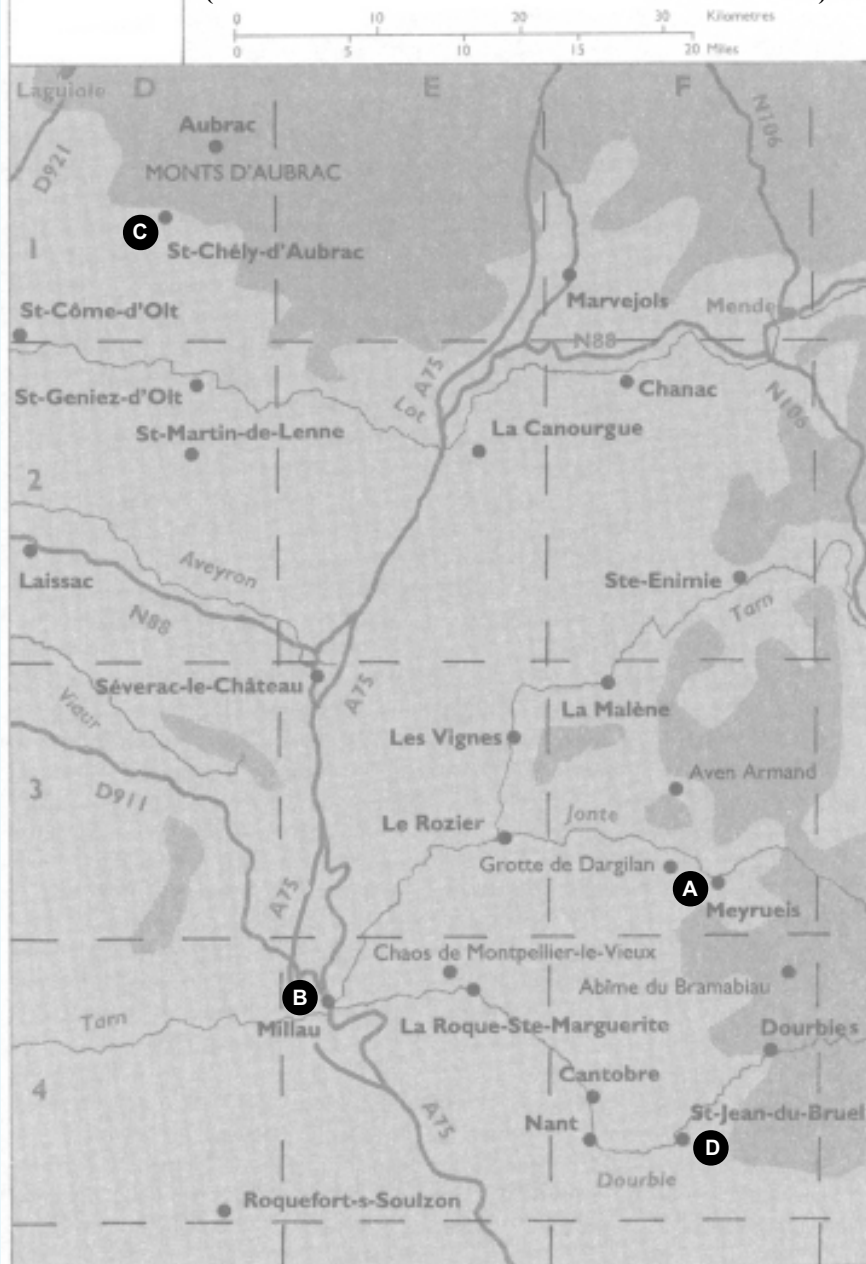


35

Tarn Gorges: orchids, *griffons*, *bateliers* and wild *loups*.

Avens and Grottes. Vultures and a *chaos*.

(Refer also to *Le Viaduc de Millau* and *Cévennes* on website.)



In *French Leave Favourites*, published in 1986, I started the chapter ‘Captivating Cévennes’ with these words: ‘The Cévennes never fails to amaze me. For the past three decades I have been bowled over by its spectacular scenery.’ I then went on to describe how, in June 1985, I had been stunned anew, as I drove on the most obscure roads I could find. Ten years later a further exploration of map sheets 35 and 36, once again in early June, left me speechless by the extrovert show Mother Nature laid on for all those lucky enough to be in the area.

For anyone seeing the Cévennes for the first time in either May or June, one word would have summed up their feelings during the course of my unforgettable morning. The word? A ‘wonderland’. Dragging me away proved mightily difficult; I would have been quite happy to stay put. I was almost prepared to forget any further ‘research’. Let me explain why.

What thrilled me so much? That’s simple: wild flowers and orchids in dramatic profusion, both in the numerous varieties I encountered and in the sheer numbers of each type I identified. The landscape was aflame – seemingly a sea of burning colours. I imagine I have now driven almost every lane in the bottom right-hand corner of 35 but the drive I made on that 1995 June morning was spellbinding.

I climbed north from **La Roque-Ste-Marguerite** (E4), in the **Dourbie** Valley, along the narrow lane that scrambles up the Causse Noir. Then I went east on the D29, to a point just before the ruins of a priory, the Eglise de St-Jean-de-Balmes (E3/F3). I turned left and drove slowly along the track. (The surface is quite safe and not unduly rough.) I kept bearing left and followed the signs showing a white arrow and two white circles on a blue background. I eventually parked at the viewpoint, a rocky outcrop, marked on the map as Corniche du Causse Noir (E3). I stopped as often as I could along the entire route. But even if you spent a day covering the 13 km run you would still not do justice to one of Nature’s most breathtaking shows. One message rings out loud and clear: stop, walk and look as often as you can. There are endless opportunities to park, put your walking boots on and explore on foot; that’s true everywhere on the *causses*. (The limestone ‘plateaux’ are usually dry as water drains away quickly through numerous fissures; underground streams abound – hence the many caves.)

The route I described above crosses a tableland of exuberant wild flowers. Gigantic coverings of them, sometimes spreading across an entire pasture; words such as blankets and sheets hardly suffice. There’s a richly handsome bonus in addition: orchids galore, in their thousands. I was able to identify four: *céphalanthère blanche*; *orchis pyramidal*; *orchis à deux feuilles*; and *orchis à fleurs lachers*. How I wished I had had with me an authoritative book on orchids, to make identification easier. In some instances, in the woods, the blooms were so numerous they were not unlike the glades of bluebells we are accustomed to in the UK. (A caveat: I was in the same area yet again during 2000: that year the ‘show’ was only so-so!)

The views north from the Corniche du Causse Noir were magnificent: of the **Tarn** and **Jonte** far below (both E3); of **Le Rozier** and Peyreleau (both E3) shimmering in the heat; and distant vistas of multi-shaded, violently sculptured rock faces and flat-topped plateaux. But, for me, the show at ground level in the woods and pastures behind me had stolen my heart. All the roads leading east from the Dourbie are an enchantment: the D41 from La Roque to Vessac (F3); the D159 to Revens and Lanuéjols (F4); the D145/D157 past **Cantobre** (F4) to Trèves, and the D114 from **St-Jean-du-Bruel** to **Dourbies** (both F4), a drive I described in *Favourites*.

I imagine May may be the best month to soak up the visual thrills but, in early June, I missed nothing. My drive in the Canyon de la Dourbie was a colourful overture: first the weir at **St-Jean-du-Bruel** (F4); next, the 14th-century covered market at **Nant; Cantobre**, snoozing contentedly on an oversize rock pillow; then past striped rock faces and, towards **La Roque-Ste-Marguerite** (E4), exceptionally pleasing pictures of a foaming river, medieval bridge, church and tower.

You could spend a month on map sheet 35 and still not do justice to the varied terrain. In the bottom right-hand corner much of Nature's most unusual gouging and carving is below ground; the caves are amazing places and should not be missed. But if you are claustrophobic don't fret, as much of her best handiwork can be admired above ground, in the form of numerous gorges and rugged, brutally-carved giant cliffs – all shaped out of the vast limestone *causses*.

One drive could go like this. Start at **Millau** (E4), sparing time first for the 'Fouilles' (excavations) marked on the map, just east of the town. The site is La Graufesenque where, 1,900 years ago, huge amounts of pottery were manufactured by 500 or more potters. On the 24-acre site the remains of both the potters' houses and scores of kilns can be identified. Visit, too, the Musée de Millau which houses seemingly thousands of Gallo-Roman pots and also the exhibits linked to Millau's once renowned manufacture of gloves. (**Roquefort** (D4) cheese – more about that in the map 39 chapter – is made from ewes' milk; the skins of the male lambs sacrificed for that purpose were always used to make high quality kid gloves.)

I would be impatient to leave the town and head for the famed Gorges du Tarn. These begin to arouse one's interest at **Le Rozier** (E3), literally a rose-festooned village. As you head north you'll see enough white water, albeit gently foaming, to grasp just why so many 'Canoe, Kayak, Rafting' signs have sprouted up over the last decade. But perhaps the finest way of enjoying the river and cliff scenery which follows is to use the services of Les Bateliers de **La Malène** (F3): these are the boatmen who steer the *barques* (punts holding four to five people) from La Malène downstream past the famed Les Détroits, multi-shaded limestone cliffs, to the Cirques des Baumes, where the river does a left-hand turn to flow south. The combination of extensive woods covering the steepish sides of the Gorges du Tarn, topped by savage rock sculptures, and the emerald water of the river is an enthralling

sight – whether seen from the roads, the cliff tops or a punt. The *bateliers* get you back by vehicle to La Malène and your parked car.

If time is precious do not fail, on any account, to drive up the seven *lacets* (hairpins) from **Les Vignes** (E3) to the viewpoint called Point Sublime: the best vista is to the east (the course the punts take) but you also have an eagle's eye view of the ninety-degree turn the Tarn completes to head southwards (E3). There are many other viewpoints: the lane that takes you to the Roc des Hourtous, south-west of La Malène; the climbs from La Malène and **Ste-Enimie** (F2); the climb east from Les Vignes; and the walks which lead up to Capluc, east of Le Rozier. One spot, worth a detour upstream from Ste-Enimie (whilst there seek out the 14th-century *maison* at the heart of the medieval village which houses the work of numerous Lozère artisans), is tiny Castelbouc, hanging on by its fingernails to a vertical rock face above the Tarn.

Another excursion from any of the hotels I recommend in my various culinary guides (at **Millau** (E4), **Meyrueis** (F3), **St-Jean-du-Bruel** (F4) or **Le Rozier**: E3) could incorporate some of the more odd-ball examples of Nature's handiwork. First, the **Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux** (E4), north-east of Millau, a collection of weirdly-shaped rocks which litter the *causse* over an extensive area, as if a drunken giant had stumbled this way and left a scene of utter destruction behind him. There's a long, signposted walk through the rocks and, these days, there's also a small mechanised green train which takes the strain if you prefer to give your legs a rest. Most of the rocks have fanciful names: Devil's Chair, Elephant, Arc de Triomphe and even Queen Victoria's Head.

Next, two fabulous underground caves lie to the north-east of the Chaos; one to the north of the Gorges de la Jonte, the other to the south. **Aven Armand**, to the north (F3), is the most renowned: every imaginable shape of stalagmite and stalactite is to be found here, enhanced by some brilliant lighting. There's a funicular, on tyres, to make at least part of the exploration puff-free. The **Grotte de Dargilan** (F3), the pink cavern, is also impressive with vast chambers, a range of natural colourings and a huge bell-shaped sculpture. Modern lighting has done wonders in showing off both these superb marvels.

A tour of the Gorges de la Jonte will please every visitor. The high cliffs, at the western end, near **Le Rozier** and perched Peyreleau (both E3), are orange and pink and they are cut and hacked into all sorts of shapes; you can have some fun working out names for the sculptures. Just west of the Belvédère des Terrasses du Truel (E3) stop at the small viewpoint above the north side of the road – three to four km from Le Rozier. On the cliff tops, high above you, the griffon vulture has been reintroduced to the Cévennes. There's a permanent telescope on site and display boards which explain everything you need to know. Unlike me, knowing nothing of the site and spectacle, I suggest you take your own binoculars. The sight of the giant vultures, with their eight-ft wing spans, gliding in the warm

thermals, is excitingly impressive. I counted ten on the morning I saw them. **Meyrueis** (F3), at the top of the gorge, is a cool spot; there's a touch of character about the place and there are several bars and cafés with shady terraces.

Now head south into the wooded forests of Mont Aigoual (map 36:B4). The forests, a pleasing mix of broadleaved trees and evergreens, were planted a century ago by Georges Fabre – to stop erosion of the then bare mountainsides. There are many arboretums in the extensive forests. The most notable on map 35 is the Arboretum de la Foux, on the south side of the D986, just west of the **Abîme du Bramabiau** (A4). What's the latter? A gigantic slash in the rock face where a subterranean river gushes out of the mountainside. You get a fine view of the Abîme from the D986 to the north; a visit requires a longish, but highly exciting and entertaining walk, the latter parts of which cling to the rock face and run alongside the rushing water.

I must not devote all five pages of this chapter to the sights on the bottom half of map 35. A quite different 'sandwich' of *pays* is on the top half. First a slice of countryside called the Causse de Sévérac and Causse de Sauveterre; then the sandwich filling of the River **Lot**, so different from its southern neighbour, the Tarn; and, finally, a third slice, at the top of the map, the high **Monts d'Aubrac** (D1/E1).

The two *causses* are less barren, more undulating, and greener than their counterparts to the south. Nevertheless, there's nothing special about them to gladden the heart. One man-made site which does please the eye is the Château de Galinières (D2), north of the D45 from **Laissac** to **St-Martin-de-Lenne** (both D2): the fortified walls, ramparts and towers are an exceptional treat. Nature tries hard with the massive rock called the Sabot de Malepeyre, south of **La Canourgue** (E2), from which they are lengthy views north, over the Urugne and Lot Valleys to the Monts d'Aubrac. La Canourgue has a fascinating clock tower.

The **Lot** Valley, on maps 34 and 35, is not among my favourite French scenic 'top of the pops'; it's attractive enough, wooded, and as far as map 35 is concerned, a pastoral landscape dominates. The best way to approach the Lot is from the D45 at **St-Martin-de-Lenne** (D2). Descend by the D95. Immediately you leave the village there's a landscape to the east which, for me, is one of the most alluring in France: distant Marnhac, far below, and a surrounding backdrop of rounded, wooded hills, an enveloping womb for the tiny hamlet. Several man-made sites on the Lot's banks capture the imagination. **St-Geniez-d'Olt** (D2: local patois for Lot) is a large, busy place. Much smaller is medieval Ste-Eulalie-d'Olt which has a handsome church, houses and a château wearing a bronze-shaded hat atop its tower. Lower downstream the ancient streets, fortifications and houses of **St-Côme-d'Olt** catch your eye; chuckle, too, at the slightly out-of-sync church tower.

Rising steeply from the Lot Valley are the southern flanks of the basalt and granite Monts d'Aubrac. South of the isolated village of **Aubrac** (D1: over 4000

ft) a series of valleys at right angles to the Lot are pretty and pleasantly wooded with extensive views south from the high ridges between the numerous streams. Much the most refreshing surprise is the descent on the D19, from east or west, into the Boralde de St-Chély Valley with **St-Chély-d'Aubrac** (D1) sitting peacefully at the bottom. On the remote, almost treeless, plateau to the north of Aubrac the pastures are covered with sheets of jonquils in late April and May; by June they have gone and, whilst not so numerous, the same ground is spotted with narcissi and dozens of wild flowers.

Make two calls in St-Chély: first to the Hotel Voyageurs. Patrick Amilhat and his wife, Brigitte, have opened a new business, La Conserverie de l'Aubrac, in the basement. During the winter months they do the preparation work to stock up the shelves with *tripoux*, *cou farci*, *confit de canard*, *foie gras d'oie* and *pâté de foie de porc* – just some of the tinned treats, delights which you can try at the hotel during its short summer season. Fifty metres away is the bakery of Jean Denis Auguy: here you must try a slice of *fouace au beurre* – the regional crown-shaped bread made of flour, fresh eggs, butter, salt, sugar, yeast and orange-flower water.

There are other attractions to be found on map sheet 35. Most of which follow are man-made. The first, the most unusual, is north of **Marvejols** (F1): the site is marked on maps by the words Parc des Loups du Gévaudan. Gérard Ménatory has opened a reserve, now around 65 acres, for 100 and more wolves from Siberia, Canada and Mongolia. Financial help from Brigitte Bardot has helped him enormously; the resultant publicity means that large numbers of visitors explore the reserve. There's an exhibit, too, which explains the story of the beast of Gévaudan – supposedly a large wolf which, over two hundred years ago, killed and ate dozens of local people in the very area where the reserve is now situated. To the immediate north-west is a more conventional sight: the Château de la Baume (E1), reached by the D73, to the west of the N9. The fortified château could be in Scotland; the interior is exuberant, with decorations worthy of a mini Versailles.

In the **Lot** Valley, at Le Villard, west of **Chanac** (F2), is a new enterprise – one which is claimed to be unique, a medieval farm. In a series of buildings all sorts of exhibits tell the story of how an estate would have been managed centuries ago. **Sévérac-le-Château** (E3), bypassed by the new A75 autoroute, is dominated by the ruins of what once must have been a sizeable and strategically important fortress; today, the old houses in the streets below the castle are much more interesting. Finally, in the woods south of **Meyrueis** (F3), is the Château de Roquedols; the small 16th-century castle, with towers and staircases, has colourful, handsome walls. The site now serves as an information centre for the vast forests on Mont Aigoual (map 36:B4).

Stop Press: just west of Millau is one of France's most breathtaking man-made structures, the highest bridge in the world. For details see *Le Viaduc de Millau* on my website.