



# Four legs good

Why go walking alone when you can enlist the company of a four-legged friend? On the 130th anniversary of Robert Louis Stevenson's journey through the Cévennes with a donkey, **Jon Bryant** follows his footsteps and makes a lifelong friend. Meanwhile, in the following pages, llamas and huskies also get an outing

A donkey may not be everyone's first choice of a partner to spend a week alone with but when you're struggling up misty, dormant volcanoes, hiking across flooded plains and through dense, chestnut forests, he (or she) becomes strangely appealing – especially when your bag is growing heavy.

Following the route that the writer Robert Louis Stevenson undertook 130 years ago (with his donkey Modestine) has become one of France's most celebrated *grandes randonnées* and having an animal beside you, carrying your luggage and refusing to move most of the time, makes the trip even more authentic.

Stevenson set out from Le Monastier-sur-Gazeille in the Haute-Loire in late September 1878 and travelled to Saint-Jean-du-Gard more than 100 miles south.

The journey took him 12 days and he kept a journal of his adventures, noting where he stopped and slept and what he fed the donkey; it later became his first published book – the aptly titled *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

It was undoubtedly the donkey that caught the publisher's eye. Stevenson's treatment of it, from frustrated indignation to tearful affection makes the book a masterpiece of unplanned adventure and understated humour. He begins by requiring "*something cheap and small and hardy, and of a solid and peaceful temper.*" What he ends up with is a "*diminutive she-ass not much bigger than a dog, the colour of a mouse, with a kindly eye and a determined under-jaw.*" Twelve days later, he can't bear to part with her.

For supplies, Stevenson took a sheepskin-lined sleeping bag, a leg of

mutton, a revolver, chocolate, a bottle of Beaujolais, a few tins of Bologna sauce and an egg-beater. For my journey, I thought about the revolver (there are wolves and boar in the hills) and chocolate, but didn't find room for the whisk or mutton. I did however, take Stevenson's book and made sure I followed the same bridleways, old droving trails and the occasional slightly-too-long railway tunnel as it traces through the Velay, Gévaudan and into the mountains of the Cévennes.

A far cry from vineyards and lavender fields, the landscape is dark and rugged and with fields scattered in a chaos of boulders. Fractured castles on hilltops look down on you and, as Stevenson did on many an occasion, it's easy to get hopelessly lost, despite the red and white marker bands that guide you along the

GR70. It's actually comforting to have a donkey force you down the correct routes even when they look unlikely. And if you don't have a pack animal, you can just follow the droppings of others.

Stevenson's dismissive, humorous disgust at most of the locals and his loathing of dogs and noisy children is a welcome respite from gushing travelogues. Clearly much of the region has barely changed in the last century but according to Éric Chaptal, who runs the Hôtel des Sources in Chasseradès halfway along the route, the popularity of the pathway is relatively new.

"Until about ten years ago, no-one locally had really heard of the RLS trail. Now everyone knows about it and it's been a real boost to the local economy. Because of the altitude [much of it is over 1,000 metres], it's cool in the summer evenings," he says. Some of the hotels offer a 'Stevenson Menu' (high in carbohydrates) and are very used to dealing with blisters, lost guidebooks and unexpected braying.

I knew about gentle braying and the legendary stubbornness, but the sudden series of prolonged, blood-curdling bleats in apparent agony... nothing could have prepared me for that. You may be 20

## The village of Saint-Germain-de-Calberte even has an annual *Miss Modestine* pageant for the best-looking donkey in the region

metres away, looking at a clearing or chestnut grove, but to everyone in a ten mile radius, you are thrashing the poor creature to within a saddle-thickness of its life. Stevenson 'lost it' a few times with Modestine but nowadays, the accompanied walker spends most of the trail stroking the donkey, playing with its ears and carrying their own luggage.

Donkeys can live to 40 years old and, according to Gaëlle Bruchet Exbrayat, who keeps 20 of them near Le Monastier, they really enjoy the trail. "They love being with people and they love walking." Mme Bruchet says all the hostels along the route know how to care for the



donkeys during the night and walkers can hire them from her after just an hour's training. "Some donkeys can do six trails in a season – they know the route!" she says. "They like being brushed and having stones removed from their hooves. They don't like tight leather straps or climbing up Mont Lozère!"

Chaptal reckons more and more people are doing the route with donkeys. They can be rented for around €45 a day and hotels charge another €5 for feed and a grassy field for the night. The village of Saint-Germain-de-Calberte even has an annual *Miss Modestine* pageant for the best-looking donkey in the region.

The 220-kilometre Stevenson Trail is something of a pilgrimage for them too.

**LEFT AND ABOVE: Walking with a donkey in the Cévennes can be frustrating and fun in equal measure but it offers the chance to explore the countryside in the same way Stevenson did 130 years ago**

Modestine was sold for 35 francs in Saint-Jean-du-Gard. Stevenson wept when he thought of her afterwards. She is reputedly buried in a field nearby. ►

### MORE INFORMATION

Full details of the route, places to stay and where to hire donkeys can be found at the Chemin de Stevenson Association's website

**[www.chemin-stevenson.org](http://www.chemin-stevenson.org)**

Also see **[www.cevennes-tourisme.fr](http://www.cevennes-tourisme.fr)**



They may be indigenous to South America, but llamas are proving popular in Charente as well, as **Heidi Fuller-Love** discovers

Since I've never managed to talk with the animals, walking with them seemed like the next best thing, which is why one boiling August morning, I drove past honey stone houses and fields full of sunflowers to reach Les Lamas de Brossac, a British-owned llama farm in a bucolic corner of southern Charente.

En route I muse that there are many bizarre things about llamas – not least their big banana-shaped ears, their habit of spitting and their scientific name *lama glama*. Hailing from South America, where they've been used for centuries to carry packs and provide lovely thick wool, this odd-looking beast with big cow eyes, a giraffe neck, deer's legs and a body like a woolly bolster, was classed as a member of the camel family up until the 19th century, when it was put into a different zoological group along with the alpaca and the guanaco.

I arrived at the ranch to find Brian Venables patiently explaining to a little boy trying to scramble on to the broad, furry back of Michu the pack leader, that you can't ride llamas. "The maximum weight they can carry is only about a third of their own body weight," he says for what is probably the umpteenth time.

You'd think he'd been dealing with pesky kids and placid llamas all his life but when Brian first moved from the UK to France with wife Margaret at the turn of the Millennium, he set up a solar panel business. "Unfortunately, we soon realised that our business was five years ahead of its time and the cost of running a SARL (a limited liability company) was hugely expensive, so after a year we had to fold," he explains.

Seeking another business idea back in the UK one rainy afternoon, the enterprising couple saw a *Countryfile* report about llama trekking in northern England. Six months later, after a lot of



careful research and visiting llama operations in France and the UK, they bought a sprawling property surrounded by woods and pastures, a small lake, and a large web of footpaths and launched their own llama-trekking business. “At first the neighbours said ‘more of those mad English with their weird animals’, but now we get quite a lot of local custom,” Margaret laughs.

The couple’s furry herd of five males and three females is led by seven-year-old veteran Michu who first started trekking when he was a yearling. “They all have different characters, but males tend to be better trekkers than females,” says Margaret.

After an introduction to the animals, safety instructions (watch out: these placid creatures are petrified of barking dogs!)

and a trial walk (when we quickly learn to keep our clumsy plates of meat out of the way of those nimble little llama trotters, and that our charges have an insatiable appetite for green vegetation), we are paired with our trekking companion. I discover that I’m to spend the morning with two-year-old female Bella. Margaret assures me she is “astoundingly easy to handle”.

Serious trekkers tend to pick the full-day 15-25 kilometre trek, while children – and less energetic adults – generally choose a ‘llama encounter’, where they feed the llamas carrots and take them for a walk around the corral. Since I’m somewhere in between, I plump for the Beleteau *randonnée*, a brisk three-hour trek through glorious *Charentais* countryside, followed by a long, lazy lunch back at the llama ranch. “We can also transport our llamas to a location of your choice, but it’s up to you to check that landowners will let you cross their land with llamas,” explains Margaret.

Slightly wary, we head out in single file behind Brian. Bella’s head bobs at a level with my chin and despite her tottering gait she moves at a surprisingly brisk pace. I clutch her lead rein tight and wonder if I’m doing the right thing. “Is it true that llamas spit?” asks a brawny Mancunian up ahead. He has voiced what everyone wants to know but hasn’t dared ask.

“Our llamas don’t spit at the clients, only at each other – it’s a dominance thing,” says Brian and the group relaxes.

**LEFT: British owner Brian Venables turned to llama farming after moving to France**  
**ABOVE: Take a trek around the corral**

Passing from a dusty track surrounded by fields of ripe maize, we plunge into a stretch of oak forest. Pricking her ears, plump and cuddly Bella peers into the undergrowth like a short-sighted granny and Brian puts a finger to his lips. “Llamas

Some children run out to pet the llamas and then stare at the mad English out walking in the midday sun

have excellent eyesight and hearing. This means they will be alerted to other animals in the woods long before you, giving you advance warning of wild animal sightings, like wild boar or deer,” he whispers.

A rabbit shoots out of the undergrowth ahead of us and vanishes into the trees. Bella snorts as if to say “I told you so”, and we head out again. Speeding along on the tips of her toes Bella leads me uphill and down dale, out of shade, and into glimmering sun, and I’m soon panting like a dog. Maybe we’re in La Charente, but this mid-morning heat is tropical – glimpses of Brossac lake surrounded by sandy beaches are maddening – I feel like



plunging into it fully clothed. The footpath snakes up into a wood thicket where Bella snatches at the leaves, then down into a hollow where Bella snorts at the lush verdure. In a small hamlet some children run out to pet the llamas and then stare at the mad English walking out in the midday sun with their weird animals. How we welcome the stops for sips of the cool,



iced water our llamas carry in their packs. Meanwhile our llamas welcome our frequent rest stops as an opportunity to get down to some serious grazing.

Three hours later, we totter back into the ranch for our buffet lunch. Sipping tumblers of the delicious local apéritif made with cognac and Schweppes, we admire our trekking companions, who frolic and feed in the corral beneath us. Over lunch with plenty of wine, Margaret tells us about her Llama Aided Activity (LAA) and Llama Aided Therapy (LAT) work. "It's been proved that llamas help physically and mentally disabled people as well as autistic children – they just seem to sense when people have special needs," she enthuses.

Tanned, relaxed and not inconsiderably fitter, I reflect that everybody would benefit from a llama hike.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Les Lamas de Brossac  
 Chez Beléteau  
 16480 Brossac  
 Tel: (Fr) 5 45 98 90 58  
[www.trekking-llamas-france.com/en](http://www.trekking-llamas-france.com/en)

#### Llama trekking in other French regions:

Creuse, Les Fragnes  
[www.llamatrekking.fr/ss](http://www.llamatrekking.fr/ss)  
 Cher, La Petite Barre  
<http://gcfbps.net>  
 Allier, Les Lamas du Tilloux  
[www.lamas-du-tilloux.com](http://www.lamas-du-tilloux.com)



## Fancy exploring the Vercors with man's best friend? **Anna McKittrick** buckles up for a dog walk with a difference

It's a familiar sight to see dog owners walking their four-legged friends through the countryside but you rarely see them harnessed to their pets at the waist and being pulled uphill. So when the tourist office suggested I try cani-rando – walking while strapped to a husky dog – I have to admit I was a little curious. Being pulled along by a dog of any description seems more like a scene from a farcical comedy. But I'm told it's a pleasant way of exploring the outdoors and is excellent exercise, so my friends and I are game to give it a go.

Nowhere is more perfect for experiencing cani-rando than the stunning Parc Naturel Régional du Vercors in the Rhône-Alps, which spans the départements of Drôme and Isère. It offers walkers a range of hikes from gentle hilly ambles to steeper, more adventurous climbs through lush green mountains.

The tranquillity is momentarily shattered as we hear the first faint bark on the approach to Kiska Vercors, the company taking us on our mini-trek. The firm is run by dog-mad Jacques Gaspard and Marie Annick Parazol who have 17 years experience and more than 50 sleigh dogs. Huskies are most in demand for sledging during the winter but rather than making them redundant during the snow-free months the dogs are used for cani-rando and it's clear that they love it.

When we arrive, most of the dogs are snoozing in the shade as they try to escape from the mid-June heat. Their furry coats are definitely more geared toward winter climes but it doesn't take them long to stir and soon they're wagging their tails vying for our affections, desperate to be chosen to come on our cani-rando. We attach the harnesses and clip the long lead to our allocated dogs and we're off.

It's quite a strange sensation at first and I can't help wondering who is taking whom for a walk. The beauty of cani-rando is that the dogs force you to walk quickly and energetically but it feels effortless. The one-hour walk takes us through forests and open spaces with panoramic views, keeping a steady pace throughout thanks to our furry friends.

We arrive back at our starting point and the dogs are panting heavily after the vigorous walk (as are we). As soon as the dogs are free from their harnesses they rush to find a shady spot for an afternoon nap and I have to say I feel just like doing the same. 🐾

#### MORE INFORMATION

Kiska Vercors,  
 Le Souillet  
 26420 Vassieux-en-Vercors  
 Tel: (Fr) 4 75 48 27 16  
[www.kiska-vercors.com](http://www.kiska-vercors.com)

#### Canis-rando in other French regions:

Maison de Montalbert, La Plagne in the Savoie: Tel: (Fr) 4 79 09 77 33  
[www.la-plagne.com](http://www.la-plagne.com)  
 Anim'Nature, Sainte-Sigolène in the Auvergne: Tel: (Fr) 4 71 66 46 87  
[www.anim-nature.com](http://www.anim-nature.com)