

FRANCE: STEVENSON'S TRAIL **GREAT VALUE**

One & Two week **SELF-GUIDED** inn-to-inn walking holidays in the wild Cévennes



In 1878, the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson went for a wander in rural France. Earlier that year his lover left him to return to her husband, and he had fallen out with his parents, who wanted him to pursue a career in law. As the colours began to change in September, he departed Le Monastier sur Gazeille in the Haute-Loire, his only company a donkey named Modestine. Over 12 days he travelled almost 200km, often bedding down outdoors. He kept a journal which formed the basis for *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*. Published in 1879, it was his first successful book, combining character sketches, humour, and musings on the troubled history of the region, particularly the Protestant Camisard rebellion against the Catholic Louis XIV.

Despite the success of the book, the region remained relatively unvisited. In 1978, on the 100th anniversary of Stevenson's journey, the outdoor recreation *Club Cévenol* retraced and walked the route. Later the walk was mapped and waymarked, and it has since been designated as the GR70, one of France's *Grand Randonnée* walks. The trail starts in Le Puy en Velay, on the Velay plateau near the extinct volcanoes of the Auvergne, and winds its way southward, crossing or sometimes following the valleys of the Loire, Allier, Lot and Tarn rivers and traversing the regions of Velay, Gévaudan and Mont Lozère, before finishing in the Cévennes.

Although Stevenson's Trail has grown in popularity, this is still a remote and unspoiled area of France, boasting great natural beauty particularly through the Cévennes National Park. Cultivated chestnut trees are common, and despite the many human inhabitants of the park, there is wildlife to be seen: vultures, beavers, red and roe deer, otters, owls, rare black woodpeckers, and the mouflon, a species of wild sheep.

Departs: Daily on demand from April to October.

Cost:	Le Puy en Velay to Chasseradès	8 days (7 nights)	From \$2170 per person twin share Single room supplement from \$520 Solo traveller supplement from \$595
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Cost:	Chasseradès to St Jean du Gard	8 days (7 nights)	From \$2350 per person twin share Single room supplement from \$570 Solo traveller supplement from \$645
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Cost:	Le Puy to St Jean du Gard	14 days (13 nights)	From \$3990 per person twin share Single room supplement from \$1065 Solo traveller supplement from \$1140
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Includes: Accommodation, daily breakfast and dinner (half-board), luggage transfers, route maps and descriptions (one set per room), taxes and service charges, and emergency telephone support if required.

Not included: Daily lunches, drinks, personal expenses including entrance fees, unscheduled taxis or transfers to shorten the stages. Extra nights of accommodation can be arranged at extra cost, please ask when booking.

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Accommodation & Meals: Accommodation is in small, comfortable *chambres d'hôtes* and 2- or 3-star hotels, with private bathrooms and daily breakfast included. Dinner is included each evening and is usually served at your accommodation, or occasionally at a nearby restaurant.

Lunch is not included. You can buy supplies for a picnic from local shops or order a packed lunch from your accommodation the night before.

Difficulty: This walk is best described as **moderate to challenging**. You will need to be reasonably fit and prepared to walk 12 to 30km in a day (up to 8 hours of walking) over undulating and sometimes rough terrain, with daily ascents and descents of up to 730 metres.



Suggested Itinerary:

LE PUY EN VELAY TO CHASSERADÈS

8 days / 7 nights self-guided inn-to-inn walk

Day 1: Arrive in Le Puy en Velay

Make your way to Le Puy en Velay. Le Puy is served by regular rail connections from Lyon via St Etienne Chateaucieux or from Clermont-Ferrand. Plan to arrive mid-afternoon to give yourself some time to explore this charming town, the historical starting point of the *Camino Francés* or Way of St James pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. Le Puy is also home to the mysterious Black Virgin, which has drawn pilgrims from all over Europe since the Middle Ages. It is in a picturesque location between the Auvergne's sleepy volcanoes and the Rhone Alpes valley and offers great views of the surrounding low mountains.

Day 2: Le Puy en Velay to Le Monastier

walking @ 19km (6 hours)

This stage follows the GR70 long-distance footpath from Le Puy, over undulating terrain and through evergreen forests of twisted 'baker's pines'. Descend to the village of Coubon, where you cross the upper Loire. Although you are near to the source of the Loire which arises in the Massif Central, the river is already impressive. Perhaps stop for a coffee or lunch in Coubon. From here continue through forests to sleepy Le Monastier sur Gazeille, which is very little changed since RL Stevenson set out from here in 1878.

Day 3: Le Monastier to Le Bouchet St Nicolas

walking @ 24km (6 hours)

Cross the plateau from Le Monastier, passing through the village of Saint Martin de Fugères, with its Romanesque church. From here descend to Goudet where you again cross the Loire. Through flower-filled meadows and tiny villages make your way to peaceful Le Bouchet St Nicolas, where you stay the night.

Day 4: Le Bouchet to Pradelles

walking @ 21km (6 hours)

Follow the GR70 over undulating terrain, through several small hamlets and through pine forests before descending sharply into Pradelles. This old fortified town is one of the 'most beautiful villages of France'. Once a major trading centre for merchants bringing goods from the ports in the south of France, it was of strategic importance during the Wars of Religion in the late 1500s. If time permits you may like to visit the museum dedicated to the draught horse (Musée Vivant du Cheval de Trait).

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Day 5: Pradelles to Cheylard l'Évêque**walking @ 23km (6 hours)**

Leaving Pradelles and the Haute-Loire behind, you descend to the valley of the Allier River and cross the river as you reach Langogne, one of the larger towns on the route. Langogne has a fine 18th Century *halle* and a Romanesque church. Onward walk to St-Flour-de-Mercoire and then through the forest of Mercoire to the tranquil and charming village of Cheylard l'Évêque, where you stay the night.

Day 6: Cheylard l'Évêque to La Bastide Puylaurent**walking @ 21km (5 hours)**

Another day of undulations departing Cheylard through the Chabadoures ravine and on to the ancient, tiny village of Luc, with the ruins of a 12th Century castle above. From Luc you follow the valley of the Allier. You may like to take a side trip (8km) to the abbey of Notre Dame des Neiges, where Stevenson spent several nights. The monks here produce table wines and a sparkling white, as well as red altar wine. You finish the day in La Bastide Puylaurent, which was a hamlet of just a few houses until the 1800s when the railway line from Nîmes to Clermont-Ferrand was built here.

Day 7: La Bastide Puylaurent to Chasseradès**walking @ 12km (4 hours)**

As this is a shorter stage, you may like to have a relaxing morning before setting off. Follow the Allier then leave the river behind to walk through forests and past stone dolmens to Chasseradès. The distinctive square tower of the 12th Century church of St Blaise dominates the skyline.

Day 8: Departure day. Tour ends after breakfast in Chasseradès.

**CHASSERADÈS TO ST JEAN DU GARD****8 days / 7 nights self-guided inn-to-inn walk****Day 1: Arrive Chasseradès**

Make your way to Chasseradès, arriving mid-afternoon. This small town has a railway station with daily regional trains from Nîmes.

Day 2: Chasseradès to Le Bleymard**walking @ 19km (5 hours)**

This stage of Stevenson's Trail is short but challenging. You depart Chasseradès following the valley of the Chassezac through L'Estampe, then walk over the ridge of the Montagne du Goulet. Once this was an important area for the practice of transhumance, bringing livestock to high summer pastures; now forest covers many former pastures. From the ridgeline you descend to Le Bleymard, a tranquil village on the banks of the Lot River.

Day 3: Le Bleymard to Le Pont de Montvert**walking @ 17km (5 hours)**

The route follows old drove roads to the chalet at the base of the ski slopes of Mont Lozère, then over the Col de Finiels. There is an opportunity to walk to the Sommet de Finiels, the highest point in the Lozère range. Descend to the village of Finiels, with its overgrown Protestant cemetery, then walk onwards to le Pont de Montvert, on the banks of the beautiful Tarn River. This delightful granite village, with its eponymous Gothic bridge, has a bloody history – this is where the zealously anti-Protestant abbot du Chayla was killed in 1702, setting off the War of the Camisards: Protestant peasants and artisans of the Cévennes waging guerilla war against the army of Louis XIV. Today the village is peaceful and charming.

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Day 4: Le Pont de Montvert to Florac**walking @ 29km (8 hours)**

A challenging walk into the heart of the Cévennes. Ascend the ridge of the Montagne du Bougès, through the pass at Col du Sapet, with views of the Tarn valley below. From there descend sharply down to the Tarn at Bédouès, then onwards through fields to Florac, in a pleasant location on the Tarnon, a tributary of the Tarn, at the foot of the limestone plateau known as the Causse Méjean.

The main information centre for the Cévennes National Park is here, in a 17th Century chateau. You may like to have an extra night in Florac (at extra cost) to give yourself some time to see the 11th Century priory, the waterfalls and trout ponds of the Tarnon, or the spectacular gorges of the Tarn nearby.

Day 5: Florac to Cassagnas**walking @ 20km (5 hours)**

You walk following the Mimente River, with views of the broken peaks of the Cévennes on either side, to reach St Julien d'Arpaon, with the picturesque ruins of a 13th Century chateau on a nearby hill. Continue alongside the tumbling Mimente to Cassagnas, where you stay tonight.

Day 6: Cassagnas to St Germain de Calberte**walking @ 16km (5 hours)**

From Cassagnas Stevenson's Trail follows foresters tracks, shepherd's trails and ancient stone-paved roads. As you leave Cassagnas you ascend to a ridge which you traverse to the Col de la Pierre Plantée, where there are many neolithic dolmens and menhirs. Then follows a sharp descent to St Germain de Calberte, surrounded by chestnut groves and mulberry trees. The abbot du Chalya was interred in the small Catholic church in the centre of the village.

Day 7: St Germain to St Jean du Gard**walking @ 23km (6 hours)**

From St Germain you stay relatively close to the twisting Gardons de Saint-Germain and Saint-Martin, two of the many tributaries of the Gard, until you reach the sleepy village of St Étienne Vallée Française. From here you ascend to the Col St Pierre, before descending through forest to St Jean du Gard, where Stevenson sold his trusty donkey Modestine and ended his ramblings through the Cévennes. It's worth taking a stroll through town to get a photo of the multi-arched stone bridge built in the 1700s. The town's historic chateau was built in the 13th Century, sacked and burned during the Wars of Religion, and rebuilt in the 18th Century.

Day 8: Departure day

Tour ends after breakfast in St Jean du Gard. From St Jean du Gard a local bus runs (except Sundays) to Alès, from where there is train service via Nîmes to many destinations in France and Spain.

LE PUY TO ST JEAN DU GARD**Combined 14 days / 13 nights suggested itinerary:**

Day 1:	Arrive Le Puy en Velay	
Day 2:	Le Puy to Le Monastier	Walk @ 19km (6 hours)
Day 3:	Le Monastier to Le Bouchet St Nicolas	Walk @ 24km (6 hours)
Day 4:	Le Bouchet to Pradelles	Walk @ 21km (6 hours)
Day 5:	Pradelles to Cheylard l'Évêque	Walk @ 23km (6 hours)
Day 6:	Cheylard to La Bastide Puylaurent	Walk @ 21km (5 hours)
Day 7:	La Bastide Puylaurent to Chasseradès	Walk @ 12km (4 hours)
Day 8:	Chasseradès to Le Bleymard	Walk @ 19km (5 hours)
Day 9:	Le Bleymard to Le Pont de Montvert	Walk @ 17km (5 hours)
Day 10:	Le Pont de Montvert to Florac	Walk @ 29km (8 hours)
Day 11:	Florac to Cassagnas	Walk @ 20km (5 hours)
Day 12:	Cassagnas to St Germain de Calberte	Walk @ 16km (5 hours)
Day 13:	St Germain de Calberte to St Jean du Gard	Walk @ 23km (6 hours)
Day 14:	Tour ends in St Jean du Gard	

Outdoor Travel offers walking holidays, guided in small groups or self-guided with inn-to-inn luggage transfers, in many parts of Europe. Other walks inspired by writers or artists include Wainwright's challenging **Coast to Coast** walk in England and **Provence in Van Gogh's Footsteps** in France.

Contact Outdoor Travel for more itinerary details and reservations

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