Greetings, friend, and welcome to your brief guide to the Le Puy pilgrimage route. The following pages address the 10 most common questions for would-be pilgrims. I myself walked the Le Puy route during May and June 2016 - this information is based on my own experiences, plus input from other walkers. Here we’ll discuss:

Q1: What is the Via Podiensis - Chemin du Puy?
Q2: How does it compare to the Camino Francés in Spain?
Q3: How much will it cost me?
Q4: Do I need to know French for the walk?
Q5: Do I have to be very fit to do the walk?
Q6: Is navigation on the walk difficult?
Q7: What equipment should I take?
Q8: Where will I stay during the walk?
Q9: What's the best guidebook to use?
Q10: What is it like to be a modern pilgrim?

I sincerely hope this material aids your preparation and planning. Pilgrim, bon chemin!

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Q1: What is the Via Podiensis - Chemin du Puy?

Many people assume the Camino de Santiago or Way of St James refers to a pilgrim route through Spain. In fact, Spain is only the convergence point for the many paths which start well before the border. The Via Podiensis, or Chemin du Puy, is one of the four major French branches of the Camino, and for its accessibility, beauty and variation, it ranks as one of the most popular long distance walks in Europe.

In France, long distance walking is well-organised and popular. The 740km Via Podiensis is designated as a Grand Randonnée - or ‘Great Walking Route’ - with the abbreviation GR65. As such, the route, infrastructure and amenities are superb for long distance walkers and pilgrims.

Why does the route start in Le Puy? Well, for centuries the bishopric in the Haute-Loire has been considered worthy of pilgrimage in its own right. With its relatively large size, medieval core and 12th century cathedral, the town has always occupied an important place in French ecclesiastical history.

A bishop from Le Puy - Godescalc - was among the first pilgrims from France to walk the Way, crossing the Pyrenees with his retinue around 951AD. The following 500 years were to see a huge upsurge in pilgrim numbers. Then, as now, Le
Puy provided **everything needed for pilgrims** - accommodation, facilities, and a cathedral for blessings and guidance.

While today’s GR65 may not always follow the exact ancient pilgrimage route, it usually runs pretty close. Every year, a lot of thought by French planners goes into its planning and preservation. For this reason you’ll usually pass through the same villages and by the same shrines and chapels as pilgrims of old, but be able to avoid most major roads and ugly urban areas. Think of it as a **spiritual, historic walk** through magical French countryside.

**Q2: How does it compare to the Camino Francés in Spain?**

**By length**, the two routes are comparable. The Via Podiensis measures some 730-750km (Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint Jean-Pied-de-Port) whereas the Camino Francés is reckoned at around 770km (Saint-Jean in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain).

The numbers of pilgrims on the trail is the largest difference. The Cicerone walking guide estimates over 10,000 pilgrims...
per year depart on the Le Puy trail towards Santiago. This number is dwarfed by those starting in Spain - it’s thought over 200,000 journey every year to the cathedral in Santiago. In practical terms this means you’ll have a much quieter time on the Le Puy route!

Differences can be seen in your fellow pilgrims. People of all ages - with many students and walkers in their twenties - tend to walk the Camino Francés. For better or worse, those on the Via Podiensis fit an older demographic - you’ll meet a lot of retired couples. And while those in Spain are likely to come from all over the world, the Chemin du Puy is a much more French affair. Neither of these differences should put you off, however.

Type of terrain and environment are fairly different between the two routes. The Camino Francés, though undulating and mountainous in parts, is not considered a particularly strenuous walk. The Via Podiensis on the other hand tackles some lofty heights and big variations in elevation between stages. And while the route in Spain often visits largish towns - even cities - the French walk is a much more rural, smaller-scale affair.

Other differences between the routes include paths, sights to visit and costs. Because so many more people walk the
Camino in Spain, paths are often like mini-motorways. In France the trails are smaller, more organic and unspoilt. Churches and holy sights along the Le Puy route are invariably open and often free...in Spain this is sometimes not the case. Finally, there’s costs. I’ll discuss these just below, but yes, France is more expensive than Spain for long-distance walking.

Q3. How much will it cost me?

The Via Podiensis in France will probably cost you 20-30% more than the Camino Francés in Spain. In Spain, albergues can be had for around €8-10 per person per night. In France you’re looking at an average more like €13-17. For that little bit extra, though, you’ll be staying in nicer places - something the French Way has over the Spanish. French albergues - called gites (discussed in section 8) - are invariably clean, well equipped and often located within stunning historical buildings.

Food and other general items you might need will also put you back more than in Spain. The Via Podiensis sometimes deposits you in very small villages along the route. These pretty little places might typically have only one or two shops, so that’s where you’re obliged to buy your groceries. I
remember writing on the site about how easy it was to burn through cash - in one village store for €10 I got some bread, half a dozen eggs, chocolate, fruit, a tin of lentils, a beer and no change!

How much you spend, of course, depends on the kind of experience you’re after. If you want to stay in swish chambres d’hôtes (French guesthouses) and eat at a restaurant every night, you can easily burn through €50-70 per day. If you prefer a simple pilgrim’s life (for most people the main reason for doing it), clean dorm accommodation is inexpensive and a great option for meeting your fellow wayfarers. You can save on food bills by cooking and preparing your own meals as much as possible.

When I did my pilgrimage I kept detailed notes on costs, a summary of which can be found by navigating to this page. Here’s the nitty gritty though. Not including the costs of equipment, flights and insurance for a month (important items to work out) I managed 33 days on the trail for around €30-35 per day, or around €1100 for the whole shebang. My main costs tended to be accommodation, at a daily average of around €16, food, at around €12, and then for other random items, a few euros more. I think you’d be pushed to see so much of beautiful, rural France for much cheaper than that.
Q4. Do I need to know French for this walk?

In a word, *non!* As a pilgrim on the route between late May and late June 2016, I met many fellow-walkers whose French was negligible to non-existent. Three South Koreans I came across had only rudimentary *English* to navigate with, but still seemed to progress serenely on their way. In order to make reservations for places to stay, they enlisted the help of gite-owners or fellow pilgrims to call ahead. It’s **amazing what can be done** with a lot of good humour, patience and if necessary, signals!

Many of the people who run the gites d’étape - stage hostels where pilgrims stay - speak some English. In essence, this means yes, you can survive with little of the local language. The French on the Via Podiensis are used to hosting international walkers, and because of the very spiritual nature of the walk, all kindnesses and hospitality are usually extended to pilgrims.

However..! A good pilgrim must ask him or herself to what extent they’d like to interact with the people around them and experience this incredible culture. The French **truly appreciate** (and in some cases treat better) those pilgrims who make an effort with the language. And though you’ll survive in English,
you will come across people who have none at all - a scenario which makes life pretty difficult.

A lot of us Westerners may have had a little French in school - if you’re planning to walk the Via Podiensis, now is the perfect time to brush it off. We’re not talking huge amounts of study time here - just basic shopping phrases, greetings and talking about yourself should do it. For those more linguistically-minded, it goes without saying the more work you put into your French beforehand, the more rewarding your experience will be.

Q5. Do I have to be very fit to do the walk?

Like our previous question, the answer is no, but it certainly helps. The average pilgrim on the Via Podiensis will be covering 20-25km per day, that’s 12-16 miles. At such a speed the 730-750km will take you around 30-33 days, excluding rest days. Someone with a reasonable base-level of fitness, able to adapt to the rigours of walking every day, will be fine. But for someone completely unused to exercise, this harsh new regime will come as a shock.

Those with low levels of fitness, or little experience walking, should do some training beforehand. Spend the months and weeks before departure building up your distance on practice walks until you’re comfortable, say, with a 15-mile day. Don’t
forget to carry a fully-loaded pack when doing this - the idea is to make the first few days of your pilgrimage as least painful as possible.

Even the fittest walkers suffer aches, pains or minor injuries along the Way. Carrying too much weight, inappropriate footwear, or walking too far too fast are all principal causes. Blisters are to be expected and it’s likely you’ll go to bed exhausted (but happy!) most nights. Don’t take this experience lightly - very few people walk this far in such a short amount of time.

Take heart, though, and don’t be put off. During my walk I met several pretty incredible individuals. The oldest pilgrim I came across was in his mid-80s. He managed consistent 25km days, keeping pace with me for a period of around 2 weeks. He sure went slow, but he got where he needed to every day.

I knew other people who’d never done much exercise before and had a few pounds to shed, to put it lightly. They suffered the first few days but after a period of adjustment, managed to get comfortable with both distance and pack weight. The human body, you’ll learn, is designed to walk. You’ll find strength and resolve you never knew you had, and you’re
constantly encouraged and supported by others walking alongside.

**Q6. Is navigation on the walk difficult?**

Sadly, not much information on the Via Podiensis is available in English (one of the reasons I’ve written so much about it). Right up until leaving for my own walk I had big anxieties about navigating my way safely across half of France. I needn’t have worried - the GR65 which makes up the Le Puy route is **superbly signposted**. For its entire 740km length, to find a stretch of 200 yards without a way marker is a genuine rarity.

The French system of route marking is both clever and practical. The *balises*, or way markers, use a system of red and white painted signals to tell you whether to stay straight, turn left or turn right. Almost as valuable, little red and white crosses tell you which paths not to follow. The system is so easy to understand and comprehensive, in all probability it’s possible (though not desirable) to walk without a guidebook.

On the occasions when you do encounter problems, help is usually at hand. Other walkers are never far away on the path, and friendly locals are sure to point you in the right direction.
The GR65 is very well known in the regions it passes through and the way is usually obvious.

A couple of things you can do to reduce your chances of getting lost are pretty much common sense. The night before, study the next day’s route on your phone, map or whichever guidebook you happen to be using. Often the gite where you’re staying, or your fellow pilgrims, will be able to help out with this. Make a note of your general direction and which towns or villages you’ll pass through.

On the route itself, pilgrims usually get lost through lack of attention or daydreaming (an easy thing to do, believe me!). I remember once missing a way marker and continuing on until an unmarked road. I stood there scratching my head for 20 minutes before I finally worked it out. A bit of squally rain had kicked up at the vital moment - struggling to put my waterproofs on, I’d missed the sign telling me to turn left.

Q7. What equipment should I take?

A lot has been written about what gear to take on a long-distance walk - it’s an area to research thoroughly before departure. The following is only a very brief summary of items to take. A more comprehensive guide can be found back on the site.
Firstly - walking **boots or shoes**. These need to be well-fitting, cushioned, waterproof if possible and broken in adequately. You need to have a pair of shoes that will look after your feet for almost 500 miles, so making the right choice is critical.

Next, a **backpack**. For most walkers it’s best to travel as light as possible. A comfortable good quality 30-40 litre backpack will carry all the stuff you need. Make sure it fits you, feels right on your back when fully loaded and has all the features you desire (side pockets for bottles, compartment for water bladder etc).

Next, **clothing**. Three sets of shirts, socks and underwear is enough. You wear one set, have the next set for tomorrow, and one spare. Washing your stuff after arrival at the gite becomes part of your everyday routine. A pair of trousers, a pair of shorts. A fleece top, pair of sandals or flip-flops and a good waterproof. A lightweight travel towel and scarf or wrap of some sort to cover your neck from the sun or wind. A sunhat. Try and take clothing that’s lightweight and quick drying.

**Tech**. Most people find their phone will do everything necessary for a pilgrimage - take photos, make calls, surf the internet and provide maps. If you do opt for heavier stuff, like
a larger camera, tablet or e-readers, remember this simple fact - it’ll be heavy and you’ll have to carry it! Ask yourself if you really need to take something before including it in your pack.

You’ll need a basic wash kit for personal hygiene, and small first aid kit with suncream, bandages, pain-killers and plasters. A walking pole - or two if you prefer - is an excellent shout. Make sure you have a rain cover for your pack. You could consider taking a compact umbrella. A guidebook, a compass, a Swiss Army or multi-use knife for making lunches and opening bottles of wine. Earplugs, a lightweight sleeping bag…and you’re set!

Q8. Where will I stay during the walk?

As a reasonably cost-conscious pilgrim, your main port of call will be the ‘gite’ - a French albergue or hostel. There are two types - private and municipal. Municipal places are run by the local council and are designed to be cheap ‘stage’ hostels where walkers can break up their routes. They’ll invariably have a kitchen so you can cook your own food, and accommodation will be in small to medium-sized dormitories. These places are good and cheap, costing only €10-13.

Private gites run along the same idea - simple shared room accommodation for walkers, but often you’ll be offered the
option of demi-pension, or half-board. This is where your private host will give you a cooked evening meal and sturdy breakfast alongside the bed for the night. This is obviously more costly - a typical private gite with demi-pension will cost you €30-35. If you take the room-only option in these places it’ll likely set you back €15-18.

Along the Via Podiensis/GR65 you’ll rarely have a stretch of more than 5-10km without a gite. Accommodation is plentiful. And of course in the villages and towns, you’ll have several options to choose from. Finding places to stay is never a big problem, but in high season it’s a good idea to phone ahead. From late June to July you’ll find more walkers doing the same route as you, and the French tend to pre-book their accommodation.

Sleeping in dorms is fun, but there will be nights when you long to be alone. For a bit of privacy, or a slightly more ‘civilised’ experience, many gites offer private rooms for a little bit extra. Then there are of course hotels along the way, and also chambres d’hôtes - the French equivalent of bed and breakfast. Both these latter options are obviously more expensive.

Finally, for the more adventurous pilgrims, camping is a realistic option. Plenty of towns and villages have municipal
campsites - in France the pastime is hugely popular. You can also ask at your gite whether they mind if you pitch your tent outside. For true penny-pincher, you could camp ‘wild’ - the Via Podiensis route is rarely far from empty, beautiful countryside. I knew several pilgrims who did this, experiencing no problems or complaints. That said, with municipal gites so cheap and the probability of occasional bad weather, even the diehard camper should look to spend at least some nights indoors.

Q9. What’s the best guidebook to use?

Over on the website, there’s a dedicated post on which guidebook to take with you - and where to buy it. The summary below borrows from that more comprehensive list.

Michelin Chemins de Compostelle Le Puy-en-Velay – Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port

If size and weight are important considerations in your choice, consider the slim Michelin guide. Measuring only 20 x 10 x 1cm, each double page offers a profile view of the stage with elevation in metres, notable landmarks with distances from the start, what shops and amenities can be found where, addresses and contact numbers of local accommodation, an accurate section of the Ordnance Survey-style Michelin map and a little diagram of how far you’ve come in total.
The Way of St James France – Le Puy to the Pyrenees (Cicerone guide by Alison Raju)

The Cicerone has **lovely background detail**, historical summaries and very sensible advice regarding the paths and places you encounter. It’s definitely the choice for someone who wants to know about where they are, and what happened in the past. It has great detail on accommodation, contact numbers and practical information on the towns and villages on the route. Maps are not a strong point.

Miam-Miam Dodo St-Jacques-de-Compostelle GR65 Guide de Randonnée

This trusted ‘go-to’ French guidebook lists every accommodation option, no matter how big, costly, small or cheap. It has all the information you need on what amenities are available where. Distances and plans of the routes are included along with descriptions of local points of interest. As the ‘market-leader’ guidebook, each year sees a new shiny edition with the latest information within its pages. Even if you don’t speak French, this guide has great, **easy coverage of the practicalities**.
TopoGuides: Sentier vers Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle (3 titles)

Full, comprehensive Ordnance Survey-style maps cover all areas of the walk. Modern, with colour pictures and a sensible lay-out, the TopoGuides have excellent coverage of accommodation options, suggested itineraries for your walk and accurate distances. The guides have specific navigation advice concerning the long distance footpaths and delve into a reasonable amount of background as to the places you visit. However, like the Miam-Miam Dodo, it’s in French, and sadly no single volume covers the entire Via Podiensis route.

Q10. What is it like to be a modern pilgrim?

Walking a pilgrimage route like the Via Podiensis endows you with several priceless gifts. The first is time. Your simple and sole task each day is to walk from one point to the next. Nobody will tell you what to do, where to stop or how to think. Passing slowly through incredible landscapes, the rhythm of your feet and beauty of your endeavour invariably provoke strong feelings. Life becomes a scenic meditation, and simple pleasures become satisfying to your soul.
The next gift is **companionship**. Though you may be alone right now on this long winding trail, you’re never truly without a friend. Pilgrims move along at roughly the same speed and you’ll become familiar with all your trail buddies. These people are all ages and nationalities, and come from all walks of life. You’re all bound by the same simple thing - the Way. Long conversations on the trail and evenings spent laughing at the table warm the spirit greatly.

**Self-knowledge** is your next gift. In walking so far you’ll encounter all kinds of challenges…Do you have the strength to carry on, can you endure? Pilgrims discover huge reserves of inner strength, overcoming all kinds of problems to get up the next day and start all over again. Inner-belief and self-reliance begin to take root in your being…soon you begin to wonder in which areas of your life you could apply this new-found power.

The **pilgrim spirit** you discover soon becomes a way of life. Pilgrims help each other out, in turn receiving assistance in their own hour of need. Conversation becomes frank and honest in a way quite unusual back in the ‘real world.’ No-one will laugh at you, take your things or force you in any way - a respect between fellow travellers permeates the journey. Look for answers and often they will come - through coincidences, situations or conversations. The only real problem most have
is in leaving the trail for home - such are the blessings of the journey.
Share this guidebook

If you know someone else who might like this mini-guidebook, you’re most welcome to share it with them.

All I’d ask is you be a good pilgrim, and don’t charge anyone or change its contents in any way.

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About Tom

Tom is a writer, speaker and life-long traveller. His site, IndieLifestyle.net, helps people change their lives through growth, challenge and practical philosophy. He’s a big fan of push-ups, veggie food and medieval castles.

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