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Le Puy-en-Velay



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Forez

BACK TO THE SOURCE

MOST OF FRANCE'S RIVERS ORIGINATE IN AUVERGNE, A ROUGH AND LUSH VOLCANIC PLATEAU OF ROLLING HILLS AND JAGGED ROCK FORMATIONS

BY ETHAN GELBER

It's completely unlike the rest of the country and sometimes even at odds with itself—which is, curiously, one of its advantages. Isolated but central, insular but welcoming, unassuming but arresting, Auvergne, and especially its Massif Central, is a superbly preserved mountain playground that inexplicably escapes the holiday hordes. There is little good explanation for its lack of popularity—the last threat of a tectonic jiggle or lava flow was more than 5,000 years ago—but it does mean that you will be guaranteed an authentic experience in the heart of France. Most of France's rivers originate in Auvergne, drawing off the abundant surface water, the underground springs of which also serve at well-known spas and some of the country's most celebrated *eaux minérales*, like Badoit, Vichy and Volvic.

From the Gare de Lyon in Paris, grab a two-hour-and-45-minute TGV (*train à grande vitesse*) to **St-Etienne-Châteaucreux**. Once you've passed through Lyon, you'll want to keep a close eye on the changing countryside. This becomes easier once you've switched to the slower regional train for the one-hour-and-20-minute trip through dramatic landscapes from St-Etienne to **Le Puy-en-Velay**. On arrival, pick up your rental car right away, a necessity in this transport-poor area.

Le Puy is scenically set amidst three towering conical lava plugs, a dramatic backdrop for the steep cobbled streets of this medieval town known for lace making. Capping each of the pinnacles is confirmation of Le Puy's enduring role as a pilgrimage site as well. The 10th-century chapel, Romanesque cathedral and 50-foot bright red statue of the Virgin Mary mark Le Puy as one of the four starting points of the route to Santiago de Compostella in Spain.

Due north of town is the extensive **Parc Naturel Régional du Livradois-Forez**. At the information office in St-Gervais-sous-Meymont, collect a map of *La route des métiers* (the Cottage Industry Trail), which will lead you to some of the 40 locations where traditional artisanal practices are still customary.

Just to the west of Livradois-Forez is the **Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne** (Regional Nature Park of the Volcanoes of Auvergne), France's largest regional park. Approximately 80 dormant volcanoes pucker the earth's surface, the oldest eroded down to their tough rock cores. The park's most prominent and accessible peaks include the 4,800-foot Puy-de-Dôme and 6,188-foot Puy-de-Sancy (also the highest). The latter looms over a little spa/ski town on the banks of the Dordogne River, **Le Mont-Dore**, a perfect base at any season for exploring nearby nature.

Clermont-Ferrand, the regional capital, is less than 10 miles to the northwest. In automotive circles, Clermont-Ferrand is famous as the home of the Michelin man, officially known as Bibendum, whose tire plant is east of town. Back in town, before dropping off the car at the Clermont-Ferrand station and relaxing on the three-hour-and-45-minute trip back to Paris, visit the dark Volvic-stone 13th-century cathedral and the older Romanesque **Notre-Dame-du-Port** basilica, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. ■

For more on Auvergne, visit www.auvergne-tourisme.info/uk

AUVERGNE'S SPRINGS SERVE BADOIT, VICHY AND VOLVIC

LE PUY-EN-VELAY
www.ot-lepuyenvelay.fr

LA ROUTE DES METIERS
www.routedesmetiers.com
(in French)

PARC NATUREL REGIONAL DU LIVRADOIS-FOREZ
www.parc-livradois-forez.org (in French)

PARC NATUREL REGIONAL DES VOLCANS D'Auvergne
www.parc-volcans-auvergne.com (in French)

LE MONT-DORE
www.mont-dore.com

CLERMONT-FERRAND
www.ot-clermont-ferrand.fr