The Turkey trip

May / June 2021

Here is breakfast

Government restrictions on travel were due to ease on the 17th May and I was feeling the need for some sun on my skin. Where to go ? Not on my wish list really were Tristan da Cunha, St. Helena nor South Georgia or the Falkland Islands, all on the green spectrum. As I had £300 credit with Turkish Airlines (who had messed me around a year previously), research was showing that a room at the 5* Movenpick Izmir was £45 a night including breakfast and taxes plus there were masses of early Christian sites nearby, notably the 7 churches of Revelation chapters 1-3, it became a no brainer. I booked a two week break 18th May to 1st June through the initially efficient Turkish Airlines office in Istanbul and the Movenpick through hotels.com.

Trustedhousesitters.com came to the rescue with Hannah happy to look after Benny the lurcher for the duration, even extending her stay should I be required to quarantine for 10

days on my return. Somewhat optimistically I hoped that Turkey would be moved off the red list before I returned.

Bag, 23kg allowed, packed with Aldi freeze-dried coffee (cheaper than but indistinguishable from the Sainsbury's version), a few sandwiches, long-life milk cartons, my music CD player, enough books and medication to last 24 days and off I trot early on the Tuesday to Heathrow via bus and bus, parking my little Toyota free in Witney. No questions asked at the airport as to why I am travelling to somewhere Boris doesn't want me to go, although a small paragraph on the gov.uk website said I could travel and Turkey were keen to welcome visitors again.

Outbound via Istanbul to Izmir went smoothly but the food on Turkish Airlines was pale by comparison with its fare in years past; on the second leg we got just a cup of water. On arrival at Izmir airport it was frustrating to discover that my bag had gone to the International Arrivals area not the Domestic where we had been unloaded, necessitating a long walk there and back. Lonely Planet had talked about a bus but it was nowhere to be found so I took a taxi the 45 minutes into town which cost just £8.30 including tip. All prices I shall express in £ and pence – there were 12 Turkish lira to a pound.

Now I hadn't been in Turkey for 42 years. Back then I didn't like it – it seemed very alien to a youngish Englishman, my first time in a Muslim country where everyone appeared to rip you off. The loos were holes in the ground with footplates, indeed some still are but few now. From Ankara to the Iranian border I travelled with a friendly group of Afghanis transporting second-hand Mercedes buses eastwards whenever Turkish bureaucracy and petrol availability allowed. Our last

night together was in a scrubby smelly hotel in Dogubayazit, my worst night ever, and this was followed by the worst loo ever (don’t ask !) on the Turkish side of the border with Iran.

Well, the Movenpick was a different kettle of fish entirely.- It turned out its swimming pool was an indoor one and even the neighbouring Swissotel had closed its outdoor one because of Covid but there were sun-loungers to use on the grass lawns of its well-tended gardens. I spent the first couple of days acclimatizing to Izmir, Turkey’s third largest city . Everyone wore masks all the time outside and inside, the stray cats and dogs were all fed and watered at pavement stations and guys pulled canvas rubbish containers keeping the streets clean. There were plenty of elegant shops, small supermarkets and a well ordered city landscape. I saw just one lady in a burqa, some with hijabs but overwhelmingly Turkey showed its secular colours. No muezzin calls for prayers either – it seemed my concerns over the autocratic , nigh despotic Islamic tendencies of the President Mr Erdogan were overplayed, at least here in Izmir. In comparison with 1979 people were friendly polite and helpful.

Economically, Turkey appeared to be doing well – the choice in shops was plentiful, there were many shopping malls in the suburbs and scores of expensive cars. We would do well to strike a post-Brexit trade deal with them – I know Beko supplies us with many fridges and washing machines but they make all sorts of other domestic appliances too. More of their fruit and vegetables could be imported – sadly I saw only 4 Minis (one in a showroom), 4 Jaguars, 30 Range Rovers but quite a few Massey Ferguson tractors so I am sure we could increase our exports with lower import duties. With Erdogan at the helm Turkey is turning towards Russia and China for trade; let’s persuade him to buy British !

My quest to visit all 7 churches of Revelation began in Izmir, Smyrna as was back two millenia. I got close to the Agora, the Roman ruins which would have housed the first Christian basilica and was kindly allowed inside the Catholic church of St. Polycarp even though it was officially closed.

On day 3 the holiday began in earnest – I took the ferry (12p) up towards the port area, walked 10 minutes to the main Alsancak railway station and bought an Izbann metro ticket (12p again) out to the airport. First attempt to rent a car with Green Motion failed because they insisted on me paying with a credit card and my MasterCard wasn't being compliant. Even after a long call to the Scottish headquarters it was still no dice but nearby Erboy Car Hire took my Visa debit card and for £116 for a week I was united with a Citroen 4 door manual and set off towards Ephesus in pouring rain. Fill the tank in Celcuk (petrol is 55p a litre) and first visit the Grotto of the Seven Sleepers where 7 Christian martyrs were walled into a cave on the orders of Emperor Decius. Then on up the hill to Meryem Ana (entrance £5.83), the House of the Virgin Mary.

This is where John, commanded by Jesus on the cross to look after her, bought a house for Jesus' mother in AD 42 where she lived until her death in AD 50. As I park up above the house my mobile rings … it's Michael Gormley, my Catholic doctor who saved my life back in 1992. You'll have to buy my book to discover how ! Anyway, it's an apposite place for a call from a good Catholic. Funnily enough, when I was at the Jordan river at the site of Jesus' baptism 10 years ago my phone rang and it was Anne, my eldest sister with whom I was friends at the time.

Mary's house, rebuilt in 1951 on the foundations of the

original, is set in charming wooded surrounds – the site features a one-roomed shrine and a gift shoppe full of the Lourdes / Knock-type tat that demean venues connected with her.

Last call that day was to the entrance of St. John's Basilica, the so-called Persecution Gate, back down in Selcuk . An information board tells me one of the carved reliefs from the pediment was taken to the Woburn Abbey Gallery in 1812 – more on such 'cultural appropriation' later but couldn't the current Duke of Bedford arrange its return as a nice gesture to Turkey ? Traffic is heavy in downtown Izmir but there is free parking on the road outside the hotel and on all adjoining streets. Take note Oxford !

Day 2 with the car finds me heading north without satnav at 7.20am. I rectified this later downloading a TomTom app to my phone. I went through the town of Thyatira (now Akhisar) but found no trace of Lydia's church and on quieter roads to Pergamum (Bergama). The Acropol (£5) is empty of tourists – it's just me and a tortoise but there are fine views and the region's steepest theatre. Down in the town is the Asklepion (£4.58) which was an early healing centre and features the Serpent Column but its best relic, an ornate altar, is in a Berlin museum. Wouldn't it be nice to return some of these purloined treasures, like the Elgin Marbles back to the Parthenon from the British Museum ?

So that's 2 more of the 7 churches notched up. I am back in Izmir by 2pm and spend the afternoon soaking up the 32 degree rays in the garden of the Swissotel – nobody questions my entry into or my presence within this elegant establishment. Supper is a kebab in French bread from a street stall (£2).

Having made contact with James Buxton via WhatsApp I meet up in his flat the following morning at 11.30am. James is the Anglican vicar of Izmir whose church is close to Alsancak station. We have a mutual friend in Adam Boulter, vicar of Aqaba, the Poitiers region and latterly Dean of Toliara, Madagascar. We chat for an hour or so and he gives me plenty of useful information on sites to see in this corner of Turkey. I set off soon after to Sardis where under strange cliff formations stands a huge restored Roman gymnasium building and synagogue. Nearby is the beautifully situated Temple of Artemis with a small church stuck on to a corner, limpet-like. This is the most special site seen so far. As I am not too far away I drive to and through Philadelphia (Alasehir) and as in Thyatira fail to spot any ancient Christian ruins. I am back in Izmir at 7pm.

Day 4 with the car starts early again and it’s an hour plus drive to Ephesus. Entrance at the Upper, Magnesian gate isn’t cheap at £18.33 including parking but it is one of the premier Roman cities of their empire. It’s a steep down and up on the Sacred Way, exploring the Terraced Houses with their mosaics and murals. The vast 4,000 seater is closed for renovation but Hadrian’s Gate is impressive as is the large Christian St. Mary’s church close to the Lower gate. One wonders how she got here from her house in the hills. I suppose horses and donkeys were the cars of the day. There are perhaps 20 tourists here whereas pre-Covid there must have hundreds daily.

I discuss tourism woes with the owners of a souvenir shop at the exit from whom I buy a pair of ‘Rayban’ shades for 7 euros cash to help driving in the sun’s glare. James has recommended a village, Kaynarpinar on the Karabunan peninsula for a nice swimming beach and I head that way. But within 12km of Selcuk I spot promising beaches on my left and little Concakoy proves the perfect spot to spend an afternoon on a fine sandy beach

with warmish water – it’s a gentle gradient out into the bay and there is grass on which to sunbathe. There are very few fellow bathers on the beach.

On returning to Izmir I start to make enquiries as to getting the required PCR test for the flight home; a nurse at an Alsancak hospital recommends the airport but it’s too soon, apparently, to fill in the online Passenger Locator Form for the UK government. The next day I undertake a long 4 hour journey south to Pamukkale and Hierapolis, more Roman ruins above extraordinary ‘terraces’ of calcified limestone shimmering white with water coursing over them, once graced by Cleopatra herself. I park the car in a shady spot in the village, enjoy a slightly pricey squeezed orange juice (£1.67) and start the climb. Entrance is £9.17, one has to remove shoes and socks and I tentatively ascend. It is certainly unusual and a mega tourist attraction for locals, young females cavorting in bikinis as they rub the clay over their bodies in the warm shallow pools. Saudi Arabia this ain’t ! For a further£8.33 one could swim in the Ancient Pools in apparently mineral-rich waters.

Above the terraces things are quieter in the manicured Roman ruins of Hierapolis and I climb in the afternoon heat above the ubiquitous theatre towards the Martyrium where the disciple Philip was strung upside down, nailed to a tree and was placed in a small mausoleum only recently discovered. The inside of this little building is redolent of Jesus’ tomb off the Nablus Road in Jerusalem with slabs for laying out bodies on 3 sides. St. Philip had come up against snake worshipping locals. This site deserves more exploration but I was getting hot and tired so descended and set off to ‘do’ number 7 of the Revelation churches at Laodicea which is close to the large town of Denizli.

Entry here is £3.08 and it’s a huge spread out set of ruins with a sacred Syria street and, for once, an unrestored theatre. But it is also the site of the largest Christian basilica in the area, well restored with mosaic floors and an impressive baptistry for performing full immersion rituals. A house close by even has a chapel within it. So that’s mission accomplished – all 7 church locations visited. 4 hour drive back to Izmir, the roads are good, mostly dual carriageway with many miles of motorway. Highlight on the return was a roadside stall where I purchased 1kg of strawberries for 83p – yum yum.

The next day I eschew driving, avail myself of the hotel laundry, purchase 3 peaches, a pound of cherries and a litre of yoghurt drink for £1.75, enjoy more sunbathing and play host in the evening to James at the rooftop bar in the Movenpick where we enjoy Bomonti beers looking out over Izmir bay.

Thursday 27th is my last full day with the car so off we go to Soke beyond Selcuk – three sites in the offing today, the first is a steep one, Priene (£1.46) with wonderful views, a small theatre and adjacent church. The sea used to come right up to Priene but it’s 20km distant today. St. Paul may have visited; he certainly spent time at Miletus along the coast towards Didim. Entry here was £2.08 to another huge site rather poorly signposted but good exercise wandering over the acreage. Last port of call was Didymus (£2.50) in the town of Didim, the port nearest to the island of Patmos where the exiled St. John wrote Revelation from AD 81 before returning to Ephesus in AD 95. Didymus is home to a massive temple to Artemis with splendid relief carvings of Zeus and Medusa, for once still on site and not in a European museum.

Friday sees me returning the car without a hitch, sussing out PCR tests at the Medifema unit which will cost less than £21 and be ready in 6 hours – eat your heart out U.K. My Boots test for the outward journey had cost £99and the result came 24 hours later. Then it's back on the metro train (£1.17), half an hour to Alsancak station and a half hour's stroll back to the Movenpick. Another afternoon is spent agreeably at the Swissotel, sunbathing and reading.

So, I- now have 3 days left to organise all matters to be homeward bound. Quarantine beckons – I had hoped the rules might have changed by now but they haven't. Initially I thought you could make your own choice of hotel for quarantining and had provisionally booked one in Witney and one in Feltham but sadly these cheaper options are not possible and you must select the government's package at £1,750 for the 11 nights, 10 days required – gulp, someone's making a profit here. Done – they have allocated me a room at the Arora Hotel near Gatwick despite my landing at Heathrow; one muses that as the 14 days in Turkey have cost relatively little, 10 extra days at enormous expense sort of levels things out.

The Ephesus / Selcuk area merits more of my time and more exploration so back I go – £1.17 takes me all the way on a 2 hour ride, changing trains at Tepekoy. Stomach is loose: was it the soft fruit ? Reach a loo above a tea shop (tea 25p) then buy a pack of Lopermid pills for 42p at an open pharmacy. While Izmir goes very quiet at the weekend, more was happening here in Selcuk. I walk towards the Artemision and spend a fruitful hour in the excellent museum (£2.50). The rooms are well lit, the gold and pottery artefacts remarkably preserved – its shop furnishes me with a stack of postcards (not available anywhere else) and a good book on St. Paul and the 7 churches, all for about £10. It isn't far to the Artemision,

the ruins of the once vast Temple of Artemis, larger than the Parthenon with 128 columns of which just one has been reassembled. Goodness, this place was one of the Seven Wonders of the World – not today it isn't.

Back to town to spend time on what I christen St. John's Hill, not to be confused with the one near Clapham Junction ! I explore the basilica, clamber to the top of the Ayasoluk castle and enjoy the views. A single souvenir shop is open briefly and I buy a couple more postcards and an excellent little booklet on St. John, bartered down to £1.67. I then write up 3 of my postcards sitting astride a Roman slab, inspired by the fact that John wrote his Gospel and his epistles on this very hill.

The journey home starts poorly when jobsworths at the station want to deny me passage because I don't have the Turkish HES card to show my Covid status. Eventually they let me pass after microscopic inspection of my passport. Phew. I get off at the airport to have the PCR test within 72 hours of landing in the U.K. Back in Izmir by 5pm, buying a litre of Kefir live culture yoghurt drink (70p) to help settle the stomach.

Next day it is cloudy and cooler and I walk to the Agora but entry there is denied to me by a pack of snarling dogs – tant pis. I write up all of my cards and spend the rest of the day relaxing. My last day is a Monday so the streets are buzzing again. The main Post Office is right opposite the Movenpick, stamps are 54p each and the 14 cards are duly dispatched. En route to the Agora I purchase a new pair of ordinary glasses for £1.25 as my existing pair were a bit scratched. This time the dogs let me in, £2.08 at the booth, and I wander round the site with its impressive vaulted undercroft.

As recommended by James I then taxi up to the Kadife Kale, Alexander the Great's 'Velvet Castle' overlooking Izmir, £1.67 well spent, stroll around awhile before walking down for a last sit in the Swissotel grounds. Mid-afternoon an email pings in from Turkish Airlines – we have cancelled your flight from Istanbul to Heathrow … this is at 15 hours notice ! Thanks a bunch. A protracted telephone call at hotel reception eventually secures me an alternative flight to Munich as the best option later in the day and on the Lufthansa website I get, for £308 (!) a one way ticket Munich to Heathrow via Frankfurt – last screen said 'Payment Successful' and it didn't concern me much that no e-ticket was forthcoming.

Hindsight reveals that a better option would have been to cancel Turkish Airlines and rearrange completely with KLM who I discover later fly Izmir to Amsterdam or perhaps go with Pegasus to Stansted. Destined to arrive at Heathrow at 10pm means my PCR test would be invalid so out I go again to the airport for swabbing. Each flight change needs to be logged with a new 'Passenger Location Form'.

At 4am on Tuesday 1st June I take an £8.33 taxi out to Adnan Menderes Airport where I pick up my PCR negative certificate and catch the 5.45 am Anasolu flight to Istanbul. My bag is checked through to Munich and I start to fill out the required Germany entry form.

But, disaster. I present all documents at the gate trying to get on TK 7738 to Munich and am denied my seat on the plane because I can't show them an e-ticket for the onward German flights. Ringing Lufthansa in Germany and then Turkey reveals that my tickets were cancelled – nobody told me ! Lord knows why … my NatWest Visa card has been working well. Airline staff are reasonably helpful, my bag is retrieved, and finding

a little travel agency called Easyticket who organise KLM flights from the other Istanbul airport (85 km away, taxi £33) via Schiphol to Heathrow. This costs me £528 ! I hope to get reimbursed by somebody but you never know. Turkish Airlines weren’t keen to accept any responsibility.

The other airport is swanky and new. Once I have printed off new gov.uk forms, proof of my quarantine payment etc. KLM efficiently transports me home – I even get 2 Heineken beers on board and Schiphol Duty Free has the Niederegger marzipan chocolates that Istanbul Duty Free used to sell.

La di da. UK Border Force let me in with scant queueing: I am escorted by an elderly Sikh with my bag via customs to the holding area downstairs at Terminal 2. Here G4S take over proceedings shambolically and inefficiently – the quarantine ordeal begins and it is poorly run to say the least. But that’s another story. Meantime let’s just say ‘tesekkur Turkey’.

Abyssinia !

Letter to Boris at No. 10

Iulii 23

Leafield

2019

Witney OX29 9QJ

Ave Boris.

Iterum me. Gratissimum ad novam domum. Ego tibi scripsis sex abhinc annos re quadras pavimenti ubi eras Praetor Londinensis.

Meminisse semper quid facis pro fratribus et sororibus meis minimis, facis propter Deum.

Sit Brittaniam florebit.

Omnis optime,

Jacobus Aestes

(Jamie Summers)

I am pleased to tell you that I got a reply to the above within a month from Ikram (Correspondence Officer at No.10) enclosing a stock thank you letter from Boris. Sadly both were in English!

Letter in the Church Times May 2016

Sir, – It was disappointing to read the twin articles on mental illness from the Revd Vic Van Den Bergh and Sarah Meyrick.

The former spent most of his article explaining how to get someone sectioned, with a tiny paragraph saying the best advice was to treat people with care, kindness, and understanding. The second article concerned itself with an unfortunate stabbing in a random situation by a 30-year-old with drug issues in which fortunately no one died.

For the past 24 years, I have been working on and off in this field, trying to help people in spiritual distress, and to help the Church to engage with compassion with such people. These are those that Jesus called, “the least of my brothers and sisters. . . what you do for them you do for me.”

Jean Vanier is wise when he tells us that, “if we come close rather than back off, if we meet rather than retreat. When we come close we will realise that our fears may be unfounded.” Absolutely, Jean: it is my contention that “mental illness” can also be understood as a trauma induced tussle with the Lord which can be better addressed by the Church than current psychiatric services. Indeed, outcomes are often better for people who avoid contact with psychiatric services entirely. The drugs don’t always work. Love always does.

It is sad that fear of the stranger persists in church circles. In medieval times, monasteries were the default mental asylums. Oh that the modern Church would take a more enlightened view of how to come alongside those with troubled minds.

JAMIE SUMMERS
Westside
Wandsworth Common
London
(PDF of published letter in the Church Times)

4th letter to King Abdullah of Jordan

Saturday 30th January 2016
Movenpick Hotel, Aqaba.

Your Highness,

Once again I am in Aqaba, this time bringing teddy bears and balloons for the Syrian refugee children and writing a book on mental health and spirituality for SPCK. I leave on Wednesday morning back to Amman and on to London with Royal Jordanian Airlines.

Layali tells me that you are here in Aqaba, so I am making one more effort to reach you with the letters I have written to you over previous visits. It would be good to meet you; if not here this time, perhaps back in London – my contact details are shown above.

So, enclosed once more are copies of the words previously sent concerning your father, Jordan and other matters together with an information leaflet of the little charity I chair in

the United Kingdom,

Yours sincerely,

Jamie Summers

This letter was collected from the hotel by a King's messenger but sadly one has to say now :

No reply

Last letter to Virginia Bottomley

Springfield Patients Council Limited

1.8.93

Dear Mrs Bottomley,

Community Supervision Orders

May I add a personal plea to the growing opposition to your proposed legislation regarding Community Supervision Orders. I trust you will recall my name, I am Carole Ingram's brother and we exchanged correspondence at the beginning of 1992.

You will be aware of the anger felt by users of psychiatric services at these proposals through your meetings

with Peter Campbell (Survivors Speak Out) , Edna Conlan O.B.E. (United Kingdom Advocacy Network) and others. National MIND, its local associations and many other respected bodies will have impressed upon you their feeling that the existing law is perfectly adequate to deal with so-called dangerous schizophrenics wreaking mayhem while out 'in the community'. The framework of care and control is in place, it is merely the implementation and monitoring of that framework that requires your attention.

To me and others the CSOs represent just another sword of Damocles poised above the heads of people with mental disabilities whose rights are already atrophied. Do you wish to be remembered as the woman who drove another draconian nail into the lives of the mentally distressed ?

St. Peter awaits at those gates – I urge you to reconsider your actions. U-turns are better than bad turns,

Yours sincerely,

Jamie Summers. (Chairman)

3rd letter from Enid Vincent

17 June 1992

Dear Mr Summers

I am writing in response to your letter of 18 May 1992. I am sorry that you were not happy with all the points made in my previous reply to you. I understand, however, that when you last attended the outpatient clinic Dr Gundy went through your case notes with you and answered all your queries on medication.

Whilst I note your praise of certain staff on Bluebell Ward, and will pass your comments on, I feel that we have already investigated your complaints thoroughly and that I have nothing further to add.

Dr Gundy has assured me that he would be happy to discuss the question of your medication with you again at your next appointment should you so wish.

Yours sincerely

DR ENID VINCENT

Chairman

Wandsworth Health Authority

2nd letter from Enid Vincent

20 May, 1992

Dear Mr. Summers,

Thank you for your letter dated 18 May 1992 referring to my letter to you dated 13 April 1992.

I have asked for the additional points you have raised to be looked into and will reply more fully as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Enid C. Vincent

Chairman

Second letter to Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

The glorious 12th August 2015

Dear Justin,

Apologies for ‘bothering’ you – I realize you are a busy man. Enclosed is a letter I sent you about 15 months ago. Your correspondence secretary, Andrew Nunn kindly wrote back on the 2nd June 2014 to say ‘I will draw his attention to your letter’ but possibly that never happened. Just to validate my credentials I have also enclosed a round-robin email concerning Jean Vanier with the other Andrew Nunn’s (Dean of Southwark Cathedral) reply above. And finally the last enclosure is the leaflet (and joining form) of the little charity I chair ‘Being Alongside’, The Association for Pastoral Care in Mental Health.

Regarding the latter; following an exchange of letters with your daughter Katharine, we asked her to become a Patron of BA/APCMH following the death of Stephen Sykes. Sadly she felt she would get too involved to the detriment of her own health so we secured Roger Royle instead – I do try and help

Katharine, posting her helpful material and making comments on her inspirational blogsite – you must be very proud of her spirituality.

Regarding my original letter, not much further to report on Johnny Cameron who may escape prison and/or a large fine because of insurance. However, finally, after what, two years in limbo the situation at Farnham seems resolved. At the end of last month the on-the-run thieving vicar from Barnsley, Simon Reynolds, was at last convicted of pocketing £24,000 of fees intended for weddings and funerals. Just ghastly – and so unfair on local clergy who had to cover (and lie) for him. I was about to write again to the Diocesan secretary in Guildford when I learnt the news … he fled half way through the trial to Europe but I assume (always dangerous !) that he has been recaptured to face the music.

Saw Ed Creasy KS the other day who remembers you. Poor Ed went and broke his leg clambering over the Pyrenees from St. Girons a couple of weeks ago.

Yours in Christ,

Jamie Summers

Sent by correspondence secretary, Andrew Nunn to Justin's 'Executive Assistant' to await his return from abroad. But no reaction. Apparently Rowan Williams was able to answer every single letter that came his way with at least a postcard – surely not beyond the whit of the current incumbent. Therefore we have to say:

France 20th to 29th July 2015

Monday 20th July

Pick up Lizzie & Peggy (her Kerry Blue chienne) in Kennington. M2/M20 to Eurotunnel. Arrive Calais roughly noon their time. Motorway to Gare Montparnasse, Paris at 3.30 p.m. then back via the busy péréferique to Trosly-Breuil at 5.30 p.m.. Spruce up a bit … change shoes etc.

Outside Jean's chapel

Messe at 6 p.m. – Catholic communion service. Sit frontish left. Alina arrives near me in middle section & a few minutes late Jean Vanier sits on an armed chair just 10 metres behind me on the right. To be in his presence. During the 'peace' greetings Alina and I greet each other warmly & others nearby.

Then I approach Jean, shake his hand –

"Salut. Je suis Jamie de L'Angleterre"

"Summers"

"Oui"

Service continues – I am only picking up certain words and phrases "Seigneur" etc.

"Je suis Anglican" … blessing only at communion time.

When the 40 minute service ends Jean and I give each other a big hug. I show him my gifts for L'Arche (2 bottles of Pixley blackcurrant cordial) – Ivan & Alina join us. I then give Jean the framed photo of Jesus (of Akiane's picture) & a

copy of Todd Burpo's book 'Heaven is for Real' with a Revelations bookmark at the photo page.

Jean looks well – stooped but well. He is 85 you know. Alina asks me to stay for supper with her and a few others. I buy 3 postcards and a little Pilgrims book by Jean which I ask her to, if possible, have signed for me ' demain matin '.

What an evening what a joy. As I said, " Ma vie est complete. Je peux mourir ! " But not yet please God.

Depart at 8.30, sat nav on again & head to the Ibis Compiègne – glacons pour mon G & T. Sleep.

Isis atrocity near Syrian border in Turkey 30 dead.

Tuesday 21st July

2/3 mile walk along the river towards Compiègne centre. Brief view of Musée de L'Armistice near Trosly-Breuil.

Site of the Armistice

Ivan makes me a coffee as I write in their garden. Peaceful. Compose thank you letter in French + 2 page selection of phrases from Excuse My French book for Alina.

She makes me copy of the letter on red notepaper and at 12.15 p.m. we hug on leaving.

" On a besoin de toi ", she says. How kind.

I an sitting in the car, stabbing at the sat nav with Elbow on the Sony CD player when soudainement the 6′ 4" frame of Jean leans into the Merc on the passenger side :

"Jamie, I read the book. Very good".

He reaches over and clasps my hand with both of his …

“You know that letter I sent you when I returned from Nepal ? Well, this is one of the songs I told you about, ‘ … the birds are the keepers of our secrets’ “.

He listens – I am wracking my brain for the sentence in French that I want to say (nous sommes logés à la même enseigne) but it doesn’t come – of course the man speaks perfect English anyway so I say,

” You and I are in the same boat, but it’s a good boat to be in. ”

What a broad génial smile he has.

The long journey south commences giving Paris a wide berth to the right. Sézanne, pretty town where a blonde appreciates my motor from a central square café – via fields of hemp / marijuana (the sweet sickly smell alerts me) at Louptière-Thénon through Sens to Bourges (vast cathedral). Fill up the tank in La Chapellotte at a small shop opposite the church where I take an expresso.

It’s been ‘ good tank country the entire way – large open fields, not much traffic. Souillac final destination and the last 2 or 3 hours are on the excellent E20, a mostly free motorway.

No parking spaces near the Hotel de Quercy but nearby at the museum are spaces. Phew it’s after 10.30 p.m. and it’s been about 9 hours plus driving – what a huge country. Check in is at the adjacent sister hotel & it’s a hot somewhat poky room. Bath in one of those French ½ baths & struggle to sleep in the heat and humidity – no a/c no fan it seems.

Wednesday 22nd July

Snooze till 9 a.m. then stroll through Souillac – big church/Abbey is a little uninspiring.

Head off through Sarlat to St. André d'Allas & on to the fascinating Cabanes de Breuil (Huts in the wood) which date from 1500 but seem older.

The Shepherd's hut

3 postcards one intended for James & Bel Dallas. It's quite well off the beaten track but there are 10 or so cars visiting.

Next is Les Eyzies, home of Cro-Magnon man with caves in the limestone cliffs above the Dordogne river. Dally awhile at the Hotel Cro-Magnon where I stayed 40 years ago with Mary Rose – looks charming, now with pool & €80/90 per night. Another time maybe.

Fill tank & purchase €6 of picnic (milk, Président ripe brie and a pack of ham) at InterMarché, Montignac. Crammed with tourists – apparently to enter Lascaux 2 one must buy a ticket in town but there is a 30/40 minute queue so I demur.

Up to the caves, text to Suzanne; shop is overpriced & I think it's wise I have avoided entry. Perhaps there are other quieter locations with original cave paintings – done some 15,000 years ago.

Back route to Souillac – rain start. Rest by pool & in room from 3 p.m. but it's too soporific to achieve much rest.

Later, walk down to the river which is a mile out of town – finish picnic. One couple have parked two deckchairs in the water and are sipping rosé ! Lads with motorbikes & one lady rider.

Find fan but still very poor night – decide it will be my last in Souillac.

Thursday 23rd July

Pay the bill @ Hotel de Quercy (€117 for the 2 nights). On my

way towards Rocamadour I turn into the delightful Château de la Treyne perched above the Dordogne river & now a Relais & Châteaux hotel.

Sit on a bench in the beautiful gardens – chapel of the house is closed but charming.

Chapelle de la Treyne

Write up my diary & then brief tour of the exquisite downstairs rooms – elegance & not hyper-expensive so perhaps in the future …

On to the PrehistoDino Park at Lacave where I hoped there might be cave paintings but it's a trail through the woods with one animatronic T.Rex vs Stegosaurus & many other creatures. Informative I guess but better for children really who love dinosaurs.

Lovely countryside to Rocamadour where I park in the valley & take the little train up to the pedestrianised area. A bit lazy but it's very hot. Staircase up to large chapel & church by the tomb of St. Amadour & espy the famous Black Virgin statue. Absolutely zippo vibes. Continue up to the Château atop the cliff passing 'stations of the Cross' …

As I approach No.11 (string him up & nail him thereon)

The eleventh station

the only significant moment of the day occurs – a 2 year old girl with dark hair is being pushed downhill in her pushchair. Our eyes meet and lock. She looks a bit startled but the mutual moment is intense.

Brief photostop at the Jerusalem cross then descend the crowded steps & back on the little train to the car park.

Off we go on the side roads to Cahors. Lovely quiet roads. Lidl stop €5 for Coulommiers cheese, yoghurt drinks & tonic.

Past the famous medieval Pont Valentré to my hotel, unbooked but they have a nice room overlooking the river Lot. So cool with the air-con & less than twice the price of Souillac but so worth it. Spend the afternoon by the pool & its perfect temperature before a tour of Cahors which is a nice little town. I'm on the Camino for some of the way – Casino supermarket for more yoghurt drink, over the Valentré bridge &

Le pont Valentré

round to my hotel.

Apple & Coulommiers for supper & glacons for my gin. Compose email to friends on the laptop which takes quite a while as annoyingly the cursor keeps moving around the script – curse the cursor !

So wonderful to be in a cool room with comfy pillow. Chouette.

Friday 24th July

News from Simon Williams who will be in Perpignan environs this weekend. Write up diary on the terrace before setting off to the Grotte de Pech-Merle outside Cabrerets.

Arrive at 10.30 – am given 11.30 entrance time. Shop for cards then 1hr 20 mins of 'guide time' – much waffle as our group of 15/20 is escorted round the stalagmites and tites & interesting but mediocre quality prehistoric cave paintings. Cost €11 to see 28 mammoths, a few bison & 2 horses (spotted). Apparently some are 29,000 years old. Get rather bored – then back through Cabrerets & a nice road via the hillside town of St. Cirq Lapopie – it's €3 to park; don't have enough coins so drive on through (looks v.touristy anyway) – uphill then left back to Cahors on side roads.

Back at the hotel there is grief as 'turning up on spec' yesterday for a 2 night stay has not been recorded & they need Room No.46 for proper booked guests. Why is it that many

French pretend they can't speak a word of English or even understand my French ? Woman @ reception annoys me … says there are no rooms available.

Back to the pool but it's cloudy now & starts to rain. Decide to head to Lourdes but as I load car reception miraculously finds Room 30 has become available – so I stay. It's not quite as nice as 46 but it's fine.

Back to Lidl for €6 of Coulommiers again, some profiteroles and an apple – small change to a beggar with 3 dogs outside. Freshen up & out into central Cahors, €80 from a hole in the wall, visit the the Cathedral (St. Stephen's … cooler inside & not too ornate) – attractive side streets in the older bit of town. Buy a Spanish knife €4 for my apple & cheese.

Back on the laptop I answer a few emails – nice one in from Andrew Nunn. Kindly Scruff Williams has secured me a bed for tomorrow night with his HSBC mates at Céret. Exchange with Louise (Goodall) & plan to meet her and Janie Gill at their hotel/restaurant in St Girons on Sunday night perhaps en route to Lourdes – we shall see. It's a little dis-organised this cruise sur le continent.

Shame about the spat with the receptioniste but weird my turn up booking was not registered. They said there was no man on duty when I arrived but there was.

Mystery. No gin tonight !

Plus ça change.

Saturday 25th July

Up at 6.30 a.m. – 7.45 I'm off towards Albi & points south. Pay the bill €200 for the 2 nights … I'd thought I might get away with half that ! Cooler today so Merc has its lid on. Countryside not quite as pretty as Dordogne / Lot & first stop is Charlie Mould's hilltop village, Castelnau-de-Montmiral

where I have an excellent ‘café crème’ in the main square. Text her to tell her … she is shopping & staying in Toulouse.

Onto the motorway sat nav says, flatter country round Toulouse before spotting traffic jam so exit onto side roads – sat nav readjusts to say it’s still 2 hours to Couiza.

First to Rennes-les-Bains but spot nothing special – looking for the Poussin tomb (turns out it’s been razed to the ground by the private owner who was fed up with tourists … site of ‘Et in Arcadia Ego’ from Holy Blood & Holy Grail, near Arques) then up to Rennes le Chateau,

The village sign

Saunier’s extraordinary garish church atop the hill with with magnificent 360° views.

Saunier’s folly

On beautiful side road through Bugarach (poor café crème), Cubières and its fête & then through the epic Gorges de Galamus, gorgeous – Cheddar Gorge phooey ! Decide against descending to the Ermitage of St. Anthony & continue through wonderful Cathar country towards Perpignan. At Rennes le Chateau bookshop I have asked which of the books in English is the best & have purchased at great expense (€20) one on the Cathars & the mystery of what was found in the church in 1880.

Superb road with just one other car between Estagel & the Perpignan plain over the Col de la Dona. On to Céret were I arrive at 5.10 p.m.. Locating Geoff & Ulla’s house is a trifle difficult but wow, they are the highest property in the town. A converted house and pigsty with much charm. Gift them the Hendrick’s gin and 16 cans of FeverTree tonic – great to see Simon Williams again & wife Amutha.

Sur le patio

Am given wonderful guest suite – supper is prawns and aioli &

salad & cherry tart al fresco near their pool. 2 g&t's and fizzy white from Limoux through which I passed earlier in the day.

Knackered by 10 p.m. so to bed – no sleeping pill tonight but sleep not too badly … views through my 3 windows to shrubs, the Mediterranean and a tree.

Sunday 26th July

Up at 7.30/8 – Geoff shows me where the washing machine is, a top loader but excellent. Dry my clothes on rosemary bushes. Ulla returns with croissants and épée bread & we breakfast leisurely under the large olive tree beneath my suite of rooms. Home made muscat grape juice and apricot jam.

The morning passes leisurely once more by the pool with English & French Sunday newspapers – 'Pinot wins Tour de France' (stage) shout the French papers when it's actually Chris Frome the Brit who wins and wears the yellow jersey !

Lunch is a delicious omelette cooked by Geoff in his pottery kitchen with chillies and octopus washed down with a 1664 lager beer. I depart at 3.15 p.m. thinking it's about 3½ hours to St. Girons.

Geoff & Ulla give me back the gin & the tonics & I pluck a lemon from the tree nearest the house. Result !

Sat nav misbehaves early as I've probably stabbed the wrong St. Girons into its system so it seems about half an hour before we clear Céret & head over a hill on the road towards Prades. Then up sharp-sided valleys into Catalan country – ski resorts at Font-Romeu, a flatter plain then up again to towering scenery over the Col de Puymorens

My 'ship of steel'

which seems to have the most extensive ski area – then down to Ax-les-Thermes, Tarascon & Sinast with fine cliffs and

obviously prehistoric sites nearby – Europe's largest cave apparently.

Then at Foix turn left towards St. Girons. We are now finished with hairpins & windy roads & it's a beautiful 40 kms valley with drumlins created in the 'basket of eggs' topography post glaciation. Lovely English-style country & a beautiful mill house at Lescure just before St. Girons. Sat nav takes me direct to the Chateau Beauregard where I have arranged to meet Louise Goodall & her fellow walkers for supper. It's 8.15 as the open-topped Merc pulls up outside this house/hotel used as the local Nazi headquarters in WW2.

Louise and Janie Gill greet me – they are milling outside- luckily there is a room free, the George Sand (Chopin's mistress) suite – LUXURY. Supper at the poor St. G restaurant in town takes till midnight. Fun walk back chatting to L & J & Ed Creasy (Eton 1 yr behind me). G&T's & giggles with the girls on my balcony & bed (alone sadly !) at 1.30 a.m.

No sleeping pill again.

Monday 27th July

7 a.m. up after not much sleep – walkers are congregating their rucksacks.

Outside the hotel

Distribute a few charity leaflets and newsletters to people who showed an interest the previous evening (Dennis, Mandy, Ed). Lug L & J's suitcases downstairs.

Morning is drizzly & dull overcast – they, & there are 15 or so of them being bossed around by the tour leaders, head off to the hills for their first day 30 kms. Most have those silly ski poles & even gaiters. Wheeze's day pack rucksack is too heavy so she unloads much kit. Take their photos for them.

Back up to my lovely suite of rooms (€198 for the night, gulp)

– write up diary, brief walk in the grounds & then it's off towards Lourdes. Part A roads part motorway past the airport Tarbes-Lourdes – was intending to stay the night here but sat nav couldn't locate the hotel I had opted for from Trip Advisor. Find it's free parking between noon & 2 p.m. down by the river with large hotels either side. One is the Sainte Suzanne which makes me laugh – so does Suzanne who is the vice-chair of Being Alongside/APCMH.

Hotel Sainte Suzanne

Up the Rue des Grottes & its grotty souvenir shops selling religious tat. Find the tourist office for a map – visit nearby church then down via the Soubirous' townhouse to the massive Grotte where the 18 visitations were supposed to have happened. Brief look inside the world's 2nd largest church then down into the extraordinary oval underground Basilica (the size of a greyhound racing stadium) with seating for 5,000 & banners of many saints

Mother Theresa

– sadly not one for St. Nino of Georgia, originally from Armenia. Walk round the outer ring then the inner ring taking photos of the banners of my favourites

Saint Francis

– then out and up around the castle/museum the highest point of Lourdes back to my car via an average café crème at the Sainte Suzanne bar.

Fortuitously I stop in a souvenir shop to find a postcard of the Bergérie in Bartres & discover it's only 5 kms away. There are scores of mixed youth in blue shirts – turns out they are from Essex, Romford in fact.

Through the main town and out into the country to the village of Bartres. Many fewer visitors here and I am the only one

climbing up to the shepherd’s hut

The Soubirous’ hut

where Bernadette aged 14 looked after her family’s sheep back in 1852. Inside the hut, wouldyabelieve it !, are a few plastic sheep & a statue of the Virgin Mary. Descend back to the village & park up looking for the family’s other house but signposting is poor & I fail to locate it although Bernadette’s ‘Fontaine’is there – somewhat dried up & mucky & tired.

I have decided against staying more than 2 or 3 hours in this famous place & drive north towards Bordeaux. Caramel sundae @ McDonalds, Tarbes then good roads through flat countryside, then Armagnac country with better architecture. Stop at a Carrefour Local to stock up with milk, yoghurt drink (good, not as sweet as Lidl’s), apple & organic camembert + 2 Danish pastries. Tea stop at a Parking soon after then reckon the town of Marmande should be my destination tonight. Arrive at 7 p.m. & find the Ibis Budget for €48 & it’s fine. Finish my ‘pique-nique’ read a bit of my Cathars book, check my emails, text the girls down in the Pyrenèes but they must have no signal.

Third night running no Zimovane/Zopliclone & pretty good night’s sleep.

My take on Lourdes – for what it’s worth. 5 million visitors a year – so it’s a congregation of Christians with those massive churches.

But sacred sites they are not. I think this little bored schoolgirl invented her visions perhaps to please her parents & the local Catholic priests, & boy, did it work ! Many shrines and associated relics have brought wealth to many towns and villages. Lourdes is just the largest. Who really cares if ‘Sainte Bernadette’ (not in my book) invented the whole thing ? Does it really matter ?

It’s a convocation of Christianity / catholicism & it’s not going to change.

Tuesday 28th July

Wake at 8.15 and set off towards Angoulème where I have arranged to drop in at Lizzie’s sister & hubby. Text to say I’m running late – plus ça change !

Have estimated that Marmande to Angouleme area is about an hour but it’s over 2 hrs 20 minutes before I locate the laurel hedge where I need to turn left to their property.

Earlier I had driven through the pretty village of Aubeterre where astonishingly I encounter 7 or 8 English cars.

J and A have a substantial old property sitting in a couple of acres + with a wood above, a courtyard with barns around and a side field with a ‘poissonerie’, apparently full of grass snakes, which one day may get turned into a plunge/swimming pool. Overgrown trees in the courtyard obscure the probable wondrous view south and south-west.

First to greet me is Peggy, Lizzie’s dog. There are an assortment of local English builders & helpers around – the former precariously up a poorly-placed ladder reassembling gutter pipes. We chat on the terrace over coffee – I stay perhaps a couple of hours; writing up my diary on the swing seat in the courtyard.

I learn that when Mother Theresa came to Holland where J lived, she insisted on meeting J who had always sent her parcels and donations on behalf of students in her school.

Wonderful – there’s me with my Jean Vanier connection and J with her Mother Theresa one.

Next mission is to Royan on the north side of the Garonne above Bordeaux where my friend Didier Rousseau used to live – discover his nice large house a street away from the sea

front. Chat with the cleaner there & go round the back where I am told people may know where Didier has gone. News is he's in the USA and married. My quest to track him down (we met in S.America back in 1978 but have met subsequently in Paris and London) continues – I compose a letter in Franglais to the docteur Vilar who now lives at 8 rue Auguste Rateau & drop it back with the cleaner. We shall see – let's hope he responds.

On up north through brackish salty oyster beds – previously I came through cognac country. Originally I aim for Challons – it's 4 p.m. now but the route is uninspiring so I track right towards Saumur on the Loire. In Vic en Bigorre I stock up at the Carrefour market with a couple of pains aux raisins, yoghurt drink, milk & an organic camembert some of which I eat in a nearby lay-by.

By 7 p.m. I'm getting a bit tired and so somewhere north of Niort there are 4 or 5 budget hotels to choose from.

The Campanile is my choice, €69 and rather better than the Ibis Budget. There is a larger bath than usual in French hotels, a kettle, a better telly and generally more mod cons. Finish my picnic in the grounds, read a bit and conk out @ 10.30, this night taking a sleeping pill as it will be a long day tomorrow. Sat nav says it's 3½ hours to Paris.

Wednesday 29th July

Leave at about 8.15. Take the motorway as A roads would have been 6 hours plus. About €36 in toll charges but easy driving with good service stations – one has Paul bakery & good coffee. Arrive at the Montparnasse station in perfect time to 'ramasser' Lizzie & Peggy at the noon pick-up time. We have the top down for the 1½ hours north-east to Trosly-Breuil – sat nav takes us through small section of lovely countryside nearby with the sunken spire and village of Haupterolles. We shop first at the good InterMarché

Peggy in the Mercedes

where I get 2 bottles of Macon-Villages, 2 bio camemberts, a Coulommiers, a causse blue and a nice ½ bottle of Sauternes for €26.

Result.

Then I'm keen to show Lizzie round the main L'Arche buildings – sadly no-one I know is around & I don't want to disturb anyone but she sees the set-up and the chapel & we visit the craft shop over the road with Peggy allowed in.

Many of the houses in the village now belong to L'Arche & we meet a couple of residents with twisted bodies being wheeled around by volunteers in the shop.

Then it's soft top on for the journey north to Calais. Brief visit to the Armistice museum again & then quite a few hours from Compiègne up the A1 autoroute.

Get there at 6.30 or so, check in Peggy at the pet reception & then have to wait for the 8.20 shuttle as a consequence of earlier delays – due mostly to the previous day's 'storming' or 'swarm' of migrants trying to enter the tunnel sous La Manche. We spot several tryers & even a couple of French police cars on duty, a rarity before recent days one understands.

Once over the other side there is a lorry parked up with British police processing two black fellows who have been discovered stowed away.

Then a massive queue develops on the M20 – police have closed off a large section (for God knows what reason). We escape at the first opportunity towards Faversham on a fast twisty road & join the M2/A2 which also has massive road works going on near Rochester.

Honestly, what do people coming to tour England think of our road services ? Drop Lizzie home at 10.30 & I'm back home by

11. No pill again.

A significant moment

It is April 1978 – having ‘ pushed paper ‘ for close on two years in a City reinsurance broking firm I have chosen to take some time off for travel. Wanderlust rather than work.

200 kms south of Bogotá, Colombia and 50 kms east of Popoyán lies the charming village of San Agustín in the Andean foothills – one could be in the Cotswolds … rolling hills, friendly people, excellent coffee and dairy products. This village became my favourite archaeological site in the whole of South America – eat your heart out Macchu Picchu ! In San Agustín itself is the exquisite Lavapatas … volcanic river rocks scoured out to make animal patterns for the water to flow over and around – monkeys’ tails, lizards, snakes – all beautifully done some 2,000 years ago.

A couple of English girls : Gail Bishop & Tessa Cormack are also ‘ gap yearing ‘ before gap years have been invented and with a couple of other travellers we take up an offer of rooms at a local farm with horses from where we explore the outlying ancient stones and sites.

One glorious morning we have ridden for an hour or so to reach ‘ Alto de los Ídolos ‘ where there is a menhir and other standing stones – as we approach the site, me on a young chestnut bay of about 15 hands, there are a few houses. Out of one of them comes a middle-aged lady in a flowing skirt who walks straight up to me, takes my right hand off the reins and thrusts into it an object –

It’s an oval amulet, made of a grey stone, carved on one side with an owl and snake motif and the reverse carved with a fly agaric mushroom set against mountains and the sun. An unexpected gift that I have kept safe over the years.