The Via Podiensis: Le Puy-en-Velay to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port



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Words by David Steele

Photos by Alison and David Steele

Introduction

We started planning this trip in 2017 - we had been told about it by a French couple that we met along the Camino del Norte. We spent quite a bit of time on the itinerary and we got proposals from two companies, the one we used last time and and one that had been recommended by two Australian ladies we'd met last walk. Alison had heard good things about the Célé Valley and we wanted to include that variant in the walk, which the company we'd used before wouldn't do, so we really were left with no choice but to go with the second company. In the planning they were very cooperative - we moved the dates several times to make sure we didn't hit certain places on weekends or public holidays (which turned out to be a waste since the French stores often take Monday off and sometimes Tuesday as well). We also wanted to make sure we had days off in Conques, Figeac, Moissac, Cahors and Navarrenx all of which had historic old towns that we wanted to visit, which was also accommodated, so we pressed the button, paid the deposit and waited. We should have known something was up when the company wanted us to pay the full amount in early 2018, more than twelve months before we were due to leave. I let them know we were travelling in 2019, not 2018, and they happily agreed we did not have to pay yet but when I hadn't heard from them again by March 2019 I was starting to get a bit worried! In the end we got the final documents late April and we were disappointed to find that several of the hotels were out of the town, especially the one in Navarrenx.
Alison had her usual injury problems - she twisted her ankle in the garden just before we left and was too scared to tell me until after she'd been to the physio and had a positive diagnosis!
We had decided not to carry all our belongings in our backpacks this time - transfer of our bags each day was included in our package - so we weren't so frugal with the clothes we took and probably ended up with too much! Our main concern, being early summer in Europe, was wet weather and we had both light and heavy weight waterproof shoes to make sure our feet weren't affected by having to walk in the rain.
In the event, we needn't have bothered - we had some rain but heat became the main obstacle. In late June, France (and much of western Europe) experienced a fierce heatwave driven by winds off the Sahara desert and an accompanying high pressure system. France experienced temperatures of greater than 45 C for the first time ever and, although it didn't get that hot where we were, we were affected for about 7 days in the Célé valley, which probably gave us a completely different perspective on that part of the country than would otherwise have been the case.
Not content with one record-breaking heatwave, late July saw a second come through, fortunately for us on the last day of our walk.
If this walk missed the stunning scenery we encountered on the Camino del Norte it certainly allowed us to see many, many beautiful and well maintained churches, abbeys and cathedrals, many in very small towns or, in many cases, stand-alone buildings in the countryside.
The map opposite shows the route we took, steadily wending our way west 738 kms in 35 walking days and 7 rest days, ending up on the coast in Biarritz for a bit of a rest after the walk.
Looking back on the pictures and blog made me realize how different everyday was (other than the persistent lack of bars and restaurants!) and what a fantastic experience we had once again!

Dave



Miam Miam Dodo
Les Guides de Référence
Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle
Saint-Jean Pied-de-Port
Roncevaux
Aire-sur l'Adour
Lectoure
Moissac
Cahors
Rocamadour
Figeac
Conques
Espalion
Aumont-Aubrac
Le Puy en-Velay
Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port (alt 190 m)
Aire-sur-l'Adour (alt 76 m)
Lectoure (alt 162 m)
Moissac (alt 82 m)
Cahors (alt 113 m)
Figeac (alt 191 m)
Conques (alt 292 m)
Estaing (alt 324 m)
Aubrac (alt 1308 m)
Le Sauvage (alt 1295 m)
Cathédrale du Puy-en-Velay (alt 669 m)



June 6, 2019

We’re off again!

Well, here we are again! We fly Perth to London then London to Paris before catching the train from Paris airport to Lyon, then Lyon to St Etienne and finally the local train from St Etienne to Le Puy-en-Velay about 36 hours after leaving!

Think I’ll have a drink...

Alison at the Qantas International Lounge at Perth Airport

June 6 to 10, 2019

Le Puy-en-Velay

Turns out Le Puy is a beautiful village with a lovely old town centred around its cathedral, the Notre Dame du Puy. The cathedral is set atop one of several volcanic peaks, Mont Anis, formed hundreds of thousands of years ago when the area was part of an inland sea and some of the photos show the very steep ascent and descent from the town up to the cathedral. On the day after we arrived a running event, Le Grand Trail du St Jacques, was on and we watched runners finishing as much as a 115 km run up the hill towards the cathedral – not for the faint hearted, my heart beat got up over 160 bpm when we walked up!

The other religious attractions, the Chapelle Saint-Michel-d'Aiguilhe and the Statue Notre-Dame de France, are also both set on a "rocher", the latter the Rocher Corneille, and we climbed up both of the rocks to get the views and take in the chapel and statue. The statue, it turns out, was made from over 200 canons taken from the Russians during the Crimean war and you can climb up the inside of it – there were too many people inside for my liking and I made a quick exit without getting to the top!

We made a couple of walks out to an outdoor store a couple of kms out of town to get some last minute gear and a couple of the pictures are from there.

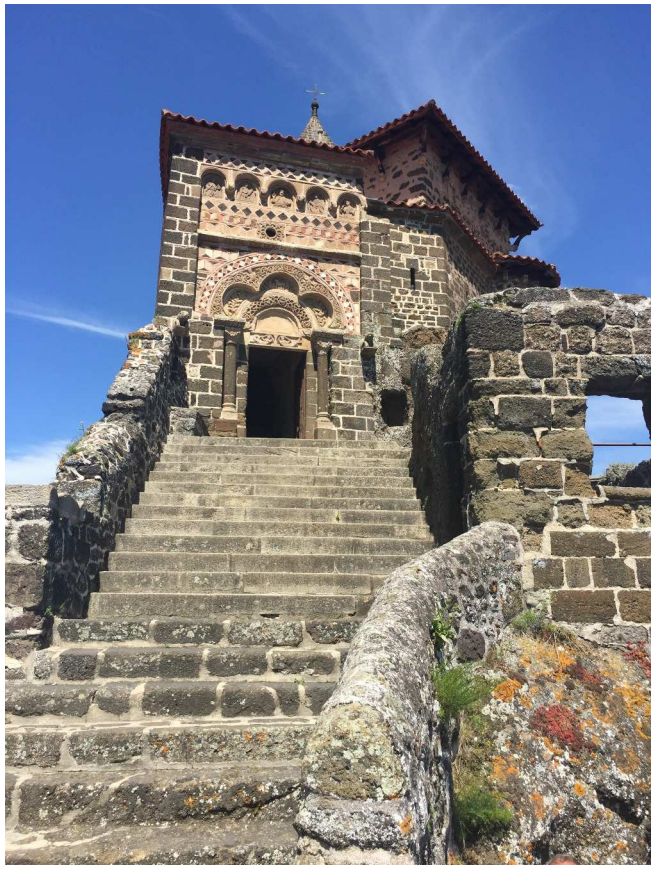
We also made it to mass at the cathedral at 7am on Sunday morning and the pilgrim's blessing after that – it was very good and the bishop made the people doing the trail very welcome, whether religious or not. After the mass and before the end of the blessing, the main door to the cathedral and the grate inside the cathedral is opened so pilgrims can go straight down the steps, on to the road and head off – we wished we'd brought our packs, we would have been off!

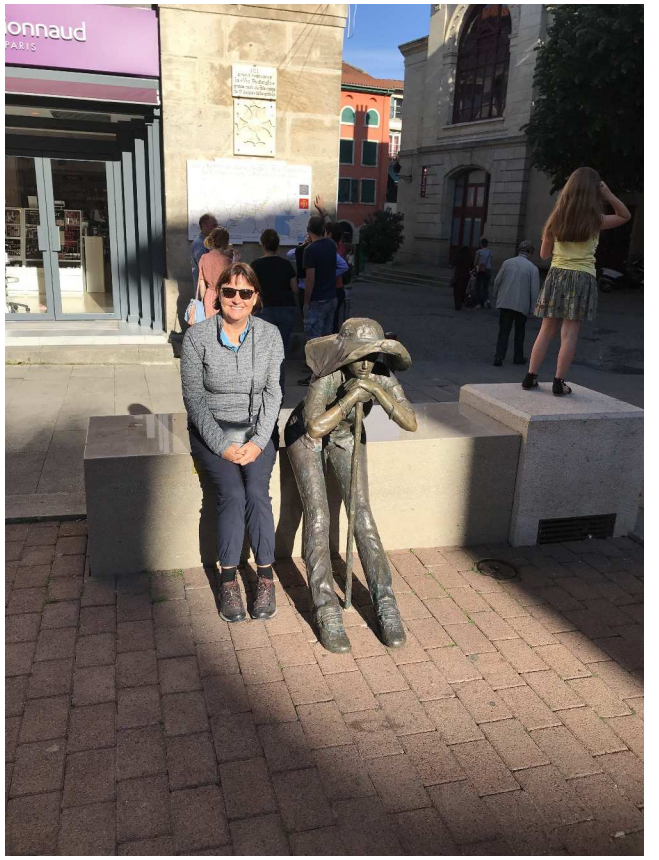
Overall, we've had a great time, found some nice restaurants and bars and rested enough to be ready for our walk. The weather forecast is a bit iffy – the Criterium du Dauphine rolled into town today for a stage through town tomorrow afternoon – last time our paths crossed a bike race it bucketed down so let's hope it's different this time!

Can't wait to get walking!



The Chapelle Saint-Michel-d'Aiguilhe taken from behind the cathedral

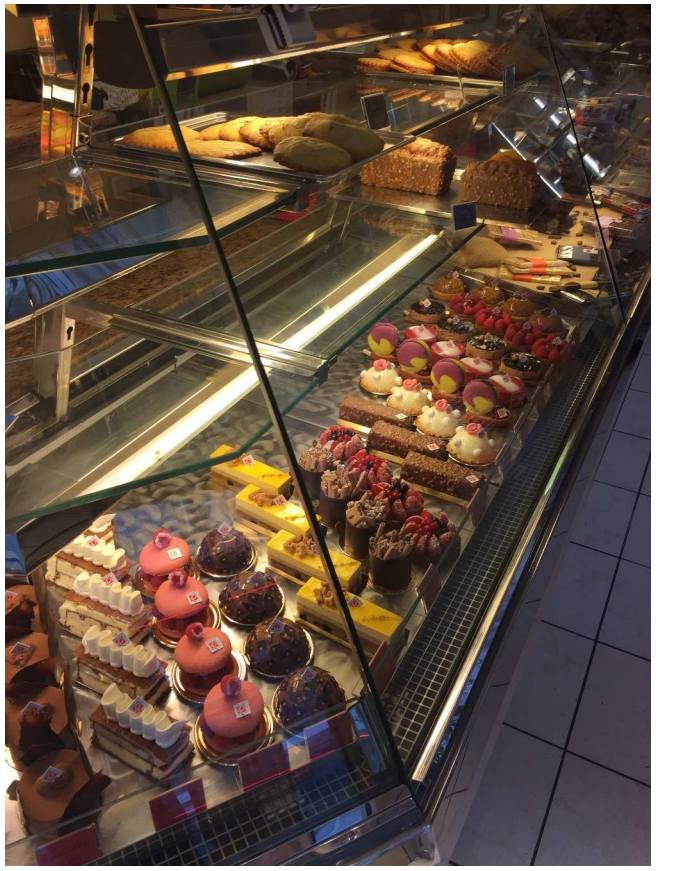






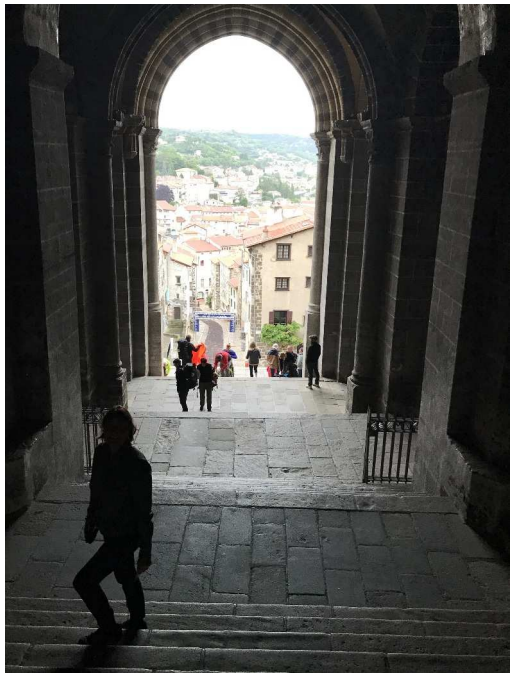


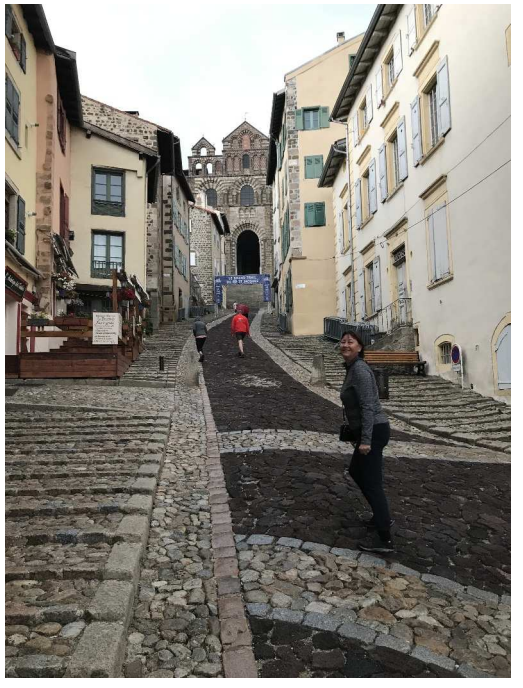
Clockwise from top left, the entrance to the Chapelle Saint-Michel-d’Aiguilhe, Alison at the Place du Plot, our accommodation, Hotel Le Regina,
the patisserie across the road from the hotel and the Statue Notre-Dame de France.

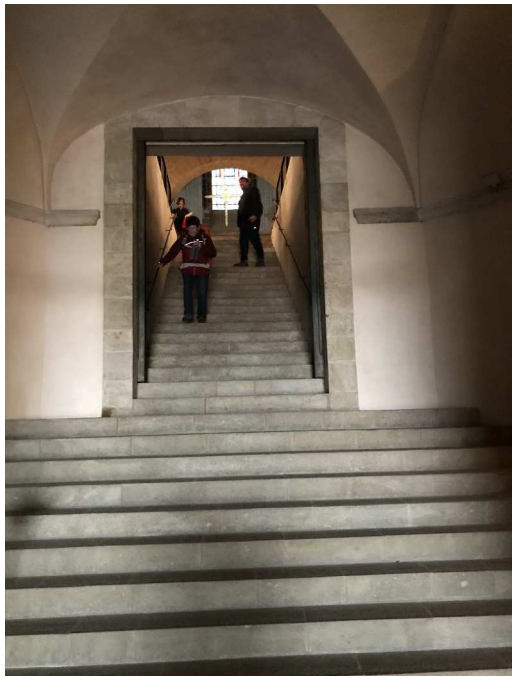




Left, at the pilgrim's mass in the cathedral and, bottom from right, looking back up through the door out of the cathedral, Alison on the way up to the cathedral and looking down after the mass.
The mass was very inspiring and we should really have done it on the day we left but we thought it would be too much to get everything packed, check out of the hotel and get to the mass by 7:00am!









Looking out over Le-Puy after our second walk out to the outdoor store.

June 11, 2019

Day 1 Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint Privat-d'Allier

We really dodged a bullet today! Yesterday had been very wet in the morning and the forecast for today was for rain starting about 11am and continuing for the rest of the day – however barely a drop fell and having now seen the trails it would have been awful in the rain!

We got away just after 8am with temperatures around 10C – a bit chilly but as it turned out almost a perfect temperature to walk in.

As we'd come to expect from the Camino del Norte, after walking through town (via the Place du Plot, the traditional meeting place for pilgrims) we went virtually straight up, first by road (past the statue of St Jacques) then a wide dirt road and finally medieval rock paths to the little hamlet of La Roche at 871m, a climb of just over 200m over 5 1/2 kms.

From there track turned into bit of a goat trail through paddocks but through some beautiful scenery along a brook that had eroded a very deep valley through the countryside. Across the river we spotted one of the infamous "shit machines" and a bit further up we smelt the results of the farmer's endeavours!

We stopped a couple of kms further on at Saint-Christoph for our first break and a coffee with some cake we'd bought in Le Puy before continuing through the hamlets of Tallode, Liac and Lic – all reasonably flat and pleasant until we hit a pretty rocky path just after Lic.

So far, the trail is much better signposted than the Camino and the French seem to be putting in the work to make it attractive to walkers – toilets, picnic tables and information signs, none of which we saw on the Camino!



Departing Hotel Le Regina

The rocky path eventually lead us out onto the road leading past Ramourouscle and the Chapelle Saint-Roche and then a steeper climb into Montbonnet at 1112m where we had some lunch and a couple of beers for me and coffee for Al.

We thought we had reached today's peak but after an easy walk out of Montbonnet we started climbing again, sharing the track with some cows before topping out at 1210m near Lac de l'oeuf. The next 5kms or so was an increasingly steep descent dropping down about 300m, first on roads to Le Chier, and then on a really rough track down to where we stay tonight – Saint-Privat-d'Allier.

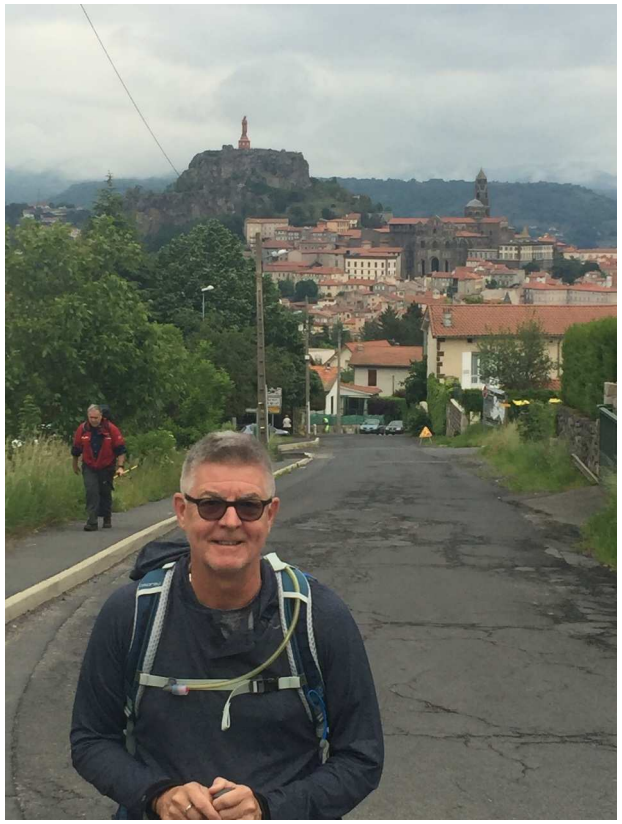
We're in a Gite d'Etape (hostel), albeit in a private room, so I'm interested to see how that goes!

Overall a great start through fabulous scenery, even if the clouds made it a bit dull.

25 kms today by my watch!







Me at the Place du Plot, Alison under the statue of St Jacques, part way up the hill out of Le Puy, and looking back into Le Puy after the initial climb.









Still on the way up, passing a farmhouse, going past La Roche towards Saint Christoph, the farmer fertilizing his fields on the opposite banks of the Dolaison river, and morning tea in Saint Christoph. We ran into the guy seated, Hugh, quite a few times over the next few days.







Inside the Chapelle Saint-Roch, lunch at Montbonnet, following the cows through the rain and mud towards today's peak near Lac d"Oeuf and still a little bit wet at the hamlet of Le Chier.









Alison coming down the very steep descent into Saint-Privat, Saint-Privat itself with the remains of a château in the background and dinner at Gite La Cabourne.
with Hugh,Michael? and Juergen. Michael had walked from East Berlin and was planning to get to Santiago de Compostela!

June 12, 2019

Day 2 St Privat d'Allier to La Clauze

Definitely a day of two halves today – the morning spent going up over a ridge from St Privat before dropping 350m over about 2km and then climbing 450m over a similar distance, to put us well and truly into the Central Massif, followed by an afternoon basically walking 12 or so km through undulating hills.

But, to start at the beginning, we kicked off just after 8am (not long after the nice man picked up our luggage to take it to our next destination) in 8C temperatures. Al wanted to go left and I wanted to go right – Al turned out to be correct so we followed the route for about 500m only to circle back and to end about about 100m up the road from our gite d'Etape (which turned out to be pretty good by the way). We walked along a mixture of roads, good pathways and the occasional rough, rocky path, fairly gently ascending to Rochegude and the chapelle and tower in the pictures. The views out over the valley were outstanding but then the fun began as we descended down to the hamlet of Pratclaux. Nothing we had done on the Camino del Norte prepared us for the steepness or roughness of the track and it took us about an hour to ascend the 2km or so.

The going got better after that as we walked on roads and fairly nice paths into the very pretty village of Ministrol-d'Allier in the Allier river, where we had a coffee and sandwich and ordered another sandwich to go (the "sandwiches" are enormous rolls that could feed four!).

After Ministrol we ascended up the other side of the river in a vertigo inducing path, past the Chapelle de la Madeleine to about 730m, from which you could see the Chapelle and tower across the river valley, before the path become smoother and we ground it out past Montare to Le Vernet de Sauges where we had the other sandwich and a coffee.

From there a drop into the biggest town we have seen since Le Puy, Sauges. We expected to be able to get a beer or a coffee but nothing was open so we pushed through and had some apricots and cake we had bought in Le Puy by the side of the road.

By now we were pretty well stuffed and just went head down for the last 7km into La Clauze, where we are in a 5 room Chambers de Hôtes built into a medieval tower (pictures tomorrow!)

29 long kilometres today, 54kms in total so far!



Setting out from Gite La Carbourne





Alison on a medieval path, about halfway to Rochegude, the Chapelle Saint-Jacques and a tower at Rochegude, me inside the chapelle, and Alison almost at the end of our descent to the Allier river. The view from Rochegude was fantastic but we couldn't find a picture to do it justice!









Looking back into Monistrol, just above river level and with the bridge we crossed in the background, then a more expansive view from part-way up the ascent. Below, some kayakers in the Allier and then the Chapelle de la Madeleine built into the cliff face.









Alison between Escuzels and Le Vernet de Sauges, walking into and then having a coffee and lunch at Vernet and the track towards Sauges in the distance. There had been no place to stop for our second sandwich and the guidebook made no mention of the place in the picture - it was a couple of mechanics making instant coffee and providing a place to rest, so we took advantage of it!











Tree sculptures and the village of Sauges in the background, the main street into Sauges and Saint-Jacques pointing the way to our stop for the night, La Clauze.
Behind Alison is a metal sculpture of a wolf-like creature, the Beast of Gevaudan, part of the mythology of the area.
Sauges was a pretty big town and we had hoped for a stop for a beer or coffee, but absolutely nothing was open - something we would become very familiar with.



June 13, 2019

Day 3 La Clauze to Saint-Alban sur-Ligmagnole

Last night was an interesting experience – all the guests were asked to leave their bags and backpacks in a locker (to stop the spread of bed bugs!) and take out of them what you needed for the night, which we found a bit weird. All of the other guests were French with only a little English so it was a bit hard to make conversation, which was also a bit weird.

We had a much better day today, with mostly flat, mostly good roads and tracks underfoot, travelling 6kms or so through the gently undulating valleys of the high country known as the Massif Central. Overnight the temperature dropped quite low and we started in 4C but brilliant sunshine and fantastic conditions! The scenery was quite spectacular and we passed through a few hamlets, Le Falzet and Villeret-d'Apcher with a spring in our step, all at around 1100m. At Contaldes we decided to take a detour of about 800m to the pretty village of Chanaleilles for a coffee break, which was very nice, adding about 1.6km to our journey. Although we enjoyed it, in retrospect it was a bit of a mistake as we passed a (better) cafe/ snack bar about 800m after rejoining the GR65 and by the end of the day we could have done without the extra kms!

From there we started climbing again on mostly very good tracks up to 1320m just before Domaine du Sauvage, which I think will be the highest point of the walk. The Domaine is a refurbished 13th century hospital that was originally run by the Templars. The book said no meals were available here, so we had bought a sandwich at Chanaleilles, however the menu looked great and we were disappointed to be eating our sandwich. I think the facilities are improving to capture the tourist traffic faster than the guidebooks can keep up!

The terrain between Contaldes and, much later, Le Rouget was very different from the lush green valleys we had been encountering. First we walked through pine forest, with clouds of pollen flying around in the fairly stiff breeze, then through scrub above the forests. It seemed to take an eternity to travel the 9.5km from Domaine to Le Rouget, not least because the signs kept showing much longer distances than my calculations! In this stretch we passed from the Haute-Loire department into the Loziere department and the standard of infrastructure for walkers, which had been excellent, seemed to drop off.

Eventually we emerged from the pine forest into Le Rouget, hoping for a break and a drink before taking on the last 3.5kms to Saint-Alban. Although there was a gite with a snack bar, there was not a soul about so we kept moving and limped into Saint-Alban just under 7 1/2 walking hours after leaving La Clauze, a distance of 28kms by my watch, including the detour, 82kms now in total.



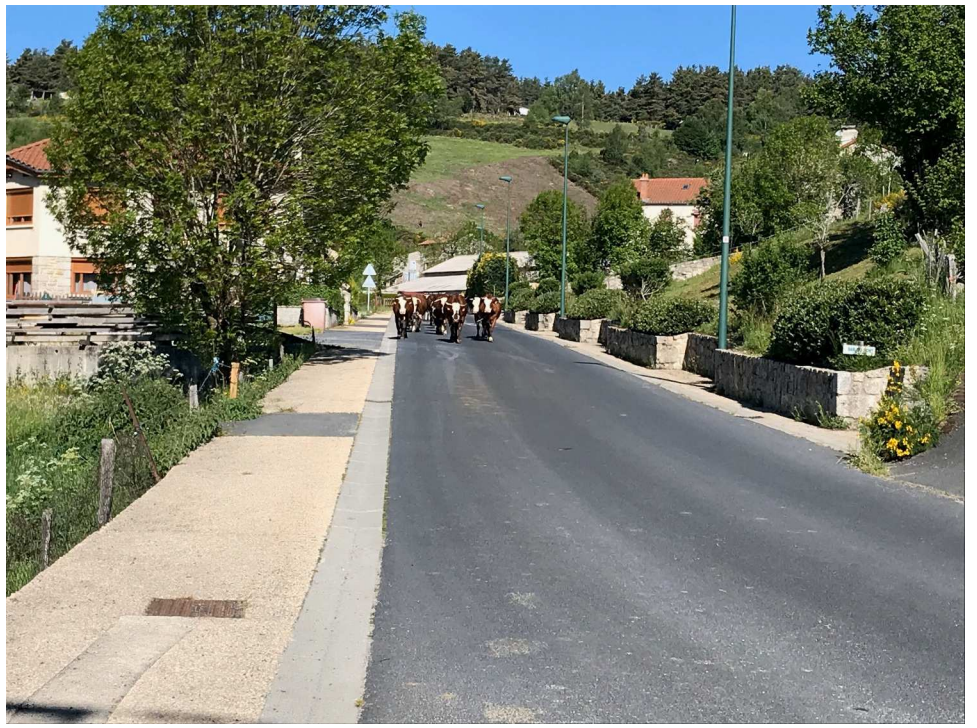
Our accommodation, Chambre d'Hôtes A la Coustette de la Clauze, and the medieval tower it is attached to.



Right, the village of Le Falzet, above, crossroads between Le Falzet and Villeret-d'Apcher and, below, Alison and across the valley to Contaldes.









Clockwise from above, the road into Chanaleilles, having a coffee in the villages, looking back towards Chanaleilles after getting back onto the trail, and Alison in the forest after passing through the village of Chazeaux, where the better cafe mentioned in the blog was located.







Above, the terrain near the Domaine du Sauvage, which felt like the top of the world.

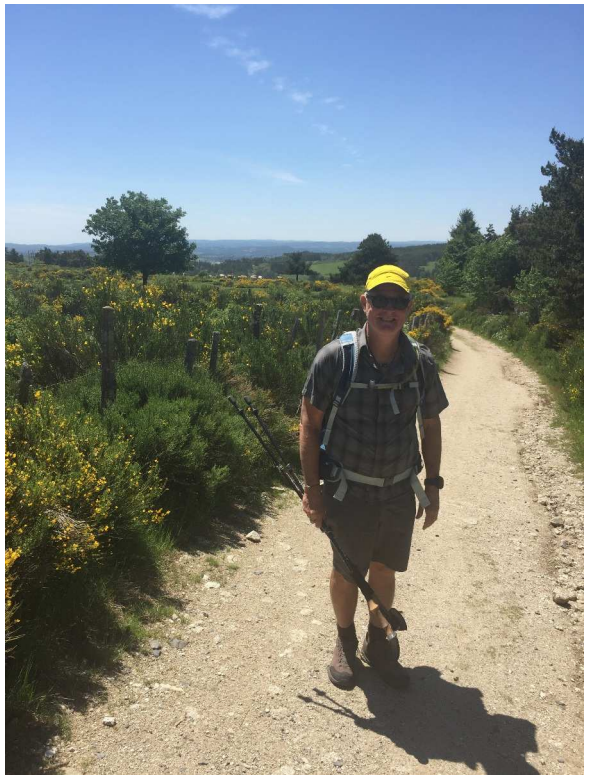


Below, Alison and I having a coffee and eating our sandwich. A couple of the people from our chambres des hôtes in La Clauze were also there at another table but they did not speak much English so not a lot of conversation. Their beer and food looked good though!









Inside and outside the Chapelle Saint-Roch, where we crossed into Loziere Department, Alison and I on the trails between the Chapelle and the small village of Le Rouget and Alison as we headed out to dinner from our accommodation, Château de la Chastre.





June 14, 2019

Day 4 Saint-Alban-sur-Ligmanole to Aumont-Aubrac

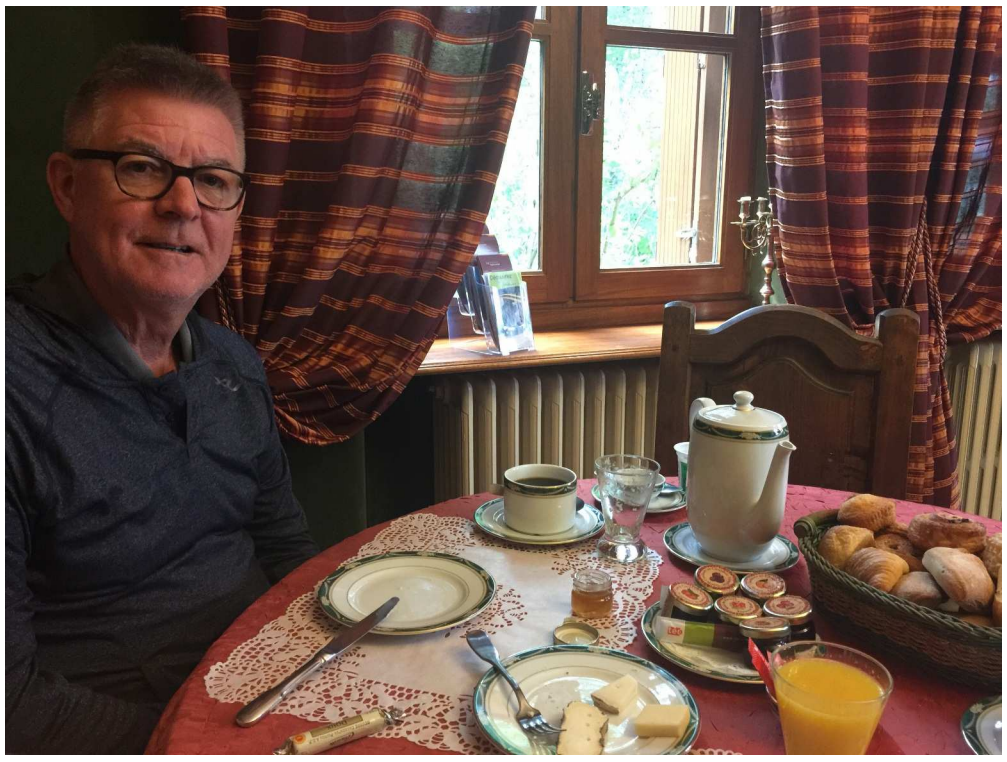
Our hotel last night was very interesting – basically an old couple in what amounted to a museum. We (thought we) only had a short walk today, so we slept in a bit, had breakfast around 9am – very French with lots of bread and pastries – and got away around 9:45 am. Rain was forecast in the morning and late afternoon and before we even left the hotel grounds we had our pack covers and rain jackets on. Not enough rain, we thought, to warrant the full ponchos.

The early part of the walk was out past the sports grounds of the town and then an up and over (the up seems to be mandatory again) to the village of Grazières-Mages (don't ask me why the town names are all double bangers!) where the rain started to increase. There is a picture of a cross on top of the hill before Grazières – they have been common appearances along the trail and apparently they mark the site of a local shrine or pilgrimage.

We crossed the Ligmanole river and I thought we were going to get a nice walk along a river valley but we headed straight uphill along a path that was turning into a rivulet as the rain continued to get heavier. I'm not sure whether anyone maintains the tracks but this one got worse and worse as the continual scouring had exposed more and more rocks and trees roots.

We passed a small village about 4km from the start of the day and then emerged back into similar country to yesterday at about 1100m – only this time wet! Finally, after about 7.5km from the start, the rain started to slow up and we dropped down into the village of Les Estrets – you can see the small church and graveyard. We could have done with a break but nothing was open and, although the rain had stopped, everything was wet. We've brought two lightweight chairs with us but up till now there have been plenty of covered and uncovered rest stops so we packed them in our suitcase today to reduce the amount of gear that got wet: we really could have used them today so they're staying on the pack from now on!

After Les Estrets we crossed the Truyere river and things got really confusing. The map showed us spending a fair bit of time on the road but the description (and the actual path) was completely different. Anyway, we climbed back uphill and into a high river valley, supposedly 4km to a junction with the road but it seemed like (and recorded on my watch as) closer to 6km. At one point we came across a sign that said 2.5km to Aumont but, again, it was closer to 4.5km!



Breakfast at the Château de la Chastre -- we didn't really want to leave because we knew we were going to get wet!!

I know it probably sounds like an unnecessary whinge but by this time we'd been on our feet for over 12km and 3 plus hours so we needed to either find somewhere to sit (see previous paragraph!) or get to Aumont!

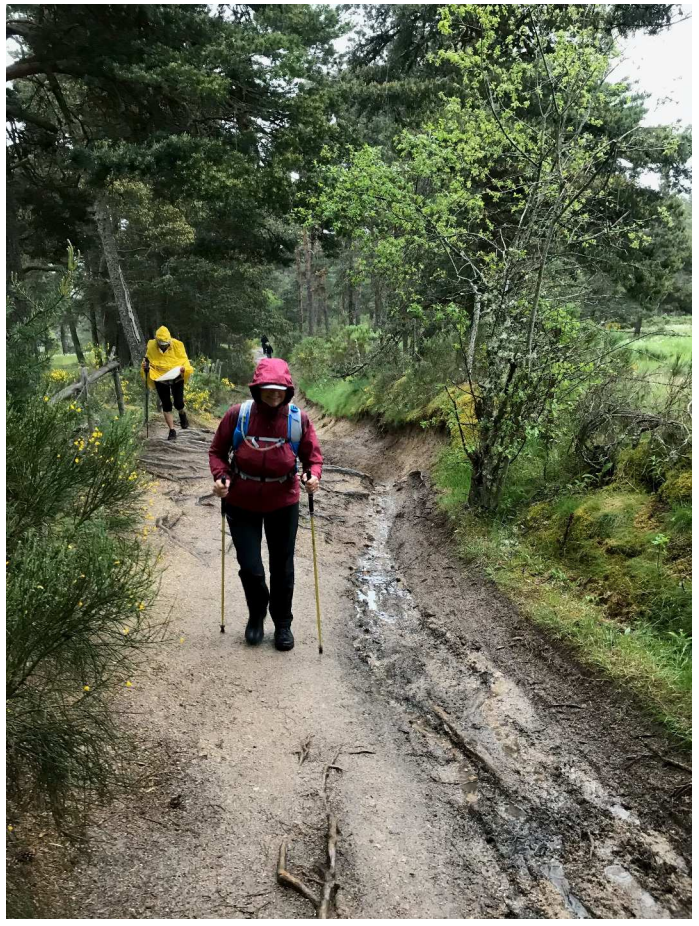
Anyway, we eventually made it into Aumont after just over 17km of walking without a break (14.5km according to the book) and found a place to stop, have some food and drink and wind down a bit before trying to find our accommodation. After a good break we set off in search of our hotel, stopping on the way to buy the French guide book, Miam Miam Dodo, which Alison already says is better than the one we've been using (even though it's in French!).

We're here for two nights with a very welcome rest day tomorrow to get our washing done and let things dry out. We're booked at a Michelin star restaurant tonight so not doing it too hard!

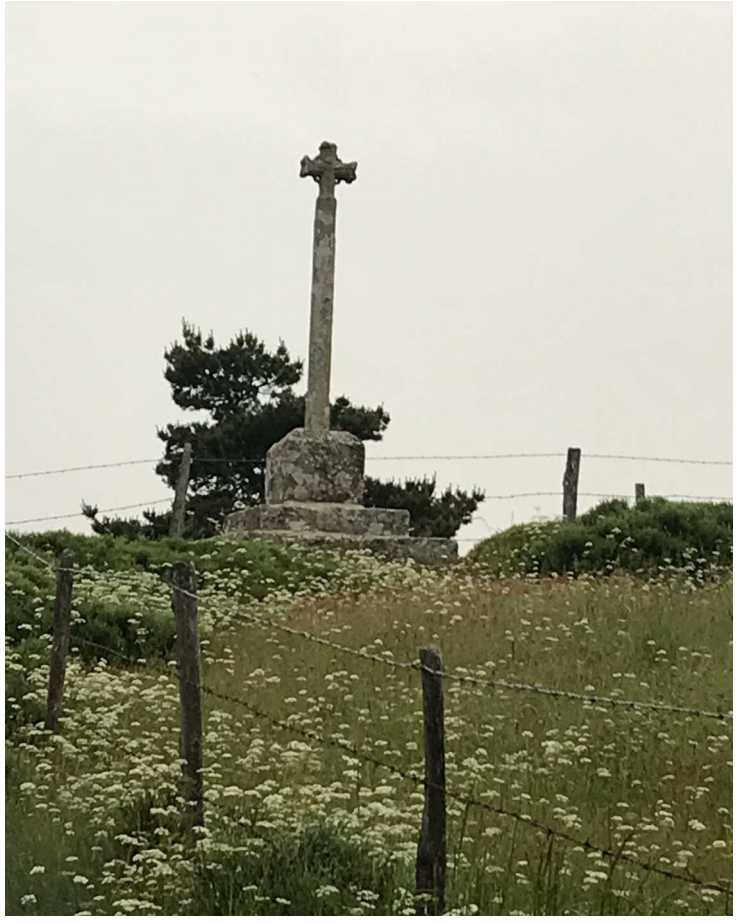
18.5km today by the time we got to the hotel (we got slightly lost again!) so we've cracked the tonne, 100.5 in total…



Left, looking back into Saint-Alban as the rain set in and, below, a cross typical of the area on top of the hill, Alison walking through the hamlet of Grazieres-Mages and then, having crossed the Ligmanole river, heading uphill through an increasing torrent to Chabannes.

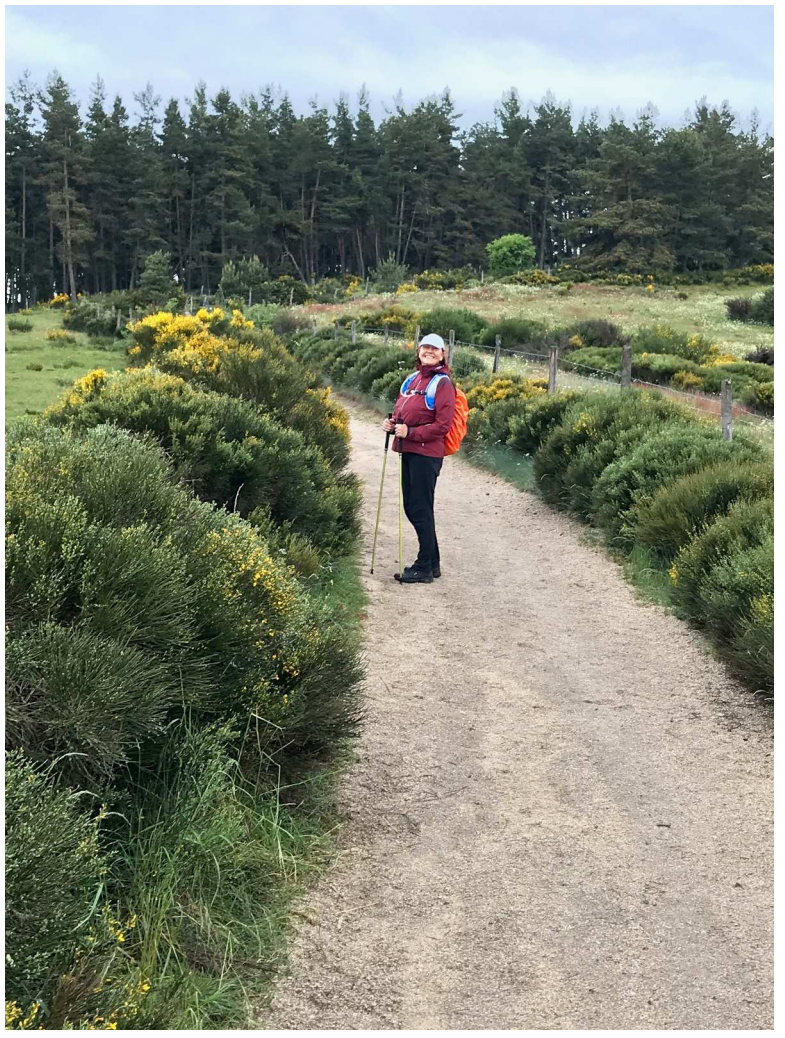




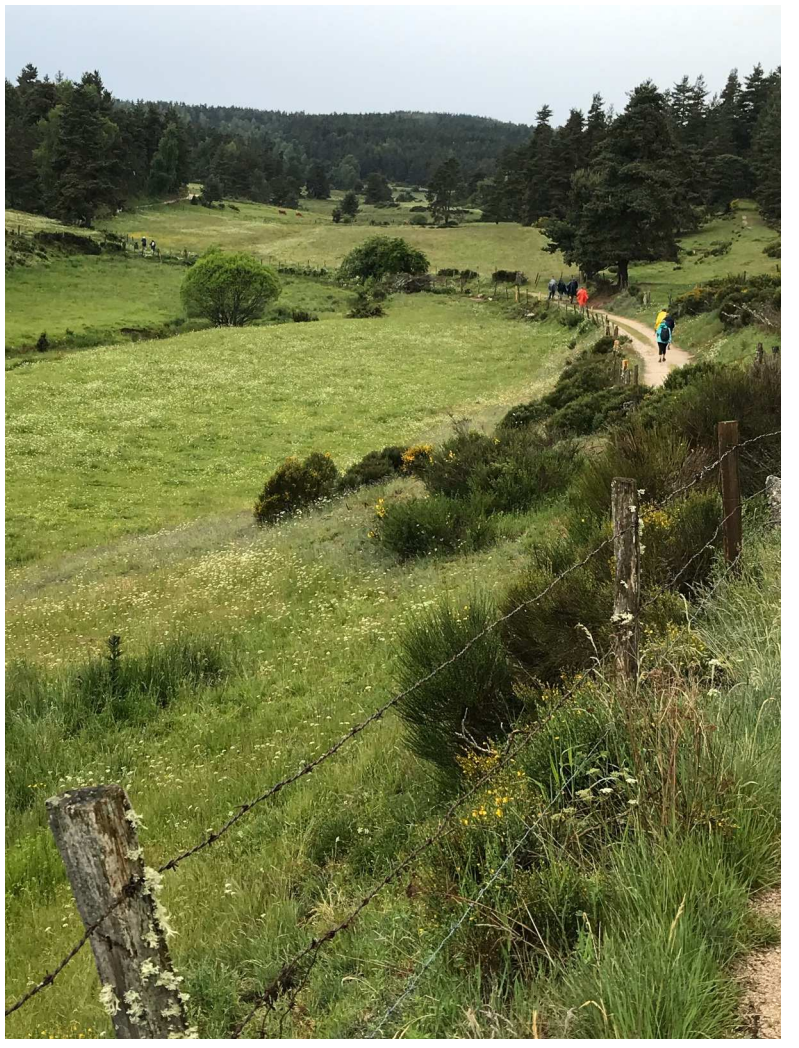








The village of Les Estrets, by which time the rain had stopped and we sat on a fence on the outskirts of town for a short break, and the view back to Les Estrets after crossing the Truyere river and climbing towards Bigose.
Left, Alison after we passed Bigose and, right, the road towards Aumont-Aubrac.









The view back over the valley through which we had walked, nearly at Aumont and a wet and disheveled walker with a beer finally in his hands!
Above, dinner at Cyril Attrazic, the Michelin star restaurant at our accommodation, Chez Camillou.

June 15, 2019

Rest Day 1 Aumont-Aubrac

Four stages under our belt and we definitely needed a break! After yesterday's problems with the Cicerone guide book, Alison has gone through our new Miam Miam Dodo book to check the lay of the land and highlighted almost all of our accommodation locations so we don't go in circles when we arrive into towns. I've also downloaded the trail to my watch and iPhone and downloaded the Miam Miam Dodo app, so no more excuses on that front. From the new (and more informative) book it looks like the first three stages are amongst the most difficult and the fourth stage, yesterday, was made difficult because of the rain and the fact we did not stop between Saint-Alban and Aumont. The weather is looking good for the next few days, so it looks like some easier days ahead.

We washed and dried a tonne of stuff after coming in with fairly wet and dirty gear yesterday rested a bit and then ate at Cyril Attrazic, one of the restaurants in the hotel and one of the Michelin star restaurants we plan to go to on the walk. The food was fantastic albeit a bit pretentious for us but we had a nice time and it was a great way to finish the day and the first stage!

We managed to get a bit of a look around Aumont this morning before the rain set in again – lucky we're not walking today, it actually hailed at one point. It is a lovely little town (population < 2000) so not much to do but rest, which is just what we needed.

We got out again for a short walk this afternoon to try to find the nearest route to the GR 65 from our hotel, so we are ready to go again!

Below, the main street in Aumont and, across the page, some view in and around the town, including the Chez Camillou from the GR65 out of town.






1822
J.M.L.
1895
R.C.P.







June 16, 2019

Day 5 Aumont-Aubrac to Nasbinals

Today was one of the best walking days I think we've had, certainly the best of this trip so far! But before we get on to the day, a bit of an update on last night and this morning – as the day wore on we could see cyclists arriving at the hotel and a few larking around in the pool but when we went down to the bar for a pre-dinner drink there looked like about a hundred of them crowding into the fairly tiny bar area. Eventually they moved to an area set aside for them and we managed to get a drink or two but the biggest shock was when we went down for breakfast the next morning! I have never seen locusts swarming but I imagine it to be like these cyclists over the breakfast buffet – as soon as anything was put out it was immediately demolished! It turns out to be an annual event a bank in Geneva puts on for their staff – a 4 day cycle through France complete with a support van! Good work if you can get it I suppose…

Anyway, despite the hectic breakfast, we got away just on 8am in fairly chilly conditions with beautiful clear skies travelling on sealed and dirt roads, past the village of La Chaze-du-Peyre and on to Lasbros where we hoped for a coffee after about 7km and 1 1/2 hrs but unfortunately the cafe did not open for another 30 minutes so we pushed on to the hamlet of Les Quatre Chemins where we did manage to get a coffee.

We are still in the high country and up until the first stop we were passing through undulating farmlands. After the stop we headed down a narrow, sometimes boggy path and the surroundings changed to much rougher country not unlike the Scottish highlands. Not many farmhouses but lots of cattle that are brought up here for the summer after the snow melts.

Another 5km on, and close to today's peak of 1245m, we had lunch at the tiny hamlet of Fineyrols at a Gite d'Etape that sold coffees and snack out of a wooden shed by the road. This is the main difference we have noticed compared to Spain – instead of regularly going through fairly substantial towns we are only going through very tiny villages (not even villages really!) with very limited options for eating.

From Fineyrols we travelled by a variety of surfaces, including some pretty rocky tracks through similar countryside, through Montgros, where we had a couple of beers and on to Nasbinals. Just before we got into town we came to a t-junction where the dirt track met the road into town and fortunately Al happened to look left (the trail turned to the right) and spotted our hotel about 800m out of town! It's a very weird set up – they have a hotel in town as well and when we arrived there was a sign saying to call that hotel (in French). Well, I did and the guy let me know the room number, I grabbed to key off the rack and that seemed to be the check-in! We'll head into to town for dinner later cause there's nothing here! Lucky we had the beers in Montgros.

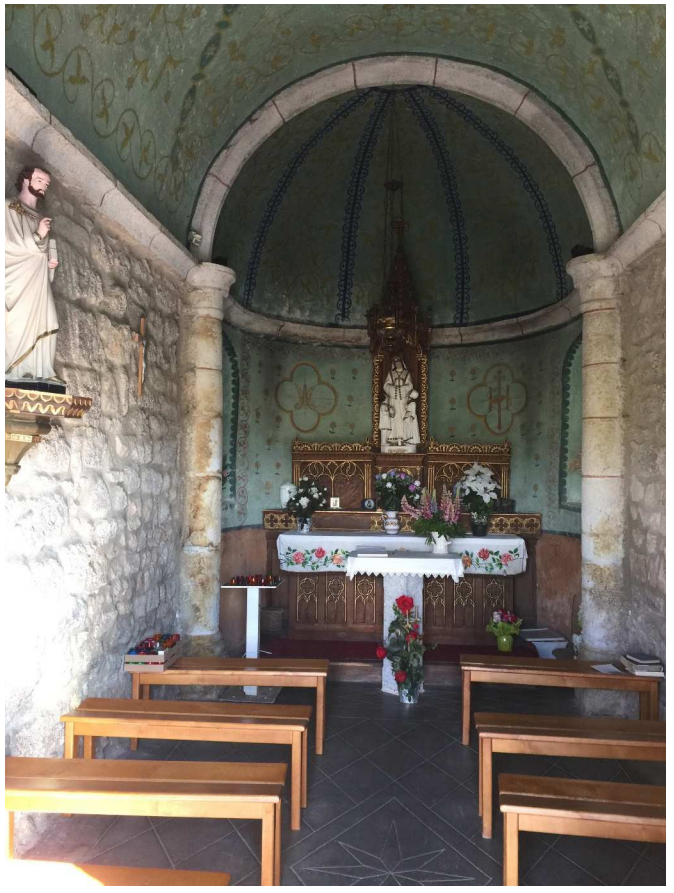
27 kilometres today and 127.5 in total. After 5 days walking we are finally further away from Le Puy than the runners who did the longest section of Le Grand Trail du St Jacques (117km) – don't think I'll be signing up for that anytime.



Getting underway with the cyclists in the background







Alison just out of and me in the first village on today's trail, La Chaze-du-Peyre. Left, the interior of the beautiful little Chapelle de Bastide, which sits all by itself at a crossroad about 15 minutes past Le Chaze.









Alison on the road to Les Quatre Chemins and then having a coffee there. As the name suggests, the town is literally a crossroad with a pub and a few houses. Left and right, the very different terrain as we headed towards the plateau.

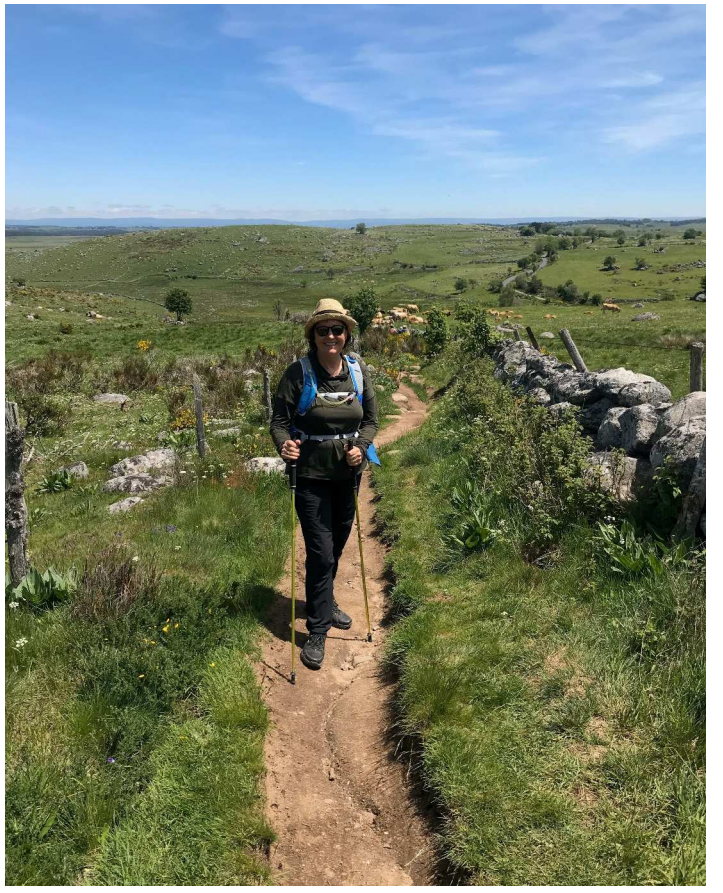






Alison and I on the plateau before and after Fineyrols. Above, we had been seeing squares of salt in paddocks for most of the trip and today for the first time, saw cows getting their salt intake!









Clockwise, the beautiful little village of Rietort d'Aubrac, the river Bes, just past Rietort, and the bridge we would cross over and, finally, a beer at Montgros.







Alison with Nasbinals in the background, me in Nasbinals before dinner, and dinner at the bar in town - it was really busy which is not surprising since it was the only place open in town!
As I said in the blog, it was a really good days walking, although we were tired by the end!





June 17, 2019

Day 6 Nasbinals to St Chély d'Aubrac

Despite the inconvenience of being nearly 1km out of town, our stay in Nasbinals was really enjoyable. The hotel was clean and quiet (despite being right next to the road into town), we had a nice couple of pre-dinner drinks at the sister hotel in town and a very nice dinner before walking back to our room. To top it off, Nasbinals is a really lovely little old town with a nice church and town hall (Mairie is French for town hall).

After a much quieter breakfast than yesterday, we set off about 8:30am into town, where we bought some quiches for lunch, and made good headway for the first 9 or 10 kms to the village Aubrac (Aubrac is both the name of this tiny village and the greater region, hence the name Aubrac appearing in many of the towns we are visiting!), where we stopped for a coffee around 11am. The track was really good underfoot, sealed and dirt roads for a while then really nice tracks through farmland. You can see a few "burons" in the photos – these are the huts that shepherds used to stay in for the summer while the herds and flocks were up on the plateau. You can also see that in this section the trail was really busy – for the first couple of days we thought the trail was fairly quiet, but now we are starting to pick up groups that either missed the first two stages or are bussed in to walk maybe 10kms of the best sections then head off to another section.



Fed and ready to walk!

Just prior to Aubrac we passed the highest point on our walk, 1368m, which was not much higher than Nasbinals (at 1180m, the highest town we will stay at). We also passed from the department of Lozère to Aveyron.

After Aubrac, the track changed as we descended about 500m over nearly 8kms. For most of the way rain had scoured the earth away leaving a very rocky path: the steeper the path, the rockier and more difficult it had become.

We stopped about half way down at Belvézet to eat our quiches and used our chairs for the first time and were very happy to have had them with us! We also spotted (actually, smelled!) a tank that we think the farmer used to create the fertiliser that the infamous "shit machines" use – you can see that the cow dung comes straight out of the barn floor, water presumably is added and pumped back up to his machine. Too bad for the neighbours!

We were very happy to get in to St Chély about 2pm, more leg weary than we thought we would be for a shortish day – just under 18kms today so I'm rounding down to 145kms in total.

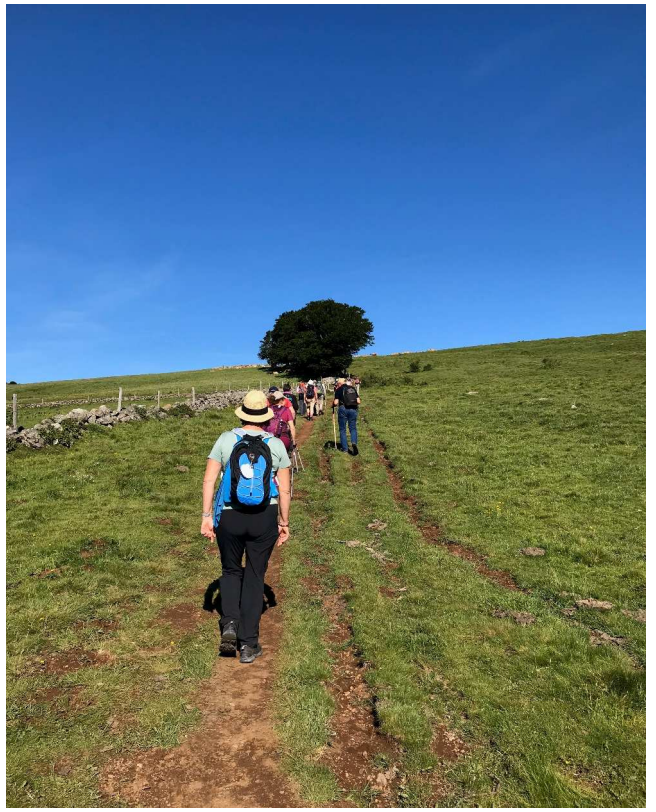




Alison in front of the 11th century church and me in front of the Marie, both in Nasbinals. Bottom right, Alison on the track out of Nasbinals and, for the first time, a big crowd in front of us about 30 minutes out of Nasbinals.

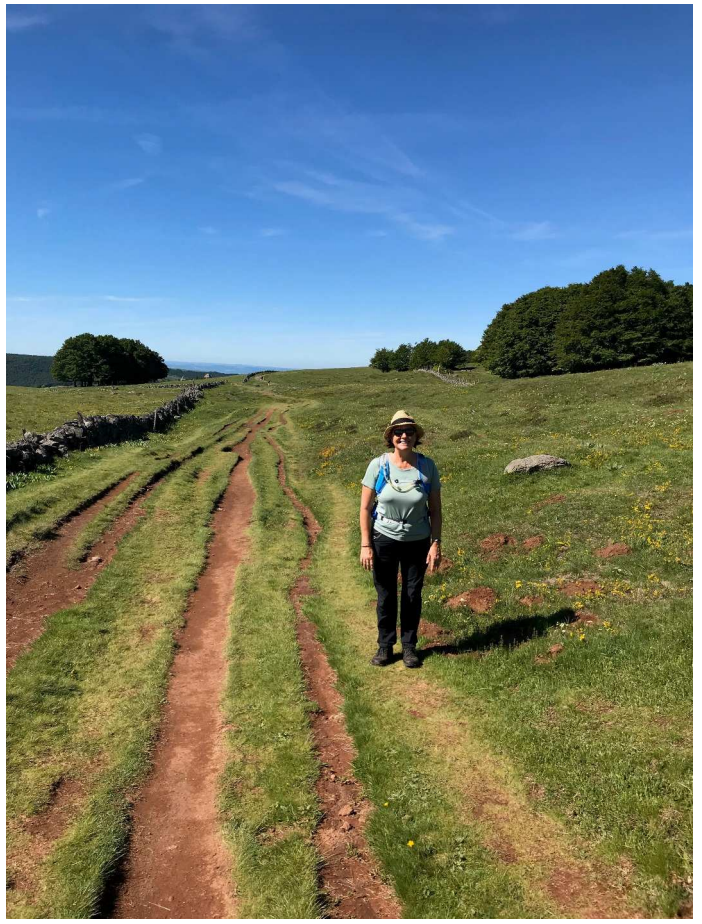






Alison with the crowd in front as we climbed near Pascalet,, one of the burons mentioned in the blog and Alison on various tracks between Pascalet and the today's peak of 1368m.
Another beautiful morning's walking!













Alison and the resort of Royal Aubrac in the background and the town of Aubrac further back. The coffee shop in Aubrac that looked like it would have done a nice lunch and then the two of us on the road out of Aubrac. The Royal Aubrac was being renovated but looked very impressive. It looks like a flat path to Aubrac but there was a very steep drop before the Royal Aubrac and an equally steep climb back up to Aubrac itself. The morning had been spent mostly in very nice open country but just past the tree on my left we had a series of descents and ascents to cross the river Aude and from there onto Saint-Chely. We passed from Lozere department to Aveyron just before reaching Aubrac.









The first of the descents, Alison on a ridge, about 40 minutes later and then descending again into Belvezet, where I'm standing in front of the offending tank!



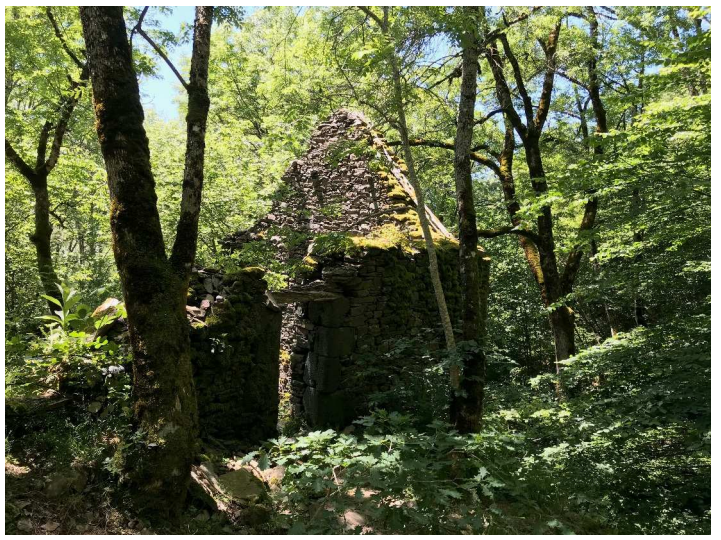






Lunch at Belvezet, descending again towards the river Aude, where we crossed and climbed up again towards the buron before descending again into Saint-Chely-d'Aubrac Saint-Chely was a really lovely town perched on the northern side of the river Boralde, which we would roughly follow the next day until it joined the Lot.









Alison and the main part of our hotel

June 18, 2019

Day 7 St Chély d'Aubrac to Espalion

We spent the second half of yesterday coming down the eastern side of the valley through which a small river called the Boralde runs (makes you wonder how such a small river creates such a big valley but that's a different story!) and that St Chély sits on. We briefly crossed the river yesterday to the western side just before St Chély and you can see the eastern side in the picture taken from our room yesterday afternoon.

This morning, after getting a couple of quiches and some fruit, we set off just before 8, crossed the Boralde again on the "Pilgrim's Bridge" and climbed back up the bloody eastern side again, spending the best part of an hour climbing up under the tree canopy before popping out onto the plateau briefly before descending again into the hamlet of Lestrade. Actually, although the first part of the climb was quite steep, and gave us great views back over St Chély, for the most part the trail climbed reasonable gently and, being under the canopy, was cool and very pleasant.

Not long after Lestrade the trail got much steeper downhill, dropping from our peak of 922m down to 444m. At just over 10km and half way down we pulled out the chairs and had a 15 minute or so break to eat the nectarines we had bought and then resumed the journey down, mostly still under the canopy, before climbing again, first to Le Rozier and then to Grèzes where we had lunch just before 1pm after about 14km. We were both feeling very tired by this stage – it's not too bad climbing up the rocky trails but climbing down is quite tiring and very hard on your feet – all the jagged edges point upwards!

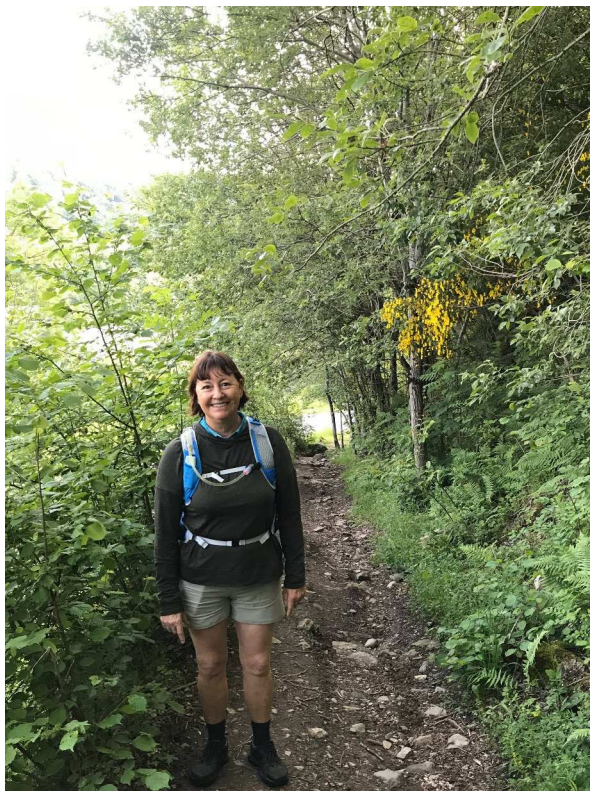
Nevertheless we set off for what turned out to be the very lovely village of St-Côme d'Olt, situated on the Lot river (into which the Boralde runs). From St-Côme, the road into Espalion is very flat and mostly road but we really struggled the 6km along the Lot and had a couple of breaks along the way just to rest the feet and legs. As you can see, Espalion is a beautiful town, the first real "holiday" town we've come across this trip, and we are going in to town to tonight for dinner and a look around. Fortunately, we are getting driven in to town because our accommodation is half way up the hill to the ruins of the Château de Calmont, shown in one of the photos. The walk up here from town just about killed us but all good now.

24 (long) km today and 169 km in total.



The main street of Saint-Chely, including the patisserie where we bought our quiches, Alison crossing the Pont du Pelerins across the Boralde river, looking back across the valley past the cemetery to Saint-Chely and Alison on a level path having made the first climb of the day.



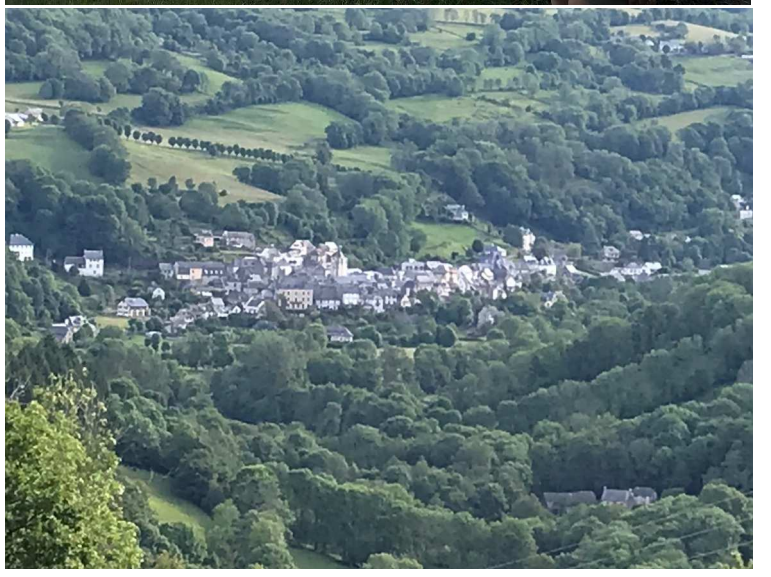




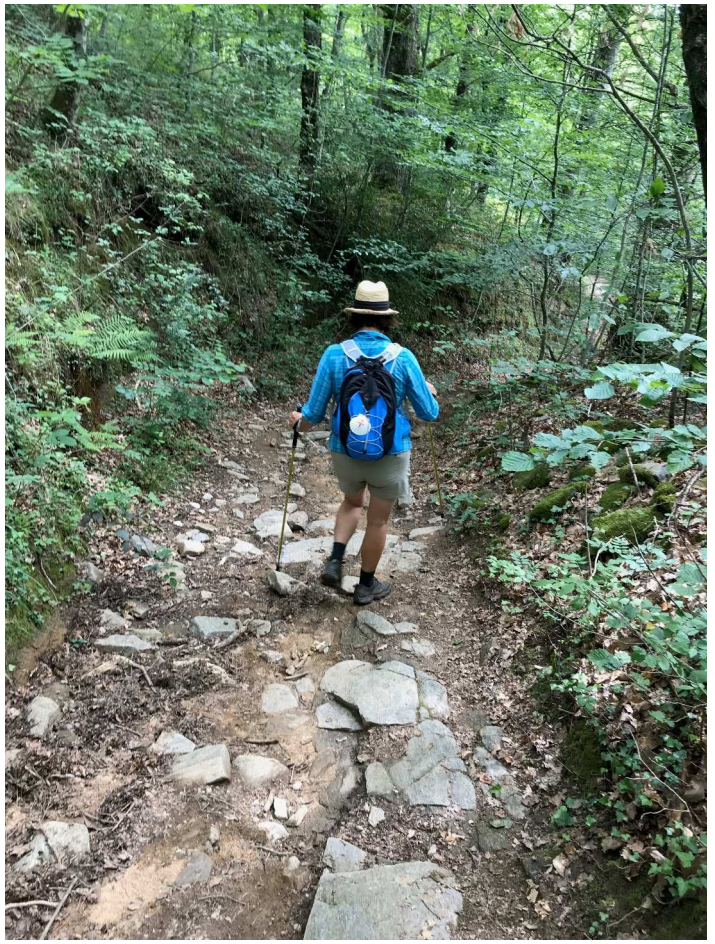


Top right, looking back past Alison across the valley we'd just walked along and, top left, continuing the climb.
On the right again, the view back down to Saint-Chely as we broke out of the canopy and, below, the plateau we walked briefly through before descending towards L'Estrade.
On the opposite page, Alison descending, sometimes through running water, towards L'Estrade and the hamlet itself.
Finally, a montage of Alison and I at Grézes, where we had lunch and a beer (maybe two?).














Desserts du Jour
Tarte aux Poires
Mandine et Framboises
Salade de Fruits Frais
de Saison
Flan Vanille Caramel
au Rhum
Assiette de Fromages
Jus d'Orange Pressé









Looking down towards Saint-Come-l'Olt, where we first joined the Lot river (Olt is the old name for the Lot, apparently), and then in Saint-Come itself, which is a beautiful old town.l





The two of us on the bridge over the Lot, which we then followed into Espalion, the outskirts of which are shown below.







Espalion was the first of two gorgeous towns along the Lot - we would see the next tomorrow.
Below, Alison at dinner in town and the château we could see out the window of our accommodation, which was about 1km out of town. We would see the château for most of the morning on the next day's walk.
Today was the first of the hotter days but still a lovely walk through a lot of very different terrain - our main mistake was not stopping for a drink in town before heading up the hill to the Chambres d'Hôtes La Fontaine.





June 19, 2019

Day 8 Espalion to Golinhac

Very long day today – further and more difficult than either guide book appears to indicate!

We started off very well – a gentle km walk into town from our B&B and then lovely views and a great walk along the Lot. You can see the seats and picnic tables in one of the photos – these were plentiful early on and non existent when needed…

Not far out of Espalion we headed inland, checking out the Eglise de Saint-Pierre-de-Besséjouls, one of the oldest churches on the route, dating back to the 11th century.

After the Eglise the trail turned steeply uphill and we climbed about 150m up over a bit less than a kilometre to pop out on a sealed track – not long after that I took a photo of the Château you could see from our bedroom window now disappearing into the distance. Another descent down into Tredou, where we stopped by the church to eat our quiche and some raspberries we had bought in Espalion – we are sitting next to the World War One memorial for the village: every little town has one and they are pretty full of names given the size of the village!

Half an hour later we stopped again at Verrières and had a coffee – not making much progress as Al's foot had started to hurt. She put her ankle brace on in Verrières and after that we started making better progress albeit still with some fairly sizable ups and downs.

We were rewarded half an hour further on with the beautiful village of Estaing – we crossed the bridge to take a look but decided to head on further to what turned out to be a non-existent bar/restaurant 7.3 kms ahead. After just over 3kms on a nice easy path along the Lot, we turned uphill again, this time climbing 300m over 2.4km on a very steep path!

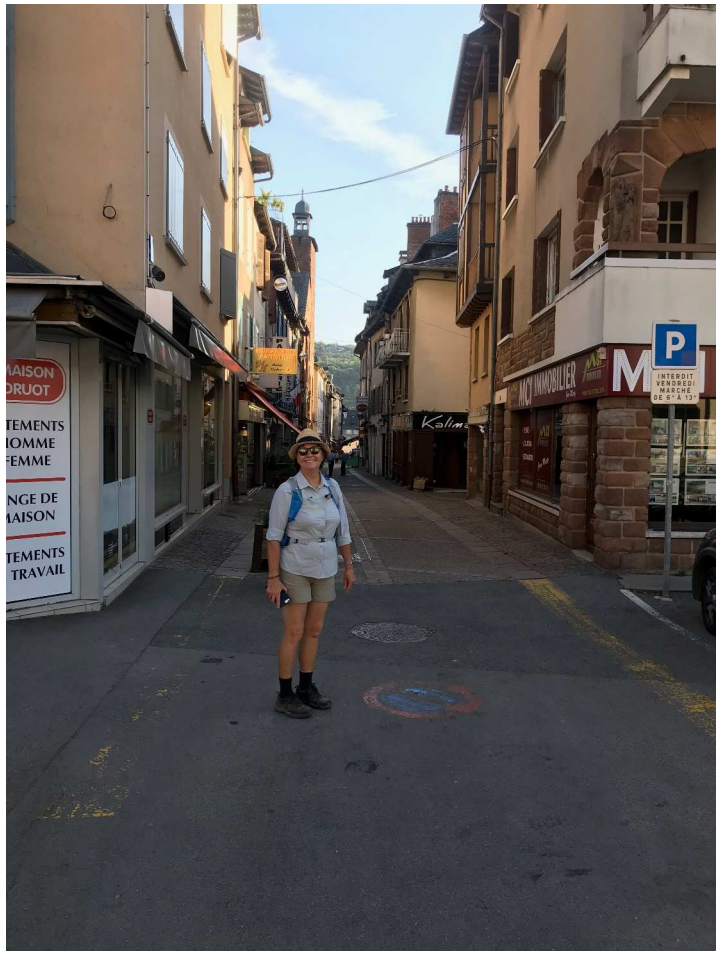
We rested for a fair while at a rest stop near where we thought the top was, again using our chairs, and ate one of our power bars and drank plenty of water from the tap at the stop. There were two walkers there when we arrived and 5 more arrived while we were resting, I don't think any of them were expecting such a climb!

We left the rest stop about 3pm still nearly 7kms from our destination, Golinhac. Although the views were fantastic, we were stuffed – we stopped once more at Massip on some logs before trudging the final 2km into our accommodation, which is right next to the church but thankfully is right on the trail.

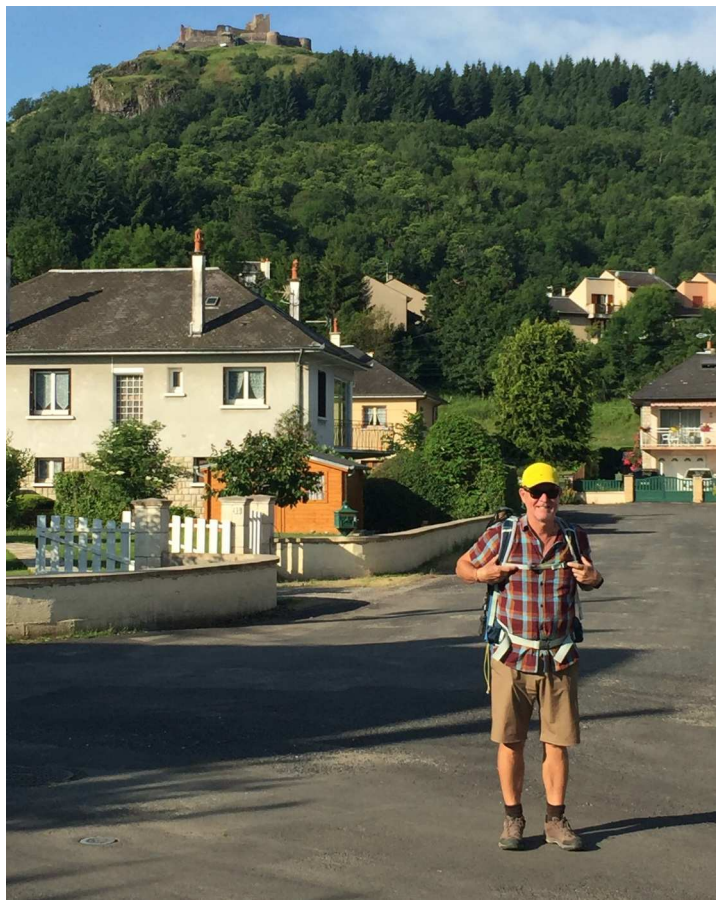
30kms by my watch today and 199km in total – think I'll have a beer !



Starting off with a downhill, just after 8am.







Clockwise, Alison walking through Espalion old town, me back by the river, one of the seats by the river and me walking through the western suburbs of Espalion with the château in the background. Espalion is famous for its Laguoile knives, one of which Alison later bought me for my birthday.

Across the page, the inside and outside of the Eglise de Saint-Pierre-de-Bessejouls, 3km from Espalion, a pilgrim statue in the village of Bessejouls and Alison in farmland after a lengthy climb up from Bessejouls. This was our first encounter with crops, but we had plenty more in store for us!!













The tiny hamlet of Le Briffoul, looking back to Espalion and the hills we had traversed in the days before, us having lunch by the war memorial next to the church in Tredou, and the inside of the church.

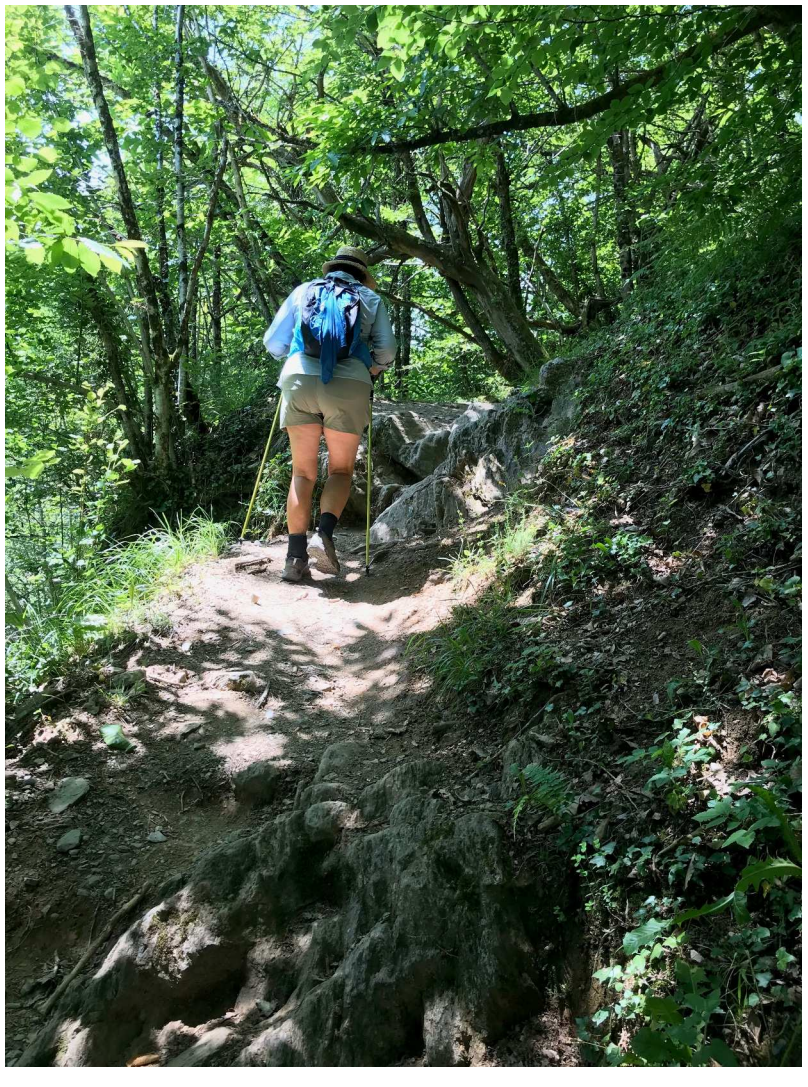






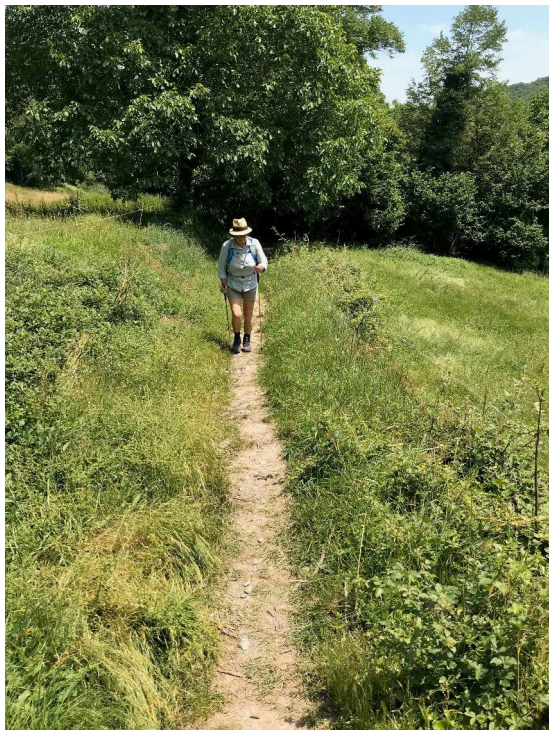
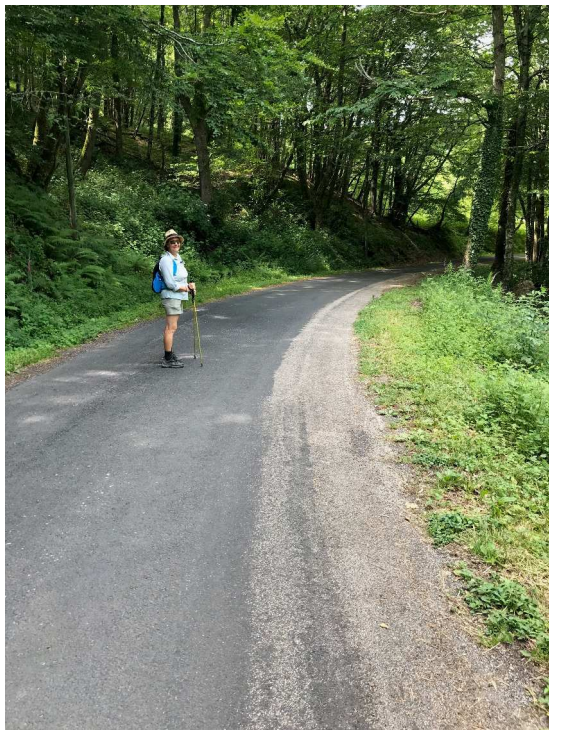






Conques was nearly as pretty as Estaing, but the sunshine made this town the stand-out amongst all the beautiful places we passed on the journey. The place was packed with people but we pressed on and had a power bar near a tap instead of lunch in Estaing! Below, Alison by the Lot and then starting to climb over 300m up towards Golinhac.




Alison still trudging upwards before our lunch, below a crossroads at the highest point of the day - there was supposed to be a bar or cafe there but it was about 500m off the road - , and Alison again, now on flat road getting close to Golinhac and one last stop to rest before the final push to finish the day.







We were glad to see our accommodation, La Bastide d'Olt. The last couple of days have seen us go through some amazingly varied terrain, lovely river walks, steep descents and ascents and, at times, incredible views. Here are two: one with pre-dinner drinks and the second looking west from Golinhac as the sun sets. Finally, the church next to our hotel.





June 20, 2019

Day 9 Golinhac to Conques

After a long day yesterday, I have to say the beer, food and accommodation at Golinhac was sensational and we both awoke today very refreshed. Overnight and early morning rain was forecast, so we were pleasantly surprised to find the sun shining when we got up, albeit with a few clouds around and a bit cooler than the last couple of days. We made sure we had a good breakfast (no doubt some of yesterday's pain was self inflicted by not eating at the right times and in the right quantities!) and set off just after 8:15am.

Golinhac is quite high but it's not at the top of the hill so we had a quick uphill to get out of town (heading SW away from the valley we overlooked) before a really pleasant 8.8km walk to Espeyrac for morning coffee. We are back in farming country again, with all the sights, sounds and *smells* that go with that! As far as I can tell we are still in the Massif Central, this morning's walk on what I think is the Espeyrac plateau – not as high as a few days ago but still between 400m and 600m. The weather has changed though, and instead of very cold mornings and fairly chilly winds, we are getting more humidity, higher temperatures and warmer breezes.

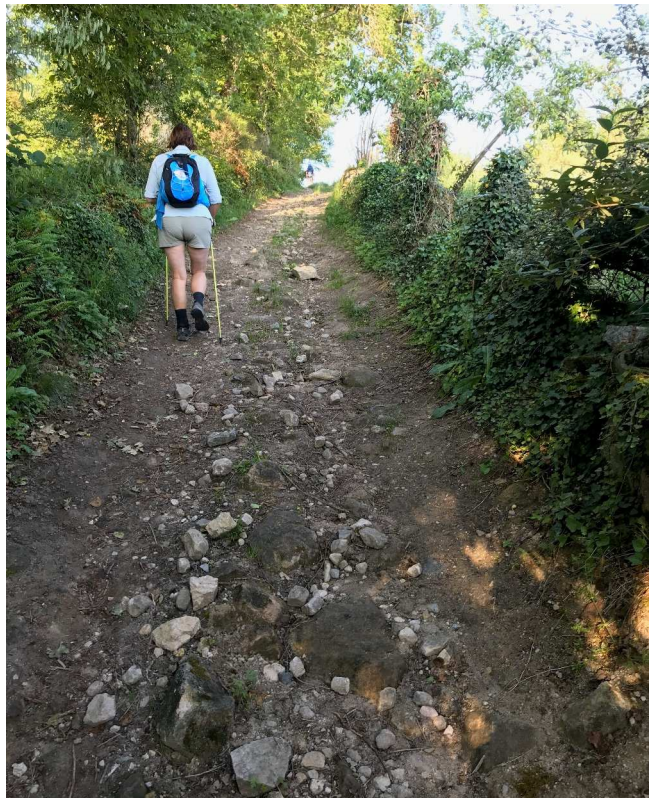
From Espeyrac we had a relatively short walk to a similar size town, Senergues, where we bought some bread, jamon, cheese and tomato, which we ate just out of town at a very nice facility provided for the pèlerins by the town.

From there, again, a great (fairly flat) walk through the plateau to St-Marcel, where we stopped again for a rest before descending into Conques, which is an amazing village perched into an almost vertical drop into the Dourdou river – we are here for two nights so more pictures of Conques tomorrow!

Just over 21kms today taking us to 220km in total and through the second stage of our walk!



Starting the day, with the church in the background.





Alison on the slight uphill to get out of Golinhac, Alison in the hamlet of Les Albusquies and on the path to Espeyrac, and me before the descent into Espeyrac (in the background). We got a bit lost on the entrance into town but made it there!









Another gorgeous village! Alison before Espeyrac, having coffee and walking out of the village past the cemetery. The last photo is looking back from just past the creek to catch a final glimpse of the village.





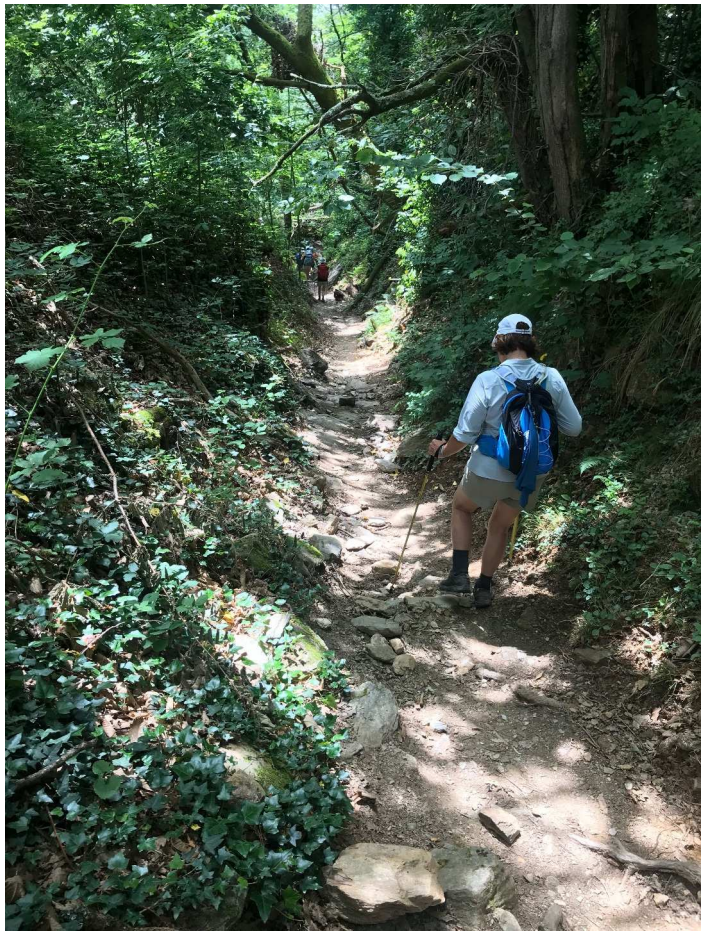


Lunch just past Senergues, walking on the plateau towards Saint-Marcel, our break in that village and looking back towards the church in the village.















Alison at various stages of descent to our hotel in Conques, Hotel Sainte Foy, which you can just make out past the white car on the right. We must have had to wait for our room and needed to have a drink to fill in time!





Dinner at the Hotel Saint Foy. We had planned to eat at another Michelin star restaurant but it was about 2kms away and down the hill. As we would continue to find, taxis are very rare in rural France, so we decided to stay in town - the dinner was fantastic anyway!

June 21, 2019

Rest day 2 Conques

Conques is just a beautiful little town – perfect for a rest day as there is not too far to walk! It is home to a very large church called the Abbey Church of Saint Foy, dedicated to and containing the relics of a young woman martyred in the 4th century and a pilgrim destination in its own right.

Apparently it was also the inspiration for the village in the Disney animation “Beauty and the Beast”!

We’ve managed to catch up on all our washing, pack our cold and wet weather gear away (although it’s raining today, the forecast is for very hot over the next few days!), have a few drinks and some very nice meals.

There are some nice shops and Alison did a bit of souvenir hunting and I’ve bought a new hat to help with the heat – we will be in the Cele valley when it gets hot, so hoping for some shade!



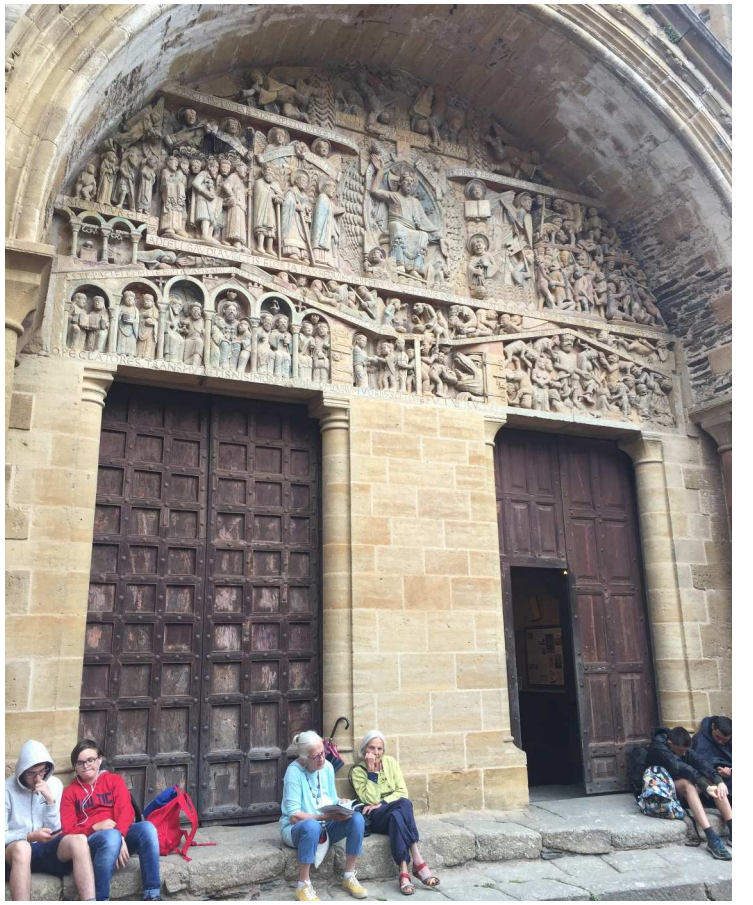

BAR
ST JACQUES
CAFE




ESCAPADE



In and around Conques and its superb cathedral of Sainte-Foy. There are a couple of photos of the tympanum above the doors to the cathedral, which was quite stunning - we would see a number of these on cathedrals but this was the first.









Looking towards Conques from the road out of town, with the cathedral in the background.



Alison outside the Hotel Sainte Foy

June 22, 2019

Day 10 Conques to Decazeville

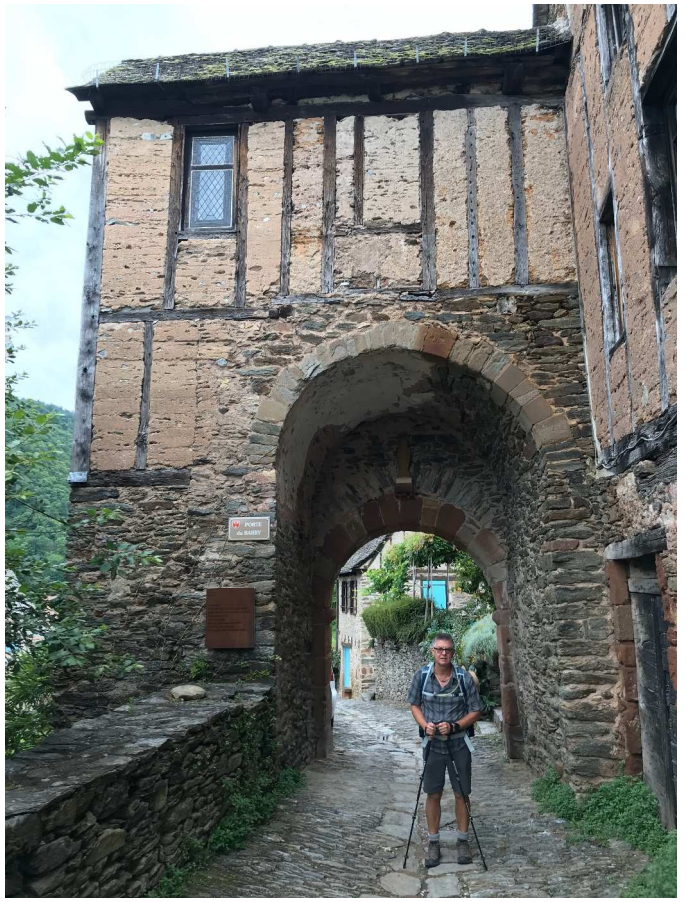
Another great day of walking today! Breakfast didn't start until 8am, so we got away slightly later than usual, about 20 to 9, after visiting the nearby epicerie to pick up some bread, tomato, cheese and fruit for lunch.

A very steep descent down cobbled roads out of Conques followed by an even steeper ascent up the hill shown in the second photo (taken yesterday). You can just make out the tiny Chapelle Sainte-Foy about 2/3rds of the way up. The photo just after the one of Alison climbing up the cobbled path is taken from the Chapelle looking back to Conques!

After about an hour of climbing, we popped out at the top and enjoyed some easy walking through farm land, mostly along roads or good paths to the village of Noailhac, where we had a morning coffee From there more of the same past the Chapelle Saint-Roch and then on to an "aire pique-nique" that a kind farmer had put in at Fonteneille for lunch.

From there the track led through more farms, sometimes hardly distinguishable from the fields, before dropping down through semi-rural, suburban and then the urban areas around Decazeville before stopping at the Church of Notre Dame in the centre of town. This is the first town of any real size we've stayed in since leaving Le Puy 12 days ago! Conques was just outside the geographical boundary of the Massif Central, albeit probably still within the geological boundary, but we are well and truly out of that region now so expecting much different scenery from here on.

20 kms by my watch today and now 240km in total. This is quite a bit more that the guide books indicate, but my watch does 3D distance, meaning that altitude changes are taken into account, whereas I think the books are using lineal measurement from 2D maps. The difference so far is about 10% – it should reduce with flatter roads but we'll see!



Leaving the beautiful village of Conques through the Porte du Barry, crossing the pilgrims bridge over the Dourdou just out of town and the climb up to the Chapelle Sainte-Foy















Conques from the chapelle, Alison almost at the top, the view towards Decazeville from just before Noailhac, and morning coffee at Noailhac.







The same valley from just after Noailhac, the Chapelle Saint-Roch, lunch at Fonteneille and the trail through what I think is wheat.







Decazeville in the distance, Alison in the outskirts of Decazeville walking down what looks like someone's drive but is actually the trail, and the Château Viviez, where we stayed the night.





June 23, 2019

Day 11 Decazeville to Figeac

Big day today! We stayed at a lovely château last night about 3km out of Decazeville (the hosts picked up and dropped off in Decazeville) which was fabulous, but it felt like we were behind the 8 ball all day!

We expected and got hotter temperatures today – about 32C maximum – but couldn't get away early because breakfast wasn't till 7:30am and then we had to get dropped into town. The grocery store our host dropped us at wasn't open so we had to walk a bit further into town to the patisserie to get some lunch, so it was about 8:20am before we got walking.

The first 11km were very pretty – up the hill out of Decazeville, past the Chapelle of St Roch (there seem to be lots of them !!!), down the hill to Livinhac Le Haute and then up the hill to Montredon. We stopped at both towns, first for a coffee and then for some early lunch but in the end we used up 4 hrs basically getting a third of the distance we needed to travel.

Between Montredon and the start of the descent into Figeac we moved through farming country again on various surfaces but the heat was getting to us, without much in the way of views to take our minds of it! We had a couple of more stops along the way, one using our chairs and a second at St Felix (where a bar was advertised but was closed).

The descent into Figeac was long, steep at times, and hot but we finally got into town around 5:40 pm – first stop a beer and then checked into our room (which was a bit pokey, so we upgraded to a river view!)

We're here for two nights thankfully and then some shorter stages through the Célé valley. 30 kms today and now 250 in total.

Before you start feeling sorry for us check out the last two photos...



Outside the patisserie back in Decazeville before setting off. We didn't realize our hosts would pick up and drop off from either Decazeville or Livinhac. If we had we would have done the extra 4km to get to Livinhac yesterday and shortened today's walk.



Looking back over Decazeville, another Chapelle Saint-Roch, the river Lot with Livinhac in the background and Alison on the bridge across the Lot.









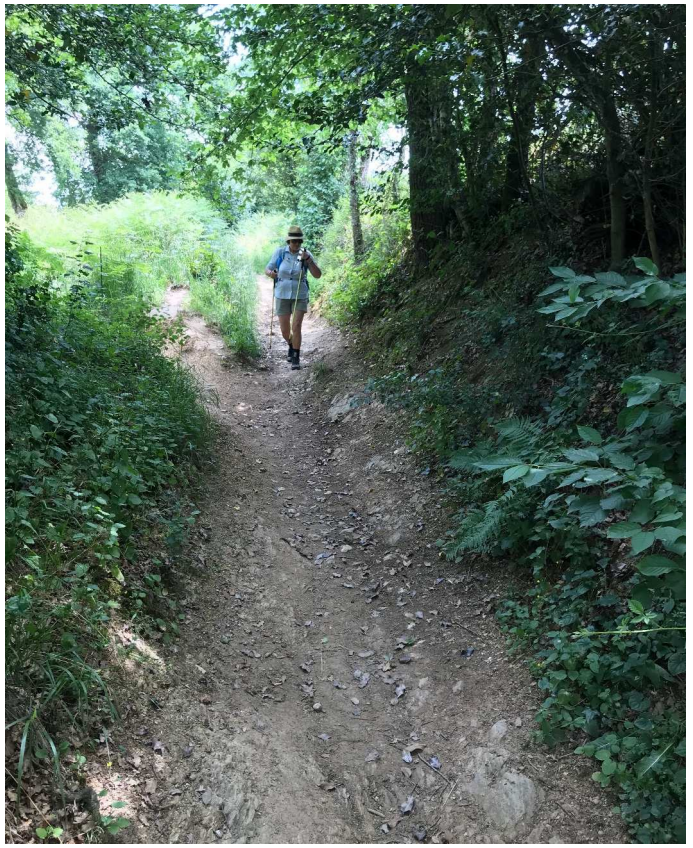


The church across from where we had morning tea in Livinhac-le-Haute, and Alison having morning tea. We spent quite a while sitting and having coffee and cakes in the full sun and never quite recovered.
Alison on the road to Montredon and across the valley to that town in the distance.









Looking back at Montredon and the Chapelle Notre-Dame, Alison on a very rough track heading downhill to Lacoste and pictures of both of us walking through fields where there is little protection from the sun and even fewer markings to follow!







Alison near Saint-Felix, where we had a break, a buron as we started the descent into Figeac and a field of poppies just past the buron.









The walk into Figeac was long and hot - it had taken just on an hour from the buron on the opposite page - and we were walking into the sun. The photos above are at our accommodation, the Hotel le Pont d'Or, but we needed a couple of beers before checking in! We had dinner at the hotel and were treated to beautiful views up and down the Cele, which we would follow for the next four days.





June 24, 2019

Rest Day 3 Figeac

Figeac is a very pretty town, the largest we've had for a rest day since Le Puy. It grew up around an abbey built in the 9th century and has examples of buildings from the 12th and 13th centuries and then 17th and 18th centuries – in between apparently the town fell on hard times!

We had a very relaxing day, latish breakfast, a look around the town (we bought a map with a walking tour set out on it but it was very difficult to follow!), then a bit of a boozy lunch and a sleep!

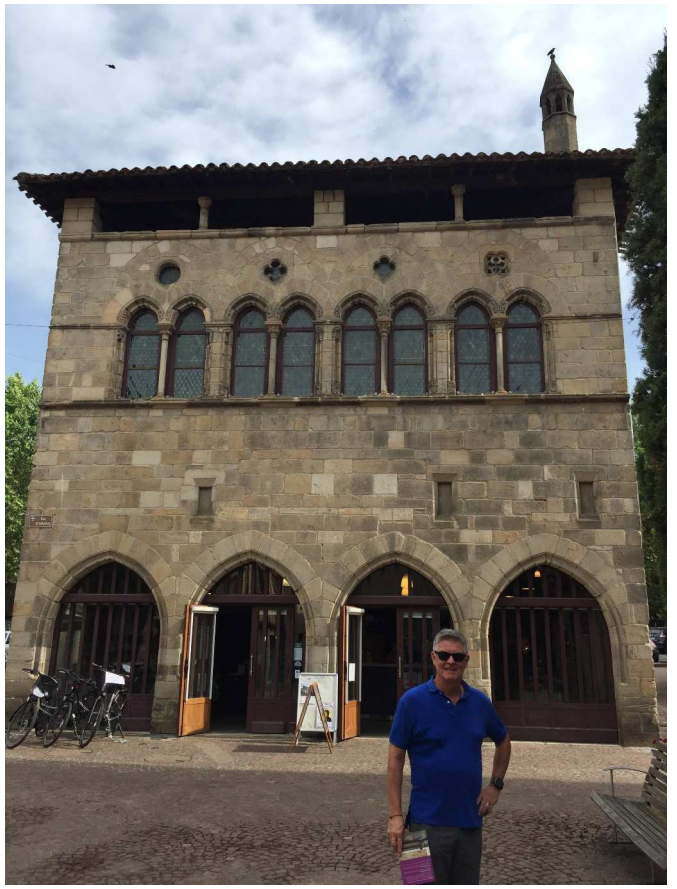
We just went out for some supplies for tomorrow – we plan to get away a lot earlier to beat the heat!

Next up a few beers and dinner!



Our hotel and the Pont Gambetta.









The old town of Figeac was really very pretty - here are some photos of our tour using the map we bought at the tourist bureau (above).






Rue
GAILLARDY
Place
GAILLARDY
3
AV 06 15 85 84 73






Leonidas
CRÉDIT AGRICOLE



Above, lunch at just about the only restaurant open in Figeac. On the opposite page, some more of the interesting architecture as well as me trying to figure out the map!

June 25, 2019

Day 12 Figeac to Sainte Eulalie

A very good day today, although very hot over the last hour.

We got away a fair bit earlier than usual, just after 7am, to try to beat the heatwave that seems to be engulfing France, and that made the day a whole lot better than the walk into Figeac. We made great progress, mostly on roads with some rougher tracks, through small hamlets until we arrived at Faycelles before 9am. The guidebook said no food at Faycelles but a cafe/bar had popped up so we had a coffee and rested for 20 minutes or so. The village looked like a postcard, I think they'd put some effort into restoring the church and the surrounding buildings to make it attractive for tourists…

After coffee we headed a further 5km through farmland between the Lot and Cèlè rivers to Beduer where we stopped and ate some fruit we bought yesterday. The land looks very rich and the farmers seem to have lots of new tractors so I'm guessing they are too!

Just before Beduer we changed from the GR 65 to the GR 651 and after Beduér we dropped down to the Cèlè itself, passing through a hunting reserve on the way! Glad it's not hunting season…

We'd made great time so far, which was lucky because I had stuffed up calculating the distance we needed to do today – I missed a 3.8km section and thought we were only 6kms or so from our destination at Beduer!

For the rest of the day we either followed the Cèlè or drifted slightly off it to walk under the canopy. The crops seem to be wheat and corn and the sections through these fields were quite warm. We stopped at a small village, somewhat strangely called Corn – I'm pretty sure that's not French for the crop – for lunch, eating the bread, tomato and cheese we bought yesterday.

Although there were some sections in Spain where this was not the case, most little towns like we have been passing (not only today but for the whole trip) would have had a bar/cafe in them which makes it easy to rest and recuperate. Not so on this trail, which makes things a bit more challenging!

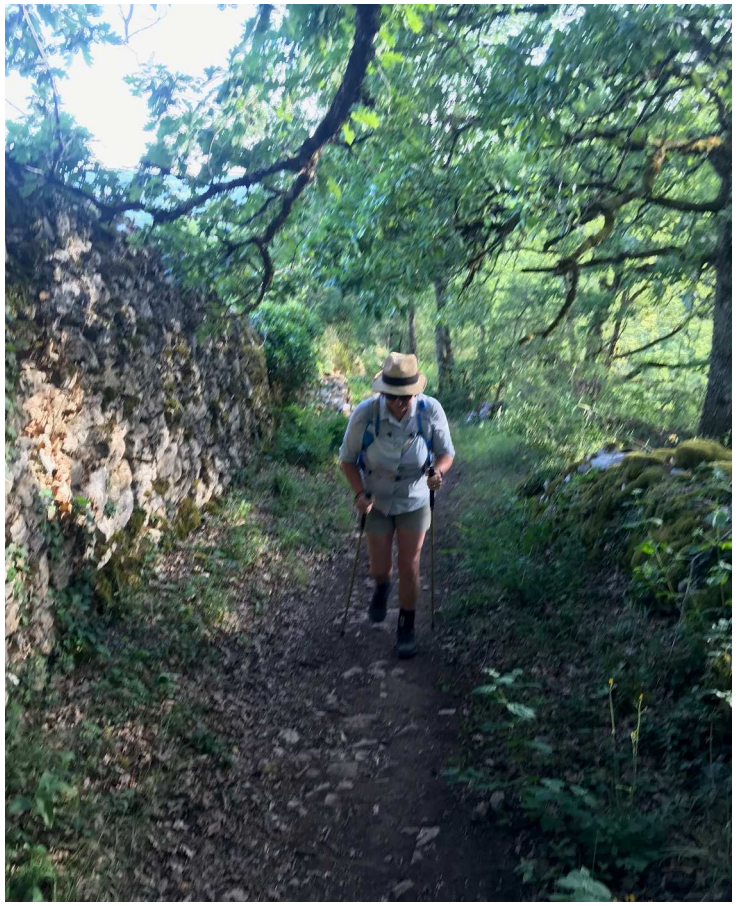
In any event, not long after 2pm we made it into Sainte Eulalie, a very small village on the Cèlè, and found our B&B. The village looks lovely but it's too hot to go out and look – I will try before dinner!

24kms today and 274km in total – around 1/3 of the way I think!

Also – very slow internet and no phone service so I might read a book! Photos when I get a connection…



Off to a nice early start from Figeac







Al making the usual morning climb after a short walk along the river from the hotel, looking back to Figeac from the top of the hill and the village of Faycelles.







Alison between Faycelles and Mas de la Croix in a pretty steamy valley, the view from just past Mas de Al Croix, the point at which we left the GR65 and started the GR651, and the Château de Beduer, which apparently you can rent!



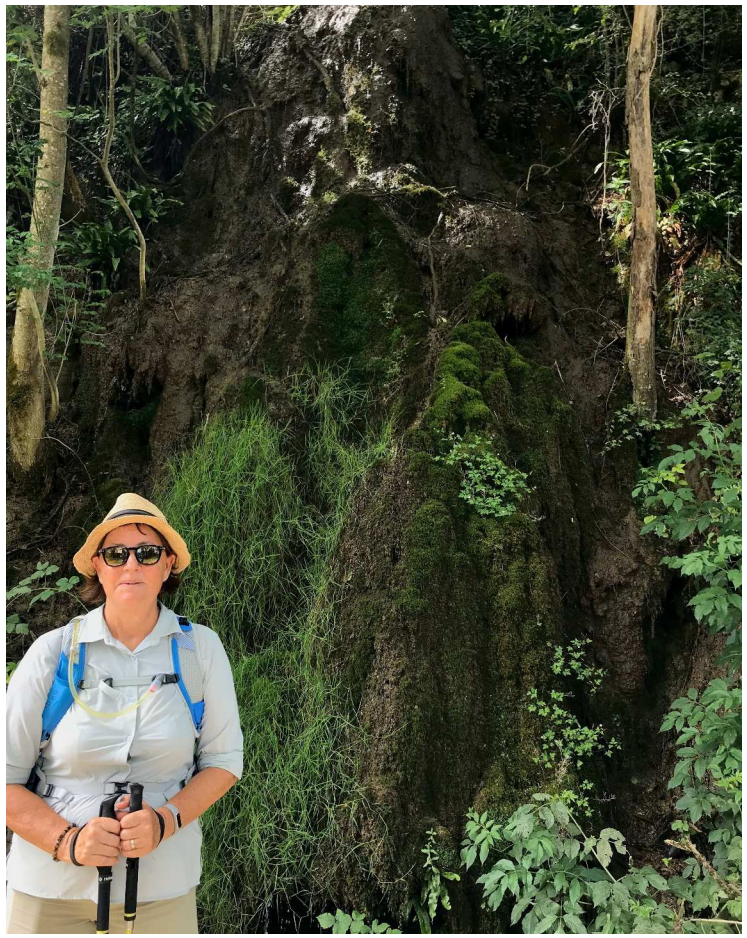




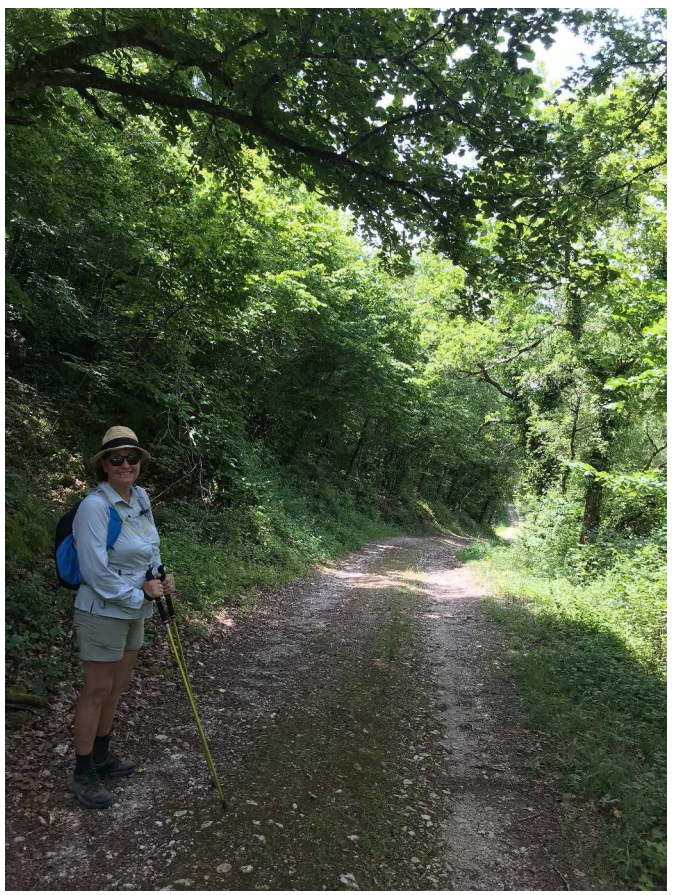


Our first view of the Célé valley from just outside Beduér, a canoe launching ramp on the Célé, Alison next to a sort of combined waterfall and plant, and cows trying to keep coll as we crossed the Célé before Boussac. So far the river and its valley seemed lush and cool but it would soon feel much hotter!









The (very) small town of Boussac, Alison in front of the church in Corn and on the road between corn and Sainte-Eulalie after we had re-crossed the Célé, below right. Bottom left is the village of Goudou.






The ninth century church behind our accommodation in Sainte-Eulalie, Chambre d'Hotes Les Anons du Célé.



June 26, 2019

Day 13 Sainte Eulalie to Cazals

I'm not sure whether today is a rest day or a walking day!

Alison's right eyelid puffed up on Monday morning – it went down during the day but each morning since then it has become worse than the day before. We bit the bullet today and decided she needed to see a doctor – obviously this is a bit tricky for us but our kind hosts at our B&B not only booked Alison in to see their doctor (back in Figeac!) but offered to drive us to the doctor's, from there to the pharmacy and then back to the trail. Neither Alison nor the doctor could tell what the exact cause of the swelling is but there was a fair amount of pus on the outside of the eyelid. The doctor cleaned the eyelid and she is now on antibiotics with strict instructions to see another doctor if the eyelid is not better in a couple of days.

We returned to the trail around 11:30am. Today was a short day anyway but it is extremely hot at the moment so we asked Paul, our host, to take us 10km up the road to Saint Sulpice where we had a drink and some energy bars and generally gathered our thoughts.

We decided to walk the 4km up the hill to tonight's accommodation at Cazals, as you can see from the photos. As you can see St Sulpice,like many of the towns in the Cèlè, is very beautiful. Amazingly, there are houses above the town built into the rock face itself!

The vegetation has changed rapidly with the heat and what looked lush a couple of days ago now looks dry and more like African bush than French forest!

We go from here to Cabrerets tomorrow – just under a 20km walk. To beat the heat we plan to walk to Marcilhac and rent a canoe from there to Cabrerets. I'm sure it will still be hot but better than walking, I reckon.

Only 4kms today but we were both glad to see our accommodation just before 2pm. We're holed up on our room hoping the residual cool in the stone building will resist the very hot wind until nightfall. 278km in total now with the next few day's progress dependent in Alison's eye and the weather!



Alison at Saint-Sulpice, with her eye treated and covered





We'd been dropped at the caravan park by the river (which was just opening for the season to give you some idea of how unusual the hot weather was for this time of year). St Sulpice itself was built into the south facing rock as you can see. Alison is part way up the zig-zag to join the trail at the top of the ridge and next to a house built into the side. Bottom left I think is a well.









A communal oven built into the cliff face, Alison on the trail having reached the top, look back towards Saint-Sulpice and the track from the ridge towards our accommodation, the Ferme de Cazals.





June 27, 2019

Day 14 Cazals to Cabrerets

Well, it was a very different day today! The really great news to start the day is that Alison's eye, while not recovered, was much better after a couple of doses of antibiotics and several cleanses, and it continued to improve during the day.

The less good news is that it is bloody hot and not likely to change for the next two days, however it will return to "normal" summer temperatures from Sunday.

We had booked a canoe at 10am, so we set off from Cazals just after 8am – you could already feel the heat but it was a fairly pleasant, mostly covered, walk down from the plateau to the valley floor and Marcilhac-sur-Célé. After about 4kms we reached the town, bought some supplies for the day and headed slightly out of town to get our canoe – I'm calling it 5kms in total on foot.

Just after 10am we got underway (with our gear in two barrels strapped to the canoe) just downstream from a barrage so the river was moving reasonably quick but not excessively so. The river is very shallow, though, and despite the instructions from the canoe guy on how to navigate past the shallow spots in these sort of "mini rapids", we got stuck in the first one! We managed to get off though without getting our shoes wet, albeit with a bit of water over the side (it was called a canoe but it was really a kayak!).

Th guy has explained there were four sections to Cabrerets: from Marcilhac to the bridge at Monteils, from there to the bridge at Sauliac-sur-Célé, from there to the bridge at Liauzu, and from there to just past the barrage at Cabrerets, and that each section would take a bit over an hour, getting us to Cabrerets at about 3:30 pm, and that's pretty well how the day panned out.

We made about the same speed as our walking pace and initially it was comparatively cool and shady, not really becoming very hot until close to Cabrerets when the sun was around its zenith. We saw some amazing views and the river was swarming with a bunch of what I think (based on Alison's opinion!) were damselflies, some a brilliant blue colour.

We mostly worked out how to manage the little rapids without getting stuck too much but we did nearly tip the kayak at one point going down a slightly bigger rapid and hitting a tree – no harm done but a bit wetter after that.

We crossed two barrages – they leave a little chute for canoes and kayaks to go down but they also provide a portage route, which we took both times.

The river meandered between the two cliff faces defining the valley, which kept the river in shade for most of the time, and we saw lots more houses built into the cliff faces – these are obviously where caves or grottoes have been converted into the interior of the house!

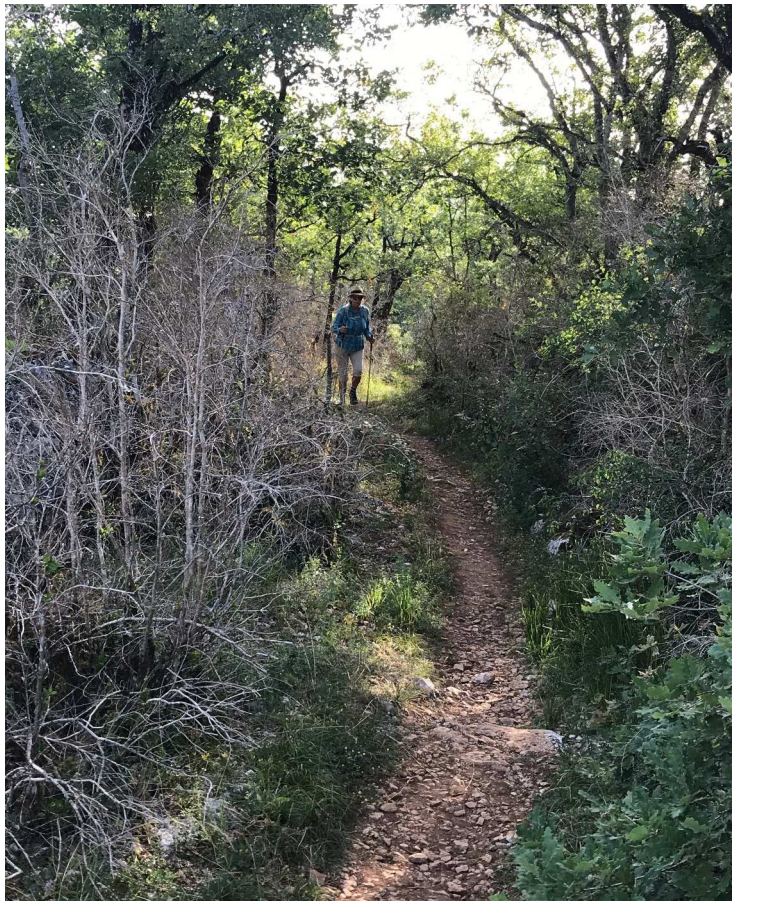
I wasn't sure whether to count the kilometres today – I was expecting a faster moving river that would basically carry us what turned out to be 19kms here. However, we are both pretty stuffed and let me tell you that 4+ hours in a kayak is just as hard as the same time walking, just different muscles hurt! What is different is the heat stress and I'm glad we took the river option. In any event I'm counting them so a total of 24kms today for a total of 302kms!

Not sure what we'll do tomorrow – we only have 10km to St Cirq but it is going to be hot again. There's a boat trip up there ….



Outside the Ferme de Cazals.





Right, the fairly pleasant trail from Cazals to the ridge, above looking down to Marcilhac sur-Célé and the Célé itself near where we launched our canoe.











Just before launching our canoe at Marcilhac, and making headway down the Célé. The owner had given us directions on how to avoid the little banks of gravel that created sort of mini-rapids on the river but we got stuck within 100m of launching! Fortunately we were able to get moving again without getting wet...
Left, looking downstream just after heading off.

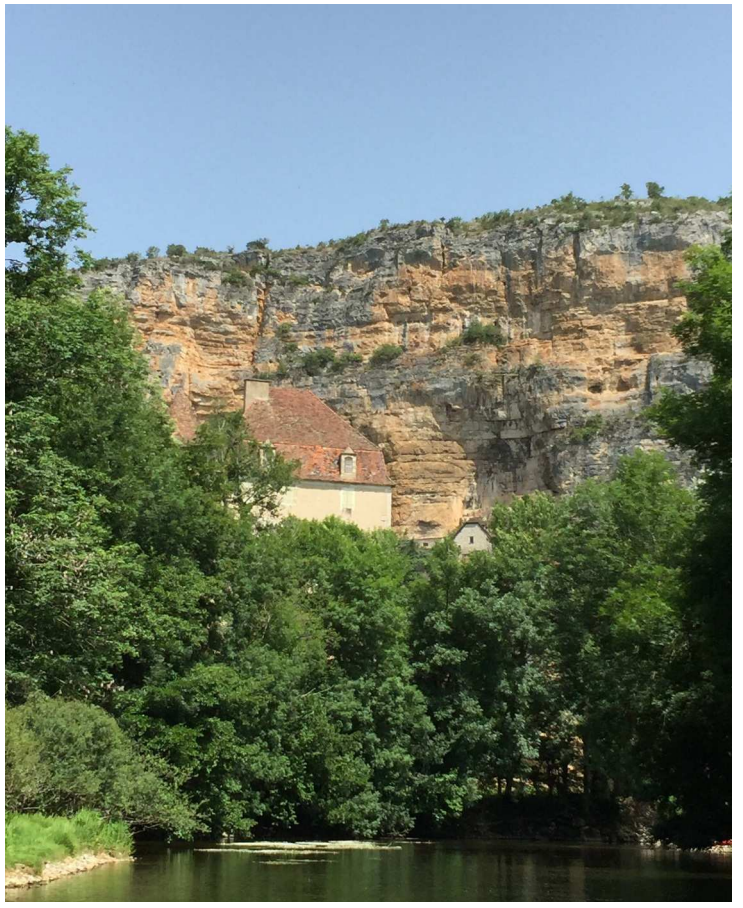




The first bridge at Monteils, right on an hour after starting, Alison and the canoe just before the first barrage, the barrage itself and then the second bridge at Sauliac sur-Célé, again, right on a further hour.



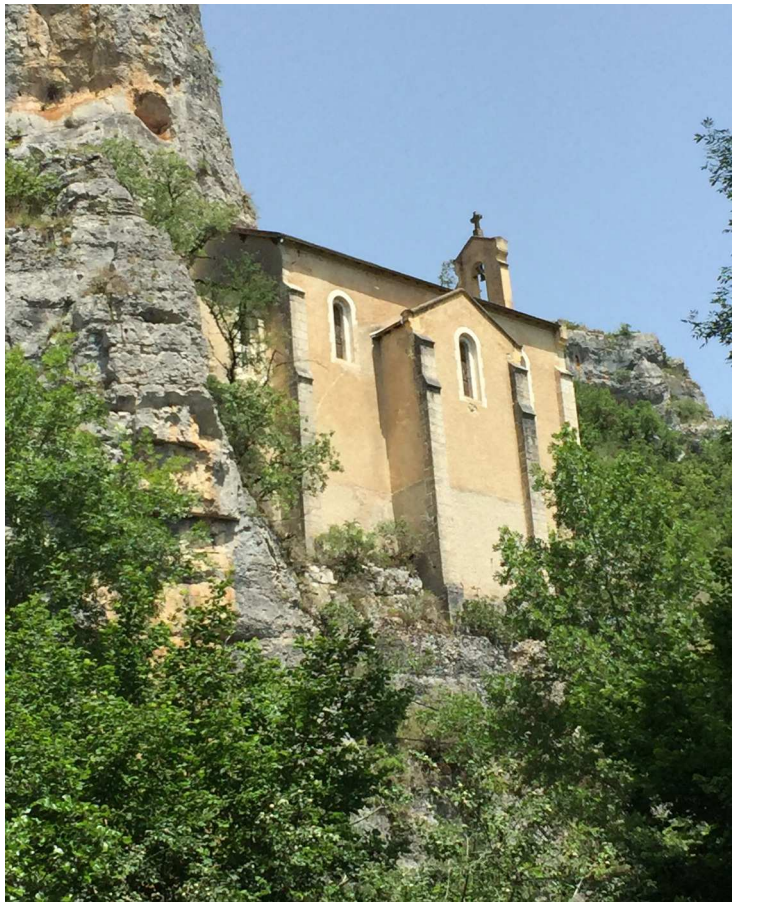




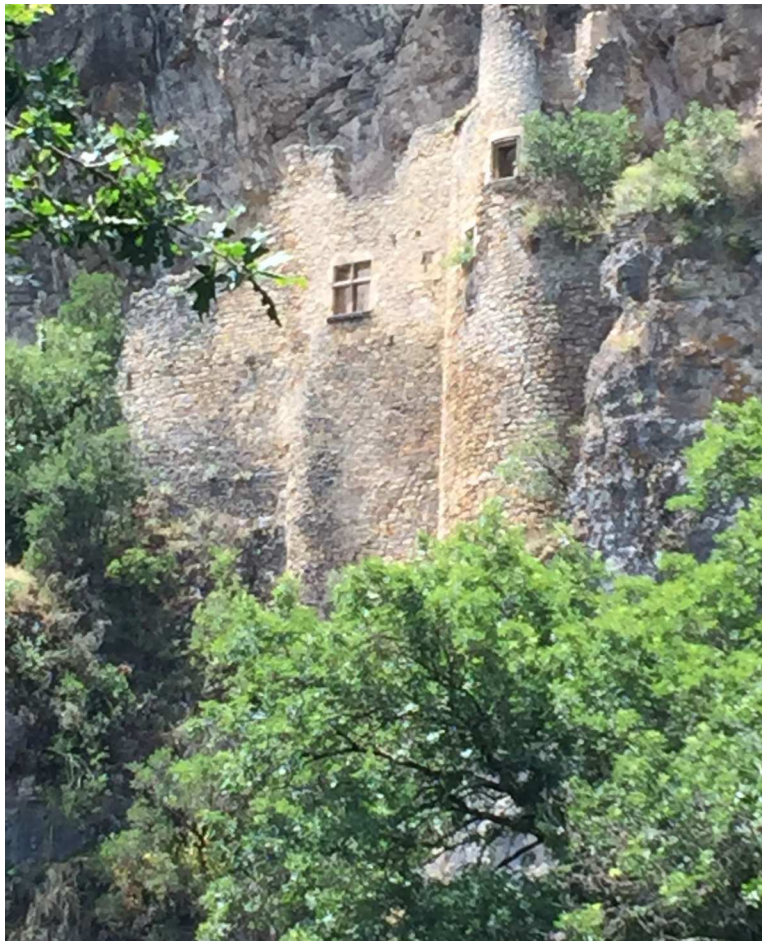
Top left and bottom right, two of the many houses built into the cliff face along the river between Sauliac and Cabarets.
Right, Alison on the bank we had out lunch just after Sauliac and, bottom left, the third bridge just before Liauzu.











There were a lot of beautiful spots along the river, not least this section just before Cabrerets where we literally passed under the cliff face. Above, an older building near the river and, below, the final bridge just before Cabrerets and Alison after dinner with the Célé in the background.







June 28, 2019

Day 15 Cabrerets to Saint-Cirq-Lapopie

Very nice day today after an extremely hot evening yesterday. Every day it's a bit of a lucky dip as to the quality of the accommodation and what sort of room we get – yesterday's hotel was lovely and the room very nice but it was west facing, which meant it got the sun full on until about 9:15pm with no air conditioning to cool the room down (sunset's around 9:45pm but we were in the valley). Usually this means we find another cool spot in the hotel until dinner and then open everything up after sunset to cool the room down. However the eastern cliff of the valley was less than 100m from the hotel just across the river, so if anything the east facing parts of the hotel (bar etc) were even hotter than the room! Anyway, eventually things did cool down and we had a nice evening but for a while it was like being in a furnace.

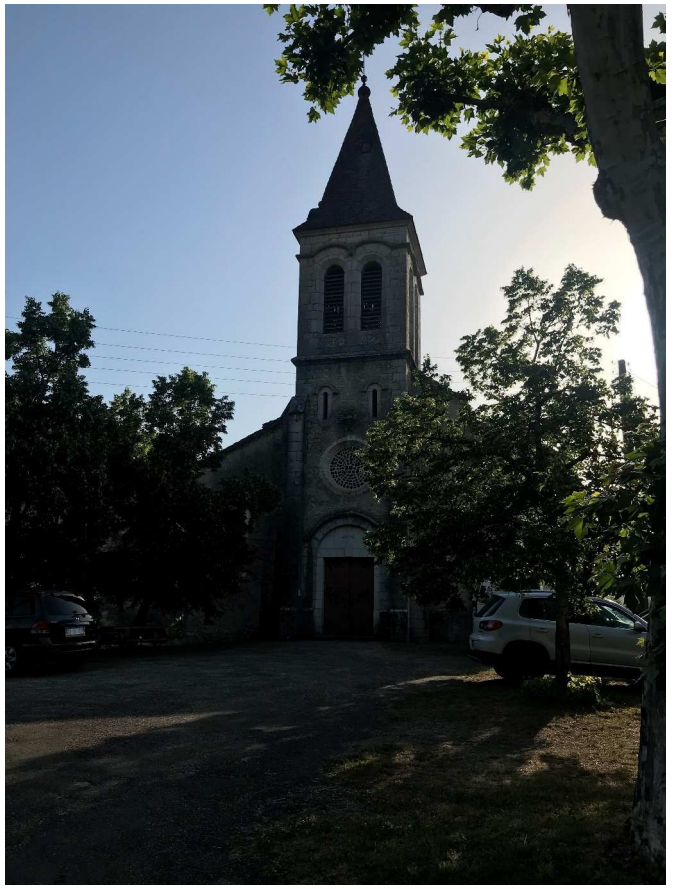
We got away today just before 8:30am, with the air still cool and nice breeze. As usual, we hiked up the hill, past the church and then a cave called the Pech Merl, which has ancient paintings in it. Once we reached the top we had a very nice walk through forest in fairly cool conditions, passing the junction of the Célé and the Lot rivers and leaving the Célé valley after an hour and a half or so and then on to the town of Bouziès where we had a short break. The GR651 finishes at Bouziès and we joined the GR 36-46, which follows the Lot valley. The guidebook said there wasn't much apart from a fountain at Bouziès but it was quite a bustling place, with boats travelling up the Lot to Saint-Cirq. From Bouziès it is 4km east (the wrong direction!) to Saint-Cirq so we will have to retrace our steps tomorrow as we walk west and south to Vers.

The walk from Bouziès to Saint-Cirq was also very pleasant – mostly shady and mostly flat until the last 400m which rises 100m to the village of Saint-Cirq. By now things had heated up and we were wet through from sweat- fortunately our hotel was about 40m from the top of the trail, and even more fortunately our room was ready for us on our arrival around 11:30am.

The hotel has a Michelin plate restaurant that only opens for lunch so we had a fantastic meal and a bottle of wine and then a look around the village before crashing to wait out the heat for the afternoon.

Roughly 12km today for a total of 314kms!

No internet to speak of at the hotel and no mobile data either so pictures and maybe even this post tomorrow!



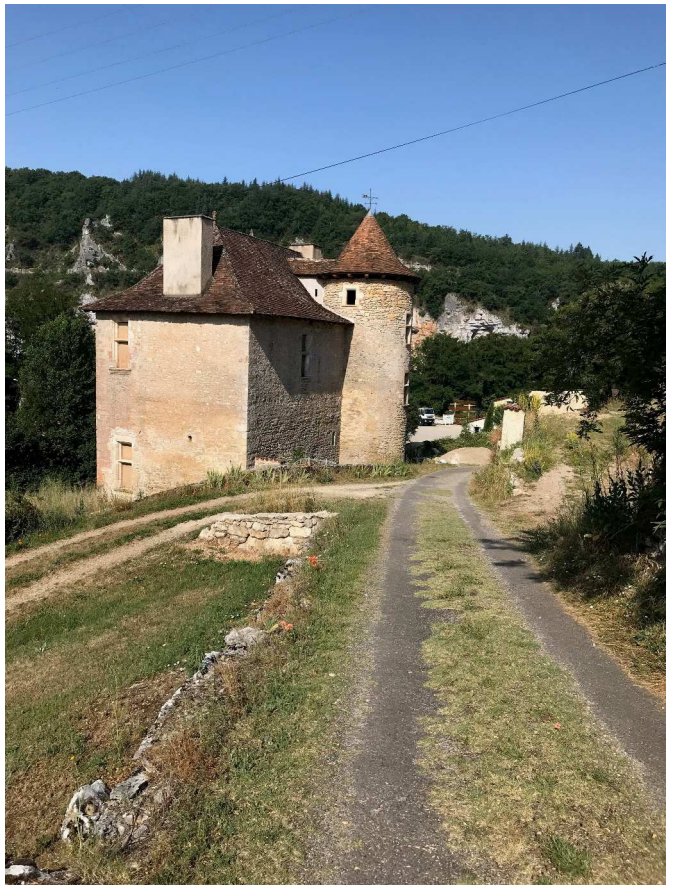
The church in Cabrerets on the way out of town, me at the Peche Merle, Alison along the plateau that we walked along, having climbed out of Cabrerets past the Peche Merle, and an old buron just before our descent to cross the Lot into Bouziès.

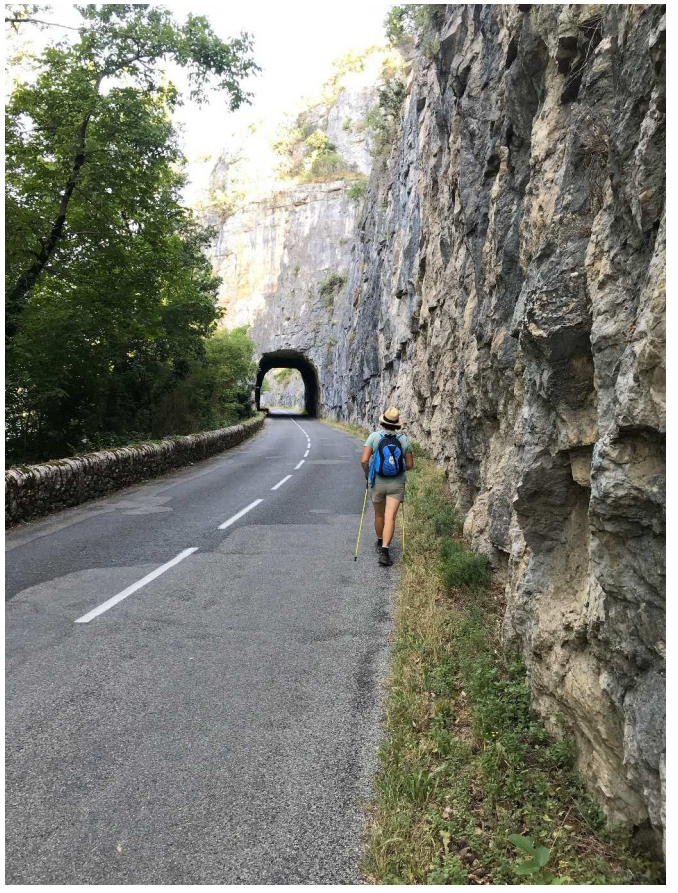










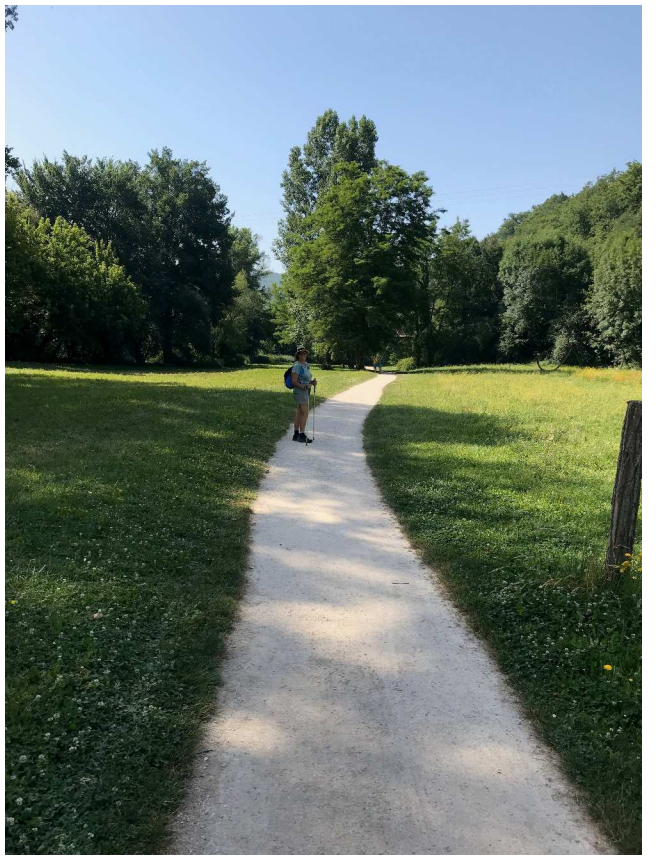


Clockwise from above, the drop down to the road just passed the picture of Alison on the previous page, emerging out of the forest past an old mill, the road along the Lot heading away from our destination towards the bridge Alison is shown and the town of Bouziès on the opposite bank of the Lot.

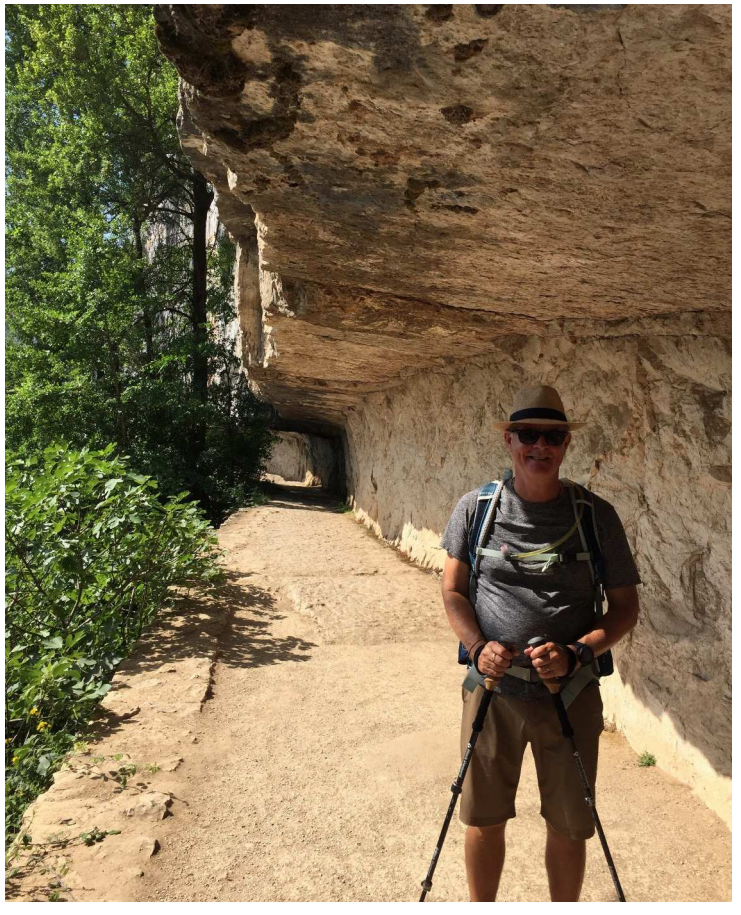




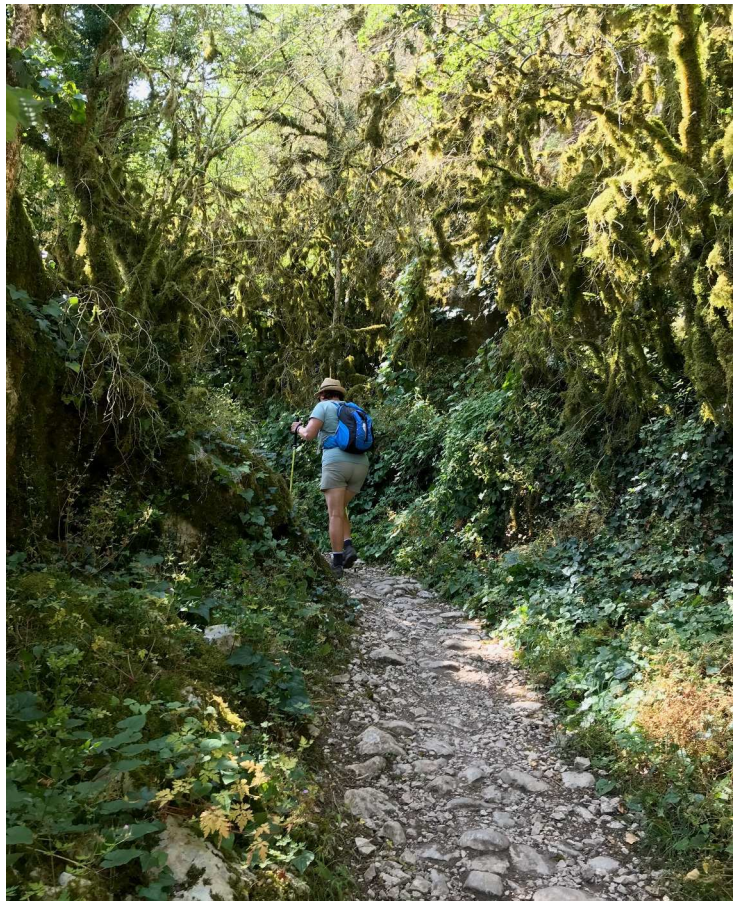




Looking back across the Lot - the fortifications are called the "English Castle" built during the Hundred Years war. Alison on the path heading out from Bouziès toward St.-Cirq and me a bit further along and then just after a lock in the river that the boats from Bouziès use to reach St.-Cirq.









Alison starting the 200m climb up to St.-Cirq, views from about halfway up, and lunch at our hotel for the night, L'Auberge du Sombral.







The view up and down the Lot from the tower on the previous page, our room at the hotel and Alison at pre-dinner drinks with the wedding-goers in the background.





June 29, 2019

Day 16 Saint-Cirq-Lapopie to Vers

The weather finally beat us today, reducing our walk by about 4kms! We've had very poor wifi and even limited mobile data since Figeac, making it difficult to get access to news or anything else for that matter, so we haven't been able to read much about the weather in Europe other than getting the local forecast (and we couldn't even get that yesterday). I just checked the news and all I can say is wow – unbelievable heat but it has not been too bad for us.

After our great lunch yesterday we crashed for a while and the room slowly got hotter and hotter and in the end it was probably the hottest night we've had so far. At about 4:30pm we started to hear people talking in the square just outside our room and by 5:30pm the must have been a hundred or more people having "aperitifs" at our hotel – as we found out, this was the first event in a multi-day wedding celebration – a bit like one of your birthdays, Rod.



Ready to set off again after a great breakfast!

Amazingly we woke today to thick fog and set off just before 8:30am and made good time re-tracing our steps to Bouziès and then heading south and west along the Lot, with some amazing views along the way. After about 9kms, the trail turned sharply 220m uphill over about 1km, bringing us out of the fog. The sole purpose of the hike up the hill seemed to be a small cross and a buron and after about 2km on or near the peak, we dropped down a miserable rocky track to reconnect with the Lot again!

The walk along the Lot was again very nice and I'll never know why the path doesn't simply follow the river from Bouziès to Vers which would be lovely and a few kms shorter. We pulled into Pasturat around 1pm, planning to have lunch, and ran into a guy with a van dropping an older guy off in Pasturat, apparently having done some shopping in Vers. He offered to drop us in Vers and I said no thanks but after walking a 100m down a hot road and seeing nowhere to stop, we turned around and said thank you very much! Best decision of the day and maybe the walk so far – the thermometer in his car was showing 39C! He dropped us at our hotel around 1:30pm but wouldn't take any money for the ride. Lunch was in full swing at the hotel so we had a couple of beers, a bottle of Rose and a 3 course lunch before going to our room, which is air conditioned (which is very unusual in France) and faces East – first time I've felt cool since we left Figeac!

There's a photo of some of the locals swimming in the lovely Vers river, which connects with the Lot at Vers, and also one of a kiwi guy named Adrian who we had bumped into over the last 6 days and joined us for dinner (another 3 course job – I don't think we're losing weight!).

17 kms today to bring the total to 331kms and one day away from a rest day in Cahors – the heatwave is forecast to break tomorrow, let's hope the forecast is accurate.



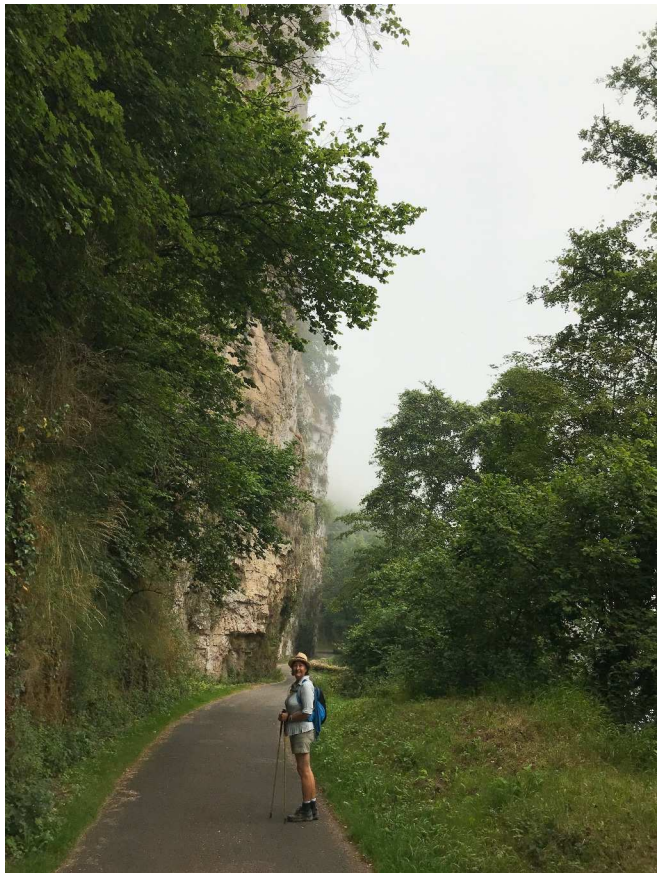
Setting off through the now empty streets of St.-Cirq in light fog past the beautiful church. We left town via a different route that we thought would be less steep but it wasn't!











Alison back on the chemin de haulage towards Bouziès, the town of Bouziès-Bas. The morning was very pleasant with great views along the Lot before we head up and it got hotter!













The buron and the cross between La Peyre and Mas de Pasturat seemed to be the only point of the climb from and subsequent descent back to the Lot, a welcome resting point, the town of Les Masseries looking back over the Lot and the start of the descent. With the fog lifting it was very hot and dry!







Lunch at La Truit Dorée after being rescued from Pasturat - two big beers and a bottle of rosé didn't really hit the sides. Below, the view from our room of the Riusseau le Vers, where people were trying to get away from the heat, and dinner with a fellow walker, Adrian. We met him in St.-Eulalie and bumped into him in Cabrerets and again at St.-Cirque but he was staying two nights in Vers and so this was the last we saw of him.. You can see Al's eye is better but still not great.





June 30, 2019

Day 17 Vers to Cahors

After a fairly late night we awoke to another misty morning. Breakfast started at 7:15am, so we managed to get away reasonably early, just before 8am in light rain/scotch mist which was lovely after the heat of the last few days and which lasted for most of the morning.

Vers was off the GR 36, which is the path we follow into Cahors, so we had to backtrack a couple of kms to the crossroad at which the GR 46 joins the GR 36. Fortunately we were not covering old ground because this was the section we got the ride past yesterday – once we got to the crossroads it was obvious we cut out closer to 6km yesterday, so really lucky we took the ride.

After following the Lot for a bit, we headed uphill to get to the crossroads, which was a fairly poor track. You can see the size rock that has been dumped on it to prevent erosion of the path – it is bloody hard to walk on!

We zigzagged around the hills between Béars and Galessie-Bas, mostly through oak forest with the occasional cut through paddocks, before rejoining the Lot where we had a break and some morning tea.

We followed the Lot all the way into Cahors, taking a variant that meant we didn't have to cut uphill and away from the river for about 5km to pass a church and then return to the river! The walk along the Lot was very pleasant, mostly in shade, and wedged between fields or market gardens and the river. We got some great views of the village of Laroque-des-Arcs across the river from us, and before too long arrived on the outskirts of Cahors.

The river meanders around the town, so it is quite a long walk from when you can first see Cahors to the bridge on which the GR 65, which we now rejoin, crosses into the town.

This marks the end of our excursion along the Célé and the Lot valleys and we return to the main route. It's been a bit of a mixed bag, partly due to the weather and partly due to the problems with Al's eye, and has certainly been much more isolated and rustic than I expected.

We sat down at bar in Cahors at about 1:30pm, so we were on the road for about 5 1/2 hours for 20km and now 351km in total. We're in a nice new hotel overlooking the western part of the river and just a step away from the route out of town. Rest day tomorrow then back on the track.

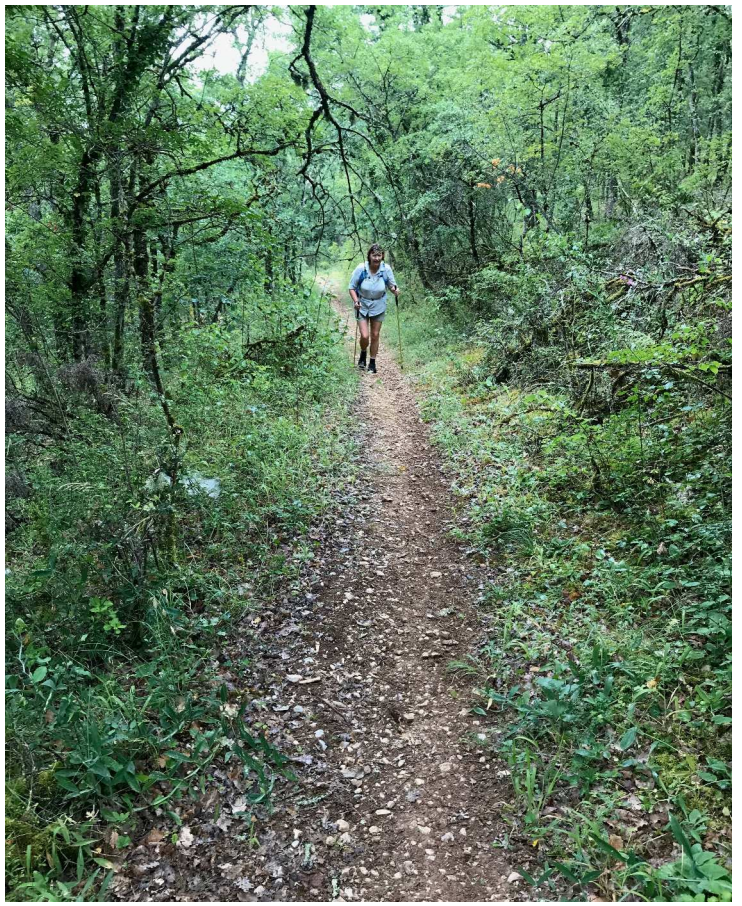


Happy to set out in light rain!





Looking downstream past a lock on the Lot before crossing from Vers towards Cahors, Alison trying to navigate the large rocks used to stabilize the path, looking back over the Lot to Vers and Al close to the top near Les Mazuts.









The work of a busy spider, Alison with the Lot behind her near Galessie-Bas, again with the village of Le Chantre behind her and finally the start of the village of Laroque-des-Arcs on the opposite bank of the Lot.









More pictures of Laroque-des-Arcs, Alison with the start of Cahors in the background and the bridge we crossed to get into town a bit further downstream.











Crossing the Lot on the Pont Louis Phillipe, a beer after a warm walk and Alison at the Fontaine Gambetta, with its statue of Léon Gambetta, a French statesman of the late 1800's.

July 1, 2019

Rest Day 4 Cahors

It's been a great day off in Cahors. First of all, the hotel is great – not very French as you can see from the photos and not in the old part of town, so not close to the restaurants etc but air conditioned with a very comfortable bed and able to do laundry (but it'll cost me!).

After a bit of a rest yesterday we walked back into town (slowly – it was still very hot) and had a very un- French meal – a hamburger each – and a few drinks. We were back in the hotel before 8pm and in bed by 8:30pm. We had a great sleep-in this morning and a slow breakfast before we headed in to town to do a bit of touristing – you can see some of the old buildings, the Cathedral of St Etienne (which is 900 years old this year) and the Pont Valentré in the photos.

We've been bumping into a Canadian couple, Jane and Lorraine, who are cycling through the region, since Cabrerets and we did so again when we stopped for a morning coffee. They mentioned they had found a vegetarian restaurant in Cahors that they were heading to for lunch, so we said our goodbyes, not expecting to see them again. Alison had spotted a nice little restaurant earlier in the day and after a second coffee we also headed for lunch and – you guessed it – it turned out to be the same place! We also saw but did not talk to a guy (we call him tracky dacks because that's what he has on most of the time) that we have also been bumping into on and off since the second day of our walk – might have to say hello if we we him again!

A quiet night planned for tonight – we got about 32 kms to walk tomorrow but hopefully not too hilly after the climb out of Cahors!





The Pont Valentré and our very modern hotel.





The view downstream from our hotel room , the Lot from the Pont Valentré just upstream from our hotel and me on the Pont Valentré, which we would head across the next day, leaving the Lot and Célé valleys, which we had been in or around since Decazeville 8 days ago. The last picture of me is on the opposite side of Cahors to our hotel and guess what, the river is the Lot!











Above, the old part of Cahors, the Cathedral of St-Etienne, Jane, Lorraine and Alison at the Restaurant Marie Colline and Alison having a second coffee at the place where we had bumped into them earlier.





July 2, 2019

Day 18 Cahors to Moncuq

Very simple plan today – walk 11kms from Cahors to La Bastide-Marnhac for coffee, walk 11kms from there to Lascabanes for lunch and then walk 10kms from there to Moncuq! I'm glad to say, it all went perfectly according to plan, with the best tracks and therefore the best time we've made all trip!

We left the hotel fairly early, just after 7:30am prepared for a fairly long day. We had a bit of a cheat coming out of Cahors, taking the road up the first hill instead of the steep and rocky trail. The result was much better for the feet but we did miss the view back into Cahors, only catching the outer suburbs.

After walking on at times fairly busy roads through small farms and hamlets, including La Roziere where you can see the small chapel, we hit dirt trails and a thunderstorm before arriving into Marnhac (as far as I can make out la bastide means walled town) about 10am – great time for just under 11kms – a little bit wet but none the worse for it.

After Marnhac, and in fact all the way to Moncuq, we were on a limestone ridge with valleys on both sides, again passing through small farms – wheat, sheep, corn, sunflowers and other crops – on a good track that led us into Lascabanes about 1:30pm. We had our lunch on the bench in front of the Mairie before moving to a little rest stop for a coffee – we could have bought food at both places we stopped but we are a bit gun shy having not had many places to stop over the last week or so! We stayed in Lascabanes for just under an hour in total before heading out for Moncuq passing the small Chapelle St Jean and the cassell in the photo. The cassell roofs are self supporting – really ingenious! We've also been amazed at the huge number of church's, chapels and cathedrals in France – they're in every town large, tiny or in between and in some instances, just in the countryside!

We made it into Moncuq just before 5pm, another amazing old town, had a beer and then found our accommodation which is a four room chambres d'hote in a renovated 15 century house – absolutely stunning! Back off to the town centre soon for another beer and dinner!

I reckon we passed half way around 12 noon today at around about 367 kms. In any event we got through 32 1/2 kms today to bring us to just over 383kms in total.



Alison with the hotel and the Pont Valentré in the background.





Left, looking back into Cahors after the climb out of town and La Roziere about 4km from Cahors.

Above, the rain setting in between La Roziere and Marnhac and, below, the church at Marnhac.









Clockwise, coffee at Marnhac trying to dry off, looking back into Marnhac and the coffee shop, the track to Lascabanes as the weather cleared up (note the lost shoes - I always wonder whether people who did this had just given up or decided they had too many shoes!) and our firs stop at Lascabanes where we had lunch by the Marie.

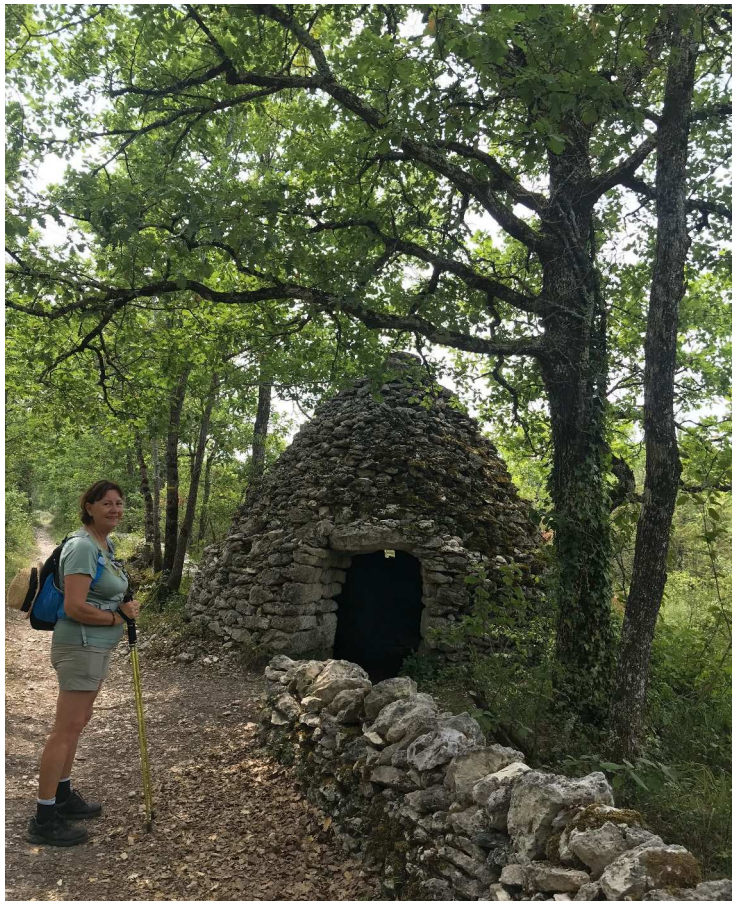


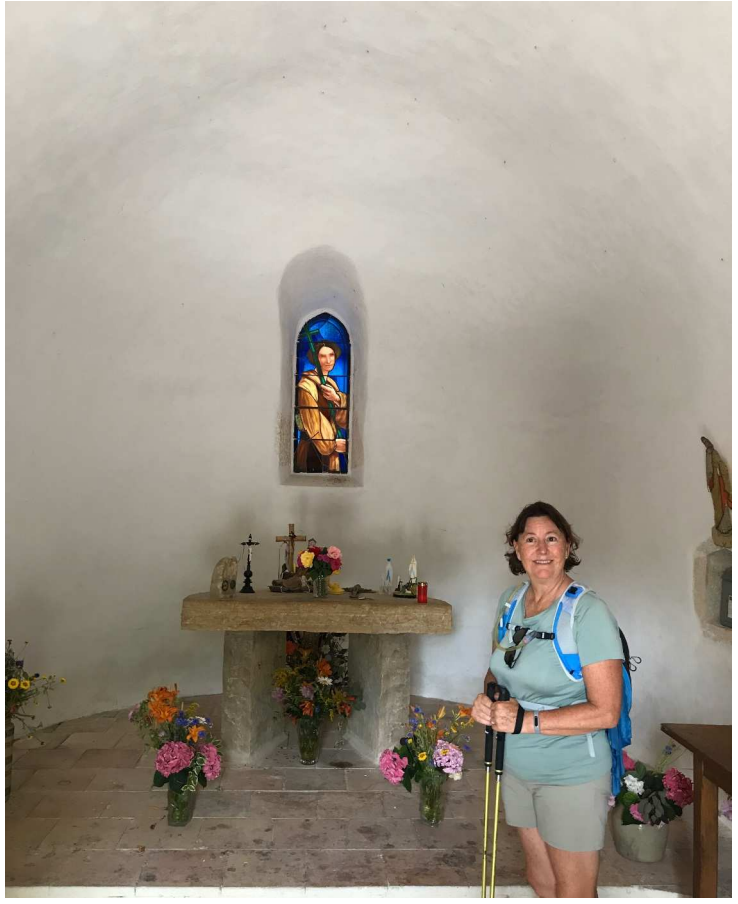






Our second stop in Lascabanes for a coffee, a buron or cassell between Lascabanes and the Chapelle St-Jean and the outskirts of Moncuq.







Although we'd had rain, the day ended up quite hot, so we had a drink before going to our accommodation - Four Maison d'Hotes - which was absolutely fantastic.
The owner Bob, a Frenchman with a New York accent, seemed to know we had stopped for a beer on the way and suggested we eat at a restaurant opposite the bar where we stopped earlier, which it sounded like he owned!





Our room at Bob and Claudine's Four Maison d'Hotes

July 3, 2019

Day 19 Moncuq to Lauzerte

Shorter day today but it felt a bit hillier and we were slower after yesterday's marathon! We had a very nice dinner in town last night – the guy who owns the chambre d'hote that we are staying in also owns one of the restaurants (maybe more!) and we ate there. Breakfast was also beautiful but unfortunately low on protein so we ran out of gas a bit during the day.

We set off just before a quarter to 9, a bit late but we only had 14 to 15 kms to do so we weren't too worried. After a short sharp up hill out of Moncuq we were back up on the limestone ridge, which took us past the Château de Charry (see the photo of the gates), which looked like a hunting lodge – we were coming across hunting reserves again and it was in one of them.

A bit further on to the little village of Rouillac, which had the only chair we saw all day, before dropping down to the valley floor for a bit before climbing once again to the village of Montlauzun. We thought we'd stop there for a break but the trail veered downhill just before the summit and the church that sat on it, so we didn't climb the last bit up – we thought we'd save our legs but we regretted it later on when we needed a break.

Down again from Montlauzun then up to another ridge between a couple of very picturesque valleys. The ridge was mostly oak forest, which again have been very common the last few days – there is a lot of advertising for the truffle industry around here, presumably because the oak forests support the growth of truffles.

The trail down from the ridge was pretty tough, we'd been going without break for over three hours by then so pretty leg weary. We spotted Lauzerte as we broke out from the forest: we knew it was a big climb up into the town and it did not disappoint – we were both balls of sweat when we finally made it to the top!

It's a bit of a funny set up tonight – we are staying in a fairly nice hotel but it is around 4km out of Lauzerte (there's a picture of Lauzerte from the hotel after we got there), which is ok but it's 4km away from the trail, so no way we were going to walk it. We had a lovely lunch in the beautiful town of Lauzerte while we waited for the tourist office to open again and then used them to order a taxi to take us to the hotel and arranged pickup again tomorrow morning. All a bit confusing (taxis are not very common around here) – we had to wait an hour for the taxi – but I suppose the company that booked accommodation for us couldn't find anything suitable in the town.



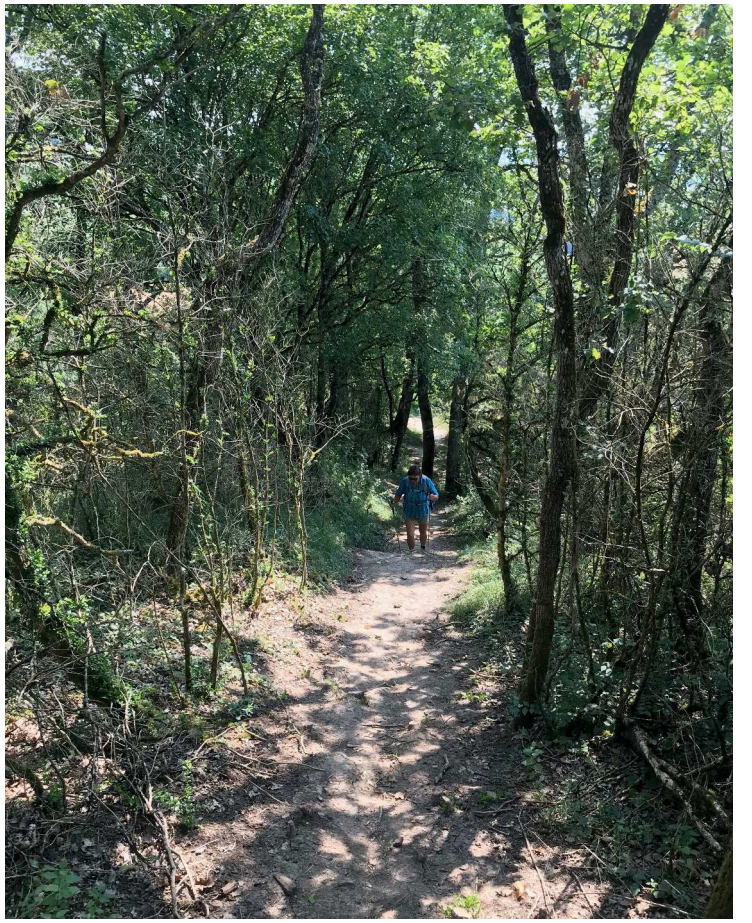


Alison leaving our accommodation, the imposing gates to the Château de Charry about 3km out of Moncuq, and the small village of Rouillac in the distance and then behind us.









The valley between Rouillac and Montlauzun, Alison climbing up the ridge after Montlauzun, sunflowers in the wheat (or corn?) fields near La Pépinière and the stunning village of Lauzerte in the distance.











Lunch in the very warm square of Lauzerte after a 15km walk with no break - note the two drinks I had on the go! Opposite, the Eglise des Carmes and the valley below Lauzerte, first looking back in the direction we had come from, then towards our accommodation and, finally, looking back from our accommodation to the beautiful hill village of Lauzerte.









July 4, 2019

Day 20 St Simplice to Moissac

A pretty nice day's walking today, although it got hot towards the end as we walked through first the suburbs and then the light industrial area of Moissac before reaching our hotel (which is *extremely* nice!).

We've noticed a lot of things have changed over the last few days: I think the last cows we saw were around Bouziès, several days ago, the stone fences are disappearing and the houses are getting newer (obviously not so in Lauzerte, but no old stone houses at all today). We also seemed to have dropped out of the rolling hills that were a feature of today into a much wider river valley than we have been in so far…

A reasonably early breakfast today at 7:30am and our taxi was right on time at 8:15am but one of the really great things about a walking holiday is just that – walking into the hotel in the afternoon or evening and walking out again the next day. The hotel was nice enough but not good enough to justify the stuffing around and uncertainty around organizing a taxi in a foreign language.

Anyway, we got walking just after 8:30am and gave ourselves a bit of a head start, knocking somewhere between 6 and 8kms off the day by starting in St Simplice, a small hamlet near where the track crossed a main road, instead of Lauzerte. After 400m we found the track and set off towards the village of Dufort-Lacapalette, which we reached in just over an hour. We had intended to buy our supplies for the day there, but the supermarket/bar/café was closed for renovation! Not a complete disaster but we knew there were no other places on today's walk to buy any food. Luckily we had some fruit we bought yesterday and a couple of protein bars!

So we pressed on from there, passing a lot of orchards – mostly apricot and nectarines – before eating our fruit at the church at St Martin, 3km down the track. The walking was pretty easy most of the way, mostly black top or nice path through oak forest, some steep uphill but not too bad. We had a second break to eat our protein bars at the top of the last big climb and stopped again about 1km further on, again at a church, the Chapelle d'Espis, before the final 5km or so into Moissac.

Moissac doesn't seem to have much character – perhaps I'm wrong and we'll see a different side tomorrow – but we are in a lovely hotel right on the Tarn river so no complaints! We had a couple of drinks before checking in and going to our room, which is huge and air conditioned!

22kms today and 420kms in total – looking forward to a rest day tomorrow, it's going to be hot!



Waiting for our taxi at the Hotel le Belvedere. The taxi driver also drove for the ambulance company in the area and she passed us in the ambulance just before we arrived into Moissac!





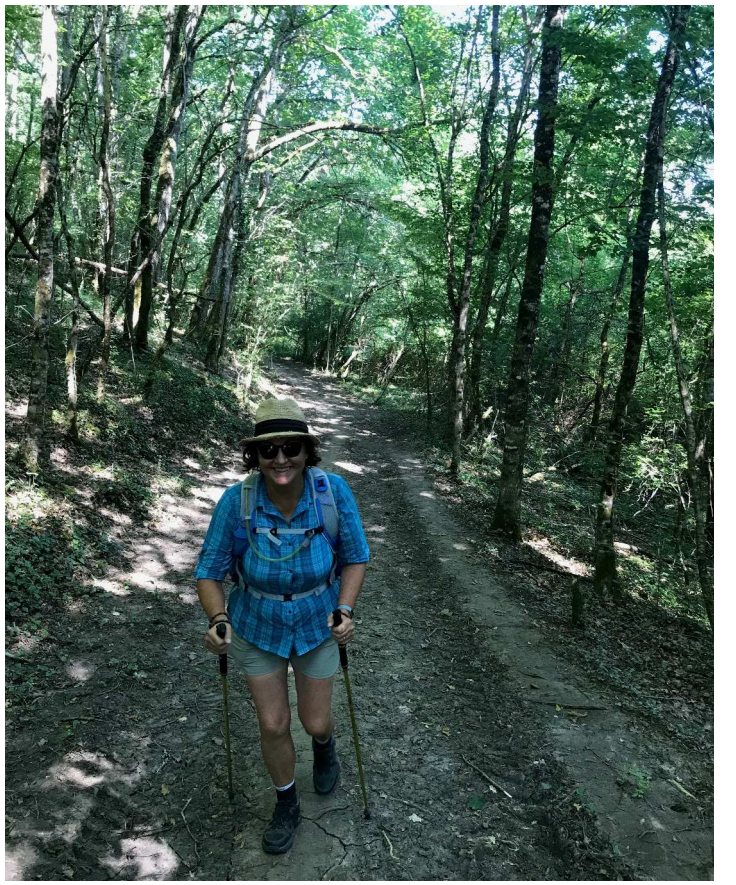
Me beside the church at St. Simplice, the view from the ridge we walked along for a bit just past St. Simplice, Alison on the way down the ridge and then about an hour later after our unsuccessful visit to Durfort-Lacapelette.











Some heavy duty traffic on the road up to the church at St.-Martin, which you can see in the background, the beautifully tree-lined D16, which we did not walk - we walked beside it for a while but then headed up the track Alison is on and through the forest. Bottom left, Alison outside the Chapelle d'Espis.









Canal boats just before we arrived at our hotel after a long walk through the outskirts of Moissac, refreshments at the very nice bar/restaurant at our hotel, a converted old mill called Le Moulin de Moissac, the Tarn river viewed from our room and dinner back at the same place we had afternoon drinks!





July 5, 2019

Rest Day 5 Moissac

Fabulous meal last night, although it got a bit hot when the wind died off – we're booked in again tonight!

A very relaxing day today in Moissac, partly because it's 36C in the shade! It's hard to believe we were starting walks in 4C only 3 weeks ago…

The part of Moissac we are in is very nice, between a canal and the river Tarn, with the river Gayonne just a bit further down. Moissac has a lovely abbey, L'Abbaye St-Pierre, with one of the best preserved cloisters in France, dating back to the 11th century. We spent the morning checking out the abbey and the adjacent old(ish) town, had a bite to eat, got some provisions and headed back to our hotel before it got too hot. Didn't quite work – we had to wash the clothes we were in they got so sweaty!

Just waiting for the weather to cool down for dinner then I think an early start tomorrow – it's supposed to be cooler but it's not obvious what is going to make it so.

PS – I found a map on the tourist office wall that shows the whole trail we are following – interesting, I thought we were heading south west but it looks almost due west on the map.



Rue Jean Moura in the old part of Moissac.









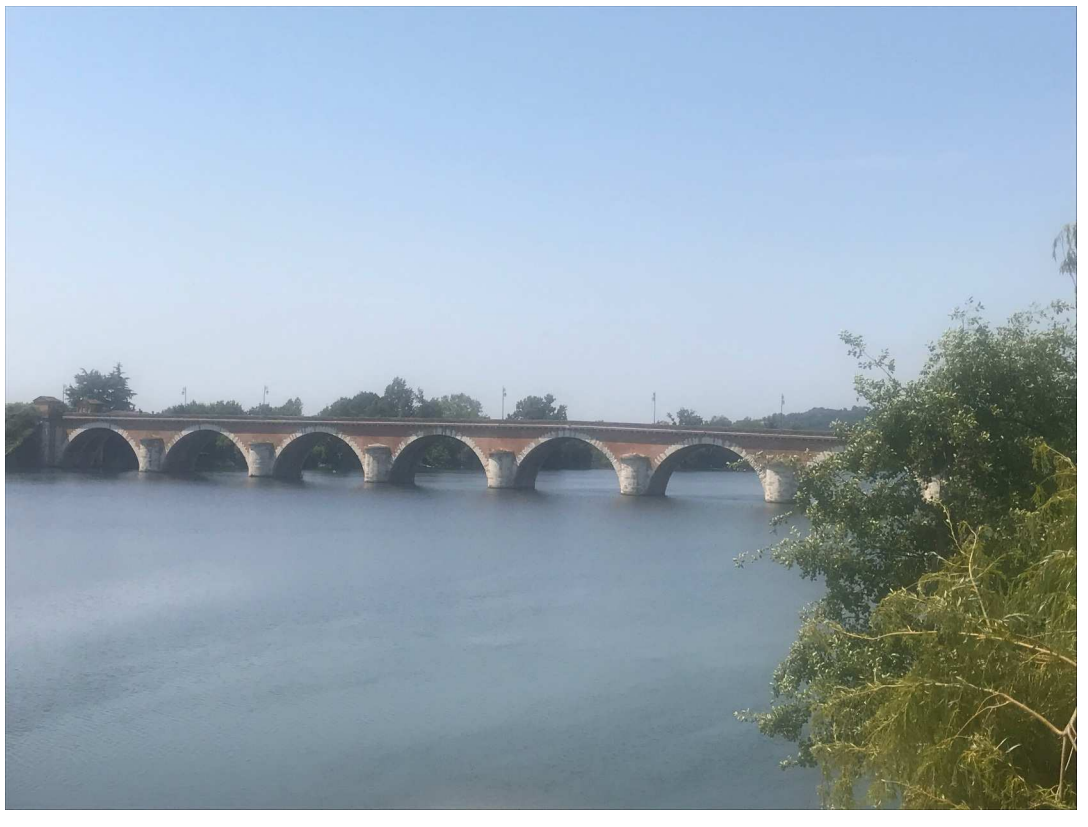


Further up the Rue Jean Moura with the Abatiale St. Pierre in the background, then views of the cloisters, the main entrance and the interior of the abbey.



Another view of the abbey and the canal again. Below, the Tarn looking downstream from our hotel and the hotel itself.







July 6, 2019

Day 21 Moissac to Auvillar

Overall a really good day today! We got up bright and early ready for breakfast at 7:00am to beat the heat, only to find out that, on Saturday, breakfast starts at 8:00am. At the very moment that receptionist told us this, a (as it turned out, very) brief rain shower came through so we grabbed our ponchos out of our suitcases and sat down for an hour of checking our iPhones!

We had a very nice breakfast, though, and set off for Auvillar at around about 8:30am not really knowing what to expect since, for the first time, we were going to follow the river, or more specifically the *Canal de deux Mers* for a long way. As the name suggests, it connects the Atlantic with the Mediterranean and, at least for the part we followed, the towpath (c*hemin de halage)* is also the the bike path between the two seas or oceans.

The canal follows the Tarn river for a while, before the Garonne and Tarn join, after which it follows the Garonne and then, as the Garonne turns south towards Auvillar, it follows the canal Golftech, which is the canal that feeds the cooling water system for the Golftech nuclear power station! Anyway, we followed it for about 15km, mostly in the shade provided by some very old and massive plane trees someone must have planted a few centuries ago.

We stopped for a short break at Malause for a coffee and a couple of tarts we had bought at the boulangerie across the road from the bar about 8kms into the walk and spotted a bunch of canal boats that didn't look like they'd moved for a decade or two!

Another 7kms down the canal, the trail crosses to the north of it, goes through a town, Pommevic, and then returns to the south side again. We thought we'd be clever and stay on the south side but when we came to the bridge we couldn't get to it from that side, so had to go about 200m further downstream, cross to the north across a lock and backtrack to the bridge!

We'd been walking almost exclusively in shade until this point but once we crossed the bridge we had 3km of full sun across the broad river valley to Espalais, where we had a brief rest, then across the Garonne and the first, last and only climb for the day up to Auvillar.

Auvillar is a lovely, historic, town but unfortunately everything (or just about everything – we managed to get a sparkling mineral water at the art gallery cafe) was closed, including our hotel! I managed to work out the sign said call if you have a reservation and, as it turned out, our key was waiting for us up on the first floor and we made it to our room. Booked dinner across the road at Le Petit Palais and the bar of our hotel finally opened at 4:30pm so all good. The Eagles won and we had a great walk – what else can you ask for?

21kms today but some of it was backtracking so I'm saying 440kms in total so far. Hoping for a cool morning tomorrow ...



Ready to go after a slightly delayed breakfast!





Alison just outside of Moissac between the Tarn and the canal, me next to the first of many locks we would pass, our first taste of the fields of corn and sunflowers that would feature heavily in the days ahead and the bridge carrying the D15 just after the Tarn joins the Garonne.







Al ready to leave the bar at Malause, boats on the canal as we returned to the chemin de haulage after Malause, Alison between Malause and Pommevic and the canal Golftech.
We'd been able to see the plumes from the cooling towers since before Lauzerte and finally understood what they were from.











After walking in the shade for 15 kms we had a completely unshaded walk across the valley between the canal and the Garonne river, which had turned west after Malause.
Clockwise, Alison heading past some of the biggest haystacks I've ever seen and hugging the shade as we entered Espalais having crossed the valley. Me resting in Espalais and finally some very straight rows of trees before crossing the river to Auvilar.
Opposite, both of us in the lower section of Auvilar before climbing up to the town itself, Alison in sweaty mess after another climb to end the day and the almost completely deserted square in Auvilar.

















Looking north from Auvilar towards Pommevic, Alison at dinner at le Petit Palais and the two landmarks in Auvilar, the circular medieval market hall and the clock tower, or Horloge.





July 7, 2019

Day 22 Auvillar to Lectoure

33km day today – longest of the trip, and 473km in total.

We had a pretty tough night last night – it was a hot and noisy hotel – but awoke to cloudy skies and a nice cool breeze.

We got out of the blocks pretty early, just after 8am and gave it a good nudge for the first 3 hours, getting just over 13km to a beautiful town called Flamerens for a perrier and a cherry tart we'd bought on the trail.

It got a bit harder after that – just over 4km to Miradoux, where everything was closed, then on another 5km to Castet-Arrouy, where everything was closed but we stopped anyway. I'd like to find out what the French GDP per capita is because as far as I can tell everything is closed except for two hours on Wednesday afternoon!

From there we had 3 little sections to complete the day and get to our destination – we stopped again at a fruit stall at the top of the hill before Lectoure and ate a couple of pieces of fruit, and once more during the final 4km into Lectoure but we finally made it around 6pm.

We lucked out though. We are in the most beautiful hotel with views to the Pyrenees, air conditioning, a hot tub and a pool.

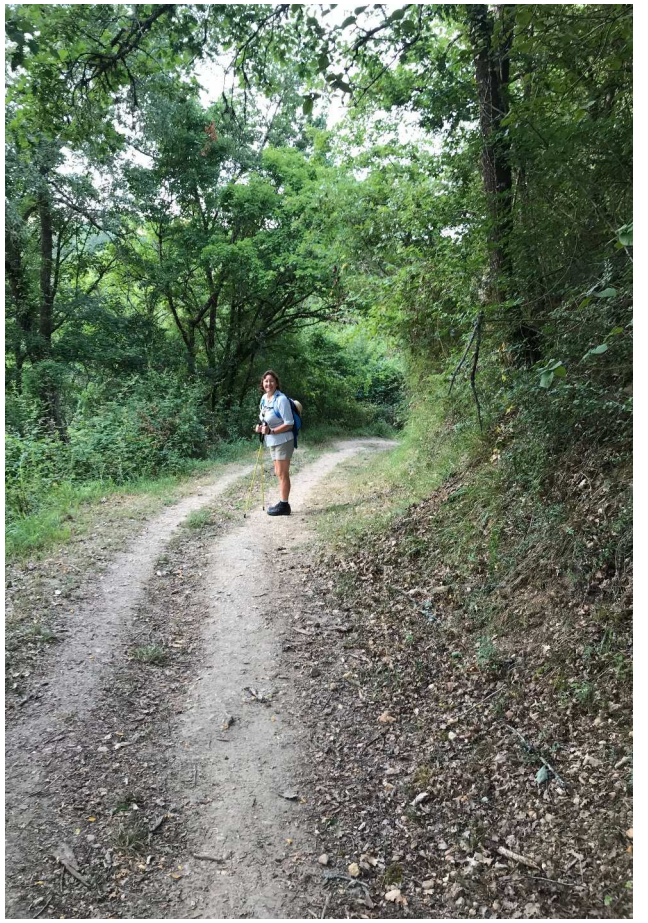
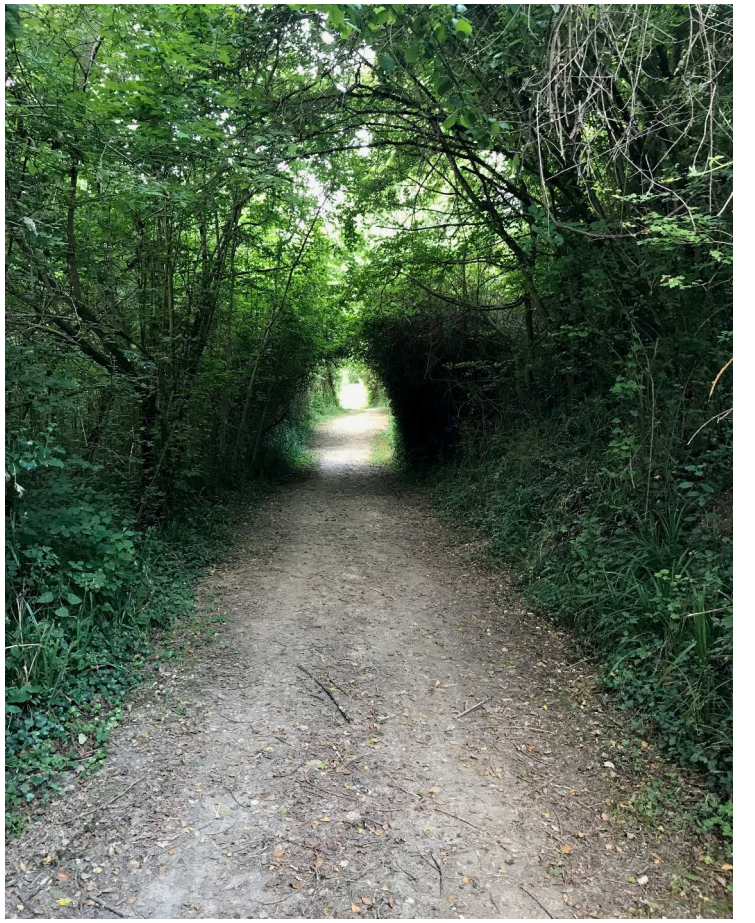
Just had my first beer since turning 60 and out for dinner shortly!

Oh, and the internet works at this place – first time since landing in France the broadband uploads photos faster than mobile data!

Not leaving here too early tomorrow!



In front of le Petit Palais across the road from our hotel, the Horloge.

Looking back at the clock tower on our way out of Auvilar, Alison and the trail about 20 minutes out of town and then two views near the small town of St. Antoine.








The church at St. Antoine, Alison with St. Antoine in the background, looking over the sunflowers towards Flamerens and then Flamerens itself







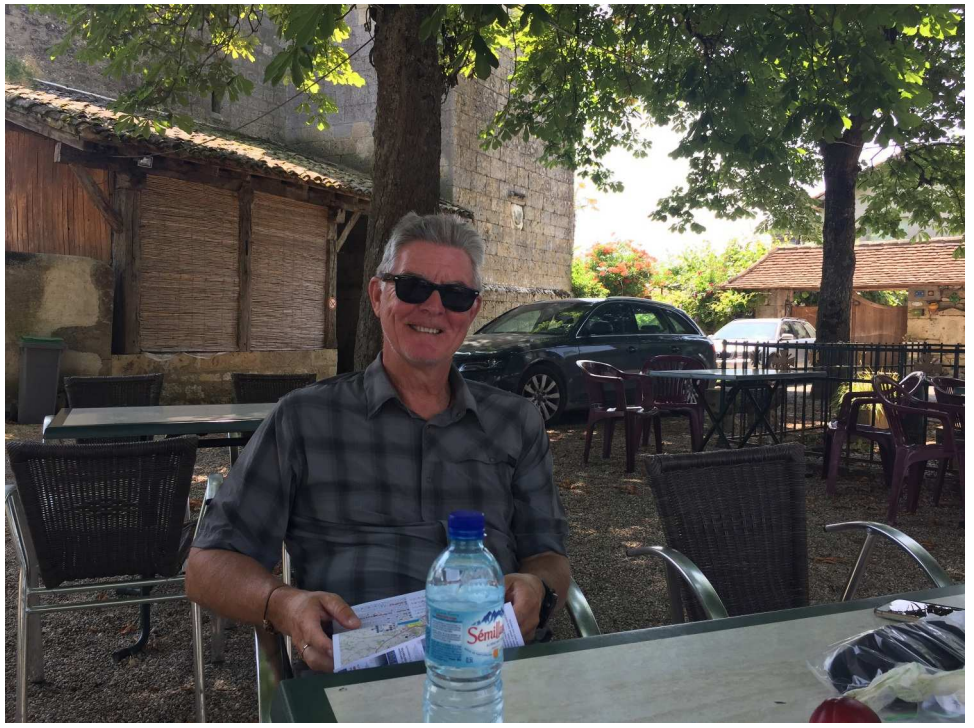


Our rest at Flamerens - a guy had set up a stall serving drinks and this was the only place we saw open until way came across a fruit stall nearing Lectoure. Below, the valley we were in just outside of Flamerens and the first of many wheat fields being harvested.













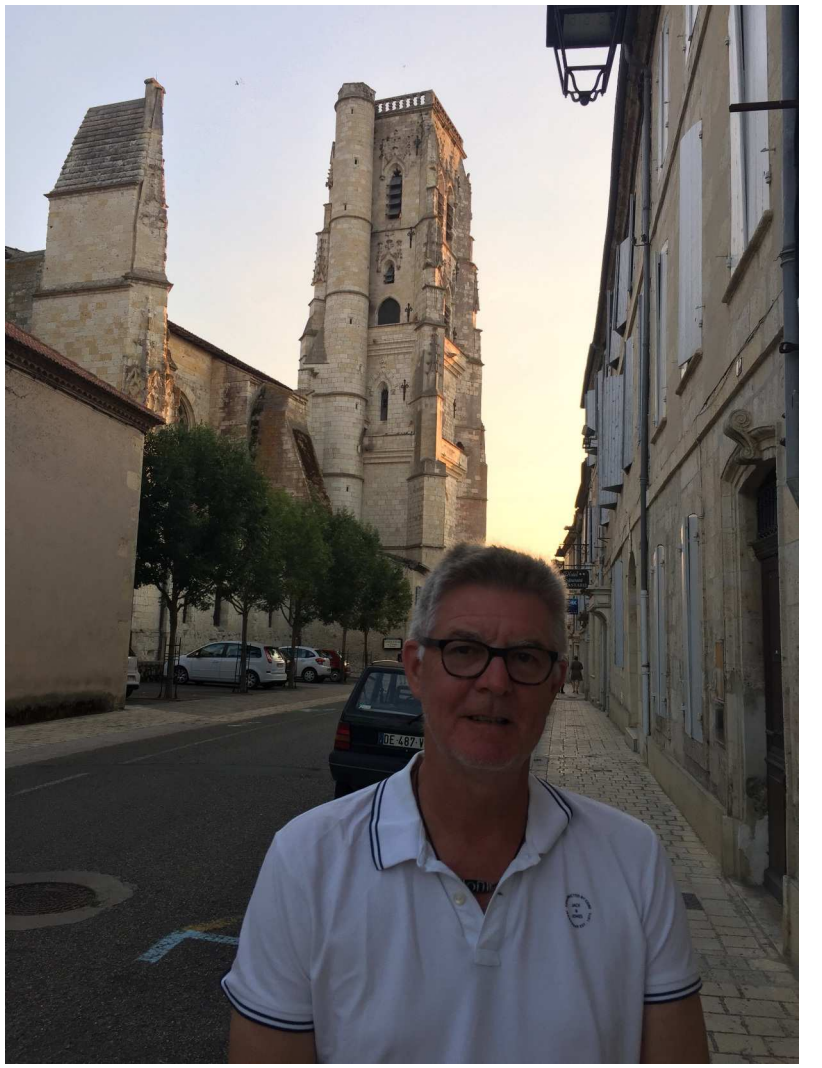
The ruins of a castle or château between Miradoux and Castet-Arrouy, taking a rest and the inside of the church at Castet-Arrouy and in the valley between Castet-Arrouy and the N21.







Lectoure from the intersection of the trail and the N21, where we stopped at a fruit stall for a break - it was still just over 4 kms away! Our hotel room, which was fantastic and two views of the Cathedral of St. Gervais and St. Protais.









Alison and me at dinner, and the youth choir in the cathedral.

July 8, 2019

Day 23 Lectoure to La Romieu

Very nice night last night, we walked 300m back into the heart of the village, had a very nice dinner, dropped into the abbey in the way home to hear a youth choir sing a few songs and had a couple of Armagnac nightcaps. At the risk of repeating myself, last night's hotel was just superb, we had a great night's sleep fully refreshed for today and a wonderful breakfast before leaving the hotel just before 9:30am, under threatening skies and the forecast of a thunderstorm.

It was a bit tricky getting out of town – my map showed the trail coming in just next to the abbey, crossing the main road, which our hotel is on, and then heading downhill out of town. So we duly headed the 300m back up the street to the abbey and saw the waymarker (balise) pointing us back towards our hotel!

Anyway, long story short they've changed to route to take pelerins past an old château at the end of town and out a different way – if we had have been in the slightest bit observant we would have spotted the waymarkers on either of the two times we'd walked down the street to the hotel.

Having finally navigated the way out, we made very good time toward Marsolan, past fields of wheat and sunflowers and sometimes through fields of wheat.

We've had a real agricultural awareness couple of days – we've seen wheat, sunflowers, corn, swedes or turnips, cherries, apricots, apples, shallots and melons to name but a few! The farms are becoming bigger now and the toys fancier.

We stopped for a coffee and cake at Marsolan after 2 1/2 hours, another very nice medieval village – we are passing through a couple of them each day and see many more on either side of the trail – it's just amazing!

Bit of a slog for the last couple of hours into La Romieu (which itself is another beautiful village) – at one point the trail took us through what looked like a junk yard!

Anyway, an easy day today – we were in having a beer by 2pm and putting our feet up by 3pm!

19kms today and 492km in total.



It was very hard to leave the fantastic Hotel Particullier Guilhon!





Leaving Lectoure having become fairly lost before finding the trail out, Alison crossing the river Gers before turning left to follow the trail, Lectoure in the distance and Alison just before Marsolan.





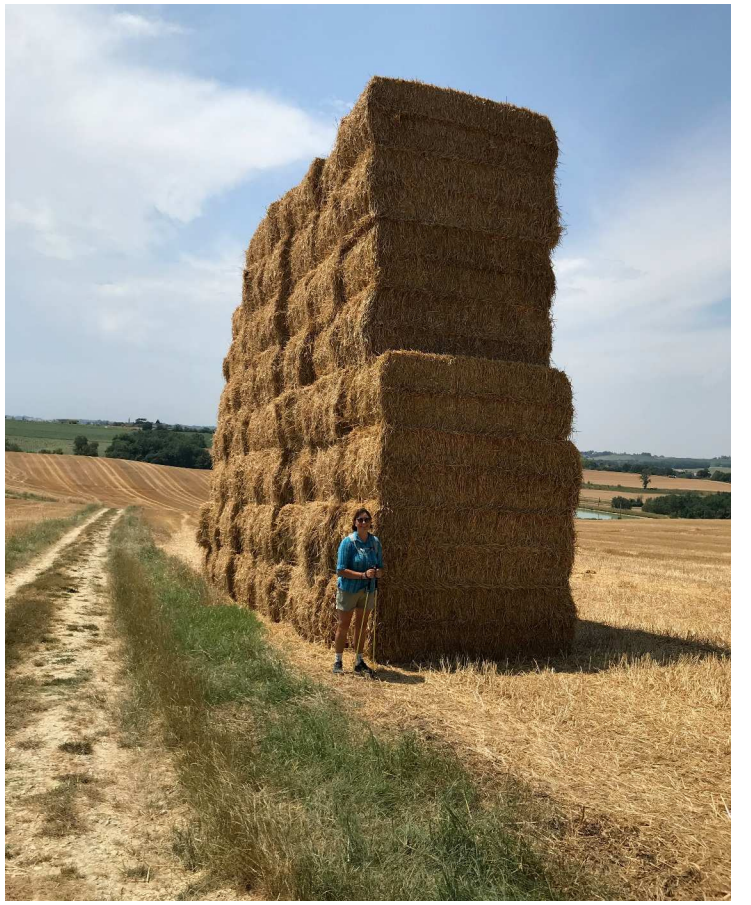


Alison, still near Marsolan, me in Marsolan and then looking back towards the town after passing through it.









Clockwise, the rubbish tip we walked through, the new contender for the biggest haystack ever about halfway between Marsolan and La Romieu, the Collegial St. Pierre from the outskirts of La Romieu and Alison at our accommodation, l'Etape d'Angeline. The restaurant shut for lunch at 2pm so we had to make do with some nuts we'd bought.











Some of the many cats that are around the town and the view from the top of the Collegiale.



My boots didn't stay clean for long!

July 9, 2019

Day 24 La Romieu to Condom

We had a really nice stay in La Romieu, having a bit of a look around the abbey, which was founded by Pope Clement V before he became pope, and enjoying a very nice dinner at our small hotel, l'Etape d'Angeline, named after a local fable about a girl of the same name. Apparently the town survived a famine by starting to eat the many cats around the town – Angeline hid two away and saved them. After the famine ended, the town became overrun with rats because all but two of the cats had been eaten. Angeline then let the cats out and they, and their offspring, managed to get rid of the rats – now there are cats roaming freely around and several statues of them!

Anyway, we got away around 8:30am with not far to travel but wanting to beat the weather. Not the heat this time – thunderstorms rolled through yesterday evening and overnight, cooling things down considerably, and more were forecast this afternoon, so we wanted to get into Condom before they hit.

Over the last couple of days we've been walking off and on on very hard dry dirt tracks with many footprints on them – today we found out how the footprints got there! The tracks are the stickiest, gluggiest clay I've ever walked on! At times it felt like ice-skating as the clay/mud covered all of the tread on our shoes. Fortunately we weren't on these tracks for as long as we were the last few days and, not for the first time, we felt lucky to have been on the right track on the right day

Early on in the day, after just over 4kms, we walked through the town of Castelnau-sur-l'Auvignon, which was a centre for the resistance in WWII and had been almost destroyed during the war. A bit further on we checked out the Chapelle Ste-Germaine, a lovely little church that looked like it had been recently renovated, before heading past Lac de Bousquètara, where we saw a lot of what looked like craw-fish or yabbies but were obviously amphibious. Progress slowed around this area as Al tried to save the ones we found on the road!

We made it into Condom right at lunchtime – the outskirts didn't look too inspiring but we're in the old town which, once again is really nice and has a massive abbey, the Abbey St-Pierre, built starting from the 11th century.

We've checked out how to get out of town tomorrow, which has once again changed from the guide book – at least we know now!

We've got a booking at a Michelin star restaurant tonight, so looking forward to that...

Just under 14kms today, so 507kms in total.





Alison about 20 minutes out of La Romieu under darkening skies, in the village of Castelnau-sur-l'Avignon, the Chapelle d'Abrin and Alison on the trail just outside of Castelnau.



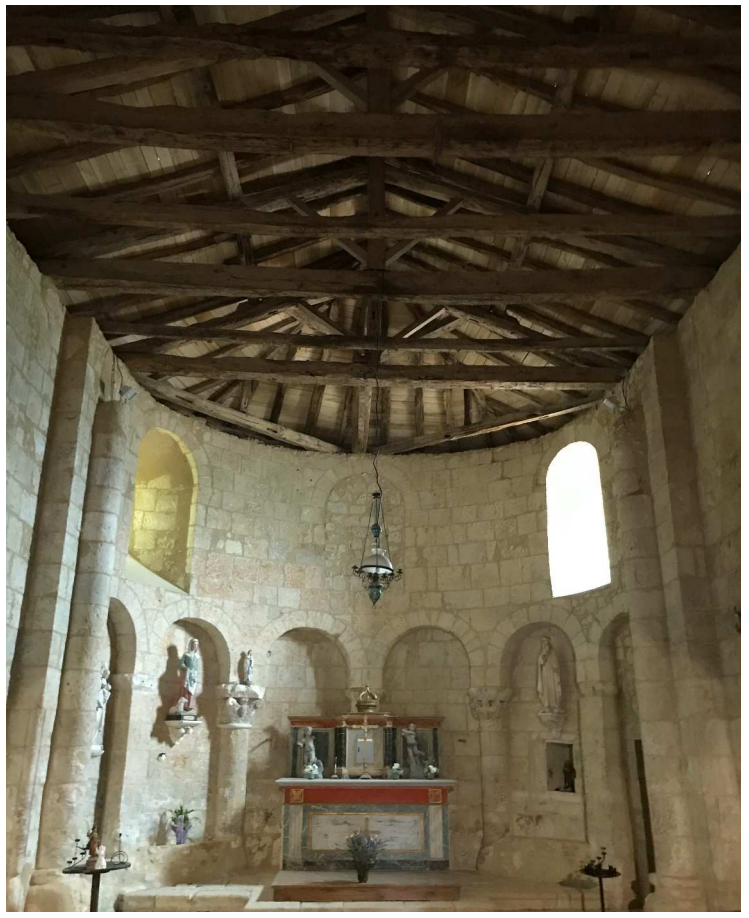






Alison with Castelnau and a villa you could rent in the background - it sounded like a good time was being had by all as we passed it! Above, the town of La Baradieu and below the beautiful Chapelle Ste. Germaine. About 30 minutes later we reached the Lac de Bousquetara.









One of the craw-fish like creatures near the Lac de Bousquetara, a change of scenery from wheat and sunflowers to grapes between the Lac and Condom and the view into Condom. It was still very muddy underfoot which made the going fairly tough. Our hotel in Condom, Les Trois Lys, was very nice and we had a lovely lunch before taking our boots off and going to our room.

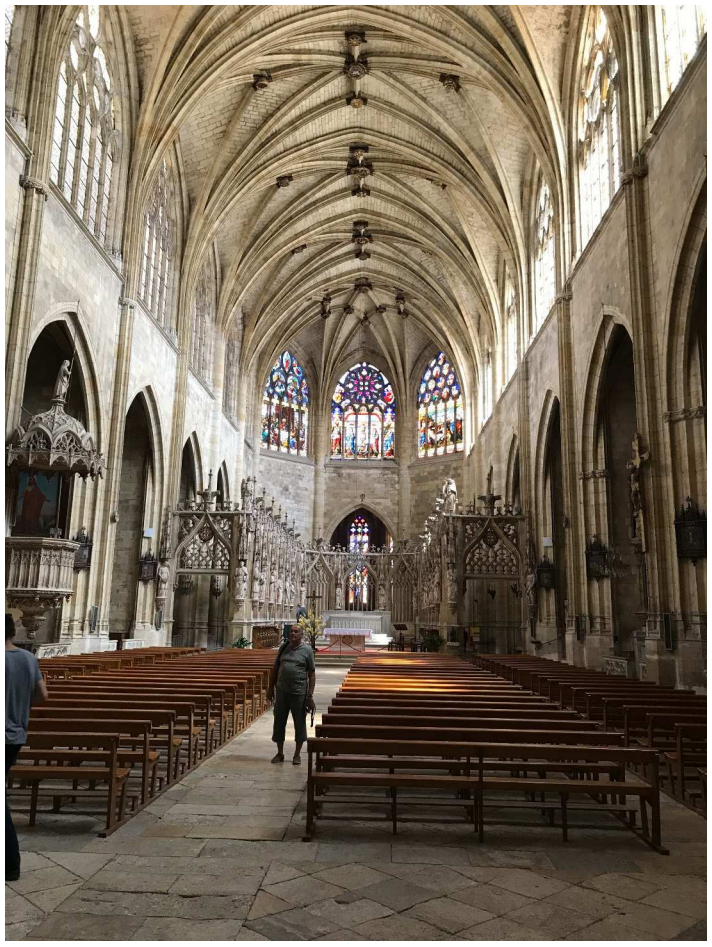




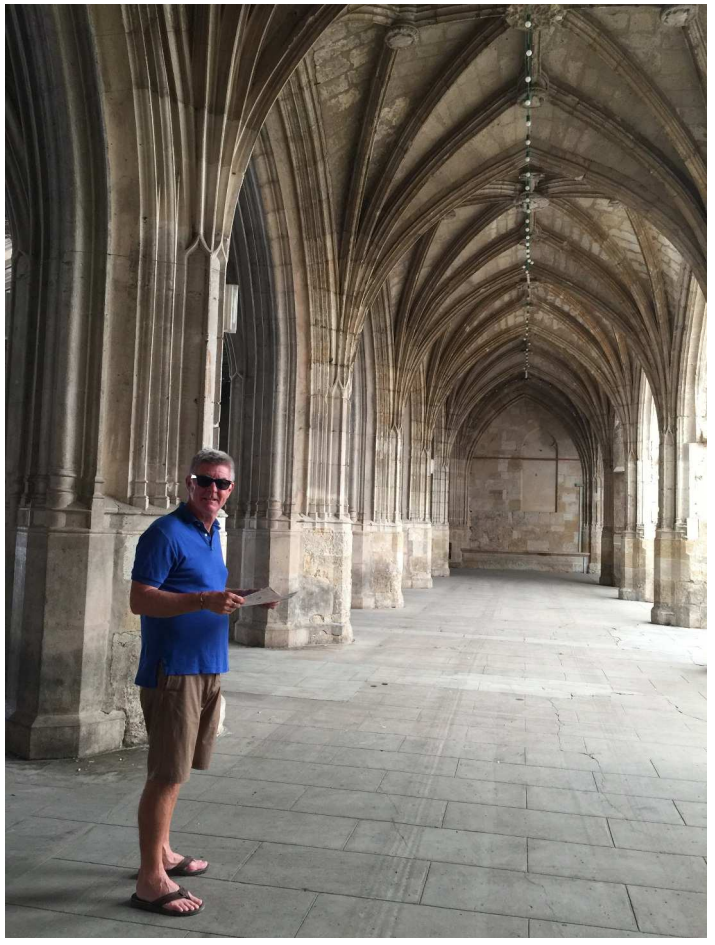

Art
Objets
Croque
Légendes



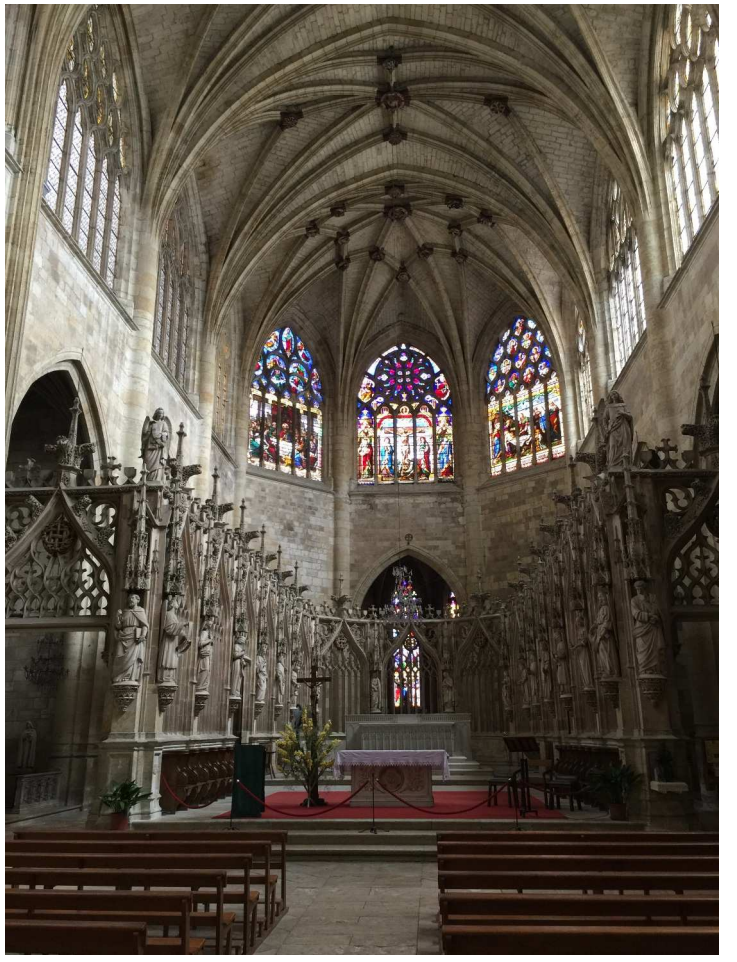








We are in d'Artagnan and the four Musketeers territory and will be for a few days. We had a bit of time to look around in the afternoon and, once again, there is a huge Abbey, again named for St. Pierre, which can be seen in the previous page and here.
Below, Alison and I at La Table des Cordeliers.







July 10, 2019

Day 25 Condom to Montréal-du-Gers

A short 17km walk today, bringing the total to 524kms!

We had a lovely night last night at La Table des Cordeliers, although some of the items on the menu we ordered were not what we would normally eat…

Another nice leisurely start to the day because of the short distance, leaving the hotel just before 8:45am – if it wasn't for the fact that we need to have our bags ready for pickup at 8:00am we'd probably be starting even later.

It was really a beautiful walk today, heading through the town of Condom, across and then along the river Baïse before climbing up onto a ridge to head to our next stop. Most of today's walking was on minor sealed roads, and what wasn't was on good unsealed paths, so we made good time.

The countryside was pretty well unchanged from the last few days, lots of farms and hamlets, big fields of wheat, corn, more vines today than before and a lot of a crop that we can't make out – beans or some kind of potato or turnip (according to Al, I would not have a clue!).

The real highlight of the day was a detour (yes, detour!) off the track to the beautiful village of Larressingle, one of the only intact medieval villages in Europe and the only one in France.

Back on the track after Larressingle we passed the 1000km marker to Santiago and shortly after that the Pont d'Artigues, a medieval bridge built especially for pilgrims and world heritage listed.

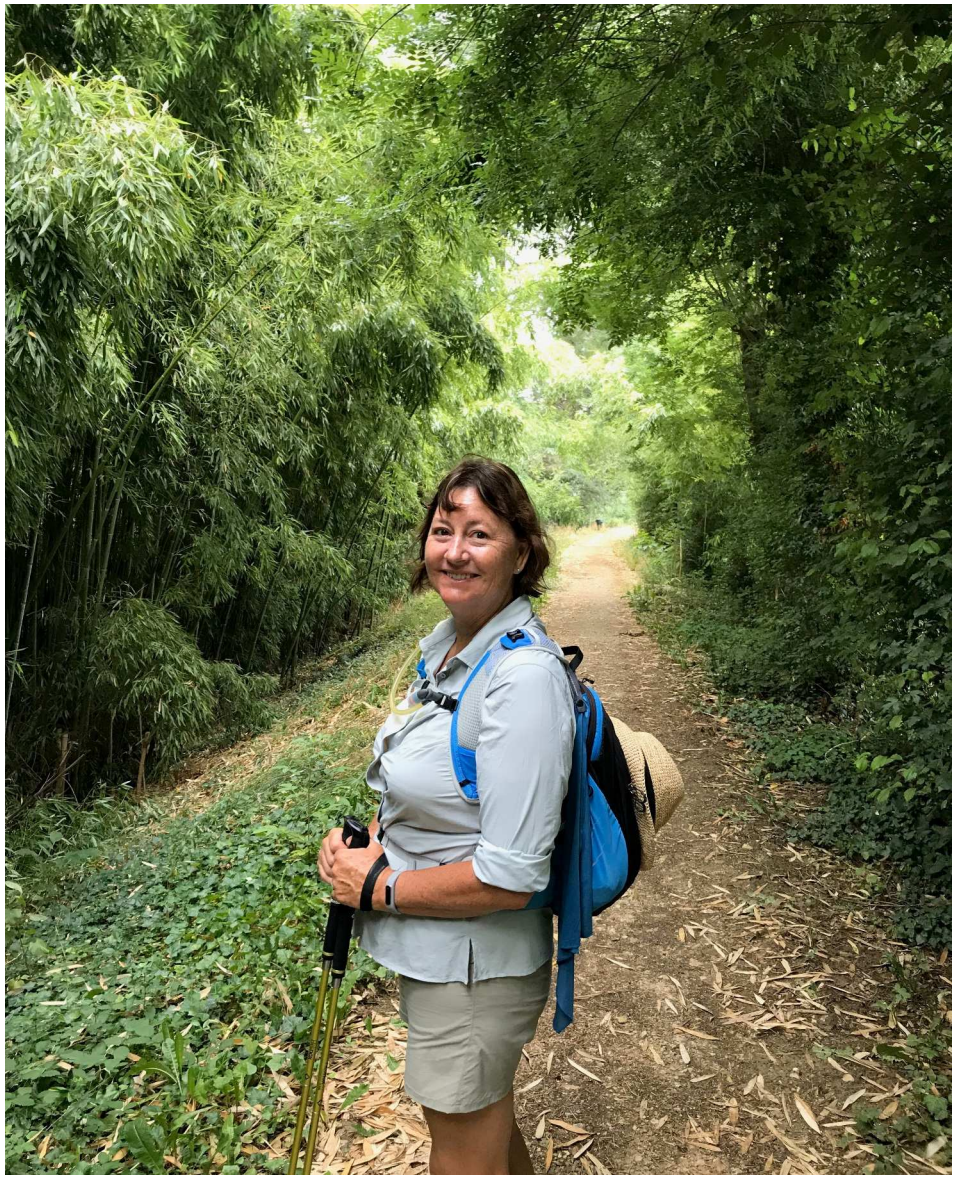
It was a fairly short walk from there into Montréal, which is also a very nice medieval village, a bastide with the traditional central square.

A couple of the photos are long range shots of châteaux – there are just heaps of them dotted around the countryside, some looking amazing and some derelict (and everything in between!).



Alison ready for another day's walking.







Clockwise, crossing the river Baïse, Alison on the trail to Larressingle and a château a bit further on.





Larressingle in the distance and then up close. It was a really stunning little village more or less in the middle of nowhere!









More of Larressingle, the 1000km mark and Alison on the Pont d’Artigues







Clockwise, the road stretching out ahead of us between Larressingle and Montréal, another château about 45 minutes later, Alison in a shadier part of the trail, not far from Montréal and then the outskirts of the town. Finally, me in the shade, probably with a beer!











The village square in Montréal - our accommodation was about 1km before the town and most places don't like you to check in before 4 pm so we had a look around. We ended up back in town for dinner so we walked the route between our accommodation and the village 5 times - in 3 times and back twice!









Again, a huge church or abbey for a small town. Above right, Alison relaxing at our accommodation, Chambre d'Hotes Carpe Diem, me at dinner back in town again and the sunset from our room.





July 11, 2019

Day 26 Montréal-du-Gers to Éauze

A very nice day's walk today again. We're really enjoying the shorter walks each day and the beautiful little villages that we are in each night. We stayed in a B&B outside of Montréal and walked in for dinner (as we had done earlier in the day for a coffee) which was nice.

Once again, we set off at a leisurely 8:40am, probably in more sunshine than we had anticipated but still pretty cool. We walked the 500m or so into town (for the third time!), through it and then ascended down to the Gers river and walked in shade alongside but not in sight of the river along great roads for nearly 2 hours before abruptly turning back on ourselves near the lake in the photos. From there to La Motte, where we stopped for a coffee just over 9kms into the day it was vines, vines and more vines, mostly above head height so few opportunities for photos.

From La Motte we descended down to a very nice flat, straightish track. Not far along the track we crossed under the bridge in the photos, which struck us as very weird because it went nowhere, i.e. there was no road on either side!

A few kms further on we came across a building with Bretagne-d'Armagnac in big bold letters on it and, just past it an old toilet block – it suddenly dawned on us that we were on an old railway easement! The easement took us all the way from La Motte to Éauze, a little bit boggy in some sections and stoney in others but flat all the way!

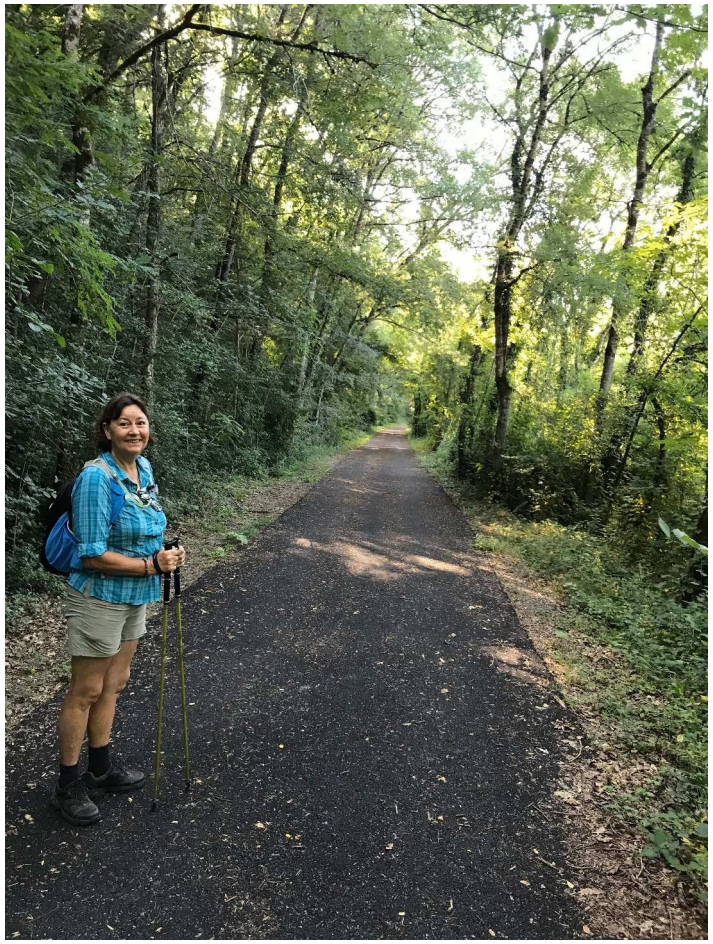
Éauze is a bigger town and not such a pleasant walk into the town centre but a very nice square in the middle of town where we enjoyed a late lunch in a very packed restaurant.

Not many photos today because the road was tree- or vine-lined for most of the way but a nice walk all the same – 18kms today and 542 in total. Only 9 days to go now!

We've got a rest day tomorrow in Éauze, so will have a look around then.



Ready to leave the Chambres d'Hotes Carpe Diem







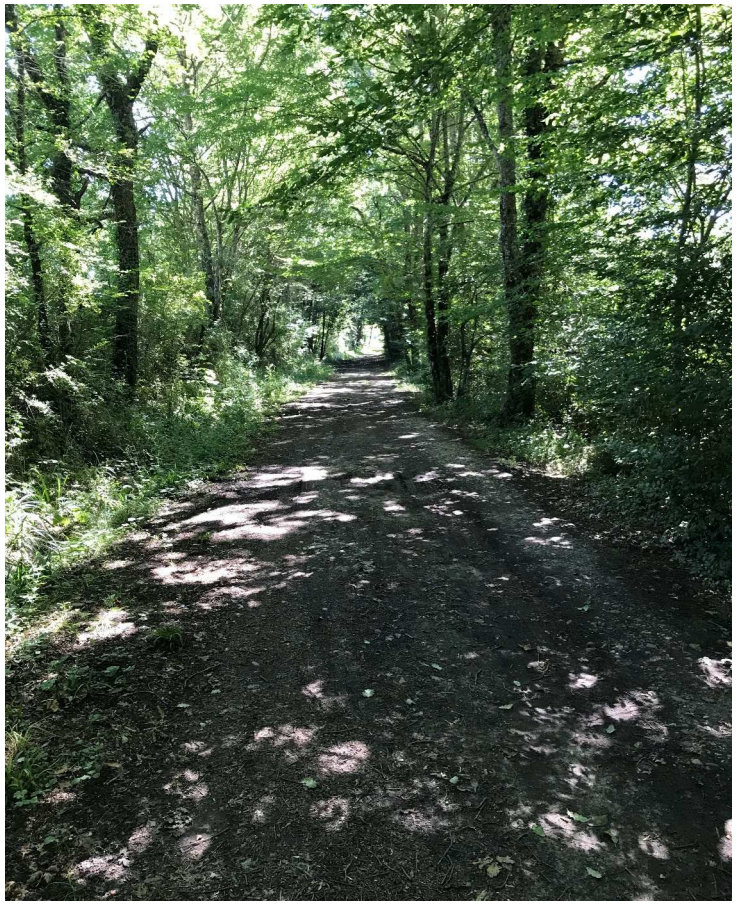
Clockwise, Alison on one of the great roads just out of Montréal, the Lacs Zou-Fou-Dou, the track just past the Lacs and the start of the vineyards before Lamothe.







A 13th century guard tower just before the little village of Lamothe, me having a coffee at the Gite d'Etape at Lamothe, the bridge to nowhere and the old railway line that we followed all the way into Éauze.











Alison having lunch at Éauze - the walk into town was long and a bit boring but the town square was unbelievably busy when we arrived, so lunch took a while! Above, the restaurant we ate at from the square and, left, pre-dinner drinks at our hotel, Henri IV.



July 12, 2019

Rest Day 6 Éauze

The walk yesterday into Éauze created a very different first impression than most of the towns we've visited – as I mentioned the walk in was on an old disused rail line (to which I think we'll return in a few days time) that was shaded on both sides by very large trees. The result of this was, instead of gradually getting closer to a town you can see in the distance, we just sort of popped into the commercial area of town, followed by a bit of suburbia and then straight into the old town square and from there to our hotel, just off the square.

We got more of a look around today and found some very nice old buildings, the cathedral of course (which was being used for a funeral this morning), and, a bit out of town, some Gallo-Roman ruins.

The town was originally called Elusa and was the administrative centre for the Roman Empire for about 200 years up to about 420AD, when the empire started to decline – the ruins are of the abandoned Domus Cieutat. After the Romans, the town moved up the hill a bit and the cathedral, La Cathedral Saint Luperc, started as a monastery in the late 900s and built as a cathedral in the 15th and 16th centuries. It is unusual in that, unlike the other churches, abbeys and cathedrals we've been in, only the columns are made from limestone and the rest from bricks made locally. Again, for such a small town, the cathedral is huge!

Anyway, after a look around in the morning we had a much better feel for the town, enjoyed a lovely lunch and hit the hotel room for a nap and a rest!

Another 6 day stage starting tomorrow so we're keeping the feet up today!



The Cathedral St.-Luperc, and some examples of local architecture. We took another guided walking trail around historic Éauze before heading to the Gallo-Roman ruins out of town.











The ruins just out of town and a model of what they originally looked like, and Alison and me having the local cassoulet - basically beans with sausage!







Inside the cathedral after lunch.



July 13, 2019

Day 27 Éauze to Nogaro

We got away nice and early, 8am, expecting a warm sort of day with a high of around 30C. After a nice breakfast, we did manage to hit the road at 8 and, after walking through the town square and old town (which was setting up for a flea market), started feeling the lightest drops of rain – not what we expected at all and our ponchos were in our suitcases!

As it turned out we walked in scotch mist for the first couple of hours which made for very pleasant walking but not much in the way of views! It was also a little bit eerie because, at least in the middle part of the morning, there was almost no noise at all – for the last couple of days we have always had the sound of at least one tractor working in the background. We passed our first copse of eucalypts in the morning and also a signboard celebrating famous "Gersoi" – people from the Gers valley – including the real d'Artagan on whom Alexander Dumas' character is based.

We stopped for a quick coffee in a town called Manciet (I took a picture of the old school on the way in – if you look closely you can see that *garçons* and *fille*s have separate classrooms) and then headed out of that town on a very busy road – we probably saw more cars on the way into and out of Manciet than anywhere since Le Puy.

Not long after we left Manciet, we went a bit off piste, led astray by the trail I had downloaded to my phone! We recovered the track again after about 1 1/2 km and not long after doing so passed a series of photos a guy had taken of walkers who had stayed at his gite over a 3 year period, and just after that passed the Greenwich Meridian heading west…

A quick stop for lunch and we were into Nogaro just before 2pm. Our hotel is just short of the town but I think we'll duck up there later this afternoon to pick up supplies for tomorrow so I'll add a few photos then.

21kms today and 563km in total!



Alison ready to leave - we had a really relaxing stay in Éauze and would need all our energy for the days ahead





The markets on the way out of town, Alison in some scotch mist that caught us just out of town and navigating past some shrubbery about an hour out of Éauze









Some old farm buildings near Peyret, Alison still in d'Artagnan country, the Moulin Le Pouy and the old school in Manciet.









Alison on the way out of Manciet, a slightly quirky garden just as we headed into the countryside after following the D153 out of town, Alison heading through a paddock on a short cut that got us a bit lost for an hour or so, and crossing longitude zero heading west.









Lunch just past the meridian and the view of Nogaro from just a bit further on. Below, the bull-ring at Nogaro and Al at what was a surprisingly good dinner at our accommodation the Hotel le Commerce





July 14, 2019

Day 28 Nogaro to Aire-sur-l'Adour

Well, our accommodation last night surprised us a bit – it wasn't that much to look at but we had a lovely meal, a good night's rest and a reasonable breakfast, so all good! We were away just after 8am with a bit of cloud cover but lost a bit of time buying some lunch at the boulangerie – it's Bastille Day and we're not sure that much is going to be open later, so we got a *sandwich*, a baguette with ham and cheese, and a lovely raspberry tart. We just got going again and we saw another boulangerie that had quiches so we bought one of those too!
The waymarking on the way out of town wasn't that great but we managed keep to the track, walking through forest and then out into the ubiquitous corn and vineyards. After about an hour we ran into a Canadian couple, Pete and Sonia, and ended up walking with them for the rest of the day.
We stopped for a break just under 2 hours into the walk at a gite, where the hosts had kindly put a couple of benches, and then walked on to a fork in the road where we had planned to take a short cut, which we did, stopping at Arblade-Le-Bas for lunch, where all the locals had congregated for a Bastille Day bbq. After Arblade, we once again had miles and miles of corn in front of us and little shade, which made it quite hot and a bit boring. In any event we made quite good time into Barcelonne-du-Gers, just under 3kms from our destination for the day. It's always deceptive when a little town crops up just before the final destination – you think you're there but you're not!
Our walking companions dropped off just before the bridge that crosses the l'Adour river so we left them and finally found a bar just over the river where we both re-hydrated before walking about 900m out of town (along the trail, thankfully) to our accommodation. We thought we could get dinner here but we can't so we're just about to head back into town. Overall a very nice walk, albeit a bit hot in the end.
There's a picture of the waymark that we followed out of town – these appear in most towns and it's nice to think that the towns care enough about the pelerins to put them in the footpaths.
Just on 28kms by the time we got to our accommodation and 591kms in total.



Well fed, well rested and ready to go!





The main road through Nogaro, the countryside just outside of Nogaro as we circled round Arblade-le-Haut, Alison, Sonia and Paul at the gite we stopped at, and the Eglise de Lanne-Soubiran.









The hinterland we were walking through, me at the point we split from the GR65 to take the shorter alternative, the miles of corn between Arblade-le-Bas and Barcelonne-du-Gers and some interesting architecture we walked under in that village.







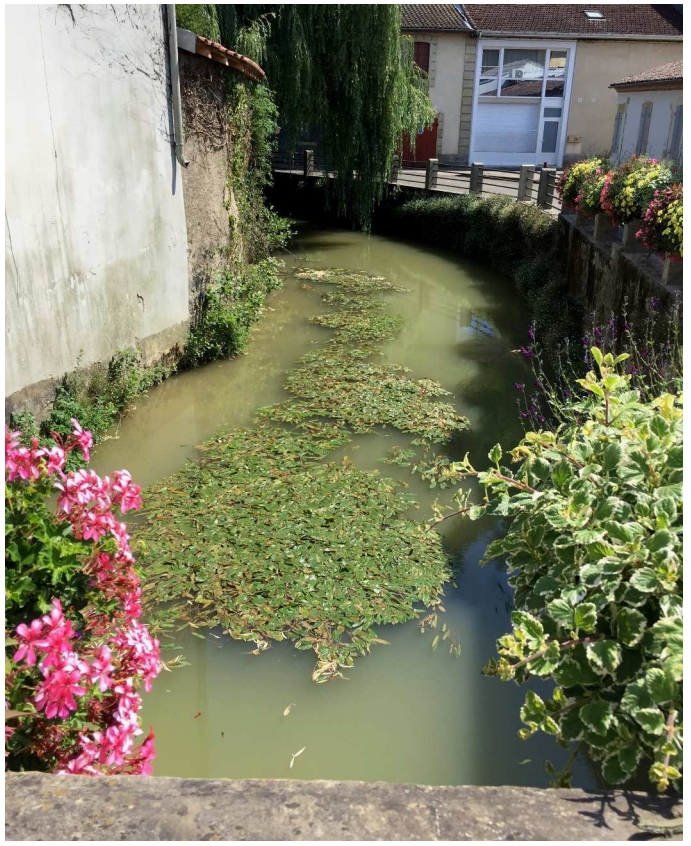


Despite the slight short-cut, it had been a pretty long and we were ready for a drink after we crossed the l'Adour river just before 4 pm. Below, another circular market hall and Al on the climb up the hill to the Chambre d'Hotes le Mas. Above left is the picture of the waymarkers in town.









Back down the hill for dinner in the only restaurant in town open for dinner, having watched the Federer-Djokovic Wimbledon singles final over a few pre-dinner drinks. To the right are canals that criss-cross the lower part of Aire-sur-l'Adour and, below, the Basilique Ste. Quitterie near our accommodation.





July 15, 2019

Day 29 Aire-sur-l'Adour to Miramont-Sensacq

The walk back into town was worth it – we had a couple of drinks, watched a bit of the Djokovic-Federer final and had a very nice meal, once again running into our Canadian friends because there was only one restaurant in town open!

Breakfast was as disappointing as everything else about our accommodation but we didn't want to walk back down the hill into town for food because there was no guarantee anything would be open because it's Monday. We had half a bottle of wine leftover from dinner last night so we stuck that in my backpack and headed off just after 8:30am, hoping that somehow we would come across a shop where we could buy supplies…

We took a closer look at the cathedral near our accommodation – again, it's amazing that such great buildings are just everywhere – and then headed out of town. Just before the suburbs began to thin out we found this absolutely fantastic organic food store, amazingly open on a Monday, and stocked up with food for the day. We only had a short walk but we knew there was literally nothing along the trail today, and nothing in the town we were heading to other than our chambres d'hotes and a few others (which usually do not offer lunch), so if we hadn't found the store we would have been a bit peckish and irritable by dinner time!

Anyway, the universe provided and we set off with a real spring in our step, first past a very nice lake, lac du Brousseau, and then through acres and acres and acres of corn. You can see from the photos that the sections were long, flat and straight, but the surface was pretty good and we made great time, stopping first after a couple of hours for morning tea and then after four hours for lunch. It was obviously our lucky day, because both times a picnic area appeared at the right time!

Our Canadian friends caught us at both stops and after the second one we walked together again into Miramont-Sensacq. It is a small town and we're all staying at the same chambres d'hote, which is 700m down a road just before town. They hadn't had the same luck with food so headed into town while we went straight to the property, which is absolutely fantastic! We had a drink and a swim in the pool before relaxing for the afternoon, so feeling good after what turned out to be a great day's walking! 18kms today, some of which we will go back over tomorrow, and 609km in total.



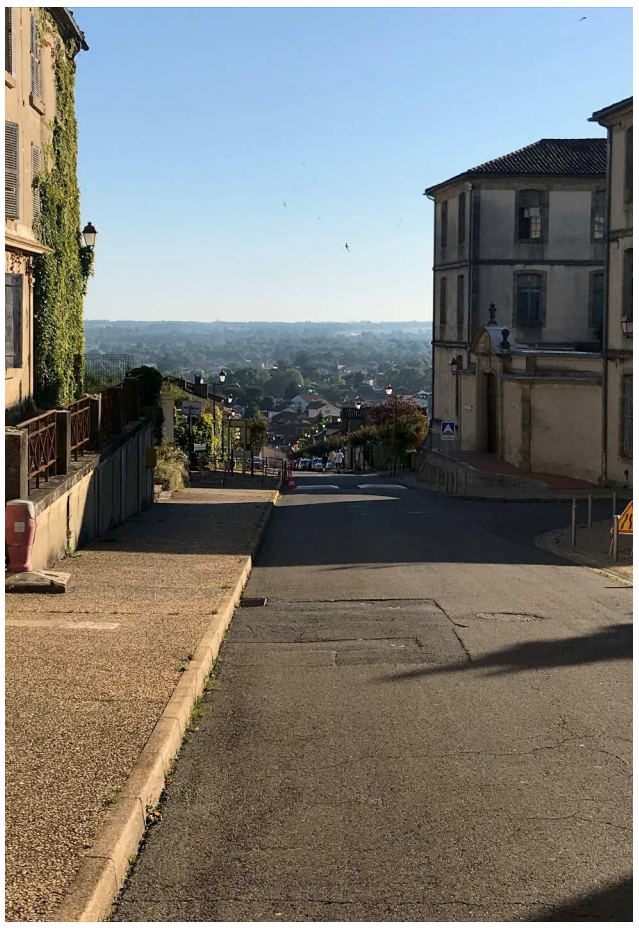
Outside the Chambres d'Hotes le Mas. The owner only allowed walkers to use the servants entrance!

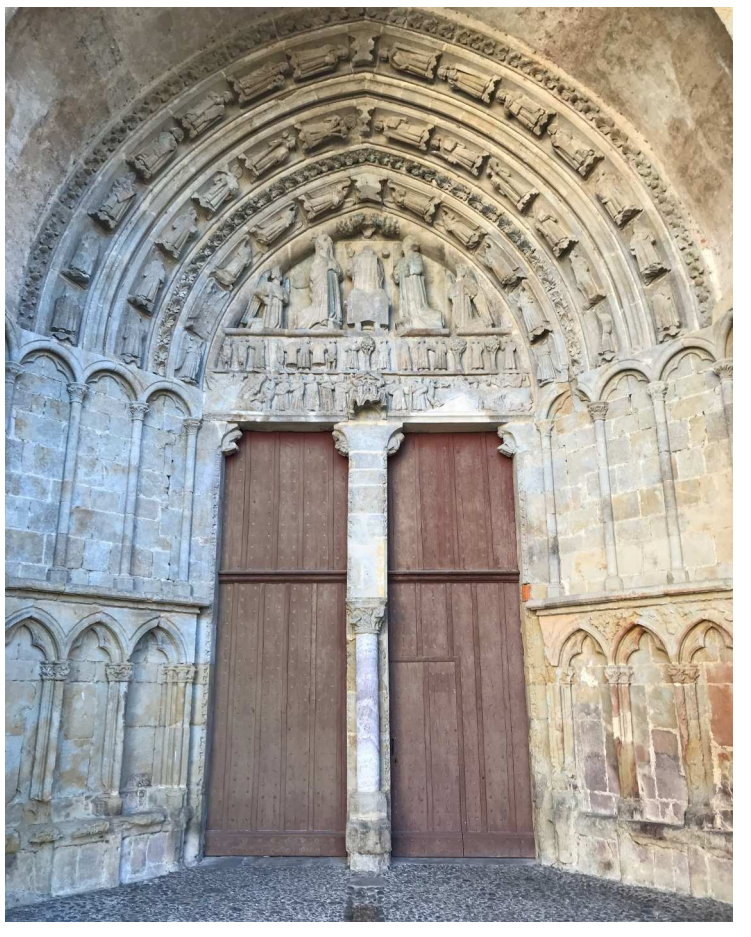




A grand old house not far from our accommodation, a waymarker near the Basilique and the Basilique's tympanum, the view down the hill to Aire-sur-l'Adour and the grocery store that saved the day!











The beautiful Lac du Brousseau, just over an hour from Aire-sur-l'Adour, Al heading into the endless cornfields, a roadside tribute near Lafosse, I think, having passed through the cornfields and lunch just before the village of Cordonnier.









The trail near Sarron just after lunch and still some distance to our accommodation, Maison du Bos, where we relaxed with a swim and drink before dinner.









The view back over where we had walked from and the imposing Maison du Bos. Below, ready for dinner and the a few post-prandial drinks with Alison, Sonia and Pete.





July 16, 2019

Day 30 Miramont-Sensacq to Arzacq-Arraziguet

I think the guidebook is telling me that today's destination is almost unpronounceable and recommends just using Arzacq, which is good enough for me!

I added a few photos to yesterday's page showing the beautiful house we were staying at – we saw some photos of it before the lovely couple who owned it renovated it and it was virtually derelict in 2001 and took them 6 years to do up!

We really had a great walk today, not particularly early out of the blocks as we had a short day but the air was still cool when we left the house and walked back to Miramont-Sensacq, a beautiful village from which we got our first glimpse of the Pyrénées on the far horizon (our host in Lectoure said you could see them from our window but we couldn't!). We walked through really nice country for the first hour or thereabouts in rolling hills – a pleasant break from the relentless corn on the valley floor. Even though we only had a short walk today we are at the stage of the trip where any shortcut is a good one, so we cut about 2kms off the road to Pimbo, another beautiful village and church where we stopped for morning coffee, by taking a slightly different route which actually put us on less road than the proper route.

After Pimbo we had about an hour and a half back on the valley floor but much smaller farms (although in one photo there's corn just about as far as the eye can see) and more pleasant than the last couple of days. As seems to be usual, the GR65 took us on a bit of a circuitous entrance into town that at times gets frustrating but we made it into Arzacq for lunch as planned, which was very nice.

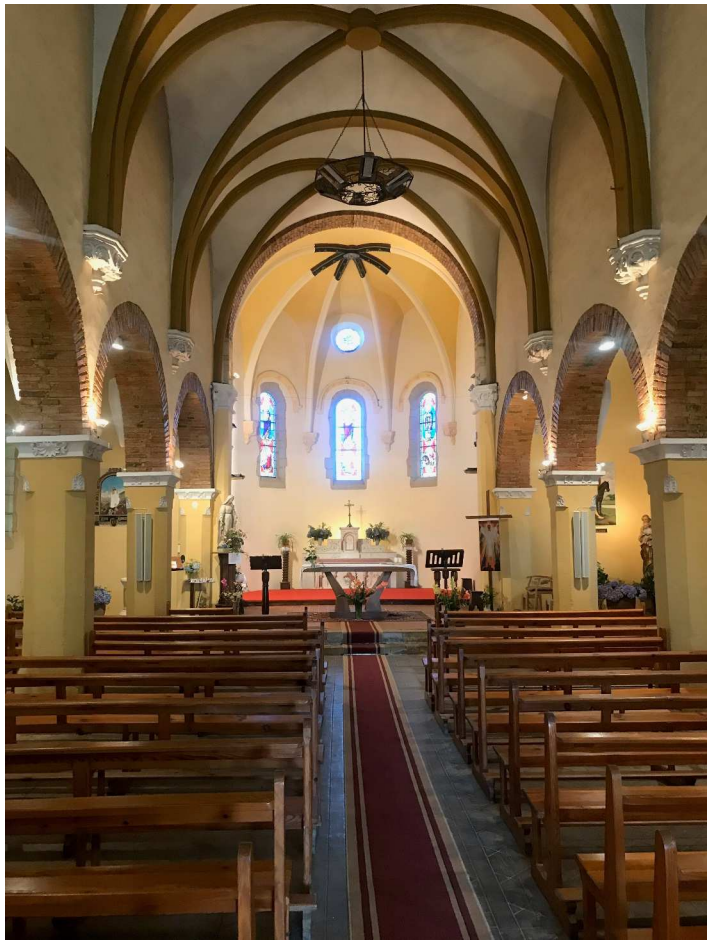
We're in another old house tonight right on the main intersection of the town – hopefully the traffic drops of in the evening. Unusually for the places we've been in they will do your laundry so we're getting a bit done!

15kms today and 624kms in total with five walking days to go.





Alison in the morning light outside the Maison du Bos and me outside the church at Miramont.



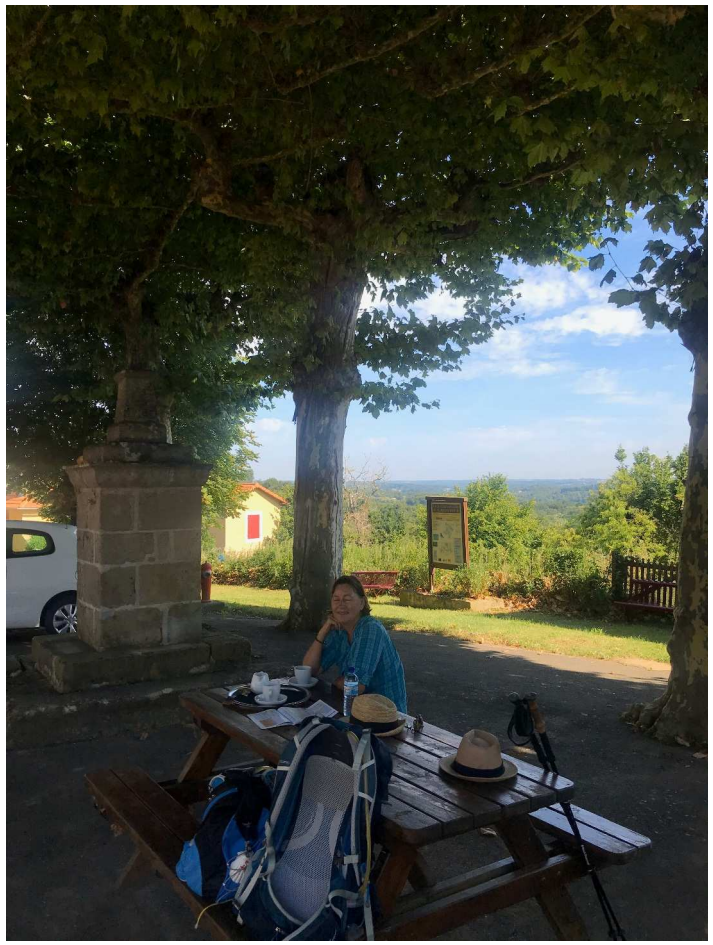


Inside the same, very pretty, church and then the view towards the Pyrenees from the church.
Below left, a very old a rickety hay-rick!











The trail between Miramont and Pimbo, morning tea at Pimbo and the church there. Below, the climb up into the town and then the view on the other side towards the Pyrenees.









Looking back up to Pimbo after descending into the valley, the road into Arzacq and lunch (with the now usual bottle of Rosé) in town before going to our accommodation, La Maison d'Antan.





July 17, 2019

Day 31 Arzacq-Arraziguet to Arthez-de-Béarn

A day of valleys and hills today as we worked our way first south then mostly west across ridges running across our path – more of the same tomorrow I think! It makes for harder walking but the views down the valleys, with hamlets and villages dotted everywhere can be amazing!

We got away from our hotel (another very nice hotel, albeit a bit noisy but with another very nice host) earlier than usual just after 7:15 am, knowing it was a long day. We'd put a fair bit of work into looking for sections where the GR 65 takes the walker off the straightest line (which it frequently does, often taking two sides of a triangle rather than the straight line that would complete the triangle) and, today, mostly took the straightest line, which took about 3km off the walk. Often we found old balises along these shorter routes, which we took to mean that the GR previously took the route we did but had been moved to keep walkers off what we thought were fairly minor and infrequently travelled roads.

After leaving Arzacq, we headed down hill past a man-made lake, up over the first ridge of the day and then down into Louvigny past an old mill. From here we took our first detour, back up to the next ridge on top of which sat the town of Fichous-Riumayou following the fairly straight road, rather than the indirect track. From there we rejoined the GR 65 down into the next valley, at the bottom of which lay the small village of Larreule, where we had our first stop for some bread, cheese and vegemite and a coffee we bought from a machine at the gite we'd stopped next to. This was the first of only two possible places to buy anything during the day, but we had stocked up in Arzacq so we felt we were prepared.

After Larreule, we again left the GR65, following the valley floor for about 3kms, back in the cornfields again, before heading uphill to rejoin it at Uzan. We stuck with the GR for a couple more kms along the ridge to Géus d'Arzacq before leaving it again to head to Pomps where we stopped for lunch, about 20km into the day.

From Pomps we pretty much stuck to the GR65 again, following the valley floor for about 3km before going up to Castillon (where the lovely little church in the photos is), quickly back down into the next valley and up again (avoiding the now normal zag away from town that the GR takes you on by sticking to the road – we've finally learned after 31 days!), arriving at our lovely accommodation in Arthez by just before 3pm – much earlier than we expected/feared!

27km today and 651km in total.



La Maison d'Antan on the main road through Arzacq.







Left, two views of the Luy-de-France in the morning light, Al a bit further on and, below, the Moulin de Louvigny.







Clockwise, the Marie at Louvigny, the village of Garos to our right as we left Louvigny, Alison on the shorter route from Louvigny to Fichous-Riumayo and me on the descent from Fichous to Larreule, where we had a coffee and a snack.







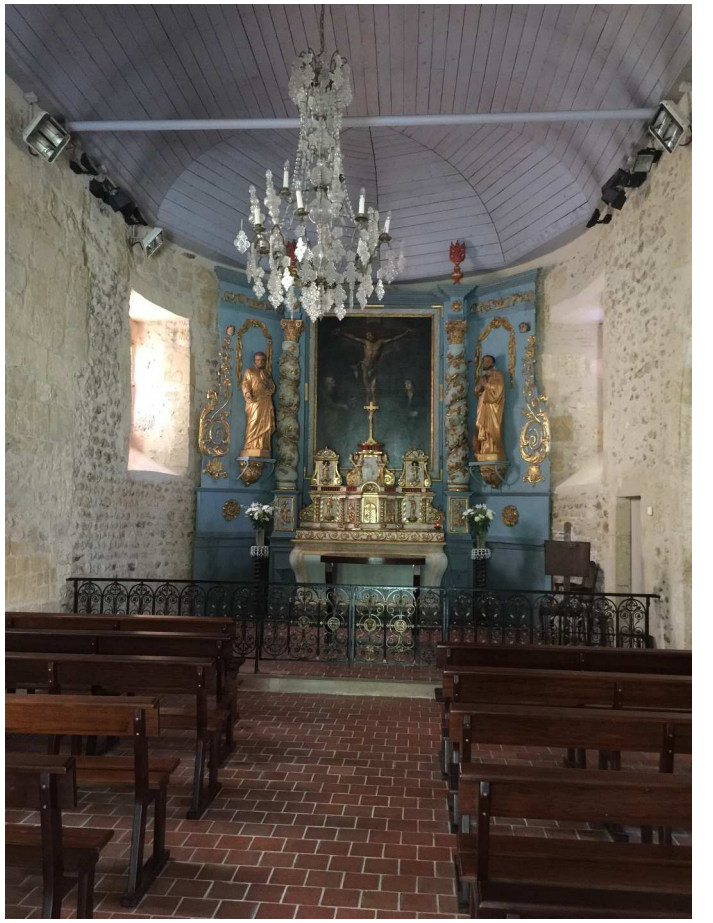


The front and back of the gite in Larreule that we got the coffee from and had our snack, Alison between Uzan and Gús-d'Arzacq and lunch at Pomps.









Al on the trail just before Castillon and walking into Castillon and the interior of the Eglise St. Pierre in that town.
Below, a final swig before the trek to Arthez-de-Béarn and our accommodation for the night, Domaine de la Carrere, another fantastic chambres d'Hotes.




July 18, 2019

Day 32 Arthez-de-Béarn to Castetnau-Camblong

We knew it was going to be a challenging day today, and it was! We got away pretty early, just after 8am armed with a shortcut from one of our hosts, Fritz, that helped us take couple of km off the first section (by taking the original Camino). This section followed the ridge that Arthez is on, gradually dropping down to the village of Gouze before taking a sharp right just before the village. Fabulous views left and right but for almost the first time there was a bit of industry rather than villages dotted through the landscape.

The track from Gouze almost to Maslacq was on private property but, as you can see from one of the photos, pilgrims or pelerins are allowed by custom!

We stopped briefly for a bite to eat as Maslacq after crossing the Gave de Pau and the freeway and then followed the valley on roads to Sauvelade, where we stopped for lunch (I stuffed up big time – at the abbey there was a place with a menu de jour but I suggested we head in further to a cafe that I thought was 2km up the road. Turned out it was about 200m up the road and not particularly good but it was the only food apart from the abbey between Arthez and Navarrenx).

After Sauvelade we seemed to get a bit out of whack – the names of towns I had written down didn't match with those we came across and my Topo maps trail went a completely different way. Nevertheless the way markers were consistently there so we followed the trail up and down about three ridges, now with the Pyrénées in clear sight, until we finally arrived at Méritien, a lovely little town just before Navarrenx. We pressed on for Navarrenx, where we had planned to stop for the day and get a taxi the last couple of km to our accommodation. We had a couple of drinks and then called the taxi, only to be told it would be an hour so we trudged the last couple of km into Castetnau.

A rest day tomorrow fortunately!

31 km today and 682km in total – looking forward to dinner and a few wines!



Alison and the beautiful Domaine de la Carrere







Clockwise, the main street of Arthez-de-Béarn, the view from the ridge we were walking along and the sign and track for pelerins to take just before the village of Gouze.







Crossing the Gave-de-Pau, looking back to Maslacq across the cornfields with the ridge we'd walked down in the background and the trail a few kilometres out of Maslacq.









Cows just past Sauvelade, and Al at a little park just a bit further up the road. I still figure out where the pictures below are but they are between Sauvelade and Méritien.















Opposite, more of the section I couldn't get my head around between Sauvelade and Méritien. The seats were a god-send, we were very tired by then having not stopped for several hours since leaving Sauvelade. Far left, the beautiful village of Méritien, about 2 km from Navarrenx. Above, the bridge over the Gave d'Oloron on the opposite side of Navarrenx.

July 19, 2019

Rest Day 7 Castetnau-

Castelnau-Camblong is sort of an outer suburb of France's first fortified town, Navarrenx. The town, quite remarkably, still sits within its original fortifications and so is quite small, just a few streets wide and a few long. Like a number of the villages we have visited, Navarrenx is one of Les Plus Beaux Villages de France.

After a morning at our accommodation we went into Navarrenx for lunch and a look around before heading back to Castetnau for a nap – the 150+ km over the last six days has zapped us a bit! Like Gers, the region claims d'Artagnan and Henry IV of France as favourite sons, with Henry IV's mother, Jeanne d'Albret, the last ruler of the kingdom of Navarre, having lived in the town.

From our accommodation, we can clearly see the Pyrénées, I think in the direction we'll head over the next three days as we head towards St-Jean-Pied-de-Port!



Alison on the main street of Navarrenx.





Some of the ruins within the Navarrenx walls, and a little bit of encouragement fro those continuing past St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port.









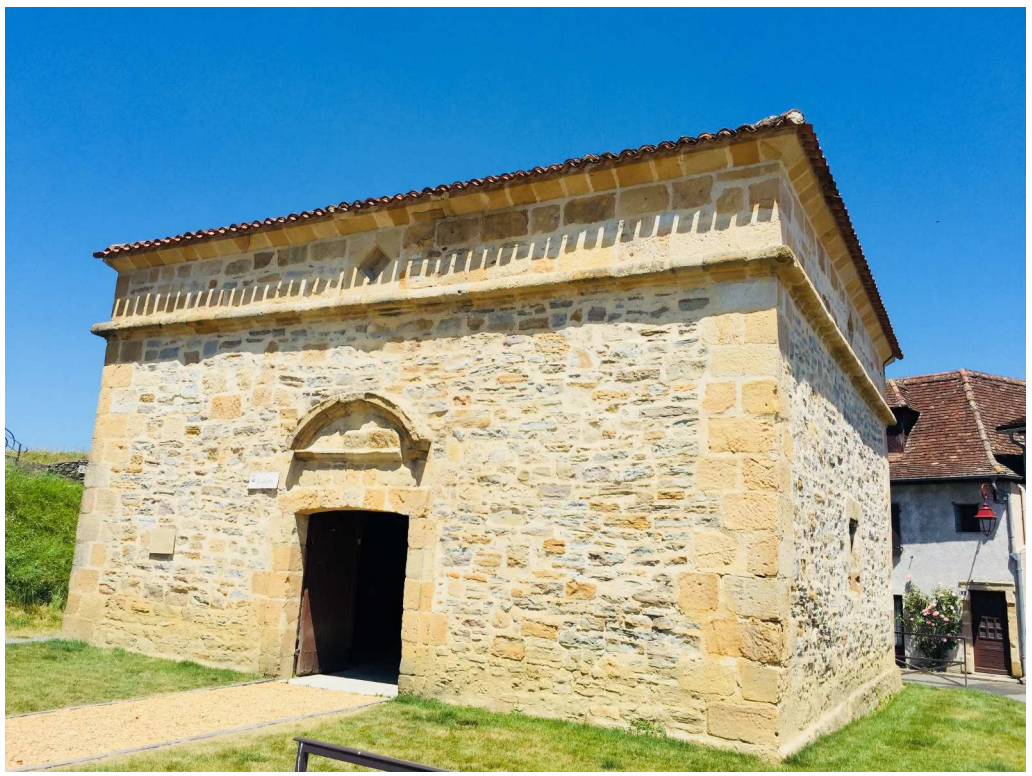








Opposite and this page, the town of Navarrenx. Although our accommodation in Castetnau is very good and they are very helpful, it was a great shame we couldn't have stayed in the old town.





July 20, 2019

Day 33 Lichos to Saint Palais

This leg has been hanging over us like the sword of Damocles the whole trip – 36 or so kms from Castetnau-Camblong along a variant that heads a little bit north (away from St. Jean) and west. We walk at more or less 4km per hour so that's nine walking hours and probably 11 hours on the road – too much for us! We woke yesterday having independently reached the same conclusion – we need to get a taxi part way down the track, so we did, taking about 12 kms of the walk by taking a taxi to Lichos, just inside the *Pays Basque*, and heading to Saint Palais from there.

We got to Lichos about 9am and set off on a pretty flat track (the only one of the day as it would turn out) before hitting the foothills of the Pyrénées and basically going up and down all day.

We passed a beautiful chalet just before Aroue and after that the architecture changed dramatically to the Basque style of white, orange and, sometimes, green.

No real towns today and not many places to stop for lunch – we took the 250m detour to the Chapelle d'Ohailby but, unusually, it was closed and had nowhere to sit so we found a crossroad a bit further on and broke out the chairs for a picnic!

A light mist hit us just after lunch and gradually increased to light showers that continued to just before Saint Palais. A lot more pastoral today and fewer crops but still tonnes of corn – one of the photos shows a reel and a tractor sprinkler used to irrigate the crops – not unlike the old tractor sprinklers we had in our yards when we were kids!

We got into Saint Palais just before 3pm – it could be mistaken for a Spanish town and guess what? It's festival time! Perhaps not a lot of sleep tonight – we've just seen some folk dancing which was nice but we seem to have a brass band below us and there's a big sound stage out the front of the hotel.

24kms walking today and now 706km in total. Two days and about 35kms to go!



Refreshed and ready for a day's walking after a short taxi ride from Castetnau to Lichos.





Alison on the trail between Lichos and Bouhaben, looking back from the top, the chalet before Aroue and Al on the long ridge between the chalet and Olhaïby. We missed a trick here and should have continued to Aroue, had something to eat and taken a variant back to the GR65.









The closed church at Olhaïby, lunch by the roadside, the turnoff from the GR65 to take the variant to St.Palais and the road into St.Palais. We wold run into our Canadian friends again in St. Palais - they had gone ahead of us in Arzacq and had stayed the previous night in Aroue. However, they missed this sign and took the long way to St. Palais.
Opposite, Basque dancing at St. Palais' festival.







July 21, 2019

Day 34 Saint Palais to Larceveau

Well, despite the festival last night (complete with music until 5am), we both got a great night's sleep and hit the road today full of beans! We knew we only had around 15km to walk so we took it pretty easy over breakfast and hit the road around 8:45am – still plenty of party goers still at it and some looking like they were just starting to feel the hangover coming on!

Not long after leaving Saint Palais we headed up what felt like one of the biggest uphills we've ever done (but shown as an "easy" trail in the book) up to the three structures shown in one of the photos. We then went down about the same amount to the Stele Gibraltar (also shown in one of the photos) then back up the hill (again, you can see the track winding uphill in a photo) to the Chapelle de Soyantz, which is covered by several trees that have been grafted into one!

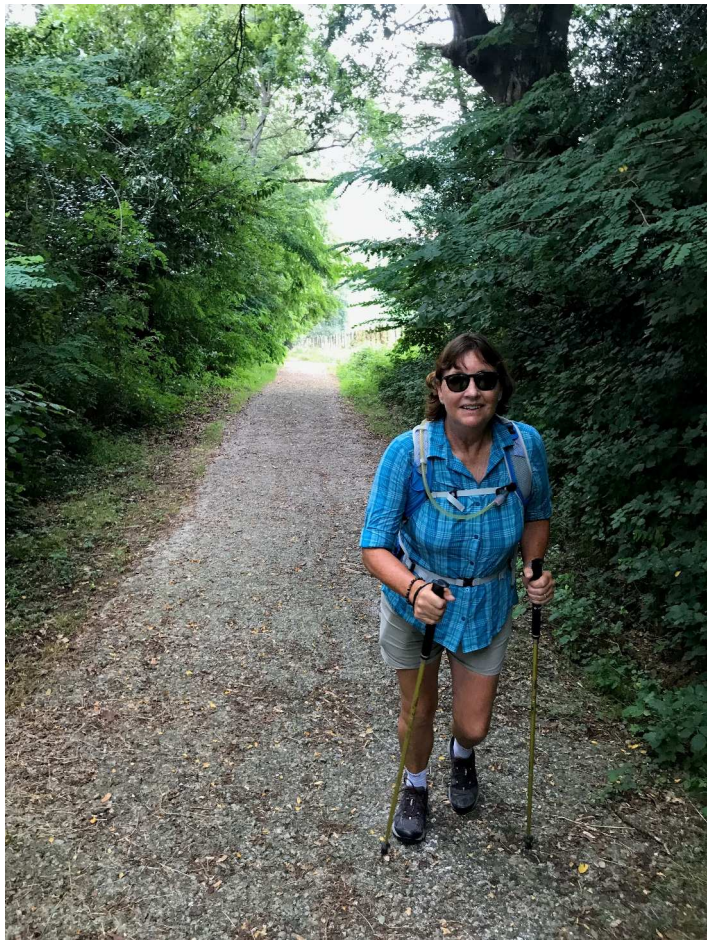
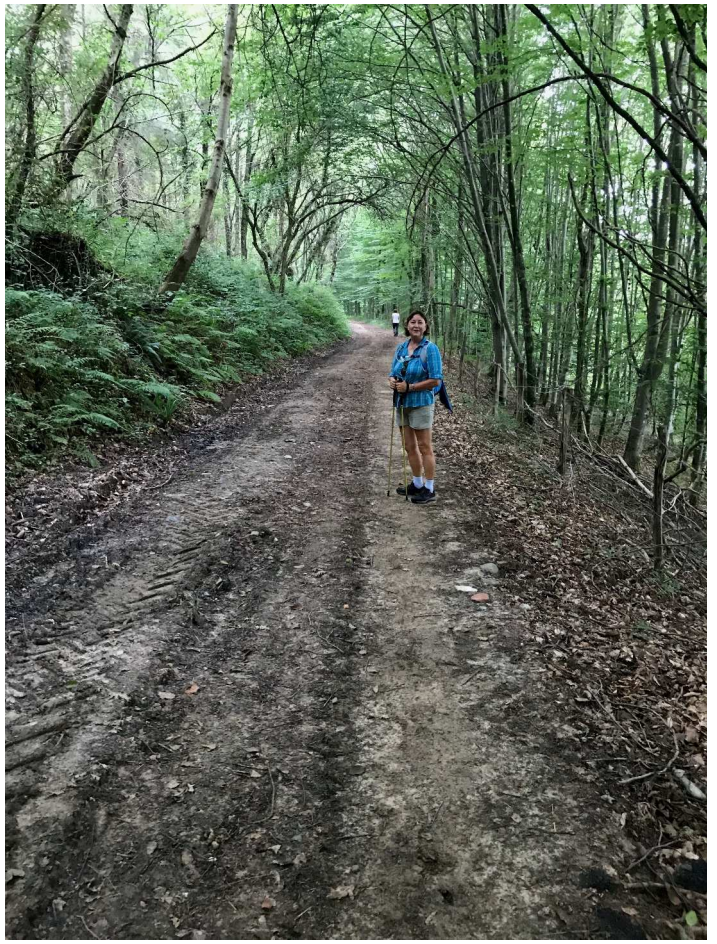
Back down the hill again past the Chapelle St-Nicholas and Harambeltz and then (thankfully) it was pretty flat going through the little village of Ostabat before stopping at the equally little village of Larceveau, arriving just before 1pm for lunch at the Hotel Espellet.

We are staying off the track tonight at a Chambres d'Hotes – nice couple running it but hardly a word of English between them and nice clean rooms but right next to a barn complete with a cow (seems to have since been moved) and a pile of *#*#. Flies everywhere of course which we have spent the afternoon killing! Not sure what the travel company were thinking … let's hope the food is good and the flies disappear in the evening!

Anyway, apart from the flies a great walk and looking forward to tomorrow's walk – 16km today and 722km in total with a day to go.



Our accommodation in St. Palais, Hotel de la Paix, after a good cleanup from the night before.

The church in St. Palais and the steep climb up to the first peak, Jolikurtegia, Alison at the peak but still in the forest, the view once we broke out from the forest and the three, unnamed, structures at the top of the hill, where we rested briefly.
















On the opposite page, Alison heading down from the peak to the Stele Gibraltar, where the pilgrim routes from Le Puy, Paris/Tours and Vézelay all meet, me by the Stele and again starting the climb up to the Chapelle de Soyarza along the trail in the distance in the first photo and, finally, the view northwest from the peak.

On the other side of the peak is the lovely Chapelle de Soyarza, which is shaded by trees that have been grafted together so that each tree has two trunks. Finally, on this page, the view towards Ostabat, Larceveau and, ultimately, St.-Jean.









Clockwise, the village of Harambeltz, Ostabat in the distance, some sheep in a very steep paddock near Larceveau and Alison at lunch in the village of Larceveau before we went to our accommodation for the night, Maison Qyhanartia.





July 22, 2019

Day 35 Larceveau to St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port

Last day of this chemin/camino/walk and a very nice one! We got away early because the forecast was for a very hot day (37 or 39C), leaving the farm we stayed at just after 7:30am. The Canadian couple that we have been seeing at many of our stops were at the same place last night (as they were the night before) and we had a very nice dinner together again but the flies were a bit much, both at dinner and breakfast! Our guide book is a fair bit worse for wear and tear having been used as a fly swat yesterday afternoon!

We thought we'd spend the day walking with Sonia and Peter but Peter had to sort out his feet after we were dropped off back at the trail (actually a couple of km up the trail from Larceveau) so we walked into St.-Jean by ourselves which was nice. We have been surprised at the solitude of the trail – we expected it would pick up as we got closer to St.-Jean but it's probably been the opposite – we only saw two other walkers and then only as we were leaving our morning coffee.

The walk today was mostly flat through very rural villages (sometimes a bit too rural – the farmers obviously use the trail to move animals from paddock to paddock, resulting in fairly shitty roads!), very pleasant and cool st first and then getting hotter as the morning wore on.

We stopped for a coffee at St.-Jean-le-Vieux, just under 4km from our destination, at about 10am and then walked the final stage into St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port feeling very pleased with ourselves, particularly Alison since she had literally limped into Santiago and then Muxía but had a spring in her step walking into St.-Jean.

St.-Jean is a sneaky place to walk into – it is hidden from view until you are within 100m of the walls, so all of a sudden our walk was over! Like Santiago, it is full of people who haven't shared our experience so it is both exciting and deflating to get to both places!

Anyway, we had a great lunch next to our hotel and then checked in – very excited to have an air-conditioned room (maybe the fourth or fifth room to have it) because by the time we'd finished lunch it was very hot.

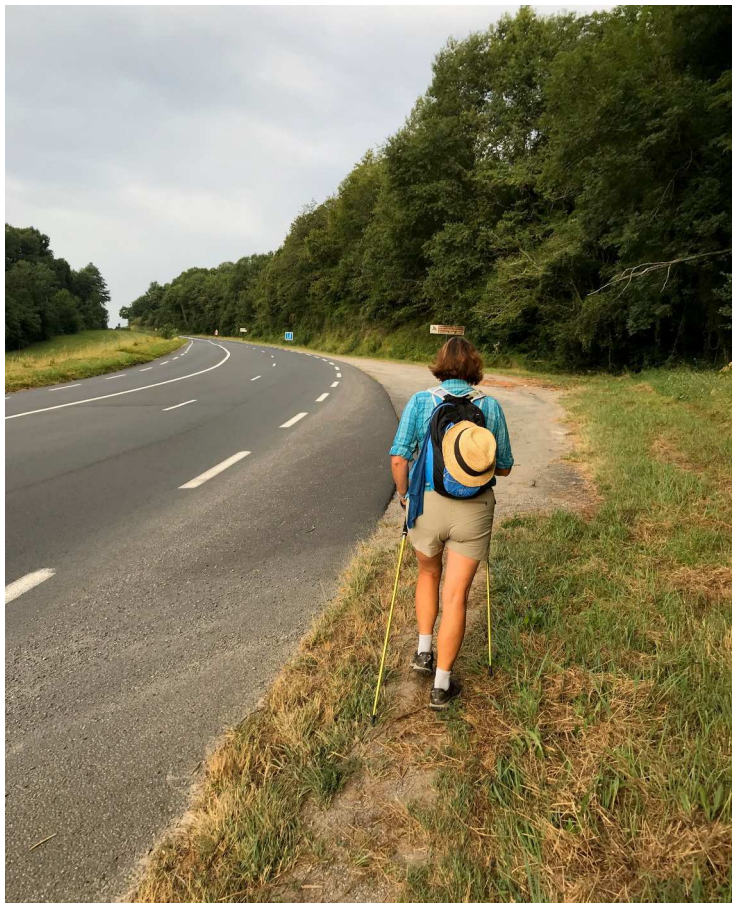
Al was too excited to sleep, so we had a look around the town and bought a guide to the Portuguese Camino!

We've started cleaning and sorting out our hiking gear and have a booking just down the road at a nice restaurant for dinner to celebrate!

16km today making it 738km in total (including the 20km in the kayak) – I think we'll sleep well tonight!



Alison all ready for the final walk of our trip!





Starting the day on the D933, which we would criss-cross most of the morning, me against a backdrop of rain that didn't eventuate, the D933 and looking towards the village of Gamarthe.









The village of Bustince, which we did not pass through, from the trail, cows in a rivulet just past the Château d'Aphat, morning coffees at St.-Jean-le-Vieux and the outside of the Eglise Ste.-Marie-Magdeleine, about 2 kms from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port.









Above, the inside of the Eglise Ste.-Marie-Magdeleine and Alison just outside the Porte Saint-Jacques that leads into the town of St.-Jean.
Below, lunch next to our hotel, the Hotel Itzalpea, and, after lunch, a shower and a bit of a rest, main street in St.-Jean, the Rue de La Citadelle and the waymarker pointing the way over the Pont St.-Jean across the river Nive to Roncevalles and Santiago de Compostela.









The Eglise Notre-Dame-du-Bout-du-Pont, at the bottom of the Rue de la Citadelle, Alison standing on the Pont St.-Jean having passed through the Porte d'Espagne, the Pont itself and the sign onward to Santiago de Compostela.
This was the spiritual end of our walk, and it felt good to finish thinking of the path up the Pyrenees, possibly a new adventure in the future.







July 26, 2019

St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port and Biarritz

We are waiting in the lounge of our hotel in Biarritz for the taxi to take us to Biarritz airport and from there to Paris and start the journey home – what a trip!

St. Jean was a very strange town – really one street in the old town and a couple more in the newer town. It was crazy busy the day we arrived and extremely hot the couple of nights we were there – another heatwave in France… Luckily for us our room was air-conditioned! We really didn't do too much other than have a brief look around the day we arrived and a climb up to the Citadel the next day. We had booked dinner at a very nice restaurant for the day we arrived, which was great but other than that we didn't venture far before we made our way by train to Biarritz.

Actually, the train took us to Bayonne, and we thought we would catch a taxi from Bayonne to Biarritz (about 20 minutes) but, of course, we arrived in the first day of Bayonne's four day festival so no taxis and a 20 minute walk from the train station to the temporary bus station to catch a bus to Biarritz!

Again, we were extremely lucky with our hotel and had a great air conditioned room! Biarritz is a really lovely beach side town, about 20 or 30 minutes east from San Sebastián where we started our Camino a few years ago, so we have had a great time. We've had a great holiday and it has been great to just chill for the last few days but we are also looking forward to getting home!



Our celebration dinner at the Hotel des Pyrenees





Dinner at the Hotel des Pyrenees, Alison in two pictures at the Citadelle above the town of St.-Jean, and the very Basque train station at St. Jean where we caught the train to Bayonne.









Alison with the Plage de la Côte des Basques in the background and again at the Plage du Port-Vieux, the Port des Pêcheurs with Biarritz and the Grand Plage in the background, and the very busy Rue des Halles leading up from the waterfront towards our hotel.









Me between the Plage du Port-Vieux and the Port des Pêcheurs, the iconic Villa Belza between the Plage du Port-Vieux and the Plage de la Côte des Basques and, below left, looking south along the surf beach, Plage de la Côte des Basques.











The Grand Plage at Biarritz, dinner at the Hotel Silhouette, where we stayed, and back at Heathrow, ready for the long flight home.

Postscript

We arrived back in Perth in August 2019 and immediately started plans for a shorter walk from Porto in Portugal to Santiago de Compostela using the guide book we'd bought in St. Jean. Convinced I could now do a better job than the companies we had used on both Caminos, I had picked the stages, the hotels and prepared the maps by late 2019 and had everything booked by January 2020.
About that time news started coming out from China about a novel corona-virus that caused a disease known as COVID-19 and was extremely infectious.
By March 2020 the outbreak was a global pandemic and the rest, as they say, is history - we cancelled the trip and remain, like all Australians, confined to Australia for the foreseeable future.
I completed this book in the mandatory 14 day quarantine period, after Alison and I visited Carly, Matt and our grandchildren Sebastian and Delilah in Townsville, which required that we remain in our house with no outside contact.
I look back on the adventures in this book and think how lucky we were, how minor the travails we encountered were (other than Al's eye, which could have been very bad) and hope that somehow the world can return to the state it was when, such a short time ago, we did this pilgrimage.
I worry that many of the people we stayed with may not still be in business when, finally we are allowed by our Government to travel the world freely again. I sincerely hope they are!
I still have the plans for the Senda Litoral and look forward to the day we can set out on the next camino.

Dave
November 2020

