A Pilgrims' Route in France: Via Podiensis

Sierra Club - Angeles Chapter - Orange County Group

1. General Information

Outing Dates and Costs	(without air transportation)	**Members**	**Non-Members**
June 19 - July 9, 2011:	21 Days from Le Puy to Toulouse	$3170*	$3270*
June 19 - July 1, 2011:	13 Days from Le Puy to Conques	$2025*	$2125*
June 29 - July 9, 2011:	11 Days from Conques to Toulouse	$1950*	$2050*
Leaders:	Ed & Helen Maurer		
Capacity:	10 - 16 paying participants		

CST 2087766-40. Registration as a seller of travel does not constitute approval by the State of California.

* cost subject to change depending on number of participants and foreign exchange rates

People in the past went on pilgrimage for many reasons: to fulfill a promise that they'd made, to perform penance, as an expression of their faith. It's also clear that some also enjoyed the sights along the way and the "differentness" of being *somewhere else*. Is this something you'd like to do?

In the last several decades pilgrimage has again become popular. As in the past, walkers do it for a variety of reasons, only some of them religious. It's not necessary to be a Christian—or even particularly religious—to find a pilgrimage journey worthwhile. But it is something more than an "extended hike"....

- It helps if one is open to thinking about what pilgrimage meant to people in the past. We are walking—at the present tail end, as it were—of a very long line of people. This gives us a different perspective on ourselves, puts us in our place. What did it mean to *them*, and what was it like for *them*? Compared to them, we travel in considerable luxury, yet each day we get out on the road and put one foot in front of the other, just as they did. So we have this in common. When they looked at some of the things that we will see—the shrines and churches, for instance—what did it mean to them? What did they feel? It may not be the same as what we feel, but just consider it.
- It helps if one has some interest in art and architecture, and the relics of the past. Or is willing to be interested. Expertise is not required. But think, among other things, what did it mean to the people who built some of the things that we'll see? Some of them took years and years, more than a hundred years. What does this say about *them*?

- It helps to regard the journey as one's own opportunity for contemplation. Walking like this, sometimes walking for most of the day, gives you a lot of time to think. Without the pressures of our regular, daily lives, it can be an opportunity to reconnect with oneself, to come to a better understanding—or reaffirmation—of what is most important in our individual lives. Or it can be a chance to let the mind relax and roam where it will, without having to feel that it's a waste of time.
- If one is religious and approaches this journey as a person of faith, you can still make use of these other suggestions. They will not detract from the meaning that you have assigned to the journey.

The first written account of the walk from Le Puy en Velay to Santiago de Compostela is from the 10th century, more than one thousand years ago! We invite you to walk with us along a part of this historic route through some of France's most remote and picturesque regions where hidden architectural, historical and culinary treasures abound. We set out just past mid-June, and follow an ancient route leading steadily southwest and generally from higher to lower elevation, and from springtime on the high plains to summer in the verdant valleys of the Midi. On a typical day, we hit the trail right after breakfast, stop for lunch, and continue walking in the afternoon--all along stopping to take pictures, meet other walkers, and visit sites of cultural, historic or touristic importance. Most nights we stay at small hotels with rooms with private bathrooms, although there are a few occasions where our accommodations will be very basic, i.e.with facilities down the hall.

Included Services:

- Accommodation in twin or double bedded rooms with private bath except where noted otherwise in the itinerary
- All breakfasts, mostly buffet style
- All dinners
- Transportation of one suitcase from lodging to lodging
- Surface transport as mentioned in the itinerary
- Walking tours with local guides and entrance fees as shown in the itinerary
- Canoe rental for two days, 2 persons sharing a canoe
- Two knowledgeable Outing Leaders: Ed and Helen Maurer

Not Included:

- Air transportation from/to the United States
- Surface transportation the trailheads
- Lunches
- Beverages with dinners
- Cancellation and medical insurance
- Optional excursions
- Expenses (transportation, meals, lodging) when deviating from the group's itinerary
- Medical and Trip Cancellation Insurance

Purchase of trip cancellation and medical insurance is mandatory.

You may want to open these maps before you begin reading the itinerary (If you are still using Internet Explorer, I would strongly recommend upgrading to either Firefox or Google Chrome. IE is slow and not standards-compliant. Chrome is the fastest at rendering these sorts of maps, though Firefox scores through its large number of extensions):

- Le Puy - Saugues
- Saugues - Nasbinals
- Nasbinals - Conques

- Conques - Figeac
- Figeac - Cahors - here we deviate from the main trail and follow the Vallée du Célé.

2. Narrative Itinerary

PART ONE: LE PUY EN VELAY - CONQUES (13 DAYS)	Distance (miles)	Up (feet)	Down (feet)
Day 0: to Europe (Saturday, June 18) Suggested air itinerary with Air France. Not included in the tour price.			

Los Angeles	depart	3:30 PM
Paris Charles de Gaulle	arrive	11:00 AM + 1
Paris Charles de Gaulle	depart	1:10 PM
Lyon	arrive	2:20 PM

Day 1: Arrive in Le Puy (Sunday, June 19)
We arrange for a private van to transfer participants from Lyon Airport to the hotel in Le Puy. The cost is expected to be around $100 per person. Dinner and accommodation at the *Hôtel All Seasons*. WiFi

Day 2: in Le Puy (Monday, June 20)
Half day walking tour of this historic city with a local, English speaking guide. Dinner at *L'Ecu d'Or*, a small, charming restaurant. WiFi

Day 3: to Saint Privat d'Allier (Tuesday, June 21)	15	+1550	-950

There's a special 7 a.m. mass for those interested. We leave after breakfast and walk pretty much all day with stops en route to look at ancient churches and fine villages. Time permitting, we'll have an apéritif at the castle dominating Saint Privat followed by dinner prepared and cooked by a local farmer woman. *Hôtel La Vieille Auberge.*

Day 4: to Saugues (Wednesday, June 22)	12	+1500	-1300

Across lush meadows and up to a rocky spur to visit a medieval chapel and the remains of a small castle. Time for lunch at Monistrol sur l'Allier and then through a volcanic landscape complete with basalt flows and past lovely farms alive with cows, horses, donkeys, chickens and geese. We may even see some turkeys! Fine dinner and rooms at the *Hôtel La Terrasse.*

Day 5: to Le Sauvage (Thursday, June 23)	12	+1000	

We need to buy provisions for tonight's dinner before hiking up into the sparsely populated wooded hills of the Margeride, one of the strongholds of the French Resistance during the 2nd World War. We enjoy the peace of this area and the many flowers blooming along the way. Le Sauvage is a typical Margeride farm with strong walls built from the local granite. We cook for ourselves in a kitchen with a huge open fire and sleep in a simple dorm. There's nothing else up here in the way of accommodation!

Day 6: to La Bigosse (Friday, June 24)	12.5	+200	-900
It's mostly downhill, and we can spend some time spotting wild narcissus in the fields. Time out for lunch in St. Alban sur Limagnole before continuing through a more pastoral landscape to the hamlet of *La Bigoss*e and its inn of the same name. Dinner of local specialities.			
Day 7: to Montgros (Saturday, June 25)	12.5	+500	
It's only 6 km to Aumont-Aubrac where we can buy provisions for a picnic lunch. Transport has been arranged to Les Quatre Chemins where we begin our trek across the open spaces of the Aubrac highlands. A hearty dinner and cozy rooms (bath down the hall) await us at *La Maison de Rosalie.*			
Day 8: to Saint Chély d'Aubrac (Sunday, June 26)	13.5	+560	-1680
During our walk across the Aubrac we share the experience of the medieval pilgrims who walked in this terrain without the advantages of modern equipment but with the certitude of their faith. To help them find the way, the little church in Aubrac rang its bells continuously during foggy weather. We visit the church and enjoy a late lunch, then it's steeply downhill to our next picturesque stop-over in Saint Chély d'Aubrac. *Hôtel de la Vallée*.			
Day 9: to Espalion (Monday, June 27)	13.5	+200	-1400
Today, we leave the sparse hills of the Aubrac and enter the different world of southwestern France: the air is balmy, the buildings of golden stone; the spoken French takes on the flavor of the Midi, and some signs are in both French and Occitan. There's plenty of time in pretty St. Côme d'Olt to explore and enjoy lunch. An old bridge leads us across the river Lot which we follow on our way to the half-timbered *Hotel Moderne*!			
Day 10: to Estaing (Tuesday, June 28)	11	+450	-450
This is an easy day for walking and a most interesting day for sightseeing. En route we visit a unique romanesque chapel at St. Pierre de Bessuéjols and the imposing castle dominating Estaing, considered to be one of the prettiest villages of France. We 'huddle' below the castle in the comfortable *Auberge St. Fleuret*.			
Day 11: to Espeyrac (Wednesday, June 29)	15	+1000	-900
In the cool morning we follow the river Lot before a steep climb out of the valley. Hiking past tiny hamlets we reach the town of Espeyrac and its only hotel, our second *Hôtel de la Vallée!*			
Day 12: to Conques (Thursday, June 30)	7	+750	-950
The Chemin Saint Jacques undulates toward Conques, one of its highlights. Descending into a forested valley we begin to glimpse the little town and its imposing abbey church. We have the entire afternoon to get acquainted with the part 2 participants and explore the village with a local guide . We stay and dine at the abbey to share the pilgims' experience. *Abbatiale de Conques*.			

PART TWO: USA - CONQUES - TOULOUSE (11 Days)

Day 0: to Europe (Tuesday, June 28)
Suggested air itinerary with Air France. Not included in the tour price.

Los Angeles	depart	3:30 PM
Paris Charles de Gaulle	arrive	11:00 AM + 1
Paris Orly	depart	4:30 PM
Rodez	arrive	5:35 PM

Day 1: to Conques (Wednesday, June 29)
We will try to arrange for a private van to transfer participants from Rodez Airport to the hotel in Conques. The cost is expected to be around $40. Dinner and accommodation at the Auberge St. Jacques.

Day 2: in Conques (Thursday, June 30)
Morning at leisure. Meet the folks who hiked from Le Puy in the afternoon and enjoy dinner *en groupe* at the *Abbatiale*.

Day 12/3: to Figeac OR to the United States (Friday, July 1) 12.5 +1450 -1650

It's first downhill on the way out of Conques, only to climb steeply up the other side of the valley. En route we'll probably see our first olive trees, a sure sign that we're getting into the south of France. Part of the distance is covered by public transit. *Hôtel Pont d'Or*.

Those ending their walk in Conques travel by bus or taxi to Rodez airport. Transfer and air transportation not included in the tour price.

Rodez	depart	10:10 AM
Paris Orly	arrive	11:25 AM
Paris Charles de Gaulle	depart	4:35 PM
Los Angeles	arrive	7:05 PM

Day 14/4: in Figeac (Saturday, July 2)

Full day at leisure to explore this lovely town, or to take an optional excursion to nearby Rocamadour, one of France's great cultural treasures.

Day 15/5: to Espagnac (walking from Faycelles) (Sunday, July 3) 10.5 -180

A public bus brings us toward the verdant and cool valley of the gentle Célé which we follow until it joins up with the larger river Lot. This is a trip back in time, and in keeping with this idea, we stay at a medieval tower that has been converted into a simple bed

and breakfast. In the 13th century, this priory began cultivating saffron, and we'll learn all about it at the local museum. Happy hour and dinner at the priory. *Gîte Communal d' Espagnac (bath down the hall).*

Day 16/6: to Marcilhac (Monday, July 4) 15 +340 -440

We cross the Célé on a picturesque bridge and climb up to a dry plateau, completely different from the green valley below. We negotiate imposing cliffs to see a castle built into the rock, reminiscent of cliff dwellings in the southwestern United States. Brangues and St. Sulpice are two more fairy-tale villages we admire as we yoyo between river and plateau. Accommodation in Marcilhac is provided at bed and breakfasts. We celebrate July 4 with a special dinner and our very own fireworks.

Day 17/7: to Cabrerets (Tuesday, July 52) - - -

After an instructional briefing, we put our canoes into the knee-deep Célé and set out on a delightful downstream 'cruise'. The river dances and weaves its way through a charming wooded valley, often between steep cliffs (*falaises*). We will have the opportunity to stop along the way and visit quiet riverside hamlets and enjoy a riverside lunch along the way. By day's end we find ourselves in Cabrerets, a village dominated by the château that once was home to the Dukes and Lords of Aquitaine. *Hotel des Grottes.*

Day 18/8: to Bouziès (Wednesday, July 6) 3 +600 -200

Before getting back into our canoes we visit the Grotte du Pech-Merle. This is perhaps one of the finest prehistoric painted caves still open to the public. The cave is decorated with magnificent Palaeolithic works of art. There are over 80 drawings of animals including mammoths, horses and bison. It is both a feast for the eyes and the mind. To try to imagine life over 25,000 years ago is really quite amazing. After our guided visit at Pech-Merle we head back to the river and our canoes. We continue down the last section of the Célé and soon paddle across the wide Lot. We disembark, say goodbye to the canoe guys, and walk the short distance to the *Hotel Les Falaises*. Back in our walking shoes, we follow an old tow-path and climb a steep hill to Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, a gem of a village. After a fine dinner in town, we return by taxi to the hotel.

Day 19/9: to Cahors (Thursday, July 7)

After breakfast we take the bus to Cahors where we install ourselves at the hotel and join a guided walking tour of the city. Dinner at a small local restaurant. *Hôtel Jean XXII*

Day 20/10: to Toulouse (Friday, July 8)

It's just over an hour by train to Toulouse. Taxi transfer to the hotel. Guided walking tour of the city with plenty of time left for last minute shopping. Farewell dinner with local specialties, think cassoulet. *Hôtel Albert 1er.*

Day 21/11: to the United States (Saturday, July 9)

By taxi to Toulouse airport and return by air to the United States.
Air transportation not included in the tour price.

Toulouse	depart	10:45 AM
Paris Charles de Gaulle	arrive	12:15 PM
Paris Charles de Gaulle	depart	1:30 PM
Los Angeles	arrive	4:00 PM

3. Additional Information

Getting There
The airports of Lyon and Toulouse are served by Air France and other carriers, Rodez only by Air France. For information on the best air transportation to and from these cities, stop-overs, car rentals, hotel reservations, etc, we recommend Paula at Sunrise Travel in Mission Viejo, http://www.sunriseteam.com, 949.837.0620.

Accommodation and Food
Most nights we sleep in hotels and inns in twin or double bedded rooms with private facilities; however, a few nights will be in rooms with facilities down the hall, and on the night of day 5 (June 23) only a dorm is available (sleeping bag liner required).

Breakfasts and 3 or 4 course dinners are usually served at the places where we sleep. Please note that beverages are only included with breakfast. Most restaurants offer vegetarian menus and will attempt to satisfy special dietary needs; however, there may be occasions when vegetarian meals are not available. You should inform the leaders of any dietary restrictions when completing your application.

Trip Difficulty
This trip is suitable for hikers who
enjoy extended up and downhill walks on well- established trails. Weather in France's *Massif Central* is unpredictable; it can rain and be cool at any time of year.
Therefore, the trip leader reserves the right to change the itinerary to ensure the safety of all participants. Expect temperatures ranging from the sixties to the nineties.

Equipment and Clothing
Your leaders will provide extensive pre-trip information, including maps of the areas we will visit, a comprehensive packing list, and suggested reading materials. Your on-trip handouts include information regarding flora and fauna,geology, local customs, and conservation.

Conservation
A number of historic monuments along the itinerary have been declared UNESCO World Heritage sites because of their contributions to European architecture, culture and/or history. Regional parks, exceptional riparian and highland environments are found along the route.

4. Pre-Trip Information Packet and Meetings

Before departure, each participant receives

- A detailed suggested clothing and packing list
- Information on the Via Podiensis and its history
- Map of the region showing our trails

- List of helpful web links

In addition, the outing leaders will organize a number of pre-trip meetings and hikes.

5. Reservations

Please send the reservation form (below) with your deposit in the amount of $400 per person (check payable to OCSC or Orange County Sierra Club, the Medical and Liability Waiver forms to: Ed & Helen Maurer, 24001 Salero Lane, Mission Viejo, CA 92691.

Please note that the trip leaders will evaluate each registrant's information and physical condition during a conditioning hike in April 2011 before issuing a confirmation and invoice.

Payments

- A deposit of $400 per person is due at registration. This amount includes a non-refundable registration fee of $160.
- The balance is due by April 30, 2010.
- In the event of currency exchange rate fluctuations of more than 5% between 11/01/2010 and April 30, 2011, the Sierra Club Orange County Group reserves the right to lower or raise the tour cost accordingly.

Cancellations

- Cancellation by the Sierra Club: If there is an insufficient number of fully paid participants on April 30, 2011, the Sierra Club Orange County Group reserves the right to cancel the entire outing and to refund all monies received from participants.
- Cancellation by participant(s):
    - A 10% fee of the tour cost is incurred for cancellations made in writing before December 31, 2010.
    - A 15% fee of the tour cost is incurred for cancellations made in writing between January 1 and April 30, 2011.
    - A 50% fee of the tour cost is incurred for cancellations made in writing between May 1 and 31, 2011
    - No refund is available for cancellations made in writing after June 1, 2011
- **Cancellation and medical insurance is required**

Documents

A valid U.S. Passport is required. List of U.S. Passport Agencies. Holders of Green Cards and/or nationals of other countries need to check for documents required from the French Consulate General in Los Angeles.

Subject to Change

Please note that the outing leaders reserve the right to change, delete, and/or add to the itinerary for factors out of their control, e.g: weather,time, trail conditions, etc. As with any international adventure travel there may be challenges, delays, lost luggage, etc. due to unexpected and unforeseen circumstances.

6. Registration Form

Name (s):	
Mailing Address:	
Phones:	
Email:	
Option Chosen	please circle one of three choices below
Entire Hike:	June 19 - July 9: Le Puy to Toulouse
1st Part of Hike	June 19 - July 1: Le Puy to Conques
2nd Part of Hike	June 29 - July 9: Conques to Toulouse

Please send this registration form with your deposit in the amount of $400 per person (check payable to OCSC or Orange County Sierra Club) to: Ed Maurer, 24001 Salero Lane, Mission Viejo, CA 92691.

Participation is limited to 16 hikers overall--an early reservation is essential to secure a space.