



A St. Jacques trail marker in Montpellier is embedded into the street.



Hikers enjoy rolling landscapes dotted with stone walls and rock outcrops along the Chemin de St. Jacques pilgrimage trail in southern France.

Following the Pilgrims' Way France: Discoveries on and off the trail

'Walking through southern France is how I described the theme of my trip to the Languedoc region, yet no one could quite envision the journey I was on.'



EDITOR'S NOTE:

In a three-part series, freelance travel writer Ann Yungmeyer shares her adventures in France.

First, she is off-the-beaten path in rural southern France where she walks a historic pilgrim trail.

Next in the series, she uncovers her dream of the perfect gift – shopping in Paris during the off season.

And third, she tips her glass to French wine-makers.

■ For information, visit www.sunfrance.com.

Montpellier, the closest gateway for air travel and TGV train service from Paris, has an art museum (Musee de Favre), shopping and good restaurants.

FIRST IN A SERIES

■ PHOTOS BY ANN N. YUNGMEYER ■

SOUTHERN, France – Languedoc-Roussillon in France – the land of olives, wine and Mediterranean cuisine – is also a region of rich cultural heritage and historic pathways.

With a small group of travelers, I set out to discover the Chemin de St. Jacques (Camino de Santiago), an ancient pilgrim path that leads through France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the resting place of St. James the Apostle.

Various legends exist about St. James (Jacques) who was known as a protector and patron of Christianity. Beginning in the Middle Ages, pilgrims forged pathways to his shrine, inspired by religious, spiritual and geopolitical reasons. Now a World Heritage site, Chemin de St. Jacques is traveled by modern day “pilgrims” for spiritual and recreational purposes.

Our trip guide, Maryse Prior, who was making her own pilgrimage on Chemin de St. Jacques, transported us to the trail. Prior and her friends hike one week on the trail every year to advance along the 1,600-kilometer trek to Compostela. I equated this to “section hiking” on the Appalachian Trail, but Prior said, “We’re ramblers, because the journey is a way to discover rural France at a pace that we can really take it in.”

We began our walk as ramblers, too, on one of the main pathways to Compostela, which begins in Le Puy-en-Velay and passes through Lozere, the northernmost part of Languedoc.

The historic path leads over rolling landscapes dotted with stone fences and savage rock outcrops. The scenery and gentle contours of the high plateaus reminded me of Southwest Virginia’s Grayson Highlands, if not the moors of Scotland.

Remarkably, 30,000 travelers cross the granite hills and high prairie every pilgrimage season, our outfitter guide from Aubrac Outfitters told us. Yet Lozere remains one of the least populated departments of France, “undiscovered, even by the French,” he said. It was mid-October, and none of us had brought enough layering to keep out the chill of a bitter wind that whipped across the moors. We warmed up only when we arrived at our lunch stop – an ancient sheepherder’s hut called a buron, with a blazing fire and enormous country meal of ham, sausages and the regional potato specialty, aligot.

The pilgrimage route is marked by the symbol of St. Jacques, the scallop shell,

and is integrated into France’s Grand Randonnee trail system. The path varies from grassy to pebbled to tarmac, passing through forestland, pastoral countryside, hamlets and villages.

For hikers who want to walk without the burden of a heavy backpack, travel transport companies can be hired to move baggage between stops. Places to stay along the way include hotels, chambres d’hote (bed-and-breakfasts), gites d’etape (dormitory-style lodging) and pilgrim refuges. Churches and town halls will stamp a “passport,” a pilgrim’s credential carried to record the pilgrimage and gain access to particular lodging.

History and culture abound for those who pause to discover the centuries-old bridges, monasteries, Roman churches and sanctuaries that played a part in the early pilgrims’ passage. Hikers come upon curious relics: stone crosses built for protection on the outskirts of villages, wind vanes symbolic of a legendary beast and community ovens in the tiniest hamlets.

Taking a few days off from hiking is worthwhile to explore some of the classified “grand sites” such as Gorges du Tarn, a meandering limestone canyon of the Tarn River. Our visit was highlighted with a stay along the river’s edge at the 15th century Chateau de la Caze, a place to wander back in time with fairytale towers, cobblestoned flooring, ancient stonework and candlelit foyers.

Nearby, the medieval village of St. Enimie, designated as one of the most beautiful villages in France, is full of legend and charm. South of the Tarn, the Cevennes Mountains, made famous by Robert Louis Stevenson’s adventure of which he wrote “Travels with a Donkey,” are popular for trekking.

St. Guilhem-le-Desert in Herault is an architectural gem, built around an abbey of early Romanesque style. Nestled in a valley, the idyllic village has artist studios



An 11th century abbey located in St. Guilhem-le-Desert.

and boutiques to browse, and the area offers convenient day hiking along Chemin de St. Jacques (a southern route which begins in Arles) with extraordinary views from the valley heights.

We followed the copper scallop shells marking Chemin de St. Jacques through Montpellier’s old city to end our tour. Over a farewell café, Prior proudly showed us her pilgrim passport with the collection of stamps indicating that she had reached a milestone, crossing the Spanish border this year.

The year 2010 marks an exciting “jubilee” year, she reminded us. It’s a holy year when the traditional day of St. Jacques’ celebration, July 25, falls on a Sunday. Special events take place along the route, highlighting traditions of the pilgrimage, troubadours, Roman art and the customs of the Middle Ages.

So Prior continues her journey, counting down 865 kilometers to reach Santiago de Compostela. For the rest of us, it doesn’t have to be a pilgrimage; walking segments of the historic path that binds the past and future is rewarding enough. The experience offers a chance to see and feel “la France profonde” – the heart of old France – where rural culture and authentic ways seem to stand still in time.



Gites d’etape or bed-and-breakfast-style lodgings accommodate hikers along the Chemin de St. Jacques.



Ancient stone crosses are found in many small villages along the pilgrimage path.

NOTEBOOK

Explore the spiritual side of fly-fishing

HENDERSONVILLE, N.C.

– Step into a stream and discover the spiritual side of fly-fishing in Western North Carolina on April 25-28 during the fourth annual Kanuga Fly-fishing Retreat.

The event begins with two days of instruction from Kevin Howell, winner of the 2007 Fly-fishing Masters national championship and a certified casting instructor with the Federation of Fly Fishers. Participants will then hone their skills in the nearby Davidson River, one of *Trout Unlimited* magazine’s Top 100 rivers in the nation.

A valid North Carolina fishing license is required for the retreat and can be purchased in advance at www.ncwild-life.org.

For more information, visit www.kanuga.org or call (828) 692-9136.

Nashville fest features artists and jewelers

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – The Sixth Annual Temple Arts Festival will be held April 10-11 in Nashville. The juried exhibition and sale features the collectible works of more than 50 professional artists and jewelers from across the country.

Saturday activities begin at 5:30 p.m. with a Collectors’ Cocktail Hour for holders of Advance Purchase Certificates of \$250 plus per person toward the purchase of art and/or jewelry during the show.

A Patrons’ Party for holders of certificates of \$125 plus per person toward purchases will be held at 6:30 p.m. There will be a live auction for certificate holders at 7 p.m., and a Gallery Opening Dessert Gala at 8 p.m. which is open to the public for \$15 per person.

Sunday’s events, from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., are open to the public with free admission.

The festival will be held at The Temple, Congregation Ohabai Shalom, 5015 Harding Road next to Belle Meade Mansion.

For more information, call (615) 352-7620, e-mail taf@templenashville.org or visit www.TempleArtsFestival.com.

'Antiques on the Row' is theme of show

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn.

– “Antiques on the Row” is the theme of the 36th Annual Houston Museum Antiques Show and Sale. Thirty dealers from across American will come together Feb. 26-28 to sell antiques of every kind.

Show proceeds will benefit Chattanooga’s House Museum of Decorative Arts.

An appraisal fair on Feb. 27 offers a chance for the public to bring all types of antiques except jewelry for a professional appraisal.

The theme refers to Warehouse Row, a newly renovated complex in the heart of downtown Chattanooga which combines upscale retail establishments, office space and dining facilities.

The show honors the late Anna Safley Houston, whose collections of antique glass and ceramics – considered the finest in the world – are on display in the museum.

More information is available by calling (423) 267-7176 or by visiting www.thehouston-museum.com.

Saint Louis museum hosts Family Sundays

ST. LOUIS, Mo. – The Saint Louis Art Museum is scheduling Family Sundays, a monthly program of art projects and tours for families.

Specifically designed children ages 3-12 years, the event encourages visitors to explore the museum through free hands-on art activities, tours, performances and artist demonstrations.

Each week’s art activity is planned for all ages. Once a month, the program features a special performance, film or artist demonstration.

For more, call (314) 721-0072 or visit www.slam.org.

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