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Magazine

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO AVEYRON

There's a hush-hush corner of France that hardly anyone knows about, but a subculture of international and interested people have winkled it

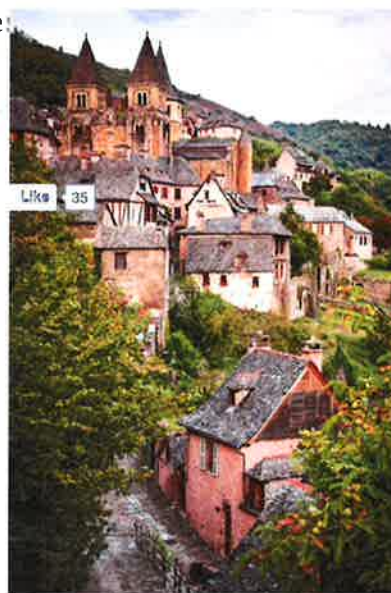
words by FIONA KERR

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THE FRENCH CALL Aveyron - a little-known region sprawled across the southern edge of the rugged Massif Central - *la France profonde*, the deepest of deep heartlands. Although only a couple of hours' drive north of metropolitan Toulouse and Montpellier, it is sparsely populated and seemingly impervious to change, a land of secret valleys, wild pastures and craggy peaks. Before I visited, a Parisian friend described it as 'being lost in the middle of nowhere'. 'But in a good way,' he added. 'People who go there tend to rave about it.'

There are no motorways or fast-train lines scarring the Aveyron landscape, so everyone who travels around it is forced to slow down. This meditative pace



The medieval hamlet of Conques

seems entirely appropriate. Since the Middle Ages millions of Christian pilgrims have walked the Camino de Santiago route, which wiggles its way across the region's northern reaches towards Spain.

Now there are new saints to worship. Everywhere I go I hear the same names: Soulages. Bras. Soulages. Bras. They are the chefs Michel Bras and his son Sébastien, whose three-Michelin-star restaurant is just outside the village of Laguiole, and the abstract painter Pierre Soulages, France's greatest living artist, who was born in Rodez, the capital of Aveyron, where a museum dedicated to his work opened last May.

The rust-brown cubes of the *Musée Soulages* are as stark as the artist's huge black canvases, a flash of modernity in what still looks like a medieval village dominated by a Gothic bell tower. Within it, Michel Bras has opened a brasserie, uniting the region's most famous sons in a one-stop cathedral for modern-day pilgrims.

There have been other contemporary incursions into the landscape: the Bras family's all-glass restaurant; the slender Norman Foster-designed Millau Viaduct - the highest bridge in the world, which cuts across the Tarn Valley - and the metallic flick of Philippe Starck's Forge de Laguiole, where traditional knives are still made.

But, more than anything, Aveyron is a place of villages (even Rodez has just 24,000 citizens). It has more official *Les Plus Beaux Villages* (the Most Beautiful Villages in France) than any other region. There are ancient hamlets balanced on ridges, villages pressed into the sides of valleys, settlements wedged into the rippling green hillsides, each with their own stories to tell.

ON MY WAY to Aubrac, I pass two nuns eating sandwiches in the shade of fir trees lining the road. Their habits match the milky-blue sky above the Aubrac plateau that surrounds the village of the same name. This is the emptiest and most untamed corner of Aveyron, but the Camino attracts a steady stream of pilgrims to what is not much more than a hamlet.

There are no shops in Aubrac and only a handful of buildings: a café, an old hotel and two *maisons d'hôtes* in grey-granite houses around the square, their steeply pitched roofs lined in silvery lauze tiles that glisten in the sunshine like fish scales.

It is mid-afternoon and the square is filled with walkers in bright waterproofs and stout sandals, families with backpacks and hikers carrying walking sticks. Some stop for a giant wedge of summer-berry tart at Chez Germaine. On the black door opposite the café, weathered silver-coloured letters read 'Hôtes d'Aubrac'. A huge glass orb, like a fortune-teller's crystal ball, hangs above it from a piece of wire. Thud. Thud, thud. Through the pilgrims and daytrippers strides a man dressed

in black: skinny jeans, ripped T-shirt, Nike hi-top trainers, trilby - all stubble and sunglasses. 'Darwin?' I ask. 'Oui.'

Didier Darwin, a photographer, runs the five-bedroom L'Annexe d'Aubrac with his partner Virginie Salazard, a former model. They first came to Aubrac in 2007. 'I blame it on the beast,' says Virginie that evening over red wine (a gutsy Marcillac, for me) and cigarettes (Marlboro Reds, for her). 'Didier was photographing places near here where they found victims of *la bête du Gévaudan*.' A famous story in France, it tells of a wolf-like animal that terrorised swathes of countryside east of the village in the 1760s, killing more than 100 people. 'And we kept coming back,' Virginie says.



asts that roam the hills are doe-eyed Aubrac cattle of colour of burnt cream. Every May hundreds of sheep in ribbons and flowers and paraded through the hills for richly marbled beef and the milk for rounds of cheese which is stirred into mashed potato to create *aligots*, a dish served at rustic *buron* restaurants in former villages. The nearest is Buron de Born (+33 4 66 32 50 03), so if you are a fan of these places that only hunger will keep you from turning back).

to Aubrac from Marseille two years ago and they have created a theatrical place to stay with layer upon layer of family heirlooms and flea-market finds. Each room is wildly different: Transylvania looks like the inside of a gypsy caravan, with a taxidermy peacock keeping watch over a dressing table laid with tarot cards, an embroidered shawl covering one wall and black lace shrouding the

xe d' Aubrac

windows. Or there's Edelweiss, which interprets the area's snowy winters in an all-white scheme and, my favourite, Aubrac, which draws on the landscape for inspiration, with a dry-stone wall, curtains hanging from branches and a faux-fur throw.



Across the square is the equally stylish La Colonie. The buildings that house both *maisons d'hôtes* were once part of a big hotel for pilgrims, but here the look is pared-back. The five bedrooms and two apartments are filled with furniture of a mid-century bent,

contemporary art and curious objects: an antique scale here, a gramophone there, an easel with a map of the Biblical lands. The owner, Cyril Lérissé, bought the place 10 years ago when it was so run-down he found drifts of snow inside and he spent five years renovating it. But why here? 'For the peace,' he says. 'Someone told me, if you like Scotland, which I do, wait until you see the Aubrac.'

On my last night a thunderstorm rolls in across the plateau, illuminating the hills in flashes of moody light. The next morning, fog clings to the village. 'This is Aubrac at its best,' says Virginie at breakfast. 'I love the mist, and the snow. There's something about the soul of this place. I grew up in a village near Grenoble and thought I could never live anywhere as small again. But here it is different, it's spiritual.'

ON THE EDGE of the medieval town of Sévérac-le-Château there is a waymarker with signs pointing to Sète, Los Angeles, Liverpool, Naples and Route 66. It's set in front of a gate, behind which stands **La Singulière**, until recently owner Sophie de Mestier's family holiday home.

The mix of global influences continues inside, all carried off with a confidence that hints at Sophie's former life as a fashion stylist in Paris. There's an antique walnut chest turned into a marble-topped sink, the reception is wallpapered in old newspapers, photographs by her husband Hervé hang in the four bedrooms: a pop of red shoes shot beside a hyper-blue pool; a woman on a bicycle piled high with flowers in Hanoi.

Music by Puccini floats through the house from an opera performance projected onto a wall in the sitting room, where there are three squishy sofas in green velvet and cream linen, and a coffee table heaped with old copies of *Paris Match* and *Jours de France*. Bundles of *Le Figaro* from the 1970s are stacked in a basket beside the fire.

'We used to come here every summer and Christmas,' says Sophie, who has named the bedrooms after her grandchildren. 'We try to create the same atmosphere now, with lots of people and laughter, and food and wine around the table.'

It's a very personal space - rows of yellowing family photographs are tacked to the wall by the stairs: weddings, babies, long-ago beach trips. In the evening, a classic French film (Truffaut, Chabrol) is played on the projector before Sophie and Hervé host supper around the long dining table. 'He talks, I cook,' she says. 'A *maison d'hôtes* is special. The people who choose to come here relax, talk, laugh. I wanted to open up the house with all its family stories, and now it's about their stories too.'

And no doubt tales from the village, where there are sensational views



Conques village, Aveyron

**THIS IS A LAND OF
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from the half-ruined 13th-century castle. It is surrounded by higgledy-piggledy cobbled streets where wooden plaques plot out the town's microcosmic history - a hospital burnt down by angry Protestants, a duke with a well-stocked library. The alleys hide tiny art galleries and a cave-like *brocante* where a little old lady sells the family silver.

My route from Sévérac-le-Château to Aubin takes me through three of *Les Plus Beaux Villages*, the most beautiful of which is Conques, a tumble of blush-coloured half-timber houses and narrow lanes ringed by a town wall, set high above the Dourdou River. Its outsized abbey is still a draw along the pilgrimage route. Inside, shafts of sombre light stream in through striped stained-glass windows, updated in shades of grey by Pierre Soulages (there he is again).

AUBIN IS A former mining village and not nearly as pretty as its near neighbour, but on the outskirts is Le Pigeonnier, a wonderful three-bedroom *maison d'hôtes*. The two stone-coloured rooms in the main house are lovely, but there's no competing with the charm of the converted dovecote that gives Le Pigeonnier its name. The rooms are decorated in linens, with free-standing metal baths. Upstairs a double bed has been cut to fit the curve of the walls, and tucked away in the former roosts there are vintage novels and handwritten chalkboards wishing guests *au temps jolies*.

'Being here is like living in a bubble, suspended in time,' says its owner Virginie Tallaron, who tends to her guests with motherly warmth. Every morning begins with a homemade breakfast on the terrace - rounds of just-baked *fouace* (like brioche but denser, flavoured with orange-blossom water) and madeleines; jams in every flavour; great big bowls of coffee - as she chatters about plans for the day, circling maps and handing out restaurant cards.



In the afternoon I drive to the nearby village of Belcastel, which rises up the banks of the Aveyron River and is topped with a little castle. On



Dressing room at

ow Virginie's recommendation and make a detour to Peyrusse-le-Roc, a cluster of stone houses with medieval ruins hidden among trees. 'It's so peaceful here, it leaves a lot of room to be creative,' says Laetitia Dhugues, who opened the pottery P2P Ceramik with her boyfriend Eric Blanchard two years ago. Together they make simple, contemporary bowls, vases, jugs and dishes, this season's glazed in white with abstract drips of mottled gold.

NINE YEARS AGO a friend of Rain Heron and Lance Ojeda lent them their holiday home in Aveyron. It was the two Californians' first visit, but they were so taken with it they decided to buy three stone cottages outside Entraygues-sur-Truyère in the Lot Valley.

Rain and Lance have now decamped to Aveyron permanently and live in the biggest of the houses. The others, together known as **Sweet French Cottages**, are done up in taupes and whites and rented out to writers, musicians, or those, like me, looking to slip into life in this sleepy neck of the woods. In mine - **La Maisonnette** - there's a muslin-draped four-poster bed, a bottle of Entraygues le Fel rosé in the fridge and a hand-painted village sign rescued by Lance when it was replaced with something more boringly uniform. 'Welcome to Entraygues-sur-Truyère,' it reads, 'crossroads commercial and touristic. Sixty traders, 40 artisans, 110 rooms.'

That evening I meet Rain and Lance for supper at their favourite bistro, Le Chou Rouge (+33 5 65 48 58 03), which serves surprisingly elegant tapas: jars of bouillabaisse; Aubrac-beef sushi; snail bon-bons. This spring the couple will open a café-gallery-boutique called H2O on the edge of town. 'We thought we'd do something traditional looking, but the planners insisted it was ultra-contemporary,' says Lance of the bright, white space with a sculpture garden. 'This place might seem unspoilt and very rural, but beneath it there's a sophisticated undercurrent. And that is the real secret of Aveyron.'

L'Annexe d'Aubrac (www.lannexedaubrac.com; doubles from about £85). *La Colonie* (www.la-colonie.com; doubles from about £70). *La Singulière* (www.lasinguliere.com; doubles from about £75). *Le Pigeonnier* (www.domainedupigeonnier.com; doubles from about £70). *Sweet French Cottages* (www.sweetfrenchcottages.com; from about £400 per week)

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