

## Walking in The Cevennes (1981)

The sun was beginning to set as we dropped down into the shadows on the north-eastern side of Montagne du Liron. The distant ridges were turning a darker grey and the valley bottoms were already a deeper green. In the lee of the ridge the air was still. The mountainside was quiet, apart from the sound of distant cow bells and a tractor far below on the floor of the valley.

We had walked 22 kilometres and although we felt that particular kind of well-deserved satisfaction which comes to city dwellers after a day of exercise in the open air, our ruck-sacks were starting to feel heavy. Even so our pace quickened, partly because the narrow path was now winding down hill and partly because we were looking forward to putting down our bags and putting up our feet at the *gite* in the small hamlet of La Bessede.

We soon found the *gite* among the half dozen farm buildings in La Bessede. It was not the sort of *gite* advertised in the quality Sundays with swimming pool and barbecue. It was a *gite d'etape* - literally a "staging post" - one of many on the *sentiers de grande randonnée* (long distance footpaths) which cross the Cevennes, and indeed most rural areas of France.

This *gite* was particularly rustic. It was a partially converted barn. On the first-floor there was a dining room with a large stone fireplace and two rooms with solid wooden beds. The walls were whitewashed. The doors and all the other woodwork were fresh and new, but unpainted. Down stairs on the ground floor cows lay on the straw, chewing away. They still wore their cow bells which clanged gently every time that they moved their heads. Their warm smells wafted up through the bare floor boards. As it was still only April, there were few other walkers around and we were alone in the *gite*, apart from the cows.

We bought some home-made pate and fresh milk and eggs from the farmer and collected water from the source behind the *gite*. We lit a log fire in the fire place, cooked macaroni with eggs and roquefort and baked potatoes in the embers, all to the sound of cow bells. Then we went to bed early and slept deeply.

Overall we found the Cevennes ideal for a walking holiday. The *sentiers de grande randonnée* were clearly marked, sometimes with small metal signs, more often with red and white painted marks on trees or rocks. It's a mountainous area, but the highest peak, Mont Aigoual is only 1565 meters above sea level. None of the walking is too difficult and we had no problems in finding *gîtes*.

Many of the paths follow ridges, giving panoramic views, particularly to the west, towards the Gorges of the Tarn and the Jonte. Within quite short distances the scenery varied between a dark grandeur which was reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands, white rocky limestone country like the English Peak District and grey-blue rolling ridges which could have been in the Appalachians. Sometimes we followed ancient droving routes, used by nomadic cattle drivers in the middle ages. Other tracks passed through thick Spanish chestnut woods which are typical of the area and which in medieval times provided the inhabitants' staple diet.

In other parts, we walked through pine forests. Often there were smells of wild oregano or thyme growing by the wayside. We saw crocuses and wild hyacinths. There were lizards and white and orange butterflies. Despite a typically French abundance of used shot gun cartridges birds sang and sometimes we heard cuckoos. The sounds of bells round the necks of sheep, goats or cows often carried for miles. On the paths or tracks between villages we saw few people, apart from shepherds moving sheep or goats to another pasture and wood-cutters. In the distance, we saw higher mountains with snow.

Twice we came down out of the hills to spend the night in small towns. Barre des Cevennes was a grey and sombre looking place. Many houses seemed to be shut up, although two goats poked their heads out through a first-floor window in one of the few houses where the shutters were not closed. Parts of the town seemed, rather incongruously to be inhabited by Vietnamese refugees, with children playing in the streets. Florac, in the upper Tarn valley, was slightly larger and more lively with hotels, restaurants and a trout farm.