

INSIDE: DOZENS OF CHARMING PLACES TO STAY

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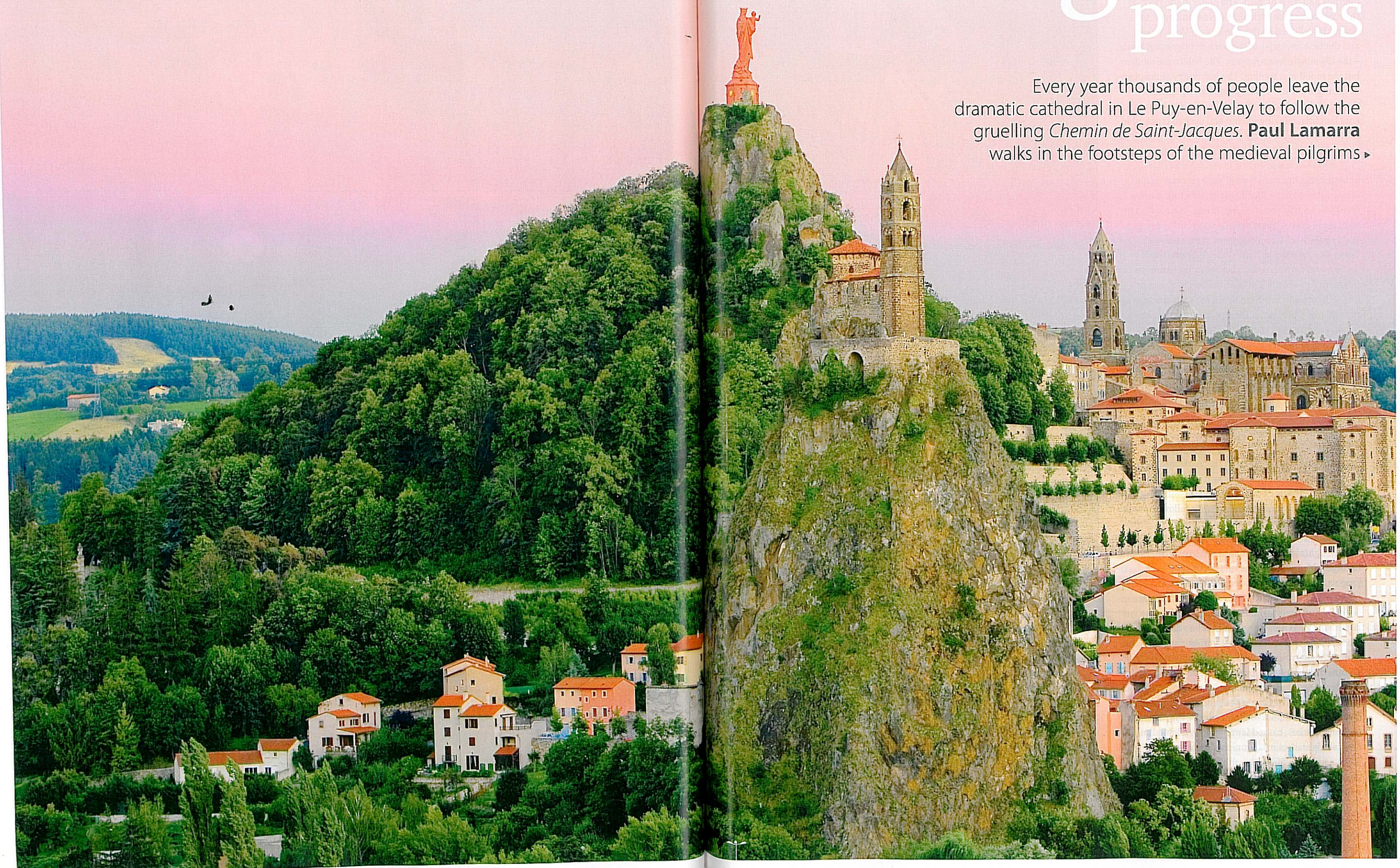
Where to go and what to see this season

PLUS Perpignan's Easter parade, village life in Gers, antiques-hunting in Provence, walking in Mayenne, language, how to taste wine



Pilgrim's progress

Every year thousands of people leave the dramatic cathedral in Le Puy-en-Velay to follow the gruelling *Chemin de Saint-Jacques*. **Paul Lamarra** walks in the footsteps of the medieval pilgrims ►



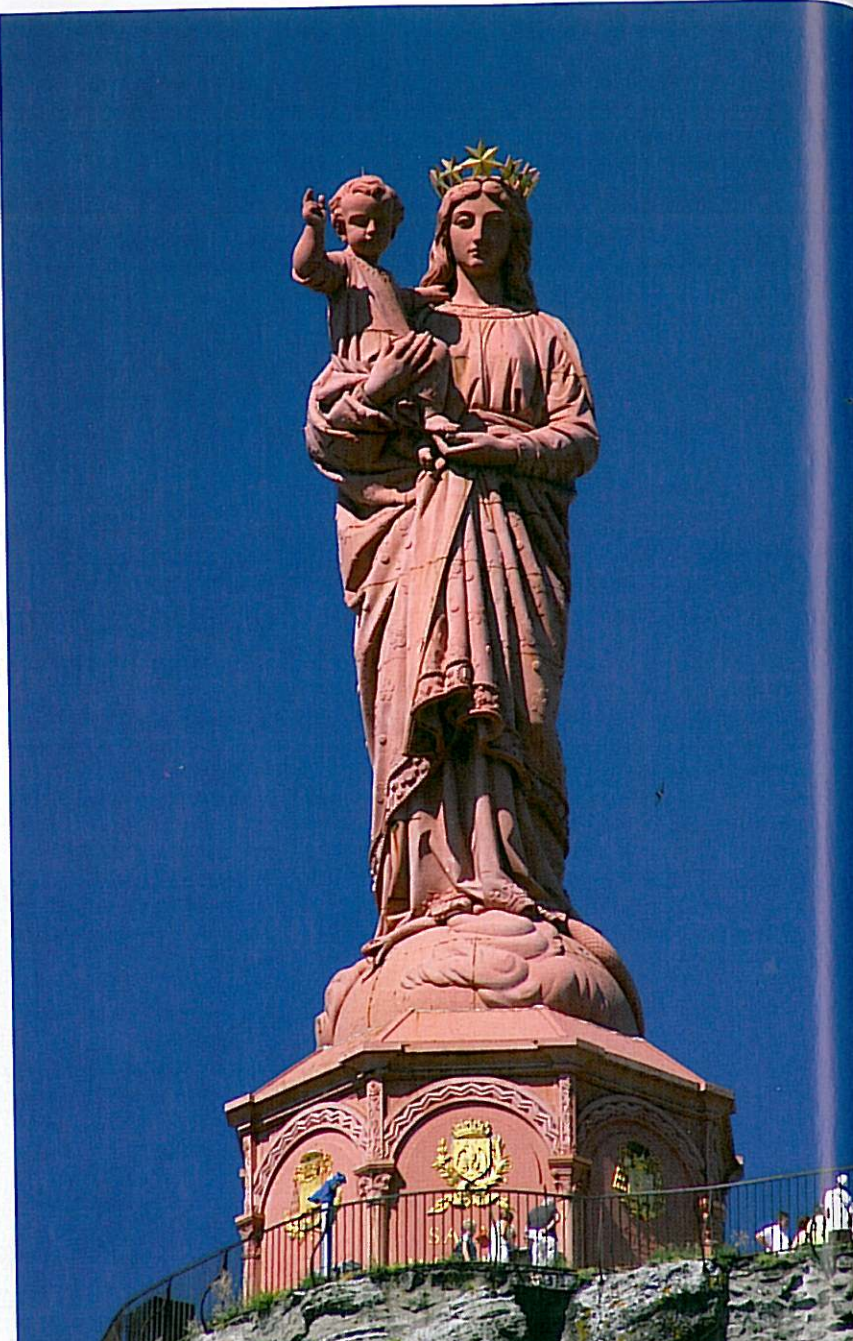
Booming out from the tower, the bells continued beyond the eight strikes that marked the hour. Mass was over and the pilgrims had been blessed. The doors in the floor of the nave before the high altar were flung open to reveal the red-tiled roofs of Le Puy-en-Velay below and the first few miles of the ancient pilgrimage route – the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques*. The bells were jubilant but the mood was sombre. The hot, sultry atmosphere of the night before – when prospective pilgrims thronged the cafés, enjoying the relaxed hubbub of easy laughter, clinking glasses and excited cross-table chatter – had ebbed away and storm clouds were gathering overhead.

A new reality was etched in the faces of the doubtful pilgrims as they paid their respects to the famous statue of the Black Madonna before moving on to place a hand on the fever stone – a large slab of volcanic rock that has reputedly been curing fevers and certainly reassuring pilgrims since medieval times. The final act in Cathédrale de Notre-Dame du Puy, was to declare with a solemn signature the intention to walk the 1,600 kilometres to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain to pay homage at the grave of Saint James the Apostle. The leather-bound volume was then whisked away, should it be mistaken for a mere visitors' book. These rituals have been played out off and on since Godescalc, a 10th-century bishop of Le Puy, donned his hair shirt, no doubt placed a pebble in his shoe and set out for Santiago, becoming the first non-Spanish pilgrim to do so.

To be a pilgrim

Every year around 10,000 sign the book and follow, literally and spiritually, in his footsteps, but this is France and there is of course a secular alternative; another 20,000 set out from Le Puy to follow the same route but as the more prosaically named GR65. As I stood in the doorway of the cathedral, the first bolts of lightning cracked on the horizon. The ensuing barrage of thunder and the rainstorm of biblical proportions were enough to make even the most pious pilgrim gulp. Intimidated or exulted, and perhaps both, I set off among the religious rather than the secular for good measure. Earlier, when rushing to the Mass, I had become lost in a warren of rough cobbled streets that surround the crisp black cathedral on its volcanic mound. And I found this little world to be a place where time seems to have stood still since the pre-Reformation heyday of the pilgrimage. The alleys flanked by grand doorways, tiny doorways, discrete convents, arches, carved family shields, dated lintels and saintly statues in their niches, take you on a journey through 500 years of history, making me giddy with a sense of historical vertigo that I hoped would last for the whole of the journey. I was not

TOP: The statue of Notre-Dame de France towers over Le Puy ABOVE: Chantal Allaire on the trail RIGHT: The cobbled road leads up to Cathédrale de Notre-Dame du Puy



a pilgrim with any particular religious conviction but I found the continuity of 1,000 years of pilgrimage and the ancient churches, bridges and hostels that grew up around it, fascinating. Within the first mile the initial flood of 200 walkers thinned to a trickle as many toiled over the first climb out of the volcanic bowl that holds Le Puy. Unlike the early pilgrims, who were almost exclusively male, this was a mixed bunch of men and women of all ages. Most were walking alone and most, judging by the shiny new boots and rucksacks, were embarking on their first serious walk. Out of town the *chemin* became a dark stripe of brittle volcanic gravel that threatened to fill my boots. The broad path was fringed with yellow grass not yet revitalised by the rain and hedgerows laden with late summer fruit – a veritable larder to the foraging pilgrim. Occasionally the scrubby hawthorn, ash and beech grew to above head height to create gloomy dells ripe for an ambush; attack by bandits and wild animals were a constant danger to the medieval pilgrim. Now and then there were flickers of the old

ABOVE: On the trail BELOW: The cockle shell marks the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela and the red and white flash marks the GR65 OVERLEAF: Saugues



The enormity of the task hit home; this was a challenge that required more than physical fitness

world in a humpbacked bridge or isolated chapels where I often stopped to shelter from the frequent bursts of rain.

For the most part I walked alone. The customary red and white flashes that indicated the GR meant that there was no need to navigate and it was easy to slip into a purposeful stride – although I couldn't hope to match the 60 kilometres covered in a day by my medieval counterpart, anxious to keep moving to save money and avoid danger. For my first day I covered 25 kilometres to finish in Monistrol-d'Allier. Before I began the descent into the deep and wooded Allier valley I stopped at the rocky outcrop topped by an austere little church at Rochegude to look over the Allier to the Monts de la Margeride. The seemingly endless crests disappeared into the distance and it was then that the enormity of the task hit home; I had covered but one thirtieth of the distance to the Pyrénées and it was another 70 days' walk to Santiago. It was clear that this was a challenge that required more than physical fitness.



Day two was at least as bright and beautiful as the first day had been wet and foreboding. However, for many pilgrims, the climb out of the Allier valley was the moment of truth. Canoeists and rafts on the Allier slid by under Eiffel's iron bridge as the pilgrims paused to survey the basalt cliffs thrusting upwards to block their way. Fortunately a steep ramp going across the cliff offered a way through. The overhanging rock gave little shade but a gentle breeze took the edge off the climb under what was an increasingly hot sun. A handrail made of rope helped pilgrims on their climb and the remarkable Capelle de La Madeleine built into a cave allowed for a dignified rest halfway up. Most made it beyond the cliffs and were delivered on to a high rolling plateau of smooth pasture punctuated by pockets of pine and remote farmsteads with a thriving sideline in *tartes aux myrtilles*. Again I walked mostly alone but there was no sense of loneliness. Now with their hoods down and their breath back, pilgrims were more relaxed and their faces became familiar. Conversations struck up easily and everyone was keen to discuss their motivation for such an undertaking. Chantal Allaire, 62, from Rennes, with a scallop shell

The recently unemployed, bereaved or divorced came in search of a catharsis and a healthy purpose

(*coquilles Saint Jacques*) – the traditional talisman of the pilgrim – hanging from her rucksack, also walked alone. Marching alongside her for a mile or more she told me how she hoped to be in Santiago by 20 November and that she would be humbled by the experience. Monique and Pierre Vezina from Montreal, Canada, were walking the *chemin* as far Cahors to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary. "First of all we are here for the history and, well, it is France, so it's also an opportunity to do a first-class hike with first-class food and first-class accommodation," Pierre enthused.

I chatted with two mothers from Brittany, who, along with their ten children and their donkey, were walking as far as they could before the end of the school holidays. One evening I dined with Werner Kriele who in the spirit of the original pilgrims was walking from his home near Nuremberg covering a different section each year and he too hoped to reach Cahors.

The recently unemployed, bereaved or divorced came in search of a catharsis and a healthy purpose. Many were seeking no more than peace of mind, but perhaps the most surprising of all, was the sizeable

Holy Year

A year in which the feast of Saint James, 25 July, falls on a Sunday, is regarded as a Holy Year. 2010 is a Holy Year and as many as 250,000 pilgrims are expected to make the journey.

Most pilgrims will start from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port or somewhere in Spain, but an extra 10,000 are expected to set out from Le Puy-en-Velay in the spring.

Pilgrims obtain a *créanciale* in France or a *crédencial* in Spain which must be stamped at the various shrines and pilgrim hostels along the way as proof of having completed the journey. Those who complete at least 100 kilometres of the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques* are issued with a certificate, or a *Compostela* as it is known.

In a Holy Year pilgrims may also be granted a plenary indulgence. A plenary indulgence reduces the time spent in purgatory by the pilgrim or an already deceased loved one.

Walk this way

The medieval pilgrims, of course, had to walk all the way from home. Once they reached France they would feed into a network of routes described in a 12th-century guide known as the *Codex Calixtinus*.

The four main pilgrim routes started in Paris, Vézelay, Le Puy and Arles. The first three converge in Saint Jean-Pied-de-Port for the climb over the Pyrénées to Pamplona via the Roncevaux pass. The Arles route crosses by the Col de Somport and meets up with the *Camino Francés* as it is known in Spain, at Puente la Reina. All four routes were added to the Unesco World Heritage list in 1998.

VIA TURONENSIS

Starting in Paris the Via Turonenis was popular with pilgrims from the Low Countries and northern Europe. From Paris the route goes via Orléans, Tours, Poitiers and Bordeaux. The route is no longer easily discernible but highlights include the 7th-century Benedictine abbey Fleury at Saint Benoit-sur-Loire and the Basilica of Saint Martin of Tours.

VIA LEMOVICENSIS

Rapidly increasing in popularity, this route starts at the abbey church of Sainte Marie Madeleine in Vézelay, Burgundy where pilgrims come to venerate the bones of Mary Magdalene. From Vézelay there are two options. The northerly route goes via Bourges whereas the southerly option takes in the grave of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes at Nevers. It continues south via Limoges and Périgueux.

VIA PODIENSIS

The most popular and perhaps most evocative of the four routes, the Le Puy route is considered by many to be the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques*. Highlights include the abbey church of Sainte-Foy at Conques and the magnificent 14th-century Pont Valentré over the Lot at Cahors.

VIA TOLOSANA

Regarded as a relatively difficult route, the Via Tolosana starts in Arles and follows the Via Domitia across the Carmague. The going gets harder as the route climbs into Haute Languedoc at Montpellier. It gets easier again as it follows the Canal du Midi into Toulouse. The Via Tolosana crosses the Pyrénées by the Col de Somport (1,632 metres) which was considered safer than the Roncevaux where bandits were a problem until the 12th century.



number who walked in the hope of finding romance. Day two ended in Saugues which has the feel of an outpost between the Monts de la Margeride and the emptiness of the Gévaudan. It is a necessary stop to avoid a very long day. It is a town however that is likely to confound the most earnest pilgrim's resolve. If it is austerity and penance you are after, then go around, for Saugues revels in the produce of its rich pastoral hinterland. The cheese trolley at the Hôtel La Terrasse groaned under the weight of 20 or more local cheeses that ranged from soft fresh *chèvres* and deep yellow *tommes* to brittle *bleus* with mouldy crusts as thick as bark. One local speciality, *aligot* – a mashed potato, cream and cheese dish that La Terrasse served-up with a tender *filet de bœuf* from the nearby Aubrac – is the very definition of comfort food. Until the end of the 18th century most pilgrims would have been glad to arrive in Saugues and sorry to leave. The 13th-century Tour d'Anglais with its fluttering blue and gold flag would have been a beacon of safety in this vast sea of countryside while the Bête de Gévaudan was on the loose.

Stories of the Bête de Gévaudan – dubbed the

ABOVE:
Meeting a local shepherd along the way – life has changed little here over the years
BELOW: Tour d'Anglais in Saugues




Napoléon of wolves by Robert Louis Stevenson – and its 100 or so victims, were at the forefront of my mind as I embarked on the 30-kilometre walk across the Gévaudan. Two beasts were shot before the killings came to an end. One at the expense of Louis XV in 1765 and the other two years later in rather controversial circumstances by Jean Chastel, a local man. This was small comfort however as recent press reports suggest wolves have returned to the area after a 90-year absence.

No room at the inn

Crossing the emptiness of the Gévaudan perhaps gave me a flavour of what it was to be a real pilgrim. With no accommodation booked and no clear idea where I was going to stop for the night I had to walk further than I had intended.

There was no room at the isolated Domaine du Sauvage, the 12th-century farm established by the Knights Templar. The refuge at Chapelle-Saint-Roché was empty but there was no food on offer. So I had to walk another eight kilometres to Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole before I found food and shelter.

With no schedule to keep to, I felt free and unencumbered. I was told before I left that the routine of rising, eating, walking, eating, sleeping, day after day would be liberating. It did indeed leave lots of space in which to think and yes, there was something very satisfying about it – spiritual even.

So when I reached Aumont-Aubrac it was with some envy that I watched the others continue while I went off to make the journey back to Paris. I had covered just 90 kilometres of the route but I had come a long way in my appreciation of what it was to be a pilgrim on the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques*. 

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL LAMARE

FRANCOFILE Where to go, how to get there and what to do

GETTING THERE

Paul travelled with Rail Europe from London to Clermont-Ferrand. Return from £89.
Tel: (UK) 08448 484 064
www.raileurope.co.uk
Regular service from Clermont-Ferrand to Le Puy-en-Velay.
Tel: (Fr) 8 92 35 35 35
www.sncf.fr



WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel St-Jacques
7 Place Cadelade
Le Puy-en-Velay
Tel: (Fr) 4 71 07 20 40
www.hotel-saint-jacques.com
Good central location. Double room and breakfast €60-€90.

Hôtel Pain Sucre

Le Vivier du Bourg
Monistrol d'Allier
Tel: (Fr) 4 71 57 24 50
Expect basic accommodation while renovations are carried out. Owner Peter Joyce is full of advice and anecdotes.
Double room from €55.

La Remise

Chambres d'hôtes
Rue Louis Amargier
Saugues
Tel: (Fr) 4 71 77 60 88
Comfortable rooms in a converted stone barn. Double room with breakfast from €45

WHERE TO EAT

Hôtel La Terrasse
Cours du Docteur Gervais
Saugues
Tel: (Fr) 4 71 77 83 10
www.hotellaterasse-saugues.com
Menus €20- €52
Traditional *Auvergnat* dishes,

a fine selection of cheeses and a very genial host.

OTHER INFORMATION

Confraternity of St James
27 Blackfriars Road,
London SE1 8NY
www.csj.org.uk
Tel: (UK) (0)20 7928 9988
Provides invaluable advice and useful courses for prospective pilgrims.

TOURIST OFFICE

2 Place du Clauzel
43000 Le Puy-en-Velay
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www.ot-lepuyenvelay.fr