

C251-CO Saint James way

Via Podiensis from Le Puy to Espalion



journey in the Pays d'Olt, or the Lot Valley.

Via Podiensis is one of the four main pilgrimage routes to the Spanish sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela from Le Puy en Velay, a Marian sanctuary since the fifth century. Since the Middle-Ages, millions of pilgrims have left from Le Puy to journey to the Spanish Galicia, at the extremity of the Iberian Peninsula, to venerate the relics of Saint James, one of Christ's apostles. This pilgrimage is today registered on the World Heritage list of UNESCO. In the first part of the tour, you will explore several different regions of France: Auvergne, Margeride, Gevaudan, the Aubrac highlands, charming and scenic in the summer months, but feared by pilgrims in the cold of winter, when it is covered by snow and fog. In bad weather, the bells of Domerie d'Aubrac (an abbey-hospital) once rang all the day and night long to guide the pilgrims towards this place of refuge. You will end your

Itinerary

Day 1 - LE PUY EN VELAY. The volcanic site of Le Puy is one of outstanding beauty, with rocky peaks dominating the plain. The city, rich with history, has always been a place of worship, and Christianity transformed it into a sanctuary dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. Place of pilgrimage and starting point of one of the paths that lead to Santiago de Compostela, Le Puy is worth the visit! We suggest you visit the Episcopal city, the Notre-Dame Cathedral, the cloister, the Saint Michel d'Aiguilhe Chapel perched on a rock mass, and the old quarter. Le Puy is also known for the quality of its lace, for its liquor Verveine du Velay, and for its lentils - *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel*

Day 2 - LE PUY EN VELAY - SAINT PRIVAT D'ALLIER (22 km – 6.30 hour walk). Every pilgrimage began with the opening mass in the cathedral, where the pilgrims bowed before the statue of Saint James to pray before setting off on their pilgrimage... 1500 km, more than two months of walking! Your journey will start on the steps of the cathedral and, walking through the city, you will reach the Velay Plateau (lovely views of Le Puy). You will make your way across the plateau, passing around volcanic cones. You will arrive in the village of Saint-Christophe-sur-Dolaison (nice 12th century church) and the Saint Roch Chapel, right at the entrance to Montbonnet. You will cross the Crêtes du Devers (a line of extinct volcanoes) located near the Lac de l'Oeuf (peat-bog located in a depression). You will leave the way and will continue to the hamlet of Rougeac sited at 3 Kilometers before St Privat. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse*



Day 3 - SAINT PRIVAT - SAUGUES (22 km – 6.30- hour walk). You will reach St Privat through fields. You will climb to the top of Calvary, towering over the village before leaving it. You will reach Rochegude, a fortress that dominates the Allier Valley and creates a natural border between two different areas : Le Velay and Le Gévaudan (nice Romanesque chapel and ruins of a fortified castle). You will descend onto Monistrol d'Allier, which holds, as church and presbytery, an ancient Romanesque priory, once dependant on La Chaise Dieu Abbey. After crossing the river, you will climb to the top of the opposite hillside to the Sainte Madeleine Chapel and the hamlets of Escluzels and Montaure. You are now in the Margeride region, a mountain chain culminating at 1551 meters at Le Signal de Randon. The summit looks like a vast, undulating plateau covered with birch-trees and coniferous forests, the plains holding little hamlets surrounded by crops. The landscape and the climate are rough and the area is thinly populated. The Margeride is often confused with the Gévaudan, the south-western part of the region which became famous because of The Beast, a solitary wolf which is supposed to have killed more than a hundred women and children. You will reach Saugues, a pleasant city of old houses dominated by La Tour des Anglais, a square keep dating back to the 13th century - *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse after Saugues*



Day 4 - SAUGUES - SAINT ALBAN SUR LIMAGNOLE (30.5 or 23 km – 8 and a half hour walk). This is a long stage, intended for the most courageous of you, but it can be shortened to a 23 km walk with a quick taxi transfer to La Clauze, a village dominated by a 12th century tower located on the top of a block of granite. You crosses a large part of the Margeride, passing through hamlets and villages, to the Hospitalet Pass, where once were situated a hospital and a chapel. The chapel you will see today was rebuilt at the start of the 19th century. You will walk down to Le Rouget, a small village named after the red sandstone of which are made the local monuments, and arrive finally in Saint Alban. You will pass the castle; a medieval fortress restructured during the 15th and 17th centuries, and will reach the Romanesque church, built on an ancient monastery – Taxi transfer from St Alban to Fontans. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in charming guest house.*

Day 5 - SAINT ALBAN - AUMONT AUBRAC (15.5 km – 4 hour walk). You will complete the crossing of La Margeride. Don't let the beauty surrounding you throughout the day fool you, life is rough on this plateau, and the high, snow-topped towers of granite all along the road reminds us that this land is completely covered by a thick snowy coat during the winter. You will make your way through grazing fields, spotted by enormous blocks of granite, before walking down to the village of Les Estrets located in Vezere Valley. You will then enter into Aumont Aubrac, an ancient crossroads of Roman routes. The church is an ancient Benedictine priory and, though altered many times through the centuries, still holds evidence of its Romanesque roots – *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel (1-star Michelin restaurant)*

Day 6 - AUMONT - NASBINALS (24 km – 7-hour walk). Having conquered the granite Margeride, you arrive at the volcanic Aubrac! You will leave Aumont to discover Peyre country. Passing through an alternating landscape of woods and farming centers, you will see the small villages of Chaze de Peyre and Lasbros, as well as the first spurs of the Aubrac Mountains. As you climb up into the heights of the mountain, you will notice the thinning of the forest and the vast grazing fields that stretch out to replace it. Here, the path is called “draille” and is lined with short, stone walls which lead the flocks during transhumance. Crossing this vast landscape you will see enormous stone boulders, which complicate the flow of the streams. Their paths turn into looping mazes and finally end in small lakes or peat-bogs. Though never monotonous, Aubrac is a vast, solitary region that you will either love or hate. But regardless of the impression it leaves on you, it will be one which will remain for the rest of your life! You will cross through a few villages, such as Rieurtort, that haven't changed for centuries. Next to the communal oven and two drinking troughs lies a portico which was used to shoe oxen. A few kilometers more and you will cross Le Bès River on an ancient bridge topped by a cross, just before reaching the guesthouse, a lovely renovated former farm. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a charming guesthouse before the villages of Nasbinals*



Day 7 - NASBINALS - SAINT CHELY D'AUBRAC (20 km –5-hour walk). You will walk to Nasbinals, with its lovely Romanesque church dating back to the 11th century and will continue your walk across Aubrac. This entire stretch was, at the beginning of the Middle-Ages, covered by thick forests and infested by wolves and bandits, making the route feared by pilgrims. On top of the crawling dangers in the forest darkness, they also had to face rough snow storms during winter. But they urged on, compelled by the nearing refuge of Aubrac and its hospital. The village of Aubrac has been built up around two square towers, wonderfully lost in an immense and monotone landscape. The remains of the Dômerie, which include only the church and the Tower of the English, was built by Adalard, viscount of the Flandres, after he had been attacked by bandits and lost in a snow storm. You will then begin the long walk down to the Lot Valley. You will cross the hamlet of Belvezet and its volcanic “neck”, a rocky peak on which you will find the remains of a château. You will arrive finally in Saint Chély d'Aubrac, a cosy little village nestling in a green valley. *Dinner, lodging and breakfast in a 3-star hotel*

Day 8 - SAINT CHELY - ESPALION (24.5 km – 7 hour walk). You will leave Saint Chély, a small village that has kept numerous testimonies of its history, among them are the lovely granite homes and the gothic structure of the Pilgrims' Bridge. But you will also move away from the rough Aubrac terrain to reach the more cosy, lush and sunny land of the Olt region! You will begin your descent, traversing forests, grazing pastures and small hamlets such as Les Cambrassats and Estrade, and reach Saint Côte d'Olt which takes up a beautiful spot in the fertile Lot Valley. The heart of the fortified city has kept its original aspect and its medieval charm and is really worth the visit. You will walk along the Lot River to attain Espalion, an important stop on the way to Santiago de Compostella – *Taxi transfer at Estaing. Dinner, night and breakfast in a charming guest house.*

Day 9 - ESPALION – End of the tour after breakfast

Season

From April to middle of October but be careful this trail is more and more popular and we recommend to reserve earlier to get (the best) rooms. Best time is May, June and September

What's included?

- 8 nights' accommodation in handpicked 2 or 3-star hotels or charming guesthouses
- 8 breakfasts – 8 gourmet dinners
- Hotel to hotel luggage transfer along the trail.
- Taxi transfers as written in the description of the itinerary
- A set of maps (1/25 000 scale) or topoguide (with translation) with the route marked on and detailed route notes describing the trail.
- A daily itinerary together with information about facilities and places of interest along the trail.
- Emergency assistance.

Visa fees - transportation fees to and from the walk area - Insurance (strongly recommended on all trips) - Transfers except those mentioned above – Drinks – Entrance fees – Additional meals - Spending of personal nature e.g. laundry, souvenirs, phone calls, are not included

Getting there and away

Nearest Airport: International Lyon St Exupery airport or Paris CDG. Back from Rodez airport with domestic flights to Paris or Lyon

By car: Drive to Clermont Ferrand along A71 motorway. Get off exit 20 and go to Le Puy along N102 road via Brioude.

Shared taxis from Espalion to come back to Le Puy (contact us for reservation)

Where to park : toll secured underground car park in Le Puy. Special rate for one week or more.

By train: Le Puy is well served from the main French rail stations with connections at Lyon, Clermont-Ferrand or St Etienne. From Espalion, links by bus (except on Sundays) or taxi to Rodez train station where you catch train to Paris

Walk difficulty

Grade 3 – walks of between 5 and 8 hours a day with ascents up to 700 m. Some hiking experience is advisable. A reasonable level of fitness and some stamina are required for these walks. You may cover long distances in remote countryside and the terrain will be rough underfoot. In mountainous areas you will encounter some sustained ascents and descents