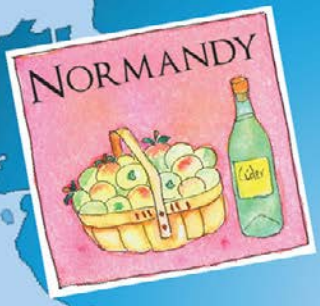
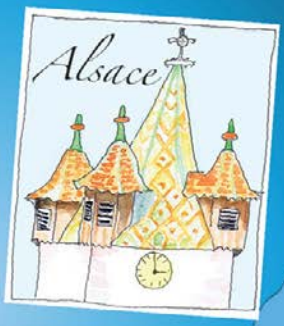
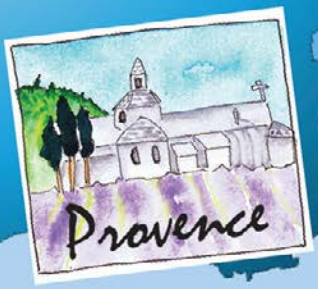
# WALKING THE HEXAGON

## An escape around France on foot








TERRY CUDBIRD

# Contents

# WALKING THE HEXAGON

## An Escape around France On Foot

by

**TERRY CUDBIRD**

To Peter and Muriel, who first taught me to love the hills, and to Lizzie who accompanied me up many of them.

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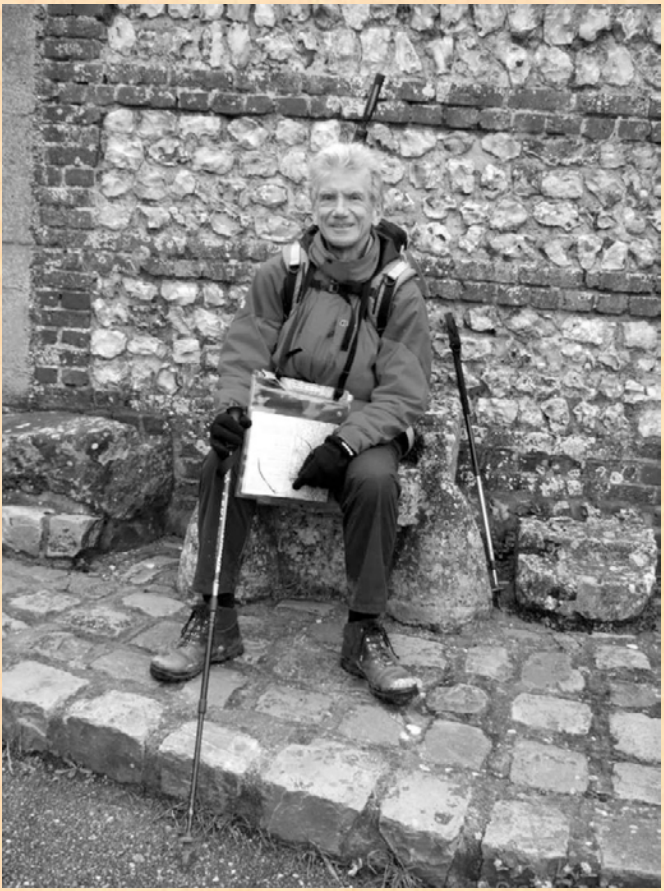
# Introduction: Why Walk?



On a cold November day I was walking down a path of slippery cobbles and rain was falling. A grey sky covered me like a shroud. I was crossing the northern plain not far from Valenciennes in the Nord *département*. Slag heaps dotted the horizon near the large Citroën factory at Hordain. It was a scene reminiscent of Émile Zola's dark nineteenth-century novel *Germinal* about the mining communities of this region. And then suddenly I noticed three

young men rolling towards me in a four by four. They wore hunting clothes and were obviously on their way back from a day's shooting. The driver stopped and lowered his window. "What are you doing?"

"Walking."

"Eh! Where have you walked from?"

"Beaudignies."

An incredulous smile spread across his face. "What nationality are you?" he asked, as if no Frenchman would be walking in the rain across the bleak plain on a cold afternoon in November.

"English."

"Do you do things like this in England?"

"Yes."

His expression suggested that my nationality explained everything. All the English, the French tend to believe, are eccentric.

I received a similar reaction on several occasions during my three hundred-day walk around France. English hikers never look the height of fashion, whereas in France it is important to appear smart even if you are trekking. Well-dressed ladies moved away from me in a tea shop in Brittany, probably because I looked like a bedraggled tramp. In a restaurant near Verdun my down and out appearance provoked pity and a free drink. A café owner in the north thought I was a poor St. Jacques pilgrim who had come in the wrong season. In the Vendée an hotelier politely showed me to the back entrance so as not to shock his diners.

My appearance and my plan to walk around France were not the only factors which struck the French as bizarre. They could not understand why I was walking alone. "The French are too sociable to do that," two ladies once said to me. French maps contain red lines for the Grandes Randonnées stretching hundreds of miles, but few people walk a GR for long distances, except in the Pyrenees, the Alps and in Corsica.

Why do third-agers seek adventures like mine? The crazy idea of walking around the circumference of France started with a conversation beside an Alpine lake just before my retirement. I told my wife Lizzie that I wanted to walk a lot of the Grandes

Randonnées - the 38,000-mile network of long-distance footpaths that cover the French countryside - and write about my experiences. "Why don't you do it now?" she said, "before you become decrepit."


The best sound in the world for me became the clunk-click of the buckles when I put on my rucksack. It meant the freedom to go where I wanted, to dream my own dreams and escape the complications of everyday life. My project quickly became an obsession. I was never as happy as when I was poring over maps, calculating distances and making timetables. Having spent so much time creating detailed plans I had to carry them out. The timetable then took over. When I first mentioned to friends what I had in mind some thought I

was mad. Why wear out your sixty-year-old hips and knees walking around France when you could spend a comfortable retirement doing voluntary work in Oxford and going on cruises? Others were enthusiastic about the idea, looked wistfully at their walking boots and said they would love to join me for a stretch. The itinerary put most of them off when they realised what was involved. "How can you keep plodding along day after day?" was a common reaction. Why not just do the best bits and leave the rest out? I could not compromise. I had said I was going to walk the circumference of France and round I was going to go.

The idea of such a circular journey is nothing new. The tradition of *le compagnonnage*, artisans walking round France in search of opportunities to perfect their skills, was strong in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1877 a little book appeared which became a major publishing success, selling seven million copies by 1914. Augustine Fouillée's *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* described the escape of two imaginary boys from German-occupied Lorraine and their journey around France, rediscovering its towns and villages, its industries, agriculture and historical sites. The famous cycle race, the Tour de France, started in 1903 and ever since has covered large parts of France, sometimes around its periphery. Yet as far as I know I am the only person to have attempted such a long circular tour on foot.

The French sometimes refer to their country as a hexagon, most frequently in the weather forecast. If you look at France on a map it has a six-sided symmetry, albeit with many lumps and bumps. My walk followed the shape of this hexagon more or less, hence the title (apologies to Corsica). I did, however, allow myself a bit of licence. For example, I did not complete the Pyrenean trail (GR10), preferring to visit the Cathar country in the east and the Béarn in the west. I stuck to the mountains behind the Mediterranean coastal resorts. I left the Alpine trail (GR5) at Briançon to take in the Écrins, Grenoble and the Chartreuse. I followed the crests of the Vosges rather than walk along the Rhine.

I completed my walk in a number of stages of around a month's duration. After each one I returned home for a rest and then resumed where I left off. Family demands prevented me completing my project as quickly as I would have liked. I covered half the total distance of 4,000 miles in one year and finished the remainder over the following two. My wife Lizzie accompanied me forty per cent of the way and friends joined us for a few days from time to time.

I wanted to have plenty of chances to talk to French people. This I certainly managed to do. I spent at least three hundred days in France and the French I met came from every walk of life. I prefer hostels, refuges and guest houses where you eat with other walkers and can chat far into the night. I made a lot of French friends whom I have visited since I finished my walk. There are advantages to walking alone. I notice things around me more when I am not talking to a companion. I walk at my own pace and stop whenever I want. I talk to more strangers when I do not have ready-made company.

I have a secret desire to adopt a different identity in middle age, like a new suit of clothes. When I speak French, I somehow take on a different personality: less inhibited, more expressive, less pragmatic. I am sloughing off my old skin and it is that sense of escape which is liberating. If I had spent some of my youth studying German, Spanish or Chinese, I might have disappeared to those countries instead. It is not France itself which is important, but rather the personal transformation brought about by immersion in a non-Anglo-Saxon culture.

I wanted to test myself physically and mentally as well. I covered four thousand miles and climbed one hundred thousand feet. Out of just under a year spent walking I was alone for six months. Gradually I found that walking long distances is a mechanical business. You quickly slip into a routine. Pack your rucksack in the morning, have breakfast, buy a snack for lunch, stride along for six hours, unpack your things in the evening, wash your clothes, have a glass or two of wine and a good meal. Life is stripped down to the essentials. You carry as few possessions as possible, you eat and sleep and leave the

complications of modern life behind. There is no doubt walking is good for mental health. Recent research has confirmed this. If I want to think over a problem a good walk alone usually helps.

There is no doubt either that the regular rhythm of walking can induce a trance-like state of peace and contentment. Perhaps it is akin to repeating a Buddhist mantra or the Jesus prayer used by the holy fools who wandered across Russia. Very often you need a tune in your head to keep the rhythm going; something with a regular beat which is easy to hum. My own secret weapon in the battle to remain sane was to talk to myself; or at least to muse about my experiences into a voice recorder. Two machines were always zipped into my side pocket. I must have downloaded over one hundred hours of ramblings onto my PC at home.

Long distance walking also has its disadvantages - guard dogs, snorers, rain, heat, intense cold, man-eating insects, paths on the map which no longer exist, blisters, exhausted limbs, aching muscles, lack of water and a rucksack which is too heavy. Why is it I always carry things I don't need? Several times I had to go to the post office to send unwanted items home.

Perhaps the greatest attraction of walking long distances is that you are constantly exposed to the unexpected. However much you study the maps, the landscape is full of surprises and never quite as you imagined it. Nothing could have prepared me for the soaring limestone pinnacles and crumbling chasms of the Chartreuse, the airy elevation of the Vosges above the busy world of the Rhine valley, the shifting light of sea and sky on the Somme estuary. If I had not walked I would never have found the old irrigation channels circling the heights of the Tinée valley or glimpsed the studded masses of primroses and violets in the shady banks of a green lane in Brittany.

Some readers might expect a book packed with heroic incidents and exotic adventures, in which case they may find my story disappointing. I am not a super-fit professional explorer trying to join the ranks of those who have crossed vast stretches of impossible terrain in record time. I did not fall off a cliff, join a hippy commune or walk from one hilarious incident to another. My adventure was

lower-key than some but it was an adventure nevertheless. I proved that a sixty-year-old can still reinvent himself and have fun, without travelling to the ends of the earth and adding to global warming. If I excite other people to walk through France I will be more than satisfied.

Bridge and chasm, the Alps

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Robert Louis Stevenson is one of my heroes. I fell in love with walking in France partly because of him. His acute powers of observation and his language turned a mundane walk into something magical. He also wove the history of his Protestant co-religionists into his story. This added to his appeal in my eyes, especially as I see myself as a historian *manqué*. I was always passionate about the subject, but never good enough to make the grade as an academic. Nor in truth was I suited to a life sitting in libraries and archives, consulting dusty books and old manuscripts. I do not quite know why I turned out

this way. My interest in the subject predated school and university. I have embarrassing memories of being asked to do a party piece when I was eight, reciting the dates of the Kings and Queens of England. A family friend used to visit regularly in an outsize Chevrolet with an enormous chow on the back seat. But next to the dog was a pile of books for me, second-hand from Harrod's Library. I remember C. V. Wedgwood's *The King's Peace* and *The King's War*, and Churchill's *English Speaking Peoples*. I was a bookish child, ragged mercilessly at school for being overweight and incapable of jumping over a horse in the gym.

March 1971 found me living in a flat in the Marais district of Paris and doing research in various historical archives. One of the key figures I studied was the Emperor Napoleon III. If you mentioned him to the French they usually laughed, as he ended his career a prisoner of the Germans after the catastrophic defeat at Sedan in 1870. If you used his name in Britain the normal response was Napoleon who? I had tracked down some of his letters in the hands of a ninety-year-old lady living in the middle of France, not far from Roanne in the Haute Loire. A letter in spidery handwriting arrived inviting me to come and see her. Château de la Grye was a modest eighteenth-century manor in the village of Ambierle. Guinea fowl strutted on the terrace outside the salon windows. I climbed the grand staircase past a formal portrait of the Emperor to see *madame* in her four-poster bed. She asked her servant to fetch a metal box and give me the contents, several bundles of letters in the Emperor's hand tied up with ribbon. I spent the next ten days by a log fire deciphering his correspondence and gazing across the overgrown garden at the hills in the distance. The local inn provided a room, five-course lunches and dinners for twenty eight francs a day (four pounds). On Sunday afternoon another lady in the village showed me the fifteenth-century folding altar painting in the parish church. The charm of rural France started to exert its magic. Madame Duchon d'Espagny talked to me about her life and introduced me to some of her friends. I made an effort to string a few sentences together in French and was embarrassed at the results.

After four years struggling with a PhD on French history I escaped into the bracing fresh air of commercial life and never looked back. But history has always been the lens through which I have looked at the world. If you want to understand a person, or a country, then you had better know something about their past. I realised the truth of this once again as I walked around France. Geology affects landscape which in turn shapes agriculture, commerce, industry and communications. These factors have a major impact on language, religious belief and culture. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to a seminal work on the English landscape while I was still at school; W. G. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape*. Hoskins concluded his book with the view from the window of his North Oxfordshire house: "Not every small view in England is so full of detail as this, upon the oolite of north Oxfordshire, for this was a rich and favoured countryside that was beloved of owners of Roman villas, even in places of Bronze Age men. The cultural humus of sixty generations or more lies upon it. But most of England is a thousand years old, and in a walk of a few miles one would touch nearly every century in that long stretch of time."

This reflection could equally well apply to France. The linkage of landscape and history has worked out differently in each region, producing variety which never ceases to astonish. As I walked around I uncovered the cultural humus with my eyes.

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Another reason for walking around the periphery of France was to see the regions which differ most from each other. I saw many regional symbols, the Basque cross and flag, the Savoyard and Breton flags, and wondered what they meant in reality. How much genuine attachment to a region is there in the France of the early twenty-first century?

To the walker the distinctiveness of the regions is apparent in a number of ways: styles of architecture both religious and secular; regional cuisine; regional languages. I heard a number of the latter

as I walked around: Alsatian in Alsace, Breton to the west of St.-Brieuc, Occitan and Provençal in the south, Basque in the Basque Country. The number of people who speak them every day as a first language is in decline and they have no official status in France, unlike Welsh in Wales. French remains the only official language of the Republic, while UNESCO classifies Breton as a language in danger of becoming extinct. Even so, it is now possible to learn these regional languages in public schools if enough parents demand it. As I travelled around I also heard regional variations of standard French, both in accent and vocabulary. These are the remains of the thousands of local dialects or patois spoken all over France in the nineteenth century and before.

Linguistic complexity in the French Basque Country

I also encountered regional customs and folklore. Some regions have different political and religious traditions which reach far back into France's history. Alsace-Lorraine, the frontier country, has always voted to the right. Political support for the parties is far from evenly spread across France, even today. The same would be true of regular attendance at mass. Some regions near the frontier and far from Paris betray the influence of a neighbouring country. There are similarities between the Swiss and the French Juras, Baden-Württemberg and Alsace, the Spanish and French Basque provinces. Some of the regions near the frontiers were the last to be integrated into the old French kingdom and the differences from the rest of France still show: Alsace (1648-1918-1945); the Franche-Comté or the Jura (1678); the Pays de Montbéliard (1792); Lorraine (1765); the County of Nice (1860), Savoy (1860).

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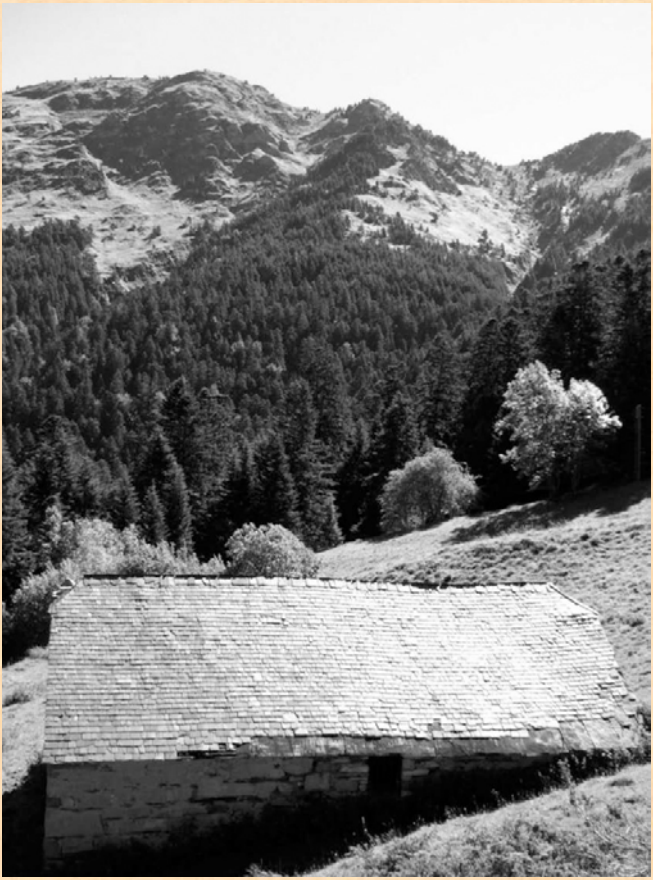
There is a very different thread running through my story which might strike a chord with many in early retirement or of my generation; the challenge of caring for and coping with ageing parents. I am an only child and my parents are divorced and on their own. Both of them started to develop dementia while I was away. Difficult phone calls punctuated my journey and I had to rush home to deal with crises. These domestic storms are a counterpoint to the slowly unfolding panoramas of the French countryside. They explain the sub-title of this book: an escape around France on foot.

# 1. The Pyrenees

## The Start of an Adventure



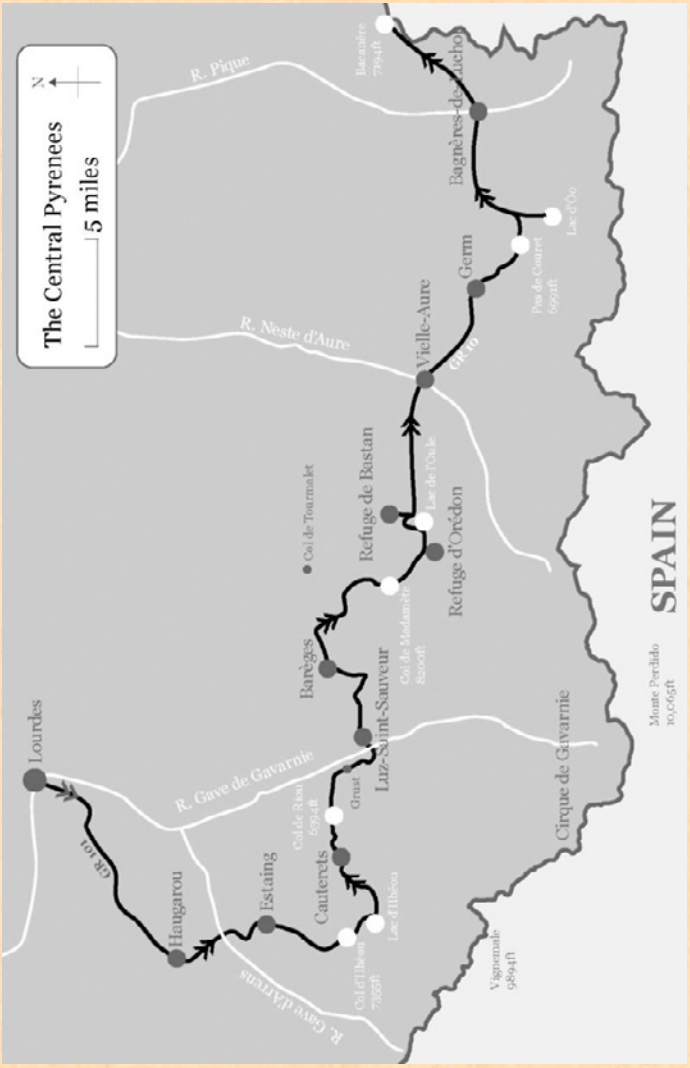
I felt I was skiing like a dream; carving perfect turns through the soft snow and keeping up with younger and stronger men. It was the last run before lunch and I stood at the top of the Swiss Wall. The drop below my skis looked vertical. Some of the moguls were the size of a small car. My legs shook and I wished there was a way

out. But I could not desert the group. I was determined to succeed, so I launched myself over the edge. It might have been a fatal error of judgement. At the third mogul I sought security in an awkward plough turn. Hopelessly off balance I dived head first down the mountain. I lost my skis and tried to brake by using my poles, but to no avail. I knew I would keep tumbling until the slope levelled out seven hundred feet down. I prayed that I could avoid the rocks and pylons, but I was out of control.

When I came to rest my right leg would not move and my knee was the size of a football. I spent the rest of the holiday resting on a couch with a bag of frozen peas strapped around the swelling. Later a surgeon told me I had ruptured a ligament in my knee; the anterior cruciate to be technical. A sadistic physio said, "listen to Mr. Cudbird's sound effects" as he bent my leg double and I yelled with pain. After an operation I spent six months in a gym with footballers and hockey players, running round bollards and balancing on wobble boards. It was a miracle of medical science. I could still do everything I used to do with only the occasional twinge of pain. Never a natural sportsman, I had gambled and lost. So I thought I would try a long hike instead, 4,000 miles to be exact; gruelling but unlikely to scare me to death. And here I was in the Pyrenees. Was I flying too close to the sun again?

Edwardian travellers in the Pyrenees came face to face with grizzly bears and packs of wolves. I passed one roadside chapel, "built in memory of an ancestor who had his throat ripped out by wolves". On my first day in the mountains another formidable adversary struck, swarms of man-eating flies: large spotted ones which bit hard and feasted on my blood until they were removed by force. I remembered Hilaire Belloc's line about "the fleas that tease in the Pyrenees". The valley was full of orchids and dog roses and the sky overcast, ideal conditions for these predators to multiply. A dead world of cloud enveloped me, echoing with the bells of invisible cattle. Just in time I saw the drop from a limestone ridge. As I wriggled down a chimney in the rock panic overtook. There seemed to be no way forward in the swirling mist. I tried several paths

which turned out to be sheep tracks leading nowhere. I knew I was becoming quite irrational, for after all I had a map, a compass and a GPS. Yet somehow a spider's web of fear, like a childish nightmare, held me in its grasp. Suddenly I woke up to a wall of pine trees on a distant slope. The mist lifted from a remote valley. I was glad to reach the hostel at 6.30 p.m.



This dark cabin provided shelter but did not raise the spirits. Josette lived here on her own and enjoyed the quiet life. She had a rough red face, unkempt hair and obviously felt comfortable in baggy trousers. A woman of few words, she let slip that she had arrived in the Pyrenees from Normandy eighteen years ago. "I've always loved walking in the mountains. Here we're nine miles from the nearest village. My sister visits in August to help with the business. Friends drop in occasionally."

Then she confessed that she had lost heart. "Walkers come in July and August but the winter trade is important. There hasn't been enough snow recently. Business is right down. I'm trying to sell the property."

I felt ravenous after a hard day. "I can offer you sausages and lentils for supper," she said. The steaming plate arrived: one sausage. At least the lentils were plural.

Next morning a comfortable valley came into view with snow-flecked peaks in the distance. I picked out sights and sounds repeated throughout the Pyrenees: large barns built of black, grey and sandy coloured stones with steep sloping roofs; a collie marshalling sheep across the pastures; the rustling of mountain streams rushing down hill. The next hostel was certainly out of the ordinary. I hammered on the door, but there was no one about. Eventually a couple turned up from Lyon to start their holiday and *madame* revealed that she was the sister of the owner. I had a small dormitory to myself, but the room was thick with farmyard dirt and the blankets smelt stale and unwashed. Outside flies hovered around the metal cover of a cesspit, which made me hold my nose. This seemed like a place where anything could happen, a set for the theatre of the absurd. A silver trout jumped out of a tank and flapped around the drive, until my acquaintance from Lyon rescued it. A shepherd ignored me when I asked if he was Serge, the owner. A young girl popped her head around the corner and promptly disappeared again. A moustachioed Frenchman drove up in a van and demanded to speak to Serge. *Désolé*, I said, and he shrugged his shoulders. I was beginning to think that Serge was a figment of the telephone book's

imagination. When two men sauntered along I took no notice. One of them stared hard at me and I guessed that he might be the owner. The opening conversation was not promising.

"Are you Serge?"

"Yes."

I went to shake his hand and he seemed surprised.

"What time will you serve dinner?"

"We don't serve dinner," he said with a blank expression on his face.

At my evident look of alarm his companion laughed loudly. "Serge enjoys a joke at everyone's expense."

It appeared that Serge was running the *gîte* alone and he would be doing the cooking.

Outside the front door I met an endearing black and white fox terrier called Kali, who was in the habit of following walkers. After breakfast I made a fuss of him and, when the time came to leave, he followed me down the road. The surface of the Lac d'Estaing was calm and peaceful. I turned left to start climbing a dank path through a forest, with Kali still following on behind. Every time I threw a stone towards him he ducked behind a tree and then re-appeared five minutes later.

The ascent of 2,600 feet to the Col d'Ilhéou was the first real test of my fitness. At school I was the fattest boy in the class and came last in every known running race. In middle age I discovered exercise and so now I had a point to prove. The climb took three hours and I could hear my heart pumping faster as I laboured up the slope. A scooped out glacial valley tumbled away behind me with protecting flanks of rocks and scree. Hawks circled emitting piercing shrieks. A few patches of snow covered the col and these caused Kali a good deal of excitement. He threw himself into them with great gusto, squirming around on his back and kicking his paws in the air.

Naively I assumed that Kali would now descend on his own back to Estaing. No such idea, however, had entered his head. He was in this walk for the long haul. He started chasing some sheep and only the severest tone in my voice, in French of course, could summon

him back. When I reached Cauterets at last, Kali refused to come any further. He resisted all attempts to grab hold of him and wandered off inside a dress shop sniffing around the racks. Once outside again he flopped down with exhaustion. I phoned Serge and an hour later Kali's owners arrived in a car from the other side of the mountain. After our eight-hour trek together I decided a fox terrier might be the perfect walking companion.

The Beau Soleil *gîte* in Cauterets is one of those stopping places where everyone on the Pyrenean trail meets to swap experiences. A tall house with several floors, it has been in the hands of Jean-Pierre's family for many years. His smiling face and helpful manner ensured that all the guests felt at home and mixed easily.

"My roots are deep," he said. "I do not have an old parchment to prove I own this building."

Jean-Pierre's maternal grandfather came from a village in the Ordesa, just the other side of the frontier. He escaped from Spain at the end of the Civil War, like a lot of his compatriots.

**Jacques and His Saucepans**

Cauterets was also memorable because it was here that I met Jacques. He stepped softly into the dormitory and I turned round to meet the warm blue eyes of a gentle giant. "Will I be disturbing you?" he asked considerately.

His round face was very mobile and, when animated, the expression in his eyes changed rapidly from laughter to concern. Conversation came easily and he was very tolerant of my mistakes in his language. "I started at Arrens-Marsous and intend to follow the Pyrenean trail all the way to the Mediterranean," he said.

He was carrying everything he might need for the wilder stretches, including a tent and a cooking stove. Different items hung from his huge rucksack. "I need to buy some crampons," he continued. "I have just fallen six hundred feet in the snow."

I wondered where he would find a strap for them.

Jacques was a clinical psychologist from Paris. What he liked best was to travel without sticking to a timetable. "When Sylvie and I

retire," he said, "we might give up on Paris and live in Bordeaux, a city of culture near the sea and the mountains. Provincial cities have so much more to offer now."

"I love technology," he exclaimed and pulled an iPod out of his sack with two miniature speakers. He had downloaded his favourite audio books, including a liberal dose of modern French philosophy.

There was a mixed cast of diners during the two evenings I stayed at the Beau Soleil and all of them had an adventurous spirit. As on many other occasions we seemed to concentrate on the French view of themselves and their place in the world. How much should we worry about Chinese competition? Why aren't we better at languages and more in the same vein? Inevitably we discussed Nicolas Sarkozy, the recently elected President of France. I knew that Jacques was not sympathetic, so I asked what he thought of Sarko.

"He is the garden gnome," was the reply, which produced gales of laughter.

Grust is a village on the edge of a deep valley with wide views of the mountains. Everywhere there are stone walls, wooden roofs and old barns. Some locals were making hay in the small fields, using hand rakes and scythes. Flowers exploded from small gardens and a stream ran singing down the main street in a stone conduit. My bed in the inn had a mattress with its own mountains and valleys. I last slept on one like this in Alençon in the 1970s. *Madame* served home cured ham and *garbure*, the vegetable soup typical of the region. She had been born in Australia and had started school there. "It's a shame the family put pressure on my parents to return home. I could have been happy in Australia. I had French friends out there who felt the same."

Luz-St.-Sauveur has a fortified church and elegant old houses with sculptured doorways hide behind iron gates. The castle stands just outside the town in the middle of hay meadows. A sign warns vandals that they will be prosecuted if caught. Only a French local authority could have written such a moral denunciation of mindless damage; it began: "vandalism is the most typical expression of immorality and stupidity!" The lady on the front desk of my hotel

had bags under her eyes and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. When I asked for a bill she rummaged among piles of paper and referred to a notebook where various items had been scribbled down. She then made out a handwritten note, which amazingly was accurate, but clearly the accounting system, like the décor, had not moved with the times. The *patron* told us that the race for amateurs over one stage of the Tour de France was due to pass through Luz shortly. Several thousand cyclists would be covering 106 miles including climbing the Col de Tourmalet at 6,939 feet. As I stood on a corner waiting for the competitors I was surprised and pleased to see Jacques walking into town. A few miserable cyclists came past in the rain and we sought shelter in a café while the worst of the weather passed.

The English and French find different things amusing, we both agreed. Jacques understood the English sense of humour very well and was a fan of the Goons and Monty Python. "I have now reached the age when I have to choose between sex and walking. I cannot indulge in both," he told me. He was whimsical on the subject of divorce. "Ladies with broken hearts can be very tedious. You find a lot of them in walking clubs. They carry their baggage with them." The expression he used was *traîner des casseroles*, literally dragging heavy saucepans around. It was evocative, I thought, the image of people walking through life with the sound of their pots and pans clattering behind them: things from their past they would rather forget, maybe that they were ashamed of or found embarrassing. We have a similar but less colourful expression in English when we describe someone as carrying baggage. This might seem an irrelevant piece of lexicography but it has a lot to do with why I embarked on a walk around France. I had some personal baggage which I hoped to escape by taking to the road.

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In the Pyrenees I recalled the elation of wandering in the hills for the first time. My parents took me for walks along the Devon coast

when I was ten years old: red cliffs, deep combes or valleys hidden from the outside world, yellow gorse, my father striding ahead in green linen shorts oblivious to my mother and me behind. Inevitably my thoughts wandered to the breakdown of my parents' marriage. The three of us were a close knit nuclear family, or so I thought. It was therefore a shock to come home one day and find my mother sobbing in the kitchen. Looking out on our rectilinear suburban garden she tried to explain why she was having an affair with a married man from the church tennis club and could not live with my father any longer. It sounds banal and today it is such a common experience it hardly passes notice. In the less open world of a post-war middle-class community, where women were the homemakers and sermons in the Methodist chapel lasted forty minutes, it was almost an earthquake.

My father could not understand what the problem was. He was always kind and considerate but unaware of other people's emotions. It transpired that my parents had not been close for years and my mother, a highly emotional and needy person, cracked under the strain. While I was at university all this started to become clear. I have been living with divided loyalties ever since.

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**No Need for Crampons**

Barèges is trapped in a narrow defile and as we crossed the bridge it was shrouded in mist. I had heard that there might be bad weather in the mountains the next day, even snow on the Col de Madamète at 8,200 feet. I phoned the mountain *gendarmerie*, who told me there would be six feet of snow. I needed crampons. Not being an experienced Alpinist I wondered whether this was all a bit beyond me, but Jacques was more philosophical. Although he had the air of an amateur, I was beginning to realise how intrepid he was. The Gîte l'Oasis was another tall building in a side street, with wooden floors and panelling scuffed by thousands of walkers. There was a crowd in that night enjoying the roaring log fire. The owner Philippe, an

experienced mountain guide, laughed loudly when I relayed the gendarmes' advice. "You will have no trouble crossing the col. The gendarmes don't know what they are talking about," he said.

Others concurred and later that evening a Breton offered a bet. "If you meet any snow I will give you a case of champagne! I crossed the col today and it was clear."

I am not naturally brave but I felt I had no option but to go for it.


Col de Madamète

I lost sight of Jacques as I approached a long glacial valley shrouded in mist. After a chaos of rocks at the side of a waterfall, I reached a soft mountain pasture. This pattern of rocky lips followed by small meadows repeated itself until I scrambled over a moraine to a much larger Alpine prairie. I had emerged from the cloud to see a sky of pale lapis lazuli framing the peaks. To the right the route crossed a series of rocky barriers. Each of these moraines dammed a lake, which was a perfect mirror of sky, pastures and rocks. The pale blue trumpets of gentians pushed up through tufts of rough grass in

clusters. Snow had collected in the hollows and I had to step over a few patches with care. It was a pity I had not taken up the bet with the Breton. Scarves of ice covered the glassy surface of the last lake before the Col de Madamète. Suddenly there I was on the rocky base of a scree-lined funnel through the ridge. I could see three large lakes in the next valley, but no sign of Jacques.

The chalet hotel on the Lac d'Orédon was crowded and impersonal. I had almost finished my meal, when an exhausted looking Jacques staggered through the door. He claimed that he was not tired, but I did not believe him and instantly supplied a reviving carafe of red wine. Jacques never gave up, being resolutely *têtu* or stubborn. He confessed that he had got lost, fallen over and ripped his trousers and only reached the col at 5p.m. It then took him a further three hours to get down, making a walk of eleven hours in total. Even so, he was still as cheerful as ever. "Don't worry, I am still alive!" he exclaimed.

The Refuge de Bastan was perched on a moraine dividing two lakes. Cedric, a tall young man with his hair swept back in a ponytail, swung baby Noë on his knee while Stéphanie, pretty and petite, cooked supper for thirty-five guests in a kitchen no larger than a postage stamp. This small family lived in a hut up the hill with a donkey and a pig for company. The donkey carried supplies from below and the pig's job was to eat scraps so that nothing was wasted. Guests were expected to take their refuse away with them. The shower perched precariously on a pallet suspended over some rocks. A solar panel heated the water and we were asked not to use soap. "Heated" is perhaps an exaggeration, as I found out when I took the plunge at 6 a.m. the following morning and endured something like an electric shock. A shack concealed the long-drop loo. One external tap served for all other ablutions.

Inside the accommodation was not for those worried about their agility. To reach my bunk I had to climb a vertical plank with holes for hands and feet, which reminded me of humiliation in the school gym. There was no room for privacy. Fifteen of us dossed down in the small attic room and I played involuntary footsie all night with

two French ladies. Those who had not booked, like Jacques, had to make do with a skimpy sleeping mat on the dining room floor. There was also a school party staying at the refuge. The girls slept on the bottom level of my room and the boys in a tent outside.

The dinner was a marvel, considering the conditions under which it was produced. *Confit de canard* was perhaps predictable, but after two days in the high mountains I would have eaten anything. I sat next to two men on holiday from Toulouse, one a Professor of Economics and one an aeronautical engineer. The economist said, "I do not know how the English economy survives. You do not make anything. All you do is pass pieces of paper around. How you have become so rich I cannot imagine."

I started to mount a defence but was cut off in mid-flow. "My sister in England lives off the rents from her properties," he added with a sneer of disapproval. I suspected he was an old-style French socialist.

After dinner I sat by the lakes. A gamelan of sheep's bells echoed off the rocks to the accompaniment of rushing water. Clouds covered the mountains in Spain, while the last rays of the sun disappeared in the west. Everything was utterly still. Perfect quiet still reigned when I got outside early in the morning, broken only by the pig honking at me in greeting. There was not a ripple on the surface of the lake and the sun was just beginning to creep down the far side of the valley. I traversed the ski bowl to a col, where a large group of walkers had huge sacks strapped to their rucksacks. This was the relief party for the Refuge de Bastan. Stéphanie was cooking for fifty-seven tonight!

The next lake had an extraordinary name, the Lac d'Ôo. This is probably a corruption of the Gascon word *iu* or *eu* meaning high mountain lake and therefore Lac d'Ôo means Lake Lake. The barrage towered above me with a gaunt refuge at one end, like a prison shut off from the world. I could just see water lapping the shore but very little of the steep sides and the cascade at the far end. Dense cloud muffled every sound, making the atmosphere closed and mysterious. Just before I was due to eat, an English couple

arrived. Anna was one of the thinnest women I have ever seen in the West, probably anorexic, with bony legs, protruding hip bones and an emaciated angular face. She admitted she had been feeling unwell. At dinner I discovered why. She munched a few vegetables; not enough calories to keep her going in the mountains. Despite her appearance she was a bundle of energy who never gave up. She did not speak much French, but was quite prepared to have a go in her English accent.

"I knew nothing much about the Pyrenean trail," she said," but I wanted to try it so I went to Stanfords in London, bought a map and here I am. We cover at least twenty miles a day and one day we walked for eleven hours."

I asked her which had been the most difficult sections.

"We left out the Chemin de la Mature (a notorious path on the edge of a death drop with no protection) but we did the Hourquette d'Arre. I would not want to climb it in a gale." she added. "You would be blown into oblivion."

Anna did all the talking and Dennis followed her like a faithful Labrador. I asked him what he did. "I'm a librarian!" he explained.

**A Taste of the Wild**

Under a blue sky the Pyrenees can seem like the gentlest mountains in the world. A typical Pyrenean ascent has four stages: the meadows of the valley floors; the woods above them; a band of pastures and barns with scattered trees; and then at the top level sparse vegetation, rocks and scree, the true *haute montagne*. The highest peaks are more accessible than in the Alps, the contours of the mountains seem softer and the tree cover is denser lower down. Rainfall is higher than average for France and thunderstorms are not uncommon. The resulting moisture supports a wide variety of plants. On one occasion I came across a large meadow by a *cabane* and every sort of wild flower imaginable. Particularly noticeable were the great yellow gentians six feet high, with their large leaves and clusters of flowers. Suddenly a plump bottom protruded from the long grass next to a more slender one. They belonged to a French couple, botanists

who had come up from the valley to photograph the flowers on this particular prairie. With their special lenses they were getting close up to the blooms, their large floppy hats making them look like intrepid nineteenth-century explorers. "This is a well-known spot for wild flowers. In fact it's like a botanical garden for the High Pyrenees. There are so many varieties here," they said.

Yet walkers should treat these approachable mountains with respect. I heard several tales of lone travellers freezing to death in April and late September, trapped by injury, bad weather and unexpected snow. Living on these slopes was tough in the past. The local museums are full of the little comforts which made life tolerable, from bed-warmers to roasting-spits designed for a dog to turn. They emphasise how hostile it could be outside, all alone in a portable shepherd's hut high up on the pastures. The piled-up stones of cottage walls recall backbreaking labour to find shelter from the climate. Balancing on the stepped gables to repair the roof required a head for heights.

Bears, wolves and lynx roamed the mountains until forty years ago. I told a refuge *gardien* about some unusual paw prints in the mud, definitely those of a big cat. "I have a friend who saw a wild lynx a year or so ago," she said.

She also told us about the bears which have been reintroduced into the French Pyrenees from Slovenia. My chances of coming face to face with a grizzly seemed remote, as each one needs a very large territory to survive. However, my host in Moncaup in the Ariège told me, "One walker came face to face with a bear outside his tent. He phoned the fire brigade. We had to respond! The sheep farmers object strongly to these bears. Hunters have killed them when they feel threatened by the female with her cubs."

It was the British who pioneered Alpinism in this region in the nineteenth century. The legendary Baron Russell still lives in the memory of many French who climb here. One said with a typically French flourish, "You are one of Baron Russell's countrymen. There is a cabin reserved for you."

Henry Russell owned a cave, where he held candlelit dinners for his friends. The British also patronised spa towns like Cauterets and Bagnères-de Luchon, where I rested after long days of effort. At the former I was pummelled by a rush of hot sulphurous water in the *thermes*, looking out at the wooded slopes of the narrow valley. In the past high society came to Pyrenean spa towns like Cauterets to be seen as well as to take a cure. The atmosphere now is altogether more clinical and quite a few people enjoy cures courtesy of the French national health service. While Cauterets is still a popular holiday centre for skiing and exploring the mountains, it does not have the prestige of a former age, when writers, aristocrats and crowned heads were frequent visitors.

Most of the buildings in Cauterets date from the late nineteenth century. To get a feel for the Belle Époque I visited the old Hôtel d'Angleterre, with its four-storey façade of tall windows decorated with marble and wrought-iron balconies. George V of England patronised the Angleterre, where you can still see the dining room of his day and admire the clothes worn by well-dressed ladies and gentlemen: crinolines, ball gowns, top hats. The hotel was closed in the 1950s and turned into flats.

Bagnères-de-Luchon is another spa town whose splendour has faded. The Allées d'Étigny, which run in a straight line to the baths, are now full of cheap souvenir shops spilling out onto on the pavement. The casino looks like a rundown picture house with its crumbling red and cream bricks, busts of ancient worthies and stained glass windows. Yet there are sill hints of what Bagnères must once have been: the parterres of the formal gardens; the turreted villa where Edmond Rostand, the author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, spent his youth; the imposing façade of the Hotel Majestic; the *mairie* with its grand stairs. Green hills and the snow-capped peaks of the Maladeta massif form an impressive backdrop.

Rostand was not the only well-known writer to come here. François Mauriac captured the atmosphere of Bagnères in the late nineteenth century in his 1932 novel *The Knot of Vipers*:

> I was at Luchon with my mother in 1883. The hotel Sacarron of that time was full of upholstered furniture, of pouffes and stuffed chamois. After so many years I can still smell the scent of the lime trees in the Allées d'Étigny. Each morning the trotting of the donkeys awakened me, the tinkling of their harnesses and the cracking of whips. The water of the mountains rushed into the streets. Sellers of croissants and milk loaves cried their wares. Guides went by on horse back and I watched their cavalcades.

From a peak at 6,234 feet near Bagnères Jacques and I had a clear view north onto the plain and west to the Pic du Midi, with its distinctive observatory, and Vignemale, a snowy hummock of black granite. All around us was rocky moorland, grazing country covered with heather. The track swung right up a slope and suddenly we were astride the Spanish border. Frontier stones marked the top of a ridge. Two giant vultures hovered over us, searching for prey. The tips of their massive wings were turned towards the heavens as they glided smoothly in perfect circles.

We charged along without a care in the world. The Pyrenees stretched out before us in perfect visibility. The Ariège hills in the east had been moulded into deep narrow valleys. After lunch I climbed up to a knife-edge summit and then down a trying descent over rough ground. I was ahead of Jacques but decided to wait for him at some cabins, as this would be our last opportunity to say good-bye before we went our separate ways. I planned to leave the Pyrenean trail shortly and take a forest road to St-Béat on the Garonne before traversing the hills of the Ariège to Foix. Jacques wanted to see how far he could get on the Pyrenean trail, so he needed to head further south. He came down the hill slowly, nursing his painful feet. I knew I would miss his warmth and sense of humour. He seemed to me not entirely French in his eccentricity. He loved to burst into song and was always easy going and optimistic. We had said good-bye a number of times before, knowing we would meet up again, but this was for real. There is a special bond between people who have shared