AUBRAC

A transhumance tradition lives on ✣ perfect aligot ✣ mystical Aubrac

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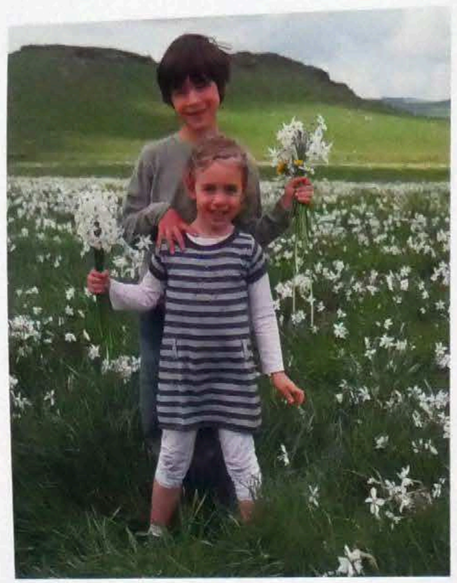
After a year of emailing back and forth with owners Pat and Laurent, at last we are at La Borie de l'Aubrac, a 150-year-old traditional Aubrac farmhouse that they have converted into a guest-house. On the windward side, where the taxi drops us, it stands four-square defiant against the elements, a solitary fortress tucked in a hollow. The north-facing stone wall is an unbroken two-feet-thick barrier against winds so piercing they polish granite. On the leeward side, just a few paces beyond vast glass windows, no gardener, no matter how visionary, could match what nature has provided *gratis*. A sea of narcissus floats above the pasture in a vast meadow that stretches into another meadow, and another one and on to the horizon. The sky is like a giant's cauldron of swirling grey and white clouds. Pat says it is very rarely blue. While the plateau's annual cycle moves from the flowers of spring to the cattle in summer and the snow in winter, Pat tells us that it is the ever-changing patterns of the clouds that transfix her. Inside, two large armchairs are placed near a window, facing the plateau. This is a view to contemplate.

Laurent returned home with his young family after a distinguished international career in hotel management. Pat is Spanish, with a CV to match. Their son, Ivan, is seven and his sister, Aïna, is four. La Borie de l'Aubrac is the outcome of their wish to remain in hospitality, but to have a proper family life as well. It is what in France is called a *maison d'hôtes*, which is a family-run guesthouse with up to five bedrooms that offers breakfast and dinner with the family, *en famille*. Much of the ground floor is a tranquil, elegant open space with a large dining table at one end, near Laurent's kitchen, and sofas around a large fireplace at the other. Upstairs are four equally serene bedrooms. In mine, the window is positioned so I can see the plateau when I'm lying in bed. We have arrived just in time for a pre-dinner sampling of Salers, a local liqueur made with a plant called *gentiane*. It has an attractive bitterness, not dissimilar to Suze, another French liqueur I'm partial to, and I discover they are distant cousins. Laurent tells me I will see a lot of yellow *gentiane* flowers tomorrow on the *transhumance*.

An Aubrac cow is dressed for her *transhumance*, when she walks from lower pastures to the sweet, high mountain meadows where she spends the summer. The festive headpieces are festooned with papier mâché flowers and patriotic *tricolore* ribbons, and one cow will wear a special bell that will set the walking pace for them all.



Just a few paces from their front door, Ivan and Aïna Mouliade Sunyer have their own magical personal playground in the flower-covered meadows of the Aubrac plateau.

Laurent grew up on a farm near Laguiole, where his father and brother still breed cattle and which his family has had for 200 years. They did their *transhumance* today, he says, walking their cows from the farm at 1100 metres up to pasture at 1300 metres. 'There were fifty cows and most of their *bébés*, except for the really little ones, so they took it very slowly,' he says. While most farmers nowadays move their cattle up and back from the summer pasture by truck, many farming families, like Laurent's, enjoy doing it traditionally, on foot. The youngest calves go by truck or trailer. 'The cows know they are going to better pasture and as soon as the gate at the farm is opened, they head off down the path,' Laurent says.

We dine with fellow guests Chrystele and Florence, hotel owners from Béziers. Hardy souls, they've walked much of the Le Puy pilgrim path and previously visited La Borie de l'Aubrac in February and October. Now, they are back in kinder weather to see the *transhumance*. They'll walk to Aubrac for tomorrow's festival – about three hours – then return with a family bringing their cattle to a nearby meadow. Laurent has cooked us tender Aubrac beef, which he serves with a red wine and shallot sauce. And *aligot*! But this is the real thing. It's as though the best mashed potato ever has eloped with a rich, stretchy cheese fondue. We all reach for another helping and talk about how extraordinary it is that here, around this table, we are the newest pilgrims to share a dish created by the Aubrac monks for the pilgrims they fed and sheltered a thousand years ago. It was originally made with bread, as potatoes didn't come to the region until devastating grain shortages in the eighteenth century. It is a dish as robust and enduring as the people who have handed it from generation to generation – in Laurent's family, from his mother to him. It's also a dish for which there are no shortcuts. When it's good, it's because of the hard yakka that's gone into getting the texture just right. Like polenta made properly. A comment Laurent made earlier comes back to me: 'People here work hard, even when there is nothing to do.'

Parisians greatly benefited from the strong work ethic of the people from these parts who left for the city. First, they were their bath boys, carrying the baths and then the water to fill them. They also lugged fuel for winter fires. The more entrepreneurial became wood and coal merchants, their shops often having a bar as well, and from there they graduated to café owners. By the mid-twentieth century, the great majority of Paris cafés and restaurants were run by Auvergnats. One of them was Marcellin Cazes, who left Laguiole for Paris when he was just fourteen years old. He carried water, worked sixteen-hour days as a waiter and eventually created Brasserie Lipp, still one of the great landmark restaurants in Paris. Others left Aubrac each year for temporary work elsewhere. Come the autumn, when the cattle returned from the pasture and the cheeses were safely stored, they would go south to the vineyards of

THERE ARE PERHAPS TWENTY MEN WORKING IN SMALL TEAMS, DECORATING COWS. IT TAKES THREE OR FOUR MEN TO POSITION THE HALTERS THAT WILL SUPPORT THE BIG BRANCHES OF HOLLY.

Languedoc and later, when the railways arrived, to the cities. Young peasants would catch the train to Paris from the train station across the road from where we had dined last night in Aumont-Aubrac.

Now, a motorway runs through Aumont-Aubrac and, at dinner, one of the women from Béziers says that Aubrac is becoming fashionable. As peasant workers in Paris, the Auvergnats were known for keeping their culture intact. I go to bed optimistic that they can do the same, no matter how many city slickers descend upon the plateau. Granite does not yield easily.

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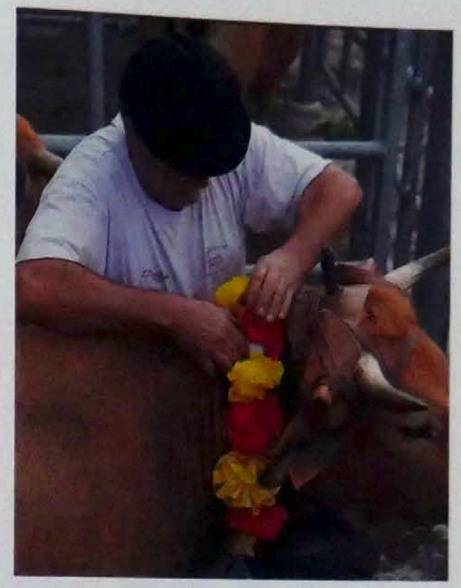
Laurent has kindly arranged for us to join the Puech family for part of their 80-kilometre walk, when they bring their cattle to the *transhumance* festival at Aubrac and then take them on to their summer meadows. The farmers are given specific time slots, half an hour apart, for their arrival with their cows in the village's main square where each will have a brief ceremony before they continue on to their destination – the meadows where they will spend the summer. The Puech family is first up, at 10.30 a.m. This means a five o'clock start for us, but Laurent still insists on getting our breakfast. By six we are in his car, thankful he knows the back routes as all the main roads are closed. I must admit I have some trepidation about today. Many moons ago in Spain, a few of us stumbled upon the Seville *Feria*, or Spring Fair, a traditional occasion when the landed gentry come to town for a major celebration. A fairground had become a smart canvas pop-up town of fancy marquees where the families entertained in great style. In the afternoon, they paraded through the fairground on horseback and in carriages, seeing and being seen, calling on one another, the women vibrant and sexy in their flamenco dresses, the men macho and sleek in fitted riding jackets



The cows stand quietly while the heavy headpieces and large cowbells are fitted, but it's still a task for experienced hands who know to avoid those pointy horns.

and black straight-brimmed hats. Goodness knows what the Seville *Feria* is like these days, but back then I felt I'd somehow crept in under the back of the tent and witnessed something real and meaningful. Would the *transhumance* today be the same?

Looking at the map, it seems incredible how far the Puech family are walking their cattle. Their farm at Saint Julien de Rodelle is another 20 kilometres beyond Espalion, which is itself a two-day walk from Aubrac on the pilgrim path. Yet they do the 80 kilometre walk in just two days. Over a mountain. We rendezvous at a farm where the forty Puech cows, eight calves old enough to walk and three bulls have spent the night in a friend's cattle yards. They set off at 9 a.m. yesterday and reached here at 7.30 p.m. 'The rest of their *bébés* have gone ahead in the big car,' I'm told. I wonder momentarily how they all fit in a car – no matter how big, but then discover it's actually a truck. We're only 6 kilometres from Aubrac, but from there it's still another 30 kilometres to the Puech's

By the end of their two-day *transhumance*, the Puech family will have walked their forty cows, some with their calves at foot, 80 kilometres from their farm up to their summer pasture. Aubrac cattle are not only distinctive with their beautiful dark-ringed eyes, but are especially robust and flexible. They have been bred over centuries to thrive despite an annual regime of great contrasts: the long *transhumance*, a summer spent roaming on the vast plateau from May to October, and then a winter spent in barns. ▸

◂ Each family taking part in the *transhumance* festival in Aubrac has their moment when their cattle take centrestage in the village square. A crowd of tens of thousands descends on this little mountain village for the festivities, many of them coming in the motorhomes that line the *transhumance* routes in and out of the village.

summer pasture. When they get there, they will have a big party with their friends.

The scene at the cattle yards could not be more alien to an Australian farmer's eyes. There are perhaps twenty men working in small teams, decorating cows. The Aubrac cows are acquiescent, but still it takes three or four men, watchful of those pointy horns, to position the halters that will support the big branches of holly, covered with paper flowers and ribbons, that are propped against the railings, ready to be fitted. Others fasten thick wide leather collars on which hang heavy brass cowbells. A little van has reversed up close to the yards. Its back doors are open and inside are even more decorations: patriotic *tricolore* garlands of red, white and blue; a French flag; a large, iron-framed photograph of the Puech farm with the family name, like a crest, on top. And more ribbons, and more flowers. Several women stand watching. This is men's work, I'm told, because the animals know the men and are comfortable with them. Every cow has a name, just like Gérard Delangle's Charolais cows I'd seen in Burgundy, and when the men are finished they will be the belles of the *transhumance* ball.

The men work swiftly. The last of the decorations are fixed into place. The oldest cows are always awarded the most elaborate decorations. The three bulls are loaded into a truck garlanded with branches of yellow broom – they will get too tired if they have to walk the entire distance. One will be unloaded just outside Aubrac for a guest appearance along with the girls in the village square. At the back of the yards, where a gate is open, a cow with one of the largest headpieces nudges the back of one of the men. C'mon, she seems to be saying, let's go! I'm told (many times) that the cows know exactly what's happening – they remember the delicious pasture waiting for them, they know the route and they'll speed up, even after 40 kilometres, as their summer home comes into view.

The haunting sound of bagpipes silences everyone. They are not conventional bagpipes but a local version, a *cabrette*, operated by a bag positioned under the arm. The *cabrette* player is Isabelle, the only woman who seems to be directly involved in this departure ritual. The men gather, song sheets in one hand and plastic cups of the Puech's homemade local hooch, *ratafia*, in the other and sing the folk hymn of the Aubrac, 'Lo Masuc'. It is a song about life as it was in the *buron*. Afterwards, Isabelle says, 'When we sing or when we listen to this song, and when we play the *cabrette*, we think about all the people who worked with courage in very difficult conditions.' Boys as young as seven worked in *burons*, she tells me. The song is sung in Occitan, a language dating back to the Middle Ages that is still spoken in pockets of southern France. Laurent told me last night that his parents still speak Occitan with their friends sometimes, and his father and brother address their cows in Occitan.

At precisely eight o'clock, our little procession of cows and people moves out of the farmyard and onto the road. It's a long steady climb from here to Aubrac, much of it along a ridge. Christian and Monique Puech and their sons Maxime and Jean-Baptiste know exactly how long it will take. A special bell – *la clape* – is fitted on a cow that is a good and steady walker and she sets the pace for the others. Most of the cows walk on the softer grassy verge beside the bitumen road and the calves walk with their heads nestled into their mothers' bodies. The noise of all the brass cowbells is extraordinary. Each one has a slightly different ring and tone, and walking in the midst of the cows is like being in the middle of a jangly, yet strangely harmonious bell orchestra. It's very festive. Pine forest lines one side of the road and on the other side the land falls away sharply to meadows covered in thick bushes of yellow-flowering broom. Occasionally, a cow wanders away, down the slope. At most, a gentle touch with a thin, carved stick brings her back to the

While the cattle take centrestage in the village square, traditional dancing is just one of many other entertainments at Aubrac's *transhumance* festival.

Watching the festivities at Aubrac from a comfortable seat in the doorway of Chez Germaine. For the remainder of the year Aubrac is largely deserted, but happily for pilgrims, visitors and thirsty farmers on the *transhumance*, its famous restaurant, Chez Germaine, survives. Proudly displayed above the kitchen door is a Diploma of Honour awarded in 1959 to its legendary owner, the late Germaine Gros.

herd. More friends of the family join us, people of all ages, and I discover some of them have taken time off work to be here. Then, when the road reaches a high plain and the verges are wider, I see my first swarm of white motorhomes. They are parked in neat, precise spacings, end on to the roadside. Their owners nabbed these prized ringside spots days ago and the arrival of the Puech *transhumance* makes it all worthwhile. They cheer us on from their deckchairs.

Proceedings come to a halt while one of the bulls is unloaded from the truck. He stands quietly while a *tricolore* ribbon is tied around his big tummy and looped under his tail, and a floral tiara is fixed to his halter. More *ratafia* for all and we set off again. The closer we get to Aubrac, the more the crowd builds, until at the entrance to the village people are jammed onto the steep banks on either side of the road. We feel like we are in a bovine version of the Tour de France. 'The Moo de France,' says Duffy. Then, we are in the village proper, a canyon between sombre four-storey granite buildings. Our cows are funnelled through the crowd, into the square and to the front of a large stage. I can't see a thing. It's nearly impossible to move. Somehow, we make it to Chez Germaine, a large café on the other side of the square that is miraculously almost empty. A man is playing the harmonica in one corner by the grandfather clock and we order coffees, beers and warm *fouace*, a bread that locals will tell you was invented by the Aubrac monks. We fall into conversation with one of the men manning the coffee machine, who tells me he has a son in Canberra and kindly asks the owners whether we could go upstairs for a better view down over the square. We find ourselves in a huge empty room with row after row of tables set for lunch. Soon it will be party time! The sound of Isabelle's *cabrette* rises out of the square and we recognise a song from this morning. On the stage, the *famille Puech* are once again in full voice. When their song is over, it's time to move on. The cows walk in single file through equally

A long lunch upstairs at Chez Germaine in Aubrac follows on from the festivities of the *transhumance* below in the village square. The historic photo shows its former owner, Germaine Gros, serving *aligot*, the famous local dish made with potatoes and cheese.

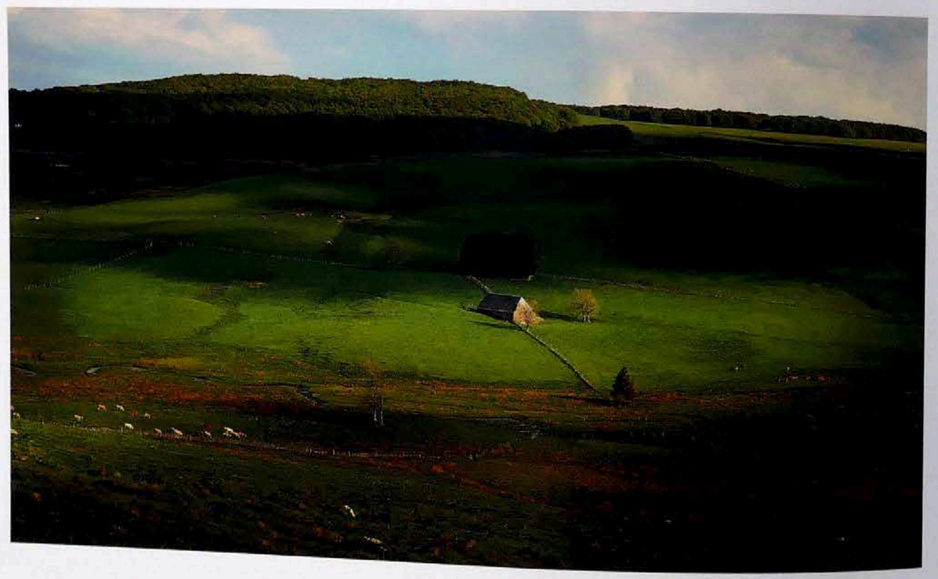
The Hibert's cows walk 50 kilometres from their farm to the high meadows, via the festivities in Aubrac. The cows remember the route from year to year and despite their exhaustion, they speed up once their summer pastures come into view. They can also hear the cries of their *bébés*, who have been brought to the meadow in a truck. Before they can be reunited, their *transhumance* finery is removed. ▸

◂ Finally, their long walk is done and the fancy headpieces have been packed away for another year.

thick crowds on the other side of the village. Someone leads the bull by the ring in his nose. They still have another 30 kilometres to go.

It takes us ages to make our way through the crush to the other side of the village where Laurent is waiting. On the drive back to the guesthouse, he tells us of another family involved with this traditional *transhumance*, the Hiberts, who bring their cows to the land right by La Borie de l'Aubrac and sure enough in the late afternoon, just as the light is beginning to soften, we hear cowbells in the distance. Outside, still several kilometres away, a long line of cows and their minders weave their way down a rise and along the narrow track that eventually passes right by us.

Having seen the beginning of the day's walk, it is fascinating to see the end. The Hibert farm is perhaps 40 kilometres from Aubrac, and we are 10 kilometres further on from the village, so they've come a long way, too. The cows can now see their summer pasture and they can hear the cries of their *bébés*, who have been brought in a large truck to the entrance to the meadow. But before they can be reunited, they must have their *transhumance* finery removed. What happens next is the most impressive exhibition of animal handling that I've ever seen. Between the cows and their field is a narrow bridge. They are stopped just before it while the men wrestle with their collars and remove the garlands. But some, in their excitement, make it onto the bridge with their bells and headpieces still intact. A tall, angular man in a black T-shirt and beret stands alone, about halfway across the bridge, with his arms stretched out at right angles. By the sheer psychological force of his presence, he calms the cows enough to allow him to single-handedly remove their collars and halters. Once all the cows are in the field, the truck is opened to discharge the calves and the noise as mothers and *bébés* cry out to one another is as loud and joyous as the cowbells on this morning's walk. Their *transhumance* is done.



The Aubrac plateau is a naturalist's heaven on earth: it has one of the richest and most diversified array of plants in Europe. Once it was a vast forest, but the monks who arrived in the twelfth century brought innovative new farming methods and cleared the land for grazing livestock.

THEY STOPPED FIGHTING THE CLIMATE AND THE *TERROIR*, THEY BROUGHT BACK CATTLE BRED FOR A MILLENNIUM TO THRIVE IN THESE CONDITIONS AND THEY MADE FRIENDS AGAIN WITH NATURE.

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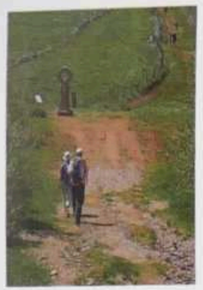
If you can tear yourself away from Laurent's *aligot*, there are two great restaurants an easy taxi ride from La Borie de l'Aubrac. To the west, near Laguiole, is Bras where we are going after our pilgrimage. North, near the faded spa resort of Chaudes-Aigues, is Restaurant Serge Vieira. Serge has been marked 'one to watch' ever since winning the most important international competition for young chefs, the Bocuse d'Or, in 2005. I'd met him and his partner Marie-Aude in Melbourne at a food festival just days after he was awarded his second Michelin star. It was an extraordinary achievement for them – Serge, a chef in just the third year of his first restaurant, and Marie-Aude, who runs front-of-house. When I said I was planning a walk along the pilgrim path from Le Puy, Serge laughed and said that was entirely appropriate as his winning dish for the Bocuse d'Or had been called *Coquille de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle* and was inspired by the fish and seafood along the pilgrimage, not least the scallop of his dish's name whose shell, of course, became the medieval symbol of the pilgrimage. The restaurants where he'd spent his formative years of training were near three of the major pilgrimage cities: Tours, Vézelay and Le Puy. Now, his restaurant is putting Chaudes-Aigues on the food lover's map and there are plans on the drawing board for a hotel and bistro nearby.

Serge was wooed by the regional authorities, who saw the benefits of having an immensely talented chef in their neck of the woods, a part of France with few top-notch restaurants. They found a site in the remains of a medieval castle in a majestic location on top of a hill just out of Chaudes-Aigues and paid for the building's renovation, then Serge and Marie-Aude covered the cost of the kitchen and restaurant fit-out. It opened in April 2009, with a small number of rooms available for accommodation. Sustainable management of the building is important to this talented couple, so solar energy is used for heating water and a bioclimatic system heats the building, which is designed to work without air-conditioning. They also use natural cleaning products, make their own sparkling water on-site and work with their suppliers to minimise packaging. Polystyrene boxes are not accepted – even their foie gras is delivered in recycled paper. There are no layers of starched white tablecloths, but instead the pleasing patina of custom-made wooden tables with little pots of wildflowers that have quite possibly been picked from the meadow outside the window.

Restaurant Serge Vieira wears its eco-credentials lightly. It is a subtle and elegant personal interpretation of fine dining, which Duffy, Ange and I really, really enjoy. It is polished, but not pretentious. Serge grew up in Clermont-Ferrand so he knows how good the local produce is and the menu has a strong regional base: Aubrac beef, milk-fed Allaiton d'Aveyron suckling lamb from Rodez (from the same breed of sheep who provide milk for Roquefort cheese), trout from Auvergne, onions and asparagus from not far south in the *département* of Hérault. His favourite citrus flavours make several appearances, too: grapefruit with the trout, lemon confit with the lamb. On our 60€ menu is line-caught cod with crisp spring vegetables, followed by beef with slow-cooked onions, then cheeses and finally a two-Michelin-starred version of jelly (apple) and ice-cream (honey), which is a delicious finale to a truly unforgettable day.

Ten thousand people and a convention of white motorhomes had made the *transhumance*, not spoilt it. People had come here to see firsthand the age-old farming trinity between man, his animals and the land, because this is where it still exists in its most natural form. The twentieth century, for all sorts of reasons, saw a steady exodus from rural France and a sustained assault on the commerce and values that underpinned it. It nearly saw

The *burons* are no longer used for cheesemaking, but there are still those with long memories who can recall the unrelenting daily routine of milking and cheesemaking. Roles of the team living in the *buron* were rigidly defined: the *cantalès* made the cheese, the *pastre* milked the cows, the *bédelier* minded the calves and the *roul* – sometimes a young boy – was the apprentice.



On the Santiago pilgrim path approaching Aubrac.

off the Aubrac cattle and the *transhumance*. Now, there are young chefs, like Serge, and hoteliers, like Laurent, returning to the place of their childhood with fresh eyes and experience of the wider world, and they may just hold the key to a very different twenty-first century.

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Today's walking is the last we'll do on this heavenly plateau, and it feels a little strange to be back on the pilgrim path without the rest of our companions. How they would have loved the *transhumance*. But if you don't own a motorhome, there's no chance of finding last-minute accommodation. Our route will take us back through the village of Aubrac where we'll stop for lunch. It will be interesting to see it post-festival. From there it's downhill all the way. Laurent drives us to Nasbinals so we can join up with the path at the place where we finished our walk the day before the *transhumance*. It's a small town with big civic pride. Smart paving surrounds a beautiful eleventh-century Romanesque church. We'd clocked an attractive butcher shop near the bar where we'd had a farewell beer with the others two days ago. It's open and we buy a roasted chicken, the first out of the rotisserie. Then it's across the road to the *boulangerie*. The weather is clear and mild, perfect for a picnic.

Laurent wishes us *bon courage* and we wish him, Pat, the children and La Borie de l'Aubrac all the best things possible. We find the pilgrim path and soon we've left the town behind and are back up in the meadows. The further we walk, the more the great long vistas open up all around us. Without Franco's altimeter to consult, I check my guidebook. We are not far from the next major landmark – a deserted *buron* at 1300 metres. 'I feel like we've been in a plane for so much of this walk, looking at the world from above,' Ange remarks. Streams cut through the gullies on the plateau. There was one near La Borie de l'Aubrac. But up here, farmers leave portable water tanks in the meadows to provide drinking water for the cattle. We now know that in some locations, especially around Laguiole, there are Aubrac dairy cows, but the ones we see here are bred for meat. They are sometimes mated with Charolais bulls. As we saw yesterday, the bulls are put out onto the pasture with the cows and then the calves will be born back down on the farm in the new year. While they're all away in the summer, the farmer can get on with haymaking on his lower pastures, filling his barns with feed for the winter.

We feel a deeper level of intimacy with everything around us and an almost proprietorial pride. How much more meaningful and interesting things are when you have some understanding of what it is you're seeing. So much of what we've learned here is thanks to Laurent. His gentle sincerity and empathy with Aubrac have left a big impression on us. When we told him about the folk dancing we saw at the festival yesterday he said, yes, he had a black tunic and hat just like the men were wearing and that there is still traditional dancing at his family occasions. His brother sings the song the Puechs had sung yesterday. What about the *burons*, we asked, now they are no longer needed for cheesemaking, what do the farmers do with them? His family's is used for storage, for feed for the cattle. Are they ever sold? 'If you sell your *buron*, you will only have four fingers,' Laurent had replied solemnly. Farms are getting bigger, he explained – farmers used to have twenty to forty cows, but they're now more likely to have eighty to one hundred. 'More than that and the man will lose the relationship with the cows.' We'd talked about how the physicality and geography of Aubrac has shaped a resilient character. Perhaps it's also the legacy of subsistence living. 'When you have nothing, you have to hold onto it,' Laurent said. He is on a committee that is looking at creating a national park in Aubrac. He really cares about its future.

The church and tower are all that remain of the once-great abbey at Aubrac. Legend and fact intertwine as to its origin in the Middle Ages, but then, as now, the sight of the building gladdened a pilgrim's heart on the long trek across the Aubrac plateau. The tower is now a *gite* where pilgrims can stay.

Late in the morning we hear cowbells, not the solo clanking of a cow grazing in a distant meadow, but the full-on cacophony of a *transhumance*. We are on a wide grassy lane with stone walls on either side, a traditional *draille* or track for *transhumance*, and as the sound of the cowbells grows louder the cattle come into view, about a dozen cows, a few calves and just as many people, including one woman on horseback. We wave and say hello as we pass on our different missions. From the crest of a hill, we see the village of Aubrac outlined on the next hill – the church tower to the left and the taller Tour des Anglais, which was once a fortification, then a storage place for the cheeses made in the *burons* and now a pilgrim hostel. In the distance, a conga of departing motorhomes snakes its way along the road out of the village. We follow the lane down and linger to watch yet another *transhumance* of about fifteen cows. It's a family affair – a woman leads a horse ridden by a young boy, bow-legged elders keep an eye on the cows and everyone carries a stick or a bunch of flowering broom. They tell us it's 25 kilometres from their farm to the summer pasture. They'd started very early and have an hour to go. Laurent said the cows can take a week to regain the weight they lose on their *transhumance*. Thanks to the *aligot*, I doubt our trek to the plateau will have the same effect.

It requires a leap of imagination to understand how the village of Aubrac looked for the 500 years of its life when it was a fortified monastery and refuge for pilgrims. It was all but destroyed in the Revolution, leaving just the church, the tower and some buildings now in private hands. Other austere, granite, rather institutional buildings came later. Yesterday, there was so much going on that it was impossible to imagine how it used to be. But twenty-four hours later, with the crowd, stage and marquees gone, it's obvious the large Romanesque church was built for many, many more pilgrims than the occasional one or two now wandering in for a look.

The original bell from the twelfth century remains, despite two bizarre attempts to steal it by the villagers of Saint-Chely-d'Aubrac, where we will stay tonight. It guided pilgrims to safety and a warm welcome from the abbot, who would greet them with water to wash their hands. The monks and sisters, all of noble birth, would wash their feet and clothes, and feed them.

Like Cluny, the monastery had a web of *granges*, or farms, throughout the region – a lot of food was needed to feed the religious community, as well as its visitors. By the late fourteenth century Aubrac had become the hub of a huge milk, cheese and beef production area. The mule drivers, who brought wine, fruit and salt from southern France, travelled back down to the Languedoc plains with cheeses packed in straw to cushion them from bumps and protect them from bad weather. In 1539, a pilgrim who sheltered from 'cruel' winds at the monastery for three days described his hosts as 'very rich monks'.

I was told a few days ago that l'Aubrac needed to look over its shoulder in order to rescue the present and by doing so, find hope for the future: 'You have to walk in your footsteps before they vanish.' The new agricultural techniques that came after World War Two focused on high-yielding cows, intensive farming and chemical fertilisers. They simply didn't work on l'Aubrac farms. Besides, the cheese didn't taste the same when the cows ate only corn or silage. The industry went backwards and when it became a case of survive or not, farmers sought out the old-timers to show them how it had worked before. They stopped fighting the climate and the *terroir*, they brought back cattle bred for a millennium to thrive in these conditions and they made friends again with nature. We could say the same about the pilgrimage to Santiagio, about why we are walking through these mountains, with scallop shells fixed to our packs and with a very real sense of connection across a millennia to the pilgrims who've gone before us.

No two days are ever the same, says Pat about the extraordinary view from her guesthouse, La Borie de l'Aubrac. It is Mother Nature writ large, with clouds swirling in the sky, morning mists, a succession of flowers in spring and the long snowy winters.