

Despatches from the Camino

An Awfully Big Adventure



16 June - 1 July 2022
Penny Buckley

In memory of Damián,
with whom I shared
so many
lovely adventures

July 2022
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Introduction

To start at the very beginning, this 2022 adventure really began in 2007, as we finished our Manche-Med long distance ride. We were having lunch with our friends Fanny and Chris Glydon at Collioure on the Mediterranean coast when Chris asked the simple question “What next?” Almost without thinking, I said to cycle to Santiago de Compostela in north west Spain. Well, that was it, there was no going back and in 2015 we cycled 1,276 miles and arrived in Santiago de Compostela, albeit with the first rains of Autumn.

To prepare us for this substantial undertaking, we became members of the Confraternity of St James, visiting the Head Office in London and joining the local Wessex group. Fast forward a few years and I saw a request in the Confraternity’s ‘in-house’ magazine placed by the ¹Association des Amis et Pèlerins de St Jacques de la Voie de Vézelay for hospitaliers to look after pilgrims on the Vézelay Route, one of several routes to Santiago. The criteria were not onerous; to have completed at least some of the Camino and a modest competency in speaking another language. Damian and I discussed this and thought it would be something we could do; we would be in lovely France, with which we have long had an enduring love affair, and we would be sharing our experiences of our Camino. Our services would be offered on a voluntary basis.

We didn’t pursue it much further than this vague notion when my world was rocked to its very foundation when Damian died so suddenly, followed by two years of The Pandemic. In 2020 I started making very tentative enquiries, not telling anyone so that when I chickened out I did not have to tell anyone either. I did not even mention it to Nikki or Tim, they would have been the harshest critics of any cop-out on my part. By March 2021, I was booked on to a three and half day training course at a monastery near Bourges in central France in September. This was going to be a real test for

¹ The Association of Friends and Pilgrims of St James of the Vézelay route

me: driving about 300 miles down France on my own and completing a course delivered entirely in french in addition there were still stringent Covid restrictions on travel in place.

Emboldened, I sallied forth in mid September for my training course, all the time thinking how difficult can it be to offer bed, breakfast and an evening meal to pilgrims. I assumed they would be so thrilled to reach a refuge at the end of a hot day's walk in the blazing sun, that they were unlikely to be overly-critical. I learnt that this is just the start; it is the warmth of the welcome that counts. The plan now was to be an hospitalière in the summer of 2022.



***My room at the Monastère de l'Annonciade, St Doulichard.
Grande luxe it was not. On arrival, I had to make my bed;
it was like boarding school only not as comfortable***

By the spring of 2022, my stint as an hospitalière was scheduled for 16 June – 1 July. There was no going back

Tuesday, 14 June 2022

Preparations began and I booked my ferry for 14 June. My first night in France was a few miles north of Le Mans, of race track fame, at Magnifique Villa MY, St Saturnin. Last night I was in the Ibis at Portsmouth as close to the port as possible. Where Ibis is basic and functional, Magnifique Villa – the MY stands for Michelle et Yann - is modern with clean lines and eclectic. The chair in the corner of my room says it all, a chair made from a cut out tin pail painted and two front legs made of old boot trees. Very eclectic, very french.



Magnifique Villa MY, St Saturnin



The chair in my room

Wednesday, 15 June 2022

Quel jour! I start the day in Magnifique Villa where all is new-build, squeaky clean in shades of taupe, sea grass and limed ash. I finish the day in a classic maison de maître, all high ceilings and stone floors in the centre of St Amand Montrond, (St Amand-MD) full of fin de siècle, heavy brown furniture and extravagant objets d'art. It is a model of faded gentility but comfortable nevertheless. I am in the Georges Sand room. Georges Sand, the 19th century author, lived not far from here at Nohant.

My predecessor at the refuge, Pascal Suret, and I have been in e-mail contact, I suggested I would arrive at Bouzais about midday. This would allow me time to 'shadow' him for an afternoon before taking over the next morning. But that is to jump ahead of myself.

Bouzais is a small village just outside the town of St Amand-MD both south of Bourges in the département of Berry which is absolutely the centre of France and about three hours from St Saturnin. I planned to arrive at about midday, in the event I arrived at 12.15, not bad, I reckoned.

As I arrive, Pascal is sitting outside the refuge chatting with Gérard the neighbour who, I would discover, would come in everyday for a chat and a beer at about 4.30 pm. He is also going to keep my bike in his barn. Pascal has arranged a simple bbq for lunch and then shows me round.

The refuge is an old building, formerly a stable, bought in 2007 by the commune and refitted as a refuge in response to the growing popularity of the Camino. It has been carefully refurbished and although very small, is comfortable, even cosy. Each room is fitted with a heater, so that even in the spring and autumn, it would be warm. The hospitaliers' room is tiny, the width of a set of bunk beds and a similar depth. I cannot imagine how two people would manage but Pascal explains that in a previous life he was a sub-mariner; he thinks it's spacious. Had Damian and I done this, as envisaged, together, it would have been a case of your move next and I would definitely have been on the top bunk – no question.

The pilgrims' 'dortoir' is the other side of the kitchen area and contains two sets of bunks beds and a single bed. The room is shared, men and women, I guess after a day's walking the only thing a pilgrim wants to do in bed is sleep. The bathroom contains a small washing machine, adequate to wash sheets/pillowcases. The kitchen is tiny, 'coin cuisine'² as the french would say but a good cooker with induction hob and big fridge-freezer.

Pascal tells me that two female pilgrims, sisters, are booked in for the evening. They are not 'veggie' but prefer vegetables. By 5.00 pm I set off to find my chambre d'hôte in St Amand-Montrand (MD); I will return for supper to meet my first pilgrims. St Amand-MD is only a couple of miles away.



² Translation: corner kitchen



Hospitaliers' room



Kitchen



Pilgrims' 'dortoir'

By the time I return to the refuge the two pilgrims have arrived and are rinsing their walking clothes, a first and vital part of pilgrim routine. Here at Bouzais the next part of the agenda is to visit the church of St Roch, for which Gérard is the custodian of the key. In common with many churches in France, and indeed in England, the spiritual centre of Bouzais has been pensioned off but is carefully maintained and used as a venue for choirs and other suitably appropriate events. After the visit to the church comes the visit to Gérard's other pride and joy, his model railway. For model railway buffs, this would be heaven indeed. It is huge and represents many, many hours of painstaking work.

*Front door of the refuge with
scallop shell.
I kept the door open
whenever I was in*



Well, this is it; there's no going back now. Pascal, who has to get back up to Normandy today, has said he wants to leave by 9.00 am. I am up early and back at Bouzais by 7.45. The two pilgrims have left at 6.00 am. Early rising to send pilgrims on their way is definitely going to be my Achilles heel; early mornings are not my strong suit.

Pascal has the place looking clean. He explains the idiosyncrasies of the washing machine, the door needs coaxing with a particular lift as well as a pull. I will have to strip all the used beds, remake them, though this only amounts to a bottom fitted sheet and pillowcase, and sweep and wash the floors each morning once all pilgrims have left. He assures me, it will be perfectly possible to have all this done by 9.30 am after which my time is my own until 4.00 pm when I must be ready to open up again.

We go through the procedure of handing over the float of €100 and check the stock of pilgrim passports,³ Miam Miam Dodo guides, T-shirts and other items pilgrims can buy, should they want to.

By 8.50 am there is nothing more to detain Pascal and no more questions I can think of. Gérard takes a picture of the two of us and he's off. That's it, I'm on my own now!

I can really look round the refuge, which will not take long, and unpack my things. The next challenge is the answerphone. It is quite likely that pilgrims will ring in while I am out and leave messages. I'm very happy to note that there are plenty



³ Translation:: Yum yum, bye-byes = Food and a bed

of plugs and I have plenty of adapters, I shall be able to charge all my tech and still use my curling wand.

I visit St Amand-MD to find out where the supermarkets are, all the usual suspects are there, Leclerc, Super-U, Carrefour, and Lidl. Leclerc is my favourite but on the opposite side of town. Lidl will be useful as I must keep to a budget of approximately €6 for the evening meal for which the pilgrims will pay a fixed amount of €9. I also want to familiarize myself with the town and general area and visit the Office de Tourisme to get a handle on the 'must-sees' in my 'free-time', this is, after all, my holiday. Tomorrow I shall visit the Château of Ainay-le-Vieil.

When I return to the refuge I'm disappointed to find no messages but in the space of a short walk round the village I come back to one message: Maurice needs a bed for tomorrow but he also says he has some blisters, then Ann rings to book her place. Hooray, two for Friday evening this is breaking me in gently. I come to learn that this is the way pilgrim affairs are ordered, namely they walk from (very) early morning till about midday and then plan their journey and refuge for the next day.



***Gérard and some of his model railway.
To enter fully into the spirit of the railway, Gérard puts on a station
master's cap***

My first two pilgrims arrive today – this is exciting! But first to château of Ainay-le-Vieil, a charming well maintained village, with a few houses for sale. During my visit to the church, I bump into a scottish couple who tell me that he is going to be painting in the gardens of the château this weekend. We swap visiting cards and talk about cycling in France she thinks she has seen our website when Googling ‘cycling in France’ information – how exciting – fame!. I resolve to visit the château tomorrow when the painters are in situ.

I return to the refuge in good time, I don’t want to be late for my first pilgrim but disappointed to learn from the answerphone that Maurice’s blisters have got the better of him and he has abandoned his pilgrimage. Probably only for this year, he will probably pick it up again next year at the same place. I am entering up my expenses on my spreadsheet when Ann, My First Pilgrim, arrives.

The first two rules of refuge life are no walking boots inside the refuge and no rucksacks to be placed on the beds. The least welcome part of the pilgrim’s life is the bed-bug, une punaise. My joining instructions are explicit and warn me of these little critters hitching a ride, typically in rucksacks, and readily spread from refuge to refuge. I am also told that, should I ever meet one, I must contact my Chef d’Hospitalité **immediately** when the whole extermination machine will be unleashed.

Plastic boxes for rucksacks



To try to avoid bed bugs, pilgrims are invited to place their rucksacks in large plastic boxes.



The Pilgrims' Bible

The title means 'Yum yum – Bye-Byes' and lists, in great detail, all the accommodation on the route between Vézelay and St-Jean-Pied-de-Port in the Pyrénées. It is invaluable.

Ann settles herself in and Gérard comes for his daily chat and beer, followed by the visit to church and model railway, it is hard to know of which he is most proud.

We spend a happy evening over supper outside on the small apron of concrete; it is warm and balmy. I love this time of day. My joining instructions tell me I can offer a glass of wine or a beer, any more is discouraged.



The refuge has been refurbished with the help of a german Society of St James

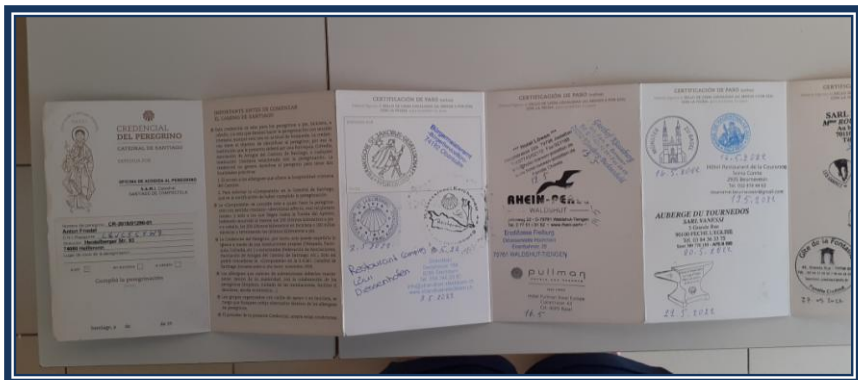


Ann is away promptly at 7.00 am and I look forward to my day at the château. My chores are almost done when I see Anton through the door unburdening himself of a little trailer tied round his waist and rucksack. The trailer is for carrying his tent.

In theory, as mentioned earlier, the refuge is closed till 4.00 pm but I can see this man is elderly and more importantly he makes plain by various gestures that he has foot issues. He's also german with no english **or** french. It's time to roll out my german long since relegated to a rarely visited part of my brain.

It is another boiling hot day, the temperature is expected to reach 40 degrees, and, although Anton looks fit, as I log his details, I see he is 80. I cannot send him out into this blistering heat. I have visions of local headlines reading 'Elderly pilgrim suffers heart attack on the Camino while in the tender care of Penny Buckley'. This is not an option. There is nothing for it but to cancel my château tour today and hunker down for a whole day in Bouzais.

Engaging with Anton is challenging but I am amazed how much of my german comes back to me . His *crédencial*⁴ shows he started in Würzburg in early May; he expects to be in Santiago in mid-August.



Anton's *crédencial*

⁴ Pilgrim passport

This is an mighty undertaking by any measure but he assures me it's his sixth pilgrimage, most of them taking place in countries where he doesn't speak the language.

To the pilgrim, the *crédencial* is as important as his/her national passport. It is proof of one's *bona fides* and must be stamped at least once a day. The stamp is the '*tampon*' not to be confused with a similar english word. I have a *tampon* for the refuge. When Damian and I went to Santiago we had approximately 77 stamps in our passports. It was nothing short of disaster when, on the last day, as we cycled into Santiago in the first torrential rains of autumn, all the ink on my passport ran. I was very afraid my passport would not be sufficient proof of my journey and therefore I would not obtain my *compostela*.

Anton showers and treats his feet to a soaking in bowls of cold water and liberal applications of painkillers.

For my part, I make a virtue out of a necessity and spring clean my e-mail inbox – as you do. Fortunately I have enough food to give him supper.

However, I am keen to know that Anton is able to get on the road tomorrow and to that end, I book him in to the refuge at Le Châtelet. Shortly after I take a call from Guillaume and book him in for tomorrow. He is going to arrive at St Amand-MD by train and walk to the refuge.



The Bouzais 'tampon'