




A whirl wind tour of France via the Dordogne

or

3 Wheels on my Wagon & I'm Singing a Happy Song!

Thursday 26th May 2011		A tour with Mel Harvey
	<p>After work, a friend, Mel and I went to Ashe Farm for a shower and dinner before taking on the A303/M25 challenge to the Channel Tunnel. Although it was busy, traffic was flowing smoothly, and we boarded the train at 11.15pm, for a swift journey to Calais.</p>	
Once we had disembarked, we drove to Cite Europe where we parked amongst other motor homes and spent a quiet night.		
<p>Friday 27th - Today was a very long day. We drove from Calais to very near Vihier. Vihier was our chosen destination because I had used the aire before. However, because sat nav wouldn't let me put in the road name, I put the first that came up on the list! (mistake number 1!!) Sat nav turned us off the main road onto a lane. I asked Mel to turn round, which he did at a small cross roads. Unfortunately – and it was probably due to being tired – he did not see the ditch along the road – and down went our back wheel and up came the front driving wheel! – We were going nowhere!!</p>		



Fortunately for us a lady was driving up to the cross roads and watched us. She spoke English. – She and her husband, Hortense & Benoit Rocher, grew grapes and brewed wine, and lived 50 yards from the cross roads. She very kindly phoned her husband, who came out with a friend and a tiny tractor. Fortunately, our towing eye was the side of our soaring wheel, and the pull of the tractor put the wheel on the road, and Mel was able to drive out of the ditch with not a scratch, dent or bruise!! He isn't driving my van again! We were then invited to spend the night in their garden at the vine yard, which we readily accepted. (They are part of the France Passion Scheme).

After a hasty dinner of practically an all day breakfast (the only ingredients that weren't frozen) which we shared with Oushka, their dog, we settled down for an exceptionally quiet night. – I woke at 3am to go to the loo, and there was no noise what so ever. Not a bird nor cricket, - nothing. However, we were woken at 7.30am by Oushka, telling us it was breakfast time. She is their guard dog, and lives outside. She sat outside our door until we were up and breakfast cooked. (She had the bacon rinds!)





Sat 28th May - Once we had washed up we went up to the house to buy some wine straight from the cellars. Anjou Rouge 2009 – very tasty. We then, after more profuse thanks to our rescuer, drove the 23k to into Vihiers where we located the aire and filled up with water and emptied the loo. We then parked up under the trees and explored the village. First we bought bread and chocolate croissants before finding a cold, stone bench in the sun, and ate the croissants – they were delicious, better than those in the UK! The next stop was a coffee – in a small cup and very strong, which we drank outside. Heaven!

While we were there we saw a wedding taking place. It was very interesting. – They drove around the town, horns blaring. The bride was in the first car with white flowers on the bonnet of the car, then came some of the guests (we guess they were immediate family, as there were many people in the square). The groom and his man came in the last car which was decorated with effigies of the bride and groom (a bit like our “guys” in November), These were wielding brooms and mops, symbolising working together. It was very entertaining.





I then drove to Puy du Feu, a place Mel wanted to see. On our way we stopped at a chapel built in a nature park, dedicated to the area. There were some lovely views.



Then it was on to Puy du Feu. We parked up with other motor homes on an aire for 5 euro per night.

Then we entered the park. It was fabulous. We will go again, but spend longer so we can see it all over several days. It is a sort of theme park, but with a difference!



First we walked down to watch the dancing water to Baroque music while we ate our picnic lunch. Very pretty and very relaxing.

Looking at the programme we decided that we would watch all the "spectaculars", and made our way to the Coliseum where we watched as two Christians drew fish in the sand of the arena, before being chased and captured by 4 Roman soldiers, who shoved them down a grid in the centre of the arena (presumably to the cells!). The crowd, who were many, booed and hissed the Romans.



The atmosphere was amazing, and this was before the “show” started. There was so much going on it was impossible to write it all down. It wasn’t long before “Caesar” started a Mexican wave which went all around the vast arena several times. Then came a parade of slaves, Roman Centurions, geese, camels, ostrich, Bacchus (complete with his grapes being trodden by his slaves in a vast tub), a Leopard, and 4 lions. It was very spectacular. – We couldn’t understand the commentary, but we could tell the crowd were on the side of the Christians! Then we saw a gladiator fight. The Christians died, and the winning gladiator successfully petitioned Caesar for the life of one of the female slaves, but he had to continue to fight a contest, and she became his property if he won.



Then came a chariot race with 4 chariots and 4 horses per chariot. A wheel came off the blue chariot; The red chariot broke; The green Chariot fell apart, and our hero in the white chariot won. Caesar was not pleased, and the hero was forced to watch as his lady was tied to a stake and 4 lions were let into the arena (1 at a time). The first lion “ate” some Christians who tried to take refuge in a wagon. Then 3 lions were sent into the arena to eat the lady, but they sat down and yawned, and one just rolled onto his back and stretched.

Caesar was very displeased. The lady was saved for now, and the lion handler cut her free from the stake. Then out came a tiger, which walked the rim of the arena where we were sitting. This was followed by a Hyena.
It was then time for our hero to be acknowledged by Caesar as Victor and crowned with a laurel wreath. Then the hero and his lady rode a lap of honour. It was spectacular!



Leaving the Coliseum, we made our way to the Viking Village.

Half an hour before the show started, characters in costume – in the pretence of sweeping with rush brooms, checked all the props. Occasionally, they pretended to fall asleep, and were shouted at by a watchman up in a tower who had a hooter. Sheep were also herded in to the village, and out the back to set the scene. A group of volunteers from the audience hoisted a ring of flowers and ribbons up a pole on the village from the far point of the river. The rope was handed to the man at the back of the line, obviously staff, as he toppled backward into the river. All the time the village idiot was hiding and playing pranks. The show started with a celebration – possibly a wedding- where a knight was appointed and he and his lady rode off into the sunset. The celebrations continued and contests between villagers took place. Deer roamed the far bank, and a boar trundled through our side of the river.



Then some monks rowed down the river, telling of disaster and invasion. Knights rode off out of the village to intercept a Viking ship, but the Vikings succeeded in breaking the defences and gained access into the village, sailing down the river to moor at the edge of the village. The tower was set alight (real flames too). Fights broke out everywhere.

Women were herded together by the invaders. Then a Viking ship rose up out of the river, complete with armed Vikings. (It was like something out of Pirates of the Caribbean for effects, absolutely brilliant). The village huts were set alight, and a tower was destroyed. Then a treasure chest rose up out of the river, and as it opened out stepped a priest, who walked on the water. The villagers bowed, and the Vikings surrendered, laying down their arms. Then they all sat down together for a feast; The babies were blessed and doves were released. The wounded were tended to, and the Viking dead were placed on the Viking ship, which was set alight and sank. The heat was incredible!



The next spectacular we saw, was in the Grande Theatre. Portraying “Mousquetaire de Richelieu” – A portrayal of Cardinal Richelieu, the 3 musketeers and Dartanyon. (Sadly, photographs were not permitted in the theatre).

The scene opened with a large chateau with a balcony on which was a Spanish lady.

Rebels descended from lanterns suspended from the ceiling of the theatre. Fights broke out, fires were started in the chateau, and the lady was carried off on a horse. Musketeers descended from the balcony of the theatre on ropes, and the rebels were captured and killed. – The musketeers to the rescue! Dartanyon was accepted as a musketeer.

Then onto the stage came a white horse which danced to music, while ultra violet lights lit the stage. It was very impressive. At the end of the music the horse folded its front legs and bowed to the audience.

This was followed by fans which descended from the ceiling and opened to reveal Flamenco dancers, telling the story of Napoleon fighting the Spanish.

The scene changed to become the court yard of a huge chateau (Versailles maybe?), and there were parades of horses; Cossack dancers; belly dancers; Indians – doing a war dance; and horse men riding horses from the Spanish riding school who stepped and pranced. All the while, the stage was slowly flooded, and became a lake. Fountains spurted out from the perimeter of the stage. Huge flower urns exploded to reveal Flamenco dancers who ascended on wires. A very spectacular pageant.

Following the theatre we made our way to a castle courtyard, for the Secret de la Lance. The scene opened with Lady Margaret walking the ramparts playing a recorder. There was some mention of St Michelle & a Dragon.



A knight entered on a horse which trotted to the music of a pipe, while sheep contentedly munched grass in the centre of the arena. Then lancers entered and we were treated to a display of acrobatic riding and jousting.



Then the castle was invaded, and battle commenced with arches, catapults, (the large war like variety), and cannon fire. The invaders scaled the walls, and Lady Margaret fought the intruders and was taken captive. She saved the day however, by drawing the magic lance of St Michelle out of a well.

A very spectacular place. It was quite a hot day, and I had to dig out the sun cream. I did wish we had taken in more to drink and a sunhat.

Sunday 29th May - We departed Puy du Feu after a noisy night listening to the rehearsals for the night show which start the following week. We heard lots of music, a lot of it classical, bangs and cracks (cannon & gun fire perhaps?) and fireworks at midnight. – We will definitely be back, but slightly later on so we can see the night show.

We made our way across country on minor D roads, and stopped for lunch south of Niort in a lay-by where we changed drivers.

Then it was down to Souberac. It was very pretty along the riverside, but motor homes were not allowed to stop there after 1st may, so we moved on, via a detour as we couldn't get back onto the N road.



We arrived at our destination at a Chateau just outside Libourne at St. Pey- d'Armes. It was vineyard, and our aire was set amongst the vines Water electric and toilet emptying was available, and it was all free.



At approx 4pm it was 30oC! It was very quiet there, and there were only 2 vans. Once we had parked up in the sun (we soon learnt and parked in the shade), out came our sun loungers, a book and a glass of wine! – Heaven.

After dinner, which took some thought as there wasn't enough oxygen in the air to light the oven, we had a game of Boule, and Mel won – naturally.

Mon 30th May - After a very quiet but hot night, we woke to yet another sunny day. Leaving our aire, we made our way back toward Libourne to Lidl to do our shopping as we had run out of salad and bread. Shopping done, we headed toward Bergerac. Because we wanted to wander, we dispensed with sat nav's services, and I map read, which I enjoy doing, but it was not easy with glasses off for reading the map, and glasses on to read road signs!!

I stopped at a place just across the river Dordogne on the D660 at Lalinde. – We found a small camp site but the office didn't open until 16.00. It was at that time 12.30, so we parked up just outside their gates in a car park, ate our baguette and ham salad, and decided to continue to a village called Badefoils-sur-Dordogne.

To my dismay the bridge was closed for road works so we had to follow very vague detour signs. By chance I turned off to a village called Mauzac-et-Grand-Castang. A long name for the tiniest village on the edge of the river. It was still lunch time siesta and every thing was closed – even the municipal camp site. I parked up and we walked into the tiny but very pretty village, and admired the view along the river. While walking into the village centre we found another diversion sign, so I decided to follow it. I am so glad we did!



The narrow road twisted and turned and climbed through woodland, by which time I had found a village on the map where I thought there may be a road bridge. We followed the road and found a stopping place where we could admire the view along the river. Following the map into the village of Tremolat, we found an aire which wasn't in the book. – However, we couldn't find the advertised water and waste disposal.

The village was very smart. Sort of “up market”, - so we moved on. Crossing the river we found our diversion signs again – they are very few and far between, and you need your imagination. – We soon picked up the road for Badoils and found a camp site, “Les Bo Baines”.



It was lovely. We parked up on the banks of the Dordogne, and ate the remainder of our baguette with cheese and wine. Later in the afternoon we went for a swim in the outdoor pool. – while in there it started to rain, warm fat drops. It was cold to get in at first, but was really lovely. All afternoon thunder rumbled around, but the showers were short and light. They did clear the air though, and a breeze sprung up, cooling the air which was in excess of 31oC at midday. Before dinner we walked around the village to find a boulangerie for our baguette in the morning. It was a lovely clear sunny evening with a really nice breeze to keep the temperature down to hot rather than scorching.



Tues 31st May - We had a quiet night on the banks of the Dordogne. It was a lot cooler and slightly overcast as we wandered into the very tiny village. We were a bit annoyed to find an aire behind the boulangerie, with water and waste disposal by the information board. It was not signposted at all, otherwise we may have stopped there. However, the sun came out again and at midday we took our books and a flask of coffee and sat by the swimming pool, venturing into the water later on, sharing it with the ducks. –



We couldn't have done that at the aire! We had veal cooked in red wine, mushrooms and cream for dinner, which I cooked that night with baked banana and ice cream to follow. – delicious!



Wed 1st June - We got up earlier this morning and got underway after paying for the camp site 26 euro for 2 nights with electric, water and pool. (the site also had showers etc but we didn't use them). I turned left onto the D29 to Le Buisson de Cadouin, stopping at Siorac to get some bread in the supermarket. We then continued to the very pretty but very tourist village of Beynac-et-Cazenac. The parking place for camping cars was up a narrow cobbled road.



From the riverside we could see the abbey built into the hillside with the village clustered at its foot. It was very expensive there, so we continued on via the D46 to Montfort where the cliff wall overhung the road, stopping at a view point to look back at the Abbey of Montfort. – This is the Dordogne I came to see!



Our route continued along the river to Souillac where I parked at an aire for the night. After eating our baguette, we wandered down to the river, passing a large pool complex. Turning round we walked back towards the centre of the town, parts of which were very old, in particular the Abbey with its 3 round domes. There were lots of little alleyways with squares, coffee shops/bars, but all closed – well it was 2.30pm. – So after a siesta we ventured into town at 4pm, but the cafes didn't open until 5pm. We returned to the van, stomachs rumbling and cooked a curry. In the evening I planned our route for the next day.



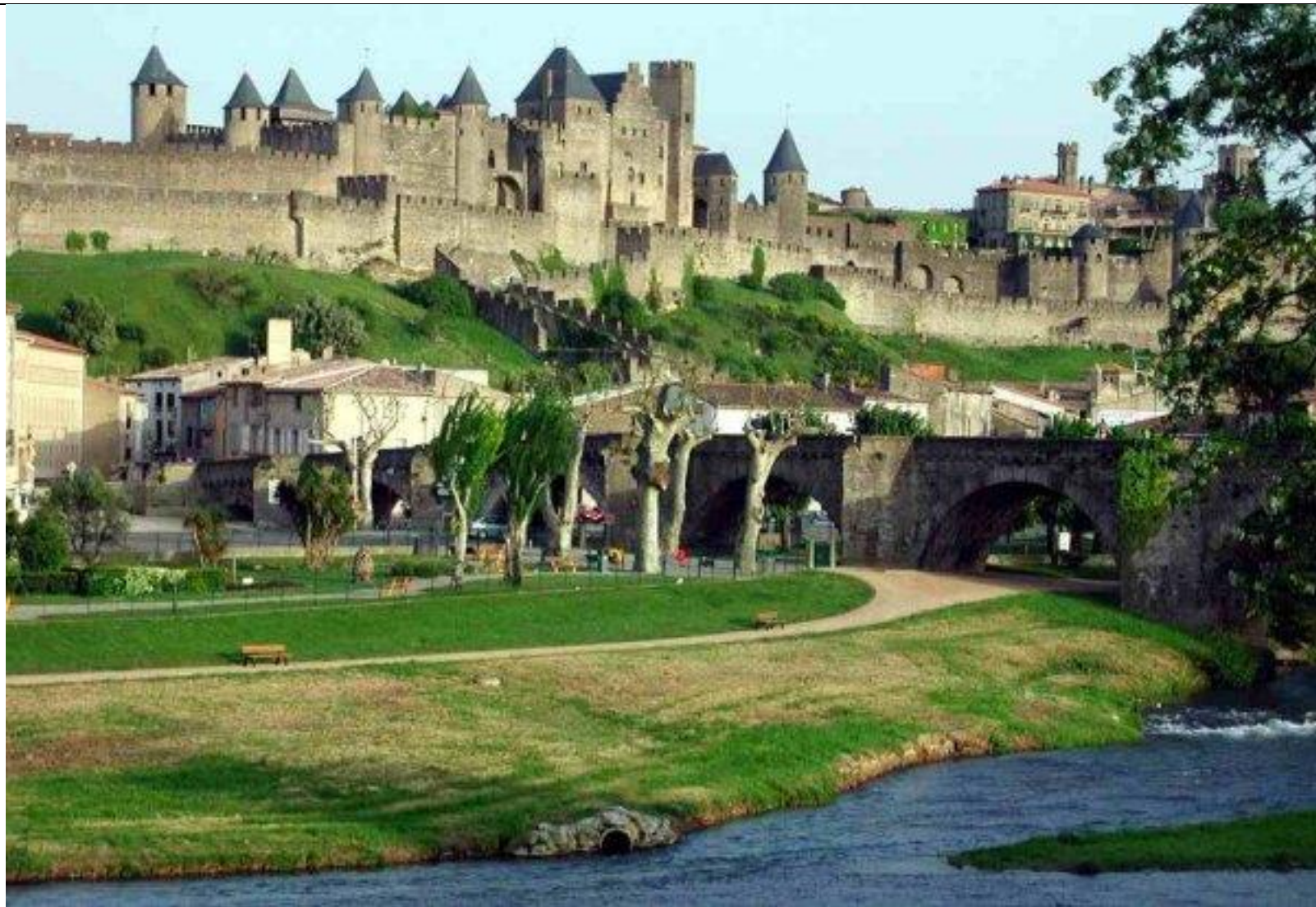


Thursday 2nd June - We were off our aire by 8.30am, and made our way onto the A10 – an expensive way to travel (14e), but we were just North of Montauban in 1hour 10 minutes. We came off the A10 and decided to go on the N20 but it took us 1 hour to do a few miles just south of Toulouse.

We arrived at our destination, Carcassonne, at 2.30, and after wandering the car park, which according to the book, charged 10e for 24 hours, we followed a camp site sign and stayed there for an extra 13e with electric, water pool, bar etc. etc. Much better than the junction of 3 main roads. (I wouldn't have been happy leaving the van there, let a lone trying to sleep there!) It was just a pity it was drizzling.



We were told that it is a good time to see the city at night, so we decided eat first and then walk in, and if we liked it we could stay another night. The electric post to our pitch was a 3 pin socket, which was unusual, but it had reversed polarity and I didn't have a 3 pin adaptor, so I had to sit and swap the wires over in our plug!



Meanwhile, Mel went on the hunt for a chemical toilet disposal, and ended up walking all the way round the site to the motor home point at the entrance. According to the site map there should have been one at every toilet block. But he couldn't find it! Never mind, - a fortified coffee was waiting for him on his return.



After dinner (pork chops in a cream sauce) we walked into the fortified city of Carcassonne beside the river Aude, a mint condition medieval fortified city, which is considered to be one of the great sights of Europe. In the narrow cobbled streets are a vast array of tourist shops, including chocolatiers, bars, restaurants and coffee shops.





The architecture was amazing. We left at 8pm to return to our camp site "Camping de la Cite"; a 15 minute walk along a stream. (We couldn't wait until the city was lit – our feet ached, and it didn't get dark until 10pm – so we had coffee and watched from the van).



Friday 3rd June - We didn't manage to stay awake to see the city lit up, but I did have a really good nights sleep after putting the sun lounger cushion underneath the mattress which is on its last legs.



We had a quick run from Carcassonne to Narbonne. I couldn't find the motor home parking though, and ended up following a campsite sign to a very quiet site in the general direction of Gruissan, ~ Les Floralys. The site was on a footpath along the canal which went right into the heart of the city. It was a good 2 km walk each way. So after pitching up and having lunch, we walked into Narbonne, where we wandered old streets and sat and ate an ice cream sundae alongside the canal.



While in town we were able to watch as the 2CV club flooded in for a rally. Some of the cars were immaculate, and Mel took a fancy to the one with ladies painted on it. The back of the headlights were painted as boobs, complete with nipple peeking above a black lace bra cup.



The purple hot rod 2CV was nice too with tiny lightening flashes for wing mirrors. Others were very rusty – perhaps waiting restoration?



We were foot sore and weary on our return to the van, but glad we had done it. By now the temperature which had been 22oC had dropped a bit, but it was still very warm. Later in the evening it rained and we stayed in the van reading and cooking liver & bacon for dinner.

Saturday 4th June - We had a very lazy start to the day with cooked breakfast before driving to Gruisson Plage. It was very busy. Motor home parking was 7euro but it did allow you to stay for 24hrs. – We didn't want to stay that long, nor did we particularly want to wander shopping centres, so we turned round and moved on. - (It reminded me of Brighton marina; big boats going no-where; expensive coffee shops and people trying to look as though all this wealth was theirs.)

Mel was very disappointed we did not drive up the coast a bit, but we were at cross purposes, as I thought when we said it wasn't our thing, to go on. – Go on meant the journey. I headed north to Milleau. We drove through some very heavy thunderstorms. – My wipers were going full pelt and it was still hard to see the road. We stopped for lunch at a service station just before Milleau, and ate our customary baguette.

We then started our decent into Milleau, down the mountainside with sheer drops to the right hand side.

We found the aire after a few moments of driving. The overnight parking was close to, but not at, the water and cassette emptying point. We took a stroll away from the town to try and get some photos of our route down.





After wandering about and having a coffee so that we could use their toilets, we settled on virtually the first restaurant we passed, and had “Plat du Jour”, (the fixed menu of the day) – Grilled Ham, chips and side salad followed by a sort of vanilla egg custard, all washed down with a heavy red wine for me, and a large beer for Mel. This was followed by more strong coffee. While we were eating al fresco, 2 stag parties converged on the square to a neighbouring bar. – It became quite noisy. We had already seen a hen party in the town earlier, with the bride to be dancing in the fountain on the roundabout, wearing her underwear on top of her clothes.



Sunday 5th June - We had a very quiet night at our aire in Milleau, and after a cold wash (I had forgotten to put the boiler on for a shower) we set off up the valley, and out of the Midi-Pyrenees and the rain.

We did not go far today, just about 40 miles, including a detour to Lac de Pareloup.

Sadly, there was no where to stop along the lake, which I had hoped for. The lake side was claimed by houses and camp sites. I turned round in the village of Salles Curan, admiring the views as we went. Soon we were entering the village of Pont de Salars, and found the aire very easily. There were 5 spaces, and unusually, you could stay there free for 3 days if you wanted to. I think that would have been ok if you had a small car or scooter to go about on, but for the pedestrian there was not a lot – although it was a very pretty village, and they did a fabulous cup of coffee!!



We went for a walk along a lane which ended in a private property, so we retraced our steps admiring gardens and houses as we did so. After a picnic lunch of.....Baguette on a bench near the river, we spent the afternoon relaxing and planning (roughly) the rest of the week. Later on we watched a boule tournament on the pitch next to the aire. Loosing interest we played a game of scrabble – Mel didn't win!!!





Mon 6th June - While Mel was washing down the windscreen and headlights, I went in search of a baguette. It was 9.30am and all of the shops, with the exception of the bars (for coffee) were closed. We drove out of the town in the direction of Cahors, along the twisty road of the D911. All too soon we were at Ville Franche – with no time to reset sat nav for the aire. The traffic was busy, and there was obviously something going on, as there were a lot of police around. We were a little disappointed, but were pressed to carry on by the flow of traffic. We arrived at Cahors just gone 12.30 to find the 3 spaces at the aire to be full. We stopped to put a couple of litres of water in the tank, and studied the map to find somewhere else. We decided to retrace our route and find an aire we had passed about 8km back at Arcambal. It was OK. – Shady, with water and emptying point, but we were not happy there, having seen the nice riverside aire at Cahors. We decided to eat our lunch and return to see if anyone had left, or drive along the opposite river bank and try and find a camp site.



As we drove over the bridge, I glanced out of the window to my left, and saw lots of vans. So I went completely round the roundabout, and back toward the aire at Rue St Georges, but continued on and parked on the river bank with at least a dozen other motor homes. It was a good place to stop. Ok we didn't have water etc within feet of us, nor a grass patch by our side, but we did have a view straight across the river.

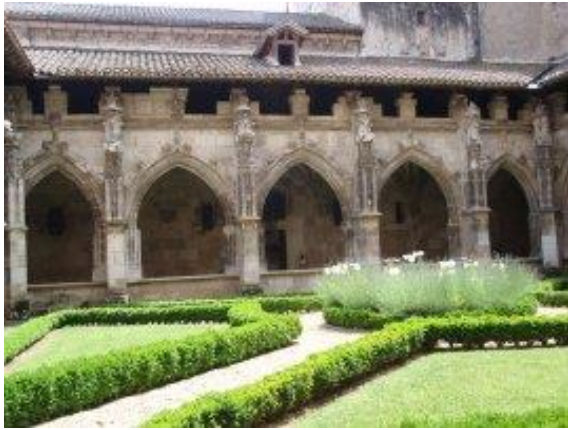


We walked into town looking at some buildings in the old part of the town, and then we visited the cathedral and cloisters. It was beautiful and very ornate, with cool quiet cloisters. We then viewed the remains of an amphitheatre which was in an underground car park! Above in the square, - Allee Fenelon, - were fine water jets giving instant cooling to hot feet and legs.



The spray was so fine it was like a mist. After a coffee, the dearest yet at 1.30e, (but we did get a biscuit), we walked to the Pont Valentre, the bridge which is the symbol of Cahors. It was built in the 14th Century (and is one of only 3 remaining). From its pointed towers unfriendly missiles could be directed at intruders!





After a laze in the sun in our loungers, we showered, changed and headed into town for a meal to celebrate 1 year of being together. We ended up at Le Bistrot Gambetta in the square where we settled for Carpaccio of Beef for Mel and Carpaccio of Salmon for me. Both were finely sliced and smoked, the beef and salmon covered the dinner plates and our chips and salads came on separate plates.



During the night we had a thunderstorm which kept me awake, and then I couldn't get back to sleep. The aire, thunderstorm not withstanding, was a little noisy with trains thundering past all night.



Tuesday 7th June - The morning started cloudy but dry, and we walked up to buy our daily baguette. On our return I asked some English people who had stayed there for some time, if they had been to Rocamadour, and the best way in. – They confirmed my thoughts, of going in from behind the village. While talking to them, I was able to watch the river being restocked with Trout, and some of them were huge. The English couple were moving further up river, as he was a keen fisherman, and due to restocking, couldn't fish for 10days. On bidding them goodbye, we turned the van round and headed for Rocamadour. It was amazing!



I parked nearly at the view point (by accident). Somewhere along the way we lost our fresh water cap (at least it was missing on our return to the van, - but we did notice later on that many vans had them missing. – Perhaps someone is making a collection!)

. Rocamadour clings to a sheer limestone spur rising from a dry canyon. To say it its setting is dramatic, is an understatement!

As we returned to the van, the heavens opened. We debated on whether to stay nearby at a camp site or continue onto Oradour-sur-Glane. We decided on the latter, as we could only sit inside and read otherwise. – The rain didn't look like letting up.

We arrived at Oradour-sur-Glane by 5pm after driving through the very busy and congested Limoges. The aire at Oradour-sur-Glane was designed for 20 vans. I think we were 24th, and still more vans came in. The aire was nicely planted, and in front of our van were bushes of red and black currants, which the man in the van next door was busy picking.

Wednesday 8th June - We spent a very quiet night on our aire, and woke to a dry morning with just a hint of sunshine.

We walked down to the village of the Martars. The entrance was a modern underground building, which through video's, photos, posters and newspaper cuttings told the story of World War 2. The emphasis naturally being this area, and Oradour in particular. We could follow most of it by hiring audio guides. Then we walked through to the village itself.



It is incomprehensible how one group of human beings, could wipe out an entire happy & prosperous village. (Excepting for 4 men, 1 woman and a boy who escaped).

The Germans surrounded the village and rounded the villagers up. The men of the village were shot at various locations around the square. The women and children were herded into the church, where they were suffocated with smoke bombs, had grenades thrown in, and any survivors were shot. The whole village was set ablaze, burning homes, shops, businesses and bodies.



It was chilling to walk the streets to see the blackened walls and bullet holes. – I thought the place still smelt sooty. –Mel thought it was my imagination, and it was just dirt. – It could however, have been small bonfires set by the grounds men who kept the lawns mown and the trees trimmed. Cars rusted in their garages or in the square; bicycles hung on store room walls; bedsteads; prams and sewing machines littered the remains of the homes.



It was an emotional place, and I saw more than one man wipe his eyes.

It was a quiet and serene place. All that could be heard was the steady hum of bees in the heavily scented trees.



Underground in a memorial, are items gleaned from the razed town, including watches; cutlery; rosary beads; spectacles and even a set of teeth on a metal plate.



The preservation was done very sensitively. – No tourist tat. The main street of the new Oradour-sur-Glane is a replicate of the old. – The baker, butcher, hotel and cafe all in the same places. The main road is now called “10th June” – the date of the massacre – the anniversary of which is in 2 days time.





On our way back to the aire we stopped for a coffee, and the sun came out, and the day warmed up. It was 2.30 by the time we had eaten lunch and a doughnut. (no jam though, but very light and fresh). So we decided to stay another night, and I worked out the route for our journey north wards, and sat in the sun and read. That evening we dined on shepherds pie – cooked in wine of course, and ice-cream with red and black currants (courtesy of the aire), topped with a dollop of fromage frais.



Thursday 9th June - This morning, after yet another peaceful night, we set off for Chinon. Sat Nav took us on unclassified roads for a while to cut off a corner. We ended up going through a village called Blond, where we came upon an enormous Chateau. Continuing on, we went through Richelieu, a moated, gated town with an enormous Chateau which was once the domain of Cardinal Richelieu (of the three musketeer's fame). We promised ourselves to come back and explore, hopefully, next year.



We continued to Chinon, which stands at the cross roads of 3 provinces. Anjou, Poitou, and Touraine. The rocky spur on which the Royal Fortress of Chinon stands, has been occupied since antiquity. A tower was built there in the 10th Century, and Henry 2nd of Plantagenet – King of England, who built the fortress in 1154. King Philippe of France gained control of the fortress after a long siege in 1205. Some high dignitaries of the Knights Templar were imprisoned here before being sentenced and burned at the stake in Paris. During the hundred year's war, the court of Charles 7th moved in, and in 1429 he welcomed Joan of Arc, who came to petition for her legitimacy, and convince him to be crowned in Reims. The fortress changed hands again in the 17th century to the Cardinal Richelieu, but he let it decline, and in 1808 it was given to the district council.



Chinon is set on the banks of the river Vienne, and we chose a camp site on the bank opposite the town and its majestic fortress, at Camping L'Île Auger, which is a municipal camp site. While at the camp site, we drank a pot of coffee and half a glass of wine, while watching an English couple try and site their caravan. We were on our 2nd glass of wine when they trundled off to get water! What a performance!



Later, while dinner was cooking, we chatted to a Brit who has moved out here, and was recommending places to go to next year, and also a bar to go to in the evening. He also recommended a drink his lady friend likes. – I'm not surprised! – it was really, really nice – a Kirr Royale – but it was really expensive. 15 euro's for 2 drinks! – I would expect to eat out for that!





Friday 10th June - Today was a travelling day. We had 200 miles to do, as our destination was Dieppe ~ simply because they had a Saturday market, and Mel still hadn't had his Moulles. – We thought they might be cheaper on the coast.

We got stuck in 3 massive traffic jams. The first was due to road works and a large deviation at Tour, which added 10 minutes to our journey. The next was road works forcing 2 lanes of traffic into 1, which slowed massively because of ramps. We actually came off here, and had a half hour break for lunch. Fortunately the French are good and polite drivers, and let me back into the queue with no problem. Mel decided the outside lane was going faster than the inside, and so I changed lanes, only to drop back by 9 cars and a large lorry! – We did get ahead by 3 lorries – eventually! Our last hold up was due to pure volume of traffic at a bout 4.30 in and around Rouen.



Sat Nav wanted to take us round the docks and onto D roads for some reason, but I navigated us around and onto the motorway, which was free, and took us straight into Dieppe. It was 6.30pm by the time we parked up on a very full aire. A large Rapido in front of us indicated it was full, and he went elsewhere. We, being smaller, squeezed in on the end. – Not ideal, being right by the bottle bank, but it sufficed. It wasn't long after our dinner of Pizza and salad, that we settled down to an undisturbed, but noisy night due to traffic. We did not realise how close to the ferry terminal we were.

Sat 11th June - This was the first morning I had woken up cold. After several cups of coffee while watching vans move to & fro, we quickly snatched a vacated space under the cliff, a little further from the road, and quite a bit further from the well used bottle bank, and water taps.



Once repositioned, we went into town across the revolving bridge to the quayside, where the fish market was. After admiring the mussels, crabs, lobsters and other fish, we went up the main street to the largest part of the market. There was everything:- Fruit, vegetables, meat, cheeses and a huge and bewildering array of sausages





Paella, pastries, sausage casseroles and chickens were being cooked at the stalls. A cooked chicken costs approx 7euros, and a cream slice 2.20euros!! Fruit and vegetables were comparable with our prices back home, once we had converted the kilos. The remainder of the market was taken up with clothes, leather goods, household linens, furniture & even mattresses! It was a busy, vibrant place and I liked it a lot.



After eyeing up the menus for Mel's Moulles, we made our way back to the van for baguette and a sit in the sun dreaming of a dinner from the "mer".

Later in the afternoon we went for a walk around the town. The produce stalls had gone, and were replaced with chairs and tables for coffee and drinks. At last we returned to the van, footsore and weary for a half hour rest before going out for dinner, where Mel had his Moulles Marnier, and I had Rae in Burre (Skate in Black butter with Samphire and capers). Both were served with Frites, of course! This was followed by apple tart for me, and homemade tiramisu for Mel –

I must say he had the best desert – It was beautiful. A coffee topped it all before we staggered back to the Camping Car.

On our way to the restaurant, we were lucky enough to see the bridge open. It worked on hydraulics which prior to the opening, allowed the bridge to drop a couple of feet so the wheels could engage with the track, then the bridge swung open – quite quickly too.



Sunday 12th June - Our last day – and we started it off with yesterdays remaining piece of baguette, tomato, thinly sliced bacon, and an English egg. A mobile boulangerie came round and Mel queued for our daily baguette. (He said it was more of a mobile shop – there was everything from water, croissants, cakes and pastries etc. The bread was cheap too. – Bigger and fatter than most 85cents. We have paid up to 1euro for a white baguette. We did wonder what an average French wage was, as bread is bought daily. – That is 10euros a week on baguette alone! (And some families buy 3 or more loaves!). They are very keen on cafe/bars for coffee. Property for sale & to rent (from what we could make out) is similar to ours at home. Diesel is cheaper, petrol dearer. Supermarkets are also a bit dearer, although produce is very fresh, and a lot of the produce is French.



We made our way to Calais along the coast, making a diversion to Berck as we anticipated eating our lunch on the sea front. However, there was no empty parking space, so we wiggled our way through a maze of narrow roads lined both sides with parked cars.



It was a bit of a squeeze at times. We continued onwards passing the cemetery at Etaples, and stopped in the car park of a closed Supermarket, where we also filled up with diesel.

We arrived at euro tunnel by 15.45, and although we were not booked until 9.20 the following morning, by paying a supplement of 23euros (approx £19), we got the next train at 16.20.

All too soon we were back in grey, rainy England , and a 21/2 hour traffic jam on the M20 – It had been closed for road works! – Welcome home!!

