

Robert Louis Stevenson once trekked 120 miles through the Cévennes mountains in France, accompanied by a donkey.

Dominic Bliss followed his route by mountain bike

Freewheeling down a forest trail at speed, you're prepared for most eventualities: sharp rocks, slippery roots, overhanging branches, even a sudden blowout. A 500kg bull with very sharp-looking horns is something you seldom picture.

But there it was. Andy, my cycling companion, swerved as the beast swung its natural weapons just inches from his midriff. Several metres behind, I opted for the more cautious approach – I braked to halt, dismounted and edged very slowly past, whispering soothingly and using my bike as a shield. It worked.

Our 120-mile bike ride across the Cévennes mountains in southern France threw up all kinds of bizarre obstacles, both animal and mineral. We encountered climbs so steep and rocky that we were forced to carry the bikes for long sections; we waded through snow up to our knees; we clambered over fallen trees; we teetered down mountainside paths barely fit for goats, brakes groaning; and at one point we fled from a pack of vicious dogs.

Travels without a donkey

This route through the south-eastern foothills of the Massif Central is something of a pilgrimage. Every year more than 12,000 hikers follow the

Treasured highland





While the Stevenson Trail is most popular with hikers, it's permissible to cycle the 120-mile route

Stevenson Trail (Le Chemin de Stevenson) across the most sparsely populated and wildest region of France. It's the route originally traced by author Robert Louis Stevenson (who later wrote *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*) and described in his book *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

To celebrate the 130th anniversary of the publication of his book, we decided to join the pilgrimage. But instead of hiking with a pack donkey, we chose to complete it on mountain bikes.

Stevenson and his famously stubborn ass Modestine took 12 days in all, while we had just four. Also stacked against us was the fact we were heading off in early April while there was still thick snow on the higher slopes. Stevenson completed the inaugural journey in late September 1878, with dry terrain most of the way.

But the Scottish writer didn't have all the advantages. Modestine was there simply to carry his bags, not to transport him. He was to spend many nights sleeping in the open. Before he set out he was warned of 'sudden death in many surprising forms. Cold, wolves, robbers, above all the nocturnal practical joker.' That's why he chose to carry a revolver. We, on the other hand, were fortunate to have accommodation booked for every night, and firearms weren't necessary. But just like Stevenson, as we started our journey, we felt 'as an ox goeth to the slaughter'.

Trains to the start

Arriving at the start of the trail was a feat in itself. Changing trains twice, we travelled by Eurostar and SNCF from London to a town in the middle of the Massif Central called Le Puy-en-Velay, a 12-hour journey in all. Since it's the nearest railway station to Le Monastier-sur-Gazeille, the village Stevenson set off from, this is traditionally the gateway to the route.

Rail travel in France with bikes is a joy compared to the UK. From start to finish it passed without hiccup. We arrived at the Eurostar terminal at London's St Pancras to check in our pre-booked bikes an hour before the train was due to leave. Then, after a 20-minute ride across Paris from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon, we joined the TGV to Clermont-Ferrand, followed by a small local train to Le Puy-en-Velay. Both the TGV and the local trains have hanging bike racks available. Book the bikes in advance and you'll be given a seat right next to the racks, so you can not only keep an eye out for thieves, but also be ready to make a quick exit at your stop.

The following morning needed a quick 12-mile road climb to the start of the trail proper at Le Monastier-sur-Gazeille. Immediately we were faced with a daunting rocky climb. It soon levelled off, but the terrain under foot was rarely easy-going, our tyres scrabbling in the crumbly volcanic stone.

This was the Velay – the first of four regions we would have to cross. It's peppered with extinct volcanoes, and the black and dark red lava stone that erupted from them millions of years ago covers the ground.



Le Gard Tourism, Haute Loire Tourism, D Bliss, A Parkes

“It's one of the least populated regions of Western Europe: 15 people per square kilometre”

Remote countryside

Stevenson's original 1878 route today forms what is known as Grande Randonnée 70 ('Big Hike 70'). France is criss-crossed by over 100 such long-distance off-road paths, covering more than 60,000km in all. Thanks to Stevenson, GR70 is one of the best known.

All GRs are regularly marked with red and white stripes daubed onto rocks and trees, which is just as well, because despite having a detailed map guidebook, it's easy to get lost in these hills. Even if we had needed directions, in April, before the start of the busy summer season, we were lucky to see more than a handful of people all day.

This is one of the least populated regions of Western Europe. One of the *departments* (the French equivalent of counties) we found ourselves in, called the Lozère, is the least populous in the entire country – an average of only



“In Gevaudan in the 18th Century, man-eating wolves killed and partially ate over 100 locals”

A full-suspension mountain bike might slow you down on the plateau sections but will be indispensable on the descents



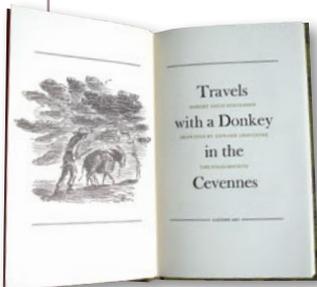
15 souls per square kilometre. Nearby, in the Cantal, there are 3.2 cows to every human being.

It's a demographic anomaly. Parts of the Stevenson Trail really aren't that far from large urban centres. The southern tip is just 35 miles north of Montpellier, the northern tip less than 70 miles south-west of Lyon. But the locals are proud of their detachment from civilisation. Hunkered down with their broadband and satellite TV, they leave the fast living to the city folk, while they get on with farming or forestry.

The first thing I noticed was the lack of young adults. Unless they work on the land or the river, they are forced to head to cities in search of jobs. It's generally accepted that once they reach middle age they will then return with their families to settle.

Plus there's the language. Many of the older inhabitants don't speak French at all, but rather an ancient southern dialect called Occitan, as different from the lingua franca as Jamaican patois is from standard English. French youngsters rarely know what their grandparents are gabbling on about. And the dialect changes with every mountain range you cross. No doubt, had our ears been attuned, we would have noticed the nuances as we left the Velay and crossed into the second region we had to negotiate: the Gevaudan.

Travels with a donkey



Published in 1879, a year after Robert Louis Stevenson made his famous journey, **Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes** is one of the earliest accounts of hiking and camping as a recreational activity. His 120-mile, 12-day

journey through one of the wildest regions in western Europe was, at the time, considered eccentric, bordering on lunacy.

'I was looked upon with contempt, like a man who should project a journey to the moon,' he writes, 'but yet with a respectful interest, like one setting forth for the inclement Pole.'

While **Travels with a Donkey** is a long way from the thrills and spills of his more famous books – such as **Treasure Island** or **Kidnapped** – the story beautifully evokes the isolation and wilderness that Stevenson experienced in the Massif Central. The Scottish writer's frustration with his stubborn, four-legged travel companion, Modestine, lends some comic relief, while the protestant Camisard rebellion (which took place in the Cévennes at the beginning of the 1700s) serves as an important historical backdrop.

Wolves in the night

Here there are further reminders of how isolated one is. Gevaudan is where, in the 18th Century, well before Stevenson and his donkey traced their route, the Beasts of Gevaudan used to roam. They were huge, man-eating wolves that killed, and partially ate, over 100 hapless locals. Their preferred method of dispatch was to tear their victims' throats, leading to rumours of vicious werewolves.

We encountered only three farm dogs – albeit ferocious, slavering ones, apparently intent on sinking their teeth into our behinds. Situations like this always pose a dilemma. Should you stop and calmly try to reason with the beasts? Or should you step on the gas and attempt to outrun them? We fled.

Stevenson himself was, probably very rightly, scared witless of French dogs. 'An animal that I fear more than any wolf,' he wrote in his book. 'At the end of a fagging day, the sharp cruel note of a dog's bark is in itself a keen annoyance; and to a tramp like myself, he represents the sedentary and respectable world in its most hostile form. If he were not amenable to stones, the boldest man would shrink from travelling afoot. I respect dogs much in the domestic circle; but on the highway, or sleeping afield, I both detest and fear them.'

That night the tourism board had checked us into a three-star hotel called Le Domaine de Barres, in Langogne. Arriving caked with mud we felt embarrassingly under-dressed in this 18th Century manor house with its swimming pool and nine-hole golf course. We made our excuses as we sat down in the gourmet restaurant, still wearing much of the same cycling gear we'd spent all day in.

Deep snow

On the second day our route quickly rose to around 1,200 metres above sea level. The snow was three feet deep in places, and huge firs had fallen across the path, forcing us on certain sections to take to the tarmac. At one point I found myself wading barefoot through an ice-cold river, carrying my bike, socks and



Fact File The Stevenson Trail

DISTANCE: 120 miles (with 12 miles of road before the start and 19 miles after the finish).

TERRAIN: Forest trails, volcanic plateaus, steep, rocky footpaths and bits of tarmac.

MAP: Use the guidebook *Le Chemin de Stevenson*, which has all the maps you'll need. ISBN 9782751401909.

GETTING THERE: Eurostar London to Paris; SNCF Paris to Le-Puy-en-Velay. Return from Ales to London. Approx 12 hours each way. Return tickets from £120.50. Many trains carry bikes, but on some routes you'll have to dismantle them. For bookings visit www.raileurope.co.uk or call 0844 8484070.

AMENITIES: There are several small towns and villages along the route, but take packed lunches in case you find yourself in the wilderness.

BIKE SHOPS: There are three in Le Puy-en-Velay, before the start of the trail (Bouticycle Ghislain, 10 rue de la Transcévenole, 43700 Brives-Charensac, 0033 471095612; Sport 2000, route de Coubon, 43700 Brives-Charensac, 0033 471055152; Décathlon, rue Gabriel Fournery, 43000 Le Puy-en-Velay, 033 471060600) and just one on the trail, in Florac (Cévennes Evasion, 6 place Boyer, 48400 Florac, 0033 466451831, www.cevennes-evasion.com

ACCOMMODATION: The following hotels/guesthouses along the route will lock up your bikes for you: Hotel Saint-Jacques, 7 place Cadelade, 43000 Le Puy en Velay, 0033 471072040, www.hotel-saint-jacques.com; Domaine de Barres, Route de Mende, 48300 Langogne, 0033 046646 0837, www.domainedebarres.com; Hôtel la Remise, 48190 Le Bleymard, 0033 0466486580, www.hotel-laremise.com; le Mimentois, 48400 Cassagnas, 0033 04 66452745, email lemimentois@yahoo.fr.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Visit www.chemin-stevenson.org or www.gr70-stevenson.com. NB: you can cut out a small middle section of the trail by taking the train from Langogne to Chasserades.

THANKS TO: www.lozere-tourisme.com, www.tourismegard.com, and www.ot-lepuyenvelay.fr for sorting accommodation.

“Although the ski lifts had ground to a halt weeks before, there was 10 feet of snow barricading either side of the road”

shoes to keep them dry. Winter rain had washed away the footbridge.

Over lunch in Chasserades our restaurateur warned us there would be a lot more snow. Normally by the beginning of April it has all melted, but this year the higher slopes were still solidly in winter's grip. We were further discouraged when he told us about a group of mountain bikers (albeit professional riders) who had ridden the entire Stevenson Route – there and back! – in just five and a half days: 240 miles of difficult, off-road mountain trails in well under a week.

One shouldn't underestimate the difficulty of the GR70. While the overall distance of 120 miles isn't too daunting, some of the steeper, more boulder-strewn mountain paths can be very hard. We spent several hours pushing our bikes up the trickier sections, while the snow forced us to abandon some altogether. My advice would be: allow at least five days to complete the route from start to finish; go in mid-summer when the tracks are driest (although you'll be permanently dodging hikers); take a full-suspension mountain bike, because while it will slow you down on the plateaus it will be indispensable on some of the descents; take spare tubes, tyres and a chain tool because there is only one bike shop along the entire trail; and don't even think about attempting it without a detailed map.

Day three saw us negotiating the mountain and ski resort of Mont Lozere. Although the ski lifts had ground to a halt weeks before, there was at least 10 feet of snow barricading either side of the road. We saw several cross-country skiers and stopped to chat to a couple with snowshoes and a sled. With our bikes we couldn't begin to follow. But our descent on tarmac down the other side of mountain more than compensated.

Views to savour

With so much nature and so little civilisation, the views in this part of France are understandably breathtaking. Stevenson described it best: 'The sun came out as I left the shelter of a pine-wood, and I beheld suddenly a fine wild landscape to the south. High rocky hills, as blue as sapphire, closed the view, and between these lay ridge upon ridge, heathery, craggy, the sun glittering on veins of rock, the underwood clambering in the hollows, as rude as God made them at the first. There was not a sign of man's hand in all the prospect; and, indeed, not a trace of his passage, save where generation after generation had walked in twisted footpaths, in and out among the beeches, and up and down upon the channelled slopes.'

One hundred and thirty years later, aside from the odd electricity pylon or telegraph line, not much had changed. On our third night, now in the Cévennes proper, we stayed in the village of Cassagnas, at Le Mimentois, a *chambres d'hotes* (bed and breakfast). The owners Jean-Luc and Stephanie explained how in their *commune* (parish) there were just three people per square kilometre. They laughed when I asked them to lock our bikes in their garage. 'When we go on holiday we leave our front door open so our neighbours can come in and water the plants,' Jean-Luc told me. 'There's never any crime here.'

The final day was our easiest. Aside from a petrifying final descent into Saint-Jean-du-Gard, during which I slashed my rear tyre on a particularly sharp rock, it passed without upset. We arrived at the trail's endpoint in time to see the bus that would take us to our final night's stop in Ales, from where we would then start the long train journey back to London.

The bus-driver agreed to bend the rules and let us put our bikes on board. Stevenson had been moved to tears at the end of his trip, on leaving his beloved Modestine behind. Our bikes, thankfully, were coming home.