The French escape with volcanic spas, hiking and no crowds

Chaîne des Puys is a range of 80 dormant volcanoes in Auvergne, which is loved by the French – but still less known among Britons



Regional Nature Park of the Volcanoes of Auvergne (Photo: Jason Friend Photography Ltd/Getty)

By Katy Dartford

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I'm standing at was once the mouth of a volcano. It erupted around 10 thousand years ago inside another, splitting the other one in two and spewing ash as far as Switzerland. The mudslide it caused buried a nearby Mesolithic camp, killing those dwelling there and preserving their bones.

But right here, right now, you wouldn't know it. Instead of a fiery furnace, I'm standing below the summit in a fairy-tale forest, with beech trees twisting like gorgons, forming a cooling canopy above me, and bright yellow broom bushes adding a splash of colour to the wooded green landscape.

As Europe experiences another scorching summer, instead of heading to the coast, I've come inland to the Chaîne des Puys – France's volcanic highlands, in the Auvergne – for a more refreshing escape.



Katy swerved the French coast for a quieter region (Photo: Katy Dartford)

Located in France's Massif Central, the Chaîne des Puys is a range of 80 dormant volcanoes stretching 40km along the Limagne Fault. Here, 35 million years ago, after the formation of the Alps, and the break-up of the continents, magma rose to the surface creating this volcanic landscape. The range is part of the Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne, France's largest natural park and the biggest volcanic complex in Europe.

Didier Sauvestre, a tour guide, tells me that one volcano is the rocky needle of the Puy Chopine ("puy" meaning volcano in the local dialect) and the other is the crescent-shaped cone of the Puy des Gouttes, formed 30,000 years ago.

With summits at 1,181m and 1,134m, they are not that high and are covered in vegetation and forest, providing an easy hike from the base at around 1,000m. Their location and altitude mean

they are also less affected by the warmer Mediterranean climate of the south. The nearby city of Clermont-Ferrand experiences average summer highs of around 25°C.

The Chaîne des Puys is also much less crowded than other mountainous regions, such as the Alps. Even during the peak summer season, I only pass one or two other hikers.

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The Auvergne is still relatively unknown among international travellers with most tourists to the region coming from within France and visiting the spa resorts of Vichy, Le Mont Dore and Chatel Guyon.

Getting to Auvergne requires some effort for UK travellers with Lyon being the nearest airport – there's also a direct train from Paris to Clermont-Ferrand – but it's worth it.

"Our area is usually a stopover for a long trip. But, as people discover and love the Auvergne, they often stay longer, for two or three days," says Virginie Deles from the Pays de Volvic, Terra Volcana tourism board.

As we walk, Didier tells me that when Julius Caesar came here in 52BC and suffered his only defeat in Gaul at the hands of Arverni chieftain Vercingetorix. In his writings, he described a “Lacus Magnus”. While the Limagne Plaine is no longer a “big lake”, there are plenty of others where you can take a dip.

The pretty Aydat Lake, formed when a lava flow dammed rivers and streams, was thought to have been a retreat for wealthy Gallo-Romans. The Gour de Tazenat, meanwhile, was formed in a shallow volcano crater called a “maar” and is near the town of Riom, the historic capital of Auvergne.



Riom was once the capital of Auvergne (Photo: Getty)

Even the name of the volcano we climb refers to the region’s watery past. Puy Chopine was known as Choupina, meaning pond, or marsh, in French. This was an allusion to the small lake that once sat between the Puys des Gouttes and Chopine.

As I reach the top of Chopine, I am almost blown over by the wind and the whole scene reminds me of the Scottish Highlands. The top of the crater is covered in heather and, from here, I can see a green landscape dotted with cones, lava domes and ancient crater lakes.

Didier points out the Puy de Dôme in the distance, the biggest volcano in the Chaîne des Puys, at 1,465m high. Crowned with a weather station and a communications mast, the landmark is

where physicist Blaise Pascal demonstrated the existence of atmospheric pressure in the 17th century. Today you can get to the top by the Panoramique des Dômes train.



There's plenty of greenery around Puy de Dôme (Photo: Julien Fourniol/Baloulumix/Getty)

Also nearby is Puy de Pariou, which features on the label of Volvic water bottles. Volcanic activity here created many springs with the layers of volcanic rock naturally filtering and enriching the water with minerals.

Roaming around the slopes of the volcanoes are roe deer and a few chamois. Didier tells me that marmots and golden eagles are also gradually returning to the area.

We finish with another volcanic summit, the Puy de la Coquille, which Didier reckons is named after a drinking vessel – perhaps due to the toast one makes when reaching the summit. The view is even more impressive with peak after peak before my eyes.

I soon find out, however, what it might be like to be in the heart of a volcano.

The ground shudders and, after a moment of suspension, I am falling through the air before being ejected on the Namazu rollercoaster, the ride mimicking the intense and unpredictable nature of volcanic activity.



Vulcania theme park is fun, and educational (Photo: Universal Images

I'm at the Vulcania theme park where you can immerse yourself in the world of volcanoes through interactive exhibits and simulations. Vulcania was created in 2002 as a place for fun, but it has a serious educational purpose.

The central museum is built around a large, deep "crater" with a spiral ramp that connects the four levels of exhibits. As you walk down the building, the crater emits deep rumbling sounds, recorded from Mount Etna, that make you feel that an eruption is about to take place.

In the lower-level theatres, I'm flying with golden eagles over the landscape in "The Volcanic Awakening" and snakes whip at my legs as they try to escape an exploding volcano in the "Awakening of the Giants".

Along with the nearby Lemptégy Volcano, where you can walk around a real volcano, these sites provide a full understanding of the region's volcanic activity and its unique terrain.

There are other places to stay cool. At the Grotte de la Pierre, in 10°C, you can learn about the history of Volvic stone. And the Aiga Resort in Châtel Guyon has thermal springs with the highest magnesium content in Europe. These waters are said to help digestion and relieve muscle tension.

A soak is the perfect antidote to hiking among the dormant volcanoes. Once in the spa's relaxing waters, which are almost silky, I feel my tired legs rejuvenate. As I reflect on my stay, I decide Auvergne and the Chaîne des Puys are a worthy replacement for hiking among the crowds of the Alps – or for bathing on busy French coastlines. I will be returning to this less well-known part of France and its thousands of years of history.

Getting there
Lyon is the closest airport with direct flights from the UK. From the airport, it is around two hour's drive to Châtel-Guyon.

Direct trains run from Paris Bercy to Clermont–Ferrand, sncf-connect.com/en-en/intercites.

Staying there
Aiga Resort Thermal & Spa, a thermal spa complex, has apartments from £60 a night, aiga-resort.com.

Further information
terravolcana.com