

Village life

Devoted following



windows are a modern addition, crafted by local artist Pierre Soulages and completed in the 1990s.

A walk through the winding streets of Conques, which are so narrow that cars and buses have to park at the entrance to the village, reveals how the monks excelled themselves. Even at the highest point, overlooking the steep drop below, the abbey church is still visible, clearly highlighting the village's most prized possession. Fortified gateways and *colombage* (half-timbered) houses aside, it is clear that the religious soul of Conques gives the village its unique character and vibrant essence.

"The key event here is the celebration of Sainte Foy in October," says Anne. "That's when we have

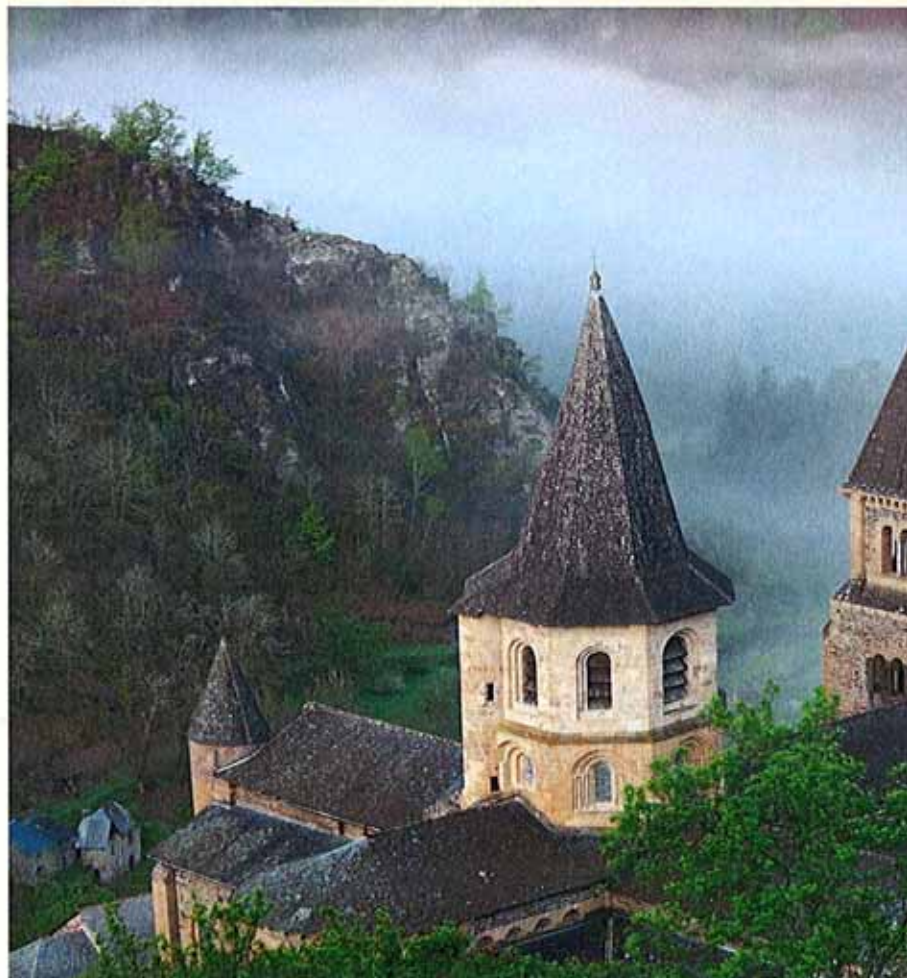
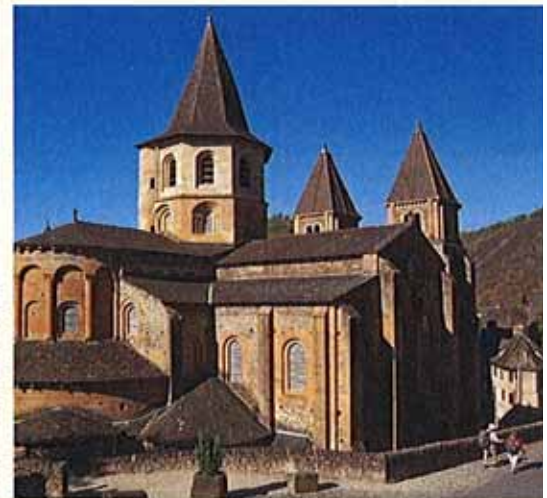
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a procession with the reliquary statue. It is a tradition that was started when the relics arrived in Conques, and then little by little the reliquary statue was built with gold and precious stones. This now forms part of the *trésor* of Sainte-Foy, which is the collection that the monastery built up thanks in large part to the religious devotion the relics created." The event retains a religious aspect, with the procession of the statue around the abbey church, but it is also a village celebration with singing, dancing and street performances.

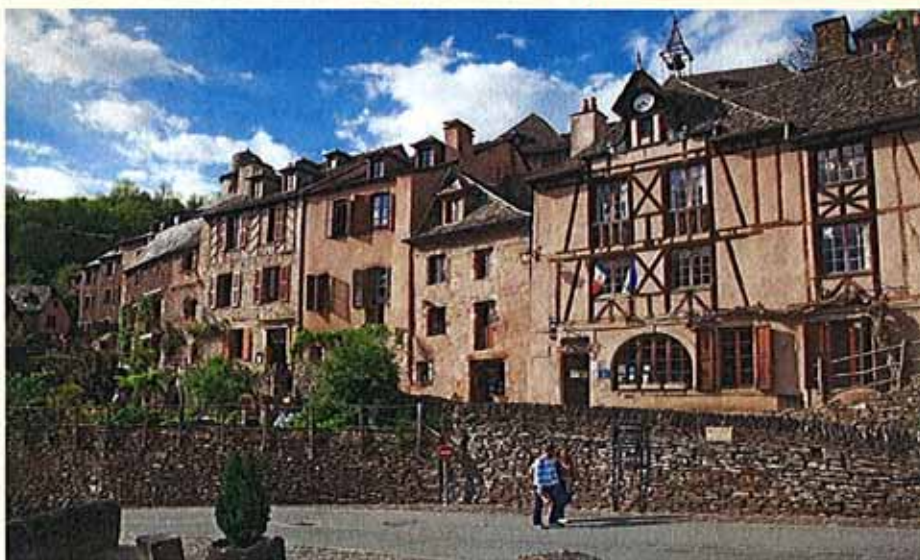
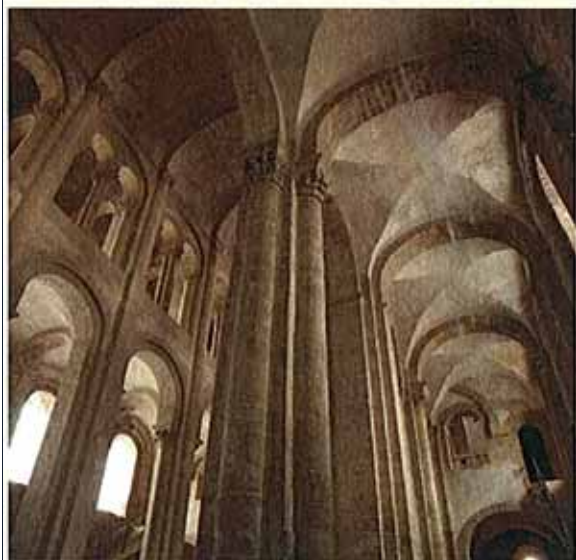
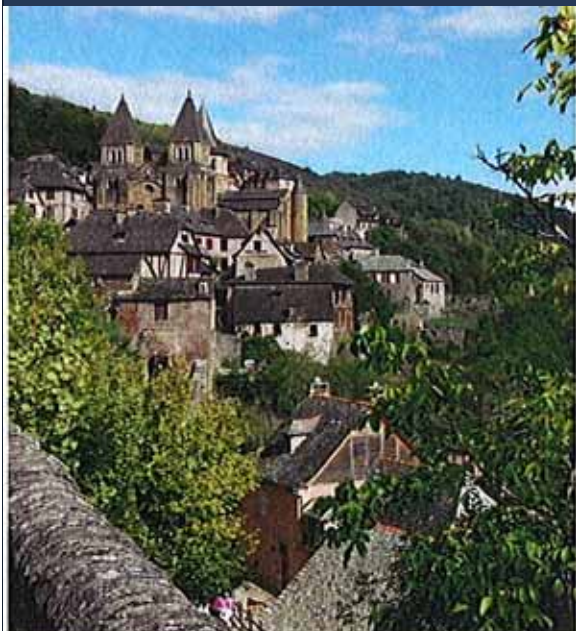
Although there is no longer a brotherhood of monks in Conques, a community of friars is in place from the affiliated Abbaye Saint-Martin de Mondray in Normandy; they are responsible for the religious services and providing the welcome at the pilgrims' hostel. Visitor numbers decline during the cooler months, although for Anne this period has a charm of its own. "Starting around October and moving into November the pace starts to slow, the shops close and the village moves into its quiet resting period. This is the time when people who like the quietness and serenity of the site come to visit, because there are smaller crowds. For me winter provides the best atmosphere; the landscape is changing and the light is softly diffused – with a blue sky it's perfect."

Visitors from all over the world come to Conques, and the village's vibrancy and dynamic character seem to provide an enriching experience for everyone – be they schoolchild, pensioner or pilgrim. 🏰

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Visitors enjoy a snack in the village square; The streets are traffic-free; Early-morning mist over Conques; Chapelle Saint-Roch at the foot of the village; **CENTRE:** Walkers pass the abbey church on the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*



VILLAGE LIFE



a *concha* in Latin, or *conca* in the local Occitan language. It is where weary pilgrims stop to rest and where schoolchildren, notebooks and pencils in hand, walk over cobbles smoothed by centuries of devotion.

That is not to say that Conques exists merely as some historical artefact. "We are very much a village in the sense that we still have inhabitants and a school," explains Anne.

"The children bring a real vibrancy to Conques. It is a primary school, so we teach pupils from ages two to 11 and this year we have 15 children from the village and the surrounding area."

The main draw, though, is undeniably the village's 1,000-year heritage which reflects the shifting religious and historical landscapes of France. With a Benedictine monastery already in place, the Conques of times gone by was embroiled in fierce religious competition with Figeac, around 40 kilometres to the west.

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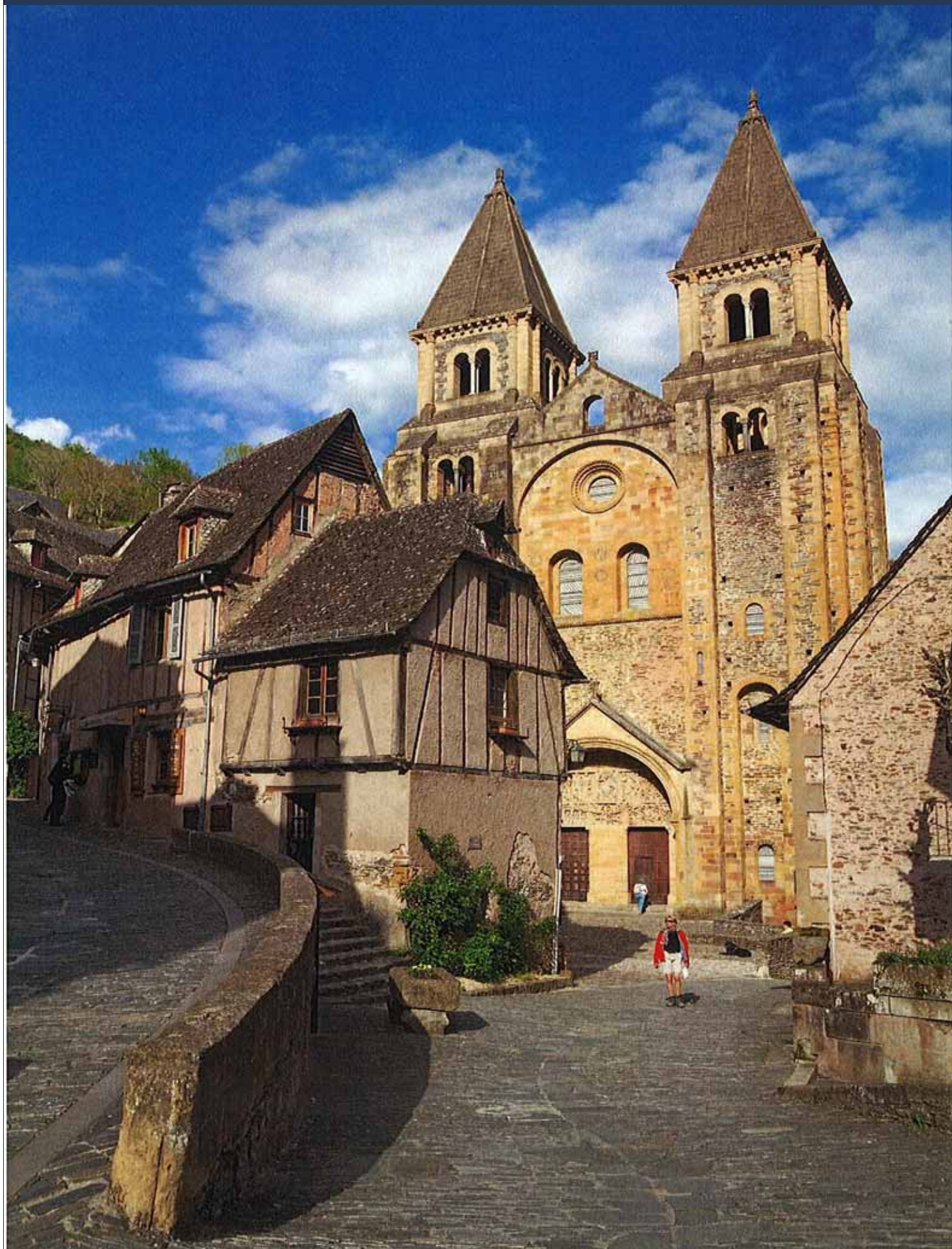
Religious devotion at the time brought royal protection as well as monetary donations, which added to the importance of villages and towns.

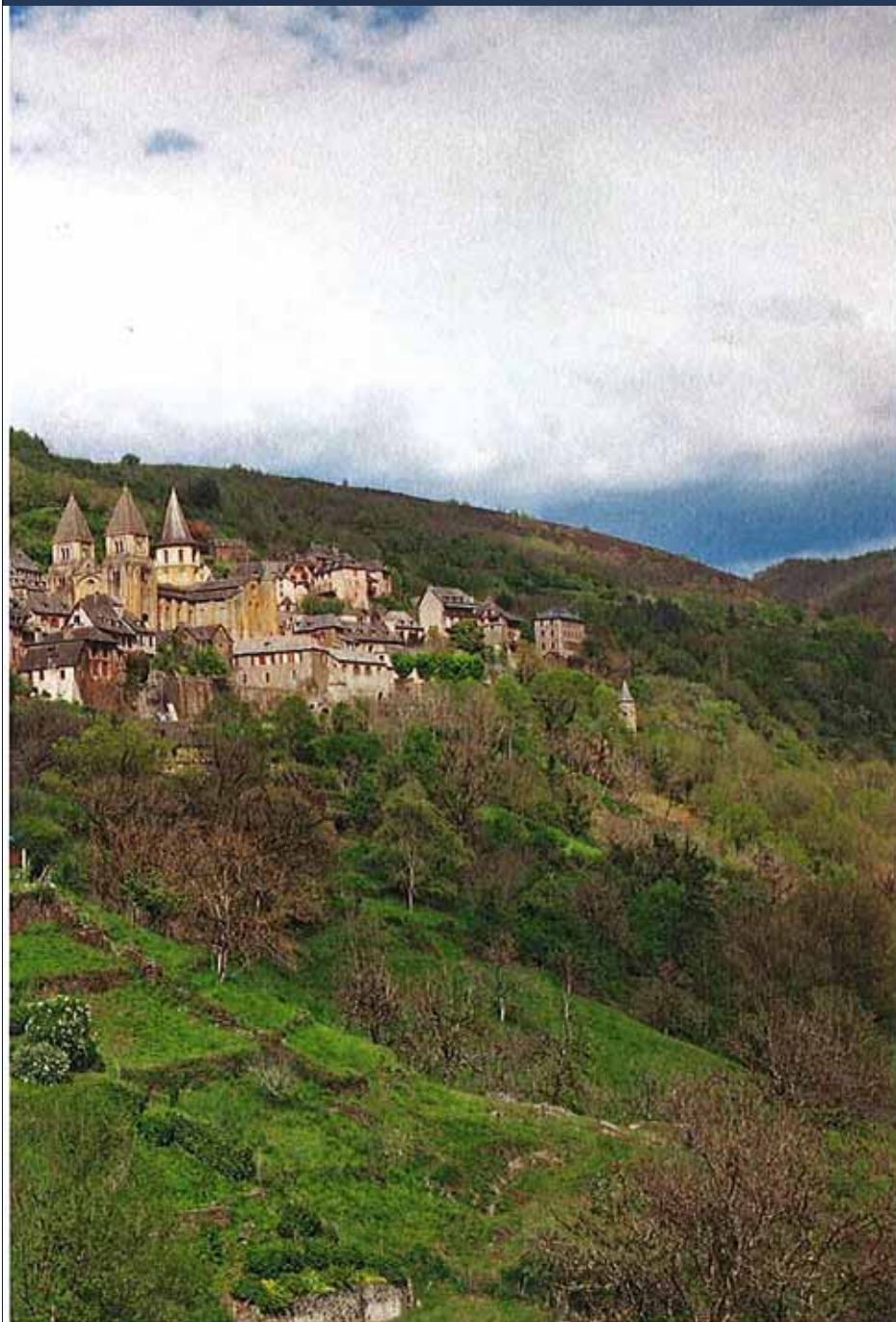
With this in mind, during the 9th century, monks from the monastery were sent on a mission to the town of Agen, a great religious centre, to return with relics for Conques. In a process now euphemistically referred to as *translation furtive* (secret transfer), the

monks came back with the relics of Sainte Foy (Saint Faith), an Agen girl who, according to legend, had refused to renounce her faith under torture during the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire at the end of the 3rd

century. The *Église Abbatiale Sainte-Foy*, built as a development of an earlier basilica, was created to house the relics, which remain in place today. People came from far and wide to worship at Conques, and its place on the religious and historical map was secured. The abbey church's vast stained-glass

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: The square and medieval house in front of the abbey church; A view of Conques from the outskirts; A street beside the abbey church; The *trésoir* of Sainte-Foy; A couple walk along part of the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*; The imposing nave of the abbey church





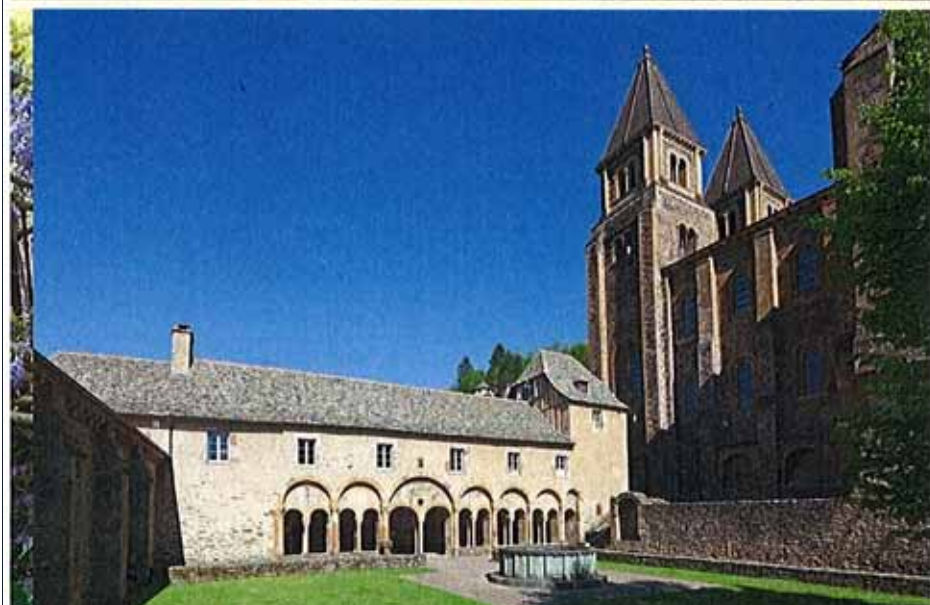
The Aveyron village of Conques, with its huge abbey church, has long been a magnet for pilgrims and tourists, and **Eve Middleton** soon discovers why

It's not often in France that you will see a small schoolchild, a tall bearded pensioner and a robed pilgrim side-by-side gazing skywards in open-mouthed awe. Yet here in Conques, where the population barely reaches 90, such mismatched combinations are par for the course.

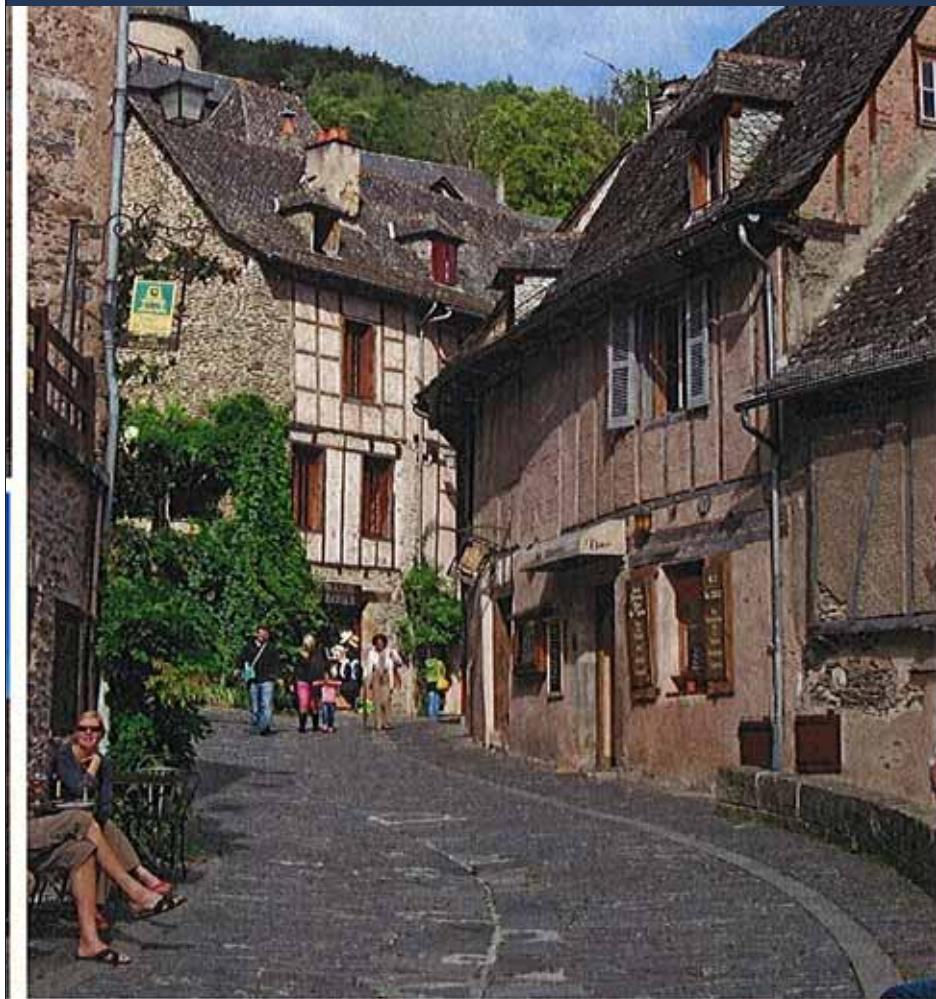
This tiny Aveyron village in the picturesque Lot Valley, deep in the Midi-Pyrénées, has a grandiose, soaring abbey church that is home to the relics and *trésor* of Sainte-Foy after which it is named. Not only is the village an important stopping place on the *Chemin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*, it also features prominently on the French school curriculum thanks to its long and involved role in the country's religious history. With Conques being a Unesco World Heritage site as well as one of the *Plus Beaux Villages de France*, it is no wonder that both the village and church inspire such awe.

"Yes, it's quite a surprise for people when they first arrive here," laughs Anne Romiguière, a guide from the tourist office. "At the outset the village looks quiet and unassuming, and then *pam!* You turn a corner and there's this great big church standing there." The village's name is testimony to its natural location; set out on slices of verdant land cut into the steep hillside, the medieval houses are surrounded by the valley sides that curl up like the inside of a shell →

ABOVE: The village sign includes Conque's Occitan name; **LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Conque's hillside setting; The abbey church cloisters; Wisteria fills a courtyard; Traditional stone and half-timbered houses line one of the streets



PHOTOGRAPHS: ENI HABIBIAEEL, EVE MIDDLETON



FRANCOFILE

GETTING THERE

By air: Eve flew with Ryanair to Rodez Airport, a 50-minute drive from Conques.

By rail: The Eurostar takes just over two hours to reach Paris (tel: 08432 186 186, www.eurostar.com). Onward travel can be booked with Rail Europe (tel: 08448 484 064, www.raileurope.co.uk).

By road: Conques is nine hours from the northern ferry ports.

WHERE TO STAY

Moulin de Cambelong

12320 Conques
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 72 84 77
www.moulindecambelong.com
Converted water mill with doubles from €130. The Michelin-starred restaurant's menus start from €35.

Auberge Saint-Jacques

Rue Gonzagues Florens
12320 Conques
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 72 86 36
www.aubergestjacques.fr
Comfortable inn opposite the church. Doubles from €53.

La Maison des Sources

12320 Conques
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 47 04 54
www.lessourcesdeconques.com
Chambre d'hôte 800 metres from the village. Doubles from €59.

WHERE TO EAT

Au Parvis Restaurant Bar



Place de l'abbatiale
12320 Conques
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 72 82 81
Traditional two-storey *colombage* house opposite the church serving *crêpes*, salads and light bites.

Lo Romiu Brasserie

Route de Sénergues
12320 Conques
Tel: (Fr) 5 65 46 95 01
Hearty local dishes served in a panoramic setting with a terrace overlooking the valley.

WHERE TO VISIT

L'Église Abbatiale Sainte-Foy

The church is open all year. Guided tours in English (45 minutes) run from April to September, priced €4. Admission to the *trésor* of Sainte-Foy costs €6.20.

TOURIST INFORMATION Conques

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 72 85 00
www.tourisme-conques.fr

Aveyron

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 75 40 12
www.tourisme-aveyron.com

L'Entente Vallée du Lot

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 53 99 38
www.valleedulot.com