

GREAT
PILGRIM WALKS
LE PUY
CAMINO

HOLY HIKING

Less popular than Spain’s Camino Francis, Le Puy Camino in France offers a mixture of challenging mountain trails, country paths, tasty cafes and quiet woodlands.

WORDS AND PHOTOS_
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Early-morning was spectacular crossing The Lot river, perfect conditions for postcard pictures.





Above: The Le Puy Camino was always well marked and the trail in perfect shape for multi-day hikes.

Right: Fresh water is available everywhere on the Le Puy Camino.

Below: The Pont Valentré - the 14th-century stone arch bridge is the symbol of Cahors.



CHEVELLE propped herself against a farm fence just outside of Montbonnet on the first day of her pilgrimage. Exhausted from the 15km hike, she was catching her breath before tackling the last few kilometres on the Chemin de Saint-Jaques – better known as the Le Puy Camino.

At 67, it was the French grandmother's first multi-day walk and her first day of retirement. A big decision to walk from Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint Jean Pied de Port – a total of 750km. Her husband of 45 years passed away 18 months earlier and she was fulfilling his dream. She planned on walking about 15km a day, inserting rest days when needed, all the way collecting her thoughts and penning a book about her husband's life for a family keepsake.

Caminos are good for that; there is endless time for thought and reflection. Another grandmother, Juliette, was just walking for five days with her nine-year-old grandson to form a special bond; Mattieu, the 20-something Frenchman eyeing off 1500km to Santiago going cold turkey kicking a cigarette and mobile phone addiction; the Americans who sold their house and belongings and now travelling and spending their kid's inheritance. I came across dozens of stories, some spiritual, some historical or some just like me, embracing the challenge.

I chose to complete the first 350km from Le Puy to Cahors. With a rest day planned in Conques day nine, for me it was a 16-day adventure.



Left: The Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy in Conques – UNESCO World Heritage listed and a must stop on your Camino.

Below: Estaing: Estaing – Classified as one of the most picturesque villages in all of France.



A theatrical start

The Camino follows the GR65 trail and is one of four traditional pilgrim routes that cross France and goes by many names; we'll refer to it as the Le Puy Camino. There is a daily 7am mass and pilgrim blessing at the UNESCO listed Notre-Dame Cathedral and attendance is well worth the effort, even for non-religious walkers. At the completion of the mass, almost on cue, massive iron gates open in the centre aisle floor, and you descend the 11th Century Cathedral's steps - a memorable way to begin your journey.

Bursting with enthusiasm, a steady trail of pilgrims brandishing poles weave their way through the cobblestone streets to start the climb out of town before soon reaching single-track, fire trail and country laneways. It's not long before the rural smells dominate - manure and freshly plowed fields soon fill the nostrils and remain a constant moving forward.

Fears of getting lost as a self-guided walker are soon dispelled with the abundance of trail markings, not only pointing you in the right direction, but also covering all possible wrong turns with X-markings. If you went more than a couple of hundred metres on the entire Camino without seeing the familiar red and white waymarking, you knew you were off trail. A dynamically updated GPS map in the exclusive Raw Travel App was also a great comfort to fall back on.

Day one is a tough introduction, especially without established trail rhythm and if you plan on averaging about 25km a day. The

first week is the toughest with major elevation changes. 500m the first day alone. Keep in mind the Le Puy Camino is rated moderate to challenging so be prepared. For every uphill there's just as steep a downhill!

The town of Le Puy-en-Velay is in a volcanic region and makes for a spectacular start to your pilgrimage and really deserves a day to explore before you begin your journey. The climb up the 268 rock-carved steps to the top of the iconic landmark, the Saint-Michel d'Aiguilhe chapel, built in 969, is almost mandatory.

A road less travelled

The allure of the Le Puy route is it's in rural France and most pilgrims are in fact French, which does bring its own challenges. Unless your French is better than school level, be prepared for lots of hand gestures and confused looks. But be polite, throw in a few French pleasantries and you'll be warmly greeted. But also expect long periods of not being able to hold conversations or sitting at a communal dinner table wondering what the others are laughing about. Hopefully it's not about you and someone will translate.

And don't forget to tell them where you're from. Often, I was mistaken for English and found the reception at times frosty, but once you made it known I was Australian, you're warmly embraced.

The French take great pride in their Camino and the route is often split into more manageable

distances and completed over numerous trips by the time restricted locals. On my trip I would say 95 per cent of pilgrims were French.

And unlike its more famous Spanish cousin – the Camino Francis – you can experience a “less commercial” and quieter journey without the cattle-pen accommodation at the end of the day. More than 350,000 walked the Spanish route this season, but less than 25,000 walked the Le Puy Camino. Plans are afoot to change this and ramp up tourism, so if you're looking for an authentic experience where some days you may not even encounter other walkers, start planning now.

Being a rural walk, it passes through stunning countryside in some of the most beautiful small towns in France. The terrain is varied as it is spectacular. It begins with the volcanic landscapes of Velay, climbing to the highest part of the route on the exposed golden-grassed Aubrac plateau, down through the heavily wooded gorges to the Lot Valley with its picture-postcard hamlet towns like Estaing, Espalion and Conques. Then there's the enchanted forests of the Quercy with the autumn leaves littering the ground, framed by drystone walls and shepherd huts before emerging to the largest city on the GR65, Cahors – where my journey ended.

If heading all the way to SJPD, the countryside flattens out and is dotted with crops like corn and sun flowers, before nestling into the foothills of the Pyrenees and entering Basque country.



**“ADRENALINE
MEANT YOU BARELY
NOTICED THE 500M
CLIMB THROUGHOUT
THE DAY”**

Knowing your limits

Before starting your journey, honestly critique your ability and fitness and establish achievable goals. “Train hard and trek easy” is my mantra, then speak with the experts like Raw Travel to plan your trip. Factor in the weather conditions. It’s not for novices. It’s a tough initiation into the world of multi-day hiking so if it is your first you need to do the hard yards.

Most daily distances for me were around 25km, but there were a couple of tough 30km plus days in late summer heat. Endurance is the key. Training with the odd 20km bushwalk is a start, being able to do it day after day is another challenge altogether. Remind yourself it’s not a race and you have the entire day to reach your destination.

Take advantage of optional daily bag-drop services. It’s comforting to begin each day with just a day pack with your main luggage waiting for you daily at your accommodation.

Water isn’t an issue either with lots of fresh H2O available from springs for almost the entire route.

For those who aren’t committed to completing the entire Camino or concerned about their health, you can hop on a daily shuttle bus, allowing you to hitch a ride down the road or cut out a section completely.

The memorable days

There wasn’t a day where you weren’t engrossed in your journey, in awe of your ever-changing surroundings. Le Puy to St

Privat d’Allier day one was probably the most pumped I’ve been at the start of a walk. Adrenaline meant you barely noticed the steady 500m climb throughout the day and celebrated with a late afternoon bevy with newly acquainted trail buddies.

Quite often you spot those familiar faces as you soon identify who is following a similar itinerary. I prefer to walk solo, but as an independent traveller, it was good to catch up and swap stories at the end of the day.

Day five stands out. It was a full 28km day starting from Aumont-Aubrac and after meandering through pine groves, you emerge onto the desolate golden grassed Aubrac plateau. Barren, devoid of trees, it’s dotted with pilgrims following the narrow trail like ants, navigating cattle feeding on the summer

grasses. Reminiscent of Australia’s Alpine region, you can’t help but imagine the harsh winters and bitter winds.

Daily, you are greeted with postcard perfect landscapes; Medieval cobble-stoned laneways weaving through villages; Ancient stone-arched bridges spanning rivers whose reflections double draw-dropping scenery.

Conques will stay in your mind forever. Rollercoaster trails lead to a dramatic steep descent into the fairytale village, featuring breathtaking miraculously preserved architecture dating back 1000 years with amazing colours and slated roof cottages. The Romanesque Abbey church of St Foy is a must visit and the Benedictine monastery watches over one of the richest gold and silver-plated treasures of medieval Christianity.

Clockwise from far left:

Plenty of time for reflection with very few walkers en route.

The grasslands of the Aubrac Plateau were absolutely stunning as you followed the narrow trail through the highest elevation on the Camino.

Navigating your way through the locals on the Aubrac Plateau.

How far do you want to go?



NEED TO KNOW

Time/Distance: Various. From Le Puy-en-Velay to Cahors 350km - 16-20 days, dependent on rest days. For the full Camino to Sanit Jean Pied de Port, 750km - best to schedule up to 40 days to allow for rest days.

Accommodation varies from hostels, private home stays, BnBs and hotels. While it can be planned and booked independently, we recommend using

experts like Raw Travel: rawtravel.com/destinations/le-puy-french-camino

They are Australian-based experts with local knowledge, their itinerary is tailor-made to your ability/time frame and provide full 24-hour support on the ground in France. They can also organise daily luggage transfer and full side-trip planning.

Right: Nightly outside the Abbey church of Sainte Foy in Conques, the local monks give a talk on the history of the carvings and architecture, albeit in French.

Far right: Saint Jacques Chapel just outside of Saint Privat-d'Allier.



The French way of life

For Australians, it can be a bit of a culture shock multi-day hiking in rural France. Being taken out of your comfort zone is all part of the allure. Embracing the French culture, which seems to revolve around food and drink, is a must.

A mandatory morning stop is a bakery for a baguette or croissant which often you'll hold onto for lunch, perhaps in a field. Then at the

end of the day it's sitting down for the entrée, the main, the platters of cheese, the dessert, the espresso, the wine, and lots of laughs.

Every region has its specialties. In Le Puy region it's the green lentles; Aligot in Aubrac; the gizzard salad in Figeac or the truffles in Lemogne-en-Quercy.

Be prepared to start the day with a continental breakfast between 8-9am and not



sit down to dinner until 7pm at the earliest. Most shops close between midday and 3pm and most not at all on Sundays and Mondays, so you need to plan accordingly.

When to go

The walking season ranges from about mid-April until the end of October, with May and September identified as the best conditions, while July and August experience much higher temps in the height of summer.

I was blessed with perfect weather starting early September, with just one day of rain and most days temps hovering around the mid to high 20s.

I plan to return in 2025 to complete the 400km to St Jean Pied-de-Port. But as suggested, I'm going to try the start of the season instead of the end. Bon Chemin! 