

***La Méridienne* Part 1: Clermont-Ferrand to Sévérac-le-Château**

French presidents like to leave a lasting legacy. Pompidou's centre, Mitterrand's library, De Gaulle's memoirs (and that legendary profile) spring readily to mind. And what of Valérie Giscard d'Estaing, that moderate aristocrat of the Centre? During his post-presidential tenure as President of the Auvergne, the A75 *autoroute* became a key component of encouraging tourism in the region. You could argue that it represents his most enduring achievement.

If it's not too fanciful to give a motorway such an appellation, you could also argue that the A75 is a 'great' motorway. *La Méridienne*, as it's popularly known, approximates the Paris meridian in cutting a 335-kilometre swathe across the Massif Central from Clermont-Ferrand to Béziers to open up some dramatic scenery to visitors who might have otherwise skirted France's granite heartland en route for the 'Med'.

In crossing six *départements* – from Puy de Dôme to the Hérault – the *autoroute* weaves in and out of three regions: the Auvergne, Midi-Pyrénées and Languedoc-Roussillon. One of the highest motorways in Europe, it frequently breaches 1000 metres to reveal some wild and spectacular territory. What's more, the light-to-moderate traffic is unchallenging and – apart from the 7 euros you pay now to view and cross the motorway's crowning glory, Norman Foster's extraordinary Viaduc de Millau – there are no tolls.

The ephemeral beauty of late autumn offered the incentive I needed to drive *La Méridienne* in its entirety. On a wet and misty morning that obscured the extinct *volcans* of the Puy de Dôme, I travelled east on the normally scenic A89 to join the A75 at Junction 2 on the southern edge of Clermont-Ferrand soon after its merger with the A71 and all points north.

Initially, we follow the fertile Plain de Limagne, bordered in the east by the Parc Naturel Régional du Livradois and by the Volcans d'Auvergne in the west. My first detour, at Exit 7, is a brief one to look at Montpeyroux, classified among the most beautiful villages of France. From its steep stepped passageways that climb up among quirky ancient houses of sandstone walls and terracotta roofs towards a towering 12th century keep, you look out across the motorway and the terrain where prosperous householders once grew their valued vines.

Onwards towards the looming interior, the A75 then follows the bends of the river Allier through its narrow gorges. At Junction 11, I exit for a very brief look at Issoire. One of six staging posts along the A75 designated *Perles Vertes*, it appears to boast little more than a grand Hôtel de Ville and a wide choice of shops on the outskirts.

We start to climb relentlessly, to 750 metres and beyond. Evergreens begin to outnumber the yellowing deciduous trees. Bisecting the Cantal and the Haute Loire with help from the vertiginous Viaduc de la Violette, the motorway reaches the formidable Col de la Fageole. Huge signs proclaim the trunk roads east to Le Puy en Velay and west to Aurillac open, but at 1100 metres or so, the pass is often blocked in winter. Today it offers a breathtaking panorama framed by the high plateaux ahead and the Monts du Cantal on one side and Monts de la Margeride on the other. As the traffic races downhill, Saint Flour, historic capital of the Haute Auvergne, resembles a model perched on top of its volcanic outcrop.

The next exit, no. 30, affords an easy diversion to admire Eiffel's Viaduc de Garabit of 1884. Resplendent in 'Gauguin red' and overlooked now by the *aire de repos* and the concrete motorway bridge, the skeletal iron work carries a scary single-track railway line high over the Truyère valley below.

After a break for lunch at the frankly undistinguished Saint-Chély-d'Apcher, another of the six so-called *Perles Vertes*, the motorway pushes into the Lozère, the least populated and surprisingly the

most elevated (on average) of departments. The next 30 kilometres or so, hemmed in by the basalt Aubrac plateau and the Monts de la Margeride as we climb towards the Col d'Issartets, at 1121 metres the highest motorway pass in France, is the most stunning stretch thus far.

At Junction 38, the vast panorama would take even the glummiest mortal's breath away. We are in the heart of the former province of Gévaudan, once terrorised by a legendary lupine beast. Today, a hundred or so wolves roam semi-free in a wildlife park. I join one of the *autoroute's* six *itinéraires découvertes*, or suggested detours, for a look at Marvejols nestling in the basin below. The Lozère's 'second city', this is a 'green pearl' that merits its billing. Step through its imposing 17th century fortified gate and you enter a charming, unpretentious town with room even for a parlour run by 'Tattoo Bob'.

After crossing the river Lot not far from its source and re-joining the A75 on the other side of another spectacular concrete viaduct, the route heads further south towards the Aveyron and my half-way point of Sévérac-le-Château at Exit 42. Since the afternoon has turned balmy, the light is perfect for photography and the Point Sublime is only 20 kilometres east, I head back into the Lozère to stand on a precipice and view a section of the Tarn's renowned gorges.

'Sublime' is the *mot just*. It's one of the best views this side of the Grand Canyon and an appropriate place at which to break my journey down this truly great motorway.

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FACTFILE

Time: All day

Distance: 186kms (Clermont-Ferrand Junction 2 to Sévérac-le-Château); 229kms (including detours)

Directions: Join the A75 southbound (direction Montpellier) at its source from the A71 or at Junction 2 if coming from the west. Exit at Junction 7 and follow the D797 to Montpeyroux, parking at the designated car park outside the village. Return to the A75 Junction 7 and continue south to Junction 30. Exit and turn right onto the D74 in the direction of Faverolles, then left onto the D909 following the sign to the Viaduc de Garabit. Follow the hairpin bends for about 3kms down to the valley floor. Cross over the river Truyère and continue up the other side of the valley and along the D909 parallel to the A75 to Loubaresse, where you re-join the A75 southbound at Junction 31. Leave the motorway next at Junction 38 and take the third exit at the roundabout towards Marvejols. Follow the D900 down a succession of bends for about 7kms to the town centre. Leave Marvejols on the RN9 in the direction of Chirac and Le Monastier, from where you climb steeply to re-join the A75 southbound at Junction 39. Continue to Junction 42, exit then cross back over the motorway on the D995 in the direction of Le Massegros and the Gorges du Tarn. Take the D32 at Le Massegros as far as Baraque-de-Trémolet, where you turn right onto the D46 following signs to the Point Sublime to the end of the line. Return to the A75 and Sévérac-le-Château via the same route.

More information: There are tourist offices for all the main centres, departments and regions along the route, but the best single point of contact is:

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