

GETTING THERE

AIR

The most direct route is to Nimes airport from Luton or Liverpool with Ryanair. The onward journey to Anduze is by bus from the Gare Routiere behind Nimes railway station. The airport shuttle bus will drop you off outside the railway station – you'll see the bus station as you approach then the road goes under the rail tracks. Be ready because this is not the terminus.

The bus you want is the A12 service to St Jean-du-Gard which leaves from Bay 15 at the far end of the gare. There are three regular buses a day 6.45am, 11.30 am and 5.30pm with an amazing flat rate fare of 1.50 for the journey. The bus stop in Anduze is just round the corner from the gite d'etape.

Unfortunately the summer services don't match up as well as the winter ones. Luton passengers will have to wait for the 5.30 bus. If you're coming from Liverpool you may have to stay in Nimes and catch the morning bus at 6.45 weekdays, 8.45 weekends.

An alternative route is via Montpellier, from Gatwick, Luton or Leeds, then train to Nimes. Provided everything runs to schedule this route has the best connections. Trains run very frequently and the fare is about 8. The Gatwick service would enable you to get the 5.30 bus to Anduze (See above for details). The Luton service should enable you to get the 11.30am bus.

The Montpellier shuttle service runs into the city centre and you would need to buy a combined shuttle/tramway ticket to take the tram to the rail station (gare sncf). At Nimes to find yourself on the bus station turn to the rear exit of the station rather than out onto the boulevard at the front.

KIT

For much of the year this can be seen as a lightweight route. I did it in mid-March and wore t-shirt and shorts most of the time. However there are some points to be aware of. Much of the route is exposed and there can be very strong winds which means something like a Pertex windshirt can be useful. The exposed situations could mean that driving rain could test your waterproofs. Early autumn can bring notorious deluges.

If the weather is good, as it usually is, protect yourself from the sun – you're often at 1000m +, with no shade and a cooling breeze. It's easy to underestimate the potential for sunburn, even early or late in the year. Some cover for the back of the neck is advisable – you've got the sun at your back for the first few days.

I've done several French routes in trail shoes but I'd recommend boots for this one. There are some rocky passages where erosion has left plenty of large loose stones and some sections where a deep cut pathway has been filled with leaves, covering loose rocks beneath.

Trekking poles.

The punitive cost of hold luggage these days creates a problem for regular users of poles. A group can 'pool' a bag but for individuals or pairs it's more difficult. If you really want to use poles there are a couple of alternatives. I posted my reserve pair (Tesco's cheapest) to the gite at Anduze. It was possible to twist off the handles and dismantle the poles to create a compact package. Postage costs were about £5 from Britain and €8 from France. They took about 5 days in transit. An alternative is to buy the cheapest pair in somewhere like Decathlon or Intersport and abandon them at the end. Sebastian at the Anduze gite was considering hiring them out; it's worth checking if he's gone ahead with this.

On further point about poles. You'll find it worthwhile to include rubber tip protectors. There are several quite long tarmac stretches where I found Nordic walking-type 'feet' very useful.

THE ROUTE

The standard route has seven stages. This can be reduced to six by combining Stages 2 and 3 to give a substantial day's walk of between 7 and 8 hours.

Maps

The Tourist Office in Anduze sells a map and guide pack covering the route. The topoguide is out of print but they include a photocopied version. [Note that around l'Hospitalet this is out of date – see comments on Stage 4.] The route is generally well waymarked, with small signposts at key points.

Where to start

The circuit begins and ends in Anduze but you may find that it doesn't fit neatly into the time you have available.

Some options

If you are looking to go directly to Aire de Cote from Cognac you might consider reducing the six hour day 1 by getting a taxi up to St Felix and starting from there to give about four hour's walking. This would work well for anyone getting the 11.30 bus from Nimes.

Get a taxi up to Cognac and start from there. The first day is pleasant but the real walk begins on day2. Not a cheap option but viable for a group.

Because of time constraints and a closed gite I descended from Les Ayres to St Jean du Gard and got the evening bus to Anduze (you could go direct to Nimes...). You follow the GR67 down to Mialet (etape 6/7 on the standard route), then pick up the GR61 which crosses the Pont des Camisards and goes round to St Jean. It took 8 hours in total.

IN ANDUZE

The gite is just off the main street. Sebastian, the owner, speaks good English and is very helpful. If you have any concerns about your accommodation later in the walk he will advise you. He also offers transport arrangements to and from various points in the walk.

The boulangerie across the road makes good pain aux cereals which they will slice and pack in bag. It keeps well, so stock up. There is a Super-U supermarket a few hundred yards away from the town centre along the street on which the gite is located. In the town you'll find a Petit Casino store and various other food shops.

Additional route notes

Stage 1

6.00 hr

You climb gently but steadily out of Anduze through villa-lined lanes with broadening views. A tree-shaded trail brings you out into St Felix and then it's mainly farm-land with some tarmac until a quite rough and finally very awkward descent to the Col de Ribares, where the landowner has responded to trail bike use of the path by creating a substantial obstacle course of felled saplings. There's then a plod up a steep surfaced road until it finally becomes a track leading to Cognac.

The gite is part of the café-bar in the centre of the village. It is very pleasant and well-equipped. There is a shop next door which usually opens in the morning. When I visited it was closed because of illness. It would be worth checking with the lady at the café before relying on it for supplies.

Stage 2

A very pleasant track follows the stream out of Cognac up on to the ridge. Now the views really open out and you are striding out on the tops. The trail drops to an area of forestry roads on a broad col then climbs steadily up the rather eroded route of the draille towards the communications mast near Col Max Negre. There are more superb views here, especially of the route ahead towards Mont Aigoual. The track winds round past le Roc d'Aigle and down to the Col d'Asclier.

To get to Mas Corbieres go under the bridge carrying the draille over the road and go past the building on the left. There is a signpost on the right directing you onto a path going down through a small gate. Another small sign says 'Mas Corbieres 20 min.' Don't believe it. It took me nearly 35. The Gite owners live in the first house you come to. Down the alley to the left is a building labelled 'Gite d'Etape'. This is the high-season gite which was deserted and locked when I arrived. I eventually discovered that other buildings in the hamlet are part of the accommodation too and that one of these had been left open for me. It was the last building before the parking area and had a large terrace below the path with a huge table. In the kitchen were tea, coffee, chocolate, milk, butter and jam – a very welcome array!

Stage 3

5 hr.

The climb back up to the col took just under 50 minutes. From there the trail goes on or just below the ridge top giving several hours of great walking with superb views. There's a quite sustained climb from the road at Col du Pas but the track is well-engineered and there's a real mountain atmosphere. When you come out on a road again you are about a mile from Aire de Cote following the road. The Col d'Asclier – Aire de Cote section took me a fraction over four hours of walking.

Stage 4

[My route took me down to a village in the valley for the night, from a point about 1.15 hr beyond Aire de Cote. In the morning I climbed up to the Col de Salides up to rejoin the GR67. As a result I can't give an accurate timing. Col de Salides to Barre des Cevennes was about 4 hr.]

You are now in the forest around Mont Aigoual (which is about 5-6 hours round trip from Aire d'Cote if you've got time spare...). The next two hours or so stays in the forest on broad forestry roads. I was glad of my i-pod after a while!

The old draille route was indicated on signposts and goes more directly across the landscape but I don't know how easy it is. The warden at Aire de Cote will be able to advise you.

Eventually you come out into the open and drop gently to the Col de Salides. An up and down section takes you beyond the col above the Tunnel de Maquaires and then you find yourself in a very different landscape, limestone rather than schist. To your left across a great broad gorge you can see the escarpments of the Causse de Mejean. The trail meets the road of the Corniche des Cevennes at l'Hospitalet, where there's a gite and an auberge (the latter closed in March). Things could be clearer at this point. The old topoguide suggested that the draille ran parallel to the road and could be followed. Problems with landowners have meant that its official route is now along the road. More and clearer waymarks could have helped here. The road is followed to a point a few hundred metres beyond a picnic area where it turns right along a broad track. This is very pleasant and leads you round to Barre des Cevennes in about ninety minutes. The gite is through the village and up the hill. In peak season a former hotel halfway up the hill operates as the gite. Out of season continue to the top of the hill and go into the Caravan/camping site. The gite is entered via the lower set of doors in the main building on the left. The dorms were fine but the kitchen area was very badly equipped – make sure you've got your own knife, fork and bottle opener! If you are self-catering go for the microwave option at the village shop. Note: Barre des Cevennes operates Wednesday closing – if you arrive then you will have to have brought food with you if you intend to self-cater. If you arrive on Tuesday remember to stock up that afternoon – even the baker is closed.

Stage 5

6.30hr inc stops.

This stage starts with a lengthy road section. There is sometimes a path running parallel to the road. Next comes a stretch on a forestry track which ends at sudden right turn into the forest at a point where trucks have widened the piste considerably. It's easy to miss the waymark on a tree well to the right of the main track. Ahead there is a rock outcrop on the slope to the right of the track and a 'wrong route' cross beside the piste. The route disappears into the trees to the right at a 90 degree angle on a very narrow path. This path eventually brings you out at a cross roads on a col. Check the signposts here! Before you continue on the GR67 don't ignore the 'Panorama 150m' sign – it's worth

a diversion. It's a steep 150m – consider leaving your sack at the bottom. Note the route you have come up on when you get to the top – there are several ways down! You get a fine view ahead towards Les Ayres and a panorama which encapsulates the nature of much of the landscape of this region – ridges, forests and the evidence of people eking out a living from an inhospitable land. The continuation of the route to Les Ayres is delightful.

The gite is easily identified to the right as you enter the hamlet. It is excellent: comfortable, well-equipped, with lovely views from the terrace. For much of the year the auberge across the road offers an alternative to self-catering.

Stage 6

5.45hr inc stops

The GR67 leaves the tarmac to the right at the far edge of the village – the sign had been knocked over and it wasn't very clear in March 2011. It then follows the draille along the winding ridge with plenty of up and down. If there has been rain, be very careful – there are several stretches of exposed slabs of mica-schist which can be very slippery. Eventually you come to a tarmac road which is followed for some time. It becomes more like a forestry piste and emerges above a wild valley among crumbling schist outcrops. The road/track is followed round the rim of this valley for some time until a col is reached where everything suddenly changes; beyond is limestone and agriculture. The GR goes right following the draille down a track which looks lovely to begin with but which soon deteriorates under foot. This leads down to the scattered hamlet of Les Aiglades. The gite is on the left just after you pass a huge well-restored 'mas' at the road side.

The gite was closed in March so I continued on the first section of Stage 7.

Stage 7

1.30hr to Mialet

The route goes down to the oldest cluster of buildings, the original hamlet with houses dating from the C16. Go along the row (not through the archway) and along an initially green track which soon reverts to the eroded rocky surface of the section before the village. You get a sense of the scale of the draille as you descend into the valley but it is rough going. In the valley you come out on a fairly busy road. Go left and round a bend and you will see the start of Mialet, with the striking arch of the Pont des Camisards on your right. The village street goes up to the left at the mini-square on the main road. As it drops back towards the road at the far end there is a shop and café with wholefoods and a basic lunch menu.

[My route from here left the GR67 and followed another GR over the Pont des Camisards and onto a track which climbed up and round the hillside opposite the descent route to eventually drop down into St Jean du Gard. This took about 1.30hr. From there I caught a bus back to Anduze.

If you plan to do that be sure to check where your bus stops. As you descend into St Jean you pass the high school. By a cross roads with traffic lights a couple of hundred yards further on you will see

a car park and bus stop on the left. Most buses go from here. However the 18.00 bus I wanted didn't go into this area but stopped at the road side by the traffic lights over the wall of the car park!]