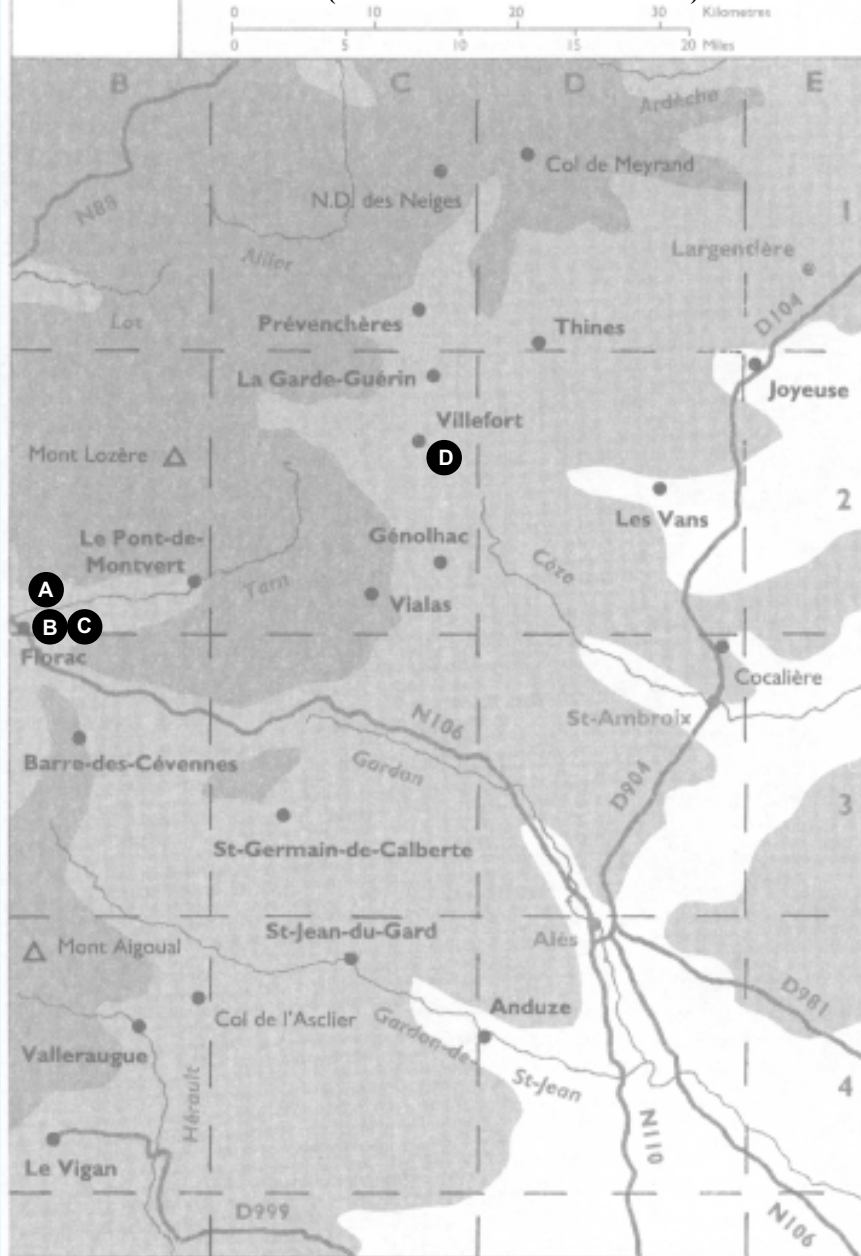


36

Captivating Cévennes: chocs, bamboo, Modestine and *crues*. *Train à Vapeur*. *Vases d'Anduze*. Bouncing baby. 'Stupendous' is the word. (Refer also to *Cévennes* on website.)



Before you read on please look again at the opening paragraph for map sheet chapter 35; my words are just as valid here. Most of the terrain on the map to the left is the Cévennes, other than the top right-hand corner which is part of the Ardèche (see map sheet chapter 31).

One word sums up my feelings for map 36: stupendous. The varied scenic landscapes are amazing: forests of beech, oak and chestnut; olive trees and vineyards; granite mountains (one is the giant **Mont Lozère**: B2 and C2); limestone gorges and plateaux (west of **Florac**: B2); wooded hills and hidden valleys where the schist is often visible; wild flowers galore; and myriad examples of man's handiwork.

Let's get cracking as I know I shall run out of road by the end of the chapter. I'll start with the Cévennes and finish in the Ardèche.

There are many approach roads to map 36. I suggest you use the least obvious, the D906 (top of grid square C1). The road runs alongside the infant River **Allier**, flowing lazily north in a shallow valley, and the once busy Paris-Nîmes railway line. Make your first stop the Cistercian Abbaye **Notre-Dame des Neiges** (C1), approached along the densely-wooded D4A. Over a century ago, in 1878, the Presbyterian Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, came this way with his donkey Modestine. The Catholic monks gave him shelter for the night. I doubt whether RLS would recognise the place now: the abbey has the same wooded, oasis-calm site but there's just a touch too much of a tourist trap. No matter, but do attend one of the services (12.30 and 18.30 are ideal) when you can enjoy the soothing chants of the Trappist monks.

Next, a surprise: 'La Chocolatière', on the west side of the D906 at **Prévenchères** (C1). Jean-Claude Briet's shop is a mouth-watering teaser: some of his chocolate sculptures are works of art.

At **La Garde-Guérin** (C2) detour 300 metres to the Belvédère du Chassezac. Below you there's a deep gorge with vertical slabs of rock in layer upon layer; there's little water in the river, thanks to the dam upstream. La Garde-Guérin is a tiny, fortified, medieval hamlet. Explore the *hameau* and, from July to mid September, admire the fine designs and crafted work of the area's artisans on display in the stone barn.

Descend to **Villefort** (C2). North of the town head west, beside the man-made lake, to Castanet, where the 16th-century castle, with sausage-like slices off its tower tops, is almost surrounded by water. At Villefort have a cuppa and cake at Georges Riou's super *pâtisserie*.

If time allows make the 30-km drive on the D362 which climbs up the eastern shoulder of the sleeping granite giant, **Mont Lozère** (B2 and C2); the numerous high-altitude views are fabulous. If not, take the low road, the D906, to **Génolhac** (C2). By now you'll be aware of the striking landscape changes: rocky terrain to the north; invigorating woods in the valleys below. The contrasts continue as you head west into the heart of the Parc National des Cévennes. Beyond **Vialas** (C2)

the mixed woods are a tonic; as are the tablecloths of narcissi near the top of the Col de la Croix. No wonder ‘*Miel*’ signs are everywhere.

Stop at **Le Pont-de-Montvert** (B2). RLS came this way: he slept out overnight, in his fur-lined sleeping sack, on Mont Lozère and he flirted with a waitress over lunch at the Hôtel des Cévennes in the village (the *auberge* is still there). Enjoy the bouncing baby Tarn but then turn your attention to the Ecomusée du Mont Lozère, an unusually-shaped building tucked away behind the village. The museum explains the mountain’s human and natural history (May to Sept). Equally interesting are outlying sites, all part of the museum: the splendidly restored, isolated farm at Troubat (to the south-east) where the buildings are constructed from blocks of granite and oak beams; the hamlets of L’Hôpital (north-east) with a thatched *moulin*, and La Fage (north-west) with a small stone bell-tower and a communal *four* (oven).

The park’s information centre is at **Florac** (B2), a modest small resort. Tourists are likely to head south-east on the Corniche des Cévennes (B3), a road running along the crest of high wooded hills. I recommend something better – the D13, D984 and D983: through, literally, **Barre-des-Cévennes** (B3), where houses almost touch above the road; past **St-Germain-de-Calberte** (C3), a *village fleuri par excellence* – awash with roses (the cracking *charcuterie* Therond is a must: on the D13 eastern exit); finishing at **St-Jean-du-Gard** (C4), the town where RLS completed his travels (market on Tues a.m.). The drive is a scenic extravaganza: vast views north and south; and an honour guard of rock roses.

What other scenic thrills await you? Hundreds. I’ve seen almost every road in the Cévennes – prime rallying *pays* and classic mapaholics’ terrain. Here are a few ideas – from dozens. Drive to the summit of **Mont Aigoual** (B4), the highest point in the national park (1567 m); from the observatory the 360-degree panorama is staggering. You’ll see large-scale maps identify an arboretum, l’Hort-de-Dieu, created by the botanist Charles Flahault with the help of his *copain*, Georges Fabre, the mastermind behind the Aigoual *massif* forests a century ago. You can descend, on foot, to the Garden of God from the D269 below the summit (20 mins down; how long up?). Or, like me, use the rather roughish three-ply track from the Col de Prat Peyrol. The arboretum, of exotic trees and plants, is a touch disappointing; the views are heart-stopping.

Drive the hairpins on the D986 west from **Valleraugue** (B4), an almost 3000 ft-high climb. Motor up the narrow road to the Col du Pas, north of the town, where a huge Cross of Lorraine is the monument to the Aigoual *maquis*. Revel in the D48 or, if you are a rally nut, the D329, both of which snake north from **Le Vigan** (B4), wooded almost all the way (on the town bypass there’s a road island ‘waterfall’). And share the excitement of rally drivers and navigators on the thrilling D20 **Col de l’Asclier** (B4). Around St-Martial ‘onions for sale’ everywhere and cultivated terraces galore.

Some of you will know that the Cévennes was a Protestant stronghold centuries ago. There’s no space here for me to recount the persecution they suffered during

the Wars of Religion. But under no circumstances bypass the Musée du Désert (the word for a hiding place), north of **Anduze** (D4), the Geneva of the Cévennes. A farmhouse museum tells the story of their persecution and resistance, and the Camisards’ revolt at the start of the 18th century (every day March to Nov).

There are many fascinating sites around Anduze. La Bambouseraie de Prafrance, on the way to the *musée*, is a mixture of South-east Asia exotic (acres of high bamboo) and cool, restful water gardens (every day March to Dec). North of the museum is the mysterious underground world of the Grotte de Trabuc with its 100,000 ‘soldiers’ of unknown origin. The Train à Vapeur des Cévennes chugs up the valley from Anduze to **St-Jean-du-Gard** (C4) – ideal for kids and dad (Apr & Oct: Sun. May & Sept: Sun, Tues, Thurs. June: every day but Mon. July & Aug: every day). At St-Jean visit both the Atlantide Parc, a tropical aquarium, and the Musée des Vallées Cévenoles. At Anduze chuckle at the brightly-tiled pagoda fountain (1649); and marvel at the Poterie de la Madeleine (at La Madeleine, to the south-east), full of *vases d’Anduze*.

What remains in the top right-hand Ardèche corner? I adore the terrain around **Les Vans** (D2): often, in the space of a mile or so, you’ll see olive, cherry and sweet chestnut trees and, *santé*, there’s many a vineyard. The local geology is amazing: the weird woods and limestone rocks of the Bois de Païolive and the sculptured *calcaire* at Mazet-Plage (to the east); the tiny Romanesque *église* at **Thines** (D1), a gem created from granite and sandstone and on a remote perch at the top of a long dead-end road and, beyond the church, a memorial sculptured on a rock face, in the style of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ painting, to those who died in a WW2 atrocity; the sandstone (*grès*) and granite homes at Chambonas and Champmajour (north of Le Vans); and the houses built from schist at St-Jean-de-Pourcharesse (east of Thines) and remote Malbosc (D2: south-west). Why not hire a bike from Claude Raymond (Le Quay, 07140 Les Vans: 04 75 37 23 47) and see the lot at leisure?

In the past I have headed north from Les Vans on the Corniche du Vivarais Cévenol (D10-D4 roads). On the Tanargue massif (D1) we’ve welcomed the cool woods and, from the **Col de Meyrand** (D1), we’ve admired the vast views – with the snow-topped Alps sparkling to the east. South of Les Vans, beside the D104, I’ve been astounded by the endless subterranean *grottes* at **Cocalière** (D3), where water and lighting combine to good effect (April to Oct: you can take your bike too!).

A couple of museums appeal: the Musée de la Châtaigneraie (scores of objects made from chestnut wood) at **Joyeuse** (E2: 15.00 to 17.00 Mon); and the Les Vans Musée d’Archeologie (July & Aug: Tues to Fri. Rest of year: p.m. Thurs). Off the right edge of map 36 are the mighty Gorges de l’Ardèche (E2): drive the spectacular *corniche* road – a real must; marvel at the Pont-d’Arc, a natural stone arch over the river; and see at least one of the fabulous underground caves – the Aven d’Ornac (E2) is a three-star wonder. The river is at its most exciting after heavy rain when the water level can rise metres in a few hours (these sudden rises are called *crues*). Stupendous is the word.