



Cévennes

The Cévennes, a mountainous range of myriad scenic landscapes, never fails to thrill me. The rugged mountains and deserted plateaux, interlaced with scores of valleys and many caves, carved by ferocious water, are in the south-east corner of the Massif Central. Some rivers, like the Tarn, flow west to the Atlantic; others, for example the Hérault, surge south to the Med. The terrain is a mix of both Mediterranean and alpine vistas. The geology is amazing: granite, limestone, schist and sandstone. You'll see forest of oak, beech and chestnut; olive trees, fruit orchards and vineyards; sheep grazing; multi-shaded, violently-sculptured rock faces; and white water galore. In late May and the first half of June the Cévennes is at its most seductive: wild flowers and orchids, seemingly everywhere, explode into an extravaganza of colour.

On your travels remember also that the mysterious Cévennes has a turbulent, tragic history. Three hundred years ago *Le Roi Soleil*, Louis XIV, was guilty of some stupid follies: one of them the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes which led to 250,000 Huguenots leaving France. Another hideous act was the suppression of the Cévennes Protestants which he set in train in 1702. The Camisard rebellion which followed lasted for a decade: hundreds of villages were put to the torch; thousands were tortured and executed. The area retains a significant Protestant influence – some 40 per cent of the population.

The Cévennes is a diamond-shaped wonderland. The towns of Aubenas, Mende, Millau and Alès lie just outside the four extremities of the 'diamond'. At its heart is Florac, the administration HQ of the Parc National des Cévennes which covers an area of over 260,000 acres. Most of what follows sits within the park and its 'peripheral zone' of over 585,000 acres.

I'll describe the Cévennes in two parts: the *pays* to the right of the diamond, north and east of the N106, from Mende, through Florac, to Alès; and then the left side, south and west of the same *route nationale*.

The best northern entry to the Cévennes is the Col de Meyrand, 4,500ft high in the Massif du Tanargue. On hot days the cool woods of the ascent are welcome. There's an observation table just below the summit, on the south side: ahead of you, to your right, lies the 20-mile long, 5,574ft-high, flat granite ridge of Mont Lozère; to the far east the snow-topped Alps sparkle.

Head south on the Corniche du Vivarais Cévenol (D4/D10), with numerous views to both east and west, to Les Vans. The *pays* around the village is adorable: often, in the space of a mile or so, you'll see olive, cherry and sweet chestnut trees – and there's many a vineyard too. Houses in the area are built of sandstone, granite or schist. From Les Vans detour north-west to the tiny 'perched' Romanesque church at Thines (D513), a gem crafted from granite, sandstone and limestone. Admire, too, the stirring memorial behind the *église*.

Now return to the Chassezac Valley and follow the D113 upstream; later use the D51 towards Villefort. Before entering the latter make two detours. First north to La Garde-Guérin, a small, fortified, medieval hamlet. Explore *le hameau* and, from July to Sept, admire the fine designs and craft work of the area's artisans on display in a stone barn. Nearby, 300m east of the D906, is the Belvédère du Chassezac; below you is a deep gorge with vertical slabs of rock in layer upon layer. Continue north to Prévencières and a surprise shop: Jean-Claude Briet's mouth-watering 'La Chocolatière'.

Next, north of Villefort, motor west, beside a man-made lake, to Castanet, where the 16C castle, with sausage-like slices cut off its tower tops, is almost surrounded by water.

From Villefort take the 20-mile long D362 which climbs up the eastern shoulder of the snoozing granite giant, Mont Lozère. The drive is a succession of treats: high-altitude views, granite outcrops and mixed woods of beech and pine. The striking landscape contrasts continue as you go west from Génolhac towards Le Pont-de-Montvert: invigorating woods in the valleys and high rocky terrain to north and south. Another visual tonic, in the spring, is the tablecloths of narcissi near the top of the Col de Berthel.

Remote Le Pont-de-Montvert is interesting for many reasons. Robert Louis Stevenson, the Presbyterian Scot, came this way in 1879 with his donkey Modestine. 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). In 1702 the murder of the Catholic Abbé du Chayla, in the village, was the trigger for the Camisard rebellion.

Recall the earlier historical events, enjoy the bouncing baby River Tarn and 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). As interesting are outlying sites, all part of the museum: the splendidly restored, isolated farm at Troubat (to the south-east) constructed from oak beams and blocks of granite; the hamlets of L'Hôpital (north-east) with a thatched *moulin* and barn, and La Fage (north-west) with a small stone bell-tower and a communal *four* (oven).

Florac, a modest small resort, is the starting point for exploring the second half of the Cévennes 'diamond'. To begin your exploration you have two routes to choose from: the Corniche des Cévennes, built by Louis XIV to quell the Camisards, which runs along the crest of high wooded hills to St-Jean-du-Gard; or, better still, my preferred run on the D983, D13, D984 and D983 which meanders through deserted country north of the *corniche*.

The latter drive is a scenic delight: extensive views; and an honour guard of rock roses along much of the winding run. Barré-des-Cévennes comes first, where

houses almost touch above the D983; then past St-Germain-de-Calberte, awash with roses (don't bypass the Therond *charcuterie* on the D13 exit); and finishing at St-Jean, the town where RLS completed his travels.

From St-Jean continue south-east to Anduze with its important sites and treats. To comprehend the Cévennes you must understand its Protestant past. To do this visit the Musée du Désert (the word for a holy place), to the north, the Geneva of the Cévennes. A farmhouse museum tells the story of both the persecution and the Camisard's revolt and resistance (March to November).

Next, visit the Grotte de Trabuc, an underground cave with galleries used by the Camisards as hiding places: marvel at the 'Midnight Lake' and the '100,000 soldiers', an army of one to two inch-high calcite concretions. Find time for La Bambouseraie de Prafrance, a mixture of South-East Asia exotic (acres of high bamboo) and cool, restful water gardens (March to Oct). The Train à Vapeur des Cévennes chugs up the valley from Anduze to St-Jean. Chuckle, too, at the brightly-tiled pagoda fountain (1649) in the town centre; and enjoy the Poterie de la Madeleine, to the south-east, full of *vases d'Anduze*.

West from Anduze to thrilling mountain terrain: first via St-Jean and then over the 2,969ft-high Col de l'Asclier, an exacting run with heart-stirring views; the drive is a classic rally stage. After the Col de la Triballe snake north-west to Valleraugue; then drive up the narrow road to the Col du Pas, where a huge Cross of Lorraine is a monument to the Aigoual *maquis*.

Drive the hairpins on the D986 west of Valleraugue to the summit of the Col de la Séreyrède, a climb of 2,841ft in just seven miles. The *col* is astride the Atlantic/Mediterranean watershed and was once part of a drovers' road to the Languedoc. Finish with an easy run to the summit of Mont Aigoual, 5,141ft above sea-level, where the 360-degree panorama is staggering; on clear days even Mont Blanc, to the far north-east, is visible.

Finish with three spectaculars – all Nature's creations. First the Abîme du Bramabiau, to the west of Mont Aigoual, 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.

Next two fabulous underground caves, both north-west of Meyrueis. Aven Armand has every imaginable shape of stalagmite and stalactite, enhanced by brilliant lighting. There's a funicular on tyres, to make at least part of the exploration puff-free. The Grotte de Dargilan, the pink cavern, has vast chambers, a range of natural colourings and a huge bell-shaped structure; here, too, modern lighting works marvels.

Where to stay and eat See the numerous recommendations, most *rapport qualité-prix* entries, in *French Leave Finesse*.