

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 p er erique 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 am 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 espresso.

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 $\frac{1}{2}$ 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, Castelnaud-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 Pyrenées 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 Angoulême 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 causee 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.

