

Country Walking

Janvier. 2009

Nick Haslam

Tirage : 46 849 ex. / CVP : **£3150** La page

Total : £15750

WALKABOUT FRANCE

IN STEVENSON'S FOOTSTEPS

Nick Haslam follows in the footsteps and hoofprints of Robert Louis Stevenson, who famously walked with a donkey through the Cévennes region of France.





The RLS trail
below Mount Lezère.

JANUARY 2009 COUNTRY WALKING 115

WALKABOUT FRANCE

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY YEARS AGO TO the day, Robert Louis Stevenson walked through the village square in Langogne where I stand. He took 12 days to cover 250km in the Cévennes with his tiny donkey Modestine. I am going to follow in his footsteps for three days, but using, more prosaically, a local taxi firm to ferry on my bags.

The clearly marked trail crosses the Allier river and climbs away through fields and rolling hills, which Stevenson described as a "fine, busy, breathing, rustic landscape". Criss-crossed with tracks, the trail leaves the GR 70 trail and heads off through woodlands where I come to the tiny hamlet of Fouzilhac, where local man René Riuetort, standing in his cabbage patch, greets me with a cheery "bonjour".

RLS got lost here on a rainy night and sought shelter, but villagers, terrified of the eccentric foreigner and his donkey, turned him away. M Riuetort laughs when I mention this. "That was a long time ago," he says. "We welcome walkers now!"

In a field outside the village I watch a kestrel hunting the hedgerows as I lunch on baguette and wine bought in Langogne, and then head on, passing a group of walkers with donkeys. They are commemorating the 130th anniversary of the publication of Stevenson's book and are walking the entire trail.

"Just as well," says Sylvie Ferrand, a 50-year-old bank manager from Nîmes, patting her donkey, "...that we've got help to carry our bags."





The chapel in Cheylard l'Évêque.



Luncheon for the author on the RLS trail.



The view from the ruined castle at Luc.

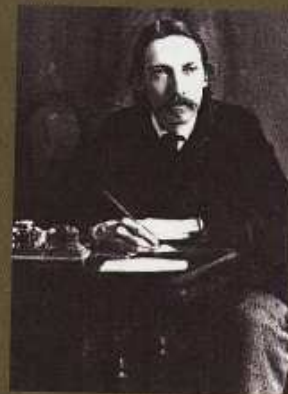
“RLS had got lost here, but villagers, terrified of the eccentric foreigner and his bedraggled donkey, turned him away.”



Louise Pottel and her 19th-century mill.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Robert Louis Stevenson came to this remote part of southern France in 1878 suffering from a broken heart. He had just met his future wife Fanny, who was already married at the time, and hoped the long walk with a donkey would cure his unrequited love. But here too he had a troubled relationship, for Modestine, his donkey "... a diminutive she-ass... with a quakerish elegance", was hopelessly overloaded and collapsed at the end of the first day. By shedding most of the items (including a leg of mutton, a spirit stove and bottles of Beaujolais), RLS successfully covered 250km, often sleeping out under the stars, and came to form a deep affection for his four-legged companion. His book 'Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes', published in 1879, is still an entertaining read today.



WALKABOUT FRANCE

Final destination: Pont de Montvert.



CHECK IN

Return flights with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) from Luton to Nîmes start from £50 return including taxes.

- There are frequent trains from Nîmes to Langogne (www.sncf.co.uk; single fare 8 euros). For accommodation on the trail: www.chemin-stevenson.org which has an excellent range from dormitories to hotels, plus general information about walking the trail.

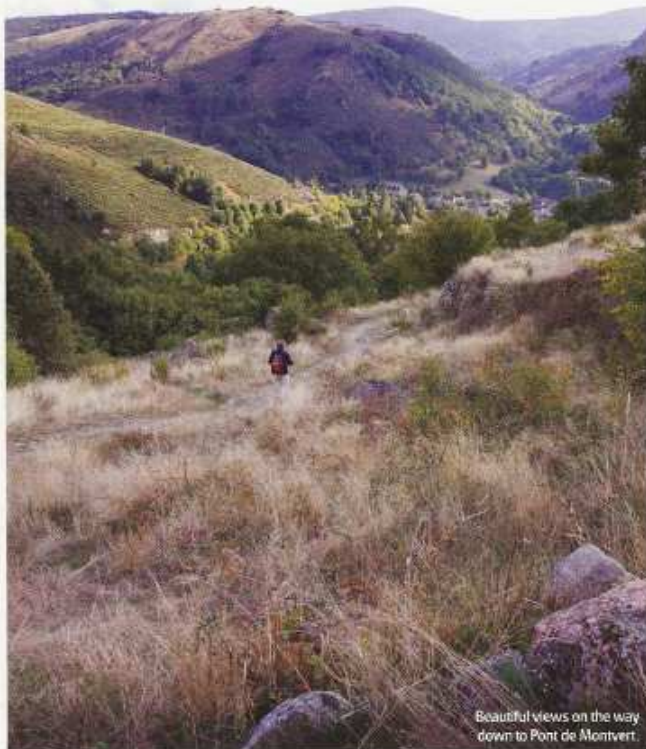
- The Stevenson's Society guidebook of the trail (TopoGuide 'The Stevenson Trail' 15 euros is an indispensable guide). The 'Lozère Carte Touristique' (8 euros) is a useful addition to the guide book.

- For taxi service to ferry bags and passengers Taxi Genestier (www.taxi-genestier.com) offer a service designed for walkers on the trail.

- Donkeys can be hired in the Lozère from Christian Brochier, (<http://anegenti.free.fr/>) who supply saddle packs, feed and importantly handling tips!

- HF Holidays in the UK (<http://www.hfholidays.co.uk>) organise walking trips with donkeys in the Cévennes.

For more information on the area: Maison de la Région Languedoc-Roussillon, www.sunfrance.com



Beautiful views on the way down to Pont de Montvert.

The Lozère is one of the poorest regions of France, the trail passing through small villages and small farms which cannot have changed much since Robert Louis Stevenson came through here. Now climbing high above the Allier river, birch and beech trees glowing in the afternoon sun, the trail then drops down into Cheylard l'Évêque, where I get a good night's sleep at the local inn, to wake early as the church bells ring across the valley.

It is bracing as I set out, fortified with a café au lait and a croissant, for the village is at more than 1,000m above sea-level. Stevenson found the landscape here, "like the worst of the Scottish Highlands... cold, naked and ignoble." But woods have been planted since then and as the mist burns off, views like blurred watercolours open up of distant valleys below.

In the village of Luc, beneath a ruined castle, Louis Voyez, a youthful 93-year-old on his morning stroll, points to the hills and says, "When I was young we'd walk with our animals to market and back, 50km in a day!" He laughs when I say I am only doing 25km and wishes me "Godspeed".

I have another picnic lunch by a small lake and then, as shadows lengthen, climb through dark pinewoods until I hear a bell tolling high ahead. At 7pm a cowed monk, late for mass, scurries past me into

the courtyard of the Trappist Abbey at Notre Dame des Neiges as I load my pack into the taxi. With only one day left I am leapfrogging south some 30km to one of the most spectacular parts of the trail, and next morning at 8am set out to walk across a high plateau to the summit of Mount Lozère.

From here to the south there's a glint of the distant Mediterranean, and the air is warmer and scented with thyme and rosemary. Stevenson himself was almost stunned at the difference in terrain "when he looked"...into the hazy air of heaven and a land of intricate blue hills at my feet."

It is all downhill now, the trail a white dusty track bordered by chestnut trees – at one time a staple source of food in this high country – and massive way stones which indicate that it has been used for centuries. At 5pm, in a series of gentle zig-zags, we wind down to the valley of the Tarn and I see smoke rising from the village chimneys of Pont de Montvert, my final destination.

In the Inn Aux Sources du Tarn overlooking the river, where Stevenson himself had stayed, I put down my bag for the last time. I have walked some 60km in three days, but it feels as if I have been away far longer. Over a celebratory beer I resolve then and there to return soon to follow Stevenson to the end of the trail. ■