

**Strolling
in the
Cevennes
around
Bussas**

Escape On Foot

Bussas is in the heart of the Cevennes foothills - a walkers' paradise. Put on a pair of walking boots and within minutes you are light years away from all pressures of the 21st century.

Whether you're a serious trekker or a languid stroller there are rambles of all kinds; across meadows, along rippling rivers and streams, through woodland, down valleys, up hills, above the tops of forest-covered ranges.

The views, the air, the exercise and the freedom will recharge your batteries like no other experience. And Bussas is the ideal walkers' base set in its own historic 200-acre estate. It is simply enchanting.

We've described some of our favourite walks, either from Bussas or within a short drive, to give you a flavour of the variety. Some are simple, others more challenging. All will reward you with a feeling of well-being.

There are hundreds more awaiting you further afield - that's if you could ever be enticed away from such an idyllic setting.

It's blissful, it's relaxing, it's magic, it's...Bussas.

Notes

These walks probably speak for themselves but you should have the added security of a proper map. The IGN (Institut Géographique National) produces excellent Cartes de Randonnée which you will find in the newsagent and Super U supermarket in St.Jean-du-Gard for around 9 euros. We have used map numbers 2740 ET and 2741 ET. Overall, they give you good value for your money. But...be careful of black dotted lines as some of these paths have disappeared since the maps were published.

The walks based on the Col du Mercou are designed on a mix and match basis. You can take them individually or lump a couple together for a longer jaunt.

The roads to Col de l'Asclier and Col du Mercou start at the bridge at l'Estréchure. Turn left off the D907 (from Bussas) over the bridge. Take the first left (D39) to Col du Mercou. Take the second left (D152) to the Col de l'Asclier.

Take the D907 from Bussas to Saumane (not to be confused with Sumène) and St André de Valborgne for the walks based there.

For the Becède walk (on the maps it's spelt Bessède, on the roadsigns it's Becède) take the D109 through Saumane then left up the D20 via les Plantiers.

Peter Black, who wrote these walks in October 2004, has been a regular visitor to Bussas over the past few years. Copyright © Peter Black 2004

The Walks

Bussas Stroll

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Soudorgues Circle via Briontet

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Becède Beauty

À la Table D'Haute

St André Haute Vallée

St André Circulaire

Bussas Stroll

This is a good way to stretch your legs when you arrive and get the lie of the land around Bussas.

Time: You can do it in thirty minutes but...relax and give it an hour.

Park: Leave your car where it is!

In a nutshell: Keep left of Bussas car park, swing left along the path through the pines. At T-junction turn left, eventually reaching the lane. Either slip down right to the bridge or left back up the drive.

Route

Head off over the bridge down the hill towards the car park. The meadow that offers leisurely grazing for a dozen or so sheep today was once intensively cultivated for fruit and vegetables. Part of the orchard remains at the far end.

Keep to the left of the car park and follow the path into the trees marked by a "Diligence" carriage sign. The building on the right that shelters the sheep was once a storehouse for chestnuts. Look around you and you'll see chestnut trees everywhere. Come the autumn you can't put your foot down without treading on chestnuts - the locals gather sackloads to roast at home.

As you climb the path through the pine trees you pass centuries-old terraces, a major feature of this little valley. Whether it was the monks in the priory who did the hard labour or not isn't certain but legions of people and animals sweated buckets to complete the job.

Look over your left shoulder through gaps in the trees - looks tranquil doesn't it? When you get to the T-junction, turn left above the pretty property which includes part of the original priory.

The track trickles down past a house on the left to the little tarmac road above the river you took earlier when you arrived. Turn right for a wander down to the bridge - maybe even dangle your feet in the gushing water. It's built this way without railings so that when the river floods it washes straight over. It tests you as a driver but you soon get used to it!

Retrace your footsteps up the lane, swinging right up towards the gates at Bussas. Just before you get there, on the right you'll see the passarelle or

footbridge, spanning the river. It's high up for a good reason; it's the only way in or out when the river floods. Usually it's a flash flood that's all over in a couple of hours.

On through the gates and up the drive until you round the corner with the long meadow on your right where Liliane skilfully cultivates vegetables. To the left there is some impressive terracing which is being painstakingly renovated by Duncan and Bernard. You get an idea of how well protected this place must have been from the drop to the floor of the valley. On the other, side pine and chestnut stretch up to the sky.

Amble back the fifty yards or so to the house. You'll probably have worked up a nice appetite and thirst.

L'Estréchure Saunter

Comfortable stroll and back to the village upstream from Bussas..and maybe lunch in the middle.

Time: Just over an hour each way

Parking: At Bussas

In a nutshell: Bussas car park. Follow path to the right round the fence line. Soucy bridge turn right. Follow river to Le Plante. Left up the hill and right at the road down into l'Estréchure over the road bridge or footbridge.

Route

Head through the car park at Bussas and swing **RIGHT** along the fence line into the woods of chestnut and pine. This path is centuries old and you can see how much effort went into laying it.

Climb to a vantage point on the ridge. Over your left shoulder is Bussas and to your right, below, is the River Gardon. There are other Gardons in the Cevennes all feeding into the Gard lower down. This one is the Gardon de St. Jean. At this point it looks like a ravine with tall cliffs towering above it.

Then down the rocky slope to Soucy. Here you swing **RIGHT** beyond the stony bridge leading to the house and proceed over another bridge then up the left hand bank of the river. Now the going gets easier as you drop to water level.

You're walking alongside oaks and chestnuts, heather and broom. Then you come to some smallholdings, the first of which is La Lane and the rest of which you by-pass as the narrow path is directed **LEFT** up through the woods.

Alternatively you can continue up the driveway with the river on your right-hand side.

There's a brief climb up to the road, at which point you pass a beautifully kept little cemetery on the left. Slip in for a few minutes of family history, or save it for your return.

Then turn **RIGHT** down the hill all the way to the bridge just this side of l'Estréchure. Turn **RIGHT** over the bridge then **LEFT** into the village. Or a more scenic route is to carry **STRAIGHT** on following the narrow road up the hill with the river to the right. After about 300 yards the road levels out and there is a driveway to the **RIGHT**. This is a public footpath and leads steeply down over

concrete corrugations past some houses. It becomes a narrow path passing closely to the left of a small house overlooking the river. Follow it down the hill to cross the river by a narrow footbridge into the village.

Retrace your footsteps to Bussas.

Not So Obscure 10-Miler

This takes you from Bussas up the Val D'Obscure to Col du Briontet, Col du Mercou and back to Bussas down the valley. It's challenging in a couple of places and easy in most, with some lovely views along the way.

Time: 5 Hours

Parking: At Bussas

In a nutshell: L'Arènas. Right hand road up the hill. Into the woods at the Mercou sign. Right, onto forest track up to Col du Briontet. Right, towards Col du Mercou. GR61A back down the valley to Soucy. Right, back to Bussas.

Route

Head off through the chestnuts and pines to the **LEFT** of the car park, marked by the "Diligence" carriage sign. Centuries old terracing rises above you. Over your left shoulder you'll catch glimpses of this lovely valley.

At the T-junction turn **RIGHT** and drop down closer to the river that accompanies you all the way to the old stone bridge at L'Arènas. You approach the bridge down the drive to the house on your left with little vineyards either side.

You might want to return for a paddle and to skim pebbles but the way forward is not over the bridge but **STRAIGHT** ahead up the hill bordered by broom and heather. Carry on until you reach the Forêt De Borgne sign.

You'll see a sign saying Col du Mercou par Col du Briontet soon after on your right. That's where you leave the road and turn **RIGHT** up some steps and into the woods. Follow the yellow bands and carriage sign through chestnut, oak and pine with ivy, fern, bramble rambles and holly at your feet.

Half an hour will see you through this section and you'll need to scramble the last few yards turning **RIGHT** onto the well established forest track. Proceed at whatever pace you like up this broad path to the Col du Briontet, taking in splendid views to the east.

Col du Briontet is a six-way intersection. Take the broad path to the **RIGHT** rather than up onto the GR61. The forest track gives you superb views away to the south and is easier on your knees.

At Col du Mercou (a five-way intersection including the D road) there's a sobering memorial to four members of the Resistance - this was a stronghold of the Maquis. Stop and take in the southerly view down to Soudorgues from the bench just along the path to the west of the road.

Then plunge down the GR61A clearly marked on the east side of the road. It's tarmac for a while before the sign directs you down **LEFT** and onto the woodland path again. There's plenty of fern and holly at foot level and shrub branches at head height not to mention the occasional ambitious support structures for spiders' webs. But the path is clear. It's stonier here too.

At Le Verdier you are back onto a tarmac path and that takes you gently down the valley to Vallongue. Here you dive off to the **RIGHT** and down to the brook. If it isn't in flood you'll just step over the stones but if there's more water flowing there's always the ingenious trunk bridge. The path leads left over the brook and there's a little bit of scrambling after that but nothing to worry about.

Then the brook broadens as it cascades down into the Gardon at Soucy. Here, there's a fine house on the other side of the river approached by a stone bridge. Unless you've been invited in, proceed to the **RIGHT** of it and on up the stone path. At the top you will see Bussas over the hill to your right - you'll be there in ten minutes. So amble down through the woods in anticipation of a swim or a well-earned drink on the terrace.

Mercou Ridgeback

Easy to medium walk up the GR61 from Col du Mercou with great views north and south, returning on the broad forest road.

Time: 1 hr 30 mins

Park: Col du Mercou

In a nutshell: GR61 from Mercou to Briontet. Forest road back.

Route

With your back to the memorial for the Maquis Four, cross the road and take the forest track to the right between the white posts (one of which says GR61). Not far along, the sign directs you **LEFT** onto the GR61 and up what looks and feels like the bed of a stream, bordered by fern and oak.

The climb takes you onto and along a ridge. If the chestnuts allow you, you'll get splendid views across the Cevennes to the north. You're walking on large stones and solid rock. The climb continues to stretch your tendons. Eventually, you reach a clear view to the North West. Stop for a while to enjoy it. Then you are pressing on uphill again, fortified by the knowledge that the return leg is dead easy.

In time the path drops down with glimpses to the south. Then you swing **LEFT** onto a broader track which shortly leads off **LEFT** up the hill. Pause here to take in this perfectly framed view of the south. On a clear day the view from here stretches forever, well as far as those blue ridge mountains on the horizon anyway.

Then you drop down through a wooded glade to the Col du Briontet - a six path intersection. Take the wider track on your immediate **RIGHT**. It's the forest road that takes you more gently back to Col du Mercou. It also lets you take in far broader aspects of the vista to the south. This section might take you less than half an hour - unless you are seduced by that view.

Mont Brion Scramble

This can be challenging, so be prepared for loose stones underfoot and a strenuous climb. Your effort is generously rewarded by top-of-the-world views.

Time: 3 hrs 30 mins

Park: Col du Mercou

In a nutshell: Forest road from Col du Mercou. GR61 from Col du Briontet. Watch your footing. Eventually turn right for clamber up to Mont Brion. Then downhill with care to Briontet and Mercou.

Route

From the Col du Mercou take the forest road up to the Col du Briontet. It's the path between the two white posts to your **RIGHT** as you stand with your back to the memorial. Once on this path, don't follow the direction to turn left up the GR61. You'll need to save some energy for later and the forest road is gentler whilst giving you great views to the south.

At the Col du Briontet take the path on the **FAR SIDE** marked GR61. (The wide path to the right with a yellow cross on it beyond the La Salle turning, has, within a few yards, a blue sign directing you to Mont Brion. It's a short, strenuous climb that way but you'll be coming down it on the rapid descent later.)

Now you plunge into the woods on the GR61 and unless you are careful you might literally plunge into the woods because the path drops down and the foothold is loose. Follow the yellow strip waymarkers (and occasional red/white ones).

You'll cross over some narrow, ravine-like stream beds. They should be relatively dry but you can see how gushing water from a great height has dramatically rearranged their features. Eventually you start to climb to a point where the path actually levels off: but don't be fooled. Down you go again pushing on through straggling blackberry bushes, with the sound of trickling water and twittering birds to keep you company.

Suddenly there's a rocky clearing, the perfect vantage spot to take in St. Jean-du-Gard nestling over there to the east. It's downhill now over the boulder and

rock path. Keep your eyes open because you are soon going to turn **RIGHT**. There should be a little cairn of stones on the path to help you but also, beyond the right turn you are going to take, there's a tree with red/white and yellow bars and a broader white one beneath. Behind you, there's a tree with a yellow cross and red/white bars.

This path to the right has a yellow bar to signal it. This is where the real climb to the summit begins. You'll quickly come to a broader path where you turn **RIGHT** and not much further on turn **RIGHT**, upwards, again. You will be well rewarded at the top. Just keep following the yellow bars, not the crosses, and I'll see you up there.

Now isn't that view worth the effort? It's a short amble through the trees to the forest road. Turn **RIGHT** and on up to Mont Brion. It's a heavenly panorama at the top. You are really on top of the world - well, this part of it anyway.

The path for the descent is on the **NORTH-EAST** edge of the clearing beyond the observation tower. It is clearly marked by a blue and white GR61 arrow.

This is a steep descent so be careful. You will need hands as well as feet and keep your wits about you. Keep your eyes open for the yellow bars. You will be down to Col du Briontet in half an hour.

From Briontet, retrace your footsteps along the forest road westwards to the Col du Mercou.

Soudorgues Clockwise

Pretty valley walk to Soudorgues then back up through the woods with lovely views both sides of the ridge.

Time: 2 hrs 30 mins

Park: Col du Mercou

In a nutshell: Col du Mercou. Join Soudorgues path a hundred yards down the D39. Just past the Relais in Soudorgues turn right. Follow blue arrows all the way back to Mercou.

Route

From the Col du Mercou set off down the D39 towards Soudorgues - but only for a hundred yards. Turn **RIGHT**, down in front of the house and hairpin **LEFT** at the stone steps, along the terracing. Push on down the hill. The view ahead is lovely. The path is stony but it's all downhill so not that taxing.

Ignore a left turn by a Mercou sign and wander on past broom and meadows of wild flowers. You'll come to a road at the bottom of a U-bend. Turn **RIGHT** over the little bridge towards some buildings at le Moina. Go towards the buildings and turn **RIGHT**, down a grassy lane and on to a splendid, tall, stone bridge.

The path here crosses from one side of the valley to the other. Climb the hill beyond but it soon levels off before the gentle climb into the village.

Walk past, or wander into, the little cemetery beside the church. "Jean Viala 1923-1980 - Maquis" rates a plaque on the Famille Lapierre mausoleum. Slip past the Relais du Fageas, unless that's your destination, and head down to the crossroads a little further on.

Turn **RIGHT** and head up the tarmac road. Keep ahead when it swings right. You are following blue and white arrows on this leg. You pass the yellow house on the right with its pool and another well tended cemetery on the left. Already the western vista is showing its full glory: what a comforting final resting place. You, however, are pressing on, pausing from time to time to take in the view.

Soon the blue and white sign leads you **RIGHT**, away from the GR63, up into the woods. Slip past the stone-arched ruin and keep to the left as you enter a field until you come across a blue and white arrow on the rocks.

The rocky path continues upwards through oak and chestnut, revealing occasional glimpses of Mont Brion standing sentinel above. There's a house without windows that could be done up with great views; only thing is, you can't exactly drive up to the front door.

Eventually, at a four ways intersection in a clearing, you meet the GR61 (also marked N3) from your left. Turn **RIGHT**. It's downhill and rocky. Just when you think you must be there, the path doubles back and plunges further downwards: it makes you wonder if you are going the right way. Persevere, and you eventually come into the Col du Mercou.

Soudorgues Circle via Briontet

Easy walking down partly paved path to Soudorgues and back up the pretty valley to Mercou.

Time: 3 hrs

Park: Col du Mercou

In a nutshell: Col du Mercou to Briontet. Turn right down "La Salle" path all the way to Soudorgues. Over the road and bridge and up steps to the Gite and on to the fourway intersection. Turn right up the valley to Mercou.

Route

With your back to the memorial, head across to the forest road on the **RIGHT** between the two white posts one of which is marked GR61. Keep to this broad path even when instructed to turn up left on the GR61. Amble up to the six-ways intersection at Col du Briontet. Along the way you can see where you will be later, down the valley to your right.

At Col du Briontet turn 2nd **RIGHT** down a path signed "La Salle Gite Pedestre". Ignoring the yellow and red/white crosses follow the stony path downhill. You come to a gravel road and might be tempted to hairpin right, down the forest track. Don't. Swing **LEFT** onto the narrow road and enjoy great views across the valley to the east with Mont Brion behind you.

This takes you down to the D39 at Soudorgues. Cross the road and past the 3T sign, then over the pretty bridge to some steps on the right signed Soudorgues. There's a thoughtfully installed handrail to help you up.

At the road, cross over to the Gite Longitude. Unless you want to book in, take the steps on the **LEFT** 30 yards short of the front door. These steps have a sign "Soudorgues 5 minutes". At the top swing over to a **RIGHT** hand lane marked N4 which eventually leads you to a four-way intersection.

(To the left of this intersection the road leads to the Mairie and a cluster of buildings. There's a lovely meadow on the left with a gentle view over the valley - good place to picnic.)

The path, however, turns **RIGHT**. You can't miss it. There are signs for N1, Relais du Fageas, Gite Pedestre and - the one you are looking for - Chemin

Communal Col du Mercou. So proceed past the yew hedge and the Relais (unless you are tempted and hungry) and onwards, ignoring the right hand turn for the N4.

Terracing is a major feature in these parts. You'll see a good example on your left across the meadow. It's been there for centuries but they take a lot of maintenance. Stroll on past the little cemetery and church with its gate in the wall that has bolts on the outside - who are they trying to stop getting out? It's all very pretty and peaceful. Even the goat bells sound in tune with the surroundings.

You head on up the path. You climb for a bit until you drop down to the sturdy stone bridge at le Moina. This is a pretty little hamlet that welcomes you with flowers dripping over the stone wall of the vegetable garden above you. Keep to the **LEFT** at the top of the lane and as the buildings slip behind you there's another little bridge at a bend in the road. Turn **LEFT**. It's marked Mercou.

A reservoir that has gone to seed, ivy and saplings come up on the left and beyond it a meadow often brimming with wildflowers. The climb gets stonier now so take a breather, you're nearly there. Pity the folk who had to do this walk before thick-soled, ankle supporting boots were invented - we take so much for granted.

Now you are up to the terracing belonging to the house above. Hairpin **RIGHT** in front of the house taking in another glance down the valley. It's a view to remember and the lucky lady who owns the house has it all the time!

Swing **LEFT** at the road for the hundred yards back to the Col du Mercou.

Striding The Ridge

This walk looks down on everything: tree topped mountains, minute villages and snaking roads. It's a go-and-return walk so there's no chance of losing your way. The track is mostly easy and not vertigo-inducing.

Time: 3 hrs 30 mins to and from Bonperrier.

Park: Col de l'Asclier, on the left, just before the bridge.

In a nutshell: At Col de l'Asclier go under the bridge, turn right and keep walking until you want, or need, to come back. You can get to Col de Pas and on beyond if you want to. Col de Pas is about 1 hr 30 mins on from Bonperrier.

Route

The drive up to the Col de l'Asclier was scenic enough (for everyone except the driver, that is). But what follows, as soon as you set off, is just spectacular. Walk under the bridge and turn **RIGHT** onto the path.

You are already above the tree line as you climb up the granite path. Pick your way gradually up; it soon levels off giving you immediate breathtaking views. There are one or two hardy pines but for the most part it's broom, heather, bramble and wild flowers.

Below, mountain roads, snowbound by winter, snake away through the valleys. You'll pass a sign on your left, the GR6C to Notre Dame de la Rouvière - but that's for another time. Press on with one or two ups and downs to the transmitter site. Here the going gets decidedly easier as the path broadens to take transmitter vehicles - not that you are likely to see one, but the path is wide enough just in case.

You'll hear goats' bells and birdsong and occasionally catch a bird of prey, hovering, on the lookout. Listen for the "yelping" calls of the eagle or the "keee" of the kestrel - they are after little animals and birds, and have perfect eyesight, so you're quite safe. (Mind you, nobody has ever been able to hold an optician's board up to them so some could be myopic. Not worth worrying about, honest.)

At Bonperrier, you can carry on to Col de Pas if you want to but this is a convenient place to pause and take in the view. It's a wonderful picnic spot too. Then, if you are not venturing further on, merely retrace your steps to the bridge at Col de l'Asclier.

On The Fageas Wavelength

Fageas is the highest peak closest to Bussas at about three and a half thousand feet. It's an easy walk up from Col de l'Asclier to the antenna tower at the top and the views are superb. Part One of this walk takes you up and back the same way. Part Two offers a longer and slightly more strenuous way down.

Time: Same way up and back - 2 hrs 30 mins.

Same way up, alternative return route - 3 hrs 30 mins

Park: Col de l'Asclier

In a nutshell: Col de l'Asclier to the antenna summit via easy forest road and back the same way. Alternatively, return dropping down left of the antenna, left at bottom and sharp left at next intersection eventually rejoining path you started on for return to bottom.

Route

You will have parked on the left just before you get to the bridge at Col de l'Asclier. The end of that little car park is the start of the forest road and the route to the top.

The familiar collection of chestnut, pine and oak accompanies you on the way up. In time you'll feel yourself scurrying past a clearing that looks like a major landslide with millions of rocks sitting there menacingly. It's quite safe so pause and take in the sumptuous view to the north. It can make you feel kind of insignificant seeing a scene that's been like that for millions of years. That's l'Estréchure way down there in the distance.

At the fork, take the **RIGHT** hand path otherwise you'll be on the long hike to Col du Mercou. You'll see where that path goes when you round the next bend. On you go round the mountain to the other side. At this point you'll see another path going off slightly to the left. (That's where the alternative route back meets up with the main path down again.) Stay on the main path climbing gradually. Unless you are on a route march, take it slowly.

The views are towards the south now, but just wait till you get to the top. At the top the panorama is awesome. On a clear day with good eyesight or a pair of binoculars you can see Montpellier and the Med from here.

Coming down the same way is understandably easier but it still takes time so don't rush unless you've got a plane to catch.

The Alternative Return:

Take the path downwards to the **LEFT** of the antenna. You are on the stony path that is the start of the *Grande Randonnée* all the way to Cognac and beyond.

You'll have to watch your step - this isn't a simple surface. Eventually it hits a forest road and the going is much easier. Veer **LEFT** onto this road - the way to the right is now barred. (It used to be the way back to l'Asclier but is no longer open.)

Shortly you'll come to an intersection and you turn **LEFT** onto the broad track with the Forêt Domaniale sign. Now the going is much easier although it goes gently uphill all the way. To your right the majestic Rocher de l'Aigle (and with luck you'll see one).

There's a short section of pine wood and eventually you arrive at the intersection with the path up to the antenna. Unless you want to go round again, pick up this path and head downhill to the Col de l'Asclier where you parked.

Becède Beauty

From this little agricultural village up to the ridge and superb views then plunging down through a pretty valley.

Time: 3 hrs 30 mins

Park: Becède. There's no parking in the village itself because there are no roads. There are one or two roadside spaces. The closest to Becède is opposite a double gated garage. There's a spot just before the broad meadow. There's a good spot at the bottom of the forest road where it meets the Becède road but be sure to give plenty of turning room to others. Or tuck into the pull-off in the corner of the 2nd hairpin from the top. Becède appears as Bessède on several maps but not on the road signs.

In a nutshell: Becède. Up the hill and through the woods. Turn right up to the ridge. Right at the ridge. Right again down the GR6A and on to Becède.

Route

Becède is a Cevenol agricultural community straight out of the history books. Narrow lanes run between the houses. The houses are three and four storeys high. The animals have the ground floor - great idea: heat rises, giving central heating above. It comes with a pong "but at least we are warm, Madeleine".

You are looking for an alley from the main path up through the buildings. It will be on the **LEFT** and marked by signs of a squirrel, a bird and a black arrow all on yellow backgrounds. Follow this path past the houses. Climbing out of Becède you find yourself looking back again and again. It really is a charming setting.

This is not the GR6A, as it might appear on the map, but a link path. Trust me, you'll come to the 6A later. Watch your step on the rocky bits as you climb through fern and chestnut. The air is so fresh you wish you could bottle it. Glancing over the valley for the last time before changing direction, the hills have a pyramid look about them.

Carry **STRAIGHT** on, with a sharp eye open for a red/white bar on a tree indicating a **RIGHT** turn. If you don't see this sign on the tree on your left you'll dive deeper and deeper into the forest and have a long climb back. So, taking the right turn, climb up into the clearing, avoiding the low, thick branch of the chestnut tree that has a penchant for tall heads! You will pass an abandoned homestead.

Keep climbing until, at the top, you turn **RIGHT** onto the GR6 that runs right along the ridge. Now, without having to watch your step quite so much, just take

in that spectacular view across the tops of tree-covered mountains. Stride on to Bonperrier, an intersection with the GR6A coming in from the left and signed downhill to the **RIGHT**, which is the way you go.

The descent is easy and broad along the forest road. You'll drop down beneath the tree line again and the chestnuts return. Away below you to the left stands the little hamlet of Le Cros. Very photogenic from here.

There's a **RIGHT** turn just after the burnt out tree trunk. The path is much narrower and marked by a red/white bar, yellow bar and black arrow. The going is stonier but you are soon back down in Becède.

À la Table D'Haute

Beautiful walk with breathtaking views. On the map, this looks formidable. A climb of a thousand feet that even the D39 road requires four hairpin bends to get up. In fact you walk straight up the valley. The climb is so gradual you hardly notice it. La Patache auberge and restaurant in St Roman de Tousque could delay you a few hours so you could be glad that the return to Saumane is even easier.

Time: 4 hours

Park: Car Park in Saumane opposite restaurant. Pick your spot carefully - some of it is reserved for patrons.

In a nutshell: Saumane, along the main road westwards for 2 kms, right at the apartments before the camp site, follow black arrows to St Roman de Tousque. Right, on to the Corniche briefly to Col de l'Exil and back down the forest road.

Route

I'm sorry about this but there's no alternative. The first part of this walk is westwards along the road. Turn **RIGHT** out of the car park and head through the village to the bridge. You can take a little detour if you want to by keeping straight ahead at the bridge and following the signs but, personally, I'd stick to the road. So turn **RIGHT** over the bridge and follow the road round to the left on the other side of the river.

Walk on the left hand verge so you are facing oncoming traffic. Go past the road turnings for Les Plantiers on your left and St Roman on your right. Along the way on your left take a couple of minutes to look at the Maquis memorial commemorating the bravery of the locals during a German paratrooper attack in August 1943. Sobering stuff.

Just along on the **RIGHT** you'll see a grassy lane beside a holiday apartments building. (If you've reached the campsite you've come too far.) Go up this lane. The sign to follow is the black arrow on yellow.

The grass gives way rapidly to granite stones and solid rock. The first bit is invariably overgrown with broom but you are soon through it. You have pine needles, cones and heather at your feet, pine and chestnuts above.

You come to an arrow that points straight over the edge of the path and a long fall. Don't fall for it; carry straight on up the well-defined path. Occasionally you'll hear cars on the road away to your right but that takes a more circuitous

route than this path. You are, of course, taking the original route. Birdsong is your accompanying soundtrack. No wonder this is a designated twitchers' path.

St Roman de Tousque comes into view surprisingly early and you get occasional views of the valley above the oaks. Three-quarters of the way up you cross a little bridge whose stream, whether trickling or in full flow, is worth dangling your feet into, should that take your fancy in such a pretty glade.

Garlic perfumes the air and a wall of moss-covered granite marks yet another resting place with broad views down the valley - see how far you've come? Round the corner, the track takes you into the village past gardens of flowers and vegetables. There's a little cemetery on the left - what a view to die for! But who are the dear departed?

The Auberge La Patache (if this is your destination) is left and through the village at the junction with the main road. The way forward, however, is opposite the end of the path where it meets the village road. Cross **STRAIGHT** over and wind your way up to the main road. Turn **RIGHT**. This is the D9, the Corniche des Cevennes. It's busy and fast. Use the verge on the right.

There's another memorial here. It reveals that Germans, Spanish and Russians fought alongside French in the resistance to Nazism. The words are moving.

Taking care, you soon arrive at the Col de l'Exil and veer **RIGHT** up the hill to the highest part of the walk. You are on the pine-needled forest road, broad tracked and impossible to lose. There are loads of wonderful views to the valleys below now: this side of the route is much more open.

There's a hunting sign - beware men with guns and wild boar. Hunting is only at weekends in the colder months. And the boar is more scared of you than you are of him so he'll give you a wide berth.

The road winds ever downwards, an eagle soars and the birds keep singing. Saumane comes closely into view. Look down and check your car, you'll be there in fifteen minutes. When you hit the tarmac swing **RIGHT** and it's just around the corner to the bridge at the main road and a short amble back to the car park.

St André Haute Vallée

Challenging, exhilarating walk rewarded by stunning views. Gradual climb 1200ft to the Haute Vallée Borgne. Some knees and bottom scrambling.

Time: 5 - 6 hours

Park: In walker-friendly St André, over the railed bridge opposite the Mairie. Public loos here and further up on the corner. You could also park at Fesquet or Pont de l'Elze to the east of the village on the D907.

In a nutshell: Take the path up the valley from St André de Valborgne, across the tops and down eastwards through Auzillargue. The path is marked by red/yellow bars, black arrows on yellow and the sign of the goat.

Route

If you park in St André, take the narrow road round the corner away from the river and a few yards along you will turn **LEFT** up a concrete and stone footpath. It is marked by red/yellow bars and the black on yellow arrow that accompany you round the walk. It is also signed la Jasse.

If you've parked out of St André (thereby shortening the final part of the walk along the main road) walk into the village and head for the bridge opposite the Mairie. Pick up the path as above.

You are climbing straight away out of St André. As with all these paths, take care if they are wet - that means slippery. It is a gradual climb so you won't feel it too much. Once you are past the antisocial electric fence, you are off into pine and chestnut woods with occasional clearings for taking your breath and breathtaking views.

The path winds up through heather, thrift, fern, broom and wildflowers. You get strong whiffs of mint and oregano. Above you now the crags stand out defiantly over the pines. You cross a wooden bridge. Left-over logs have been used to build some helpful steps beyond.

The first junction meets a path from the left. Carry on. The view back down the valley is all the more impressive in the knowledge that you've climbed a thousand feet to be here. Glance across at the crags, like serried ranks of men's grey faces.

This broader forest road takes you over a carpet of pine needles with revealing views down to St André. At the next junction turn **RIGHT** up a well-gravelled

forest road. Between the trees you'll see the criss cross of valleys and forested hilltops.

Next, a three-way junction. Turn **RIGHT** following the red/yellow bars. Just along, there's a remarkable obelisk. Was it carried there, sculpted there or is it a natural outcrop?

The forest path is replaced by a much narrower track to the left of a clearing. This marks the start of a tricky stage. Take it slowly because it involves descending a gulley using hands and bottoms as well as feet - and you have to keep your eyes open for the signs. At the foot of the gulley the path veers left, marked by the red/yellow bars and the sign of a goat.

You come to a gate and proceed downhill through the forest. Look for the markers. They are there, honest. There's a mixture of red/yellow bars, black arrow, single yellow arrow and the trusty old goat.

Into a little meadow with a chestnut in the middle. Head for the right of this tree and push on downwards following the arrow **ACROSS** the path (not leftwards down). When you meet a broad path turn **RIGHT**. Within fifty yards turn **LEFT** downhill. It's a bit of a scramble; the path becomes slatey and loose so you could be on your bottom again. Follow the signs downhill until you hear geese, ducks and the rest of the farm greeting you into Auzillargue.

Turn **RIGHT** towards the buildings and fork **LEFT** through a gate by the cattle shed, then through a couple more gates beneath the farm buildings. Stay on the **RIGHT** fork as the terracing splits. You get a good view of the valley below.

It's an easy path down now but take care on the solid rock and slate. The views are much more open. Those dolls houses down there are actually three and four storeys high. Eventually you reach the road. Turn **RIGHT**.

From here you've got a stroll along the road to your car with the Gardon available on your left for a paddle. The map shows a number of alternative routes back to St André. Some are more elusive than they appear. After the exertions of the previous few hours you would do worse than stick to a level road back. From le Lauzert (where you came down onto the road) to St André is a half-hour saunter.

St André Circulaire

A pretty woodland walk uphill at first followed by a long descent, with pine, chestnut, birdsong and tranquillity for company.

Time: 3 hrs 30 mins

Park: St André de Valborgne - several little free car parks for "randonneurs, pour la journée ou demi journée". Public loos opposite the Mairie over the bridge or on the corner just before the square.

In a nutshell: Left up the hill beyond the square in St André rising a thousand feet to the Haute Vallée Borgne. Follow the black arrows on yellow and return down the ridge on the far side via les Abrits.

Route

In St André de Valborgne make your way westwards through the pretty little square shaded by tall plane trees. Opposite a car park there's a narrow road on the **LEFT** marked by five black on yellow signs including the arrow that will guide you much of the way.

Climb the winding tarmac path that eventually arrives at the Gite Village. Beyond the shop, turn sharp **LEFT** around the "Gites de Devoir" sign and on uphill through the chestnuts. San André recedes quickly beneath you.

Where the forest road swings right, carry **STRAIGHT** on through the fern and broom. Fork **LEFT** at the forest road and admire the tranquil views across to the right. The path is easy for quite a while now as you wind your way through pine and chestnut. Frequent signs say "Toute Cueillette Interdite" ("No Picking") so best not to I suppose.

The full sign-set reappears reassuringly. There are numerous side paths to avoid but the way ahead is pretty obvious.

You get the choice of two paths at the next fork. Take the **LEFT** one downhill. There's another choice shortly. This time ignore the one on the left and take the **RIGHT** one that leads you on down the ridge and views of the valleys beyond.

The path winds a long way down and eventually levels off, waymarked by a bath of quite modern design, collecting water for animal consumption rather than

human ablution. Stay on the main path with the mountainside to your left. There are houses down the valley to your right with the D10 running alongside them.

As you descend to les Abrits you hit a tarmac road. Turn **RIGHT** down the hill. Signs direct you off the tar past a house on the left then along a passage between other houses. If you keep **STRAIGHT** on you'll come down a little slope to the D10.

Stick with this road for a while with the river bouncing along on your right. Then swing **LEFT** up a slope that proclaims "St André 1 hr" - you can do it in half that time.

Now you go through a farmyard. It might be gated off to keep the cackling geese in but you are both entitled and welcomed to go through. If it is closed off there will probably be a handwritten sign to say you are on the right path and to proceed on through. If the geese get cornered, give them an obvious wide escape route. They hiss like demented women but they prefer tastier things to nibble than you so don't worry.

From here it's an easy saunter downhill, through fern and heather, on a stony narrow path back to St André.

