

Summer 2010

Di and Peter Scott

welcome you

to

La Borie d'Estaules

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About the Longère:

Electricity and if there isn't any. A disjoncteur, which is found in all French homes, protects against overloading and surges caused by lightning. So **if the electricity goes off** and the disjoncteur switch (in the cupboard by the front door) is DOWN, put it back up and all should be light.

During a **thunderstorm**, you are strongly advised to unplug any electronic equipment you may have, such as laptop computers, radios, rechargeable razors, etc.. Storms can be violent (they're also well worth watching) and **lightning** causes power surges ("spikes" or "transients") as transmission lines are long and above ground, unlike in urban areas not prone to summer storms.

Fuses are the modern automatic trip type. Spare **light bulbs** are usually under the sink. A **torch** is by the front door.

There is 250 litres of **hot water**, electrically heated 24 hours a day, which should mean it is constantly available.

The **wood burner** is regulated by the air inlet in the door, and the number of logs you put in. Logs and kindling are in the woodshed. Please put ash in the bin, not on the garden as the soil's not short of potash & it makes an awful mess! Remember that fires burn people and houses and are not compatible with children. Keep the door closed if you are not beside it & make sure it is safe before you go to bed. You have a fire entirely at your own risk.

Cooker: light burners and grill (top of oven) with the gas lighter or a match. To light the oven, set at 1, then put a match in the hole at the bottom, front, centre.

The **washing machine** is a top loader. Remember to close the inner door carefully before pressing "go" or it will self-destruct. There is a long **clothes line** through the double white gates.

Leave bags of **rubbish** in the green wheely bin up the lane. Recycling - see next page.

Water, from a spring belonging to the commune, is tested twice yearly and good to drink.

If the **shower tray** is slow to empty, it may be due to hair, even though it's cleaned every changeover. Lift the chrome cover with your finger-nails to clear it, or ask us to do it for you.

Explore our **field** behind the house which is home to more than a hundred species of plants.

The **sun umbrella** is kept in the garage; you will find a **barbecue** with tools in the woodshed. Please put ash from the barbecue in the bin, never on the garden as the soil's not short of potash & it makes such a mess!

Your **phone** number is 04 7178 6916. Use the phone as if you were staying with friends. All normal calls are "on the house" - & see page 7.

If something won't do what you want it to, *please* tell us.

Shopping and needs:

In CONDAT (* open Sunday morning, closed Monday)

Post Office, at first sharp bend; last mail collection at 3.30 p.m. weekdays, 11.30 a.m. on Saturday

Bank, Crédit Agricole, below Post Office, open Tuesday to Saturday. Cash dispenser.

Bakeries. See Bakery Note page 5. We use the lower one, open on a Monday. *

Recycling point on Riom road at the 2nd bridge. Also some containers near the 1st bridge.

“Casino” for groceries/fruit, fresh milk (sometimes), on main street, closed Mondays. *

“Shopi”, a small supermarket off main street on right. Closed Sunday except sometimes in July and August. Open on Mondays. Butchery section and sells plain bread.

Chemist (*pharmacie*, green cross), main street on right.

Dentist, Dr. Simon, from the roundabout head for Bort, his is the small, modern building on the left, after the school. A model of courtesy & competence, his surgery is well equipped.

Doctors: Condat – none at present (September 2009)

Marcenat, Dr. Delcorde 04 7178 8383 / Egliseneuve Dr Brunie 04 7371 9043

Riom-ès-Montagnes, group practice at 24, rue Alfred Durand. Phone 04 7178 0014

Riom surgery times: mornings, just turn up. Afternoons, by appointment only.

Church Sunday services: Egliseneuve 11 a.m., Riom 10 a.m., Condat 6 p.m. (Correct June 2009).

Churchgoers of all denominations prefer Egliseneuve. *

Cafés, Chez Bambin opposite the church also sells good *pâtisserie* especially *pâte brisée*. The café at the far end of main street sells fishing licences.

Petrol and diesel at the Peugeot garage at the roundabout. Shopi has a 24/7 plastic card only pump. *

The local people’s **marché de pays** is on Wednesday evenings in summer. You can eat and drink there, often to music. Condat’s Tuesday market has disappeared.

In EGLISENEUVE

Good butcher, Post Office, grocer (Casino), chemist, etc.. The bakery changed hands in September 2000, still good bread but they no longer make almond croissants, longingly written about in the past.

Wednesday street market with cheese, fruit, etc., plus plants, live poultry (for growing) and other things such as cherries, honey, garlic, etc. depending on season. The Arche Auvergnate has closed.

The old chap who used to sell traditional wooden hay rakes, Mr. Parrot, and once lived in the Sweet Little House, died in his nineties in February 2002.

In SAINT AMANDIN

Closest bakery to Laquairie for your breakfast bread, open on a Monday. Also a good restaurant, L’Amandine (see page 8 & menus at the back, after the index).

A great starter on Monday morning...

Besse’s Monday market is well worth a visit, especially as **shops and the Simply supermarket in Besse are open on Mondays**, because of the market. (For other Markets see next page)

Supermarkets and more shops in **Riom-ès-Montagnes** (ès means “in the”) and **Besse(-en-Chandesse)** where Simply, part of the Auchan group, is a good supermarket, particularly for wine. Bort-les-Orgues has two supermarkets.

The nearest big supermarkets (*hypers* or hypermarkets) are in **Clermont** - Leclerc, Auchan, Géant Casino, from the autoroute follow signs to Aubière. In Clermont city centre there are car parks at Centre Jaude and Place Jaude (take your ticket with you and put it in the machine on your return with the payment asked for, your ticket is then returned so you can get your car out). Or you can park & ride into the city centre by tram.

Shopping and needs (continued)

Cash dispensers in Condat, Riom-ès-Montagnes (2), Besse (2), etc..

Street markets

Monday	Besse
Tuesday	there no longer is a market in Condat
Wednesday	Egliseneuve / Salers / & 2 nd & 4 th Wednesday of the month Riom-ès-Montagnes
Thursday	Champs sur Tarrantaine
Friday	Murat / Champiex
Saturday	Riom-ès-Montagnes / Issoire (best local market) / Bort-les-Orgues
Sunday	Lanobre / Clermont city centre antiques market and nearby flea market

For further details of neighbouring towns, see Places to see on page 21.

Bakery note: The lower bakery's bread is excellent and our first choice. The upper bakery is reliable. The Egliseneuve bakery sells a range of bread and some patisserie. The bakery in St Amandin is open on a Monday.

Bread: a large, ordinary loaf is just called a "pain", pronounced *pan* - ask for *un pain, deux pains*, etc.. *Baguette, parisienne* and *ficelle* (string) are progressively thinner. The five blobs with one in the middle is a *marguerite* (daisy), the stick with lethal spikes (good for self defence) is an *épi* (an ear, like an ear of wheat), a ring is a *couronne*. Rye bread (*pain de siegle*) is often quite hard and may be intentionally sour. *Pain de campagne* and *pain meule* are more substantial, perhaps made with stone ground flour. *Épeautre* is spelt, a type of triticale. Names vary in other regions.

Cheese note: "fermier", produced by hand on the farm, has more taste than the creamery made "laitier". Cantal is a hard cheese a bit like cheddar, "jeune" is mildest, "entre deux" is middling and "vieux" strongest. We prefer the *vieux*. The best place to buy Cantal and St. Nectaire is at Parpaliex. Go up through Chanterelle, round Le Bac, turn left, go along the lane for about a mile, through the untidy farm on both sides. La Montagne de Parpaliex is a large farm on the right, on a ridge. Go into the yard on the right and into their little shop. A St. Nectaire costs about €12 and is good as you can get. Their Cantal is sold by the kilo. They also generally have butter, cream, eggs, etc.. Raymond, the cheese man at Egliseneuve market on a Wednesday has excellent Fourme d'Ambert (a blue from east of here) but does not usually sell Gaperon.

The Department of Cantal has more appellation cheeses than any other department, ten I think. Most often seen Auvergne cheeses are Cantal, Salers, St Nectaire, two blues - Fourme d'Ambert and stronger Bleu d'Auvergne - and the delectable but little known Gaperon which is made with pepper and garlic but does need to be ripe. Bleu de Trizac, Murol and the unusual mild, soft, blue Carré d'Aurillac are lesser known & worth trying too. Tome is a generic type (or can be young Cantal) as is Montagne which may be 25% fat content as against 40 - 45%. You may also find other local cheeses such as Bleu des Neiges and many types of goats' cheese.

People generally cut the rind off, except for Gaperon and cheeses eaten very young. St Nectaire rind is best removed, some enthusiasts like Cantal rind, often cutting it off then eating it last!

Shopping and needs (continued)

In *charcuteries* you will find local air dried sausages and hams (*jambon sec / de montagne*, cooked ham is called *jambon blanc* or *jambon de Paris*).

Wild boar (*sanglier*), venison (*chevreuil* from roe deer, *cerf* from a red stag, *biche* from a red hind), hare (*lièvre*) and other game is often on menus in autumn, as are wild mushrooms. It's fun, good exercise and a lot cheaper to find your own (see Gathering on page 25).

Opening hours

Sundays in Condat: the butcher, bakers and Casino for groceries are open to noon but mostly shut on Monday. The same shops open on Bank Holidays, including Christmas morning.

In summer, Shopi also opens on a Sunday and sometimes Casino on a Monday.

Typically, shops open 8 am to noon and 2 p.m. to 6 or 7 p.m. Bakeries may open and close earlier. Post Offices close at the last posting time, generally between 3 and 4.30 p.m..

There is usually a shop open somewhere, bakers, grocers even hotels staggering their closing days and holidays.

But be warned, by the time you finish that leisurely breakfast and get on the road, whatever it is you're going to see may be shut for lunch. For example, the cable car from Super Besse used to close from 11.30 am to 2 p.m. We know a café that shuts for lunch. The major electrical retailer Conforama does not open until 10 am then closes again from noon to 2 ("one must eat" they explained). Chez SNCF you can find Left Luggage firmly locked when your train departs.

It's not always easy to fathom. Shops that close on Mondays may open if Monday's a public holiday.

Banks open Tuesday to Saturday (except for some city centre banks that open Monday to Friday). Cash dispensers, see page 4.

Bank Holidays - *jours fériés* or *jours de fête*

New Year's Day - 1 January

Easter Sunday & Monday (24 & 25 April 2011)

Labour Day - 1 May (a Sunday in 2011)

Victory 1945 / VE Day (Sunday 8 May 2011)

Ascension Day (forty days after Easter, Thursday 2 June 2011)

The Monday after Pentecost (7 Sundays after Easter, Monday 13 June in 2011). Officially abandoned in 2004, but widely taken as a holiday)

Bastille Day - 14 July which is a Thursday in 2011

Assumption (always 15 August which is a Monday in 2011)

All Saints Day (1 November which is a Tuesday in 2011)

Armistice 1918 / Remembrance Day (11 November which is a Friday in 2011)

Christmas Day (a Sunday in 2011, many shops open in the morning)

see http://www.linternaute.com/savoir/agenda/jours_feries.shtml

and for public holidays around the world: <http://www.jours-feries.com/>

Telephoning

Use the phone as if you were staying with friends. Normal calls to fixed lines are “on the house”.

For a UK number, dial 00 44 then skip the first 0 and dial the rest of the number.

E.g. to call 0171 234 5678 from France, you dial 00 44 171 234 5678.

To phone here from the UK, the caller should dial 0033 4 7178 + the last four digits as below

If you make a lot of long calls or calls to mobiles, we may ask for a contribution. Calls currently cost about 4 centimes a minute plus VAT to the fixed lines in the UK, EC countries, Switzerland, Canada & USA (excluding Alaska and Hawaii), whatever the time of day.

The Scott's	04 7178 6357
Laquairie	04 7178 6867
Longère	04 7178 6916
Sweet Little House	04 7178 6061
L' Amandine restaurant	04 7178 0283
La Grange aux Fleurs	04 7178 7798
Ché Marisou restaurant	04 7178 5545
JC Leclerc restaurant	04 7336 4630
La Bergerie @ Sarpoil	04 7371 0254
Lac des Moines	04 7178 5910
Les Diablares restaurant	04 7371 2021
Dentist, Dr Simon	04 7178 5141
Gîte de Saignes	04 7371 9260
Hotel de la Poste, Marcenat	04 7178 8478
Auberge des 3 Rivières	04 7178 5302
Mato Coulis (pizzas @ Besse)	04 7379 5086
Vélorail (bookings)	04 7120 9177
Ambulance	15
Fire	18
Police	17
Besse Tourist Office	04 7379 5284
Condat Tourist Office	04 7178 6663
Riom-ès-Montagnes TO	04 7178 0737

*The first 4 numbers
speak English*

BUT

the others don't!

*Ask if you would like
us to phone for you.*

French time is one hour ahead of UK time and 6 hours ahead of New York time, i.e. at 10.00 p.m. in Condat it is 9.00 p.m. in London and 4 p.m. in New York.

If you need to use a call box, buy a “Télécarte” (“à 20 / 50 / 100 unités”) costing about €0.15 a unit from a Post Office or Tabac. There are two call boxes in Condat.

Although cover is improving, mobile phones do not always work well in mountains and calls can also prove expensive.

Eating out (price updates needed please)

*It's ALWAYS advisable to book a table.
Ask if you'd like us to phone for you.*

L'Amandine at Saint Amandin on the way to Riom-ès-Montagnes, our nearest restaurant, about 10 minutes. Don't be deterred by the campsite, Pierre's classic food is well presented on pretty china. Nathalie & her staff are friendly and welcoming. Children can play outside & be seen from some tables. Closed Monday evening from September and Sunday evening from October. Menus from about €10 to €30, children's menu €6.10, wine reasonably priced. Dinner for two, allow €50. Sample menus (when I can get them) at the back of this folder, after the index. **Recommended.**

La Grange aux Fleurs at Sarran, down the Rhue valley. A pleasant 35 minute drive to a prettily converted barn, the owners, Nicole and Denis, are most welcoming. The food is traditional yet imaginative. User-friendly, a lovely setting and atmosphere. For a meal for two with aperitif, wine & coffee allow €50 or €60. There's a 2 hour walk you could do before lunch and/or a pleasant 10 minute after lunch stroll up to the old communal oven on the hillside above. Visitors describe their truffade is "not to be missed" & we agree. Typical dishes on offer at the back of this folder, after the index. Our favorite. **Recommended.**

Ché Marisou - off the Condat/Montboudif road at Veysset, ask for directions, it's not easy to find. Serves only authentic Auvergnat food in a traditional setting, no *haute cuisine*. In several guides & an article in Marie Claire in 2002. Atmosphere, big hearth, *lit-clos*, massive dining table with benches. Friendly, helpful host & service. Set menu €28 (July '07), children ½ price. Allow €50 for dinner for two including an aperitif, red & maybe other wine and a digestif. Good value for money if you consider part of the bill as an admission fee to a museum & cultural event, which it is. See *footnote*...

Les Diablares is a hidden pearl in Compains. Interesting food well served. An all woman team (members of *Restauratrices d'Auvergne*), they open on Sundays in spring & autumn and daily in the school holidays. Menus from €18 to €31. We have enjoyed many an excellent lunch there. On a Sunday, visit the Russian Orthodox Convent (qv) near Marcenat on your way home. **Recommended.**

AND ALSO . . .

The **Auberge des Trois Rivières** in Condat (formerly the Central Hotel): the small restaurant in the hotel serves generous portions of hot, unfussy food, simply presented on plain white china. Often open on Sunday evening.

Lac des Moines, ½ mile from Condat on the Allanche/Murat road. Now offering normal French menus at local prices. Service could be better. Food good, improvements needed to atmosphere, surroundings and other matters. This update is by friends who lunched there in May 2009.

The **Gîte de Saignes** at La Godivelle changed hands in 2006. Sadly, the €17.50 *Table Montagnarde* is not what it used to be. Reports are now disappointing. We used to park at Espinchal, the walk takes an hour and is very pleasant.

La Fenoune in Condat's main street does pizzas, including take-away. Improved since it changed hands again in 2005. Very helpful to a family who arrived late and hungry on a Saturday in July 2010.

Eating out (continued – price updates needed please)

And further afield:

Between Besse and Super Besse, L’Etable at **Fontaneix**, a mountain farm, is similar to the Grange aux Fleurs but only one menu, which changes daily. In winter you can see cows through the windows dividing their quarters from the restaurant. Reasonably priced, very friendly, spotless. They also sell their own St. Nectaire and the smaller Pavin cheese. **Recommended.**

In **Besse**, watch your pizza being made and baked in a real brick oven fired by blazing logs at **Mato Coulis** fun; about €15 a head including pudding and wine. In the old town up a very narrow side street, ask for directions. Book in advance - downstairs is definitely nicer. For traditional French cooking, **L’Ousteau** is said to be the best bet – reports please. Le Beffroi and the restaurant at Lac Pavin are no longer recommended. For superb food and exemplary service, try the art-déco Radio in Chamalières or the €35 menu at JC Leclerc in Clermont (see page 10).

La Cascade is a hostelry on the Besse road just north of Egliseneuve. Country cooking, not *haute cuisine*. Simple dining room with bar. Can be crowded in summer, especially on Wednesdays (market day in Egliseneuve). Customers may include farmers who park their cows in the car park. See *footnote...*

In **Le Chiex**, on the Besse-Clermont road, near the Grottes de Jonas, the **Relais des Grottes** is in Michelin, & serves good food at very affordable prices. The all-woman team is most welcoming.

In **Riom-ès-Montagnes**, the St Georges has fed us well, good presentation, service not always what it should be for a Michelin-listed restaurant. Costs slightly more than the Amandine.

Allanche was a culinary desert, but I am now told that Le Relais des Remparts is more than satisfactory. Reports please. The Buron des Estives, (open May to Sept) at Montagne St Roch Sud, by the main road this side of **Allanche**, serves traditional Auvergnat food. Reports needed.

Marcenat’s Hotel de la Poste has changed hands and is no longer recommended.

Eat well yet inexpensively in **Le Puy** at Le Chamarlenc, 19, rue Raphaël. Run by Philippe (the creative light who set up the Gîte de Saignes). Menus were €10 to €14. Highly recommended by Susan Kane and Andrew Coulson in 2003 - “Simple but truly delicious”. Open Tuesday to Saturday for lunch & tea. Downhill from the cathedral, bear left at the fountain into rue Raphaël.

In and around **Issoire**, our preference is La Bergerie at Sarpoil, 10 minutes from Issoire, leave past the hospital, cross the motorway, follow St Germain le Herm. Recommended – phone 04 7371 0254. Also near **Issoire** are the Auberge des Louises at Tourzel, the Auberge de Margot at Usson, La Mairie Restaurant at Sauxillanges & further south, Boudes les Vignes at Boudes, where you can round off the day with a visit to Annie Sauvat’s vineyard for some excellent wine. Or eat under the plane trees at Le Cour Carré in Perrier (just north of Issoire).

In the centre of **Murol**, Au Montagnard has menus from €10 to €30. Welcoming with good food.

The Ferme-Auberge du Bruel at St Illide serves mostly homegrown food and we ate well there in 2009 as it had been recommended to us twice. They make their own foie gras and have a well stocked farm shop.

In and around Clermont-Ferrand:

Our preferred restaurant in **Clermont-Ferrand** is **JC Leclerc** in the old Quartier Juridique, (Michelin starred). Lunch menus are €35, €55 and €75. A culinary event I have not experienced outside France. They combine sophistication and chic with commendable, unobtrusive service and a genuine desire for you to enjoy your food. Closed on Sundays, so can no longer be combined with the antiques and flea markets in central Clermont. Advisable to book. **Recommended.**

At **Royat/Chamalières** the **Radio** serves noteworthy food, beautifully - both Michelin & Gault Millau agree. The building is original art déco and interesting in its own right. **Recommended.**

L' **Amphitron Capucine**, 50, rue Fontgiève, Clermont is very agreeable. Aperitifs, their four course Esquisse menu, wine and coffee for two was €105 in 2009, but you could do it for less. Friendly, efficient, we will definitely go again.

At the other end of the scale in **Clermont-Ferrand**, Crêperie Grill Le 1513, 3, rue des Chaussettiers, near the cathedral. Great for small kids as they have a play area with toys, + tasty crêpes and ice-cream.

NB: La Cascade, Ché Marisou, the Buron des Estives and Gîte de Saignes serve traditional Auvergnat food only. MatoCoulis does pizza & steak only. The other restaurants listed above serve traditional French cuisine often with a local touch.

Et la Cuisson?

The French cook meat **much less** than the British.

So when you order meat and are asked « Et la Cuisson ? » meaning “How would you like it done...”

BLEU is very, very lightly cooked (however *au bleu* means with a blue cheese sauce)

SAIGNANT means bleeding, but is more cooked than “bleu”

A POINT is medium,

(TRES) BIEN CUIT is (very) well done

As well as steak, this includes duck, chops, lamb, venison, etc..

Eating in

If you don't fancy cooking, at the weekend, butchers generally sell passable coq au vin, pounti, chou farci, lasagne and other tasty comestibles.

La Fenoune does away pizzas (see their listing above).

Less well known cookery terms

AGRUMES citrus fruit (oranges, lemons, limes, etc.)
 AIGRE-DOUCE sweet and sour
 ALIGOT potato and cheese blended together until stringy. Local speciality
 AMUSE BOUCHE an appetiser (same as a “*mise en bouche*”)
 ANDOUILLETTE chitterling sausage
 APÉRITIF a drink before your meal, such as kir or a beer
 ARMAGNAC a brandy similar to Cognac
 BAVETTE flank / skirt, usually beef
 BICHE venison, theoretically from a female red deer
 BLEU - “au bleu” is with Auvergne blue cheese, for “bleu” meat, see note on degree of cooking.
 BREBIS ewe, meaning cheese made from sheep’s milk
 BOURRIOL a buckwheat (& maybe + wheat flour and/or potato) pancake, finished with cheese
 BRIOCHE yeast-raised buns baked in a tin (or a man’s spare tyre)
 BROCHETTE a skewer or what’s on it
 CARTE the “à la carte” menu as opposed to the set price ones
 CASSOULET a variable stew based around duck, pork sausage, pork, haricot beans, garlic, etc.
 CÈPES wild mushrooms (Ceps - *Boletus edulis*)
 CHARCUTERIE prepared meat, generally pork, such as ham or smoked sausage
 CHÂTAIGNE sweet chestnut (also *marron*)
 CHÈVRE means goats’ cheese. So chèvre chaud is warm goats’ cheese, not a snug goat.
 CHEVREIL venison from roe deer
 CHOU FARCIE cabbage stuffed with meat - a local speciality
 CONFIT classic method of conserving, usually duck (*confit de canard*)
 COPEAUX literally shavings (copeaux de cantal is finely sliced Cantal cheese)
 COUFIDOU a dark, slow-cooked Auvergne beef stew, like a *daube*
 CUISSON the degree to which meat is cooked - see note « Et la cuisson »
 DAUBE a dark, slow-cooked stew of seasoned, braised beef
 DIGESTIF a drink after your meal such as brandy or marc
 EAU DE VIE very strong spirit, double distilled, can be over 60% alcohol
 ÉMINCÉE thin slices, sometimes pieces
 ENTRÉE starter. The main course is the Plat
 ENTRECOTE sirloin of beef
 ESCALOPE thin slice of meat from fillet/breast/leg, usually chicken or veal - ask what it is
 FARCE / FARCIE stuffing / stuffed
 FILET fillet (see “Et la Cuisson” above) also a thread, net, stolon, goal & who knows what else
 FRICASSÉE previously cooked meat, etc. warmed and served in a white sauce
 FROMAGE DE TÊTE brawn made from a pig’s head, same as Pâté de tête. No cheese involved
 GARNI(E) with trimmings, maybe vegetables
 GENIÈVRES juniper berries
 GÉNISSE a heifer, so it’ll be beef
 GÉSIER gizzard, a delicacy well worth trying
 GIBELOTTE a sauce made with white wine et al, usually served with chicken or rabbit
 GIROLLES wild mushrooms (Chanterelles - *cantharellus cibarius*)
 JAMBON CRU/ D’AUVERGNE traditional dried and/or smoked ham
 KIR white wine & cordial (blackcurrant, chestnut, blackberry). Kir royal is with Champagne
 LARDONS larding bacon, usually diced “poitrine fumée” which is smoked streaky bacon
 LENTILLES DE PUY authentic green lentils from the nearby Le Puy area
 MACHE lamb’s lettuce (a winter salad)
 MARC strong spirit distilled from wine pressings
 MARINÉE marinated, steeped in a marinade
 MARMITE a stew pot or what was cooked in it
 MENU a set price menu. « Je prends le menu à 17 » “I’ll have the €17 menu”
 MIEL honey

MILLE-FEUILLE puff pastry - literally thousands of leaves
 MISE EN BOUCHE an appetiser
 MOELLE bone marrow
 MORILLES wild mushrooms (morels - *morchella* spp.)
 MOUTON sheep (see also *pieds de mouton* below)
 MUSEAU ox muzzle, a bit like rubbery tongue
 NOISETTES hazelnuts or choice cuts of meat
 NOIX walnuts, also the tasty part of shellfish or select cuts of meat
 NOTE the bill. Ask for « La note » or « L'addition s'il vous plaît »
 OMBLE CHEVALIER char, a trout species found in mountain lakes
 ONGLET a tender cut of beef from the back
 OREILLES ears, e.g. pigs' ears pan fried with cèpes
 PANSETTE spherical sausage usually filled with lamb
 en PAPILLOTE cooked in a paper or foil parcel
 PATRANQUE local dish made from breadcrumbs, whey, green Cantal cheese, butter & garlic
 PAUPIETTE thin slice of meat or fish
 PATE dough / paste / pasta / pulp / pastry (not to be confused with *paté*)
 PAVÉ a good piece
 de PAYS local
 PIEDS DE COCHON pig's trotters, generally boned & stuffed
 PIEDS DE MOUTON either sheep's feet or wild mushrooms (hedgehog fungus *hydnum repandum*)
 PINTADE/PINTADEAU guinea fowl/young guinea fowl
 PISSENLIT dandelion, used in springtime salads
 POIREAUX leeks
 POMME strictly speaking apple, but often shorthand for potato
 POULE a hen amongst other things, sometimes served as a *confit* (qv)
 POULET chicken (a *poussin* is even younger)
 POULETTE a smooth sauce with egg, lemon & parsley served with sweetbreads, veal, etc.
 POUNTI a spinach/ham/egg/prune loaf, served sliced. Local speciality
 PRUNE is a plum
 PRUNEAU is a prune
 PROVENÇALE the Provence style of cooking especially with tomatoes, olive oil & garlic
 QUEUE DE BŒUF oxtail
 RÉGIONAL local, an Auvergne speciality
 RILETTE meaty sausage
 RIS sweetbreads (rice is *RIZ*)
 de SAISON of this time of year
 SALERS local red cattle with sweeping horns, noted for their beef. Can also be their cheese
 SIECHE is cuttlefish (served without the shell)
 SUPPLÉMENT (DE CEPES) extra (ceps)
 TARTIFLETTE a cheese, potato, bacon, white wine & onion dish originally from the Alps
 TRANCHE slice
 TRIPES a brown, meaty tripe (totally unlike flabby white Lancashire tripe)
 TRIPOUX local dish of meat parcels wrapped in fine tripe, a bit like a mini haggis
 TROMPETTE DES MORTS wild mushrooms (Horn of Plenty *craterellus cornucopioides*)
 TRUFFADE delicious local cheese and potato speciality, try it at the Grange aux Fleurs
 TRUFFE truffles
 VEAU veal, usually from a somewhat elderly "calf" 6 months or more old
 VENTRÈCHE tuna strips with the skin on cooked in brine, also called *ventresca*
 VOLAILLE any poultry in theory, but generally chicken

Tipping

Menus rarely include a service charge and we usually leave a tip. However, if the owner is serving you, she/he may not expect one. For example, my hairdresser always rejects any attempt to give a tip. Di's hairdresser is pleased to have one because she's an employee. Going back to restaurants, we leave up to 10% if deserved, but it's a tricky subject as staff in service industries in France are better paid than their UK equivalents and enjoy better terms of employment.

Vegetarians: France has virtually no vegetarians, though there is a vegetarian restaurant in Paris. There is fish on most menus, or if stuck, ask for an omelette, adding "with no meat", because the ethic is not understood. Mountain cooking had to be based on meat and cheese, as animals were the sole source of protein for self-sufficient people at this altitude although green lentils are grown lower down. Vegetarian is *végétarien*, vegan is *végétalien*.

We take vegetarian friends to the Grange aux Fleurs. It's possible to order a salad as a starter, asking for no meat (we can phone & forewarn them if you like), followed by truffade or fish, then cheese and pudding. Good food in pleasant surroundings.

Local wines

Taste **wines** in *caves*, for example good whites and pinks at **Veyre-Mouton** (by Exit 6) where there is a good selection. Once a major wine producing area, the vineyards around Clermont were wiped out a century ago by phylloxera but there is now extensive replanting with resistant root stocks. **Boudes**, **Chanturgues** and **Chateaugay** are among the more palatable Auvergne reds, though as with all wine areas, some are better than others. Little known & interesting is **Marcillac**, made from the ancient local mançois grape and far older than Bordeaux. We consider Auvergne reds relatively expensive than similar quality wines from the Rhone valley or Bordeaux, and at over 1,000 feet, the climate is not as reliable as at lower altitudes. If you had a meal on arrival, you may have enjoyed Odette and Giles Miolanne's Côtes d'Auvergne from Neschers. Most Auvergne reds are Gamay or Pinot Noir.

Other local delicacies

M & Mme Reveray who made such excellent foie gras and other duckocentric delicacies at Plauzat have now retired, sadly for us.

Pallut's smart place on the left as you leave Condat towards Riom-ès-Montagnes has jars of their good, coarse local paté at a reasonable price, which make acceptable presents. They also do fresh pork, air dried ham and sausages.

Fish crib:

aiglefin / églefin	haddock	loup de mer	sea bass
aiguillats	dogfish	maquereau	mackerel
anguille	eel	merlan	whiting
araignée de mer	spider crab	merlu	hake
arc en ciel	rainbow trout	mérrou	grouper
bar	sea bass	morue	salt cod
barbue	brill	muges / mulets	grey mullet
baudroie	monkfish / angler fish	omble chevalier	char
brème de mer	sea bream	perche	perch
brochet	pike	plie	plaice
cabillaud	cod	praires	clams
carpe	carp	raie	skate / ray
chapon	Provencale for a big scorpionfish / rockfish	rascasse	rockfish / scorpionfish
colin	coley (or hake?)	rouget grondin	gurnard
colinot	hake	rouget de roche	red mullet
congre	conger eel	roussettes	dogfish
coquilles St Jacques	scallops	Saint Pierre	John Dory
crabe	crab	sandre (<i>Sander lucioperca</i>)	zander / European pike-perch, (also a sea fish)
crevettes	shrimps	saumon de fontaine	American brown trout
crevettes roses	prawns	seiche	cuttlefish
daurade / dorade	sea bream	serran	sea bass
écrevisse	freshwater crayfish	sole	sole
éperlans	(tiny) smelt	sole limande	lemon sole
ésprats / sprats	sprats	sprats	sprats
étrille	spider crab	targuer	topknot
fario	European brown trout	thon	tuna
flet	flounder	tourteaux	crab
flétan	halibut/chicken halibut	truite de mer	sea trout
gambas	king prawns	turbot	turbot
grenadier	exotic hake/whiting	turbotin	chicken turbot
grondin	gurnard	vanneaux	queen scallops
laitance	soft herring roe	vivancau	red snapper
langoustines	large prawns	zées dorées	John Dory
lieu jaune	pollock		
lieu noir	coley / saithe		
limande	dab		
lingue	ling		
lotte de mer	monkfish / angler fish		

Fish names are not consistent even within the same country. The French "Colin" and English "Coley" for example each seem to cover several distinct species. Additions and corrections especially welcome.

Things to see

Châteaux

Perched on a pinnacle above **Apchon**, scramble up to the ruined castle which held out against the English in the Hundred Years' War (what did they do for water?). The imposing ramparts of **Murol**, a mighty fortress going back to Roman times (open certain days, sometimes with residents in period clothes - *animations*; a small collection of ancient rare breeds of livestock includes “Higland” cattle). Chateaux of a more conventionally classic line listed below. Little **St Floret**, on the Besse/Issoire road has the remains of interesting frescoes; the village is pretty, too.

Château de Parentignat is a fascinating mix of history and clutter, having been in the same family since 1707. Mostly 18th century, it is near exit 13 (A 75), 35 km south of Clermont. Open daily from 1 July to 3 September, and at weekends from 27 May to 1 October, from 2 to 6 p.m.. Greatly enjoyed by the Hutchings who “found” it.

Little remains of **Besse's city walls** apart from one of the gates (near the Hotel Beffroi, see Eating) and some short lengths past the Post Office.

A trip to **Cordès** makes a pleasant day out and can be combined with other pursuits.

Of the eleven Cantal châteaux open to the public (in the afternoon plus some in the morning at holiday times), the most interesting are:

Anjony: 15th-18th C, 23 k N of Aurillac, open from February to November

Auzers: 14th-15th C, SW of Riom-ès-Montagnes, open from Easter to All Saints

La Trémolière: 15th C, 8 k N of Salers, open 15 June to 15 September

La Vigne: 15th-18th C, 10 k S of Mauriac, open 15 June to 15 September

Val: 15th C, 7 k N of Bort-les-Orgues, open daily (except Tuesdays out of season)

A list of châteaux is given in the “Sites et Patrimoine” leaflet.

Gardens

High Auvergne is rather cold in winter for plants with -15°C normal and temperatures sometimes down to -25°C, cold enough to split the trunks of oak trees. There is an “ethno-botanic” garden at Antignac with plants from seeds from archaeological sites, traditional medicinal and food plants and other plant related things. The Margeride ecomuseum has a plants section. Other gardens at Chateau de Chassan and Ch. de la Vigne (Cantal): Ch. de la Batisse, Ch. de Cordez (laid out by the same chap as Les Tuilleries; remarkable hedges; chateau & gardens can be seen separately) & Ch. d'Opme in Puy-de-Dome: for a fuller list and descriptions, see the “Visitez un jardin en France/Auvergne” leaflet.

Vulcania

The 118 million euro science-oriented theme park dedicated to volcanoes. The Narbeths enjoyed a visit in July 2002 with girls of 12 and 6. They spent 3 hours, there was plenty of parking, no queuing and many of the texts were in English but although it was midday and not especially busy, there were no audio guides in English available. Interesting if fairly scientific, so best for over 12's or volcano buffs. Entry was €18 for adults, €12 for children. Vulcania is northwest of Clermont, about 1¼ hours by car. Admissions are less than half the ¾ million a year expected, causing financial problems.

Scenoparc

Closed in 2009, sadly but unsurprisingly. For the record, it was at Valette, near Riom-ès-Montagnes, dedicated to man's relationship with animals. Tastefully done, but difficult to see who it would appeal to. The animals were far away & obscured by greenery. A bit academic for tots, too hilly for the unsteady, no good for a rainy day because it was mostly outdoors.

Churches

The squat, solid, primitive style of the 11th and 12th centuries, typical of the region, is known as Romanesque. The region's four great churches are all within an hour:

St Nectaire: open daily except Tuesdays & at lunchtime

- atmospheric, note the extraordinary painted stone capitals (tops of the pillars),

Orcival: open all day

light and airy for its date, designed and built by an unknown master mason

St Austremoine: Issoire, also open all day, a former abbey church

unusual painted pillars, exceptional capitals, signs of the zodiac around the outside of the nave; our web site has photos of St Austremoine church

and the wonderful 12th century **Notre-Dame-du-Port** in Clermont-Ferrand, unusual sculptures, full of light and many interesting features (see below).

Other large churches have mostly been extended later, the oldest part is usually at the altar end - as at **Riom-ès-Montagnes** which has a 13th century wood carving of Christ.

There are some delightful village churches, like unadorned **Picherande** or **Tremouille** (where our daughter Christabel was married in 1998). Look for stone (*lauzes*) roofs, low curved walls, small windows. On a rock outcrop, **Fortuniés** is the essence of an Auvergne country church, simple, tiny, unchanged, a jewel; *very* slowly restored from '94, Fortuniés is on the way back down the Santoire valley from Murat, bear right on the D23 towards Chalinargues, in a couple of kilometres you will see Fortuniés on your left.

Rebuilt after being destroyed by the English in the Hundred Years' War, **Cheylade** has a naïvely painted ceiling, 15th C, extraordinary, and unique in France. (See Drives, page 24).

You often have to put a ten or twenty euro centime coin into a slot to turn on the lights, not always easy though to find the slot in the dark. Church (and other) buffs will enjoy a day in **Le Puy** where there's lots to see. The cathedral is interesting, it's fever stone dating back to pre-Roman times. The beautiful and curious Church of St. Michael on top of a stone pinnacle is 11th century and contains exceptional paintings, making the climb up well worthwhile. See also page 22.

St Flour cathedral is said to contain a life sized black Christ, but I have not seen it.

The Chapel of **Notre Dame d'Estaules** is a stroll down the lane from La Borie, but following a theft is often locked. The curious round chapel of **St Gorgon** is on a pleasant walk (we did it with a 7 year old) or can be reached by car.

La Godivelle has an ancient, pretty, little church (dedicated to Saint Blaise) with one or two surprising gargoyles.

Strangely primitive stone crosses can be found here and there, as at Chancel, near **La Fonte Sainte**, a pleasant place for a stroll up to a bump with a super view - Di's father walked up aged 82.

Built of dark grey lava, **Clermont-Ferrand** cathedral was begun in 1248, & is said by the Guide Bleu to be the finest Gothic building in Auvergne. It contains some very old murals and medieval windows. Nearby, a statue of Urban II recalls the first crusade. Also two very fine modern windows. It is somewhat dark & sombre, so for me, Notre Dame du Port, founded in the 6th century by St. Avit, is more interesting and definitely lovelier. Walk to it through the old quarter, along Rue du Port. Burnt by the Normans, it has been repaired and rebuilt with great unity. Only a small part of the Basilica is pre-Romanesque but is well worth a visit. You can climb up to a balcony on the other side of the street for a bird's-eye view. At the time of writing (2008) it is still being restored (again). Remarkable inside and out.

Haras National d'Aurillac

Housed at Aurillac since 1806, France's, and probably one of the world's, largest and most important stud of heavy breed stallions, numbering over 100. Guided visits from mid July to mid September, other times by appointment.

Visits

The Syndicat d'Initiative (Tourist Office) in Condat organises (often free) visits. Adults and children much enjoyed watching cheese made on a farm. Apart from standard information, they also know of happenings such as antiques fairs and the interesting monthly cattle fairs at Brion.

Millau viadict

Beautiful, spectacular. A fantastic feat of engineering, the Millau (pronounced *mee'oh*) viaduct is 2½ hours, 220 km (140 miles), via Allanche, Massiac and the motorway. The toll to cross is €5.60 each way (September '08). The highest in the world, 2,460 metres long, built on time and within budget at a cost of 310 million euros, it was designed by Sir Norman Foster to carry the A75 Clermont-Ferrand to Béziers motorway 270 metres above the Tarn. The tallest pier at 343 metres is higher than the Eiffel Tower. It required over 200,000 tonnes of concrete and 36,000 tonnes of steel. Drive across, visit the display underneath (on the D992 south of the Tarn), take a picnic. See <http://www.leviaducdemillau.com>

Antiques

Allanche has a major antiques fair the first week in August. Every Sunday morning there is a flea market (interesting and other junk) and an antiques market in Clermont Ferrand - ask for directions. *Antiquités* are expensive antiques, *brocante* means ordinary antiques/collectables, dealers are known as *brocanteurs*. A *vide grenier* is a car boot sale.

The Tranchades at Laquairie

Not officially open to the public, the Tranchades near Laquairie are interesting geologically as they are evidence of the volcanic layer sliding down the hill on the underlying granite layer, due to the weight of the massive ice cap in the last ice age. You can see signs of movement in most of the houses at Laquairie. The Tranchades (or Trenchades) are fascinating evidence of movement as the volcanic layer of rock fissures as it slides off the granite. Some of the clefts are 100 feet deep. See also page 19 and the 'walk' on page 29. Talk to Di **before** attempting to visit the Tranchades.

MUSEUMS AND DISPLAYS

Mont Mouchet has a National Monument to the Resistance which was very active in Auvergne, tying up two divisions and inflicting heavy losses on occupying German forces. “Interesting and very moving”, the Museum is reported to be open daily in summer, at weekends in spring & autumn.

Musée de la Haute Auvergne in St Flour (pronounced SAN FLOOR) centre: pre-history to 1900, traditional cheese making equipment, burons, daily life in the last century, religious art, musical instruments and a fine collection of Auvergnat furniture from beds to dressers; guide notes in English.

Musée du Ski in Besse: the evolution of skis and skiing which is rather older than you might suppose. Small, interesting.

Musée de la Radio et du Photographie at Lanobre, on the Chateau de Val road - gramophones et al., recommended by the Marchants. However, in 1999 we were told it was closed. Update needed please!

Ecomusée de la Margeride (said with a soft G), 12 k from St Flour. Spread across several sites, “with houses, gardens, objects, sounds and smells, with pictures and interiors, the museum tells the past and present story of the people in this mountain land...” The Hawkings family who went twice, write “exhibitions really excellent, well worth the trip”.

Musée de la Vigne et de la Vie Rurale at Plauzat on the way to Clermont.

Other more distant museums, described in the Musées d'Auvergne leaflet, include Antique Ceramics at Lezoux, Cutlery at Thiers, Agricultural Machinery at Ambert, Popular Arts and Traditions at Riom (by Clermont), and several in more conventional fields. There are two fine museums in central Clermont. Le Coq houses natural history and other exhibits, Bargoin has pre-history, Gallo-Roman, medieval and other antiquities and an outstanding collection of oriental carpets.

More things to see

Special displays in the National Park:

- ◆ Maison de la Gentiane, Riom-ès-Montagnes; the story of a liqueur made from gentian roots; small garden of mountain plants; sample of Avèze.
- ◆ Maison des Fromages, Eglise neuve; cheese - with a glass of wine.
- ◆ Maison du Buronnier, Laveissière; about the men and women who raised cattle and made cheese in the burons (Occitan word meaning a summer stabling in the mountains); a century ago there were a thousand burons, this is one of the ten that remain.
- ◆ Maison de la Pierre, Volvic; go into the lava flow where the stone was hewn to build Clermont cathedral; futuristic music and lighting; slides.
- ◆ Maison des Tourbières, St-Aleyre-ès-Montagnes; Auvergne's upland peat bogs and sub-alpine wetlands. Book a guided walk (commentary in French) or browse the exhibition. Interesting.
- ◆ Maison de l'Eau et de la Pêche, Besse; lakes, rivers and their inhabitants.
- ◆ Maison de la Faune, Murat; wild animals of Auvergne. Good place for a wet afternoon for kids. It has many local animals & birds and a good collection of local butterflies. You can get real home-made ice-cream at 15, Place Marchande afterwards (the patronne's husband is Italian).
- ◆ Maison de la Flore, Col de Guery near Le Mont Dore; native flowers and plants.
- ◆ Maison de la Foudre (also Musée de la Foudre), Marcenat; approach the mystery of electrical storms; video film, photos, objects struck by lightning. Small, quirky, interesting. Open June & Sept. 2.15 - 5.30 pm. July & Aug. 10.30 - 12 am & 2.15 - 6 pm. Admission: adults about €, children €1.50.

Lac Pavin is one of a number of volcanic crater lakes, many circular. Accessible by car, it takes an hour to walk the footpath around it, within the steeply wooded crater. Pavin was the last active volcano in France and is said not yet to have finished cooling; to look at the ice in winter, you'd never guess. The small café is OK and the restaurant upstairs is good. A GR footpath leads to another crater lake, Montcinère, about 1½ hours walk. 1200 metres altitude.

Take a cable car up from Super Besse (€6.90 return in 2010) and walk along the ridge then scramble on to the **Puy de Sancy**, so named because once upon a time there was a pilgrimage to a cross at the top on 6 August every year. In French the peak became known as Saint Sixte which in Occitan is Pè de San Chi, the origin of the word Sancy.

Sporadically closed to the public because of a long-running dispute, the **Tranchades de Laquairie** are geological faults caused by a layer of lava slipping on a stable layer of granite - see walk 6 on page 27. In the valley below, its sides washed away by the River Santoire, the **Roche Pointue** is the remains of a small volcanic plug. Park at the bridge on the Riom road just outside Condat and walk up the wooded valley for 15 minutes. The full circular walk takes about 45 minutes.

The **Viaduc du Garabit** lies south of St Flour. An early iron bridge of considerable size constructed by Eiffel. A grand day out can be had doing the circle St Flour / Chaudes Aigues / Truyères gorges / Sarran dam.

The **Puy de Dôme**, a unique volcanic bump near Clermont-Ferrand. Walk up or take the bus in July and August - at other times you can go up by car. There's an information centre at the top plus a restaurant, several radio masts and the remains from a Gallo-Roman temple to Mercury. Relics from the temple, including a tiny bronze statue of Mercury, are in Musée Bargoin in central Clermont (near the obelisk). Excellent views of the chain of extinct volcanoes running away to the Northeast.

The **Plateau de Gergovie** where Vercingetorix, chief of the Celtic Arverni tribe (hence Auvergne) defeated the Roman army, has a visitor centre + film in English. Follow signs from the Clermont/Issoire road. Well spoken of.

The tiny **water mill** (Moulin de la Gazelle) near Ségur-les-Villas is authentic, fascinating and, astonishingly, free. Restored and lovingly re-built by enthusiasts, it is just up the Allanche road above La Gazelle - head up the Santoire valley from Condat towards Murat.

At **Bort-les-Orgues** you can visit the hydro-electric station at the bottom of the dam. It is free (2003), but for safety reasons you have to give your name at the Tourist Office first. Then you join the next tour (every hour, on the hour?)

The **Abbaye de Mègemont**, 10 minutes southwest of Issoire is only open some weekends, usually in the afternoon. Enquire at the Issoire Tourist Office. Founded as a religious order in 1206, it declined from the Revolution until 1995 when it was listed as a historic monument and restoration began. Parts of the church are 13th century and older.

Poterie de Moneaux, 15 k from Besse on the D36 just before the Col St. Robert, has a good display of their hand made pottery for sale. Open daily from April to October and in school holidays. Recommended.

Parc Animalier, Ardes-sur-Couze - reported to be "Brilliant for children (& adults). Two year-old twins loved it apart from the over-friendly goats! Le Beffroi Restaurant in Ardes (off the main street) has excellent food though somewhat uninspiring decor. Brilliant coq au vin & local salade du Cézallier. Good idea to combine the restaurant with an afternoon visit to the zoo" (Summer 2000). Ardes is a 1 hour drive via La Godivelle and St. Alyre-ès-Montagnes.

La Monastère Znamenie, a Russian Orthodox convent, La Traverse near Marcenat allows visits on Sundays between 2 and 5 p.m. and daily in July & Aug. from 2 to 6 pm.. They sell their own honey, spiced cakes, fabulously painted "eggs", books they have published about their icons, and about Condat and Marcenat. For most people though, the most interesting part of the visit is seeing the superb ancient and modern icons in the chapel. From the D36, follow signs for La Traverse or (appropriately enough) La Godde. There are now seven nuns there (up from 3) and except for the massive outer wall, they did the building work themselves, including the copper onion dome. When Di passed by recently, a nun was working on the roof and when I enquired who drove the swing shovel, Sister Anastasia breezily said she did. Their *pain épice* is rather severe but we recommend their honey, especially because it is not mixed with sunflower honey, a widespread practice.

And....

History on the ground: burial mounds, dolmens, bronze age settlements and more than one “English camp” dating from the Hundred Years’ War.

The **Grottes de Jonas** near Le Chiex, a fortified village of caves cut into a cliff face, includes a defensive habitation with interesting loo used by the seignior, and a church with just discernible murals reportedly the oldest in Auvergne.

Near Perrier is a group of caves that were lived in until the 1940s & are now being restored. Access is free, the site large and well suited to picnicking, if you don’t mind carrying your lunch.

From Condat station to remote forest glades, are reminders of a more recent invasion. Poignant plaques marking places where members of the Resistance were shot or seized never to be seen again. Even very remote memorials often have fresh flowers.

Places to see

Besse (pronounced *bess*) was an important town in medieval times, many traces of its age are still evident. Now also has cafés, small, interesting shops, an Simply supermarket (good wine selection, crowded at peak times but may stay open through lunch in the holidays; cheapest local petrol and diesel), a real pizzeria, ski museum (see page 17), several hotels and restaurants (see pages 8 to 10), and two old churches. The street market is on a Monday. Children recommend the play area. Cash dispenser at Crédit Agricole. 20 minutes from Condat.

Super Besse is a typical small modern ski resort, crêpes, cable cars, bob luge and bobble hats. There is a swimming pool and skating rink. The cable cars run most of the year (weekends only from March to end of June) but stop for lunch from 11.30 to 2 p.m-ish, going up to the Puy de la Perdrix at 1800 metres (5,800 feet); sun, cold and wind at the top can be more pronounced. Madame Serre's café/bar is the one we prefer, it's called Lou Cantou ("lou" is Occitan for "the", a cantou is a type of chair).

Riom-ès-Montagnes, a country market town; shops, Post Office, banks, cash dispenser (at Crédit Agricole, bear left before the Mairie, 200 metres on left); Vadrine's *Quincaillerie* (hardware) and Gamme Vert (farm shop on outskirts) have a selection of proper bells for your cows. The small Casino supermarket in the centre (lots of fruit outside) is good; Champion, on the right as you come in from Condat, is now much cleaner than previously; it has some good wine. The swings, etc. were recommended by the Tong family with children of 2 and 4. Large street market on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month; livestock in the cattle market. Visit (free) the Avèze factory and taste their gentian liqueur. 20 minutes from Condat.

St Flour (*san floor*) is pleasant rather than remarkable, altogether quieter than Salers; was fortified; museum see above; cafés; good ice cream from the bakery; signposted city walk. The cathedral is said to have the only black Christ in France, the statue is life sized, we have not seen it. 1 hour from Condat.

Salers (*sal air*) is a striking country town, grey stone houses with roofs of *lauzes* (shaped flat stones). The Lucases avoided the busy time by driving through the southern mountains, reaching Salers in late afternoon, dining on *pounti*, a speciality at the Hotel des Ramparts, and returning by Riom-ès-Montagnes. 1 hour from Condat.

Murat has a good approach from the north; an old town with narrow streets; interesting antique shop, small museum of local fauna (see page 18) and good Friday market. 45 minutes from Condat.

La Bourboule is a spa specialising in the treatment of allergies especially in children; plenty of shops, cafés, a covered market (*halles*), the river running through is the young Dordogne. What can I add to their leaflet's claim "You will be able to put your vital node to rest in La Bourboule".

Le Mont Dore, also a spa on the Dordogne, which rises at a spring on the slopes of the Puy de Sancy above the town, is smaller than La Bourboule; a pleasant place with a feeling of busier bygone days. Winter skiing, walks, cable car onto the Sancy. 1 hour from Condat.

Bort-les-Orgues (meaning 'organ pipes', *orgues* are cliffs formed from old volcanic cores) at 400 metres has a lowland climate; not perhaps worth a visit in itself, but just beyond is the huge dam, 390 metres across, second tallest in France at 120 metres, retaining the lake mentioned under Château de Val, above. For those interested in birds, stand on the bridge and watch the brown crag martins. 50 minutes from Condat.

Marcenat is a quiet, pleasant country town with a fascinating exhibition about lightning. 15 minutes from Condat.

Places to see (continued)

Allanche has remains of early fortifying walls and a Roman bridge (it's the smaller one, the Tourist Office used to get it wrong, but there's now a proper sign). Excellent antiques fair in the 1st week of August. Famous too for its *estive* (see article on page 39), one of the few remaining, the spectacle even draws film and TV crews. By 1996 the cattle were heavily outnumbered by stalls, musicians and tourism consultants. However the traditional Auvergnat dancing was beautiful and truly memorable and the *estive* remains a highly colourful and enjoyable social event. See it soon, before the messy, real cows are replaced by hygienic, inflatable ones on wheels. Usually the last weekend in May.

Chaudes-Aigues (pronounced *showed zygg*) has hot springs, providing central heating to many houses in the town, and other curiosities. Can be seen as part of a grand day out including the Truyère gorge. There is another one of those sad memorials in memory of the doctor and his son who were shot just outside the town by the Germans during the last war. It is 1½ hours from Condat.

Issoire is a pleasant town with a particularly striking abbey church - St Austremoine. Easiest approach is via Besse, then if you have the inclination, come back over the high country - more direct but slower - e.g. up the Courgoule Gorges (D26) or via D32 Solignat. Good Saturday street market. 1 hour from Condat.

The village of **La Chaise Dieu** is unremarkable in itself but has a great, rather austere monastic church. In the gloom, the Scott family missed the famous Dance of Death frescoes, and the celebrated tapestries were away at the cleaners; carved woodwork adorns the organ and the pews are amazing but we found the whole slightly forbidding. A nice little shop opposite sells dried mushrooms in astonishing variety. 1½ hours from Condat.

“A strange town in a strange setting”. Since early times the starting point for pilgrims from all over Northern Europe, **Le Puy en Velay** exudes history and must be one of France's more unusual towns, with extraordinary volcanic pinnacles, one with a 10th century church on top, adding to its oddity and charm. Removed from a pagan altar by the Romans for their own temple and now part of the cathedral, the Fever Stone was believed to cure those sleeping the night on it. Thousands of pilgrims still set out on foot via the Lot, across the Pyrenees to Santiago da Compostella on the western coast of Spain. The road via St Flour that looks direct on the map is *very* slow, an easier approach is via Besse, down the pretty river valley to Issoire and on - allow 2 to 2½ hours. Natives of Le Puy are called Ponots.

A busy industrial city, **Clermont Ferrand** has all the amenities, shops and supermarkets you'd expect. For a treat, visit one of France's oldest chocolate shops - near the cathedral. Several good museums (see page 18), one with an exceptional collection of oriental carpets. Railway station and airport. Head office of Michelin tyres which has extensive factories there. 1 hour from Condat.

Footnote: a prodigiously expensive tramway has been installed over several years and, frankly, Clermont was best avoided all together. Formerly handsome Place Jaude is spoiled. The traffic and parking situation is not good. And we shall all be paying for it for years to come.

Aurillac, Cantal's county town, is probably not worth a visit in its own right. Known as a traditional centre for umbrella making. The National Heavy Horse Stud is on the outskirts - see *Haras National*. 1½ hours from Condat.

Brion is a tiny village in the middle of nowhere. From spring to autumn, cattle fairs are held which attract people from far and wide. Eat at stalls or picnic atop the extinct volcano overlooking the fair field. See Countryman article on page 39. Just beyond La Godivelle, it is 30 minutes from Condat.

The Parc des Volcans d'Auvergne is Europe's largest National Park, 120 kms north to south, “protected because of its special beauty and fragility”.

Two distinct ranges of mountains lie within the Park, both rising over 1,800 metres (6,000 feet). The northern part, in the Department of Puy de Dome, is more developed and more densely populated. The southern part, especially that in Cantal, is quieter, more rural.

Among animals found are moufflon, chamois, marmots, red & roe deer, wild boar, edible & hazel dormice, pine and beech martens and red squirrels.

Birds include many species now rare or gone from Britain, crested tits visit our bird nuts in winter, shrikes generally nest by the house, black kites and honey buzzards can be seen easily and red kites are commonplace, distinguish them from buzzards by their forked tails. See also Birds, page 31.

Not at all knowledgeable about butterflies and moths, I am indebted to Maureen Pearson for getting me started and especially to Leslie Whiteside for her invaluable contributions on page 35.

The sheer quantity of wild flowers and their great variety never cease to amaze and delight. From daffodils as far as the eye can see, to hay made more with flowers than grass, to the carpet of wild thyme underfoot scenting the evening.

Books, ask if you would like to refer to:

The Mammals of Britain and Europe by Maurice Burton

British Birds by John Gooders and Terence Lambert

Petersen's Birds of Europe (French & English editions)

The Illustrated Flora of Britain and Northern Europe, superbly illustrated by Marjorie Blamey

The Concise British Flora by Keeble Martin

Pocket Guide to Mushrooms and Toadstools

Les Champignons Comestibles by Fernand Nathan (in French)

A Passion for Mushrooms by Antonio Carluccio

and many other books on creatures great and small.

The mountains were formed at very different times. The southern range, known as the Cantal mountains (Plomb du Cantal (1855m), Puy Mary (1787m) and Puy de Peyre-Arse (1686m) are the remains of a single, huge volcano, some 50 kilometres across, one of the world's largest, now extinct, mostly eroded away by ice and time to form the high, grassy plateau known as the Cézallier.

The northern mountains are much younger... The rest of this note will be completed in due time!

Drives

It is well worth leaving the main roads to explore. Here are some starters:

- The road from Condat to Murat (D16, D3, etc.) runs up the valley of the River Santoire through marvellous scenery (see Fortuniés church, Museums, Murat - not to be confused with Murol, to the North). The roadside wild flowers are well worth stopping for too.
- The Gorge de la Rhue is particularly striking between Condat and Champs-sur-Tarrantaine, with miles of forests, torrents, a remarkable beech tree, dams, occasional glimpses of great pipes carrying water to hydroelectric stations and the Gorge itself.
- Climb up from Condat to Montboudif, birthplace of President Pompidou, past Crégut, follow the shore of Lake Lastouilles, then on through the unusual countryside around Marchal (where there's a suitable café for lunch). If your brakes work, drop down by the ever narrower lanes into Embort in the Rhue valley.
- A day out we often inflict on friends is Apchon castle, Cheylade church, picnic at table by waterfall, then up to the Col de Serre through the mountains and home via Dienne.
- Another full day out is Besse/Issoire/Le Puy en Velay, then back through high, remote country. Miles and miles of stunning daffodils in May.
- A long, spectacular day out is St Flour/Alleuze/Chaudes Aigues/Truyère gorges.
- Take the road to Allanche. Stop at the D21 intersection and see the Cascade de Veyrines. Go through Allanche, follow the D9, go left before La Gazelle towards Le Jolan. Go right on the track to Notre Dame de Valentine. Plenty of picnic places here. The chapel is not amazing in itself but perched on a bluff above the Santoire valley, the views are worth the effort.

Near the road:

Waterfalls: just north of Egliseneuve (2); Saillant which freezes spectacularly in winter; south of Cheylade with grassy area + picnic table; several others are listed in the "Sites et Patrimoine" leaflet. Find the picnic table by a brook off the lane from Jassy to La Fumadoune (near La Godivelle) or sit atop the Site du Fraisse (5 kms west of the Château de Val) - both accessible by car.

Winter driving

Except for the Col Croix St Robert (Besse to Le Mont Dore road, closed December to April) and the Pas de Peyrol (Puy Mary, closed November to May), roads are kept clear of snow with impressive efficiency. After an overnight fall, a snowplough clears this lane at 5.15 am, more than early enough for the school bus or a day's skiing.

In heavy snow, special tyres or chains are compulsory between Besse and Egliseneuve, common sense and large flashing signs tell you when.

Outdoors

Apart from activities written up in more detail below, there is climbing, hang gliding, mountain bike hire, golf at Le Mont Dore and Clermont, even bungee jumping. Ask us, see information leaflets and local tourist offices.

Adventure playground: claimed to be “between Tarzan and Indiana Jones” Lioran Aventure at Le Lioran opens at weekends in Spring and daily from 15 June. Suitable for all ages, several acres of trees seem to be involved. Information from 06 7497 4094 or visit their web site www.lioran-aventure.com

Fishing: rivers and streams contain wild brown trout, some stocked rainbows and their offspring. You need a permit which is inexpensive and can be bought in many shops (e.g. the café next to the lower bakery in Condat). As a conservation measure, crayfish may only be caught on a single day in August. The season ran from 14 March to 20 September in 2009. The beginning is best.

Gathering: blackberries, plums, juniper berries, raspberries, strawberries and bilberries grow wild; find mushrooms in the fields and beech woods that surround us. The Hunters sold ceps in Condat for €10 a kilo. We have several books on fungi if you need them.

Horses: riding stables at Montboudif and Condat. Mounts look reliable more than inspiring. Horse lovers might also enjoy visiting the stud of draft stallions at Aurillac (see *Haras National*, page 17). On your next holiday, why not ride one of France's great bridle ways? Basic overnight accommodation for horse and rider (as in the Gîte Equestre by the waterfall at Egliseneuve) at each day's end.

Skiing: downhill at Super Besse, cross country throughout the area - Besse, Picherande (where the National Sled Dog races are held), Egliseneuve, even Montgrelieux. Prices are lower than in the Alps which undoubtedly has more choice and a longer season for downhill. However over fifty miles of cross country pistes within half an hour of here offer unequalled skiing in magnificent surroundings. Lessons in both types of skiing at Super Besse. Ski hire everywhere.

Swings: good play area at Besse and another in Riom-ès-Montagnes

Swimming: pools at Condat (praised by visitors, several children have made friends there, paddling pool for littlies), St Amandin if you're eating at the restaurant (handy pool-side bar for non swimming imbibers), a good indoor pool at Super Besse, and in most towns. Over a mile long, Lac Lastouilles has numerous little beaches to swim from; we found the water warm, clear and clean; perfect for a day out or just an evening dip; from Montboudif go through La Crégut, keep the lake on your left, pass the Base de Voiles, keep left wherever you can, through a car park, cross the top of a long dam and the further you go, the better it usually is. Nearby Lac Taurons is quieter but access is not as easy. Try the River Rhue at La Chapelle for paddling, cooling off and construction of dams.

Tennis: Condat has 3 hard courts, about €6 an hour, book in the Gardien's office. When the Hawkins played, Saskia (7) enjoyed the adjacent mini golf.

Outdoors (continued)

Train: A little train runs from Bort-les-Orgues to Lugarde. Called the *train touristique* or more impressively, the *Gentaine Express*, you can join it at Riom-ès-Montaignes and trundle sedately across the Cézalier. Enquiries and bookings at the Riom Tourist Office. It tends to stop at level crossings which are treated very seriously, even if the railway only crosses a farm track.

Vélorail: a fun idea. After four years off the rails, it reopened in summer 2008. You can once more pedal along the disused railway line from Landyrat through beautiful countryside on a trolley that takes four people on a double seat between two bicycle seats with pedals. From Landeyrat station, runs of up to 8 hours (took us 5, picnic included). The editor did not do their entertaining translation. You're given a good talking to (in French) before starting! To book, phone 04 7120 9177

Water sports: the Base de Voiles on Lac Lastouilles (see Swimming, above for directions) hires sailing dinghies, sail boards, canoes, etc.. Teenagers who went out in their dinghies recommend it.

Temperature conversions

° C	° F	1 ° C = 1.8 ° F
- 30	- 22	Canadian winter cold
- 20	- 4	as cold as we get - every few years
- 10	14	normal winter low at 800 metres
0	32	freezing point
10	50	
20	68	room temperature
30	86	normal summer high at 800 metres
36.9	98.4	normal body temperature
40	104	a hot day in Clermont
60	140	water too hot to keep your hand in
100	212	boiling point

Walking: with so many wonderful walks, it is hard to know where to begin. What follows is merely a pointer.

France has a superb network of waymarked footpaths. National paths known as GRs = *Grande Randonnée* have an overnight stop (*Gîte d'Etape*) at the end of each day's walk, for example the Gîte de Saignes in La Godivelle. Map IGN 903 shows all national footpaths in France which are marked on the ground by a white paint flash over a red. A red and white X denotes no path, making the system easy to follow. A walk of up to a day is a PR = *Petite Randonnée*.

Published by Chamina, the "Balades à Pied en Auvergne" books cover hundreds of local walks, all waymarked and mostly circular. Walks up to 2 hours are marked in blue, 2 to 4 hour walks are yellow, 4 to 6 hour walks are green. Departure points have a discreet information board.

Best walking maps are IGN's TOP 25 1:25,000 series. There is a local set in every house. Ask Di if you would like to borrow maps of areas further afield or local Chamina books (in French - they also cover flora, fauna, architecture, geology & much more).

The expert walker: Di, with Bleuet (and older generations of terriers) have walked all over the place. She will advise you on the sort of walks you'll enjoy. The 2 hour Montboudif loop is a good starter. In hot weather there are several pleasantly shaded walks. A **botanical walk** has been laid out near Riom-ès-Montagnes, either guided (info from the Tourist Office opposite the Mairie in Riom (ès-M), but the commentary is in French) or make your own way round. Afterwards, sit in the shade at the farm at the start/finish with a cool drink; they also sell jam and who knows what else.

Place names are not always spelled the same on maps and signs. For example, Anglaret and Marniac, the hamlets up the road, are also Anglariex and Margnat - being the French and Occitan forms. You may also see Laquairie written as La Quairie.

Height comparisons: La Borie is 850 metres, Laquairie is 900 metres. England's highest mountains are all under a thousand metres (Scafell Pike is 978 metres, Helvellyn is 950). The ridge opposite La Borie is 1,000 metres. Snowdon is 1,085 metres and Ben Nevis is 1,344 metres. Super Besse is 1,350 metres. The Puy de Sancy is 1,880 metres. The Plomb du Cantal is 1855 metres.

Keep an eye on the **weather**. Go into the mountains when it's fine. If it's wet, go down the hill; on a spring morning in Issoire it may well be snowing on the Sancy. Temperature falls about 1°C per hundred metres. At altitude it can and does change quickly. Heat, cold, sun, rain and snow are more significant the higher you go. Thunder storms usually give lots of warning; avoid peaks and ridgeways in lightening. You can get sunburn on a cloudy day in winter, particularly if your skin is fair or unused to weather; high factor sun screens are very effective, or hats in summer.

On longer walks, have boots or strong shoes suitable for the terrain you may cross. We take a compass; if you don't have one, point the hour hand of your watch at the sun, the bisector of the angle between midday and the hour hand is South. Or using the traditional method, just see which way the satellite dishes point.

On walks over two hours, we take water (plenty when it's hot) and usually a waterproof and a bite of lunch (or Emergency Rations). Di's advice is to wear/take "layers".

Some favourite walks

There are **walks from La Borie d'Estales** from several minutes to several hours. For example:

1. Up the lane, past the Sweet Little House, and keep walking until tired. Then come home again.
2. Down the lane to the main road. Sharp left and follow the track beside the river, across the stream (bridge), up through the forest and take the first track on the right. This leads to a house and pasture (Chastelet), cross the fence and walk between the house (on your right) and a small building (the old bread oven on your left) and keep straight on. You will soon see a notice board (on your left) and YELLOW paint flashes which take you zigzagging up the hill. It's a good climb but the views are wonderful. Follow the yellow flashes along to ridge to Chez Francois and then right at the lane into Charreyre. Through the hamlet, still marked yellow and drop down onto a track just past the last farm house. This goes steeply down through the forest to Le Danty where you turn right (still waymarked yellow) and follow the track along the river. At the wire fence you follow the markers up through the steep, pretty wood until you come back to the notice board you started from. Then straight on past Chastelet and home the way you came. Allow 2½ hours or more. Take a map or speak to Di before you go.
3. Up the lane, past the Sweet Little House and in 250 yards take the vehicle track on the left. Follow it until you come to a fork (½ mile?) and bear left up the newish steep rutted track. Keep climbing (ignore all tracks on the left) through young pine forest and up to the top. On a good day you will have wonderful views north to the Sancy range and south to the Cantal mountains. At the junction you have several choices. You can EITHER go right, leaving the hamlet of Le Bac on your left and come back to La Borie on the lanes. At the other side of Loubinou you can pick up a track (on the right) which brings you out on the road between Anglaret and Margnat (the beginning of it is marked on the map). Then pick up walk 5. Allow a good 2½ hours. OR turn left and follow the track along the ridge and into the forest. Down through the forest until the steep bends, where you MUST take the track on the left which follows the contours and brings you back to the stony track you climbed up earlier. (NB. on the map it looks as though you can continue down and get back to La Borie, but this is no longer possible. If you miss the left turn you will eventually end up on the main road between Condat and Egliseneuve). This takes about 1½ to 2 hours. OR you can pick up the BLUE circular walk through Le Bac and Chanterelle which will add another 1½ hours. OR, if you are really energetic follow the blue flashes into Le Bac and pick up the GR/Vache Rouge (red cow) markers, and on to Egliseneuve!

and from Laquairie

4. Up the lane.....

Short waymarked walks

5. Montboudif. 10 minutes by car. The walk has exceptional flora, beautiful views and entertaining sign panels. Park by the church and head up hill on foot, bearing right to keep the cemetery to your left. Take a map. Waymarked blue. 2 hours. Also suitable for mountain bikes.
6. **Ask Di before attempting this "walk"**. The Tranchades at Laquairie, a 2 hour scramble, now fallen into disrepair, through curious narrow rock clefts up to 100 feet deep. Moss, big trees, potted geology, glimpses of mountains, unique, pretty, demanding. Not suitable for little children. Difficult to find and tough going in places but interesting. The way out is no longer viable.
7. La Godivelle - 20 minutes by car: park at the church, take the waymarked circuit through forest, over high grazing land, through the hamlet of Brion (q.v.) and round in a big circle through Jassy back to La Godivelle. 3 hours. Other options possible. Map needed. Waymarked yellow.

8. Egliseneuve - 10 minutes by car: park by the Post Office. Go over the main road, down the hill; blue waymarks. The Bogon walk follows high ground and is a favourite of Di's. 1½ hours.
9. Boslabert is half an hour by car, off the D32 from La Godivelle towards Issoire. The circular walk goes past a curious abandoned village with no road where little but a church with graveyard remains. Different countryside. 2 hours. Map required. Little walked by anyone.
10. Lugarde - 15 minutes by car: park in the square. Waymarked blue, circuit takes 1½ hours. An easy walk with glorious views.
11. St Bonnet de Condat - 25 minutes by car: park by the church. A circuit which takes you up on top of the "orgues". With only modest effort you will see both the Puy de Sancy and the Plomb du Cantal. Waymarked yellow, about 2½ hours.
12. St Amandin – Park at campsite. Waymarked blue. At campsite entrance, turn left on and cross the main road. Take the track on your right. Follow the markings up through forest and lanes to Vezol. Climb the Suc de Vezol for the most spectacular view. A must for a clear day. Allow 2 hours.
13. Lac Pavin –Circular walk round the lake which takes about 50 minutes. Ideal after a morning shopping in Besse. Handy café.

Longer waymarked walks

14. From La Morangie up to the top of the Puy de Sancy is not in the books but follows GR 30. This is one of our favourites. La Morangie is just over half an hour away, at the end of a lane off the Picherande/La Tour d'Auvergne road. Map and suitable gear essential as the Sancy is 6,000 feet. This bit of the mountain is quieter by far than the Super Besse side. 5 to 6 hours. A couple setting off on a mild morning in September '99 who assured us they had "walking clothes" had to turn back at the ridge because they were so cold. In early October, from the top of the Sancy, where there was fresh snow above 1,500 metres, we have seen Mont Blanc sparkling white in the sunshine, 197 miles away!
15. Ravel – park on the D203. Waymarked green. A 5 hour circular walk, which takes you to Lac Chauvet and the beautiful Cascade de la Barthe.
16. Egliseneuve – Park at the campsite opposite the lake. Follow GR 30 across the river and up the hill to Les Angles and then to La Clide. Just after that you leave GR 30 and follow the green markings to Espinat. You pass Lake de la Fage, Moudeyre and finally Graffaudeix and back to the campsite. Allow 4 hours. This and Walk 14 are good for days when the weather is too unsettled to go higher.
17. The Plomb du Cantal is over an hour by car but don't be deterred. There are many walks, this one is more than worth the effort. The flowers - blue gentians, wind flowers and alpines - are superb and the southern range has fewer people and more wildlife - deer, moufflon and chamois can be seen. Well waymarked from the village of Les Gardes, near St Jacques des Blats. Map and suitable gear essential. 5 hours.
18. To save walking up the hill take the cable car from Le Lioran – they start at 9.30 am, and walk the ridges. Follow GR 400, white and red markings, towards Puy Gros (SW) for spectacular views, flowers and butterflies.
19. Col de Serre – park in front of café. A long spectacular walk, waymarked green, for experienced walkers only. Allow 6 hours. Follow GR 400 south and either climb on to Puy Mary (concrete steps) or take the variant to the ridge, below the summit, and cross the Breche Rolland (a scramble) to the Col de Cabre. From there the path goes down into the valley, with Peyre Arse above and on the left, to La Courbatière and then back to Col de Serre.

There are many more wonderful days out in both the Cantal Mountains and on the Massif de Sancy. For ideas or more information, talk to Di. All houses have walking maps, and you will find she has made alterations, where the route / path has been changed. Times given are walking times, not allowing for stops. For all high level walks proper walking gear is essential.

Birds

About 150 species are officially listed for Auvergne, plus many passage migrants. Most of the following have been seen, plus some unlisted

Alpine accentor	Accenteur alpin	Jay *	Geai des chênes
Barn owl *	Chouette effraie	Kestrel *	Faucon crécerelle
Black kite *	Milan noir	Kingfisher *	Martin-pecheur
Black redstart *	Rougequeue noir	Lapwing	Vanneau huppé
Black woodpecker *	Pic noir	Lesser spotted woodpecker *	Pic épeichette
Blackbird *	Merle noir	Linnet	Linotte mélodieuse
Blackcap *	Fauvette à tête noire	Little grebe *	Grèbe castagneux
Blue tit *	Mésange bleue	Little owl	Chouette chevêche
Bonelli's warbler	Pouillot de Bonelli	Long tailed tit *	Mésange à longue queue
Booted eagle	Aigle botté	Long-eared owl	Hibou moyen-duc
Brambling *	Pinson du nord	Magpie *	Pie bavarde
Bullfinch *	Bouvreuil pivoine	Mallard	Canard colvert
Buzzard *	Buse variable	Marsh tit *	Mésange nonette
Carrion crow *	Corneille noire	Meadow pipit	Pipit farlouse
Chaffinch *	Pinson des arbres	Melodious warbler	Hypolais polyglotte
Chiffchaff *	Pouillot veloce	Middle spotted woodpecker	Pic mar
Cirl bunting*(7.6.07)	Bruant zizi	Mistle thrush *	Grive draine
Citron finch	Venturon montagnard	Montagu's harrier *	Busard cendré
Coal tit *	Mésange noire	Moorhen	Poule d'eau
Common sandpiper *	Chevalier guignette	Nightingale *	Rossignol philomèle
Coot	Foulque macroule	Fengoulet *	Engoulevent d'Europe
Corn bunting	Bruant proyer	Nuthatch *	Sittelle torchepot
Crag martin	Hirondelle de rochers	Peregrine falcon	Faucon pèlerin
Crested tit *	Mésange huppée	Pheasant *	Faisan de chasse
Crossbill	Beccroisé des sapins	Pied flycatcher *	Gobe-mouche noir
Cuckoo *	Coucou gris	Pochard	Fulgule milouin
Curlew	Courlis cendré	Quail	Caille des blés
Dipper *	Cercle plongeur	Raven *	Corbeau grand
Dunnock/hedge sparrow *	Accenteur mouchet	Red kite *	Milan royal
Eagle owl	Hibou grand-duc	Red legged partridge *	Perdrix rouge
Fieldfare *	Grive litorne	Red-backed shrike *	Pie-grièche écorcheur
Firecrest *	Roitelet triple-bandeau	Redpoll	Sizerin flammé
Garden warbler	Fauvette des jardins	Redstart	Rougequeue à front blanc
Garganey	Sarcelle d'été	Redwing *	Grive maivis
Goldcrest *	Roitelet huppé	Reed bunting	Bruant des roseaux
Goldfinch *	Chardonneret élégant	Ring ouzel	Merle à plastron
Goshawk *	Autour des palombes	Robin *	Rouge-gorge
Grasshopper warbler	Locustelle tachetée	Rock bunting	Bruant fou
Great crested grebe *	Grèbe huppé	Rock thrush	Merle de roche
Great grey shrike *	Pie-grièche grise	Rook *	Corbeau freux
Great spotted woodpecker *	Pic épeiche	Serin *	Serin cini
Great tit *	Mésange charbonnière	Short toed eagle	Circaète Jean le blanc
Green sandpiper	Chevalier culblanc	Short toed tree creeper	Grimpereau des jardins
Green woodpecker *	Pic vert	Short-eared owl	Hibou des marais
Greenfinch *	Verdurier	Shoveler	Canard souchet
Grey heron *	Heron cendré	Siskin *	Tarin des aulnes
Grey partridge	Perdrix grise	Skylark	Alouette des champs
Grey wagtail *	Bergeronnette des ruisseaux	Snipe	Bécassine des marais
Grey-headed woodpecker	Pic cendré	Song thrush	Greve musicienne
Hawfinch *	Gros-bec	Sparrow hawk *	Epervier d'Europe
Hazelhen	Gelinotte des bois	Spotted flycatcher	Gobe-mouche gris
Hen harrier *	Busard St Martin	Starling *	Etourneau sansonnet
Hobby *	Faucon hobereau	Stock dove	Pigeon colombin
Honey buzzard *	Bondrée apivore	Stonechat	Traquet pâte
Hoopoe *	Huppe d'Europe	Swallow *	Hirondelle de cheminée
House martin *	Hirondelle de fenêtre	Swift *	Martinet noir
House sparrow *	Moineau domestique	Tawny owl *	Chouette hulotte
Jackdaw *	Choucas des tours	Teal	Sarcelle d'hiver

Birds (continued)

Tengmalm's owl	Chouette de Tengmalm	Woodcock	Bécasse des bois
Tree creeper *	Grimpereau des bois	Woodlark	Alouette lulu
Tree sparrow	Moineau friquet	Wren *	Troglodyte
Tufted duck	Fuligule morillon	Wryneck	Torcol formillier
Turtle dove	Tourterelle des bois	Yellow hammer *	Bruant jaune
Wall creeper	Tichodrome échelette		
Water pipit	Pipit spioncelle	<i>The following have also been seen:</i>	
Water rail	Râle d'eau	unidentified gulls/ terns	
Wheatear *	Traquet motteux	Collared dove	
Whinchat	Traquet tarier	Black stork	
White wagtail *	Bergeronnette grise	Crane	
Whitethroat *	Fauvette grisette	Sand martin	
Willow tit	Mésange boréale	Griffon vulture! (presumably a vagrant from the Tarn Gorges)	
Willow warbler	Pouillot fitis	Redshank (in breeding plumage, Lac Crégut, 13.6.02)	
Wood pigeon *	Pigeon ramier	Cormorant (with grebes on Etang de Majonenc)	
Wood warbler	Pouillot siffleur	Osprey (in autumn, several, usually fishing)	
Woodchat shrike	Pie-grièche à tête rousse		

Mr C Bouchardy, naturalist and author, writes that on the Massif du Sancy...

from April, the craters and cliffs come alive with returning birds, including some of the rarest and most beautiful species. The Sancy is one of the last bastions of the rock thrush, a small, shy member of the genus, with blue head, red tail and vent and a white rump. At least ten pairs have been counted there on rocky escarpments and scree close to grassland.

The ring ouzel, another total migrant, black with a large white crescent on its breast, nests at over 1,000 metres in pine woods bordering pasture. The alpine dunnoek, citron finch or rare wall creeper are more difficult to spot than commoner species such as chats, siskins, pipits and larks. The linnet, black redstart and wheatear are found on the high plateaux, wet land shelters meadow pipit, curlew and snipe.

The diversity of birds of prey deserves special mention, with sparrow hawk, goshawk, red kite, black kite, honey buzzard, buzzard, booted eagle, Montagu's harrier and short toed eagle (Circaetus gallicus, largest bird of prey in the region, a snake eater with a 170 cm wingspan). The black woodpecker has spread slowly and you can hear its powerful call among the hundred year old beeches.

He does not mention hen harriers which in spring and summer can be watched from the car near La Godivelle where one June evening in 1995 the Joneses saw more than 30 at the same time. As a comparison, according to The Field, only eight pairs bred in England that year.

Black kites, now extinct in Britain though common scavengers in medieval towns, are slowly regaining numbers in Auvergne. I cannot verify this personally, but apparently, a good place to see them is on the refuse tip at Issoire, although the Truyère gorges may prove pleasanter.

In winter 2009, we watched a rare wall creeper close-to on the walls of St Nectaire church.

Montagne de la Serre, SW of Clermont, run by LPO (like the RSPB), 1 August to 15 November. On one of the main lines of passage for migrating birds; bird observation, audio visuals, exhibits, information.

The birdwatching point at the **Col de Prat de Bouc** near Murat/Plomb du Cantal operates in late summer/autumn.

Mammals

Bats are fairly abundant though I cannot say what sorts we have. Even the most confirmed townsman can tell a budgie from a swan yet who recognises the dozen or more species of bat found in Northern Europe? Certainly not me, though I do find them interesting. We have at least three varieties in the roof that take flight at different times before dusk. Post script: Thanks to Lesley Whiteside (yet again) I have now learned more about European bats & will be adding to this brief note accordingly.

Deer can be seen from time to time, most often running across the road. We suffer from both red and roe deer in the vegetable garden. The antlers in the Longère were cast in our field behind the house in March 2006, in 2007 the same stag had 12 points.

There are **mouflon** in the mountains. The only time we have seen them close up was a spring evening when we were returning across the newly opened Col Croix St Robert. The high ground was white with a late fall of snow. Ahead of us, animals jumped onto the road, ran into the field on our left and watched us warily but let us drive within twenty yards. It was a group of a dozen rams, beautiful with their brown coats, a whitish patch on their sides and great, curled horns. Moufflon are primitive sheep.

Chamois only appeared on the Sancy range quite recently, travelling from the southern massif spontaneously. Who knows why this sudden migration occurred? Maybe they were too numerous in the south. We have seen groups of chamois on both ranges when walking there.

Wild boar are both clever and very shy. Visitors report seeing something shadowy, like a big grey dog, crossing the road ahead of their car at night. Are there still wolves here, they ask? Almost certainly boar. We have seen them at dusk in the Rhue Gorge and our neighbours once lost all their potatoes. Boar's presence is clear enough: look for areas of ground turned over in the search for food. In winter their tracks are often identifiable because their tummies leave a groove in deeper snow. In September 2002, a 90 kg boar was shot a hundred yards behind our house.

Marmots are found on both northern and southern massifs.

Dormice are not timid and may come into houses at night where they cough, scratch, clog-dance, wheeze, chew and crash about like kangaroos. Adult head and body length is 12 cm, tail length is 10 cm, and weight up to 180 grams (over 6 ozs, ten times the weight of a house mouse). Nocturnal with big eyes, soft grey fur and very agile, they are charming and pretty but a nuisance indoors where they are noisy and may cause damage. Dormice get fat in summer, sleep from November to spring, waking up slim again. There are also the smaller, brown hazel dormice, but I have never seen one. "Dormouse" is a misnomer as they are not mice and have no connection with doors. The name comes from the same root as "dormir", to sleep.

Pine and beech martens are seen from time to time and in the winter of '96/7, one killed all our hens. Guests staying in the Sweet Little House have often watched pine martens from the bedroom window.

Stoats generally turn white in winter & are then known as ermine. Visitors at the SLH watched one on 7.12.2000 and I see white stoats most winters from my office window. There are also weasels which specialise in hunting rat-taupiers underground.

We see **red squirrels** occasionally. With their tufty ears and bushy tails they are much more appealing than greys which have not reached Auvergne. Since pine martens have been protected, their numbers have increased considerably, very much to the detriment of red squirrels which they catch.

Reptiles & amphibians: the most commonly seen snakes are grass snakes - *couleuvres*. There are adders too, which are very shy, and two sorts of lizard. We have two sorts of frog and huge toads. Another interesting amphibian is the salamander, like a large black newt with vivid yellow splotches.

Farm livestock

Cattle: the local breed is the **Salers** (*sal'air*), red with lyre shaped horns, through originally black. Triple purpose, they were used as draft animals until very recently. Today, they produce meat and milk. Salers cheese is similar to Cantal but can only be made within this area from the milk of Salers cows at grass, which means from about April to October, making it available from summer to spring. The breed numbers 180,000 - by comparison, there are over a million Limousins.

Another mostly beef breed, **Aubracs**, can be seen on higher ground - there is a fine herd by the road to La Godivelle and another in summer on the east of the Pont de Clamouze. Their heartland is further south. Bulls are frequently almost black, the biscuit coloured cows look very fetching with black points - nose, ears, eyes, feet, tail. They are reputedly hardier than Salers and well suited to the highest grazing land. The breed numbers some 80,000.

Dairy cattle: **Montbeillard** cows are red and white blotched, like Ayrshires. The commonest dairy breed, their milk is used for cheese making. Another widespread minor breed, the **Abondance**, originates from the Alps; cows have a slightly striped brownish red body with a white face. The occasional pale grey cow is probably an Avoriaz. Spotty cows are generally Normande crosses.

An endangered local breed, the **Ferrandaise**, was reduced to only 160 cows in 1978, numbers have now crept back to 550, but many blood-lines have been lost. They are red and white or mottled.

Until quite recently, both cows and steers were the universal draught animals. Nowadays, hefty oxen can be seen pulling their carts at summer events, exhibited by enthusiasts. Working cattle were shod with oval iron shoes like the one in the SLH that can occasionally be found at antique fairs. The little sheds (known as "travaux") with pulleys still found in some country villages were for shoeing cattle.

Sheep: principally a dairy breed, white faced **Lacaunes** are the origin of Roquefort and most French sheep's cheese. Said to number some 800,000. Unsurprisingly, they look quite like a Friesland with a white face and pink skin. Similar but somewhat stockier are the **Blanc du Massif Central**, or BMC for short, the second commonest breed in the mountains, after the **Bizet**, which are black sheep with a broad white face stripe, though their fleece tends to turn ginger in the sun; rams are horned, ewes polled. There are said to be 150,000 Bizets. Looking like BMCs, Limousin sheep are not really local but are common in northwest Cantal. In southwest Cantal are the **Causses du Lot** with white faces and striking black eye patches like pandas. The handsome pure black polled sheep are **Noires du Velay**, population 40,000. Last comes the speckle-faced **Rava**, also numbering 40,000, found mostly in the higher mountains.

Though not strictly local, there are three rare breeds, the Raïole, Caussenarde des Garrigues and Rouge du Rousillon which are slowly recovering from the brink of extinction.

All sheep in France have to have a personal ID number on an ear tag. In Britain, numbering is only required for cattle through there unpopular are moves afoot to make implanted chips compulsory.

Auvergne also has one breed of goat, the **Chèvre du Massif Central**, reportedly affectionate and mischievous. Not how I'd describe a goat. The commoner Grivette is an Alpine breed. In poultry, there's the **Bourbonnais**, a black turkey, and other fowl (including the **Coq du Pêche** whose feathers are used for tying trout flies), geese, ducks and rabbits, as well as a donkey, the **Ane du Bourbonnais**, black with a white muzzle, and the small strong **Auvergne** horse, only 80 remain.

Taking up the rear as it were, is the **Cul Noir** (black bum) a stately pig which has what you'd expect with a name like that.

Dragonflies & Damselflies are very difficult to identify without a net to catch (& release) them but at watery places you will see some brightly-coloured obvious ones.

For the uninitiated, **damselflies** generally carry their wings folded backwards along their bodies when at rest and are smaller than dragonflies.

Bright blue - Common Blue

Bright ruby red - Small Red

Bright green - Emerald

Electric/peacock blue, looks much more substantial with dark brown wings, hovering, over the water - Beautiful Demoiselle

Among the **dragonflies** (wings held outwards)

The wasp-like markings of yellow and black - Club-tailed Dragonfly

Red-orange, not very big - Darters

Very pale blue/grey body - Skimmers

The largest are the Hawkers

Male with paired blue, pear-shaped spots along his body - Hairy Dragonfly

Female with paired yellow spots; these are the earliest in the season

Later, the Brown Hawker, with amber wings and the Emperor, male very blue, female very green.

There are far more in July & August but this list may help you begin to appreciate them.

Butterflies are very closely linked to the flora, soil type and altitude

IN JUNE

Skippers:

*Safflower Skipper (*Pyrgus fritillarius*) - both dull brown with white markings

Large Skipper (*Ochlodes venatus*)

Small Skipper (*Thymelious sylvestris*) - Both orange brown

Dingy Skipper (*Erynnis tages*)

Whites *Black-veined (*Aporia crategi*) - the one most seen here - almost transparent

Small (*Pieris rapae*) - underside yellowish

Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) - male bright yellow, females are creamy yellow

Blues:

*Common (*Polymmatius icarus*) male is blue, female is brown

Idas (*Lycaeides idas*) - male deep blue

IN MAY

Orange Tip (*anthocharis ardamines*) - goes with Lady's Smock

Small Copper (*Lycaena phlacas*) 2.2 - 2.7, orange with dark brown spots & brown edges

Green Veined White (as above) (*Pieris napi*)

Fritillary unidentified, also

Wall Brown, (as above)

Fritillaries (very hard to distinguish):

Silver-washed (*argynnis paphia*) - is the largest, up to 7 cm wingspan & bright orange, common

*Spotted (*Melitaea didyma*) - is a red-orange, about 4 cm

*Heath (*mellicta athalia*)

*Meadow (*Mellicta parthenoides*) - both very similar, as are

Niobe (*argynnis niobe*) &
High Brown (*Argynnis adippe*)

Of the Browns:

- *Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*) - very common. Dark brown with eyespot on each forewing.
- *Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*) - could be confused with a fritillary except that the underside has a row of eyespots.
- *Dryad (*Minois dryas*) - dark brown with 2 large, blue-centred eyespots on each forewing
- *Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*) - dark brown, with several, yellow-ringed eyespots on the underside. Very fond of bramble. Slow flier.
- Woodland Ringlet (*Erebia medusa*) - on GR30 both sides of Godivelle. Bigger & prominent eyespots (4) on each wing.
- Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*) - is much smaller, about 2.5 cm. Has orange/red row of crescents at outer edge of each wing.
- Smallest (very tiny) is:
- Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*) - bright orange, fades with age.

Assorted other Butterflies:

- Marbled White (*Melonargia galathea*) - black with large white spots, about 5-5.5 cm.
- White Admiral (*Ladoga camilla*) - brown/black, white band through middle of each wing, to 6 cm.
- Green hairstreak - plentiful in May at La Borie.
- Small Tortoiseshell (*aglais urticae*) - probably the one everyone knows with orange-red ground colour, black markings and edged with blue crescents.
- Red Admiral (*Vanessa Atlanta*) - black with red bands and white spots.
- Purple Emperors (*Apatura iris*) & Lesser Purple Emperors are regular summer visitors
- And just once, in 2004, a very rare variant Lesser Purple Emperor
- We also see swallowtails, Camberwell (& other) beauties.

Moths

Many and varied, day and night flying, most of which are hard to identify.

- *The Chimney Sweeper - black with thin white stripe at the tip of forewing, very plentiful in the field
- Yellow Shell - like a small shell on the seashore - lives up to its name
- Garden Carpet
- *Beautiful yellow underwing
- 6-spot Burnet - black with red spots.
- Hummingbird Hawkmoth - the common sort seen hovering, sipping nectar.
- Occasionally, Broad-bordered Bee Hawkmoth which are larger furry ones
- Also *Convolvulus* hawk, Privet hawk and Clifden Nonpareil

* seen in field at La Borie

Beetles by Tom Eccles

The variety of habitat in this part of Auvergne, with its vast tracts of grassland, grazing livestock, mountain streams and woodland supports a rich and diverse beetle fauna. Many of the species are characteristic of mountain regions or higher altitude.

Unlike butterflies, beetles often go unnoticed even though they are all around us, but the occasional emergence swarm of a species or a casual intruder scuttling across the patio will sometimes attract our curiosity.

The following is the result of my (not very thorough) entomological investigation of this delightful locality during two memorable holidays; the first in April 2002 and the second in June 2005. It attempts to give an indication of some of the more conspicuous species which the interested naturalist may come across in the course of his or her rambles.

The first species *Pyllopertha horticola* was found in abundance in the garden of the "Sweet Little House" in June. It is a chafer of the family Scarabaeidae which feeds as a larva on the roots of grasses. It may occur as an emergence swarm which synchronises the availability of mates. It flies readily in warm sunshine and like all beetles it is completely harmless.

The Blue Stag Beetle, *Platycerus capreae*, is quite rare occurring throughout Europe in areas of high altitude. It is much smaller than the commoner Stag Beetle, but has a similar life history, spending its early stages as a larva in rotten wood, probably of ash.

I came across three examples: one crawling across a path, one resting on a fence paling and another under a stone. It does not occur in Britain.

Dictyoptera aurora is another mountain species. It is a handsome velvety brick-red colour. In Britain it occurs only in Scotland.

Saperda scalaris is a strikingly marked longhorn beetle, one of many species to be found hereabouts. Like most longhorn beetles, it is attracted to recently felled timber where it lays its eggs and undergoes its metamorphosis. It is a ready flier. The present specimen settled on a fallen cherry tree by the stream near the junction of the road from "Sweet Little House" and the main road as I was watching the activities of another longhorn beetle *Xylotrechus rusticus*.

Carabus auronitens is a large handsome ground-beetle which is nocturnal usually, but sometimes active in the day-time on hot days. It is one of several *Carabus* species to be found here. The others are *C. monilis*, *C. nemoralis*, *C. problematicus* and *C. cancellatus*. The latter is a diurnal species (not found in Britain.) which may be found running about on the turf on the Puy de Sancy.

Chrysocloa is a leaf beetle which occurs in damp meadows on knapweed and other compositae. The example illustrated is an unusual multi-coloured "rainbow" variety. It is usually a sombre dark blue or even black. It is not recorded from Britain.

MANY THANKS TO LESLEY WHITESIDE FOR STARTING THESE PAGES ON DRAGONFLIES, DAMSELFLIES, BUTTERFLIES AND MOTHS, SUBSEQUENTLY ADDED TO BY DI.

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO TOM ECCLES WHO WROTE THE ABOVE ARTICLE ON BEETLES & PROVIDED THE SUPERB BEETLE PHOTOS ON OUR WEB SITE

Auvergne, France

Auvergne is a “Region”. It has precisely defined boundaries (like Scotland), rather than vague ones like “The West Country”. It is divided into four Departments - Allier, Pûy de Dôme, Cantal and Haute Loire - which are equivalent to counties.

Condat is a “Commune”, somewhere between a parish and an Urban or Rural District. It has a mayor and an elected council.

Paris is split into “Arrondissements” which are administrative areas. Each Arrondissement is divided into four quarters - “Quartiers”

There are some 20 regions. Others are Provence, Brittany, Ile de France (Greater Paris), etc..

France has nearly 100 departments, arranged alphabetically and numbered.

01 (Ain), 02 (Aisne)... 14 (Calvados), 15 (Cantal)... 46 (Lot)... 84 (Vaucluse)... 89 (Yonne)...

91 to 95 are Paris departments. The department is shown by the two last numbers on a car registration plate (ours is 484 HM 15 because we live in Cantal) and the first two numbers in a postcode (ours is 15190).

Cars in France are registered to the owner, so when you buy a second-hand car, you get a new registration number for it, with the last two letters showing the Department you live in.

One way to pass the time as you drive along is to spot where cars come from, starting at 01. Corsican cars are a bit thin on the ground though.

Advertisement

The French live longer, work shorter hours, have more holidays, enjoy better health especially in old age and have higher disposable incomes than the British.

Income tax is lower and the road fund licence was abolished in 1999, but social security charges are much higher (there are actually three entirely separate charges - health paid to a health fund, pension paid to a pension fund and social security proper paid to the state contributions agency). Someone paying 6% in the UK would pay 23% here. This is offset by an excellent health service, an income-related pension entitlement, and cheaper cars/wine/petrol/diesel/food/etc.. Almost half of all households pay no income tax, but it’s hard to make true comparisons. The two taxes introduced to fill the social security black hole (CSG and CRDS) now raise substantially more than income tax (and make me wince when they hit the doormat in October.)

It is illegal to write a cheque if you do not have sufficient money in your bank account...

It is common to write a cheque and not be asked for a guarantee. On more than one occasion we have ordered goods from a firm that had never heard of us and found the goods appeared before the invoice. Our Residence Card (Carte de Séjour) is enough for us to enter most European countries, (other than Britain which requires a passport).

Except for the drivers, France is a good country to live in.

A separate note about the health service will be added as so many people ask about it.

A house in France

As we are often asked about buying a house in France, this is what we say. France is a big country and the first and most difficult question to settle is where to settle. Visit your chosen area at several times of year - spring may be blissful but summer choked with mosquitoes or too hot to sit outside. Our friends in Provence stay indoors in July and August and have double glazing to keep the heat out. Another essential is how will you and friends & family get to and fro?

Is the house to be a holiday home or do you plan to live there sooner or later? So what kind of house? The SLH may be fine for a holiday but would not be suitable as a permanent home as it lacks space for an office, workshop, garage, junk store, etc.. Broadly, it costs the same to live in France as in the UK, so you will need the same income. Think very carefully if you're intending to work. The rules are not the same here. Expect to pay more than half your income in tax and social security charges.

Some areas have substantial foreign or just British communities which can be a help and provide a source of contacts, conversation and friends. You might want to join a club or group. In Apt (Provence), dozens of English speakers get together informally every Saturday morning at a big café in the main square to chat, swap books and generally compare notes.

With houses, the sums are not the same. You should not bank on making a profit. Roofs are expensive (€10,000 to replace a small one), septic tanks are not. Electricity and plumbing cost the same as in the UK. Tradesmen are as elusive here as in the UK. You may find a house for €15,000 but have to spend €150,000 on it and unlike the UK, you may not get your money back, partly because the French regard housing as a wasting asset rather than as a retirement fund.

If you have decided on Auvergne, there is very little property for sale in this part of Cantal - it took us over a year to find Laquairie. Issoire is a good starting point with several estate agents. Laforet is in the main square, Place de la République. Agence Gambetta is just off the main square, in rue Gambetta, and at Arcades Immobilier Julie Legrange speaks good English. Clermont also has plenty of estate agents. The department of Allier is 1½ hours nearer to the Channel ports and very pleasant too. Prices are still reasonable there, except around Vichy.

Speaking French makes a huge difference and in our view is essential to become part of the community, get your phone connected, go to the doctor, ask what pounti is or sort out your insurance.

To be continued...

From *The Countryman*, Summer '95

Brion's autumn cattle fair starts early. As day broke, deals were being celebrated, maybe regretted, over a glass of wine in one of the stone barns pressed into service as cafés and restaurants. You need something to keep out the early chill at 4,000 feet. By eight o'clock the dealing is well under way; people outnumber the 400 cattle. Brown and white Montbeillard dairy cows are tied in lines with rope head collars, their bells left at home; two Friesians stand out as black and white impostors. Beef cows are mostly chestnut red Salers, their elegant horns sweeping up and back; the sprinkling of other beef breeds includes hardy, oatmeal coloured Aubracs, their eyes, noses and ears fetchingly black. The remaining cattle are youngsters, straight from the mountains; reared as nature intended on nothing but milk and wild pasture, they find ready buyers to turn them into the finest beef. The backdrop of mountains apart, the men in waterproofs, hats and wellies could be at a Dartmoor sale. And the prices? "Middling".

Down below on the fertile plains, farmers are as prosperous as their Norfolk counterparts. Huge irrigated fields grow anything that thrives in Britain plus sunflowers, maize and, of course, vines. Some growers specialise in walnuts, asparagus or garlic. There is no cultivation back in the mountains; hill cow subsidies may be more generous than Britain's and livestock farmers get other help as well, yet empty cottages and farms tell of a continuing drift from the land. Young folk look elsewhere for work, even though Paris has a more sympathetic attitude to agriculture than London. Apart from climate, terrain and the EEC, Auvergne's livestock farmers have other worries.

Most perplexing is the fragmentation of their land. Property is left equally between children, a tradition which has created an enduring problem. Two hundred years ago the village of Thuret's 1,500 acres were in 5,800 parcels. Determined attempts by government to consolidate holdings have had success on the lowlands though not in the hills where farmers spend hours moving stock from one little field to another a mile away. Some fields have no water or difficult access, others are simply too small to bother with. So it is that land grazed since the last ice age is taken over by wild broom, then scrub, then forest.

Where a mole makes a dozen neat heaps of soil, a "rat taupier" or rat-mole makes a hundred. Brown rodents 5½ inches long with a 2½ inch tail, small ears and eyes, they eat roots, in the garden munching their way underground along the rows of vegetables. Touch the carrot plant that looks limp and it falls over, revealing an empty hole where the carrot should have been. In the fields, soil from their hills contaminates the hay and damages machinery. Like voles and lemmings they often increase to plague proportions.

Until quite recently, farming families would move in summer to high farmsteads known as “burons”. Their dairy cows cropped the sweet mountain pastures; milk was turned into St Nectaire or Cantal cheese. At the beginning of this century there were a thousand active burons, now there are a dozen. Will burons suffer the same fate as Britain's drove roads or the Dartmoor warreners' homes, overgrown and fallen into disrepair yet used within living memory? In spring, all over the Massif Central beef herds are still moved up to the high grazings, a tradition known as the “estive”. In Allanche it is celebrated the last Saturday in May. On their way to the mountains, groups of Salers walk along the main street, tricolour ribbons decorating their horns, bells clanging. Stalls are set up, musicians play, there is a holiday air. First prize in the raffle is a pedigree heifer.

Further south sheep are milked to make Roquefort cheese. In the greener north, flocks contain tens rather than hundreds because of the high cost of fencing small fields. From May to September, on the Puy de Sancy 2,200 ewes, dozens of small flocks run together, are looked after by an old shepherd who lives in a hut with his two dogs for company. Nowadays few people are willing to spend months alone, with no doctor or café nearby, without even a television. Snow can dust the peaks from September, the last drifts disappearing in July. Cantal, in mid Auvergne, has grazing land higher than Ben Nevis, but in other ways, the scenery, the wild flowers, the superb walking, even the rainfall, it is like Devon, on a grander scale; the National Park, eighty miles north to south, is Europe's largest. From a farming point of view, a Devon dairy farmer is likely to be in his thirties, single handed and milking eighty cows or more. His Cantal counterpart is older, has half the number of cows and can count on family help. Half a dozen men and women with wooden rakes gleaning the last wisps of hay for the baler is a common sight. A direct result of small herds is that animal health seems better. In spite of cattle standing immobile all winter, it is unusual to see a lame cow. Reportedly the average British dairy cow is culled at six, many Cantal herds have twenty year olds.

Little artificial fertiliser is used. In the warm summer days, grass thick with flowers and herbs makes quickly into sweet, green hay. A third cut is often taken as late as the end of September. Cows graze the aftermaths dotted with purple autumn crocus before coming in to winter in traditional stone shippens. Partly to avoid keeping the family at the other end of the building awake all night, the cows' collars and bells are hung up in lines on the wall. Enough hay for winter plus a bit spare is stacked in the loft above. Five months cattle spend, tied by a chain round the neck, before hurling themselves ecstatically out again onto the freshly green spring grass.

Perhaps a cow with a bell round her neck, spending the days looking after her calf while eating gentians and wild thyme is not the most efficient of systems. But it produces food worth eating, gives employment in an area where there is little else, it is natural, sustainable and a joy to see.

FAQs

Why do they put juniper bushes in strange places with coloured paper on?

Because there has been a wedding. Decorated evergreen trees are used to mark the route and the house. Modern fertility rite?

What are the tall fir trees for in front of some houses?

One of the occupants is an *élu* (elected representative), probably on the town or county council.

Why do some cars have pink tulle on their aerials?

Because the car was at a wedding. Cars are decorated with tulle bows before they drive in convoy, horns hooting, to the reception.

Why do cows have bells?

Because their horns don't work.

What breed is Bleuet?

She's a "grizzle" Border terrier born in April 2001. Bleuet is French for cornflower. For those who remember her, Clover, the senior terrier, was sadly put down in March 2006 aged over 16 and is buried in the sunny bank just beyond the washing line with her friend Nut and a small, short-lived cat that fascinated her.

Why is there a railway station at Coindre in the Rhue valley?

There isn't. At least it's not a railway station, even though it says Paris-Orléans Railway Company on it. It was built as a hydro-electric generating station, presumably using a station design.

What is the difference between gendarmes and police?

The police come under the Ministry of the Interior (like the Home Office) and are found in towns, on motorways, etc.. Gendarmes come under the Ministry of Defence and cover rural areas. The two forces overlap and work closely together. "Gendarmes" is a corruption of "gens d'armes" meaning armed people. Police in towns come under the local authority.

When do we go on holiday?

In spring and autumn usually. When we are away, we like to arrange house-sitters who have the Longère for a couple of weeks free of charge and keep an eye on the hens in return. So if the idea appeals, let us know.

What breed are the hens?

Our several French hens are Marans, an old breed from Western France. Their beautiful dark brown eggs are unique. Ours are the old 'noir-cuivrée' (copper-black) type. Shell colour is genetic, unlike yolk colour which is due to diet. See <http://marans-club.chez-alice.fr/accueil.htm>

More FAQs to follow as the editor has time.

Departure

it's not that we want you to go, but on the day of your departure, do please leave by 10 a.m., so that we have enough time to make everything as welcoming for our next visitors as we hope it was for you.

Please leave the house clean and tidy, as is customary with rented houses. We care very much about this.

Make sure you haven't inadvertently left anything of ours in your car or rucksacks, especially maps and walking books, or accidentally exchanged anything (like pillows).

We hope you enjoyed your stay in Cantal and wish you a safe and pleasant journey.

And lastly, don't forget to leave the key!

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*Any corrections or updates, or anything that could be added
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