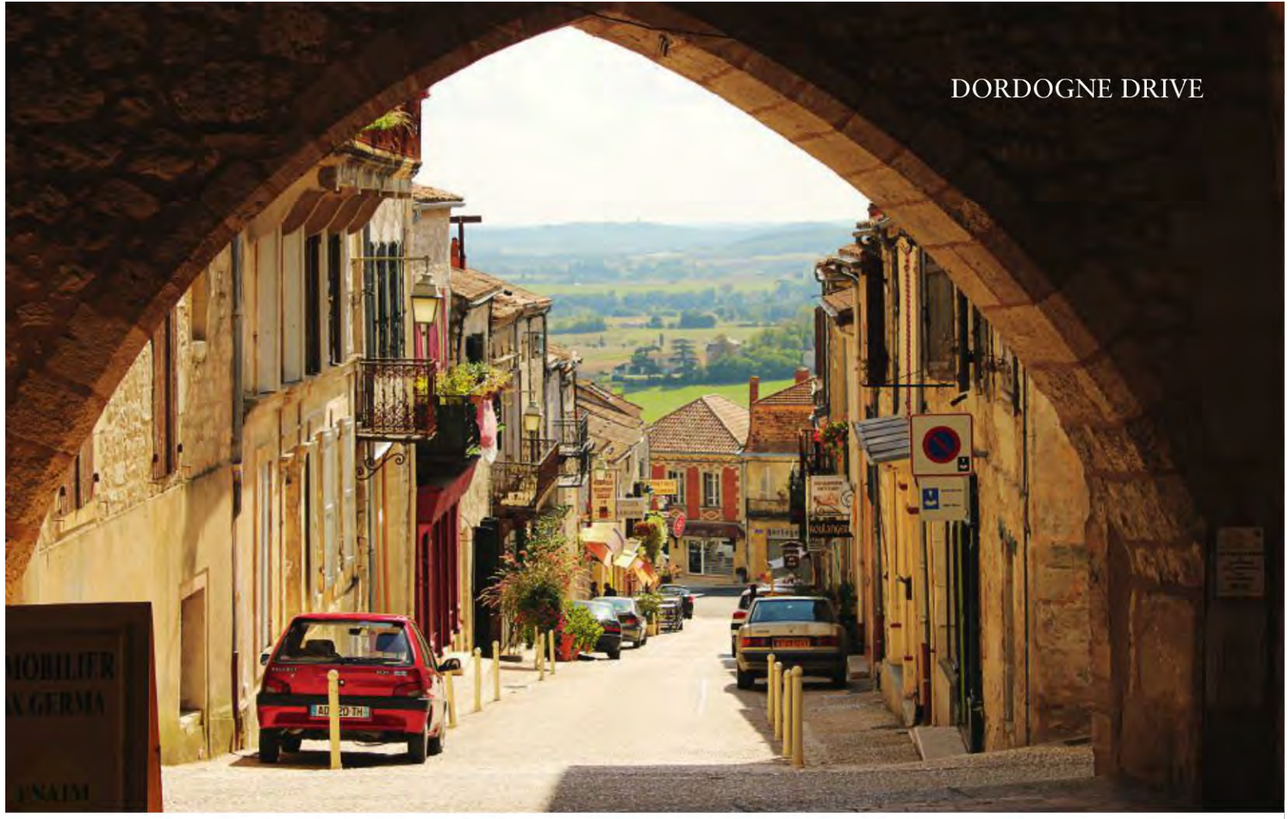
As we walk up into the pedestrianised area of the medieval village, it's nice to have my feet on terra firma and despite the buzz of the market, my head feels still, away from the vibrations of the car.

We admire the many stalls lining the street under the crooked, timber-fronted buildings and the scent of soap, honey and fresh flowers wafts under our noses. The maze of 14th- and 15th-century streets winds around and down towards the church, and with more and more stalls from which to choose all manner of produce, we somehow become focused enough to gather a few bits and pieces for lunch. A tin of foie gras is a must; fresh peaches, a baguette and a small block of cheese are squirrelled away in our bag to be enjoyed later en route to Monpazier. The pretty houses decked with hanging baskets and the many pottery shops and galleries distract us, but it isn't long before the rattle and hum of the 2CV lures us back and we jump in, keen to be behind the wheel again.

We bumble gently along, me trying to keep the map still enough to read it while my husband drives, talking me through the tricky gear-changing procedure for when it eventually becomes my turn. I try to concentrate, but the view around me is more enticing as the straight road leads us towards Villeréal, another of the fortified *bastide* villages. We've gathered some speed on the approach and as there's no time to stop and look in, we skirt around the village, tipping Wacky-Races-style on to two wheels – or so it feels – to take the bend. The whirr of the car winds down again as we come to a halt in front of a line of young children who are crossing the road. As we sit beaming from

PHOTOGRAPH: CROSS CHANNEL SPORTS CARS

ABOVE: **The Citroën 2CV in which Carolyn travelled through the Dordogne**



BELOW, CLOCKWISE: **The hilltop Château de Biron; Making a grand entrance in Monpazier; Market day in Issigeac;** FACING PAGE: **Two views of the *bastide* village of Monflanquin**

ear to ear, with the car chugging away, the children stare in bemusement at this most prehistoric-looking vehicle.

We turn a few heads in Monpazier, too. As we enter the *bastide* village through a pointed arch in the walls, a few tourists turn and stare. A quick circuit into the streets quickly takes us out again where we park and walk into the centre. The idyllic square is surrounded by pretty arches on one side, and the covered market area on the other – its wooden roof and stone pillars date from the 16th century. Though the children viewed our car as ancient, Monpazier really puts that into perspective; the village was founded in 1284 by our very own Edward I, and finally became French during the reign of Charles V of France in the 14th century. Little has changed since, though it is undoubtedly smarter these days.

We wander away from the main square and poke our noses into the Église Saint-Dominique before strolling into the backstreets where a couple of ghosts of French motoring past are there to greet us in the shape of a polished black Citroën DS and a rusty Renault 5.

As we enter the *bastide* village of Monpazier through a pointed arch in the wall, a few tourists turn and stare

A few droplets of rain begin to fall, so we return to the 2CV – which often takes the moniker '*quatre roues sous un parapluie*'. It's just the umbrella we need for making the return journey to our holiday house. There's just one little detour we want to make: Château de Biron, which appears on the horizon soon after we set off. This imposing fortress dates from the 12th century, but has changed a lot over the centuries. Unusually for a château of its size, there isn't much of a surrounding settlement, so it stands out from the rolling Périgord hills. We take a little spin around it as far as we are able in the car, peering out of the semi-circular windows at the castle above. The pitter-patter of raindrops on the canvas roof probably makes the rain sound heavier than it is, but nevertheless we forgo a quick visit on foot, preferring to stay dry and continue our journey home, watching the wipers flick-flack back and forth as they prove more efficient than the paper clips they resemble.

We have become quite used to being overtaken by the speedier motorists, for whom we had been slowing down and waving to pass by. What we didn't expect was to feel a similar frustration on getting caught behind a relatively new Vauxhall Corsa with a Paris number plate. The driver is hunched over the steering wheel and we trundle along behind him at 30km/h, wondering how he fares on the capital's *périphérique*. The road begins to straighten and we see our chance to overtake. In any other car, there would be no hesitation in making a quick dash, but in our tin snail, we can't be sure about making the manoeuvre in time. We take a deep breath; Toby turns on the indicators, puts his foot down and the Parisian disappears in a cloud of dust (in our imaginations at least…) as we overtake with a 'woo hoo!' There's life in the old Dolly yet.

We revert to trundling at 2CV pace as the rain clouds float away and we arrive back in time for a cool glass of rosé on the sundrenched terrace before dinner with the rest of the family.

The next day, we wake up to clear blue skies and over breakfast we make plans to drive south into the *département* of Lot-et-Garonne. We first take a foray into Lauzun, the nearest village to our holiday home. This sleepy little community is dominated by a 16th-century château at its heart. Sadly it is closed to the public, so its imposing walls and large wooden gate hide any treasures within. We park just under the walls and spend a while pottering around the village, admiring the bijou church opposite the Maison aux Cariatides, an incongruous neoclassical villa built in 1830 with four sculpted female figures on the pillars between the windows on the first floor and an ornate fresco at the top.

PHOTOGRAPHS: PATRICK ESCUDERO/HEMIS.FR; CAROLYN BOYD; TORY SHERGOLD

Our next stop is Monflanquin, another of the *bastide* villages in this area, but first there is the small hurdle of me driving the car. Having been talked through the process by my now-experienced co-driver, I take my turn after we stop on a small lane. The steering wheel feels slim in my hands and both the handbrake and the gear stick are very alien, being to the left of the steering wheel rather than by my side. What's more, there's a choke – something I haven't had to use in some 20 years. Indeed, it is like learning to drive again; stalling at junctions, wiggling the gear lever in and out to get it to the right position, remembering to turn off the indicator (nothing automatic here) and panicking slightly when a speedier car comes up behind us. After a while, my heart stops beating quite so fast and we gather pace on a wide main road, our hair blowing in the breeze of the open roof. It's a hot day and the 'air-con' (a few narrow flaps under the windscreen wound open by hand) is on 'full' as we beetle past sunflower fields, *pigeonniers* and orchards laden with fruit.

Like many of the villages on our trip, Monflanquin is half-asleep. The sun drenches the cream-stoned square, and the pretty arches of the arcades around it frame the shops, cafés and, on one side, a sensational view of the hills beyond a side-street. We sit on the steps in the dappled shade of a tree in the square and tuck into our sandwiches, admiring the pretty buildings around us adorned with flags and vivid green climbing plants. It would

ABOVE: A flag-garlanded street in Penne-d'Agenais; Carolyn enjoys an open-top view of the village

be easy to while away the afternoon here, especially if we transposed ourselves to a café terrace, but we have a 2CV in our possession and our time with dear Dolly is running out. We take a quick turn around the village, admiring the church and the sensational views from the square behind it, and head back to the car.

We have agreed to meet Andy from Cross Channel Sports Cars at the village of Penne-d'Agenais near Villeneuve-sur-Lot and although the chance of real air-con and a less bouncy car seat do appeal, my heart is heavy that the experience is nearly over – especially as I have resumed my position as passenger-cum-navigator. We cross the narrow bridge over the River Lot at Saint-Sylvestre-sur-Lot, and see the silver dome of the Basilique Notre-Dame de Peyragude twinkling in the afternoon sun from its position high above the trees at the top of Penne-d'Agenais.

It's a narrow road up to the village and as the car comes around the final corner into the square, Andy is already on his feet waving – presumably having heard the 2CV coming. We park under the plane trees in the square and reluctantly hand over the keys while regaling him with tales of our driving adventure. After a few photos in the archway that leads into the maze-like village, Andy drives away in the car, the familiar rattle, hum and whine fading into the distance.

Francofile

Tour the bastide villages of the Dordogne in a 2CV

GETTING THERE

Carolyn and her family travelled overnight from Plymouth-Roscoff with Brittany Ferries. The overnight crossing starts from around £244 for a family of four taking a car and sharing an en-suite cabin. The return trip was on Brittany Ferries' Caen-Portsmouth route. Prices start at around £195 for a family of four taking a car and sharing an en-suite cabin (tel: 0871 244 1400, www.brittanyferries.co.uk). *See holiday planner on page 23 for more travel information.*

GETTING AROUND

Cross Channel Sports Cars offers 2CV hire from €150 per day for one or two days, or €125 per day for three or more days. There are extra costs for additional driver (from €25) and insurance excess protection (€15). They can also arrange airport pick-ups, picnic hampers and accommodation. Morgans and an MGB are also available for hire (tel: 07702 551 225/(Fr) 5 63 94 58 31, www.ccsportscars.co.uk).

WHERE TO STAY

Le Verger

47410 Bourgougnague
Tel: 0845 268 1985
www.cheznous.com
Property ref 254863
This lovely self-catering property near the town of Eymet makes a great base. Price from £795 for seven nights.
See our review in issue 196, January 2015.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Lion d'Or

6 Rue Eugène Mazelie
47410 Lauzun
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 94 10 15
Pleasant restaurant in the sleepy village of Lauzun. Menus from €18.

La Maison sur la Place

10 Place Gambetta
47140 Penne-d'Agenais
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 01 29 18
Stylish restaurant on the village square. Menus from €34.

TOURIST INFORMATION: Dordogne tourist board, tel: (Fr) 5 53 35 50 24, www.dordogne-perigord-tourisme.fr; Lot-et-Garonne tourist board, tel: (Fr) 5 53 66 14 14, www.tourisme-lotetgaronne.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CAROLYN BOYD; TOBY SHERGOLD

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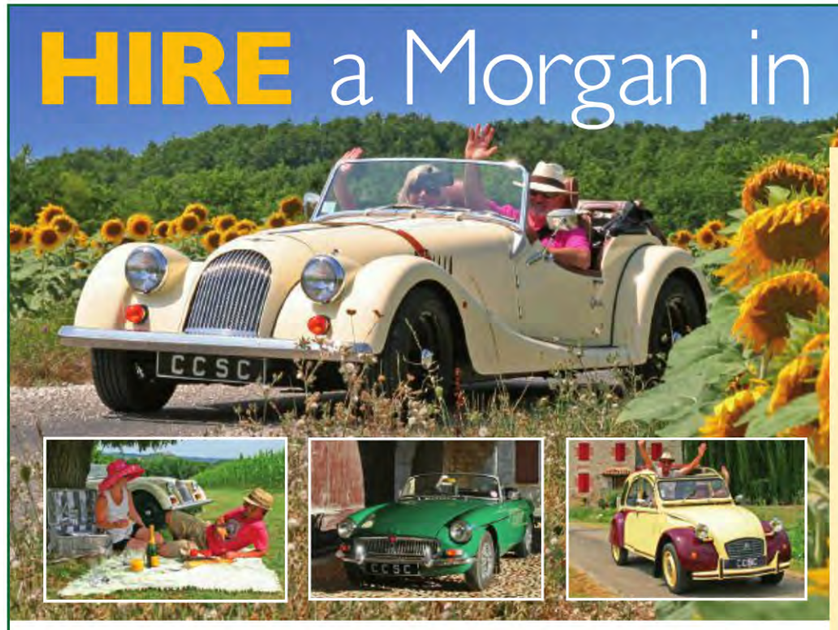

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