

Unexpected pleasures

Carol Kubicki discovers the passerelle of Lac de Monteynard



Our brightest blazes of gladness are commonly kindled by unexpected sparks, so said Samuel Johnson.

Samuel Johnson's words are wise and we are sure he would have owned a motorhome had the opportunity arisen. We try and have as many 'unexpected sparks' as possible on our campervan holidays by planning as little as possible. When we cross the sea to continental

Europe, we usually have a good idea which countries we will be visiting and may have a destination or two in mind but, as will be familiar to many readers of *MMM*, it is often those unplanned places that you stumble upon that deliver the most joy; the calculation goes something like $E=SD^2$ (where E is expectations and SD is shattered dreams).

My partner, Anthony, and I were pottering back from southern Tuscany and wanted to spend a few days walking or cycling in France, and were searching for inspiration; Anthony gets a perverse enjoyment from climbing steep uphill roads and paths, whether cycling or walking, while I incline more to the horizontal and we were struggling to find somewhere that satisfied us both. In a fairly desperate attempt to find an area that would maintain our marital harmony I browsed lazily through the ACSI guide; this was still early June and we were making the most of the good value sites the ACSI card offers. The

ACSI campsite descriptions are often cryptic, but we like to think we have developed a skill in interpreting them. In the Rhône-Alpes region a campsite description that promised 'one of Europe's most beautiful footpaths', caught my eye; how could we resist investigating such a bold claim?

The campsite with this audacious description is Camping de Savel, 15km from La Mure, in the Isère department of the Rhône-Alpes region. La Mure is a pretty French town on the Route Nationale 85 and is part of the Route Napoléon (in 1932, a 325km section of the RN 85 from Golfe Juan to Grenoble was inaugurated as the Route Napoléon, to commemorate Napoleon's return to France from exile in Elba in 1815).

Napoleon stopped in La Mure on 7 March 1815 and it is worthwhile following in the footsteps of the emperor and pausing in the town to stock up at the supermarket and buy a map of the area from one of the many book shops in the main street, as the shopping opportunities beyond La Mure are limited.

The D116 to Mayres-Savel winds pleasantly above the azure Lac de Monteynard reservoir. As you turn off the highroad for the campsite after Mayres-Savel, if you can tear your eyes away from the fantastic view over the lake with its mountain backdrop, look to your left and you will see the Passerelle du Drac, one of the reasons why walking in this area is so special.

The Passerelle du Drac is one of two high metal suspension



It doesn't get much better than cycling on peaceful French roads

The Passerelle du Drac: spot the slender bridge that spans the gorge

bridges over the flooded narrow gorges around the Lac de Monteynard; they look spectacular and, to those not keen on heights, they also look terrifying. The Passerelle du Drac is the nearest to the campsite. Built in 2007 it is 220 metres long and 85 metres above the water. The second, the Passerelle de l'Ebron, is slightly shorter at 180 metres long.

The Lac de Monteynard was created by damming the river Drac in the 1960s and flooding the valley and the village of Savel. The village of Mayres, high on the hillside decided to honour the lost village by adding Savel to its name. As you would expect, the French make good use of the lake as an amenity and there are plenty of opportunities for watersports.

Camping de Savel has an enviable position on the lake shore. The steep hillside is terraced and this means that most pitches have a lake view. Out of the high season of July and August there is a good chance you will be able to secure one of the pitches at the water's edge, with nothing between you and the blue water of the lake. The temptation to spend the day sitting in the warm sunshine and watching the boats on the lake and the red kites flying above is powerful. At 500m above sea level the air is crisp, even in the burning sun and topping up your tan is a pleasant experience. However, we had come to test the claim that here was one of Europe's most beautiful footpaths, so activity was required.

Both of the passerelles are so new that they did not appear on our *Institut Geographique National* map for the area. However, they are well signed, visible from a distance and very popular and so few

The flooded gorge of the River Drac



Crossing the Passerelle du Drac



navigational skills are required to find them.

We chose to spend the day cycling, as this gave us the opportunity to see more of the surrounding countryside. This choice did mean that we spent a large component of the first half of the day pushing our bikes. It is not unusual for us to try and cycle in places where this should not even be considered on two road bikes; mountain bikers would be able to cycle more of the route. For walkers, a popular choice is to take a boat across the lake and walk back over the two passerelles. This is a walk of about 13km and during July and August there are regular service boats ferrying visitors across the lake, during low season the campsite staff can arrange a morning crossing.

As we left the campsite, a large French walking group arrived at the embarkation point by boat. We prefer some solitude for our days out and were immediately pleased we had chosen to cycle, as this meant we could get ahead of such a large group. However, the Gallic ramblers were on a route march and quickly overtook us when we stopped for photographs. Of course, as cyclists, we quickly caught them up along the track that traversed the hillside above the lake and



The cemetery at Col de Cornillon

they seemed to be very amused as we rang our bells to alert them to our presence and formed a guard of honour with their walking poles as we cycled between them. We smiled in an English embarrassed way and they all grinned and shrugged in the French manner. We didn't want to repeat this performance and so resisted any photography opportunities and cycled quickly with our heads down towards the Passerelle du Drac, along the path that hugged the side of the narrowing gorge at the end of the lake.

The passerelles are a metal version of the rope bridges found in the Himalayas and South America and are suspension bridges with wires underneath for additional support. However, even this double support does not mean that the bridges do not flex. Having seen too many Indiana Jones films, we approached the bridge with some trepidation and cycled cautiously onto it, but the seductive sight of the deep blue water 85 metres below through the mesh floor of the bridge made

cycling across that little bit too stimulating and we dismounted and continued our crossing more cautiously, immersed in the beauty of the surrounding crags and sparkling blue water. However, the babble of 50 French walkers was fast approaching and they bounded determinedly onto the bridge without a hint of wariness and soon the bridge was bending sinuously, causing us some alarm and concern about the maximum load of the bridge and we made a dash for the opposite shore.

From the bridge we took the very steep and rocky track up to Villarnet (any mountain biker would find cycling down this thrilling, but pushing a bike up it proved to be hard work and we were glad of shade from the trees to keep us reasonably cool). We took a break from the constant uphill and, leaving the bikes, followed a narrow path on a bend in the track that took us to a vertiginous viewpoint over the lake; this allowed the marcheurs to take the lead and enabled us to continue up the wooded hillside at our own pace.

Villarnet is a sleepy village without even a café for much needed refreshments (we were surprised that no entrepreneur had taken on an economic opportunity, given the large numbers of walkers who now pass through the village between the two passerelles). From Villarnet you can follow the signed path down to the Passerelle de L'Ebron, but for us it would have meant once more being surrounded by hardy French ramblers and we opted for the quiet lanes through L'Orme and Villard-Julien to the Col de Cornillon.

This is beautiful and classic French cycling, empty roads, stunning views whichever way we looked and the occasional silent hamlet. We stopped to watch two red kites following a tractor; these beautiful and distinctive birds never fail to give us pleasure. At the Col de Cornillon

Other attractions

There are plenty of other walks from Camping de Savel. From Mayres-Savel a steep zigzag path goes up the steep mountain from the village and you could choose to continue to Le Senepy at 1,750 metres or make a circular walk on the lower flanks. Either way, the views will be worth the slog.

The D116 continues high above the Lac de Monteynard and is a quiet enough road for pleasant cycling.

Windsurfing and other water sports are popular on the Lac de Monteynard.



Where to stay

Recommended campsites in the area

▲ **Camping de Savel** 38350 Mayres-Saval
Tel: 0033-476-811479 Web: www.camping-savel.com
Open: April to October
Cost: €16-€22 (£13.90-£19.15) motorhome + 2 adults including hook-up.
The facilities are good and fresh bread is available to order every morning.

Wild camping is available on a grassy area at the beach at Mayres-Saval, a few hundred metres from the campsite. The area has a barrier and a small fee is paid at the campsite.



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(885m) there is a beautifully situated cemetery and we took a much-needed rest here. The view across to the Massif des Écrins to the east and the Vercors to the west was enchanting, with attractive craggy mountains still covered with plenty of snow.

At St Jean-d'Hérans, we took the road down to the Pont de Cognet. This road winds very steeply down the hillside, losing all the height we had gained, to a narrow section of the gorge where there is an old bridge over the River Drac. This is also the site of a hydro-electric power station and there are dramatic signs warning the passerby of 'Danger de Mort' and graphic photographs demonstrate

how quickly the water level can change here according to the power station's needs; we heeded the advice and did not get any nearer to the river than leaning over the bridge.

From a bridge in a deep gorge, it is obvious that the only way is up and Anthony tackled the five hairpin bends with gusto, while I pushed my bike up the 500 metres or so, humiliated when another cyclist sauntered past. The climb was worth it, though, as the undulating road that traversed the hillside through La Baume and St-Arey gave us some wonderful traffic-free cycling and put new life into my tired legs. We rested at the village pump and washhouse in St-Arey, washing the sweat and grime from our faces before the last stretch back to Mayres-Saval and then appreciated the freewheel back down to the lakeside and the campsite.

Camping de Savel has an attractive bar and restaurant which overlook Lac de Monteynard and is the perfect place for savouring a cool beer after a day of 30km of cycling and walking and 750m of ascent.

Was this one of Europe's most beautiful footpaths? This is an extravagant claim and it depends on the criteria you use. However, it is well placed for a pleasant break, being on many motorhomers' route either north or south and gives first-rate value for money in the picturesque stakes. ■



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Pitches by the lakeside at Camping de Savel are easily available in early June