

For doomsday believers, this is the only place that will survive Dec. 21, 2012

6 JULY 2011 - A tiny remote village in southern France is being billed as a haven against the end of the world by Apocalypse devotees.

Hundreds of websites suggest that the rocky outcrop – or the upside-down mountain, as it is known – that soars above the village of Bugarach harbours a series of caverns and tunnels that have magical power and may even serve as a base for aliens.

It seems Bugarach, with its tiny population of fewer than 200, may be the place to be on Dec. 21, 2012, when some suggest the world is going to end based on calculations of the Mayan calendar. The date supposedly signals the end of a 5,125-year cycle and the end of the world as we know it.

Many have already come seeking refuge in the village. Residents, however, are not happy to see their town transformed into a haven for “Apocalypse believers and lunatics.”

The village and its mountain, which rises 1,200 metres in the Corbières Mountains, has been the subject of endless myths for centuries, sparked by the mysterious heretical sect the Cathars, who made their home in the region before they were driven underground in the 13th century.

A few kilometres away is the village of Rennes-le-Château, which is said to have inspired Dan Brown, the author of *The Da Vinci Code*. The region is full of ruins from medieval religious sects and orders, including the Cathars.

Many have portrayed Le Pic du Bugarach as mystical because of its unique shape. Geologists, however, explain it by saying that the mountain exploded after it was formed and landed upside down.

It is said to have inspired everyone from Jules Verne in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* to Steven Spielberg in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Myths and inspiration aside, what worries local residents is an expected influx of devotees in the months leading up to Dec. 21, 2012, and the possibility of a mass suicide like the one in which 74 members of the Order of the Solar Temple died in a series of suicide pacts and murders.

“This place is bubbling with activity,” Jean-Pierre Delord, the village’s mayor, told Le Figaro.

UFO enthusiasts are frequent visitors, New Age enthusiasts come for the supposed benefit of magnetic waves from the mountain or to search for a secret passage, while others hunt for treasure.

“Some websites in the U.S. were selling tickets to come here,” Delord told The New York Times. “We are 200 locals; we don’t want 2,000 to 3,000 utopians showing up in Bugarach.”

Delord told Reuters the number of visitors to his sleepy village has risen to 20,000 since the start of this year, which is double last year’s figures.

The mayor has since taken matters into his own hands and contacted the police and a French government agency for monitoring cults, asking for help. “If it happens as in Mr. Spielberg’s *Close Encounter of the Third Kind*,” Delord told The New York Times, “it would be necessary to call in the army.”

The head of France’s sect watchdog certainly isn’t underestimating the situation. “We don’t want to be paranoid,” Georges Fenech, told Reuters, “but we are taking this seriously.”

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