

France: The Way of St. James

Tour code: JPT

Revised: October 07

We have been running this trip for many years now - it was one of our original hotel treks. It covers a large swathe of the uplands of the Massif Central. The route takes a path that the early Pilgrims walked on their way to Santiago de Compostela in Spain - one of the great journeys of history. Obviously this is just a section of that route. It goes up and down valley through some of the marvellous remote countryside of the Massif Central, including the plateau of the Aubrac, the valley of the Lot and the green hills of the Aveyron. This is a walk in deepest France, for those who really want a bit of peace and quiet away from it all, a flavour of the past with a dose of religious history. The accommodation in some cases is fairly simple - one and two star hotels, reflecting the nature of the country we are traveling through, but if two words aptly describe this route it would be rustic and charming.



Travel Information

Season: May to October, uncrowded and usually not too hot in the summer.

First Hotel: Hotel Bristol, Le Puy, on the afternoon/early evening of Day 1.

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

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 St Pancras 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 Chateaucieux at 15:05, where you change for Le Puy departing at 15:57 arriving at 17:17.*

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;*

End of Tour: In Conques on day 12. Travel to Rodez by bus (no service on Saturday or Sundays) *and then daily direct non-TGV train For Example: dep. 11.50, arr. Paris Austerlitz 18.50. Or on any weekday and Saturday, taxi to St. Christophe, and direct non-TGV train to Paris Austerlitz dep. 07.03, arr. Paris 13.35.*

Level of Difficulty

Fitness: A moderate to strenuous graded trek that anyone with a reasonable degree of walking experience and current reasonable state of fitness should cope with. The relatively high grade reflects the length of some of the day stages and the nature of the terrain.

Day stages: Approximately 15 to 26 km per day with average altitude gains of 550m. This is about 5 to 8 hours of walking.

Waymarking: The route is well marked with red and white GR waymarks and 'Chemin de St Jacques' scallop shell signs.

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. 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.

Language: Don't expect people to speak English! Why not bring a phrase book with you and practice a little French?

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

Evening meal, bed and breakfast are included throughout the tour. Two star hotels offer en suite facilities. One star hotels do not always have en suite facilities. Luggage is transferred between hotels every day.

- ❑ **Night 1: Le Puy.** 2 star. This elegant and well equipped hotel is centrally situated a short walk from the train station. All rooms have en suite facilities, telephone and T.V.
- ❑ **Night 2: St Privat d'Allier.** 1 star a medium-sized Logis de France listed hotel (30 rooms) in this quiet village of 200 inhabitants.
- ❑ **Night 3: Saugues.** 2 star Logis de France small hotel (17 rooms) with a restful atmosphere and a shaded terrace. TV and phone in rooms.
- ❑ **Night 4: Les Faux.** Another small village hotel with 13 rooms about 1km off the route. The rooms have either a bath or shower and W.C. Set in the quiet picturesque hilly area over the River Limagnole.
- ❑ **Night 5: Aumont.** 2 star small hotel in the centre of the town. The rooms have either a bath or shower and W.C. as well as T.V. and telephone.
- ❑ **Night 6: Nasbinals.** 2 star a hotel in the centre of the village, close to the church.
- ❑ **Night 7: St Chely d'Aubrac,** 2 star. A small hotel with comfortable rooms in the centre of a small village. The restaurant offers regional specialities.
- ❑ **Night 8: St Come d'Olt.** Our guesthouse (Chambre d'hote) tonight will give you a warm welcome. This is a 19th century Aveyronnaise house located in the entrance of Saint-Come d'Olt, one of the most beautiful villages of France. It has a private garden and a heated swimming pool with six superb bedrooms. Each of the six rooms wonderfully restored in 2002 has its own personality with private bathroom and from 2 to 4 beds. A generous breakfast, is included.
- ❑ **Night 9: Estaing.** 2 star standard. The Logis de France hotel is tucked into the narrow space between the river Lot and the castle. It has 40 comfortable rooms with all modern conveniences. The large dining room has a fine stone fireplace in which the chef cooks a range of regional specialities.
- ❑ **Night 10: Espeyrac.** This small hotel, owned by the family Marragou, offer a warm welcome, the hotel has a nice restaurant and bar.
- ❑ **Night 11: Conques.** The hotel we normally use is a 2 stars, 11 bedroom hotel. It is very situated in the center of the village.

Outline Itinerary

- ❑ **Day 1:** Arrive Le Puy.
- ❑ **Day 2:** Le Puy to St Privat d'Allier 22 kms. We climb out of Le Puy onto a plateau and overlook a winding valley. We pass through black basalt villages like La Roche,

then cross a watershed to reach St Privat, perched above the Allier gorge.

- ❑ **Day 3:** St Privat d'Allier to Saugues 18 kms. Much of the day is spent crossing the valley; we start with a level walk to Rochegude, where the Saint Jacques chapel dominates the Allier pass, providing beautiful views. We descend to the river at Monistrol (Romanesque church) and climb the other side past some striking geological formations. Easy tracks at about 1000 metres take us to Saugues, meeting-point for all pilgrims coming from the Auvergne.
- ❑ **Day 4:** Saugues to les Faux. 25 kms. We stick closely to the route the pilgrims took as we start off through the tiny hamlet of Pinet where many of the pilgrims stayed. We gradually climb up the valley and follow the Villange River upstream to Clauze with its ancient tower - the remains of a 12th century castle. Our walk is long but not steep through wooded landscapes, moors of broom pine woods and meadows enclosed by granites posts.
- ❑ **Day 5:** Les Faux to Aumont. 19 kms. We eventually arrive in the village of St Alban with its Romanesque church dating back to the 11th century. We climb upwards for a couple of hours, enjoying the views of St Alban and the lush Limagnole Valley. Eventually we emerge on to the Margeride plateau at around 900 metres, before descending down to Aumont. This is a desolate region of wild flowers, treeless, empty of people. Part of the route here follows the old Roman road of Agrippa. Aumont is a fine little town - one of those delightful undiscovered parts of France.
- ❑ **Day 6:** Aumont to Nasbinals. 26 kms. Our walk starts off through the small town with its 16th and 17th century houses, until we join a forest path. We pass through the villages of La Chaze and Lasbros and we start to cross the vast and remote plateau of Aubrac. Our route takes us through tiny hamlets and farmsteads crossings streams over ancient granite bridges until we arrive at Nasbinals.
- ❑ **Day 7:** Nasbinals to St Chely d'Aubrac. 20 kms. An exhilarating day, much of it on open hillsides and grassy drove roads, reaching 1350 metres. We pass through the great transhumance centre of Aubrac (church of 1220 and Tour des Anglais), drop steeply past the ruins of Belvezet castle to pretty St Chely in its secluded valley.
- ❑ **Day 8:** St Chely d'Aubrac to St Come d'Olt. 16kms. We contour along beech-clad slopes onto an open ridge, and then descend through chestnut woods to St Come d'Olt, with its mediaeval gateways and twisted church spire.
- ❑ **Day 9:** St Come d'Olt to Estaing 17 kms. We pass the exquisite little chapel at Bessuejous, climb through oak woods to a ridge with extensive views over the Lot valley, and pass between vines and tobacco-fields to reach Estaing. Estaing has preserved vividly the memory of the passage of pilgrims to Compostela. The famous festival of St Fleuret is held yearly on the first Sunday in July, during which hundreds of costumed people follow a procession to commemorate Saint Jacques and other pilgrims. An imposing castle dominates the town.
- ❑ **Day 10:** Estaing to Espeyrac. 23 kms. After a short stint along the banks of the Lot, we climb up to the plateau of Campeux. We continue along the left bank of the Lot until Rouquette and then through beautiful villages such as Golinhac, Campagnac and still smaller hamlets until we reach Espeyrac.
- ❑ **Day 11:** Espeyrac to Conques 13 kms. A short distance today, taking us through Senergues (picturesque castle) and maintaining our height until the final dramatic descent into Conques. This, one of the finest hill-towns in France, clusters round the magnificent Romanesque abbey of St Foy, patron saint of prisoners: her shrine became an object of pilgrimage in its own right.
- ❑ **Day 12:** Return home.

