

More Despatches from the Camino

Another Awfully Big Adventure



1 - 16 July 2024

Penny Buckley

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

July 2024
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Introduction

This is my third year as an hospitalière in a refuge on the Voie de Vézelay. After two years at Bouzais and four solo journeys to France, I feel sufficiently emboldened to drive a little further south west to fully paid-up holiday territory – the Dordogne, sometimes referred to as ‘Dordogneshire’ an awful lot of British people bought property there in the early 2000s. The Association des Amis et Pèlerins de Saint Jacques de la Voie de Vézelay (APSJVV) run four other refuges on the Via Lemovicensis: Ainay-le-Château, Velles, St Ferme and Sorges, Sorges et Ligeux en Périgord to give it its full name. I am going to Sorges this year; in the Périgord Noir home of black truffles, foie gras, walnuts and several other culinary delights – what’s not to like.



Refuges on the
Voie de Vézelay

To make better use of the ferry crossing, I've decided to 'bolt' on a week at the Holiday Property Bond site at Constant near Bergerac. It is an hour further south from Sorges and I will be in the area where Damian and I first rented a gîte in 1995 and cemented our love affair with France, which began in 1988,. For sure there will be a host of

bitter sweet memories. At Constant, I will have two bedrooms and have suggested that Hilary, hospitalière at refuge, St Ferme at the same time as I am at Sorges, comes and spends a couple of days with me. Hilary lives in Salisbury; we met through the local branch of the Confraternity of St James. I have the space and it will be fun to relax and compare pilgrims together. I will be in France for a month. I am so excited and looking forward to it greatly. I also expect wall-to-wall sunshine the whole month.

The adventure starts on 29th June crossing from Portsmouth to Caen. It's a brutally early start for me, never my strong suit but Portsmouth harbour looks radiant as we slip out past the aircraft carrier, HMS Prince of Wales and the Spinnaker Tower.



Early morning
departure from
Portsmouth

I'm breaking my journey at Le Mans, home of the race track. My first year, 2022, I stayed on the outskirts of Le Mans at St Saturnin. This was not particularly special; a comfortable new build but no soul. This year I have booked a chambre d'hôte, Le Clos d'Hauteville, in the centre of town. This is as different as chalk and cheese a 'maison de maître'¹; behind the anonymous entrance portal it is all high ceilings and extravagant mouldings but comfortable and within walking distance of the centre of town.

¹ House of the master



Le Clos d'Hauteville, Le Mans:
completely anonymous from the street but behind a high
wooden portal this beautiful garden is revealed

Le Mans → Angoulême

Breakfast is a feast; great choice with homemade jams. Two of the other guests come from Tarrant Monkton about half an hour from Bournemouth and a favourite destination of ours when Damian was on the TEM course at Blandford. It never ceases to surprise me how small the world is and the more we get around it the smaller it becomes.

Sunday is market day in Le Mans. Who can resist a French market, not I and I have at least an hour to spare; my destination today is Angoulême. I head off to the centre of Le Mans, in common with many French cities, the centre has been reimagined to accommodate the market, partly a marché aux puces² but also a regular market, fish and butcher stalls, even on a Sunday, and clothes, leather work, chair caning, knife sharpening, all of commerce was there. However, I have noticed in recent years one does not see the (painfully tiny) cages of livestock; day old chicks, ducklings, and rabbits. Perhaps the animal rights mob have prevailed, even here in France noted for a much more robust approach to animal husbandry. I love walking round and noting little architectural details like this chap on a house façade. He looks as though he's had a tiring day at the chasse³; it's possibly at least 200 years old.

I leave Le Mans at 11.00 am with three hours driving to Angoulême. By any standard it is not a great distance but if I'm tired I must stop, there is no co-driver with whom to swap. Angoulême is ground zero for Bande Dessinée⁴, in France known as BD, and I want to visit the Museum dedicated to this art form. In England comics are rather frowned upon. Certainly my English boarding school did not consider it worthwhile literature, being the preserve of children and teenagers. By contrast



² Flea market

³ The hunt

⁴ Comic strip

the French have elevated the genre to high art form; Damian always said he learnt his French by reading Hergé's stories of Tintin.

When I arrive in Angoulême my hotel is firmly locked and, for all the world, looks very much like an **ex**-hotel, giving me some seriously anxious moments but I ring and Madame arrives to unlock. Huge relief it is after all Sunday afternoon, definitely 'down' time in France. Happily, I have just over an hour to find and visit the Museum of Bande Dessinée – that's probably enough!



Three of the best known French comic book characters (to me):
Tintin and Asterix & Obelix

I enjoy the Museum which also has a temporary exhibition of foods made famous by comic book characters, think Popeye and spinach. Sunday evening is not a great time for finding somewhere to eat. The French generally eat at lunch time on Sunday but Angoulême has come up trumps with two very agreeable looking places and I go for the one opposite the town hall where voting in the second round of M Macron's hastily called general election is taking place. There are gendarmes on the door to prevent trouble. To my great surprise, they are happy for me to take a look inside, I guess I don't look a terrorist threat. In fact, it's pretty quiet for all the reasons above. Given the huge vote in the first round for Marine le Pen's Rassemblement Nationale, I am slightly surprised that I can find no-one who will admit to voting for RN and I speak to several people who might be thought of as likely supporters.

Angoulême → Sorges

I'm on the road to Sorges in good time. It is only an hour and a quarter on minor roads so progress is somewhat slower. I am astonished anew every time I come to France at how easy driving is, better, much less crowded roads make for a stress-free journey. I arrive about 11.15 am and meet Bernard and his sister Emmanuelle. The formalities are to hand over the cash float and to show me where the bins are. French houses generally don't have individual dustbins, rather rubbish is taken to large municipal bins located on the outskirts of the town. It is quite a hike past the war memorial and across the main road to the déchetterie. When this is completed Bernard and Emmanuelle are on their way back to Orléans. Bernard tells me that Dominique my local 'go-to' chap on the ground for APSJVV and any refuge emergency, will come and meet me this afternoon.

Now I can get my bearings, Refuge de Sorges is a world away and much nicer / better than Refuge de Bouzais. It sits on one side of an open square and was, in a previous life, the priest's 'motor house'. Opposite is the church and linking the two was once the presbytery, later the gendarmerie, now the Mairie. It is all relatively newly converted although there hasn't been a priest in Sorges since the late '90s. The whole ensemble is built in warm honey coloured stone. In the way typical of French Mairies, for which there is apparently no shortage of money, the entrance is smart and the tricolore is flying proudly, no expense spared here, a new block paved approach and charming flower beds complete the ensemble. A table and bench outside the refuge with pots of roses and oleander all make a charming picture, it is the polar opposite of the rather utilitarian exterior of Bouzais.

Inside, the séjour⁵ is huge, at least three times bigger than Bouzais with a newly fitted kitchen including dish washer – luxury! – there is even a proper space for an 'office'; my computer can stay out, really helpful as I register each pilgrim. There is a large dining table, big enough to seat eight comfortably. I am delighted, the best moment of the day is when the supper is on the table the pilgrims are relaxing with a glass of wine / beer and we share stories of the day; the walk, the last refuge and those they have met on the way. I look forward to

⁵ Living room

this time greatly and is one of the main reasons I enjoy doing this. It feels like a supper party every evening

Upstairs is the dortoir⁶ with three sets of bunks + a folding bed and the hospitaliers' room, small but room enough to take two single beds as opposed to a set of bunks – again, luxury when compared with Bouzais.

Once unpacked, I can take stock of what Sorges has to offer. This is certainly a more prosperous area than Bourges. It is full-on holiday country as explained in the introduction. I learn that there is an English owned house surely an indicator of a desirable area and there are plenty of other signs of prosperity. The library and post office are in a newly refurbished building and, most astonishing, the post office is open every morning, even Saturday, there is every danger it provides a real service, a refreshing change. Being the ground zero of the black truffle, Sorges is home to the Museum of the Black Truffle, also newly renovated. Most surprising of all there are four new-build shops on the edge of the village all carefully landscaped: a Co-op convenience store, baker, butcher and pharmacy. However, it's Monday so the butcher and baker are closed! How many villages can afford to invest in new shops for relatively small communities?

I enjoy getting to know my new home of the next fortnight and finish my tour by calling at the church from where I hear the sound of the organ playing and also meet Dominique, who lives at St Astier about 40 minutes away. Apart from any *cris de coeur* on my part, Dominique will also help by writing a cheque when I settle up the refuge account at the end of the fortnight.

I also learn that my very own private organ recital will take place every afternoon. The organist lives in Paris but has a holiday home in Sorges; he is giving a recital on Saturday for which he is practising daily.

I have had a happy introduction to my temporary home and the sun is shining. I have no pilgrims booked in tonight and can't help hoping this is **not** a foretaste of the whole fortnight. I have come a long way to look after pilgrims, I want to be busy ... little did I know!

⁶ dormitory



The refuge, Sorges



Pilgrims' dormitory

Séjour

Tuesday, 2 July

Contrary to hopeful expectation, I wake to an overcast day – what's that all about, this is the Périgord in July, it's not meant to be like this. Thiviers, my nearest town, is about eight miles distant and I need to stock up on supplies. although I have brought my bike, I'm not sure how easy it will be to cycle for shopping. Thiviers has a Lidl, a real bonus. As before, I have to watch my budget carefully and Lidl will stretch it that bit further. Bernard told me he had achieved an average per day per pilgrim of just over 5€; pretty amazing, I wonder what he gave them and how much of it?!

Tonight Brigitte is booked in. In an ideal world I like two or three pilgrims; to be busy but not frantic and, helpfully, they can talk to each other taking the pressure off me.

Thiviers is a depressing, rather grubby little town suffering the familiar malaise of closed shops and boarded up houses, even the Club d'Amitié looks sad and friendless. That Thiviers boasts an Office de Tourisme is slightly surprising, and smacks of delusions of grandeur; the best it can suggest is the self-guided town walk which does not reveal many gems, hidden or otherwise, bar a modest, privately owned château.

I head off to Lidl to stock up and hurry home. The refuge must be open from 4.00 pm and I look forward to welcoming my first pilgrim, Brigitte.



Château de
Vaucocour,
Thiviers

Brigitte is very charming and we spend a pleasant evening. She also is a military daughter and tells me that her father was a big fan of Brigitte Bardot hence her name. She also gives me the heads-up on tomorrow's pilgrims of which there will be five, already booked in, three young people and their two 'educators' which Brigitte suggests are counsellors. She suspects that the youngsters could have 'problems'. I already know two of them won't eat pork so I'm guessing they are Muslim.



Brigitte

View of
the church of
St Germain
d'Auxerre from the
front door of the
refuge.
My own daily
organ recital comes
from this church



Wednesday, 3 July

Brigitte is on the road early which is great. Officially pilgrims should be out by 8.30 am allowing me time to strip the bed and get the sheets washed and on the airer before I leave for my day. In general, pilgrims want to be away early to get their walking done in the cooler part of the day; some are gone by 6.00 am.

I'm planning to visit Périgueux today, it's the county town of the Périgord and Wednesday is market day. I remember the market well from 1995, the year Nikki went back to Baltimore post-graduation. It was where we were introduced to a marvellous salad of melon and cured ham, not particularly unusual these days but novel then. Here, in south west France, strawberries and peaches are added, it was a whole new culinary experience in the '90s.

Périgueux market is just as I remember it. The produce looks just fabulous and, as always, I think it would be easy to become vegetarian in France in summer. In preparation for my party of five it feels prudent to lay in stocks of potatoes, a good, economical, filling standby for pilgrims in need of plenty of carbs. I have a couple of recipes to vary the dishes.

The Michelin Guide suggests the best view of the cathedral of St Front – who has heard of St Front? – is from the Cours Fénélon with the guide and a reassuringly old-school paper map under my arm, I find my way there. The cathedral has a byzantine look with several domes, it is very distinctive, set on a rise above the river and looks radiant in the sun.



I hurry home via the Auchan supermarket, a veritable temple of consumerism, and am back in time to welcome the pilgrims who are joined by Thomas. We will be six tonight – stocking up on potatoes was a good move.

The youngsters, two boys, Yunus and Mahamadou and a girl, Fannysky, are easy company and I suspect find me something of a curiosity. They come from the Paris suburbs, the 'banlieue', and have possibly not met an English person before. In fact, Yunus is from Drancy where Nikki and Larry had to report when they came to France in 1997 and when Nikki, mistakenly, thought she could get back into America without a Green Card – as if! Their counsellors, Florient and Caroline are pleasant, easy going and sympathetic they all seem to get along very well and I don't notice an 'problems' but then everyone is in holiday mode. Thomas is rather quiet, possibly overwhelmed by these jokey teenagers who have had time to get to know each other. We spend a very happy evening round the table



From left round the table: Yunus, Florient, Mahamadou, Fannysky, Thomas and Caroline

Thursday, 4 July
General Election Day in UK
American Independence Day

Caroline had warned me that they would leave about 8.00 am. They are only walking to Périgueux, nevertheless that will take the best part of the day, to catch the train home. In the event it's more like 8.30 and at 8.15 Fannysky is still wandering round in pyjamas – girls! Thomas leaves shortly after.

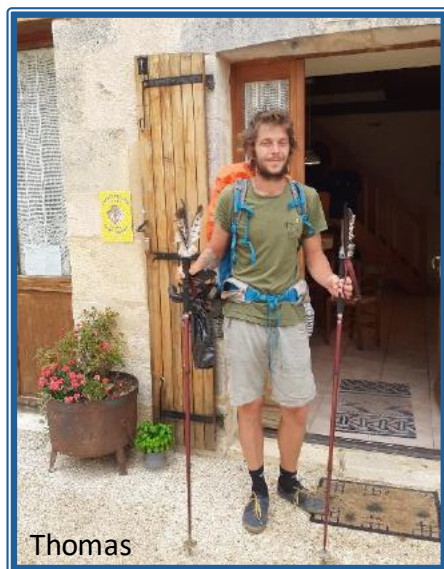


Florient, Yunus,
Caroline, Mahamdou,
Fannysky

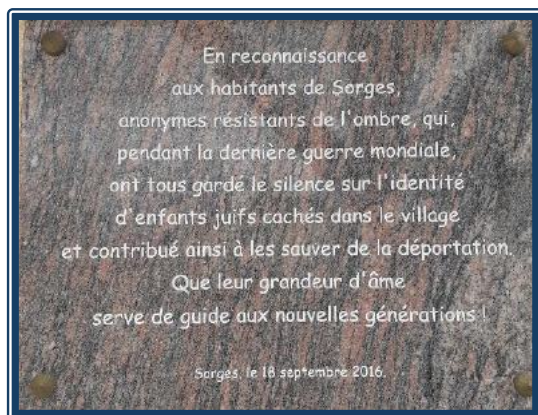
England goes to the polls today and I wonder to what fresh hell I shall wake tomorrow; a change of government is essential but I'm not going to enjoy the alternative, of that I am very sure. Once all my pilgrims, NB. I am very proprietorial about pilgrims they are always 'my' pilgrims! - I must strip the beds which only amounts to a fitted bottom sheet but getting to the top bunk proves extremely challenging; the only way I can manage it is to climb into the top bunk, from here on I see the number of pilgrims as an expression of the number of top bunks to be made. Six beds is a lot and I'm not finished before 11.15 am but I'm confident I shall speed up as I get in the swing.

I only have one pilgrim tonight, Alain, a retired colonel from the Belgian army; he may be retired but he is still pretty hard-core. His rucksack weighs 20 kgs; he does not carry a tent, declaring that he likes to sleep under the stars. Unsurprisingly, he is fairly right-wing and has robust views on most topics but we spend another happy

evening and I give him a bit of back ground to our election and our political situation in general by the time I go to bed my brain is aching from talking French.



Thomas



In recognition of the inhabitants of Sorges, nameless, shadowy [members of the] resistance, who, during the last world war kept silent the identity of Jewish children hidden in the village and thus saved them from deportation. May their generosity of spirit serve as a guide to future generations.

Sorges, 18 September 2016

76 years on, the French have placed a memorial to a painful time.
This plaque is on the Mairie

Friday, 5 July

I should be able to get out early today; I plan to visit the Grotte de Villars, a pre-historic underground system of caves discovered in 1953 by the local caving club.

Alain's first words to me are 'have you heard the result?' 'Result, result?' O-o-h, The Result!. Alain assures me I won't be happy and I'm not, despite expecting it. Alain is away by 8.00 am and I by 10.15 with the bed re-made – this is much better!



This is what 20 kgs looks like!

Alain is also carrying a fair amount of body weight.

Grotte de Villars is north of the refuge and is not very busy. Our guide, Morgane, speaks wonderfully clearly; I can follow her pretty easily. I love to hear the language it is like a song and I greatly enjoy the tour. It is a wonder that the caves remained hidden for 19,000 years and were only discovered by chance when some steam was seen rising from a crack in the ground.

I return via Brantôme, a pretty town on the river Dordogne, visited several times on past holidays. The French make the most of river locations and I find a bar restaurant beside the river. It happens to be owned by an English family and their son is behind the bar – what a great holiday job! He points me to the only supermarket in town I need to stock up; I am expecting Martine this afternoon but there could be voicemails and possibly some who just turn up on spec.



Wonderful
stalactites in the
caves at Villars

Martine is a year younger than I and walking as far as Périgueux where she will be met by her grandson who will put her on the train for Limoges. Curiously, and she is on her second pilgrimage, she has not been to Santiago, never arrived in the magnificent Praza del Obradoiro. I feel she is missing a vital part of her pilgrimage journey. No matter how far one has walked / cycled to arrive in that square with the cathedral of St James on one side, the Town Hall on another and a parador on the third, is an extremely emotional experience.

It would be impossible not to encounter some problems en route but all would melt away as you turn into the square in which there are always plenty of other pilgrims. Martine says she doesn't want to walk in Spain. This seems to me a great shame and I hope that she will decide that she must overcome her fear / prejudice. I am confident she will realise what she has missed.

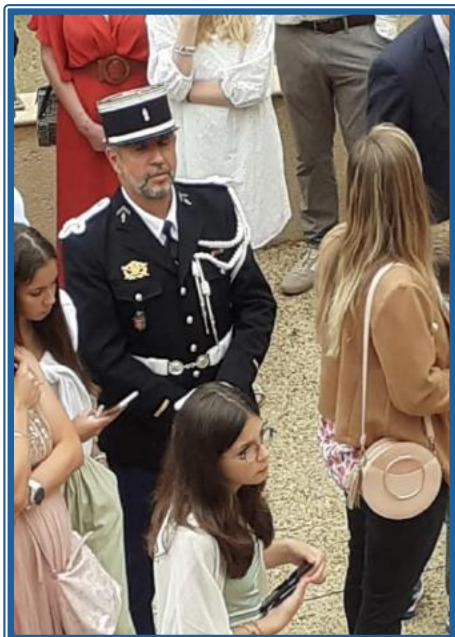


Saturday, 6 July

Martine is away in good time and removes her sheet – two bonus points earned! Sadly, the weather is dull. Does it not know this is the Dordogne - it should be wall to wall sunshine. I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to do; I shall have to go to Thiviers for supplies but the weather doesn't encourage me to explore I have four pilgrims tonight, Ruben, Nellie, Hans and Fien.

When I return to the refuge it's cool, overcast I may as well be at the ranch as anywhere and this turns out to be a good move. At about 2.00 pm people start gathering on the forecourt of the Mairie. Ladies and girls are clearly dressed for an Occasion, the chaps in a range of outfits from shorts and trainers, albeit 'smart' shorts to über smart suits. There is also a chap in uniform, in the British Army we would call it Number 1 dress. He is resplendent in silver braided kepi, and a jacket generously embellished with silver epaulettes and aiguillettes – he looks The Biz, but now it is raining and guests are sheltering under umbrellas – July! The groom arrives with much fanfare and fol de rol including fireworks, followed by the bride more decorously. I can observe all the action unobtrusively from the window of the dortoir. All disappear into the Mairie.





A heavily braided officer of the gendarmerie



Arrival of the groom ...

... and the bride

No 1 Wedding disperses to be followed immediately by, No 2 Wedding, somewhat more 'heavy industrial' in style. May both couples have long and happy marriages!

Ruben (dutch) is the first to arrive he is **hugely** tall and has taken a year out playing basketball in America, surely a gift to any team; He's now thinking of studying psychology, shortly after Hans and Nellie (dutch) arrive and finally Fien (Belgian) a lovely young woman full of fun, speaking three languages. Suddenly the refuge seems full of rucksacks, walking poles and boots.

My routine for pilgrim arrivals is to offer a drink whether cold or hot; today I am tempted to offer a nice cup of tea though it is not quite that bad. I must register them; name, age, sex, country of origin, starting point (of pilgrimage) expected destination whether on foot or other, maybe bike or horse, or donkey even, I've not yet met either of the last two! At the end of the season, all this, will be collated and number crunched to produce a final total of pilgrims making pilgrimage. In 2023 440,000+ pilgrims registered at the Pilgrim Office and this would not include Martine who has never arrived in Santiago. Barring the Pandemic Years the numbers steadily increase year on year and pilgrimage is a major money earner.

The routine for pilgrims is to wash out their kit and then look to booking the next night, from then it's time to relax and share experiences. Many will offer to help with meal preparation. Again we share a happy evening and a bottle of wine which Ruben has contributed to the party. After supper the dutch are glued to their devices because the Netherlands is playing Turkey, in the Euros I understand though that is the extent of my knowledge.



Ruben, Hans, Nellie
and Fien

Sunday 7 July

No-one seems in any hurry to leave. I want to say 'Go, just go', I need your sheets in the washer. Fien is away first. For all that the pilgrims chat and become instant friends, bonded by shared experience, they do not always want to set off and walk together. Some positively say they don't like walking with others. I can understand this; pilgrimage is a time to think and reflect. Nellie and Hans are next and lastly Ruben who, over breakfast, declares this to have been the best day and the best meal so far! Of course, this is very welcome to me. There is a 'livre d'or' (visitors' book) which pilgrims sign and write, hopefully, warm words and it is unlikely they will write 'rubbish refuge' and/or 'the hospitière, well' Nevertheless, affirmation is always welcome. Ruben is last out at 9.15 and is kind enough to gift the other bottle of wine to the refuge –generous and very welcome.



Once the refuge is readied for the next pilgrims, I think about my Sunday. It's market day in Sorges, when I imagine the village will come alive as all French towns / villages do on market day. It is not a big market; I imagine comes into its own in the winter months when the truffle sellers have produce to sell. Readers, don't forget this is truffle central.

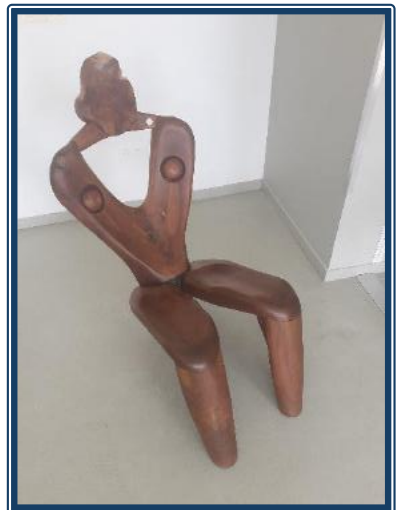


Market
hall,
Sorges

There is the customary giant paella pan, a portion of which will make an excellent and delicious Sunday lunch for me. A local wood carver has an exhibition of his work, interesting; but I don't think 46 Wills Rd is ready for such an avant garde look.

I finish the morning at the bar which, along with the rest of the village, has come alive. The tables outside are busy with grandmothers and their little ones, young families and old men discussing the state of the nation. . I sit down order coffee and write up my journal.

It's a chair, Jim, but not
as we know it.



Damian and I used to love this time, people-watching in the sunshine. I thought I would never be able to do it again; I feel lucky to have discovered this way of being in France with a 'mission'. At 1.00 pm the people and market will evaporate, Sorges will revert to a sleepy Sunday torpor.



A giant delicious
paella – lunch is
sorted!

I am expecting two pilgrims tonight Marieke (Dutch) and Wojciech (Voytek, Polish). Marieke speaks impeccable English with no trace of an accent. She reveals she lived in Kent for several years working at St Christopher's Hospice. I didn't ask but I fancy she is a physician in palliative care.

Wojciech follows, he has walked a formidable 17.7 miles this day with his rucksack. He set out from Gdynia on the Baltic coast in April and has, to date, walked 2000+ kms. This rivals the pilgrim Damian and I met in 2016 on the Plain of the Meseta in Spain; he had set out from Kyiv in the Ukraine. In 2016 I'm not sure I could point to Ukraine on the map. Sadly, that is not the case now. Wojciech is the most openly and unself-consciously spiritual of all my pilgrims so far. It is clear that his Catholic faith is fundamental to him.

The organ recital is tonight and we all head to the church, leaving a note on the door of the refuge as to where any arriving pilgrims can find me. I take the precaution of explaining to a programme distributor, well, more flier than fully paid-up programme, that I may have to slip out. This seems only polite.

Marieke, Wojciech and I enjoy the recital and we spend a convivial evening over supper. Marieke wants to be out by 8.00 am, Wojciech is more relaxed



Chez Cécile is an eclectic café; very curious **very** French. In England it would look like a collection of junk; in (mostly) sunny France it looks rather charming and playful

Monday 8 July

I've been in Sorges a week now and welcomed 15 pilgrims, almost the total number of my first year at Bouzais. Marieke and Wojciech are off and I set off with a plan to visit the château at Jumilhac le Grand.



The château, which has been in and out of the same family ownership over the centuries, is the classic French château, all conical and chisel-shaped roofs. Inside it cries out for some serious TLC but I enjoy the visit and may even have met the Marquis and Marquise getting their hands dirty, extending a very large table – very of-the-people.

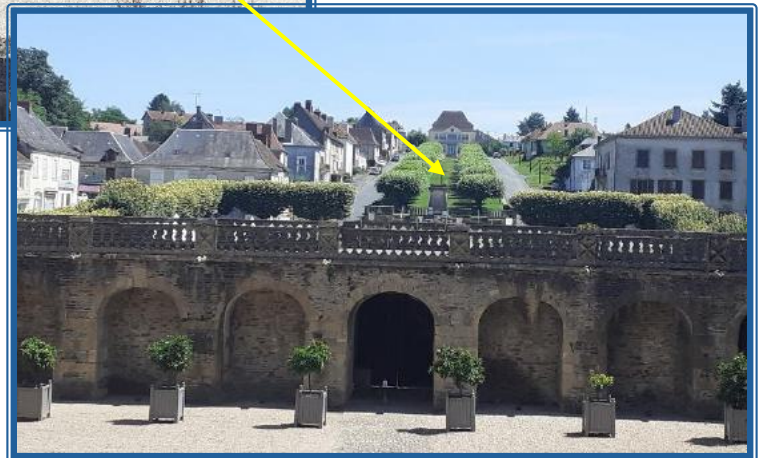
The village is pleasant with a long alley of plane trees stretching out from the main courtyard of the château. I have just time to visit the gardens before high-tailing it back to the refuge.

I am expecting Fazila (Belgian), Wilfried (French) and Agnès (French) this afternoon. It's been a very hot day, they will need lots of cool drinks and the reassurance of knowing their walking day is done.

Agnès is first; she's a seasoned walker who started from Thiviers, 9 miles distant, this morning. She looks cool and calm, despite the weather, then Fazila; they both know Fien who had been with me last night, they have all become firm camino friends who will no doubt meet up again. By 6.30 Wilfried has still not arrived and I'm anxious to start supper – I am on my knees after a rather sleepless night. He finally turns up a big, hairy bear of a man looking very hot who downs three glasses of cordial which barely touch the sides – an expression I try to translate, perhaps the French don't have an equivalent.



Château of Jumhilac



View of the avenue of plane trees from the first floor balcony of the château, Jumhilac le Grand

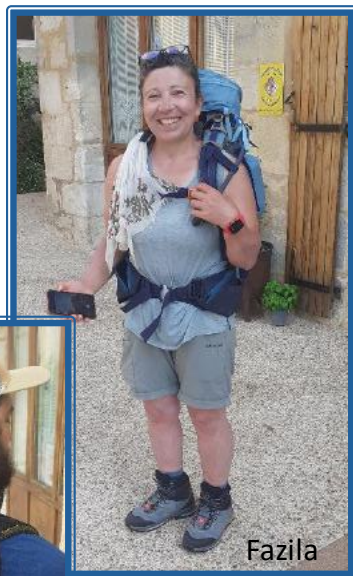
As always supper is a relaxing opportunity to swap stories over a meal with a glass of wine or beer. Here a note about wine / beer. My joining instructions allow me to offer a glass but any more is gently discouraged. Pilgrimage is not another name for extended pub-crawl. A great boon, I have now discovered box wines, this means that I don't have to finish a bottle at one sitting, nice as the idea might seem; I'm astonished, I can buy three litres of very quaffable rosé for about 11€!

Everyone helps with clearing up and after supper Agnès and I sit outside in the evening sun which lasts till almost 10.00 pm at this time of year. Agnès is a very serene person, we share grandchildren stories and she tells me she is a député on her local town or commune council. I'm sure she brings a lot of sense to the council table.

Whether it is my bone-tiredness or that Fazila and Wilfried mumble but I have great difficulty understanding these two pilgrims. I am aching to go to bed.



Agnès



Fazila



Wilfried's photovoltaic cell for charging his devices on the move. Amazing! Very 21st century pilgrim

Tuesday, 9 July.

Agnès is first out this morning – bravo Agnès – followed by Wilfried and then Fazila, unfortunately for her it is a false start as she forgets her walking poles, that's an hour and 7 km down the pan, she must be kicking herself.

As mentioned earlier, Sorges is the truffle central and proud to host the Truffle Museum, a new, very glossy building . Truffle growing and harvesting seems an unpredictable enterprise shrouded in a certain amount of mystery. I have booked a tour of the museum with Madame. Fortunately, I am the only one on the tour; I can stop her frequently and ask questions freely. This is helpful!



Truffles,
tuber melanosporum
aka 'black gold'

Tonight I have three pilgrims: Catharine, Jean-Marc and Philippe. Jean-Marc is a caricature of the eponymous Frenchman; red beret, extravagant, well coiffed handlebar moustache and round glasses. While registering Jean-Marc I learn that he lives in the Vendée, the area of our very first holiday in France, when the love affair started. It was also where we almost bought a house. Although I can't remember the name of the tiny hamlet, little more than four houses, I do still carry the picture of the-house-we-almost-bought-in-France in my wallet. Immediately Jean-Marc says La Tardière – y-e-e-s-s! That's it and then he tells me he was the 'postie' for La Tardière This seems beyond coincidental. However, I know that if we had gone through with the purchase, we would never have done our long-

distance rides including to Santiago de Compostela and, by extension, I would never have become an hospitalière. The party is completed with Phillippe, a rather serious chap who declares that he likes to walk on his own and be on the road at 5.00 am! This is fine; I tell him his breakfast will be left out and he can help himself and I am happy for him to leave the front door unlocked; Sorges seems incredibly safe and we will all be up a couple of hours later.

Jean-Marc and Catharine speak extremely clearly, it's a joy to talk to them.



Jean-Marc,
Catharine and
Phillippe.



A borie, a curious little building on the Route Napoléon into Thiviers. It is too small to shelter a sheep much less a shepherd, maybe his shepherd's crook, a small stove?

Wednesday, 10 July

Philippe has escaped silently! When Hilary, hospitalière at St Ferme a few walking days down the road from Sorges, and I get together at Constant, she tells me that Philippe also stayed with her; she did get up to give him his breakfast. Oh dear, I hope he didn't think the service at Sorges was lacking. Philippe's other distinction is he is one of only three pilgrims of whom I have no picture.



Catharine and
Jean-Marc

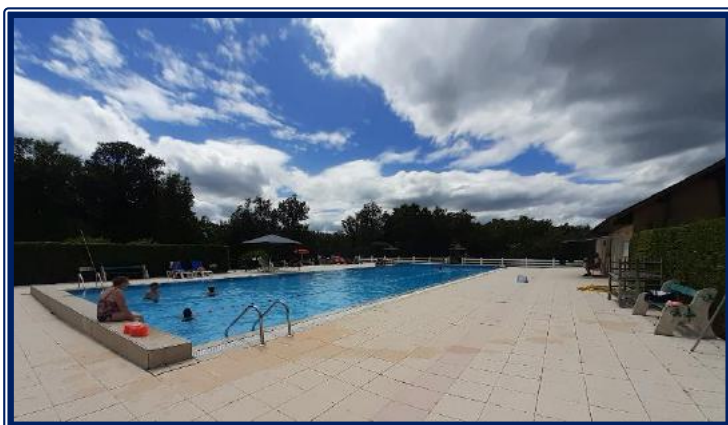
As I said earlier I have brought my bike to France and normally would have expected to use it for shopping some days, as I did regularly in Bouzais. Unfortunately, I forgot to bring a pannier I will be extremely limited in the amount I can carry and will have to fashion something out of a bag-for-life, strapping it to my rack. This is less than ideal, not to mention looking somewhat Heath Robinson.

I have located the back and quieter road into Thiviers, Route Napoléon which runs parallel to the N21. It is straight as a die for about six miles. As I am riding along this very quiet road, I spot a walker approaching with staff and rucksack. He can only be a pilgrim. I stop and ask and, yes, it is Marcel (Dutch) who is booked in for

tonight. I quickly tell him I'm not open till 4.00 pm and he is quite happy. I plan to go swimming in the local pool this afternoon, it is sooooo hot.



The pool, on the outskirts of Sorges, is superb but, astonishingly, only open during July and August, from 10.30 am– 8.00 pm with an hour and a half for lunch. It seems such a pity that such a desirable and expensive asset is only operational for such a short period, especially when the region would (normally) have a lot of sun.



Unfortunately, I don't have as long as I would have liked in the pool but I feel refreshed and hurry back for opening up. Marcel has been waiting in the church and entirely happy. He has been recently widowed and speaks only halting English; he set off from Maastricht on 20 May, a detail clearly recorded on his scallop shell.

Shortly after Jean-Pierre and Sophie arrive. Sophie is in a very bad way, her eyes are badly swollen, red and streaming, poor girl is allergic to pollen. This is my first real problem.

Happily, the secretary at the Mairie is just leaving and I quickly grab her. A call is made to the local doctor who agrees to write a prescription which we can collect, the pharmacy will make it up. All is achieved remarkably quickly, with no undue fuss and Sophie is hugely relieved. I wonder how easy it would have been to achieve this result in England in 2024. So grateful is she, for my help that she presents me with a gift of a beautifully smelling body lotion. For my part I am just thankful that she did not delay telling me by even a few minutes otherwise Madame la Secrétaire would have left and been tucking into her evening apéro. She would not want to be disturbed, indeed, I probably would not have rung her.

However, interestingly, I learnt that if I cannot offer a bed and cannot identify any accommodation locally the Mairie has a duty to step in and source something for bona fide pilgrims. I guess I could also have rung Dominique



Marcel, Sophie
and Jean-Pierre

Costs for staying at the refuges, certainly on the AAPSJVV, are 'donativo', that is, they are a donation, you give what you can afford and what you might expect to pay for simple, communal accommodation and a simple meal. Generally, pilgrims give between 20–30 € Notably, Wojciech gave me 10€ but he was a young man and was going to be on the road for about six months.

I always encourage pilgrims to settle up before we all go to bed. The only leverage I have with regard to getting their money is to hold their pilgrim passport. This is the most important document for a pilgrim and will be proof of their pilgrimage when they present themselves at the Pilgrim Office in Santiago, only then they will earn their Compostela. It is also the proof that they are entitled to ask for accommodation in pilgrim refuges. Refuges are not to be thought of as a cheap option for holidaymakers. When they have paid, I stamp their passport with the refuge stamp.

Jean-Pierre completely throws a spanner in the works by saying he doesn't have a pilgrim passport and is not even interested in having one. He unashamedly declares he just wants to be with Sophie and walking is the price he is willing to pay – Jean-Pierre is in love. For both of them it is the second time round. That's fine and J-P just pays for his stay and also gives me his address in Salon-de-Provence saying if I am ever in Provence I must look him up. It's an easy gesture given casually, nevertheless, he didn't have to and I am grateful for it.



Marcel's scallop shell with
his departure date



The Sorges refuge stamp

Thursday 11 July

Ricardo (American) is with me tonight. Marcel has met him and shows me a picture of the two of them. Ricardo is another, even bigger, bear of a man than was Wilfried. I wonder if this is Marcel's way of preparing me for what might otherwise be a bit of a shock when Ricardo rocks up at my doorstep. I have no way of knowing but I am grateful because Ricardo is truly big and a little intimidating – I'm prepared.

I plan to visit Excideuil, a hill top town, today and treat myself to lunch. I don't particularly enjoy eating on my own now but I can read the paper on line – if the restaurant has wi-fi which is not a given. The French are much more serious about eating, they don't try and combine it with looking at devices, even on weekdays, an internet connection is not considered important. By happy chance it is market day although I arrive at 11.30, a little on the late side, French markets start calling time about midday. The market stretches up the winding main street and stalls are all set at a perilous angle with one end of the table 'jacked up' to compensate for the slope. The stallholders have all been coming for years and are well used to the form. There are plenty of cafés spilling onto the street and I hear many English voices. Even a true Aladdin's cave of a shop selling loose goods, pasta, dried fruit, nuts etc, La Vie en Vrac, is owned by an Englishman. He's been here 30+ years.

At the Augerge du Chapon Fin – The Delicate Capon – I go for the menu du jour. It's usually a good choice and great value but unfortunately my stuffed tomatoes are full of mince, rather hard and not very tasty.

Ricardo arrives shortly after I return. He is **very** big and swarthy, I'm quite pleased to have had Marcel's heads-up. The first thing he tells me is that he has no cash! Hmm, this could be interesting, all dealings are in cash or cheque, Ricardo only has US dollars and the nearest cash machine is in Périgueux. After a worrying few moments, I fall on an ideal solution I will be Ricardo's Bureau de Change; we check the exchange rate for the date and I give him euros – done! He is sooo `grateful and pays me.

Ricardo tells me he comes from Brooklyn, is a US marine, adding once a marine always a marine. He has two daughters who live with their mother. We have found several areas of common ground, my recent visit to New York, Nikki in Baltimore and Noah, a cadet at the US Coast Guard Academy.

Next to arrive is Bertrand, the polar opposite of Ricardo, tall, thin, reserved and no English at all. This will be an interesting evening. However, Ricardo has an app on his phone which will translate. Ricardo / Bertrand speak into the phone and it comes out in French / English. I think Bertrand has some emotional baggage to which he briefly alludes but I don't hear exactly and I don't need to know. I understand he is using the pilgrimage to sort things out; it's good that the two of them are communicating easily – thank heavens for the tech, I can get on with the supper!



Ricardo, Bertrand and two passing German cyclists

While we are eating supper two heavily laden cyclists arrive outside. For an instant, I think I am going to have to feed two more. They are not pilgrims but German touring cyclists heading towards Les Landes for a summer job. They come in briefly for a cold drink, it is very hot even at 8.00 pm and then get on the way. They have tents so are self-sufficient.

Just as I think that is it for the night, Anéo, wannabee comedian, arrives. He is happy to camp but equally happy to have fallen among thieves and enjoys the prospect of a proper bed tonight. Fortunately,

he does not want to eat. He is also relentlessly cheerful, humming and whistling as he showers and goes about his pilgrim routine.



Anéo,

Friday, 13 July

Ricardo is away before I am up. I hope he remembers to visit the ATM in Périgueux. Bertrand and Anéo seem in no particular hurry. To the collective credit of my pilgrims, many of them strip their beds and put the sheets in the bathroom.

At midday I am about to head out when my four expected German pilgrims arrive at the door. To soften the news that I'm not yet open, I offer cold drinks and suggest they leave their rucksacks in the refuge while they get some lunch at the bar restaurant

For my part I head back to Excideuil for the second day running. It is only a few miles further than Thiviers and so much nicer, with a huge Super U, sooo much better than Lidl.

On the way into Excideuil I pass a memorial, relatively recently erected to commemorate an act of great courage by members of the local Maquis against the Milice, the hated political, para-military organisation created by the Vichy government during the last war. Memory is long in France, as only a country occupied by a foreign power, would be. The memorial was only erected in 2007, 63 years after the event.



*In this place, on 30 May 1944,
under the command of a young
member of the Maquis
Louis Roux,
representatives of the villages of
Lage and Excideuil staged a
victorious ambush against three
vehicles of the Milice.*

*They freed four hostages:
Alphonse Parrot, tortured by the
Milice at Thiviers
Mmes Brizon and Cipierre and
M Faure*

*Nine members of the Milice in the
service of the Nazis, were
slaughtered
In passing, remember!*

The Germans, Arnd, Holger, Volker and Walter are at the door shortly after my return. These chaps are a jolly, disparate crowd and are respectively: electrician, GP, court administrator and prison guard; the Camino is a great leveller. Although they are walking together at this stage, they did not know each other before meeting on the Camino. They are joined by Annette another German and a teacher. Once all pilgrim tasks are complete, they sit outside in the sun to mull over the day. Holger (GP) seems, from my limited acquaintance of them, to be the de facto leader and definitely the group joker; with a quick riposte for any/everything but they are all good company and we share stories. Holger did part of his medical training at BMH (British Military Hospital) Rinteln now, sadly, part of the vast British military estate fast falling into disrepair in Germany. Volker comes from former east Germany. We have plenty of shared memories from my time in Rheindahlen as a daughter and Braunschweig as a wife.



Arnd, Volker, Self, Holger, Annette, Walter

It is interesting to note that these four chaps and one woman, all strangers to each other, will all bed down in the dortoir with (apparently) not a moment of concern.

Saturday, 13 July

The Germans are in no hurry to leave. Holger, in his role as OC d'équipe⁷, has bought croissants and other patisseries for the 'troops' and, delightfully, for me also. On the refuge budget, I cannot afford to buy croissants.



Volker, Holger, Walter, Arnd



Annette

I am now de-mob happy. I have welcomed 32 pilgrims date – a lot - and I'm really looking forward to my week at HPB, Constant.

It's another hot day, I'd love to go for a swim but there's not really time. I have three chaps booked in for tonight. Pierre a pleasant young French man followed by Didier and Philippe. None are particularly easy to understand; Philippe particularly mutters into his beard, Didier talks - A LOT! I am tired and more than happy to let them talk amongst themselves.



Pierre, Didier, Philippe

⁷ Officer Commanding the team

Sunday, 14 July
Bastille Day, Fête Nationale

The three chaps are on the road at 8.00 am and the sheets in the wash. I'm much better able to talk French this morning; a better night has helped greatly and Didier and I have an exchange; he speaks clearly this morning and admits that his wife says, if no-one was listening he'd talk to the stones. Yup I'll believe that. Nevertheless, after not 'bonding' particularly well last night they all want to kiss me.



Uber chatty
Didier



Pierre



Philippe

Today, I am meeting my successor at Périgueux railway station. Leila is a Cambridge undergraduate arriving at 5.30 pm by train from London, St Pancras. I arrive in Périgueux mid-morning and head for parking Tourny, there seem to be an awful lot of uniformed chaps, chests bristling with rows of shiny medals, walking purposefully. Of course! - it's Bastille Day, Fête Nationale.

Statue of St James in the
St James Chapel of
Périgueux cathedral



I find a lovely restaurant not far from the cathedral and just as I'm finishing my lunch, my go-to favourite of confit de canard, I catch sight of Annette my pilgrim of Friday night. She is somewhat taken aback at hearing her name called out in the street but realisation dawns and she joins me for a cup of coffee. Her husband has met her in Périgueux and they are spending a few days in a hotel. Annette's English is pretty good and I learn she is expecting her first grandchild in October. This has proved to be a very happy way to spend a Sunday lunch time before the maître D gently tells us he would like to close.

I have a couple of hours to kill before Leila arrives and I sit in a sunny square and write up my journal.

Leila's train is on time, we connect easily. and are soon high-tailing back to the refuge where Dominique has come to stand in for me. He has signed in two pilgrims, Aurélian and Alexia. We shall be five for supper and it's all hands to the pump. Dominique has brought a clafoutis for pudding, it's rather a 'leaden' offering!



Leila, Dominique, Aurélian, Alexia

Statue of St James in the refuge. It is a modest statue sitting high up; not every pilgrim is motivated by spirituality



Monday, 15 July

This is it! I am now completely de-mob happy, 37 pilgrims and I'm done! which is not to say that I have not enjoyed my fortnight. I have loved it and feel incredibly lucky to have found a way of being in France 'with a mission' but I'm exhausted.

I'm also little fed-up with preparing Chicken Salade Véronique, Salade Niçoise and escalopes of pork. I must add another dish to my repertoire before next year.

Aurélian and Alexia are out in good time. Alexia is charming and full of fun. Leila and I head off to Thiviers to do a big shop, as she has no transport she will be dependent on the Co-op for supplies and that will inevitably cost more than Lidl. In two weeks, my opinion of Thiviers has not changed, it is still grubby, slightly down at heel with far too many empty properties, domestic and commercial, it's the usual story and Thiviers, despite being a relatively large town has not found the secret to stop the decline, unlike nearby Excideuil. Some Google research reveals that Excideuil has a population half the size of Thiviers, so it doesn't seem to be a numbers game.

We return to the refuge, me to load up my bike and pack. I have only an hour's journey tomorrow to HPB Constant but I'm keen to get away and let Leila find her hospitalière feet. She will be fine.

Pierre and Lydie who are scheduled for tonight, rock up at about 11.00 am; they are very happy to leave their rucksacks and come back at 4.00 pm. They come from the Landes area of France, Pierre

has a very strong accent, they are both rather tedious but perhaps I am just tired now. Both Leila and I agree that conversation is challenging.



Leila, Pierre and
Lydie

Tuesday, 16 July

Sorges → HPB Constant, St Félix de Villedieu

I've had a great fortnight, met interesting people and spoken a lot of French which I love but now I am done!



Leila and I. I am definitely de-mob happy!

Before I leave I want to visit the foie gras farm just on the outskirts of the village. I have to admit to being somewhat ambivalent about the ethics of le gavage, the process of force-feeding geese to fatten their livers for delicious pâté. The process is explained in detail and Monsieur is very keen to explain the geese are free to range through the walnut trees during the day- they are happy geese. Certainly, the French have fewer qualms about the practice but as I noted earlier, generally, they



are much more robust in their approach to animal husbandry v gastronomy.

At last, I'm on the way and using the pilgrim way, direction Périgueux and thence to HPB Constant, my new home in the west for a week.

Hilary arrives about 6.00 pm and we head out for supper in St Félix. After a fortnight of looking after others, we both need to be looked after. We have lots to talk about and compare notes. Many of 'my' pilgrims became 'her' pilgrims a few days later, Philippe who was away super-early, Wilfried with his solar panel on his back and Fien, the lovely vivacious girl.

Wednesday, 17 July

Today we are meeting Hilary's friends Natty (Nathalie) and Gérard for lunch in the vineyards of Monbazillac. Damian and I visited Monbazillac with Nikki and Larry during their visit in 1997, noteworthy as the time when Diana, Princess of Wales was killed in Paris and, closer to home, when Nikki left America without the necessary paper work to get back in when they returned at the end of the holiday.

Neither Natty or Gérard have any English but we spend a happy and delicious lunch overlooking the vines.



The vineyard of Monbazillac

Completely by chance, we note there is an open-air violin-cello concert in the next village. This is completely fortuitous but it's a lovely warm evening in the garden of a lovely house.



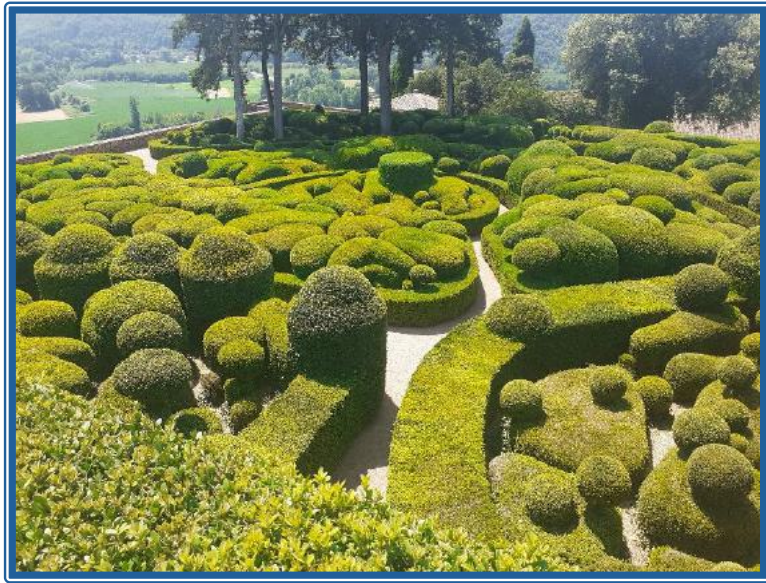
Thursday 18 July

Hilary leaves for Caen and the ferry today; I have NO plans for the day; I feel I deserve this day off after a full-on fortnight at the refuge. I shall swim in the lovely open-air pool.

Friday, 19 July

Rest over, I must make best use of the time I have left in France; I'm going to visit the Château of Marqueyssac, famous for its thousands of cloud pruned box bushes. Marqueyssac is not far from the first gîte we rented in the Dordogne, there will be many place names I recognise; over the years we had three holidays around here. It is full of lovely, happy, sunny memories and I am thankful, once again, to have discovered the APSJVV; a way to be in France with a mission; it feels all the better because I wondered if I would ever holiday in France again. I pass a sign to St Vincent de Cosse - that was it! Only

a tiny collection of a few houses high above the road and the Dordogne river. I do a quick about-turn but nearly 30 years has warped my memory and I missed the turn. I'll come back next year.



Cloud pruned box bushes of Marqueyssac



... and a modern 'cubist' approach



Confluence of the rivers Vézère and Dordogne at Limeuil.
We visited Limeuil after putting Nikki and Larry on the
train at Sarlat when they had to abort their holiday
with us

Saturday, 20 July

Today is a no-car day; I plan to do one of the bike rides carefully detailed by HPB; It is not the best day to choose, it's dangerously hot and I only make as far as Chez Lambert, a rather down at heel sort of place biding its time until someone comes along to love it and breathe new life into it; Madame has zero interest in providing a service. I turn round and head back to Constant, with my map reading skills, I can easily get lost and the swimming pool is a very attractive option.

Sunday, 21 July

It's Sunday; I'm going to Bergerac for lunch. Here is another town marking 80 years since the liberation of France. In the square there is a display of some 20 enlarged black and white photos showing Bergerac under occupation and then liberation. It is salutary and needs no explanation.



The town's most famous son is Cyrano de Bergerac, a 19th century soldier in the French army possessed of an inordinately large and ugly nose. The town, spotting a good marketing opportunity, has majored on the connection



Cyrano de Bergerac

On this day, however, Bergerac is en fête for its triathlon; the town is heaving with Lycra clad folk of all ages. I love seeing quite little boys kitted out, just like their fathers, with scaled down racing bikes. I am just in time to see the swimmers set off in relays down the river.



And another, more
modern take on
Cyrano de Bergerac



I find a restaurant in the old town and settle down to, you guessed, confit de canard. Sitting at the next table are an English couple, she is a bio-chemist; I cannot resist getting into conversation.

Monday, 22 July

I am ready to go home tomorrow; six days on my own is enough. I am breaking the journey north of Tours and catching the evening ferry from Cherbourg back to Poole. This makes for a very easy run home and fall into bed.

It has been a marvellous month and I feel lucky to be able to do this. I am scheduled to come back to Sorges and Constant again in 2025 and I am already looking forward to it greatly

Pilgrim statistics

This year I welcomed 39 pilgrims, broken down by nationality as follows:

French	24
German	5
Belgian	4
Dutch	4
Polish	1
USA	1

In 2022, my first year at Bouzais I welcomed 19 pilgrims, in 2023 24. Who knows how many I will welcome in 2025.