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Long walk to freedom

A stylishly converted mountain hut miles from any roads in the Auvergne region of France is to be Nell Card's home for three days. But first she has to get there ...



Rock steady ... Niercombe buron, in the sparsely populated Auvergne hills

There is a tiny stone hut on the edge of a bluff in the Cantal mountain range in the Auvergne region of central France. Standing on the opposite ridge with a week's worth of kit on our backs, we could see the white smoke of its just-lit fire catching on the wind. We skittered sideways down the flank of a steep, wooded valley and made our final ascent to Niercombe - a remote, off-grid buron perfect for two. More than 3,000 burons once peppered the hills of the Auvergne. Until the 1950s, these small stone shelters were used by dairy farmers to produce and store *salers*, a nutty, buttery cheese named after the local breed of cattle. Now only 200 burons remain. Many are in ruins, some have been transformed into rustic restaurants or refuges for walkers, three continue to produce cheese and one has been converted into a unique holiday home, billed as a "cure for modern living".

The Auvergne is one of the least populated regions in Europe - there are five cows to every person in the Cantal, we were told. The hut is a 90-minute hike from the nearest farm, four miles from the nearest road, and a world away from London's St Pancras International, where our journey had begun two days previously.

I boarded the Eurostar with my boyfriend, Will, on Monday at 7am. We changed trains in Paris and again in Clermont-Ferrand. From there, we took a single-carriage train through increasingly remote green hills towards Aurillac, the nearest major town. We could have flown from London to Rodez or Brive, or from Paris to Aurillac, but, if you really want to experience the remoteness of this region, it's best to travel by train.

At 7pm that evening we were met at the station by Isabelle - owner of both the buron and a B&B in Aurillac. La Chapellénie occupies a 14th-century building that has been imaginatively restored. In a vast, dark, stone-floored reception room, armchairs cluster around an open fire; decanters filled with jewel-coloured liqueurs rest on vintage suitcases. The reception area (once a medieval street and still partially cobbled) leads to a sleek kitchen that guests can use in the evening. Breakfast is served in the conservatory.

Three enormous en suite rooms lead off an ancient spiral stone staircase. Ours was encased in the deep-red planks of a single sequoia - a tree that was felled to make room for Aurillac's underground car park. Throughout, walls are either bare stone or partially stripped back to the plaster, exposing four centuries of paintwork and wallpaper. Each room is infused with the smell of ancient woodsmoke.

Way to go



Staying there
Doubles at La Chapellénie (+33 6 8024 2333, un-jour-en-auvergne.com) cost from €150 B&B. A two-night break at Niercombe, which sleeps six (two in a nearby outhouse) costs €950, with a third night free in September and October, including transfer (by Land Rover or guided walk) to the buron. All food for two or three days costs €150pp. La Roussière (+33 4 7149 6734, laroussiere.fr) has doubles from €78 B&B. Dinner is €26pp, including drinks. To contact La Tuillière, call +33 4 7147 0660. All food and accommodation were provided.

Getting there

Nell's travel was provided by Rail Europe and Eurostar (08432 186186, eurostar.com), which has returns from St Pancras to Paris from €69. Fares from London to Aurillac start at £146 return. For bookings, contact Rail Europe (raileurope.co.uk, 0844 848 4070).

We had an aperitif with Isabelle and talked about the buron. Frederick, Isabelle's Austrian husband, purchased the 300-year-old hut in 2004. With the help of local craftsmen, it was gradually restored. There's no electricity, no Wi-Fi and no phone signal. Water comes from a spring and you're unlikely to see anyone else for days. By this point, the buron had reached mythical status in our minds, but we weren't there yet ...

The next day, Isabelle drove us into the mountains towards La Roussière, a remote B&B at the foot of the Plomb du Cantal peak. A converted 18th-century farmhouse, it is owned by Brigitte and Christian - a mountain

Our guide led us up grassy slopes, pointing out buzzards above and wild flowers at our feet



Say cheese ... the simple interior of the buron is kitted out in beech, stone, felt and linen

guide who would walk with us to the hut the following day (there are no obvious paths). On the drive, we got stuck behind a truck full of *salers* cattle wending its way up the mountain; the unseasonal, incessant rain had delayed their annual ascent.

"That evening we joined other guests - a young family of three and an older Belgian couple - at the *table d'hôte*. Before the meal, we took our pick from Brigitte's selection of 10 aperitifs. Will

had the cat on his lap; their dog was curled up beside the inglenook fire. Outside, white clouds passed quickly across the eroded green peaks of extinct volcanoes. A herd of horned cows nuzzled the grass, their heavy bells clanging.

"*C'est la France profonde*," announced a guest, sinking into the sofa with a glass of luminous yellow liqueur. At breakfast, we filled up on homemade cinnamon yoghurt,

croissants with quince and rose jam, and bowls of tea. As we prepared to set off, we noticed the herd of cattle in front of the house was on the move, too. The rain clouds cleared completely as we followed them up the mountain. It was a fairly tough 10km walk to Niercombe. Christian led us over mountain springs and up grassy inclines, pointing out buzzards above and wild flowers at our feet: purple mountain pansies, yellow gentian (the root of

which is used to make the luminous liqueur), violets and buttercups were scattered across the high grasslands. We heard the bark of a stag nearby.

Happily, Christian had factored in a lunch break at La Tuillière, a buron that caters for hungry walkers. Roselyne has lived here alone, without electricity, for 18 years. When we arrived there was a cauldron of vegetable soup bubbling over the open fire. Gas lamps lit the main room, where we were served the set lunch: kir, soup, *truffade* (a local dish of pan-fried potatoes, cheese, garlic, bacon and parsley), salad, cheese and apple tart, washed down with a bottle of red wine, all for €25. As we ate, Roselyne sat under the chimney smoking roll-ups, her back against a massive netted ham that was curing beside the fire.

That afternoon's climb, on full bellies, was arduous. As we cut across the final ridges Bernard, another mountain guide and owner of the nearby refuge, La Fumade Vieille, was preparing the buron, stocking the kitchen and lighting the fire for our arrival ...

The metre-thick stone walls of Niercombe are dappled with ochre lichen and surrounded by dandelions and tufts of sweet-smelling gorse. A tiny wooden front door leads to an open-plan room under a vaulted stone roof. The interior has been kitted out with simple, natural materials: beech, stone, felt and linen. The upper floor is the living area (we slept under duvets on built-in horsehair sofas).

Downstairs is a shower room (there is hot water) and a dark kitchen where we found bread, saucisson, steak, strawberries, cheese (obviously), a jar of fresh chestnut soup and a generously stocked wine rack. Everything was sourced from the market in Aurillac and was impeccably fresh and flavoursome. Suddenly alone, we lit the lamps and candles, built up the fire and opened a bottle of wine as the wind whistled outside.

We quickly fell into a simple routine at the buron. We got up before dawn to watch the sun rise and the clouds clear from the valley below, then scurried back to bed for a few hours. We made huge breakfasts (goat's milk yoghurt, scrambled eggs, toast with homemade Reine Claude jam) then sat on the stone bench at the front of the hut studying maps, the peak of the Puy Griou rising in the distance.

Each day we packed food bundles and tramped out for hours into the Parc des Volcans d'Auvergne, which extends to nearly a million acres. We climbed the Col de la Chevre in search of marmots. The ridge is 1,618m above sea level and was still partially covered in slabs of thick snow. Thin cloud tumbled over the ridge, and on more than one occasion we were scuppered by rocky vertical ascents. In the early evening, we kicked off our boots and sipped cold beers on that front bench. Deer grazed in the distance; cattle bells and waterfalls filled the silence.

La France profonde may be a somewhat overused phrase, but by day three, I think we had finally understood what it means.

Splendid isolation ... More places to get away from it all

Italy

La Molinella, Umbria
This little old watermill amid the peaceful Umbrian hills has been transformed into a stylish bolthole for two, with shabby-chic interiors, vines, potted lavender and a swimming pool. Though Annie, the owner, will let you in, you will then be left alone, with the nearest major town, Perugia, just under an hour away. Hiking, riding and making your own fun are really the only entertainment for miles. La Molinella costs from €995 a week, and is closed from November to April (+39 340 634 9783, sawdays.co.uk).



Czech Republic

Tara, Staré Hamry
A gorgeous wooden cabin sleeping 10 in six rooms, with hip lighting, traditional rugs and long verandas, Tara is set in a 15,000 sq km mountain forest reserve and is surrounded by its own 20-acre wild flower meadow. It's two hours' drive from the bar-filled city of Brno (Ryanair flies there), but has uninterrupted views of nature for 12 miles - not a telegraph pole, light or house in sight. The cabin is available through One Off Places (£850 a week, oneoffplaces.co.uk).



Switzerland

Chalet Grouse, Valais, Switzerland
The Swiss Alps are more peaceful than the French in summer, but for real seclusion choose a chalet on the outer reaches of a tiny hamlet such as Ayer in Val d'Anniviers. There, the Chalet Grouse (from €750 a week, availability this summer, holidaylettings.co.uk) on a steep hillside surrounded by pines, has three bedrooms and balconies offering mountain views.



Scotland

Torsa House and Island, Argyll & Bute
Sheltered between the Isle of Luing and Degnish Point is the one mile by half a mile island of Torsa. The island, once home to 11 crofting families and now available as an exclusive rental, is 16 miles south of Oban, reached by ferry, has a medieval fortress, and otter, minke whales and dolphins can be spotted from the shore. The house sleeps six and has a half-acre walled garden, plus use of a motorboat. There's one week left for this year (20-26 July, £1,125), so you'll have to hurry or wait until next summer (01852 314274, torsa-island.co.uk).

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL VENNING FOR THE GUARDIAN



Stone aged ... the sitting room at the 14th-century La Chapellénie in Aurillac, above, and, right, Nell sets out to explore the walking routes around Niercombe