

Sunday, 19 June

I am up at 6.30 am to send Anton on his way. His destination is only 12 km down the road but that will be enough for an 80 year old in this blistering heat. However, storms are set to arrive today and tomorrow. This will be never so welcome.



Anton and his tent trailer. Despite his earlier feet issues, Anton sets a jaunty pace

Once I have cleaned the refuge, I set off for Ainay-le-Vieil on my bike, but until I am absolutely ready to go I take the precaution of keeping the door to the refuge closed. I really don't want another pilgrim rocking up and scuppering my plan again. It's a pleasant ride to Ainay and I am reminded of all the many miles Damian and I have covered in France. It is the perfect country in which to cycle, wide open countryside and good, relatively clear roads. The plan is to see the gardens and the painters during the morning and the interior of the château in the afternoon. I spend a happy morning

walking round and watching painters tucked into various corners of the garden, doing their thing. Their subject is the 'blue' woman, in the picture below, who sits remarkably still



A gathering of painters and their Lady in Blue subject

In the afternoon I take the guided tour of the 14th century château which is in the process of being refurbished. It is known as le petit Carcassonne, a well fortified circular château, looking pretty similar to its namesake further south.



Château of Ainay-le-Vieil

Guillaume duly arrives at about 9.00pm. France is an hour ahead of UK, it is still broad daylight – a lovely warm summer's evening. He plans to be away at 7.00 am. He seems a very pleasant 40 year old chap but there is no time to get to know him; he needs to get his head down for his early start.



*Some dramatic statuary in the
château garden*



Monday, 20 June

Guillaume is on his way in good time and I expect at least three pilgrims tonight. Before that though I plan to visit the gardens at Le Prieuré d'Orsan about 25 minutes from Bouzais. It's another scorcher of a day; discretion and valour come to mind and I'm going to go in the car. While on my way, I pass both Guillaume and Anton, the latter is unmistakeable, towing his little trailer.

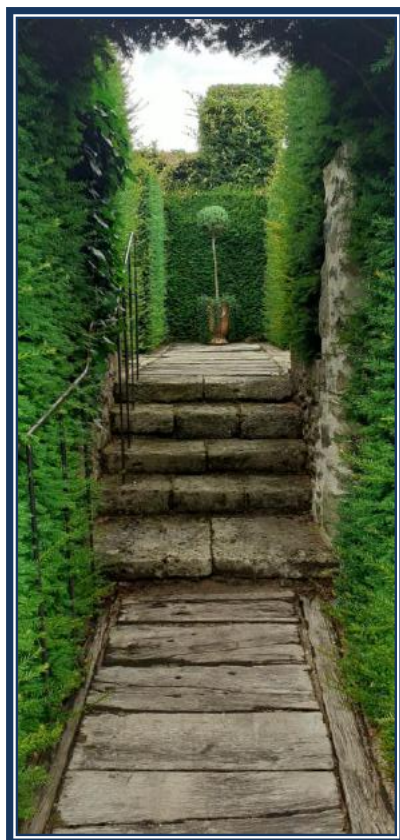
The garden at Orsan is a complete joy, a masterpiece of the horticultural arts and member of the RHS – it doesn't get much better than that. It is also a complete contrast to Ainay-le-Vieil. Where the 'lawn' at Ainay was a parched brown weed patch, Orsan is green and lush, the plantings carefully planned and growth luxuriant. The hostas and swiss chard look as if they're on steroids so vigorous are they. A sorry contrast to my hosta at home which looks as though it is only just clinging to life. However, I can see that all this is achieved by an extensive watering system which is laid all over; a combo of water, sun and warmth can't fail to produce results. The other thing I notice is that there is no plastic or metal anywhere. For everything; staking, trellises, fencing, pergolas, the go-to material of choice is wood, mostly willow osiers or beech and chestnut stakes. There are several kinds of garden, wild flower, vegetable, rose, herbaceous, orchard covering many acres. The whole place is utterly charming I love it and despite the searing heat it feels cool and refreshing







Swiss chard on steroids



I sit in various cool shady corners of this lovely garden but know I have to be back. I have agreed to be at the refuge at 3.30 today for (another) Pascal who is walking from the other refuge belonging to the APSJV at Ainay-le-Château and before I return I must also stock up on food, a visit to Leclerc is essential.

I'm back in good time to find Pascal already ensconced in Gérard's kitchen. While I am registering Pascal, Christina a german who has also booked in, arrives at the door, followed very soon after by a young girl on a very heavy looking bike, complete with woven wicker basket. Sarah is german / iranian and has arrived on spec. She tells me she spends most nights 'in nature' but presumably feels like some comfort tonight. She has her tent strapped across her two panniers all topped off with a sheep skin rug. I don't discover if this is to cover her or for her to step out on from her sleeping bag in the morning. Suffice it to say that her complete outfit weighs a ton; I cannot even lift it. We fall to discussing the mountainous sections of the Camino, the Montes de Oca and Montes de Leon and Sarah acknowledges that she will probably have to abandon the bike which, apparently, only cost €100 and continue on foot.

No sooner is Sarah registered than the Tourist office in St Amand-MD ring asking if I have space for two pilgrims, german and austrian, tonight. I have, just. Monsieur will bring them in his car right away. Thus Martin and Johann arrive.

From having only one pilgrim per night for three nights it now feels like Piccadilly Circus but I love it and set about preparing the supper. I shall have to take one of the kitchen tables outside so we can all eat together, happily Johann is not eating so we will all fit. For me, this is the best part of the day, hearing their stories of refuges visited, good and not so good and sharing experiences in french, english and german.

We agree on varying departure times and fall into bed. I've certainly earned my stripe today but I've really enjoyed it; this is what I came for.



Left to right: Pascal, Sarah, Martin, Christina, Johann



Sarah has woven sprigs of mistletoe into her basket! She is definitely one of nature's flower children but vivacious and fun

Tuesday, 21 June

My pilgrims are all gone by 7.00 am and I've greatly enjoyed their company. I fear for Sarah, she has no helmet and is wearing Birkenstocks but she does not fear for herself. Her maps are minimal and large scale; after our talk last night, she is considering changing to the Voie Littorale, the coastal route down the Atlantic coast which Damian and I did. This will be absolutely flat



While stripping beds, I find Martin's wallet under his pillow. I can only imagine the panic he will feel when he discovers it's missing. He obviously felt that he was in a den of thieves and vagabonds and the only safe place for his worldly wealth was under his head, the object all slightly defeated by leaving it there!

Part of the registration process is to collect pilgrim's contact details, mostly in case of Covid but this turns out to be Martin's lucky day. It is about 9.00 am now and he's been walking a good two hours, he cannot possibly turn round and come back, that would be soul destroying for him. I fancy he is quite an emotional man, having welled up when he was explaining his circumstances to us all last night. There is nothing for it, I ring him and tell him I will bring it to him in the car; a journey of about seven minutes for me. We agree to rendezvous at the church in the village of Arcomps which he is just approaching. Neither of us will miss this, every french village has a church and I will be there quicker than you can say Santiago de Compostela.

As I arrive Martin and Johann arrive also, he is ridiculously grateful and also a little emotional and asks if he might hug me. He calls me the Spirit of Bouzais and offers to pay for my petrol. I know how desperately worried I would feel and am just happy to have solved what could have been a major problem although he hadn't realised he had not picked it up. I doubt he will make that mistake again.

Now the day is my own. I have arranged to visit the other refuge at Ainay-le-Château and meet Bernard and Isabel, the hospitaliers. It is only 25 minutes by car but a morning's walk for a pilgrim. Typically pilgrims will spend the night at Ainay and make Bouzais their next stop. The refuge is much bigger than Bouzais. The hospitaliers' room is big enough to have beds side by side rather than stacked and they have their own shower. There is also a much bigger kitchen with bigger table indoors and outside a bigger garden with table and large parasol. All these are definite advantages, nevertheless I am happy at Bouzais. Neither Bernard nor Isabel speak any english, all conversation is in french. It's a wonderful

opportunity for me to practise my french but hard work nevertheless. I have to really concentrate.

I return to Bouzais and find no messages and settle down for an evening of catching up and an early night. I am woken at about 1.00 am by an immense storm and find the rain lashing in through the window of the dortoir on to the single bed. The mattress is soaked and I can't close the window. In the end I manage to wedge a hat stand against it to keep it closed. I feel somewhat like Bathsheba Everdene in Far from the Madding Crowd as she struggles to cover her hay ricks in the storm. Sadly, I had no Gabriel Oak to come to my rescue.

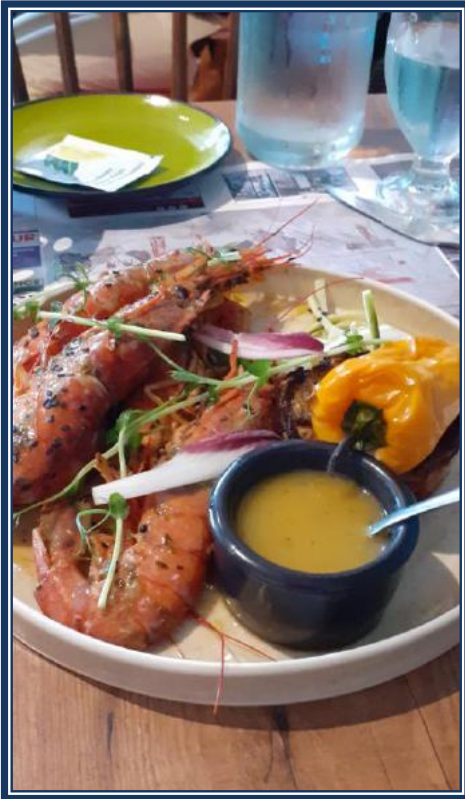


All routes to Santiago are extremely well sign posted with the modern representation of the scallop shell

Wednesday, 22 June

A survey of last night's damage to the mattress reveals no major problem. Happily it seems dry enough but I may be limited to four tonight, at the moment I only have one.

I plan to visit the museum in St Amand-MD today. It is no treasure trove of priceless artefacts but there will be something interesting, I have no doubt. I also decide to treat myself to lunch out. It's raining again, much needed to cool things down and I don't want to go back to the refuge yet. The Bar des Halles opposite the market hall will do very nicely and it is pleasantly busy, always a good sign. The menu is not extensive but the langoustines sound a good choice – thank you! They are artistically arranged and delicious.



I'm expecting Pieter and Christian tonight; I will do my chicken Véronique recipe. This will be quite a change. Up to now it has been salade Niçoise every night. The pilgrims know no better but I am getting a bit fed up with same old same old. As we sit down Pieter says 'Oh it's like home' which I take as a compliment. I also crack open a bottle of wine. I fear it is not going to be a great wine but it will make the evening go with a swing.

Christian is a formidable walker. He tells me he regularly walks 50 kms a day, about 26 miles, and likes to start at 5.00 am. However, he's going to start at 6.00 tomorrow. Pieter is leaving at 6.30.



Christian and Pieter

Thursday, 23 June

I've been at Bouzais a week now and fully in the swing. First thing, strip the beds and get the sheets in the washer, remake the beds, Hoover, get the sheets out on the line; most days they will dry within the hour.

Today I plan to visit the fortress of St Amand-MD, by bike using the pilgrim way. I try to imagine how the medieval pilgrims would feel as they trudged day after day. There would be no phoning ahead to ensure a bed and no means of telling the family back home where they were, how it was all going. I also like to imagine my pilgrims, walking this path and the joy they will feel as they round the corner and see the spire of the St Roch church at Bouzais. They will know they don't have far to go now.



There is not a lot to see of the fortress but I am lucky enough to be the only person on the tour so the guide speaks slowly and enunciates his words with great care. I get the feeling that he thinks he must talk to me as if I'm a bit simple but that's OK. Though the fortress is in a commanding position, the trees all around obscure the views, one of the reasons I went. We always loved visiting the high points anywhere. Although dating from the 13th century, it is a ruin despite some extensive excavations in the Seventies.

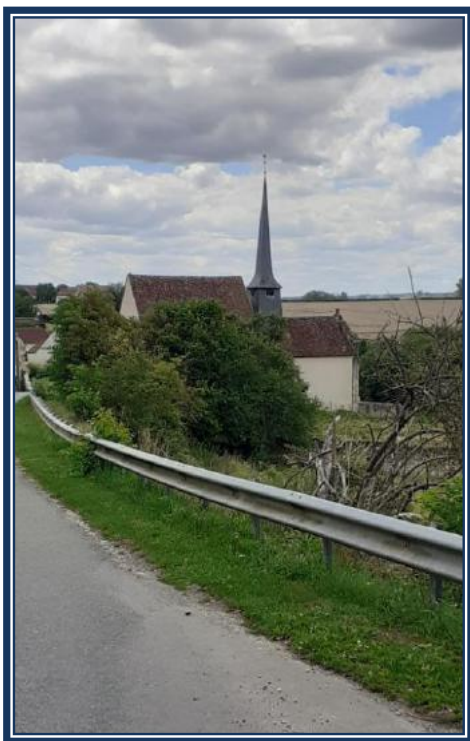
***The pilgrim way between
St Amand-Montrond and Bouzais***

I cycle home the same pilgrim route but have to go out again in the car to restock the wine and beer' I can't to carry these heavy items on a bike. Sadly, I find there are no messages from hopeful pilgrims; this is disappointing I have not come all this way to look after pilgrims only for there to be none, it feels a waste of my time but these things cannot be arranged.

To my joy when I return with the beer and wine aka essential supplies, I find a young cyclist waiting for me. I am surprised how my heart sings when I turn the corner at the church in Bouzais and see someone waiting.

Herman is a pleasant young belgian who has cycled from Nevers. We spend a happy evening comparing notes on our respective pilgrimages. NB his Ortlieb panniers, this will be important!

He seems in no hurry to get away in the morning; 8.00 am will be fine.



***The church of St Roch, Bouzais.
This is what the pilgrim would
see as he/she enters the
village.***

***St Roch is not only a patron
saint of pilgrims but also dogs,
diseased cattle, gravediggers,
bachelors and apothecaries;
an impressive list by any
standard!***

Friday, 24 June

When we meet this morning, Herman announces that he has pannier issues, to be precise the material of the one of his panniers has become detached from the frame which holds it to the bike and it was I who found the problem immediately. To the pannier cognoscenti, Ortlieb is the 'gold standard' with a price to match. No one expects them to fail so fundamentally and on their first outing. Herman is not a happy bunny and I don't blame him. However, thanks to the internet he is already working out how to get round the problem, it is for certain he cannot ride unless it is fixed. Various solutions are possible. The most obvious one to try first seems to be the cycle shop in St Amand-MD. I am happy to take him there, saving him about an hour and fortunately, it can be fixed readily. What seemed a disaster had been headed off at the pass. Result!



We're back by 9.20, all that remains is for Herman to settle up. My joining instructions offer clear guidelines for costs of hospitality. The evening meal is a fixed rate of €9 but the bed and breakfast is offered on a 'donativo' basis – you give what you can afford. Most people were giving €20 for their bed and breakfast, though I expect students would give less. I am slightly taken aback when Herman offers me €15 for his meal **and** B&B, and Herman is not a student

Herman, the belgian

and this especially as I'd saved him a lot of time, and possibly money. Hey ho, some you win, some you loose.

I wish him 'bonne route et bonne continuation' which is the lovely greeting cyclists wish each other on the road.

Now what shall I do? I haven't been to a market yet and they are always wonderfully colourful affairs in France. I head for Vallenay which is some distance but it will be worth it, I am confident. Vallenay market turns out to be a one-stall-wonder what's that all about?! and the stall holder is sooooo not-busy he's over the road having a beer.

In keeping with its market, Vallenay seems a one-horse town but that might be a doing it a disservice. French towns and villages are always quiet except on market day – **if** the market is half-decent. Damian and I were always surprised how one could drive through a french town and there would be no-one, absolutely no-one, about. Many french towns are dying on their feet because, in general, no-one wants to live in the countryside there are masses of properties, both domestic and commercial falling into ruin.



The sort of property Damian and would have loved to buy when we were looking in 2003, this one now slowly falling into decay.

I believe there are two further reasons for this sorry state of affairs, namely the french inheritance laws which are very different from ours, resulting in families unable to agree on what to do with their parent's properties when the parents die and secondly the flood of british people who were buying up any old ¹tas de pierres in the early 2000s has reduced to a trickle post-Brexit.

The situation is similar with commercial property. As in this country independents cannot compete with the big out of town ²grandes surfaces

Once back at the refuge, I am happy that I have a message, this time from Jean-Marc who will be with me after 4.00 pm.

Jean-Marc has walked 37 km and could be described as a pro-pilgrim, this is his seventh pilgrimage, for heaven's sake. As we talk I wonder if he does anything else in his life. He also likes the sound of his own voice and declaims at length on several subjects. I find it and him exhausting.

Le Bon Gérard arrives for his afternoon chat and beer which, I am relieved to say, takes the heat off me.

I also receive a call from Liliane, the Chef d'Hospitalité to discuss my accounting sheet. The accounting sheet was one of my major concerns, bringing together, in a perfect storm, my least strong suits: technology and accounting. I had sent my sheet off at the half-way point just to check it was as it should be and also to check I was not being too extravagant on the menus. With great delicacy, Liliane has to tell me that my costs are a 'little high' – whoops, I must pull in my horns. Luckily I have nearly a week to even out the costs.

Jean-Marc assures me he can get his own breakfast and let himself out.

¹ Translation: Pile of stones or tumbledown property ripe for development

² supermarkets

Saturday, 25 June

Jean-Marc is gone before I'm awake. He is the only one of my 19 pilgrims of whom I did not get a picture and I don't feel it's a great loss, I could not warm to him.

I don't want to waste time. Gérard tells me the market in St Amand-MD is big and quite the meeting point for the town so that's my destination today, on my bike. I never fail to feel a surge of excitement at French markets the produce looks wonderful it looks as though it is exploding with flavour, as though it has been grown in honest soil where a lot of our produce can look tired. Lettuces are my favourite, they are huge in France and of many different varieties. I always feel I could turn veggie in France.



French markets are very catholic – with a small ‘c’ - affairs, the whole range is there, from the standard offerings to beds, chairs and tables, windows etc etc. Despite Gérard's build-up it is a modest market but has, as well as garlic and sausages, a stall selling soap made from asses milk. Now that is a new one on me

Garlic



Sausages



Asses' milk soap

Sunday 26 June

Today has been quiet I don't want to be in the refuge all day and I think it unlikely I will have any pilgrims now. I decide to go out to lunch. The choice on Sunday is not great, Bar des Halles is closed and the only place seems to be La Rotonde in the centre. Beggars and choosers come to mind. It is not a great meal but served on slates and slices of wood to give the appearance of a sassy establishment,

I return to the refuge, hoping that I will see a pilgrim sitting at the table waiting, I know this will lift my spirits – there is not; my spirits are unlifted. Soon after Gérard arrives for his daily beer and chat and this is certainly a welcome interruption, though hard work as he has a strong accent, sometimes impossible to penetrate.

During the evening I take a call from a pilgrim for Wednesday, I have two tomorrow and one for Tuesday at least. It is not many but at least I have a chance to even out my spending.

Thus ends a typical wet Sunday, much the same in France as UK. How can it have been 40 degrees last Sunday when I went to Ainay-le-Vieil, so hot that I found the 10 miles back in the midday sun a little worrying, and 15 degrees this Sunday; I've had to put the heater on!