

France: The Cevennes

Tour code: JCV

Revised: October 06

In the autumn of 1878, the Scottish writer, Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, set out from Le Monastier in the Auvergne to walk south across the Cevennes accompanied by "a small grey donkey called Modestine, the colour of a mouse with a kindly eye". It took this pleasing pair eleven days to complete the trip, and the book that Stevenson wrote about their journey, *Travels with a donkey in the Cevennes* was his first successful book and one, which has since become a travel classic.

Stevenson should have put the Cevennes "on the map", but despite his account of his travels through this region, it remains little known. His book did however inspire the establishment of the Robert Louis Stevenson Trail ("Trace Historique de Stevenson" on French maps) in 1978, the centenary year of the original walk. The local people encouraged by a Scotswoman, Madame Pat Villette, decided to retrace and waymark the trail. The route was partially waymarked by blue and white markers carrying the St. Andrews Cross of Scotland. More recently the Stevenson's Trail has been designated as GR70 and waymarked with the usual white over red GR marks.



The walk starts near Le Puy en Velay in the Auvergne, a hilly region of extinct volcanoes in the north of the Massif Central and follows a winding route southwards across the Cevennes, a more mountainous area on the eastern flank of the Massif Central. The Cevennes National Park covers 3,284 sq kms, of which 914 sq kms in the central zone are protected. The headquarters of the park are at Florac and it is the only generally inhabited French National Park. The region that Stevenson chose for his journey boasts great natural beauty and is almost totally unspoilt. Depopulation as drastic as that in Stevenson's native Scotland has left a region full of sad romantic ruins. The walk itself is not difficult; the hills are not particularly high. However, the trail does cross two significant mountains: Mont du Goulet (1,497m) and Mont Lozere (1,699m); for the most part we are able to follow quite closely the route taken by Stevenson over a century ago. It is not known the exact route that he went on all the days however and some parts that he did walk on have become road, so the GR trail heads off on different cross country routes.

Travel Information

First hotel: In Le Puy-en-Velay, about 5 minutes walk from the train station.

Travel:

Full Package: If you are thinking about our flight inclusive package we use British Airways or Air France scheduled flights from London Heathrow to Lyon, and then onward travel by train to Le Puy (see below under 'Nearest Airport').

Land Only: But depending upon where you come from, you may find it much more convenient to take our 'Land Only' option and fly from London Stansted to St. Etienne on Ryan Air. You can then return on the Ryan Air flight to Stansted from Nimes or Montpellier which are nearer the end point of the tour.

Flights to Paris are also available from most UK regional airports with onward connection to Lyon by air or TGV high-speed train. There is now a direct TGV train service from Paris Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport to Lyon. There is also the Eurostar Rail Service from Waterloo via Channel Tunnel and Lille. (Journey time to Lyon approx 5 1/2 hours).

Nearest Airport: Lyon (for full package customers). You should take a morning flight. On arrival take the airport shuttle bus to Lyon Part Dieu station (*not Perrache station*), which takes 30 minutes. *The best train to aim for has been the TGV at around 14:15, which will get you to St Etienne at 15:16, where you change for Le Puy departing at 16:05 arriving at 17:17.*

Please check times before travelling. These rail tickets are included in the Air and Rail Travel package. You will receive up-to-date train times for your date of travel, or alternatively you can visit Rail Europe's website at www.sncf.com.

Of course St. Etienne is actually the nearest airport

Alternative airport: Paris. There is a TGV rail station at Charles de Gaulle (Roissy) airport, so there is no longer any necessity to travel into Paris. *The most suitable train departs at around 11:26 and arrives in Lyon at 13:33. You change trains for St Etienne- Chateaucieux departing at 14:11 and arriving at 15:13. Change again for Le Puy departing 16:04 arriving at 17:25. Also via Eurostar to Lille then TGV dep 12:17 change at Lyon Part-dieu and St Etienne, arr Le Puy 19:49; Please check times before travelling.*

End of Tour: The tour ends after breakfast on day 8 in Florac or after breakfast on day 10 in St Jean du Gard. Florac is remote and it is necessary to get local transport to the nearest train stations at Genolhac or Mende. The first bus is at 09:00 not on Sundays and bank holidays otherwise taxi for approx. £30 pounds per person. From St Jean local bus (not Sundays) to Ales (45 minutes), and train via Nimes to Lyon for afternoon flights back to Heathrow airport via Paris.

Or From Both Florac and Ales you can take bus / train connections via Nimes to return to Nimes or Montpellier, for flights direct to London on Ryan Air (check summer 2007 timetables when available: note that it is unlikely that you will make a flight much before noon)

Please check times before travelling.

Season: June to late September.

Level of Difficulty

Fitness: Moderate - Challenging with a few long days. For reasonably fit and experienced walkers. The grade reflects the length of some the days and the roughness of the terrain. The longest day can be shortened, but no clients have indicated that the grade should be lower.

Day Stages: up to 35km/22miles per day over hilly terrain. But on this long day there is a shorter alternative as well.

Waymarking: Most of the route is now a GR (official long-distance trail) and has been recently waymarked with red and white signs; on days 2, 3 and 4 our route deviates in part from the GR and it is necessary to follow the route descriptions provided together with the maps.

General Information

Baths: it is not normal for your room to have a bath, the main reason being that it takes up a lot of space, some hotels/guesthouses may have a separate room in the house where a bath is available to guests, but in the main it is showers.

Breakfast: in countries such as France/Italy/Spain/Greece etc are usually coffee and toast/croissant, if you want more for breakfast then we would suggest you purchase some food the night before. It is important for you to tell us if you have any dietary requirements when you book your holiday so that we can inform everyone that you are staying with.

Single Supplements: are payable on most of our tours. 1) The single supplement guarantees the privacy of your own room, however, rooms can at times be small and in some places may not enjoy the same facilities as double/twin rooms. 2) You are not just paying a supplement on the room but the luggage transfer costs you are paying in full. The cost of moving 1 bag or 2 bags etc remains the same. On some of our trips it is possible to reduce the cost of the single supplement if you happen to be a 3rd person travelling, or have chosen a date when other clients are booked.

Language: When travelling in less frequented areas you will not necessarily come across people speaking English. Remember you have left home to find things different so bring a phrase book with you.

Luggage: When staying in hotels, sometimes your luggage will have been taken to your room awaiting your arrival. However don't be surprised if your luggage is waiting for you to take it up to your room.

Accommodation & Meals

Half-board (evening meal, bed and breakfast) throughout in country hotels of 1, 2 and 3 star standard with en suite facilities where possible, but these cannot be guaranteed. On the longer 9-night / 10 day trip, the last night in St Jean du Gard is on a bed and breakfast basis only.

Bring a swimming Costume? At Arlempdes (night 2) swimming in the river is possible. On nights 7 (Florac) and 9 (St. Jean de Gard) our usual hotels have pools. Obviously we cannot guarantee that they will be open when you happen to pass through.

Note: that the hotels we use vary in quality, sometimes there is little else at a location we can use or other hotels will not give us one night bookings. You should be reassured to know however, that Robert Louis had to often make do with his home made fur lined bivvy bag or stayed in pensions with several to the bed, eating 'pot luck.' You won't need to do this!

❑ **Night 1 Le Puy:** rather than spend the first night at Le Monastier which has only limited accommodation and in any case makes the journey from UK on day 1 quite long and tiring we have chosen the Hotel Bristol, a very pleasant and comfortable two star hotel, only a few minutes walk from the train station in the historic city of Le Puy, capital of the Haute Loire department and readily accessible by train from Lyon or Paris.

❑ **Night 2 Arlempdes:** after a road transfer to Le Monastier to start the trek we walk on to Arlempdes where we stay at a welcoming 1 star hotel in this tiny village overlooking the upper Loire valley. The hotel is a traditional logis with a homely stove and wood-beamed restaurant.

❑ **Night 3 Pradelles:** in the midst of the mediaeval splendour of the town, we stay at a centrally-situated 2 star hotel offering ensuite accommodation and of course a fully fledged regional menu boasting 'Specialties Auvergnates.'

❑ **Night 4 La Bastide:** A welcoming, one star hotel (hotel de prefecture) with a good restaurant, rooms have ensuite shower, but sometimes no ensuite WC.

❑ **Night 5 Le Bleymard:** A high standard two star hotel (hotel de tourisme), traditionally appointed, with ensuite facilities and a fine pine beam and stone restaurant surrounding a large hearth.

❑ **Night 6 Le Pont de Montvert:** A two star modern hotel, which sits on the riverbank of the Tarn, ensuite, with balconies and a restaurant again specializing in the regional fare.

❑ **Night 7 Florac:** a rather grand 3 star hotel in the centre of this pretty market town, headquarters of the Cevennes national park.

❑ **Night 8 St. Germain de Calberte:** A modern resort style hotel (hotel de tourisme) and gite complex set amidst wonderful countryside, with limited ensuite facilities within the hotel, Again with good regional food and a swimming pool.

❑ **Night 9 Saint Jean du Gard:** Built in 1882, our excellent two star hotel here offers fine facilities in an idyllic setting. There Rooms are ensuite including telephones and there is a swimming pool!

Outline Itinerary

- **Day 1:** Clients fly to Lyon or Paris and transfer to Le Puy where our hotel is 5 minutes walk from the station.
- **Day 2:** Taxi transfer (included) from Le Puy to Le Monastier where the Stevenson trail starts. We walk on via the village of St. Martin de Fugeres to Goudet where we cross the River Loire. It is an hour or so's walk upstream to Arlempdes. 9 miles/14 km.
- **Day 3:** Arlempdes to Pradelles. There are two alternative itineraries for today. The longer alternative follows the GR70 Stevenson's Trail all the way for 34km/21miles. We walk through Montagnac, Ussel, Le Bouchet St Nicholas, Landos and Arquejol to Pradelles. The shorter alternative 22km/14 miles, goes more directly via La Sauvetat to rejoin the GR70 at Landos and follow it to Pradelles.
- **Day 4:** Pradelles to La Bastide Puylaurent. Once again there are longer (GR70; 35km/22miles) and shorter (22km/14miles) alternatives. We walk to Langogne and cross the River Allier. A series of paths past mills and wayside cavalries brings us to the ruined village of Fuzilhac. Of this region Stevenson wrote, "Moor, heather marsh, tracts of rock and pines, woods of birch, green and stony cattle tracks wandered in and out...." Little has changed. Pass through the village of Cheylard and the Chabadoures ravine on to La Bastide Puylaurent. The shorter alternative leaves the GR70 at Langogne and rejoins it just before Luc.
- **Day 5:** [Note if you want to add another rest day to the tour we suggest La Bastide, from which it is an easy day walk to the abbey of Notre Dame des Neiges, where Stevenson spent several nights]. La Bastide Puy Laurent to Le Bleybard. 15 miles / 24 km. We head south away from the river through woods and past dolmens to reach Chasserades. A walk over the Montagne du Goulet ridge brings us to Le Bleybard.
- **Day 6:** 22 km/14 miles. We head south along an old drovers road, over the Col de Finiels, past the Chalet du Mont

Lozere. The col with its fine viewpoint over the Cevennes, makes a delightful lunch stop. There is an opportunity in clear weather to reach the Sommet de Finiels (5574 feet), the highest point in the Lozere range. We descend to Le Pont de Montvert. There are alternative routes from Sommet de Finiels to Le Pont de Montvertl

- **Day 7:** 14 miles/22 km. From Le Pont de Montvert we head south along the Martinet valley and ascend the ridge of the Montagne du Bouges. From here we continue along the crest of the two valleys of the Tarn and Mimente. At the end of the ridge we descend into Florac. You can discover the region's history and geology at the imaginative exhibition house in the old chateau. The quaint boulevards of the old town offer a tempting array of cafes. (End of tour for 8-day trip).
- **Day 8:** 8 day tour ends in Florac. 10-day tour continues. 15 miles / 24 km. We continue up the valley of the Mimente to reach the Col de Jalcreste. From here an old shepherd's trail leads through the forest, chestnut groves and deserted farms to St Germain de Calberte.
- **Day 9:** 14 miles/22 km. From St Germain the route leads through the sleepy village of St Etienne. We pass a picturesque manor house before our final walk through forest to St Jean de Gard.
- **Day 10:** 10 day tour ends after breakfast at St Jean du Gard. Bus to Ales (not Sundays), then train to Nimes.