CROSS COUNTRY

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Today, on the feast of St James, pilgrims converge on his tomb in northwest Spain; TIM SALMON takes one of the ancient paths from the heart of France.

Pilgrim's plod: *penito*, *penites*, *penitent* – a fake conjugation, of course, but it measures precisely the weary trudge of pilgrims' feet squeezed between a too-heavy load and the hard flat ground of a forest track. Three hours out and four to go, the mind empty except for treacherous thoughts of taxis and ice-cold drinks.

We were climbing up out of the valley of the River Lot one hot and humid afternoon, our feet only just emerging from the stiff clasp of pain that envelops them during an hour-long lunch stop, when a car drew up beside us.

"Are you going far?" the driver asked.

"To Conques," I said. For a moment I thought she was going to offer us a lift. "We've come from Le Puy."

"Ah," she said, "you are doing the Chemin de Saint Jacques. Can I ask what you think of the *points d'eau* – the water points?" She was running a project to restore the springs and fountains that punctuated this once teeming medieval thoroughfare to the tomb of St James the Apostle at Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain.

The story of quite how James the Apostle, decapitated by a Roman soldier in Jerusalem in about AD44, came to be buried in northwest Spain is a tall one. But the belief that he was drew millions of people throughout the Middle Ages – Bishop Godescalc of Le Puy reputedly the first in AD950 – to undertake long and hazardous journeys in search of salvation through his good offices. Chaucer's Wife of Bath was one of them.

The route from Le Puy was, in fact, only one of four main routes across France. But its advantage for the modern walker/pilgrim is that it has been incorporated into France's splendid network of long-distance footpaths as the GR65, complete with waymarks, guidebooks and accommodation. And if you are going to do any of it there is no better section than the first. Apart from the logic of beginning at the beginning, Le Puy itself is a most unusual and lovely town, built all over the spiky basalt cores of long extinct volcanoes, and the country that separates it from the great Romanesque abbey of Conques is among the most untamed, unpeopled and untravelled in France.

Small-scale and easily walkable, the centre of old Le Puy clusters round the steep slopes of one of the volcanic plugs, its lofty Renaissance houses making narrow canyons of the cobbled streets and stairways that climb to the roof of the town. Here, at the top of the black lava ribbon of the rue des Tables, is the town's theatrical cathedral, the starting point for all pilgrims. Theatrical in the daring of its position, in its ornate and multi-storeyed facade, and in the great dark bowel of its subterranean entrance, through which you are drawn up into the nave, where, dazzlingly lit in the surrounding gloom, a brilliant white doll is presented to your gaze. This is the much venerated Black Virgin, Notre Dame du Puy – a substitute, in fact: the original was burnt during the French Revolution.

Here we came in the quiet of a Sunday morning to start our journey. We sat for a moment on the cathedral steps, looking out through the dark frame of the gate to the already sunny hills enclosing the town, filled our water bottles at the ancient Fontaine du Choriste, bought a picnic in the place du Pot, where a suntanned *clochard* wished us luck and the shopkeeper asked, “Are you going to Spain?"

"Only Conques," I said, wishing ruefully for a moment that we were.

"You are *bien courageux,* anyway," he said. We stopped for coffee and *croissants* on the corner of the still shuttered rue St Jacques, and then began our climb to the higher ground.

For those who require more ceremony, there is a pilgrims' Mass in the cathedral every morning at 11.15am. In the sacristy you can sign your name in the pilgrims' book and obtain a pilgrims' passport that you can have stamped with a special seal at every overnight halt. And, if you find a priest, you can ask for a special pilgrims' benediction.

Most of the first day was uphill, not a ferocious ascent, but a steady pull from Le Puy's 625m to 1,200m and back to 900m in St Privat d'Allier. In the first innocent hour of excitement and optimism our packs seemed like gossamer, although they must have weighed a full 15kg with water and food. As we rose from the hazy blue bowl of Le Puy to a patchwork plateau of fields, the cathedral bells boomed behind us for early Mass. The sky was wide and high and big clouds drifted across the sun, keeping the temperature cool. The wheat fields were bright with poppies and blue vetch. Larks sang and a woodpecker dipped ahead of us from ash tree to ash tree. Under our feet the ancient lava cobbles of the pilgrims' way were softened with grass. We passed a decapitated cross where other pilgrims had placed their pebbles on the plinth, as custom is.

We passed through hamlets of black rock farms, built of Cyclopean masonry, where 1950s tractors, spindly as water boatmen, waited in the hay dust under low-arched barns. Golden lichenous walls enclosed our path. Yellow rock rose and carmine pinks grew in abundance in the turfy grass, and mats of blue campanula hugged the cliffs of a small ravine. A pine wood

soughed in the wind. Fritillaries and peacock butterflies flitted from thistle to warm stone. A black and scarlet beetle sucked at the scabious.

At lunchtime we lay in a hay field, watching a buzzard as it looked for prey. When we got up to go on, the weight in our packs seemed more leaden than gossamer, and the tops of my feet had begun to ache. "It's my mountain boots," I told myself. "The soles aren't bendy enough." It was that afternoon that we invented the expression "pilgrim's plod" to describe our pace.

The first day set other patterns, too. There were sections of road, but they were never more than little-used lanes connecting tiny hamlets of four or five farms and a few, often derelict, houses. By far the greater part of our route was along footpaths or farm tracks. We saw very few cars and scarcely more people, every one of whom wished us a cheery *bonjour* with the unfailing courtesy of ordinary French people.

We passed pilgrim crosses, squat plain affairs in the middle of a hedge, or elegant ones, carved with the effigy of a pilgrim, recognisable by his insignia: scallop shell, staff, broad-brimmed hat, and cape. We went into the first of many chapels; sturdy, unadorned buildings whose stony lines have been softened by a thousand winters and whose dark recesses seem still to hold the fluttering shades and whispered prayers of thirty generations. It was dedicated to St Roch, patron of pilgrims. In the damp pages of the visitors' book, we, like many others, dedicated our journey – to my parents and my companion Camilla's stepfather, all dead within the past few months – and were overcome by a sudden grief, which I do not think was entirely provoked by personal sorrow.

At night we stayed in small hotels or the walkers' hostels, *gîtes d'étape*. Oh, the bliss of white sheets, hot water and food. The hotels were invariably clean and comfortable; prices ranged from £19.50 to £29 for a double room. The *gîtes* are more primitive and more variable, some offering separate rooms, others only dormitories, but the price is £3–£4 per person. We ate consistently well and sometimes exceptionally so.

One meal stands out. At the Hôtel de la Terrasse in the little backwater town of Saugues: a salad with walnuts and mushrooms from the woods, little balls of sea trout, a choice of cheeses that looked as if they had lived half a century in Rumpelstiltskin's cow byre and, for dessert, a pear poached but still quite firm and slightly chilled, capped by vanilla ice cream, hidden under a fluted bonnet of chantilly with a mint leaf in its crest, the whole set in a warm chocolate sea – for Fr100.

And did it come at the right time! I had been mutinous, ready to burn my boots. We had begun the day suffering, forgotten it all in the joy of early morning above the mist-filled valley of the River Allier and the wild beauty of the chapel and ruined castle of Rochegude, before gritting our teeth for 1,000m down into and up out of the valley. And thus it was every day:

moments of hateful endurance, passages of pure delight.

After Saugues, we were lighter, and getting fitter. We were higher now, 1,000m and upwards. The landscape changed from day to day, from the Gévaudan to the Margéride to the Aubrac. The rock became granite. There were no crops any more, just meadows of sweet-smelling hay and pastures. Beech appeared among the pine trees. Clouds of violets grew in the grass. Then suddenly the trees gave out. Before us, for two days, stretched a boggy moorland waste where thousands of kohl-eyed cows grazed in their stone-walled enclosures. All were accompanied by bulls of powerful dimensions and not always irreproachable character.

We began to make friends with other pilgrims., whom we met in the *gîtes* at night: French families, a Dutchman on his way to Jerusalem, a Belgian couple on horseback on their way back from Compostela, already four months on the road. For a couple of days we found ourselves travelling parallel to a party of evidently fervent pilgrims bearing a wooden statuette of the Virgin Mary on their shoulders. They stopped for an hour at lunchtime to be refuelled by their support vehicles. Whenever we stopped to indulge in pastoral reyerie, they came up behind us singing hymns. We began to feel rather uncharitable.

Partly out of a desire to get away from them, we broke our five-to-six-hour rule. I had reckoned ten such stages of would get us to Conques. And while not exactly a doddle, six hours is perfectly manageable, especially with plenty of stops. When we stepped it up to seven or eight hours, the extra effort proved a severe test of character. "We'll have a short day," we said, "by way of compensation."

We spent the night in the delightful, if slightly barmy, Hôtel de la Route d'Argent in Nasbinals (with another good meal). By morning it was raining. Never mind, we said. Just four hours or so to St Chély. We got to Aubrac, soaked. Someone was drawing grey curtains of rain across the landscape from the northwest. Aubrac was earning its medieval reputation as a land of vast and horrid solitude.

Fortified with hot chocolate and a giant slice of *tarte aux fruits rouges* from Chez Germaine, where a log fire burned and the old lady herself sat doing the books in splendid isolation among her customers, we set off again. For an hour we sloshed along on the edge of a beech wood beside a brown torrent, until I realised we had come the wrong way. I had forgotten that all GR footpaths in France are marked by the same red-and-white paint stripes that had guided us faithfully from Le Puy. Coming out of Aubrac, we had followed the wrong set.

All was not lost. The map showed an alternative route, three or four hours longer, but were we not fit and in good heart? Valiantly we squelched on. The mist came down and I had to remember my compass skills. But two extraordinary things happened. One was finding an

almost perfect Roman road cutting through a huge and dripping forest. And then out of the mist came two black creatures, running. My God, I thought, wolves. Then I saw they were dogs, and fleeing in front of them was a fawn-coloured creature, a young roe deer. We stood stock still as the three raced towards us. Thirty metres away, the deer saw us, veered into wire and stumbled through, weakening. The dogs on its tail caught its leg and it was down, yelping. We thought it was done for and ran towards to it. The dogs took fright, the deer lay scarcely moving. "What shall I do? Should I finish it off?" As I dithered, it silently resurrected itself and limped off into the woods.

When we got to the log fire that Monsieur Magne had thoughtfully lit for his pilgrims in the *gîte* at St Chély, the day, as they say, was declining, and so now was the altitude. Down we went into the valley of the Lot, through chestnut woods and maize fields, to a softer, more indulgent architecture of timber frames and overhanging eaves. St Côme, Espalion, Estaing – beautiful little riverside towns: "the first smile of the south" for pilgrims coming down off the rude heights of the Massif Central. And thence to Conques.

What can one say of Conques? It lies well down on the flank of its hot little valley, reached by a medieval path through a tunnel of greenery. It is a village of steep-roofed, stone-tiled, half-timbered houses. Higgledy-piggledy, one wants to say, in the full Disney sense. Half-ruined, it would have charm. Three-quarters renovated, it does not. Too many geraniums, too much wood stain, and – the real kiss of death for such places – too many *artisans*. Its only *raison d'être* is, and ever was, the abbey, and that is lovely.

It is big for a Romanesque church and that was to accommodate the thousands of pilgrims who flocked to venerate the relics of the girl martyr, Sainte Foy, brought here in the 9th century. Her statue, made in about AD900 of beaten gold and precious stones, is still on display in the abbey's treasury, among many other beauties of early medieval ecclesiastical art.

What moved us was the worn lofty stone of the interior; the thought of the generations of others – tired, joyful, sad, roguish, decent, gentle, vulnerable people – who had been there before us; and hearing two of our jolly fellow walkers singing with the choir in the candlelight, the slow robust cadences of the plainsong resonating among the pillars and the darkening vaults with a kind of bedtime reassurance.

Why had we done it? "Are you principally walkers or is there some reason of belief?" our fountain lady had asked.

"Well," I said, "our parents' deaths seem to have something to do with it. But, as to belief, it's *pas très orthodoxe."*

But there was more to it than that. It had to do with the romance of travelling long distances on foot, by a road that for a thousand years has known only the scuff of human feet and the clip of animal hooves; with the mysterious pleasure of fording the same streams, turning the same stones, breasting the same crests, as generations of our forebears; with the pleasure of being out of doors, hearing the wind and the ticking of the broom pods about to spill their seed; with being just one of God's creatures on the face of the land, with no more complicated purpose than advancing one foot in front of the other. "The simple joy of walking: a trifling freedom in a vain world, but something of essential value to both the spirit and the heart," as the anonymous Frenchman had written in the damp visitors' book at Montbonnet.