**Beasts of burden lighten the load**

Anna Selby

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* When the author Robert Louis Stevenson decided to walk through the wild and desolate Cevennes in southern France with only a donkey for company, arguing that it would be more sure-footed and less flighty than a horse, his adventure was regarded as somewhat eccentric. Not only by his friends at home but also by the villagers of Le Monastier, who issued dire warnings about wolves and robbers. Nonetheless, they were more than happy to sell him a donkey.

Stevenson's idea, published as a memoir entitled *Travels with a Donkey* in 1897 and recently reprised by Christopher Rush in his book *To Travel Hopefully*: *Journey of a Death not Foretold*, has also been revived in the Jura mountains in the Franche Comté region of eastern France. The appeal is the same: the chance to travel through solitary places of natural beauty without the slog of a pack on your back. And the Haut Jura is indeed beautiful. Much of it is higher than anywhere you'd find in Britain (we were always above 1,100m, sometimes higher) but the scenery is a good deal less savage than the top of Ben Nevis in Scotland. There are dramatic outcrops of limestone, gorges, glaciated cliffs, dense forests and forbidding escarpments softened by flower-filled meadows. Occasionally, there is a dilapidated barn, once a small chapel, but there is little trace of man.

Of course, romantic notions can come unstuck when faced with problems of a purely practical nature. My own first challenge was how to fit seven days of clothing for three people - not to mention the four bottles of red wine my husband was carefully stowing - into two panniers, each weighing a maximum of 25kg. Stevenson designed his own pack to double as a "sleeping sack" made of green waterproof cart-cloth and lined with blue "sheep's fur". Within 10 minutes of trying to load the donkey on his first morning, his hopes were, he said, "in the dust". The pack would not stay on even for a moment.

My own solution was to leave half of our belongings in the boot of the car. Even so, it seemed far too much for a small creature with fine-boned legs and delicate unshod hooves to carry. Our donkey, Gatino, the smallest of the four in our party, looked likely to sink under the weight. Of course, he didn't. Donkeys have not been beasts of burden for millennia for nothing and Gatino moved off without demur as we headed for the hills.

For the next seven days, our lives took on a different rhythm - our pace adapted to that of the donkeys. In the morning, the children went to catch the donkeys from the field and groom them. My 12-year-old son Christian groomed with such enthusiasm that our guide, Antonie, exclaimed: "*Il brille!*" In the meantime, we packed and balanced the panniers. (If they didn't weigh exactly the same, the pack would - and occasionally did - slip under Gatino's belly.) Then we walked through a thick pine-scented forest or an open alpine meadow, filled with wild flowers and butterflies.

At times, we seemed to have found Arcadia. Stopping for our lunchtime picnic in the sort of alpine meadow where you half expected Julie Andrews to appear at any moment and start singing, we basked in the sun. The donkeys, unladen, grazed under the trees. Antonie explained flowers and herbs to the children and unrolled a curled leaf to reveal a wriggling green larva. A curious herd of cows clanged their way over to investigate us only to be chased away by the children.

Other days were not so idyllic. One long trek involved a lot of arduous uphill walking through sinking mud and we all arrived exhausted and filthy at that night's farm. And though six of our seven days were gloriously sunny, the Jura's weather is unpredictable and half of our penultimate day was spent sheltering in the lee of a barn from a spectacular mountain storm.

The Haut Jura has not changed much from the France Stevenson would have known in the 19th century. There were no televisions or electronic games in any of the places we stayed but none of the children seemed to mind. Instead, having arrived at a farm for the night, they would make friends with the farmer's children and improvise games. One late afternoon we walked up to a waterfall in the forest where Christian dived into the icy mountain pool for a dare. We visited cheesemakers and husky-drivers - sleighs are the preferred method of travel in winter - and passed through hamlets full of Swiss-style chalets with every window ledge covered in pots of red geraniums.

Walking at a donkey's pace, there is plenty of time for conversation and contemplation, though, of course, daydreams could be rudely interrupted. Usually, placid, amiable and patient, sometimes one or other of the donkeys would come to an abrupt halt and have to be coaxed, cajoled, bribed and, if all else failed, pushed. In the meantime, another donkey would push on in a sudden determined sprint, its pannier pushing you into the ditch as it passed. The air often rang with cries of "*Viens*, *Blanchette*", "*Allez-oop*!", "*Arrête*!" or simply "Stop!" One of the donkeys didn't like water and would refuse to cross a stream. Another shied away from narrow gateways.

On the whole, though, it was a happy relationship, with gratitude on our side for carrying the load. If we didn't weep, as Stevenson did when at the end of his journey he sold his donkey, we were certainly sad to say goodbye.