

CYCLING IN THE
ARDECHE & CEVENNES



JOURNAL
OF
ANOTHER GREAT ADVENTURE

Penny & Damian Buckley

May 2006

The Route



The Facts

15 Days: 6-20 May 2006

795 kms (494 miles) cycled in total: 0 punctures!

7 départements traversed in 3 régions

Daily Summary

Day	Date	From → To	Distance Cycled	
			(kms)	(miles)
1	6 May	Céret → Avignon	40	25
2	7 May	Avignon → St Martin d'Ardèche	80	50
3	8 May	St Martin d'Ardèche → Les Vans	74	46
4	9 May	Les Vans → Villefort	27	17
5	10 May	Villefort → Nîmes	108	67
6	11 May	Rest Day at Nîmes		
<i>Sub-total - First loop</i>			328	205
7	12 May	Nîmes → St Martin-de-Londres	69	43
8	13 May	St Martin-de-Londres → Clermont-l'Hérault	48	30
9	14 May	Clermont-l'Hérault → Murat sur Vèbre	54	33
10	15 May	Murat sur Vèbre → Mazamet	68	42
11	16 May	Mazamet → Carcassonne	51	32
12	17 May	Damian's Birthday & Rest Day at Carcassonne		
13	18 May	Carcassonne → Sougraigne	69	43
14	19 May	Sougraigne → Cucugnan	45	28
15	20 May	Cucugnan → Céret	63	39
<i>Sub-total - Second loop</i>			467	290
GRAND TOTAL			795	494

Day 1

Thursday, 4 May

Bournemouth → Oréans via Calais

Here we are again on the threshold of Great Adventure II. In fact, today is a bit of a 'faux commencement' since, to the casual observer it is starting as any other of our French holidays have done for the past 15-20 years. We load the bikes in the car, set off for a Channel port and spend the first night in a Campanile. On this occasion, we are in Orléans. Being here immediately brings back happy memories of our Loire trip. I would love to visit the Pont de l'Europe, the wonderfully graceful bridge built to mark the millennium.

I miss the frisson of excitement of travelling by plane with boxed bikes but I am confident there will be frisson a-plenty once we are on our way. This trip will take us 100m higher than our highest point last year at Gerbier de Jonc and we can look forward to several serious LSAs*.

For now it is great to be back in France.



* Lung-Searing Ascents

Day 2
Orléans→ Céret

Friday, 5 May

It is great to wake in France. We chat to another Englishman at breakfast who is cycling the Pyrenees and then cycling round Spain. We marvel at his plans, which make ours seem rather modest.

I am scheduled to drive the first stage but the engine makes that dispiritingly dead sound when I try to start the car. We just can't believe that we shall have to call Green Flag for the third year running - there is all a terrible sense of déjà vu about it. Fortunately, with the help of some jump leads we can get started. Even more fortunately the Peugeot dealer is not far and we can get a new battery. Thus, two hours later than scheduled, we set off. We pass through some rain but by Clermont Ferrand the sun is shining, temperature's rising and my spirits. I am a fine weather cyclist, which probably marks me out as a softie; my spirits soar and plummet with the temperature.

Our route takes us over the new Millau viaduct, one of Norman Foster's recent 'oeuvres' - it is quite stunning, magnificent, breathtaking and many other superlatives. I would like to stop, and feel sure there must be a viewing platform because stopping on the bridge is forbidden, but it escapes us. The French have missed a trick here; perhaps it is in the pipeline.

Soon we are into the vineyards of Côtes de Roussillon. Beautifully tended, all the vines seem small, as though only two or three year old plants. I wonder if some twenty-first century phylloxera has wiped out the entire crop necessitating wholesale replanting. Then we realise that, this year, we are in France very early and this is just the normal amount of top growth for the time of year.

The weather is warm and sunny and we are pleased to note all the signs of warmer climes: umbrella pines, cypresses, flatter, pantiled roofs, prickly pear cactus etc. We turn into the Glydon's house 930 miles after leaving Bournemouth. Mas de Soula has views to die for - Monts des Albères and the Canigou. We enjoy a happy evening trying not to make it too bibulous - tomorrow we set off.

Day 3
Céret → Avignon

Saturday, 6 May
40 kms

A wonderful day, we are dressed for action. I take a picture of the Canigou, noting it still has snow on it! After photos with Fanny and Chris we are off for Perpignan station. This is the start; a 20 mile ride along a route nationale. It is uncomfortable with cars and lorries whizzing past. We are grateful for a broadish cycle track, a bit lumpy and bumpy but it does serve to separate us from the traffic. Damian gets a bee in his bonnet or rather a hover fly in his helmet and I wonder if my paramedic skills are going to be called for this early in the trip, happily they are not.

***Leaving the
Glydon's
house***



As we struggle to get bikes down the steps at Avignon station, we are helped by kind people who are interested in what we are doing. They have been on a pilgrimage to St Gilles, which, they assure us, ranks alongside Rome, Jerusalem and Compostela. They are slightly amazed that we are cycling to Mont Aigoual; this in turn slightly worries us but we put it to the back of our mind.

The journey to Avignon is three hours and I see my first flamingoes on the inland ponds and also some of the white horses of the Camargue.

We find our hotel and hurry to get out into the city. We cannot leave without seeing The Bridge and there will be no time tomorrow. I find the bridge a bit of a disappointment. It is, in fact, only half a bridge -

going only to the middle of the river. Perhaps the chapel of St Benezet in the middle is worth the detour but we don't give it a chance to prove itself. The sky has also become overcast so the photo ops are much reduced.



The Bridge at Avignon



Damian and Molière

Day 4
Avignon → St Martin d'Ardèche

Sunday, 7 May
80 kms

We wake to better than expected weather and spirits rise. Portion control is the name of the game at breakfast and we decide Hotel d'Angleterre fulfills all the basic requirements of a hotel and no more. We set off for St Martin d'Ardèche feeling great. Our routine is to buy lunch provisions early on and we arrive at Pujaut. The village is en fête and M le Boulanger is setting out his bread stall. Amongst his wares is the longest baguette in the world, 2m at least. We chat and he invites us to see the oven in which he baked the loaf. Mindful that this will take time and we have 75 kms to conquer today, it seems churlish to refuse and we follow him. The oven is **hugely** deep but not tall and he tells us it is 80 years old. We chat, thank him and wish Pujaut a bonne fête. We are reminded again that episodes such as this are what make these expeditions such fun.

Our route takes us through the vineyards of the Côtes du Rhone and Tavel Rosé - acre on acre of immaculately tended vines. It seems amazing that anything grows in the soil; it looks dull and lifeless and gives a new definition to stony. The only other crop we see is asparagus and the gang of workers doing the back-breaking work of picking it.

***M le Boulanger
and his baguette
at Pujaut***



By afternoon we're feeling the effects of the climbs. The book describes today as 'easy' and in comparison to that which is to come: that may be so but we regret that we have not done more training. I even begin to wonder if we shall be abandoning this expedition.

We arrive in St Martin d'Ardèche, a delightful town; apparently totally reliant on tourism with many places to hire canoes/kayaks. This reminds us of happy holidays canoeing down the Dordogne and the Dronne but there will be no time for canoeing this time.

We change quickly and go for supper. Damian chooses fried Camembert cheese with a strawberry coulis on bed of rocket for a starter! I am amazed since he is nothing if not conventional in his food choices. When in France, however, his palate metamorphoses into something altogether more avant-garde. The whole meal is delicious.

Day 5
St Martin d'Ardèche → Les Vans

Monday, 8 May
73.5 kms

We wake to hissing rain but cannot afford the luxury of waiting to see if it improves as we have a long ride today through the Gorges de l'Ardèche; it will be an LSA of that there is no doubt. Happily, by the time we are on the road it has stopped raining but is dull and overcast; photo ops will be very limited, a real shame since the scenery, we know, is dramatic. We travelled the road years ago on our way to our holiday in the South of France. When I wasn't terrified by the sheer drops I was overcome by the size and staggering ruggedness of the scenery - this is Big Country. On the plus side, there is no wind against which to battle and not many tourists too busy looking at the view to notice toiling cyclists. We then realise it's a public holiday and all self-respecting Frenchmen are safely tucked up at home with plenty of coffee and Le Figaro.

The road is 36kms of unremitting climb and hairpin bends. We stop to take pictures at the first viewpoint but press on quickly uncertain how long the rain will hold off. Having left St Martin d'Ardèche at 9.40 am we arrive at Pont d'Arc, the MOST amazing natural bridge over the river, at about midday. However, having got to this point we then have to come down and I note the descent is 12%: this is seriously steep and would defeat us utterly if we were coming up, as it is it merely terrifies me going down.

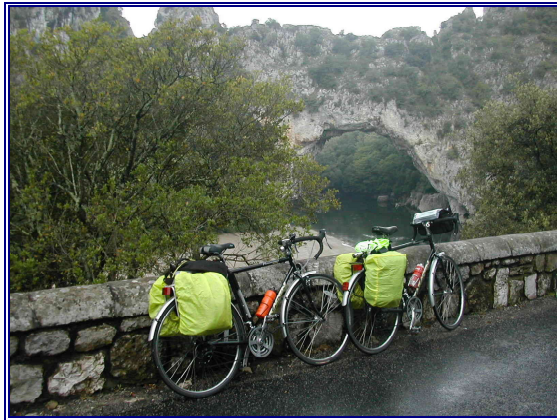
We're into Vallon Pont d'Arc for lunch and sit on the central square steps for our picnic lunch. This immediately marks us out as foreigners, no Frenchman, even for a picnic, would eat so informally. It starts to rain heavily again, so we run for the nearest café. The coffee is excellent but we dare not get too comfortable; we have 30 kms to Les Vans. There is nothing for it but to don many layers of waterproof clothing in a sort of reverse strip tease finishing up with our 'moonboots': we get the distinct feeling we are providing the cabaret for M le Patron and his guests.

The route now becomes easier and at Les Vans we fall into Hotel Le Carmel, tired and bedraggled. The owner is English and recognises that the tired cyclist needs a bath more than a shower and upgrades us. As the name implies it was formerly a Carmelite convent and I try to imagine the nuns, who only left in 1972, living here. They would not

recognise our bathroom, which is very 21st century, a far cry from the bowl and ewer they probably had to use.

We have a delicious supper - crème brûlée to die for - in the converted cloister.

Tomorrow will be the real test of stamina; a climb of 650m in 15 kms!



Pont d'Arc

Hôtel le Carmel, Les Vans



Day 6
Les Vans →Villefort

Tues, 9 Mayr
27 kms

Hôtel le Carmel has achieved full marks in all respects. We enjoy a wonderful buffet breakfast with the best marmalade we've ever tasted in France; light years from the runny orange jam which the French try to pass off as marmalade.

Happily, the weather has improved enormously and we are away with a clear blue sky, bound for Villefort. Before we have even left the town limit sign we are climbing and there follows 3 hours of unremitting, lung-searing, bottom gear, ankle-working ascent. Most of the time we are only just making 6kph maximum with many stops to recover; and this is fun???? We eventually achieve Col du Mas de l'Ayre at 846m but seriously question what we are doing. It is becoming an endurance test, although the views of the Cévennes are wonderful and we do have plenty of time to enjoy them from the saddle. However, we know that this is only half the maximum height to be achieved this trip - can we possibly make it. The payback of the climb is the quick and easy descent into Villefort but we are suddenly buffeted by a strong wind. Could this be the Tramontane mentioned on the forecast?

We arrive in Villefort and feel it is time to seriously reappraise the future of the expedition: given the difficulty of this morning how can we manage Mt Lozère at 1400m or Mont Aigoual at nearly 1600m. On the personal achievement scale we score well, but is it fun? Briefly, we seriously consider catching the train from Villefort to Nîmes but this seems to be a 'wimp out' too far. After much studying of the contours and comparison of elevations, we decide to give Lozère and Aigoual the heave-ho, and head due south for Alès tomorrow. We try to analyse the situation and decide that the Loire trip had a clearly defined aim: There was a certain romance to following a river, source to sea, with the major challenge at the beginning after which it was, literally, downhill all the way. I feel very despondent, I hate to start something and not see it through, but acknowledge that this is the sensible approach. The new plan is a route closely following the railway, which looks reasonably flat, and we book the room in Alès.

Hôtel Balme, Villefort is a typical example of a French Logis whose glory days are but a distant memory. From the clutch of accolades in

the hall, we gather mine host is a chef of some note but he is rather brusque and we decide to skip his gourmet extravaganza.



***Highest point of
the day***

***Huge moth which
had been assaulted
by a sparrow***



Day 7
Villefort → Nîmes

Wednesday, 10 May
108 kms

The weather is not promising but we are soon en route for Alès; mostly gentle downhill, a great way to travel. The Cévennes scenery is stunning. While taking a photo of the granite 'chain' I notice what looks like an extraordinarily long creature crawling sinuously along the road. It seems to be made of many sections and looks like a **very** long caterpillar. It is, in fact, 44 caterpillars travelling nose to tail. I have never seen such a display of follow my leader and blind faith in the front 'man'. I fear that they will never get to the other side and it will be a case of 'caterpillarcide' on the grand scale*.

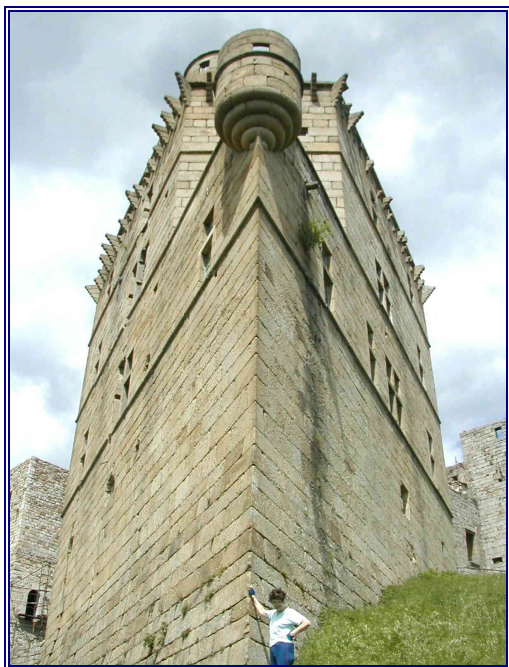


*A clever
demonstration of the
stonemason's skill*

** We later learned that these
processional caterpillars
contain a highly toxic poison
in their fur. - There was
never any danger of us
touching them*



The lunch stop is Château de Portes the front of which looks like the prow of a ship. The wild spring flowers in the meadows are beautiful, with a variety and profusion we don't see in England.



Château de Portes

We make good progress and are in Alès by mid afternoon. It seems a waste to spend a night here so decide to make a run for Nîmes some 40 kms further south and where we had, anyway, planned to spend a rest day. We book the hotel in Nîmes and cancel Alès.

We must fly like the wind and will still not arrive before 7.00 pm at the earliest. We are now cycling through the vineyards of the Pays d'Oc appellation - this is my sort of cycling! We feel we have recaptured some of the spirit of the Loire trip.

Day 8
Rest day at Nîmes

Thursday, 11 May

We enjoy the luxury of not having to pack panniers and get on the road immediately after breakfast.

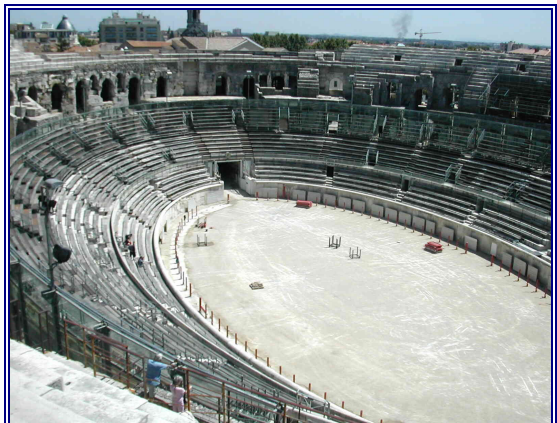
It is an absolutely brilliant day, azure blue sky to set the photos off perfectly. Nîmes is an old roman city and the site of the best-preserved coliseum in the world. We spend several hours here; I feel a bit like a Christmas tree with glasses, camera and the audio guide strung round my neck. The audio guide was an inspiration on somebody's part. It makes the visit interesting and so much easier than listening to French. We love our sightseeing day and thoroughly enjoy the respite from the saddle.



By supper I feel I could do justice to a bucket of moulles. Surprisingly, because Nîmes is not that far from the sea, they are rather elusive and when we do find a restaurant they are a big disappointment.

The arena

***24,000 seating capacity
-and one of the few
remaining locations for
bullfights in France***



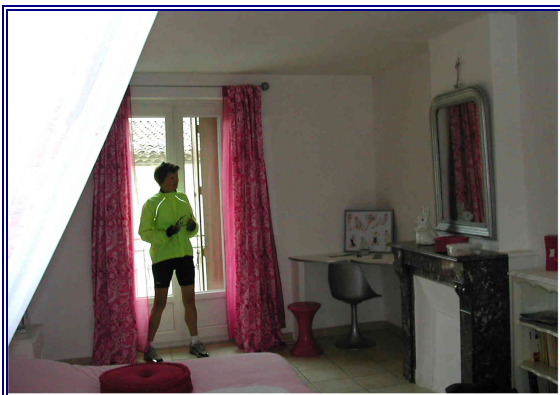
Day 9
Nîmes → St Martin de Londres

Friday, 12 May
69 kms

We are starting the second leg of our trip today - Nîmes to Perpignan. As always, I find getting out of a big city somewhat daunting, but it goes pretty well and we leave the bustle behind. We do not have a detailed IGN map for today's ride and are working from an enlarged page of the Michelin atlas - not perfect but good enough.

First stop is at Caveirac for standard lunch rations, baguette, 2 tomatoes, some ham, some cheese. pretty much the same most days. It is not a big village: something like Burton but has a most wonderful boucherie/charcuterie/delicatessen and I buy some mini peppers stuffed with goat's cheese and some with anchovies - they are scrummy! The weather has turned cool again and I have plenty of time to reflect on our journey. Each day I hope to recapture the spirit of our Loire trip and mostly I don't feel we do. The book called this trip 'Remote Cévennes' and they're right. The countryside is rugged and very sparsely populated, whereas we derive much of the pleasure cycling through villages, stopping for coffee and talking to the people. While most of the land is vineyards; where not, it is barren limestone cause. The weather is changeable and the crew, all one of it, is feeling mutinous.

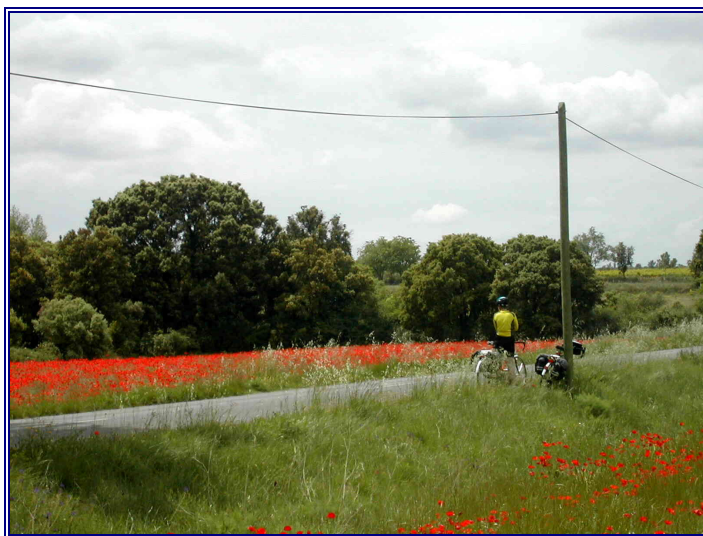
We arrive at St Martin de Londres and find our chambre d'hôte - "De ci de là", literally from here and there. When I found it on the web, I felt sure it was going to be slightly 'off the wall'. I was right, our room is a fully coordinated, shocking pink and silver confection. The whole ensemble is best described as 'eclectic', even the musical box plays the Pink Panther.



B&B at
De ci ... de là

We take a walk round the town and come upon a sculptor at work. It turns out this is just his hobby but he is very enthusiastic, skilled and happy to show and tell us about various commissions he has undertaken. He is interesting and tells us about the cross of the Languedoc. It seems rude to interrupt him but we are hungry and eventually get away to a pizza.

The circus is also in town. Big Top would be overstating the case but the animals look reasonably happy and well cared for. The French do not seem to be so sensitive about circuses, one can often see posters in towns large and small.



A rare stretch of flat cycling near Buzignargues

Day 10

St Martin de Londres → Clermont l'Hérault

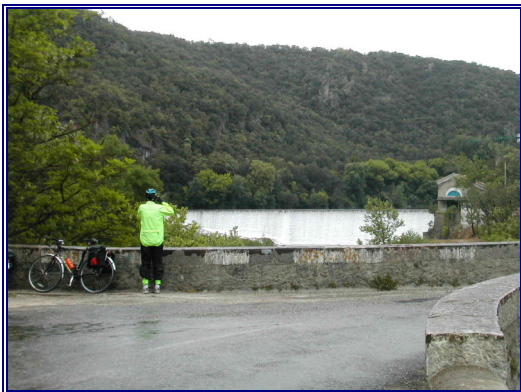
Saturday, 13 May

48kms

De ci ... de là fully justifies all my expectations, nothing is normal/ordinary. Monsieur has travelled widely in Morocco and southern Africa bringing back trophies and objets d'art to decorate this quiet little corner of France. He also has a weird and wonderful collection of ephemera so that the whole place had a slightly Daliesque feel about it but it makes an interesting change from the sometimes rather stodgy Logis de France hotels.

After an indifferent breakfast, we set off up another mountain on another LSA. The St Martin-de-Londres Saturday cyclists are out in force and race past us with much joshing about our heavy loads. Again the weather is changeable, which means sometimes raining, sometimes dull. This expedition can be summed up as toiling up, up, up, followed by flying down, down, down; bowling merrily along seems to be in short supply; the crew is revolting again.

We arrive at Clermont l'Hérault and check into the Hôtel Terminus, it is, as its name implies, as exciting as any Station Hotel in England. While having a cup of tea we look at the weather for the next few days. Tomorrow will be sunny followed by two days of 'orages' (storms). This is very bad news and with very, very heavy hearts we decide to abandon the trip. Were we to continue, we would be in the hilly, remote Haut Languedoc region - more climbs, more descents, this is not fun and we feel it would be foolhardy to continue. We must contact Fanny and Chris and sort out a train back to Perpignan. Deep despondency has settled on the captain and crew.



***Barrage below
Causse de la
Selle***

Day 11

Clermont l'Hérault → Murat sur Vèbre

Sunday, 14 May

54kms

Hôtel le Terminus has earned 'Worst Hotel of the Holiday Award' The room is basic, breakfast mean and staff indifferent. However, while eating breakfast we catch sight of the forecast in the paper, our part of France is covered in sunshine symbols! We look at each other and decide to press on - feeling better already.

We have to cancel emergency texts to Fanny and Chris and set out on what will be a long day, starting and finishing with a Lung Searer. At the end of the day we shall be at 1000m.

We are still amongst vineyards but the soil is red, red like Somerset. Quite suddenly it changes dramatically to a much more hostile landscape with no crops - I wonder if this is how Mexico might look. As we pass through gullies I half expect some Red Indians (is this PC?) to ambush us. It's OK on this lovely day but I would not like to have a puncture and diminishing water supplies. We reach St Gervais-sur-Mare, a village on the pilgrimage route to Compostela, at tea time. There are several pilgrims, couples and organised groups, easily spotted by their sticks and cockleshells. From St Gervais we have 21kms of which 7km will be ridiculously steep. It is also a wonderfully hot day but not good news for cycling. Damian decides that we must find someone to take us and the bikes up this climb. I think this is the ultimate 'mission impossible'; it is, after all, 4.00pm on a Sunday afternoon in this sleepy little village. I start to prepare myself mentally and physically for this assault knowing it will probably take us three hours perhaps longer. I am, quite frankly, gobsmacked when Damian returns and says he has found someone who, for €20, will take us and the bikes to Croix de Mounis (809m), the highest point, from which we still have 7kms into Murat; we are never so grateful for this help.

The countryside has flattened out into alpine meadow landscape. Murat is tiny but Hôtel Durand is **great** - comfortable room, spacious shower and even a hot air blower so we can wash out our kit. We have the most superb confit de canard for supper and are amazed that such a tiny village and modest hotel can provide such an excellent meal at such a reasonable price. We discuss the thorny problem of whether to own up to the 21kms of 'assisted' cycling in the journal however we feel we have recaptured the spirit of the Loire trip.

Day 12
Murat sur Vèbre → Mazamet

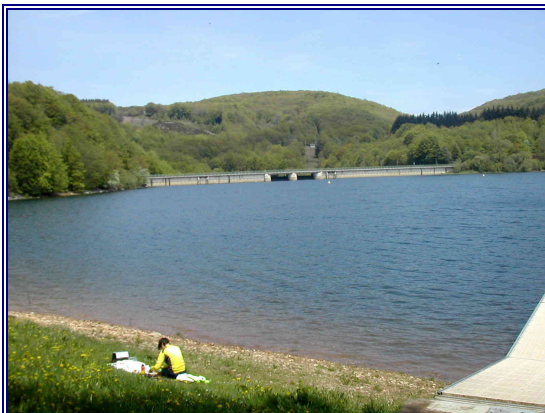
Monday, 15 May
68kms

We vote Hôtel Durand 'Best of Holiday'

We have a long ride today but it should not be too arduous being mostly downhill. Murat is also on the pilgrimage way and we leave the hotel with a Dutch couple+dog. They will not go all the way to Compostela in one 'hit' but will walk selected sections. Sadly, the weather has changed, gone is the lovely hot sun of yesterday and we're back into 100% wet weather gear and wondering, once again, why we are doing this when we could be at home. Despite the weather the countryside is astonishingly, breathtakingly magnificent. We're still in the Haut Languedoc. I never realised there was so much untamed nature in France; it is a world away from the gentle, well cultivated flood plains of the Loire.

The weather improves and we're bowling along - this is the cycling for me! We pass another couple of touring cyclists who, we learn are en route for Compostela. He seems to be heavily burdened with front and back panniers, rucksack **and** sleeping mats while she has got away with a relatively light load though we suspect her bike, which rather incongruously has a wire basket on the front, is rather heavy. They too have a little cockleshell fixed to a pannier. We wish them 'bonne continuation' and feel they need it.

We have a 24km downhill roll into Mazamet, arriving at the Tourist Information office whilst a journalist is taking some publicity photos and she asks if we would mind having our photo taken. We're more than happy to oblige and are reminded of our brief moment of fame when we were interviewed for Baltimore lunch time television!



***Lunch stop at Lac
Raviège***

Day 13
Mazamet → Carcassonne

Tuesday, 16 May
51kms

The Boulevard proves to be an adequate hotel but our breakfast routine is thrown into complete disarray. Normal procedure is to snaffle 3 individual pats of butter for our lunch. Hotel Boulevard serves its butter in a dish - very genteel but means we have a butterless lunch.

Tuesday is market day in Mazamet. I love the bustle of French markets and in 11 days on the road this is the first market we have come upon. I love the catholic (small 'c') variety of stalls where the vegetable stall rubs shoulders with the bed stall, the chair caner, the butcher, ironmonger, clothes stalls, honey, wine, live rabbits, chickens, etc., etc. The fruit and vegetables are so wonderfully colourful and bursting with goodness, I feel I could easily become a 'veggie' in France. However, even I have to admit that one French market is much the same as another and we have a long journey starting with 10kms of XLSA.



***Market day in
Mazamet***

We break the Lung Searer to visit the tiny medieval village of Hautpoul which literally clings to the hillside. I marvel at the talent the French have for creating a pretty, shady little terrace in the tiniest of spaces - a vine trained over a frame, some geraniums, heaven!

We cannot delay too long, we are not even half way up this hill and we can only manage 6 kph, it's extremely hot and lorries are tanking past us. The pay back will be 40 kms downhill into Carcassonne but it's a steep descent so brakes on the whole way, our hands are locked like

claws at the end. When I dare to look anywhere else but the road ahead, the views are of more rugged cliffs and deep gorges. The book tells us the approach to Carcassonne is of 'crusade proportions' which sounds a bit scary. We find the station and ask a couple who kindly lead us in their car to our hotel. Hotel l'Octroi is only 300m from the walled cité of Carcassonne and we have a view of some of the 52 towers from our bedroom window..



Laundry arrangements in Hautpoul. This lavanderie had recently been used. NB the soap bubbles!

View from our bedroom



Day 14

Wednesday, 17 Mayr

Damian's Birthday and Rest Day at Carcassonne

We allow ourselves the luxury of an extra half hour in bed, it is, after all Damian's birthday and last year we spent my birthday in Tours. We're into the city early to walk the 3km perimeter. It's a World Heritage site but in fact the ramparts and towers were rebuilt in the 19th century. I find it somewhat sterile and wonder if this is a heresy! It has all the worst features of a popular tourist destination - shops selling expensive souvenirs and cafés selling expensive coffee and icecream. I imagine in July and August the place would be heaving.

However, the heat is building up and the clear blue sky makes for great photos but a rest day also means laundrette day and while waiting we plan tomorrow's ride. It will be a long one with the regular feature of the LSA. We think it prudent to sort out a bed which proves a wise move as our destination town, Rennes les Bains, is hosting the Tour de l'Aude Féminin, a cycle race of the Aude département for women - obvious really. All beds in Rennes are taken and we eventually have to settle on a Logis somewhat off route but beggars and choosers come to mind. It will be 70kms up and down (of course!) and we must be up at 6.45 am to allow a 3 hour lunch break if the heat of the day is similar to today. Having made the admin arrangements we go out for supper.

Despite being somewhat touristy the cobbled streets are delightful and we find a great restaurant and have warm goats cheese salad and confit de canard which has become my favourite. Mme la Patronne makes a big fuss of Damian and he receive birthday texts and calls during supper which still seems a miracle of modern communication.



***Canal du Midi
runs through
Carcassonne***

Day 15
Carcassonne →Sougraigne

Thursday, 18 May
69kms

We wake up to indifferent weather. How can it be beautiful one day and dull the next in this part of France? Hotel l'Octroi is excellent and Madame most helpful. We're away by 8.45 am, a personal best but essential as today will be long and tiring. We're soon climbing hard but also have some long, flat(ish) stretches. I find myself bowling effortlessly at 16.8 mph, a real novelty since this has been a trip of two speeds, very slow and very fast. I even find time to think and decide that if we ever cycle in France again, we shall stick to river courses.

By mid morning the weather is looking threatening again and we arrive at our lunch stop, the village lavanderie, just in time. A plaque on the wall proudly proclaims it was refurbished in 1970 and I find it amazing that such facilities were still necessary. After lunch the predicted 'orages' arrive and there is nothing for it but to don full wet weather gear; we still have 30 kms to do. To pass the kilometres we play games but wonder what on earth I am doing and feel so sad that the spirit of the Loire trip is slipping away again. Perhaps it was a one off. We remove and put on waterproofs several times to combat the swirling misty rain; it feels just like Wales.



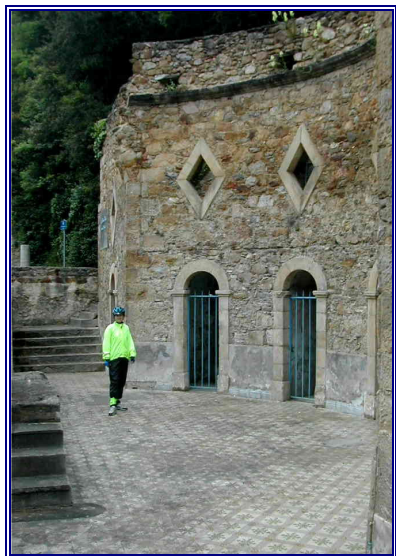
One Taurean to another. Red marble bull at Missègre



Exhausted!!

The guests at Logis Ecluse au Soleil (The Suntrap) are all English-speaking and we enjoy a happy, interesting evening with a couple who live in Chevy Chase. They are mildly surprised when we say we know it until we explain the Baltimore Connection. There is a couple from California and a young man reconnoitring a walk for a holiday company. While we enjoy practicing our french with french people, it is a pleasure not to have to cudgel our brains at the end of the long day.

We are nearing the end of Great Adventure II. Tomorrow we shall cycle 40 kms leaving 60 kms to get back to Fanny and Chris. Once again the weather for tomorrow is promising - this is becoming a familiar chant!



***The hot baths at
Rennes les Bains***



***An intimate
bath à deux***

Day 16
Sougraigne → Cucugnan

Friday, 19 May
45 kms

We wake to a slightly better day and fortify ourselves with a marvellous, abundant breakfast. Ecluse au Soleil has earned one of the coveted Buckley Best awards!



Departure from Sougraigne

To rejoin our route, we must first return to Rennes les Bains. Rennes' glory days as a spa town are long gone but today it is en fête and dressed overall for the Tour de l'Aude. The race will not start till early afternoon but roads are closed and there is a general buzz around the town. We will share the route for some distance but there any similarity will end.

While toiling up yet another hill I realise that May is the best time for seeing the wild flowers and bicycle travel a great way to really notice them. Apart from all the usual varieties we find in England, we have seen several different species of orchids.

We stop in Bugarach for coffee, a remote village of some 200 souls yet able to support a café and restaurant. By lunch time the villages along the Tour route are faintly stirring and we decide to watch the cyclists as they race through ?? . Cycling is almost a religion in France There is much fanfare with many gendarme motorcycle outriders to clear the roads followed by the support vehicles and sundry hangers on, first aid, press etc. Somewhere in the middle are the cyclists, on this occasion

about a 100 like a swarm of bees in their fluorescent lycra, they swirl round the corner in front of us and are gone.



***Tour de l'Aude Féminin
through Soulage***

Our last night on the road is at Cucugnan. This is Corbières country and it is great to be riding through the vineyards on a sunny afternoon. In nearly 500 miles of cycling, we have been through many of the great appellations sadly, dégustations are a no-no for me on a bicycle. It is also Cathar country and we pass two massive châteaux, Pérepertuse and Quéribus.

The sun is out again and we briefly consider cycling up to Quéribus which I would very much like to see. The châteaux in this region are quite different from those of the Loire, being 13th - 14th century and built for defending territory rather than pleasure pursuits. However, the hill will be an XXL SA and I just don't think my legs will work. We may visit as we pass tomorrow or return on Monday in the car on our way home. I am conscious this would be cheating but I have ridden up enough steep hills to last me a life time. Perhaps our next trip should be 'Windmills of Holland'

Day 17
Cucugnan → Céret

Saturday, 20 May
63kms

Once again we allow ourselves a half later start. Breakfast is meagre, portion control is king so that wringing extra butter, jam and hot water from M le Patron is like drawing teeth. In other respect Hotel la Table du Curé de Cucugnan is good.

Out of the village, straight into an XLSA and were soon passing the road to Quéribus. We think about offloading the panniers, locking them together and hiding them in a bush but the detour would take at least two hours out of the day and we have agreed to be with Fanny and Chris between 4.00 and 5.00 pm. We press on: it will have to be the car option, purists can call this cheating but I feel I have earned my spurs this trip.

Once past Grau du Maury we're flying down again as fast as we dare. The road is all bends when to travel at too much speed would just pitch us over the edge. Back again into the Maury vineyards, it seems novel to be using our legs to propel us at 33 kph when most of the time gravity has been taking us at that speed.

We're now quite close to the spanish border and the Catalan influence is noticeable. We stop for coffee in Estagel and I feel there is less attention to detail. We make our lunch stop at Col de la Bataille and are relieved to escape the boiling heat and blinding sun.

As we set off I feel we are close to journey's end. At Thuir we shall have only 21 kms - an hour and a half **at most**. There is however, the final Lung Searer above Fanny and Chris' house and this becomes the longest Lung Searer of them all - my knees are SHREDDERED! However all bad things come to an end and we're flying down at high speed in the drive at Mas Soula, Chris is there to meet us and record the moment adding that we're 18 minutes late after 493 miles! They have the champagne on ice and we spend a happy evening, with the promise of a LONG lie in.

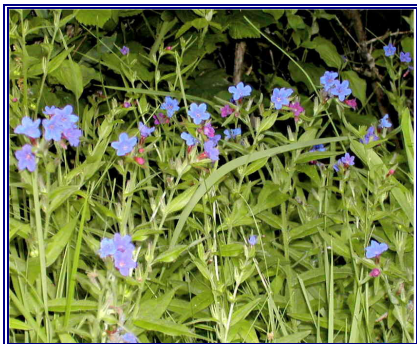
Days 18, 19 and 20

21,22,23 May

We have a day to draw breath and have lunch together at Collioure, a Catalan fishing village much favoured by the Impressionist painters.

We leave the Glydons on Monday and head back to Château de Quéribus. This is the really novel experience, being on four wheels where only a two days ago we were on two, quite honestly, we are astonished that we cycled down this road, it makes us feel rather wobbly just thinking about it; we're also pleased we did not hide the panniers and visit on bikes. Quéribus is perched precariously, but not so precariously, as it has been buffeted by the four winds for 800 years. We spend a couple of hours there before heading back for the motorway, Orléans, Calais and home.

This trip was so different from last year and not quite the same success but despite all we feel it's a great achievement. Weather played a huge part but there was too much hard slog. Looking back, we saw some wonderful, interesting places and met kind people and already I am forgetting the worst parts. However, I may also just have got long distance cycling in France out of my system.



***Some of the
beautiful flowers we saw***

The End