

Bridge of the steel ribbons

By BRIDGET MARTIN

It looks like a piece of embroidery — a strip of ribbon, pierced by seven slim needles threaded with multiple strands of gossamer. Stretched across a valley in southern France, however, it is no embroidery, nor a sculpture, but a 290,000-tonne bridge.

At 245m, the Millau viaduct is the highest bridge in the world. The tallest of its supporting piers, at 343m, is about 22m taller than the Eiffel Tower (including the antenna). At 2.5km, it is also the longest of its type.

A connection in the motorway link between Paris and Barcelona, the bridge spans the River Tarn gorge, which cuts a deep gash between two plateaus.

Traversing the Tarn Valley before the viaduct was opened in December, 2004 involved a long trek down a winding road into the valley, through the town of Millau and up the other side.

Now the trip takes minutes — the viaduct is said to cut it by 100km and up to four hours. And it is a marvellous spectacle.

A nature-lover, I'm not prone to enthuse over steel and concrete, but the Millau viaduct has me pretty breathless.

We first glimpse the 90m supporting cables, such as the rigged masts of seven yachts, looming across a field. Then we are, literally, upon it.

The bridge has a slight curve, designed to prevent drivers from experiencing a floating feeling.

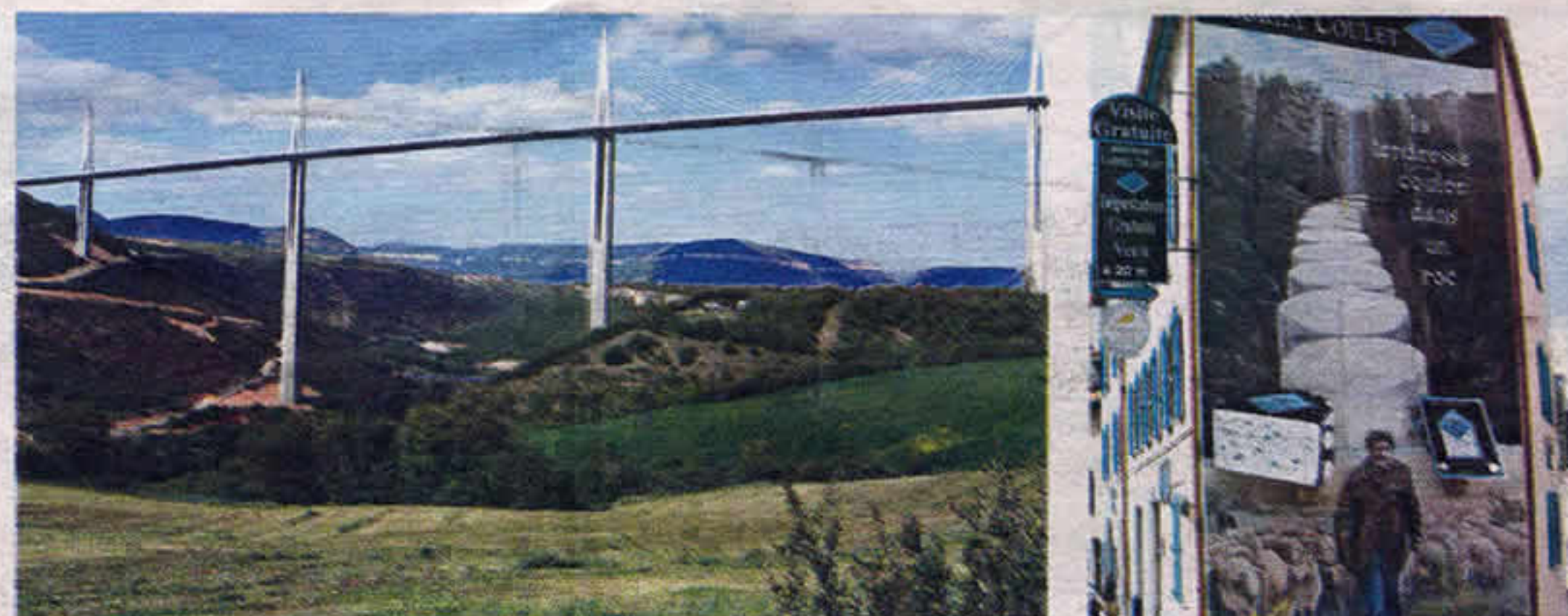
As a passenger, I am mesmerised by the repeating patterns of the central supporting cables as they fold and unfold like the ribs of a fan.

Later, we drive to the official viewing point below the bridge and, along with busloads of other sightseers, we stand next to the third pylon. No longer ethereal, it is a massive post of concrete.

A strange and distant rumbling draws our attention to the traffic far above our heads. Far below we can see the bridge which the viaduct replaced, now dwarfed by the new edifice.

The viaduct is in the department of Aveyron, in south central France, an area renowned for its medieval architecture.

Ten of France's most beautiful



villages are here, but I can only wonder how the judges picked them. Every town and village is a postcard scene of ancient stone buildings, with traditional sloping roofs of scalloped, fish-scale slates.

Two of these villages, Conques and Estaing, are on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain.

Pilgrim walkers from all over Europe and beyond pass through,

symbolic scallop shells dangling from their backpacks. They spend the night in modest hostels near cathedrals as they draw closer to their spiritual goal.

We visit another pilgrimage site of sorts, in Aubrac, in the north-west of the department.

It is mid-May and, the snow having melted and the ski season ended, it is time for cattle to make the journey to upland meadows where they will graze

for a few months, providing milk for the wonderful local cheeses.

But first they have to undergo a ritual, the transhumance festival of Aubrac, which marks the departure of shepherds for the mountains. With flowers and flags entwined around their horns, herd by herd, they are walked into the town square to

be paraded in front of judges. Their milk and cheese is considered, their decorations, coats and behaviour assessed and then they are walked off into the mountains, followed by a crowd of well-wishers (at least as far as the cattle trucks, these days).

I haven't run with the bulls in Pamplona, but I can now say that I have walked with the dairy cows in Aubrac.

Aveyron is justifiably famous

for its cuisine. Just a few kilometres from the modern marvel of the Millau viaduct is Roquefort, home of the blue cheese.

On a guided tour, we descend into deep caves, the only place in the world where conditions are suitable for the transformation of ewe's milk into the famous cheese.

One challenge of the day is deciding where to eat. The local restaurants are superb, and not

FACT FILE



GETTING THERE: Air France flies daily from Paris to Rodez, in the centre of Aveyron (www.airfrance.com). Ryan Air has cheap daily flights to Rodez from Stansted airport in London (www.ryanair.com). Or take a train from Paris to Clermont Ferrand. Avis car hire at the station, (13 63 33; www.avis.com.au).

The Millau viaduct is a one-hour drive from Rodez; tours to the viaduct leave from Millau.

MORE: Millau tourism office, phone 33 (0) 5 6560 0242, www.ot-millau.fr. Rodez tourism office, www.ot-rodez.fr. or phone 33 (0) 5 6575 7677.

Cable vision: (Clockwise from far left) The massive bridge over the river Tarn; traditional dancers and decorated cows at the festival of Aubrac; painted wall in Roquefort, and the Tarn valley

particularly expensive. Most offer a package deal — four or five courses, chosen from an extensive menu — and often serve an extra *amuse bouche*, or "mouth amuser", as a taster while you wait for the entrée. The goat's cheese ice cream and the beetroot sorbet stay in my memory as among the most outstanding tastes we encountered.

As with so much in the Aveyron, tradition and modernity are flawlessly combined.