

It's just a flash in the pan

Kieran Falconer went panning for gold in southern France

GOLD doesn't always come like a California rush. For centuries grains, and more rarely nuggets, could be picked from French river beds at their lowest ebb. The gold is thinly distributed throughout the country — the Pyrenees, the southern edge of the Massif Central (the Cévennes) and the Massif Armoricain. From the time of the Gauls right up to the 18th century, people panned for gold there.

The practice died out and was all but forgotten until the 1970s, when a downsizing journalist tried to make a living from gold panning. His subsequent book inspired a thousand hippies to wet their bums in French rivers, and gold panning remains a Sunday afternoon staple.

But panners are not miners and are touchy about the subject. "I am no gold digger," Véronique Vilain tells me. "We panners are a different breed."

I very much agree. Hunched down, my feet are frozen from a river of spring water and my arms ache, having held a rubber pan for an hour and half. So far I haven't come up with enough gold to put a cap on a tooth never mind make a ring. But I live in hope. That's the wonderful thing about gold — it lures you on.

Vilain is an ex-champion gold panner of France and now runs an outfit near the village of Boisset Gaujac, near Nîmes, to let others have a go. You start in her house where a huge TV plays a video (in French) that reminded me of the boring educational films we saw at school.

Basically, glaciers and rivers wrinkle out the gold dust from stones where the water sends them downstream. Gold is also usually found near quartz. I'm just nodding off when she reveals her own finds.

Thick test tubes filled with



Kieran Falconer with the gold-panning expert Véronique Vilain, who finds £10 worth of gold on an average day

of this is washed, the stones particularly as the gold sticks to the underside. Then there is a complicated ritual of sloshing and slooshing to various different rhythms that will make your arms hurt so much that you can ignore the spasms in your back.

After 20 minutes you end up with what looks like a lot of fine sand. This is where I got worried and passed the pan back to Vilain. After all, I didn't want to ruin my chances of retirement.

Vilain had no trouble and after a quick slosh she pointed. "Look, see there!" My eyesight isn't brilliant but I could just make out two small pinpricks of shining gold against the

I COULD SEE TWO SPECKS OF GOLD AGAINST THE BLACK

black pan. The gold fever returned. I began to fantasise — give up writing, buy that château I fancied down the road — when she washed it all back into the river.

"Oh that's nothing. Let's start again," Chagrin is definitely a French word.

On an average day she finds one gram of gold which, according to the international price, is about £10. When you think it takes 75 grams to make an 18 carat ring, you realise panners aren't in it for the money.

Come the summer the Car-

don is writhing with gold hunters in bikinis or shorts. Whole families can be seen like heached fish, heads bowed, squinting into pans, Vilain is among them all, shaking pans and instructing in French, German and English.

On the riverbank, picnics, kids splashing about and encouragement from the local campers make it a very jolly affair. What's surprising is how semi-seriously everybody takes it. There is, I conclude, a bit of the gold rush in all of us.

For a couple of hours it's worth the diversion and on a hot day the river water is very welcome.

It's also the perfect place to cool a bottle of wine.

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