

# Take the high roads

How a quest for a favourite tippie turned into an exhilarating journey of new discoveries

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Mel & Stuart Gill

## US AND OUR 'VAN



### Mel & Stuart Gill...

gave up sailing for motorhoming 10 years ago and have never looked back. They're both retired and enjoy at least a couple of two-month-long trips a year in their 'van



2015 Marquis Majestic 125. It's large enough to live in comfortably for a month or more and small enough to access most narrow roads. It's also economical

**MAIN** Path to the cirque at Gavarnie

**RIGHT** Old village house

We arrived at the summit (1,709m/5,607ft) of the Col d'Aubisque in the Midi-Pyrenees at the same time as Lycra-clad cyclists whom we'd spotted at the start of the ascent. They were red-faced and panting from their 10-mile climb. By contrast, we were fresh and enthused by the views we'd enjoyed at stopping points along the way. We were here for the vistas; the cyclists were here for the hell of it.

Over a couple of weeks we'd been travelling through some outstanding high Pyrenean scenery as we tried to escape the summer heat. We planned a little more time in the mountains before heading north (and homewards), seeking out places in France that we had not been to before, a task which grows harder year on year.

The sun was just beginning to peer over the peaks on the horizon. The mist hung in the valleys, enhancing our experience, as we strolled in the cool air to catch the scene on the other side of the pass. The road snaked towards our next destination of Gavarnie and, as we drove carefully down the steep descent, cyclists overtook us as they enjoyed a freewheeling ride into the valley.

Gavarnie is famous for its cirque that encircles the head of the valley – and for the highest waterfall in mainland France. As we approached from Luz-Saint-Sauveur, we caught glimpses of the cirque and the snow trapped in its north face.

The amount of traffic warned us that this is a popular destination. We hoped that we would find room in one of the two motorhome aires in the village, but it did not look promising. Luckily, at the larger



aire about a mile above the village, there was plenty of space (though without a view of the cirque).

Stuart visited here in 1985 for a winter ice climbing expedition (the cirque is a renowned climbing venue) and he had wanted to see the main waterfall glinting in the summer sun. It was frozen the last time he saw it!

A steep path led us down to the village, where we joined the throng heading up to the cirque. It's possible to hire a donkey or horse to reach the cirque but, trying to save money, we opted for Shanks' pony instead. It was quite a slog in the heat, although there's



a restaurant where the path ends at the scree slopes, but we returned to the village for slightly more acceptable food prices.

A cool morning greeted us, the pink sun illuminating the surrounding peaks as we drove towards Gavarnie which, though busy, got top marks from us.

A touch of déjà vu overcame us as we parked at the Col du Tourmalet (2,115m/6,939ft). Once again, we were surrounded by breathless cyclists all eager to have their photos taken at the summit as proof of their impressive endeavours.

Stopping for lunch at the more peaceful Col d'Aspin, we prepared to say our >

### THE JOURNEY

This article focuses on our week in August travelling from Col d'Aubisque in the Pyrenees National Park to the Gorges de l'Aveyron in Tarn-et-Garonne. This was part of a four-week trip in Europe

### THE COSTS

Fuel Average 30p/mg.....	£88
Ferry Newhaven-Dieppe with Camping and Caravanning Club membership discount.....	£317
Site fees .....	£27.11
Attractions Two adults: Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges land train and château .....	£8.13
<b>Total costs.....</b>	<b>£440.24</b>

492 miles



## TOP TIPS



Plan a picnic at the quieter Col d'Aspin (1,490m/4,888ft) for stunning views across the Pyrenees

Arrive early in Gavarnie if you want to stay in the town centre aire, otherwise be prepared to stay in the aire a mile out of town

Don't miss the ruined castle hanging off the cliff at Penne, in the Gorges de l'Aveyron. Parking for vans is limited if you want to canoe the gorge, so arrive early

**ABOVE** Our picnic lunch spot at the Col d'Aspin (1,490m/4,888ft)

**BELOW** Cordes-sur-Ciel seen from the aire

farewells to the high mountains.

After this it was downhill in a quest to find picturesque villages and a local liqueur by the name of *pousse rapière* (a herbal armagnac, the name of which literally means rapier's thrust) brewed in these parts and requested by some friends.

A storekeeper in Gavarnie had heard of it, but didn't stock it. "A little spoonful in a glass of champagne is very nice, but it gives me an 'eadache," he explained. In all, we were to try five towns and villages before we came across some *pousse rapière*. Our quest to find it took us gradually eastwards in the foothills of the Pyrenees, via the pretty towns of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, Saint-Lizier and Mirepoix.

Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges had come into view looking a little like an inland version of Mont Saint-Michel due to its hilltop location, crowned with the eleventh/twelfth century cathedral of Sainte Marie. The town is walled, with three entry gates, and can only be reached by using the ample parking facilities at the bottom and then walking or using the €1 (88p) tourist train.

At the lower level surrounding the parking are the extensive remains of the Roman city of Lugdunum, which once had a population of about 10,000. With a forum, temple, theatre, baths and marketplace, it had been far larger than the later town of

just 250 people on the hill above.

The town has been an important episcopal centre in the past, as evidenced by the grand fifteenth/sixteenth century timbered houses, as well as being one of the stops on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. We easily walked a circuit of the town and steep streets in an hour and dodged a thunderstorm to explore the Roman remains.

Saint-Lizier is another hilltop town with a Romanesque cathedral, but also with a bishop's palace and fourth century ramparts. Arriving late afternoon, we found space in the central car park, one of two used as motorhome stopovers (the quieter and more spacious one being a little way above the town).

With thunder rumbling, we walked to the cathedral from which the town radiates. Just in time as it turned out; a thunderstorm of biblical proportions arrived and proceeded to dump torrential rain. From the cover of the cloisters we watched assorted gargoyles spouting mini-waterfalls for 20 minutes or so; the eleventh century drainage seeming to do its job well.

When the weather had calmed down next morning, we enjoyed the views from the gardens of the bishop's palace (now a retreat and hostel) at the top of the village. It being a Saturday, a *vide-grenier* (attic sale) was in ➤





**ABOVE CLOCKWISE** Old hilltop town of Cordes-sur-Ciel; Canoeing at Gorges de l'Aveyron

**BELOW** Road through Gorges de l'Aveyron

progress outside the cathedral and we could not resist a rummage, ignoring old garden tools, vases and other bric-a-brac to find a stall with old jewellery – including what appeared to be a genuine, working, vintage Omega Seamaster for which the stallholder wanted €40 (£35.19). We stepped back to Google for more information about the model and its value (a lot more than €40). As we did so, someone else grabbed it!

In our ongoing search for the elusive *pousse rapière* we moved on to the bastide town of Mirepoix, the large main square of which our guidebook described as one of the loveliest in southwest France. Bastide towns are the medieval equivalent to new towns, having been built to hurriedly settle areas prior to the Hundred Years' War.

The large (but not particularly attractive) aire is within walking distance of the town square and, as we approached through the shade of wood-beamed arcades, we had to agree with the sentiment of the guidebook – the square is stunning. It is surrounded by pastel-coloured half-timbered buildings and with a covered arcade all round it housing shops, cafés and bars. Some of the buildings have ornate carvings; the Maison des Consuls has 103 carvings of heads and even

a tortoise. We returned in the evening to savour the busy, but relaxed, atmosphere as the setting sun highlighted the colours and ancient beams all around us.

Opting for a day of scenery instead of town life, we headed for the Gorges de l'Aveyron in the Tarn-et-Garonne region. It promised some cool chestnut-clad hills as well as the river gorge.

As we traversed the Gorges de l'Aveyron, one minute we were at river level and the next high up on a corniche with tunnels on the D115. This area is notable for small fortified villages and Penne typifies this, with an impressive castle perched high on a rock pinnacle.

Parking is limited, but we found space in a layby on the outskirts and sought shade in Penne's traffic-free narrow streets, as well as the magic of the sun shining through the stained glass illuminating the church interior. Forsaking the hot climb to the castle itself (€6/£5.28), we invested in ice creams at a café in its shadow.

A short distance away is Bruniquet, a sixth century town built on the trade of hemp, flax and saffron and with two castles for the price of one. Overnighting in a small, shady campsite (there is an aire here, too), ►





we did the obligatory uphill walk in the cooler morning sun to the castle entrance.

There's quite a lot to explore of the two castles in various states of repair and split by ownership of two sides of a family in the fifteenth century. The village made for a lovely (though sometimes steep) stroll, its stone houses, with wrought iron façades and mullioned windows, showing the wealth of the traders who once lived here.

Uncertain as to our best onward route we programmed a waypoint into the sat-nav at Cordes-sur-Ciel. This 'accidental' waypoint proved to be a fantastic highlight for us, as well as marking the end of our quest for the *pousse rapière*.

Approaching the town (another bastide) we appreciated the apt moniker of 'town in the sky'. Finding the large aire (free for daytime parking), we gazed up at the impressive skyline of houses built from the local limestone, wondering how we were to get up there in the heat of the day. 'Slowly' was the answer as we sought the shady sides

**ABOVE LEFT** Sunset at the Gavarnie aire

**ABOVE RIGHT** Castle at Penne, Tarn-et-Garonne

of the narrow and cobbled streets after walking through one of the gates in the ramparts. There is a land train for those who may find the climb too steep.

We pointed our camera everywhere – this town being photogenic from every angle. After lunch in one of the lovely squares with panoramic views, we chanced upon a small shop selling wines and liqueurs.

There, in a dusty box on a shelf, lurked the object of our quest: *pousse rapière*. Upon presenting the bottle to our friends, it transpired that this was the actual shop where they had first found the liqueur.

Although Cordes was just a small entry in our guidebook and an accidental find, we highly recommend it, especially if you visit in spring or autumn when, we're told, the morning mists float above the hilltop town.

Our hunt for the *pousse rapière* over, our explorations had also revealed all that we love about France: mountains, scenery and fascinating towns and villages. And, of course, food and drink! [www](#)

## WE STAYED AT

**Aire Municipale Gavarnie**, D923 (Route du Col des Tentes), 65120 Gavarnie, Hautes-Pyrenees

☎ 0033 562 924910

📍 [valleesdegavarnie.com](http://valleesdegavarnie.com) 📅 All year

£ £8 (£7.04)

**Parking Palais des Evêques**, Saint-Lizier, Ariège

£ Free (not an official aire, but overnight parking tolerated)

**Camping Municipal d'Arreau**, 8 Rue de la Courbère, 65240 Arreau, Hautes-Pyrenees

☎ 0033 562 986556 📍 [camping-arreau.fr](http://camping-arreau.fr)

📅 16 December – 14 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €14.60 (£12.85) with 4A electric (6A and 10A also available)

**Aire de camping-car Mirepoix**, Allée de Palafrugell, 09500 Mirepoix, Midi-Pyrenees

☎ 0033 561 681047 📅 All year £ Free

**Aire Municipale Venerque**, Allée du Doc Ventadour, 31810 Venerque, Midi-Pyrenees

☎ 0033 562 115959 📅 All year £ Free

**Camping Le Paysseil**, 82800 Bruniquel, Tarn-et-Garonne

☎ 0033 644 780041

📍 [camping-lepaysseil.fr](http://camping-lepaysseil.fr)

📅 June – September

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: €14 (£12.32)