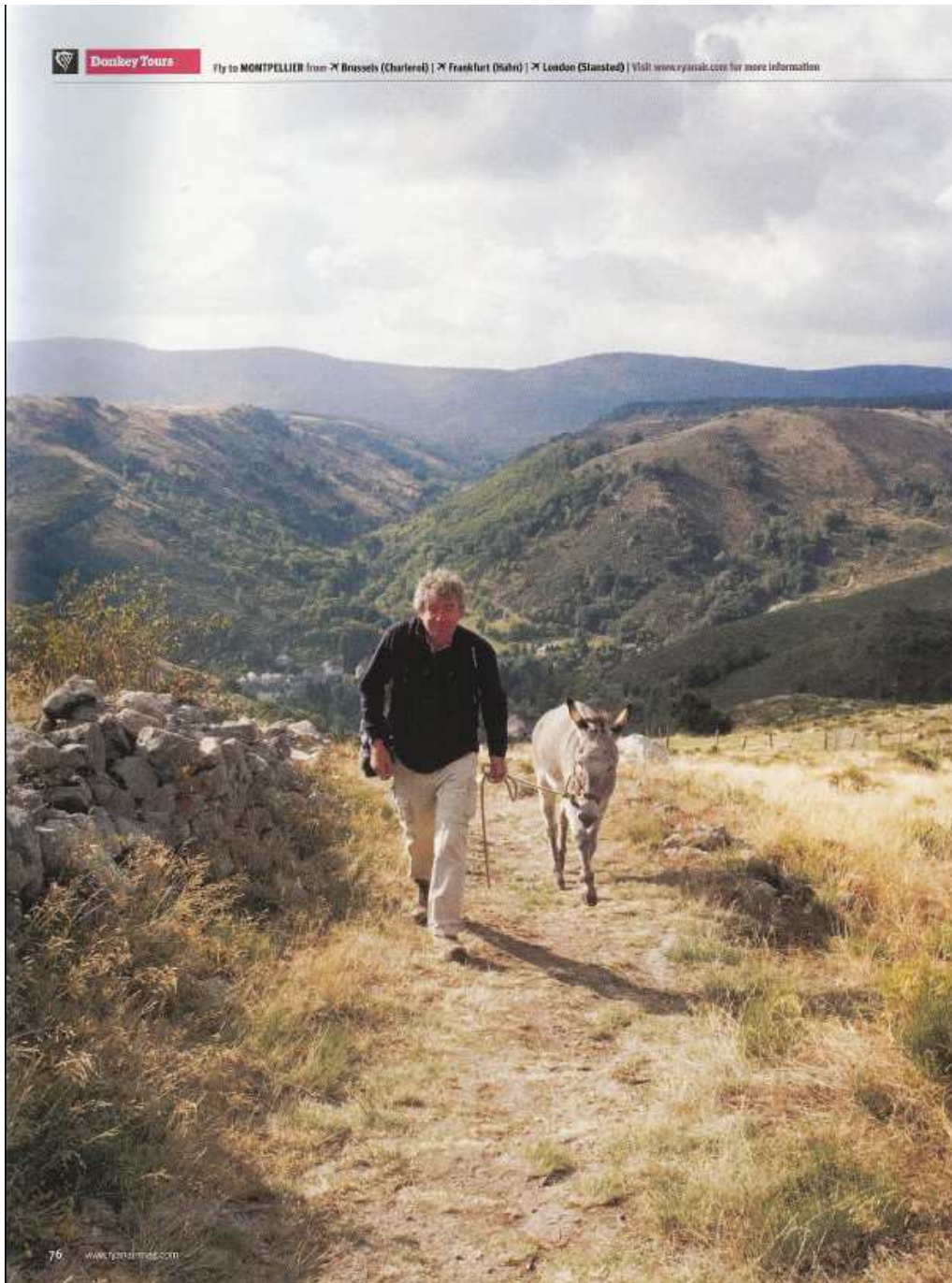


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Nick Haslam takes his donkey by the reins and follows in the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson in Cévennes, France



ON THE STEVENSON TRAIL

On a misty morning in the square of Langogne, a small town in the Lozère region of southern France, I meet Morganne for the first time. She's 17, with a feiching fringe and a fine rump. I tickle her ears a trifle timidly as owner Christian Brochier looks on approvingly.

"She's pretty," he says. "But a bit fickle at the moment. She's on heat!"

Exactly 130 years ago to the day, *Treasure Island* author Robert Louis Stevenson walked through here on his 12-day, 250km journey with Mochestine, "a diminutive she-ass... with a quakerish elegance". Barely visible beneath a vast sheepskin sleeping bag stuffed with a leg of mutton, a heavy coat, bottles of Beaujolais, brandy, black and white bread, an egg whisk and a revolver. Stevenson's tiny donkey could barely put one hoof in front of the other. Less prosaically equipped, and assured of a bed each night in local inns, I have little more

Photo © Nick Haslam, Getty

than a bottle of local wine, a baguette and an essential copy of his journal, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

At 10am we set off to the strains of a bagpipe – a troupe of musicians leading 10 donkeys and some 40 walkers from the Stevenson Society on the fifth day of their commemorative walk down the Stevenson Trail. As we walk, Brochier counsels me on the finer nuances of donkey handling.

"It's like a marriage – you never quite know where it might go and you have to compromise," he says.

As if to prove the point, Morganne stops dead and chews on a succulent thistle. Despite my tugs on the head rope she refuses to budge. Christian takes over, and with a hard series of yanks finally has her on her way. "As I said," he tells me tensely, "Compromise, and a firm hand!"

We are walking through rolling countryside, described by Stevenson as "fine busy breathing rustic landscape", terrorised in his time by >>



Music men

- Musicians Raphael and Niklaus with their donkey
- A fine picnic lunch
- Johanna plays a tune



GULF OF LYONS

Photos: © Nick Woodman/Getty

a ferocious wolf, which devoured (he wrote with relish) "shepherdesses noted for their beauty". Today, there are neither wolves nor shepherdesses, just a huge tractor ploughing a field, which almost puts Morganne to flight.

In dark woodlands and driving rain, Stevenson became totally lost – blundering through marsh, swamp and bog until nightfall, when he stumbled into the hamlet of Fouzilbac. Locals, alarmed at the sight of this bedraggled foreigner, slammed their doors in his face. Furious, he and Modestine, "now a haggard, drenched, desponding donkey", slept out under a tree – Stevenson, revolver in hand, drifting into deep slumber, warmed by frequent swigs from his brandy bottle.

Yet Fouzilbac in bright sunshine is a different story, and René Rieutort, standing among his

cabbages, says his distant relatives were among those who turned Stevenson away.

"That was a long time ago – it would be different now," he says. Morganne, perhaps missing her comrades who have walked on ahead, or perhaps still bearing a grudge for poor Modestine, refuses to believe a word and departs at a gallop, towing me at the end of her head rope to the mirth of gathered villagers. Only the timely assistance of Johanna, our accordionist, saves the day. "Get in front of her," she yells as we cannon past. "She likes to walk behind other donkeys." And so for the next kilometre I walk with Morganne's nose pressed to my back, her ardour cooled until we catch up with the others.

That night we drop down through woods to Cheylard l'Évêque, which Stevenson described

sniffily as "a few broken ends of village with no particular street". But a warm fire and a wonderful supper at the Chalet Cheylard Inn – with accordion and flute played by Johanna and her troupe – give us all a very different take on the village. Before turning in, I walk up to the field above to find Morganne and her brothers chomping cheerfully on some oats in the frosty evening air.

Next day, we climb through pine woods with lovely views over mist-filled valleys – Morganne, her fringe at a rakish angle, setting a cracking pace. "Perhaps she's scented a stallion somewhere ahead?" I ask Christian.

"I hope not," he replies nervously. "The sex life of donkeys is very direct. Nothing stops a male donkey – never get in the way!"



"For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move; to feel the needs and hitches of our life more nearly; to come down off this featherbed of civilisation, and find the globe granite underfoot and steppin with cutting flints."

Extract from Stevenson's *Travels With A Donkey in The Cévennes*



We stop for lunch in a cool forest glade and the musicians strike up a lively French peasant dance called a *bourrée*, teaching us the intricate steps. Warmed by the dance we walk on, stopping that afternoon at the ruined castle of Luc, dominated by a vast white statue of the Virgin Mary, installed only months before Stevenson had been through. He'd had a bad day, struggling to keep his unwieldy pack on Modestine's back. "Even a holiday is something that must be worked for," he grumbled, adding with typical optimism, "the great affair is to move... to come down off this featherbed of civilisation".

At dusk we arrive at the Trappist monastery of Notre Dame des Neiges, where a cowed monk, late for mass, scurries silently past. I sadly tie Morganne up and say goodbye. We have covered 50km together, but I have accepted an invitation to walk my last day with another



Photos © Nick Hazdon, Getty



Safe passage

- Jean Pierre and Pistache take a break
- Donkey fashion
- Pont de Montvert

72 and has worked his entire life with donkeys in the steeply terraced hills here. "They're clever animals, they'll never walk into a hole - while that thing," he gesticulates in disgust at his tractor, "will just go on and break an axle!"

We walk on for the last kilometre down to the pretty village of Pont de Montvert, where Stevenson had spent the night at the Aux Sources du Tarn inn. Greatly taken with Clarisse, the serving girl, he wrote that "her eyes were steeped with amorous languor... although she had a figure which was a case for stays". A faded sepia picture taken some 40 years later shows a stern, matronly woman. Perhaps Stevenson had spent too much time with his donkey and was a little desperate for human warmth.

Jean Pierre agrees, but notes that the Scottish author sobbed when finally he and Modestine parted company. "You too will miss these days on the hills with a companion who carries your bags without complaint", he says. There are no tears from me, but perhaps a slight lump in the throat as I pat Pistache goodbye for the final time. **W**

I [HTTP://WWW.GENTLEFREE.FR/DONKEY-HIRE](http://www.gentlefree.fr/donkey-hire)
WWW.DONKEY-STEVENSON.ORG (TRAIL INFO)
WWW.HFHOLIDAYS.CO.UK (WALKING TRIPS)
WWW.JEAN-GENESTIER.COM (BAG TRANSPORT)

donkey owner, Jean Pierre, on what he says is the most spectacular part of the trail.

At 8am we drive 30km south, then set off on foot across Mt Lozère with Pistache, a donkey trainee who is walking today without a load. Stevenson was, for once, practically speechless when at the summit he gazed "into the hazy air of heaven and a land of intricate blue hills at my feet".

The view is stupendous, the Mediterranean just visible far to the south, and we walk down now into a different land, the warm wind scented with thyme and rosemary. The white dusty track leads over green hills through tiny hamlets until, as the shadows lengthen, we come down into the Tarn valley.

A man working in a field hails us. "Why is that donkey walking free and you two carrying loads?" he laughs. The man is Pierre Chappelle, who though looking just 50 is in fact



THE END