

I Yam What I Yam, Said the Sweet Potato

What are you going to be for Halloween? Here's one: a dog nose and tail, a large plastic cone to attach around your neck, and you're a wounded woof to go. Or for fun, how about an exaggerated version of yourself? Gearhead, geek, helicopter (grand) parent, couch potato, bleeding heart environmentalist or, in my case, bleeding heart high desert rat. Then there's dressing up as the true self—but who even knows who that is? I looked it up. It's no surprise the question "How to know who is your true self?" produced seven powerful strategies, five steps, six steps, six ways, 10 questions and a true self quiz. Apparently, it's equal parts social expectations and fear of rejection that lead us to override the still, small voice within; to compromise the soul of the poet, musician, explorer that lives inside us. But I think we all recognize that icky feeling in our gut when we compromise our essential self. Maybe taking our true self out for a trick or treat night would do us some good.

I spent the last two weeks traveling at the speed of five-women-of-a-certain-age per kilometer through the picturesque Dordogne region of France. France is roughly the size of Texas and, within that, the Dordogne covers roughly 4,000 square miles. It's also the county of Périgord and, just to confuse things, there are four subregions within the Périgord: Périgord green (rivers and valleys), purple (wine region), black (oak and pine woods) and white (limestone plateaus). Our fearless fivesome explored some of all four. We found it to be a land of 17,000-year-old prehistoric cave paintings, of ancient and modern-day troglodyte dwellings carved into cliffs, 1,000 huge towered and turreted castles, of medieval bastides or walled cities. I can see why France and England fought for 100 years during the Middle Ages for the right to lay claim to this beautiful territory. It boasts grand rivers: Dordogne, Garonne, Vézère, Isle and Dronne. And now, world-renowned vineyards producing Bergerac, Pecharmant and seasonal aperitifs made from walnuts, chestnuts, even prunes. Thanks to Michel de Montaigne, it's the birthplace of the modern essay. This is the land of foie gras and of truffles, with dogs, not pigs, now the preferred hunter. Weekly markets fill each village with booths brimming with local crafts and fresh produce. In addition to dogs trotting purposefully ahead of their owner whose scarf, *de rigueur*, is thrown jauntily over one shoulder, there's always a cat coolly surveying the hub-bub from a third-floor windowsill curled next to a pot of bright red geraniums. Just to complete the visual perfection, a white lace curtain gently shifts in the open window and periwinkle blue wooden shutters startle the beige limestone exterior. Greeting each new day, as townsfolk and tourists gather at local cafés, are the peals of each town's cathedral bells and the chorus of bonjours sung in a descending scale of cheer like the delicate song of the canyon wren. A French shopkeeper told me the Dordogne is a region where "the time has not passed," evident in the elegant simplicity, precision, arrested aesthetic and mannered choreography of each day. These communities know who they are.

Yes, five women in sensible shoes. Believe you me, it was never a look I had aspired to but here it was. Collectively we were married, divorced, widowed or all three. Some had children and grandchildren, some neither. All together we had weathered many setbacks, produced many miracles— after seven decades it goes with the territory. Endurance athlete takes on a new meaning. Walking sticks in hand, packs on our backs, we inhaled all the French confections of food, art and place. And we covered all sorts of topics. The one that cropped up frequently,

whether floating in a gabarre on the Garonne or scaling the centuries-old rock steps into Chateau Les Milandes, the entertainer Josephine Baker's former residence, was that each of us was embracing and celebrating being who we are. We proclaimed "yamming" as one of the great opportunities of the third act.

Life asks us, men and women both, to perform so many parts in this life-play. It's the blessing and curse of being in the contemporary human race: spouse, professional, parent, grandparent. But at this moment five women in our 60s and 70s were not only taking a true vacation tooling around the French countryside, but had entered a time in our lives in which we were taking a permanent vacation from being other than our true selves. I'd often thought, as we age, that we become a more and more exaggerated version of who we always were. I used to think that was a bad thing, that we were acting really old when really, we've stopped acting. This Halloween let's all be what we yam.