



On the Trail in France

Ronald W. Kenyon

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Many tourists who visit Paris wish they could discover the real France, the hidden France they have read about in novels and seen in paintings at museums. They would like to visit charming villages, meet "real" French people and savor traditional French cuisine. But how to do it? And, for that matter, does this authentic France still exist? That real France, la France profonde, does exist. Having lived for many years in Paris and speaking fluent French, I know the country well. I love France and the French people and have written this book to share what I have learned. You can follow along as I describe my walks on sections of the 180,000-kilometer network of blazed trails crisscrossing France.

In the first nine chapters of this book I recount the experiences I have had walking in nine very distinct regions of France. Individual chapters are devoted to Auvergne, Finistère--the westernmost part of Brittany, Alsace, the Cévennes Mountains, Provence, Rouergue, the Loire Valley, Emblavez and a section of the pilgrimage trail to Santiago de Compostela--the Way of Saint James.

Much of *On the Trail in France* is devoted to unexpectedly encountering total strangers, enjoying French food and wine, appreciating nature in all its beauty and fury and exploring the French--and other--languages. I met many unforgettable characters, young and old, named and nameless. Elderly raconteurs in Auvergne and Provence. A saucy waitress in Alsace. Precocious children in Finistère and Provence. A Schoolmaster who wanted American pen-pals for his students. A bilingual lady novelist in the Gare de l'Est. Monsieur Prouff, always showing up in a different guise. A modern troubadour. Savvy businesswomen and sleepy soldiers. Students and chefs. Goatherds and dopers. A publican who was a painter. Winemakers and snail wranglers. A phony artist. Penniless pilgrims. They all pass through these pages. And I even had a brief encounter with a serial killer--without learning of his crimes until a year afterwards.

It is almost impossible to write about France without writing about food, and it is through food that we may acquire an understanding of the elusive French character that both intrigues and thwarts us. It is through food that we may grasp the meaning of one of the defining characteristics of France, the mysterious notion of terroir, which I translate as "the soul of the soil." During my walks I ate peasant fare at rough-hewn tables and gourmet cuisine in elegant dining rooms. Steaks and game. Morels and bilberries. Snails and skate. Jerusalem artichokes. Dishes with exotic names: pounti, far, bäckeofe, kouign aman, landjäger, pommes tapées. And who can know France without knowing her cheeses? I savored Munster and Pélardons and Cabicous, tommes and fourmes and pavés.


I drank lambic apple brandy in Finistère and neya sussa wine less than a week old in Alsace. A beer brewed from buckwheat. I even tracked down a wine called Clinton.

Visitors may be surprised at the diversity of languages, dialects and cultures evoked in these pages. I met people who could shift effortlessly from French into Breton, Alsatian, Occitan or Provençal. I even discovered one of the world's least-known languages, Welche, that has nothing to do with Wales.

On the Trail in France is a welcome guide for anyone in good health who practices recreational walking and desires to learn more about France and the French. It is my hope that these chapters will not only entertain and inform but encourage readers to venture off the beaten track to discover the human and natural treasures awaiting them. To start you on your way, I have included a compendium of practical information in a separate chapter entitled "Your Walk on the Trail in France."

As an additional enticement, I have included more than forty photographs illustrating some of the sights I saw...on the trail in France.

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