



*Photograph: Chris Hellier/Corbis*

## How to tread lightly

What has impeccable eco credentials, four legs and can alleviate tiredness in children on long walks?

*Kevin Rushby finds out in the Alpes Maritimes*

I made it through embarkation, I think, without being noticed. There were no accusatory shouts, no sudden lurches into nightmares of public shame and humiliation. "Call yourself a green?!" And once on the plane, of course, it was simply a matter of keeping my head down. There was only Sophie to deal with, hissing across at me, "We shouldn't be here. Think of the polar bears - all drowning. David Attenborough cries himself to sleep." Help! Is every flight going to be like this from now on, I wonder? Green-guilt trips. Four-year-old Maddy, gazing down at the English Channel, tries to spot bears - Pooh, Paddington, Lars - all drowning, not waving. Daddy did it. I crouch lower in my seat. We could have taken the train to the French Alps. We could have walked. Shelley did it in 1814 and it only took a couple of weeks at 30 miles a day.

At Nice airport, however, a line of private jets salve the burning fires of green-guilt. Those super-rich super-polluters - global warming is all their fault. And look at all those sparkling yachts. Do those tycoons ever shout: "Turn that gold tap off! Save the planet!" How absurd they are.

I dragged Sophie and Maddy away from the car-hire office to the bus stop. Gandhi was right. Consume only what is necessary. Tread lightly. The flight is all in the past, we're pure green from now on. No hire car. Old habits of holiday hedonism be damned.

We took the bus into the mountains, the Alpes Maritimes. In our bag were sheets and towels to save on hotel-washing. We would spurn their free soaps and shampoos. Unfortunately Maddy rather let the side down by saying, very excitedly and loudly, "I've never been on a bus before!"

But what a bus it is. The road through the Gorge de Daluis creeps along a rocky ledge, hundreds of metres above the twisting blue waters of the river Var, to the small town of Guillaumes. There we meet Christine Keiffer who runs a trekking agency in the spectacular Mercantour national park, 800 square miles of sparsely inhabited mountain terrain on the French-Italian border. She introduces us to our vehicle for the week, a 15-year-old Provençal donkey called Gideon. The beast's green credentials are impeccable: while Maddy hugs him, he's even trying to eat a plastic chair.

"Are donkeys like horses?" I ask, doubtfully. I have never liked either kind of animal, ever since a disastrous expedition in the Sudan some years ago when I fell off a stationary animal in front of a large crowd of onlookers. But Christine is certain that her donkeys are different. "They are like people," she says, "Lazy, greedy - and intelligent."

Gideon confirms at least one of these by dropping the plastic chair and starting to eat a wooden support post of Christine's rather wonderful mountain home. I wonder if it's too late to go back to the car-hire place. But Maddy has already attached a pink lead rope to Gideon's halter and is exchanging sweet nothings with our pack animal. "He says he loves me," she announces.



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### Part Two

"Donkeys can't talk, Maddy."

"Don't be horrible, Daddy - he might hear you."

Christine briefs us on how to load, handle and drive Gideon. "Show him you're boss," she says, "And don't let him eat while you're walking." Then our route for the days ahead is explained. Every day, we will walk along marked paths through the mountains, stopping the nights in various auberges, retreats and outposts. Dinners, wine and packed lunches are all provided. There is a detailed map, a guidebook to donkey-management, and an emergency phone number. Nothing can go wrong. We set out.

The first uphill section teaches us our first lesson. Gideon is the boss. He ambles along at his own pace, eating whatever takes his fancy. Grass, flowers, herbs, bushes and small trees all go in one end and emerge, a short time later, at the other. Occasionally he freshens up by letting his willy dangle - something that fascinates Maddy who had thought he was a girl. It's all very educational and the scenery magnificent.

France is certainly the place for trekking with donkeys. Maybe it's the influence of Robert Louis Stevenson whose classic *Travels with a Donkey* was inspired by a journey through the Cévennes in the 1870s. Nowadays, there are over 80 farms and centres dotted around the country that will organise walking expeditions. The advantages with young children are obvious: the donkey's antics are an endless source of amusement while an occasional ride alleviates tiredness. Don't be misled, however, the kids need to be good walkers as riding is tiring in itself and sometimes the paths are simply too steep to risk the saddle.

Accommodation on our first night was simple bunk beds in the tiny hamlet of Sauze. Bernadette, our hostess, proved to be a brilliant cook and her wine jug refilled itself periodically with very palatable local plonk. In the morning, Gideon helped me out of my hangover by standing on my toe - do remember to take stout walking boots. Our boy was in fine fettle, even managing a trot through the village when he sighted a bed of hollyhocks that needed eating.

After we finished apologising to the householder, we moved on, wending our way up the Var valley, surrounded by jagged peaks and shady forests. During the hot part of the day, we dozed in the long grass, lulled by the sound of Gideon's munching. We were better at controlling him by then, having made the discovery that a stick waved in the air would energize his steps.



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### Part Three

Prosaic as the choice might seem, Stevenson's little gem of a story is the perfect accompaniment to a donkey trek, his tussles with Modestine in the Cévennes made Gideon all the more bearable. Until, at least, the final day.

It had been a long march, climbing to over 2,000m in hot sun and then descending steadily with Gideon insisting on more and more snack breaks, the low bushes spitting grasshoppers as he browsed. In a moment of exasperation I broke a dry stick on his backside, but without any visible effect. Then we came to a spot where the path did a tight hairpin over a deep chasm. I went to have a look. Gideon did too. His head appeared next to mine, then his shoulder. The side of the pack saddle smacked me square between the shoulder-blades. Gideon turned and the last thing I saw as I pitched forwards was his mild brown eye, regarding me with infinite wisdom. "That's for the stick," it seemed to say.

The tree that clung a few feet below the edge saved me. That and the stop knot on the end of Gideon's head rope. I swung around, grabbing wildly, and got a branch. Gideon had barely flinched as my full weight came to bear. I clawed and crawled my way back to safety. It occurred to me to beat Gideon within an inch of his life. Instead I sat down and drank some spring water.

The crickets sang. Far below, the mountain torrent splashed. The sky was blue. We had not been inside a vehicle or a shop for days, not even handled money. Maddy had already tramped nine miles that day and still had a smile on her face. Gideon gave me the asinine equivalent of a Gallic shrug, then went back to cropping the grass. I lay back on a patch he had yet to eat, feeling peculiarly exhilarated and glad to be alive. We were treading lightly and enjoying it too.