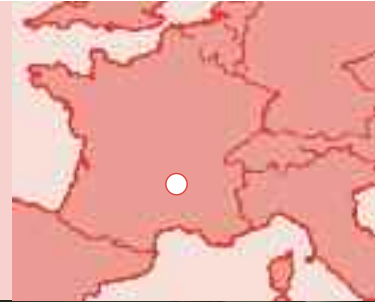


Holiday: Valleys & Volcanoes Walk

Rating:  level

Holiday type: Guided Walking

- Super value, **fully inclusive**, guided walking holiday; traditional mountain village off the tourist trail
- Dramatic landscapes: deep gorges, sweeping vistas, ancient volcanoes
- Breathtaking views of the Alps, Mont Blanc and Mont Ventoux
- Very friendly hotel: swimming pool, sauna, mini-gym
- An amazing variety of birds, butterflies and wild flowers



This guided walking holiday is based in Les Estables, the highest village in the Auvergne. It's a traditional gathering place of mountain shepherds. You'll find ancient houses weighed down by their heavy stone roofs, and quaint old-fashioned bars. Nowadays it's a lively winter sports and hiking centre.

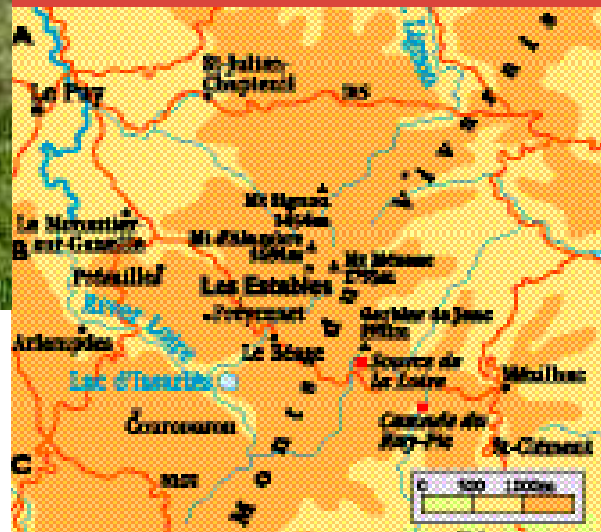
The Hôtel La Découverte is run by walkers - Bernard, Martine and Alexandre Aubry - for walkers. The modern Scandinavian style building has a wonderful setting overlooking the village (a short walk away), the valley and the mountains beyond. The informal décor helps to give it a relaxed and welcoming "house party" atmosphere.

There's a comfortable sitting room, TV room and bar. The heated swimming pool has panoramic views and an adjoining sun terrace. You'll also find a sauna and mini-gym. There are drying rooms and a laundry. The 21 twin rooms, all south facing, are on two floors in the east and west wings, and quiet.



“This a unique region of sweeping landscapes, deep gorges and ravines. The mountain wildlife is special too with kites, eagles, buzzards, deer and marmots all co-existing at different altitudes.”

Dinners are unhurried and convivial in the French style. It's good French home cooking with fresh local ingredients. Picnic lunches are provided and include wonderfully varied organic salads and tempting home made little cakes. Drinks are from a help-yourself bar, and you pay approx 35 euro for unlimited wine with all meals, all week: you settle up at the end. Evening entertainments often include live piano music, a slide show about the region, boules and other competitions.



A typical itinerary: Day by day

Sunday Arrive in Les Estables

We pick you up at the airport and take you to the hotel in time for a swim before dinner.

Monday Massif du Meygal 17km/10mi

Today's circular walk is like taking a journey back in time as we trace the heritage and traditions of this remote corner of France. Starting off in the hidden hamlet of Montvert, we discover ancient water mills, original bread ovens and abandoned *maisons de la béate* – ancient religious meeting places where children used to come to study the Bible, read the Catechism or perfect their lace making skills. There's a pretty spot where we picnic at the foot of the Mont de Testavoire (1,436m) then, in the afternoon, we return via the Meygal Forest – look out for buzzards circling overhead.

Tuesday Chapelle de Soutron 18km/11mi

This morning the hotel's minibus takes us across the Ardèche mountain range. Here, our path skirts a series of ancient volcanic domes - known as *sucs* that are unique to this region of France. In the afternoon, we climb to the summit of the Rocher du Sutron where the little chapel affords superb views of one of the most famous *sucs* - Mont Gerbier du Jonc, source of the great river Loire.

Wednesday Sucs des Chartreux 17kms/10mi

First stop this morning is to see the ruins of the ancient Carthusian monastery at Bonnefoy. It was the monks from here who built the large farm buildings in Les Estables, using the traditional *lauze* roofing stones. It's an easy ascent up Suc de Montfol – superb views right across the Ardèche mountain range. Headwater guests in May/June should see an amazing array of colourful wild flowers: lilies, orchids, cotton grass and bright yellow gentian.

Thursday Le Puy en Velay

We give our walking boots a well earned rest today and head out instead in the hotel minibus to Le Puy en Velay, stopping off en route at the Frères Perrel farm-museum to see first hand how life in the region has (or hasn't!) evolved over the years. After lunch, lots of free time to explore the extraordinary town of Le Puy, formerly a starting point for the St Jacques de Compostela pilgrimage route: the cobbled streets, Roman cloisters, Notre Dame Cathedral, imposing Virgin Mary statue and tranquil gardens.

Friday Mont Mézenc 16km/9mi

After a lift (optional) to the Dents du Diable, today's walk is a gentle ascent up Mont Mézenc (1,753m) where we're rewarded with incredible 360° views out over the Ardèche and Haut Loire landscapes. On a clear day, we can see right across from Mont Blanc in the French Alps to Mont Ventoux and the Dentelles de Montmirail in Provence – an incredible 220km panorama! On our ascent, don't be surprised to see little furry marmots foraging in the undergrowth.

Saturday Gorges de la Loire 11km/7mi

It's a complete change in scenery for our final day as we follow the course of the famous river Loire, traversing paths only accessible to walkers. It's a surprisingly dramatic landscape. Lunch is a picnic beneath the gorges. In the afternoon, we complete the loop fairly early on allowing us to get back to the hotel in time for a last dip in the pool – maybe a sauna too – before dinner.

Sunday Leave Les Estables

We take air passengers to Lyon airport after breakfast.



For departure dates,
 prices and travel
 options, please visit
 our website at:
www.headwater.com

Walking Details

This is real “escapist” mountain country walking, and is a world away from the pressures of modern day living. In general the paths are good though pebbly in places so ankle-protected walking boots are essential.

