

***La Méridienne* Part 2: Sévérac-le-Château to Béziers**

The second part of what seems more like a voyage than a mere journey down this epic *autoroute* should be a sunnier affair. After all, it's only roughly another 150 kilometres from Junction 42 to Béziers, the end of the line and a stone's throw from the Mediterranean. This is the Midi-Pyrénées now and virtually the Deep South.

The A75, *La Méridienne* as it's known, roughly bisects the Massif Central on its journey south from Clermont-Ferrand. I've surely already negotiated the trickiest part of the route. Cross the new viaduct at Millau and it's an hour's plain sailing at most.

Unless, that is, the weather intervenes. We're in the Aveyron now, a most beguiling and varied *département*. There's a huge difference between its more domesticated western territory and the kind of wild spectacular scenery found here at its eastern edges either side of the Tarn valley. The spiteful weather turns a landscape scarred by deep river gorges into the original 'blasted heath'. Stray from the motorway and you could imagine bumping into Lear and his cronies or Catherine out calling for her taciturn lover.

As I climb the Col d'Engayresque, we're back at nearly 900 metres and the steep descent affords a memorable glimpse of the distant Viaduc de Millau. The lights at the top of its seven monumental pillars, blinking in the murky beyond, suggest a great liner lashed by a storm. In such conditions, one might baulk at the idea of crossing such a leggy edifice, but it's a testimony to this feat of engineering that – once you've paid your €7 and ventured onto its platform, suspended high above the Tarn valley for almost 2.5 kilometres – it feels more stable than it does back on 'dry land'.

Having already seen Norman Foster's masterpiece from the *aire de repos* (with its fascinating permanent exhibition on the viaduct's construction), I feel cheated that today clearly isn't the time to gape at it from below. The next day, however, the meteorological beast turns as gentle as a lamb. On the way home, I follow the old serpentine *route nationale* that used to bring all the motorway traffic down into the congested town of Millau and out the other side. The road west then follows the Tarn and passes directly underneath the viaduct. Such a perspective brings mere facts to life. You can really visualise how the Eiffel Tower could indeed fit underneath the structure at its highest point.

The road leads me to Peyre, one of the Aveyron's ten *Plus Beaux Villages de France*. Sculpted into the rock face, this little treasure provides breathtaking views of the viaduct. I kept imagining some ex-pat artist who found a piece of paradise way back before the village was classified and popularised. One day she opened her shutters to find that her inspirational view had actually been enhanced by one of the architectural wonders of the modern world.

On the southern side of the *viaduc* lies the Causse du Larzac, part of the Parc National Régional des Grands Causses. Many years ago, I stopped at the Aire du Larzac in the middle of a black night and experienced such a disquieting sense of emptiness that I had to get back quickly into the car. Sunday's hostile weather actually complements this extraordinary lunar landscape of scrub and dolomitic rock. The following day's sunshine transforms it into the terrain of the Lone Ranger.

I take a detour to look at the southernmost of the Aveyron's *Plus Beaux Villages*. La Couvroletade, a kind of miniaturised Carcassonne, was founded by the Knights Templar, who helped to bring agriculture to an inhospitable landscape where today legions of sheep provide milk for the local Roquefort cheese.

One of the *autoroute's* suggested detours, or *itinéraires découvertes*, leads me back to the A75 at Le Caylar, a small town surrounded by outcrops of jagged rock and singled out by a remarkable carved elm in its square, seemingly transplanted from the Navajo Reservation. We're now into the

Hérault department and the Languedoc Roussillon region. So it's no real surprise that the sun breaks through as the motorway hastens towards its final leg via the impressive Escalette tunnel, which transports you from the Larzac plateau towards the Lodévois valley scarily far below.

Stunning though it is, the transition is abrupt enough to make your ears pop. So the next day, I take another suggested detour – back to Le Caylar from the plain via a series of precipitous climbs – that leads me over the aptly named Col du Vent (or windy pass) to a sublime *Table d'Orientation* at Mont St. Baudile, 848 metres high. Given Monday's limpid air, you can see right across the Languedocian plain on one side and the Causse de Larzac on the other.

At the foot of Sunday's descent, however, I take an easier detour at Junction 54 to drive around the Lac du Salagou and take in the weird rock formations of the Cirque de Mourèze. As the startling red-tinged 'lake-scape' hoves into view, I screech to a halt. Chased by hunters, a mother and baby wild boar make a mad dash across my path. I only hope that the dramatic rainbow portends their escape.

The last stage of *La Méridienne* is an easy one past the serried vines of the fertile plain. There remains one last stop. Even on a Sunday, the lovely town of Pézenas buzzes with human activity. The International Toy Museum entices me. For all its grandiose title, the museum houses the private collections of a handful of enthusiasts displayed in five small rooms of sheer delight.

And so to Béziers, where my sedate motorway joins the throng and hubbub of the A9. The city has its architectural moments, but wouldn't tempt me to move here. The A75, on the other hand, has already tempted me to explore more of the spectacular territory that this truly great motorway opens up to privileged motorists.

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FACTFILE

A75 detours

Peyre and the Viaduc de Millau: (From the north) Exit at Junction 45 and take the D911 at the 2nd exit of the roundabout in the direction of Millau (8kms). From the town centre, take the D41 west to Peyre. After a look around the village and at the viaduct, return to Millau on the same road and then join the D809 south in the direction of Béziers and La Cavalerie. Follow the old *route nationale* for roughly 20kms to rejoin the A75 at Junction 47.

Couvertoirade: Leave at Junction 48, heading east on the D7. After about 8kms, turn right onto the D55 and follow the road for another 6kms. Park in the village car park on your left and walk into the village. On leaving, turn left back onto the D55. After 3.5kms, turn left onto the D609, which leads you to Le Caylar, where you re-join the A75 at Junction 49.

Mont St. Baudile and the Col du Vent: (From the north) Leave at Junction 49, take the D9 through Le Caylar to Saint-Pierre-de-la-Fage (roughly 13kms). Pick up the D9 again towards La Vacquerie-et-Saint-Martin-de-Castries and Montpeyroux. Just before the Col du Vent, take a detour on your left to climb to the *Table d'Orientation* at Mont St. Baudile. Afterwards, continue on the D9, marked as the Routes Causses et Vallées de l'Hérault, over the *col* and down through Arboras to Montpeyroux and finally Gignac. Take the A750 west towards Béziers at Junction 58 or 59 to re-join the A75 between Junctions 56 and 57. The total detour is approximately 40kms.

Lac du Salagou and the Cirque de Mourèze: Exit at Junction 54 and take the D609 to Cartels. Then follow the D148 to and around the western half of the lake, using any inviting tracks to drive down to the water's edge. After passing through the charming village of Salasc, turn left onto the D8 for a closer look at the rocks of the Cirque de Mourèze. Turn left onto the D908, which leads through Villeneuvette and Clermont l'Hérault to Junction 57 of the A75. A detour of around 24kms.

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