TRAVELS BY CAMPER IN SPAIN, THE PYRENEES AND FRANCE

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MICHAEL AND NORMA

SPAIN

For the first time in our travels from the UK, we took the large ferry from Portsmouth down across the Bay of Biscay to the port of Santander, on the north coast of Spain just west of Basque country. Our intention was to move south quite quickly, before it got too hot in southern Spain. (NOTE: our entire route for this trip is mapped on the last page of this account.)

The route took us, first, down through the very scenic Picos (peaks) de Europa. We had some fabulous driving, up and out of the little town of Potes with its backdrop of the sharp mountain range, then continuing down the east side of the Picos national park but still being surrounded by mountains. In the hills and along the valleys the farmers were busy, moving stock towards higher altitudes, their flocks protected by guard dogs. Quite a climb latterly, to over 1600 metres through several hairpins and steep slopes overlooking great views.

Latterly we had a fast run on a toll-free motorway down into Salamanca. By this time we had joined the main route south in this part of the world, originally the Roman road Via Plata and now named the Ruta de la Plata or Silver Route – so called because it linked the silver mines in Asturias in the north to Andalucia in the south.

We knew where we were aiming for, but getting there meant we had to drive through all of “new” Salamanca to get to the southern part, where the compact old city lies on a hill. Having arrived, we walked over the nearby road bridge and along cobbled and traffic-free roads up the hill towards the old city.

Salamanca is regarded (notably by Lonely Planet) as a "dream destination". Since Roman times (Hispania) it has been an important staging post on the silver route. Following the Muslim invasion in the early 8th century, and the peninsula becoming Al-Andalus, Salamanca passed from hand to hand between the Christian and Muslim armies as the ideologies struggled for dominance, the "*Reconquista*" as the former saw it. In 1218, in the latter part of the conflict, Salamanca established what became the greatest university in the peninsula and rich in artistic activity. The university became the intellectual centre of opposition to Franco's fascist rule.

The compact nature of the old city makes it easy to walk around. We started at the twin cathedrals, which were shut – this being Spain, nothing happens or opens before 10:00 am – and then wandered past the university.

We walked further north through narrow lanes between golden sandstone buildings to the Plaza Major, "widely considered" to be Spain's most beautiful central square, even more so than Madrid. However, the undoubtedly beautiful buildings and palaces, planned and designed by the Churriguera brothers whose work can be seen throughout the country, currently enclosed a vast mass of marquees, which were to be housing books as part of a literary festival. Thus, the square as such lost its grandeur.

The next day, the twin cathedrals turned out to be the highlights of our visit. The elaborate Gothic tower of the Catedral Nuevo rises high over the city and can be seen from miles around. It is faced by elaborately carved Renaissance porticos. Inside, there is a church within the church, and inside that there is another elaborately carved (in wood this time) choir – which Norma thought looked a bit on the dusty and unloved side). Throughout, there are innumerable colourful chapels featuring many saints and tombs.

The new cathedral was built to buttress the Romanesque Catedral Vieja, which was established in 1120. The main feature of this marvellous old building is a glorious 15th century altarpiece, with 54 panels depicting stories of the lives of Jesus and Mary. They frame a Limoges enamel statue of Salamanca's patron saint, the 12th century Virgen de la Vega. Overlooking the altarpiece, in the vault is a large painting of the final judgement, with the doomed entering hell through the gaping mouth of a greedy dragon. In the ancient chapels there are some charming frescoes, statues and carved tombs, with some bright little altarpieces. There is a superb 15th century alabaster tomb of Diego de Anaya, an archbishop of Salamanca, whose statue overlies a collection of mournful dogs, lions and other unidentifiable creatures.

Walking round this little cathedral was a highlight of the walk, so we strolled down the hill and back to the van over the Roman bridge, most of which is a survival of the Roman era.

In the early evening, when the museums open again, we walked back over the river to the Museum of the History of the Automobile. This was a pretty good display of about 100 cars in three floors, strictly ordered by the year of manufacture. Obviously, few were of pure Spanish origin, but as far as we could gather, all had some relationship with Spain and many were very rare.

We then took a bit of a deviation from the Silver Route, to Avila. We saw the famous walls from far away on the approach, and stopped for the view from a well-known lookout point, the “four posts”. From there, we easily found the immense open car park close the northern walls and backed by an expanse of scrubland.

After lunch, we walked up to the city, *Avila de los Caballeros*, which after the Muslim-Christian battles were over, became an important commercial centre. (Not that its intellectual base was enhanced by the expulsion of all Jews in 1492.) The old centre is enclosed by the finest preserved walls in Spain, and probably the best in Europe. They are incredibly impressive. Built mostly in the 12th century over Roman and Muslim bases, they have been “updated” over the centuries, along with the 88 defensive turrets and watchtowers. We walked part of the wall, but it was quite tough going for Norma’s increasingly painful knees, with its steep slopes, uneven surface and high steps.

The cathedral is in the middle of the eastern part of the wall, and the granite-walled apse forms part of the defences. The exterior, particularly the grey 18th century reconstruction of the western nave, has a rather unfinished look, but the interior is highly unusual and impressive. The architecture is a mixture of Romanesque and Gothic, with Plateresque (as in silver and goldsmiths’ skills) wooden and stone carvings of amazing detail. The western nave is a boring grey, like the outside, but once past the highly decorated choir the cathedral’s columns and walls feature a mottled appearance, reddish on white limestone, which along with the shapes of the arches are reminiscent of Moorish design.

There is a magnificent altarpiece by Pedro de Berruguete, majestically carved Renaissance walnut choir stalls, and an unusually (for a church) interesting museum spread through old chapter houses and sacristies.

We had a lovely drive back to the south-west towards Caceres. It started with the hilly country that is the western end of the spur that extends across to the north of Madrid, and we did not expect such winding roads and even a pass with several hairpins. The road fell down into a fertile valley, with its steep sides marked by level after level of terraces up to the hilltops, with a green mass of fruit trees. As the terrain levelled out, every little town was setting out fruit stalls, and we bought a kilogram box of cherries for €5.

We walked up into Caceres, which was quite familiar from our 2011 visit. We entered the old town from the Plaza Major and under the Arco de la Estrella, thus facing the Iglesia de Santa Maria and the Casa de los Dolphines, one of the leading families of the 16th century. Then it was just a matter of meandering round this very quiet (at least early in the morning) Renaissance town. Its long history, with little destruction over the ages and its importance as a trading centre, lead to its being Spain’s first listed heritage city in 1949.

We had been recommended a new aire at Badajoz by some British campers, and this is where we were headed next. (An “*aire*” in much of Europe is a parking place only for motorhomes, with some security and basic facilities.) We had read in the rather dismissive guidebooks that Badajoz has little

to recommend it as a tourist stop, having “only” some Muslim and Christian monuments, a rather negative view that we found was largely contradicted during the following day’s explorations.

Our morning walk was in a continuing cool but welcome wind into the city of Badajoz. There are some unpleasant aspects of the history of the place, especially some atrocious massacres carried out by Nationalist forces when they took Badajoz in 1936 in the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, ever since the Muslims took the region in the 9th century Badajoz has been battled over by armies including those of Portugal, France, Spain and Britain. But we experienced a pleasant atmosphere, with much work on rebuilding and renovating some previously run-down areas.

We crossed the river from our aire by way of the partially reconstructed fortress of Hornabeque and the old (now) pedestrian-only bridge over the River Guadiana. In the mid-1980s we had anchored *Cera* near the mouth of this river, which down near the sea is the border between Portugal and Spain. No customs or other officials ever appeared to clear us in so we simply continued our sail round the south-west coast of the peninsula.

Continuing our walk, we followed the river to the north of the old town, where lies the 8-hectare site of the old Alcazaba. In Muslim times this was a town in itself, but is now a scattered collection of buildings associated with extensive archaeological works. The prominent tower, the Torre Espantaperros (Scare-Dogs Tower) is the symbol of the city.

Down from the tower we came to the Plaza Alta, a large, bright and airy space with only one or two tourist groups at this time. The facades are decorative, and one of the public buildings is painted with a geometric tromp l’oeil red and white design.

The following day we drove on mostly fast and absurdly good roads through typical Extremadura terrain, trees in a mass of shades of green ranging over slopes to the horizon. It’s hard to tell the kinds of trees from each other: some, clearly, are olive; then there are cork oaks, but those tend to stand apart, with thick trunks; and there are holm oaks, of the same family but not for cork. The guidebooks talk of other trees, sweet chestnuts for example, but if they are there, they are simply part of the green forest.

Castles and fortified villages on wooded, conical hilltops tell of the repeated conflicts that are such a feature of the history of the whole disputed peninsula, right until the peace that followed WW2.

Getting further south, the villages became whiter and whiter, with a particularly pretty place being Cumbres de un Medio. It appeared deserted, apart from a few elderly people, and that may have been so – but the flowers along the main – and only true – street told of effort to keep the place alive. From there we soon reached our target, the sister but larger and more developed village of Cumbres Mayores, in northern Andalusia.

We drove up an unsurfaced road to the top of a hill overlooking the village, and to the aire. This was genuinely rural stuff – the first to call was a flock of goats, led by a big black boss female, with an udder drooping full with milk. We could hear (and Norma could smell) pigs in an enclosure just down the way, and there were local sheep in a wire-fenced paddock just behind us. Cows were also shy visitors.

Late afternoon we walked down to the village, hoping to get a look into the substantial castillo and the adjacent Iglesia, but both were – not unsurprisingly – shut. We still wandered through the village, getting lost in the concentric pattern of lanes. Most houses were painted white or off-white. Striking were those showing a strong Portuguese influence, with ceramic tiles making features of the balconies and doors.

We were now in the northern Sierra de Aracena, one of the least-visited corners of Andalusia. We chose next to cross the mountain range directly south to Aracena on what looked like very minor roads on our map – but which, as so often in Spain, were mostly easy and well-surfaced.

Aracena is one of the larger white villages, but we chose to not risk the van and our nerves by challenging its narrow lanes. We got some good views of it from the main bypass road, though, before cutting down and south again, along more great driving roads, up and down the sierra hills on fine surfaces, twisting and turning one way and the other, white villages peeping through the olive-green forests.

Our visit for the afternoon was Minas de Riotinto, the centre of one of the world's oldest mining districts. Copper has been mined here since about 3,000 BC, iron since Roman times and silver and other minerals made the region a prime mover for the Silver Route, down which we had been generally following from the northern coast of the peninsula to near the south coast.

Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto is now the world's second-biggest mining company, after BHP-Billiton. Listed in both London and Melbourne, the company was founded in Britain by a consortium of entrepreneurs in 1873 to mine copper at Rio Tinto. The land was purchased from Spain, with the deal providing that no royalties would ever flow to the country. Franco later tried to annul this contract, but was diverted by Civil War issues.

The company turned it into one of the world's great copper mining centres. Production here reached a peak in 1930; in 1962 Rio Tinto merged with Broken Hill's Consolidated Zinc Corporation, with a world-wide reach in mining and sales. Copper mining ceased at the red river site in 1986 and silver and gold in 1996. The mine closed altogether in 2001.

We took a visitors' train that is composed of restored 1913 carriages, but is pulled – very slowly – by a diesel replica of a small steam locomotive along a restored but rickety narrow-gauge line. The first part of the run was through a landscape completely destroyed by an extraction method known as calcination which requires the burning of thousands of tons of copper pyrites. This, of course causes the air to be saturated with sulphur dioxide, a potent pollutant and poison. Working here at the time, around the turn of the 19th century, must have been like hell on earth. This process was terminated by 1907. Great piles of slag were on either side, some solidified into slabs that have slipped down each other like cliff faces.

The train runs alongside the River Rio Tinto – literally, the "red river". And so it is. We were told that the river has always flowed red and acidic all the way to the Atlantic, although another source (Wiki) says that it became red only after the start of mining (how would they know?). "Normal" organisms cannot survive in it, but many acidophilic micro-organisms do thrive on the minerals and colonise the river the whole way. A part of a Roman road can be seen, once used by Romans to transport silver to Italica in Seville.

The next section of the train run goes through the remnants of the industrial facilities built by the British from the early 19th century. Rusting remains of substantial locomotives and all kinds of rolling stock are strewn over the landscape. Decaying signal boxes were where rail traffic was directed to various parts of the plant.

The train continues beyond the mining works and into the natural landscape, along the start of the original 83km line connecting the mine with the sea port at Huelva. The train now stops at Los Frailes station, about 11km from the start, and after a 20 minutes halt during which many passengers wandered down to the red river, returned peacefully with no commentary.

It was a terrific little trip, taking a total of an hour and a half or so, and we decided to follow up with a look at another mining area close by, at La Atalaya. The Spanish company EMED, now Atalaya Mining, has estimated that there is still sufficient copper available to justify, at relatively low cost re-opening the mine. The processing plant is mothballed, but can soon be brought back into operation. We gazed at the truly vast extent of the open-cut mine, where gigantic mining trucks were already making circuits of the steps cut round the walls, carrying loads of spoil.

In the next stage of the tour we continued down to Cadiz. Entry to the spit of land on which Cadiz lies is via a high and mighty new bridge, a very impressive final approach indeed. Despite some of the roads being new to our Tomtom, we managed to navigate ourselves to a big new car park with a special rate for motorhomes, so by 3:00 we were settled. We were right next to ships at the port and could feel a refreshing sea breeze.

Later, we went for a paseo to get a feel for the local area. Cadiz lays claim to being the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in Europe, spanning a period of four millennia and its founding as a city by Phoenician traders in 800 BC.

Columbus sailed from here on his second and fourth voyages. In 1587 Sir Francis Drake raided the harbour, delaying the imminent Spanish Armada, and in 1596 Anglo-Dutch forces burnt down most of the town. Cadiz experienced booming times in association with Spain's exploration and exploitation of the Americas, and during the 18th century it enjoyed 75% of the trans-Atlantic trade.

Our afternoon walk, starting with the colonnaded walkway fringing what is the port car park, was around some rather bedraggled and seedy areas, festooned with dreadful graffiti. But it was pleasant along the sea wall in a sea breeze. We descended from the bastions into the Plaza de Espana. Here, an impressive white tower and monument commemorates the adoption by a national parliament of Spain's liberal 1812 constitution, proclaiming the sovereignty of the people. Cadiz was then briefly the capital of Spain, but the constitution was rapidly revoked by the tyrannical King Ferdinand VII.

Back at the van the skies were clear and blue, the wind cool, and the background noise of trucks departing the port right behind us with containers quite prominent!

Later, we heard the dissonant noise of people practising, or tuning up, bugles and other instruments – and before long we were treated to the sight of a large brass band moving slowly along the walkway. The music was a slow chant, somewhat funereal, and the band walked at a slow march. They were obviously rehearsing for some forthcoming festival. The rehearsal did go on a bit – they marched to and fro until nearly 11:00 pm, by which time we could have hummed the dirge ourselves! Still, it was an unexpected glance into some local culture.

The city of Cadiz is compact, as it well might be, constrained by being set on what is very close to being an island. So we were able to manage most of the main sights in the one day. We started with the Museo de Cadiz, highly rated but really only an art museum with nothing about the history of the place over the last two or three hundred years. There some good paintings of the classical and earlier eras, particularly Dutch and Spanish, and an extensive archeological floor concentrating on the ancient Roman influence in south-west Spain. All was well displayed as an art gallery, but not quite what we were looking for in terms of history.

We walked down then to the medieval district through the maze of *calles*, through some attractive plazas. Quite quiet to start with, the place was beginning to hum through the influence of two large cruise ships and their passengers pouring into the streets. One face of the Plaza de San Juan de Dios is fronted by the imposing neoclassical Ayuntamento (town hall), beside which adjoins the little church of that name. Down towards the southern waterfront there is a collection of Roman ruins, including a theatre, but the ruins were being stabilized and not open.

Just past them is the Catedral and its plaza. The cathedral is a handsome neoclassical building with a golden cupola that you can't actually see, and inside it was refreshingly free of the over-

indulgence in glittering religious decoration that is such a typical feature of Spanish churches. It is the “Nueva” cathedral, built on the site of an older one, and was not finished until 1838. The large crypt holds the tomb of Manuel de Falla, a Cadiz native.

It’s a short walk in the oldest part of the town – the Barrio del Popula – to the Mercado Central and the Plaza de Topete. It’s a large enclosed market, and especially good, in Norma’s expert opinion, in the matter of fish. We bought some prawns for a paella later.

We had a tapa lunch at a pleasant taperia right beside the market in a cool calle, before walking back across the “island” to the van on the north side. An enjoyable morning, and the strengthening wind – a reinforced sea breeze – kept the temperature down.

On our way again, we took a freeway down towards Cabo de Gibraltar. We cut across the attractive hill that is the Alcornocales natural park over to Barbate, and had another look at the coast that is here known as the Costa del Luz. It is notorious for its windswept nature, and therefore popular among windsurfers and kitesurfers – but even they had huddled down away from the beaches in the scant shelter of the scrub. We have never felt such strong wind gusts in the van, which seemed to be trying to knock us off the road.

Unsurprisingly, as we approached Tarifa, on the southernmost tip of Spain, we were overwhelmed by the number of wind turbines – although about half were feathered and not running because of the strength of the wind, and thus not generating anything..

Round the cape and up to industrial Algeciras, and so to the approaches to Gibraltar. We had not been hugely impressed by Gibraltar during our two visits arriving at and then leaving the Mediterranean in our yacht *Cera*, but it was a good place to provision and fettle the boat, so we were interested in visiting the Rock again. However, the motorhome aire in our most recent guide, next to the new marina in Spanish waters, was now a huge car (only) park and a multi-storey residential building site. We could find no other place to park, so continued round the coastal road until coming to a large park by a sports stadium, where a handful of vans were established. It turned out that what might have been an aire a bit closer to Gib was a market that day, and there was nowhere else to stay the night.

We did find an acceptable parking place a kilometre or two along the road, and shared it with a handful of other vans overnight.

For old times’ sake, we then drove up the coastal strip to Estepona, initially through unattractive industrial suburbs and then through scrubby scenery with a backdrop of hills. Estepona itself presented very well, although many of the huge developments on the southern approach were yet to be completed. We found little change at the marina from when we wintered in the boat in 1985-86. What were new were the multi-storey tower blocks up behind the marina, and the now much more developed and busy main street through the town, despite the season not having started yet.

Entering the Sierra Margarita natural park, where the “*pueblos blancos”* are centred, via a winding and narrow road up from the coast with good views, we came to Grazalema, where it seemed that

there were a few possibilities for a night stop. We did stop at the first such place we came across, with a view across a chasm to the village, perched on a ridge backed by peaks and cliffs.

Grazalema we found to be an enchanting white village, with lots of flowers in pots and on balconies, and a lovely view from the terrace in the main square. Then we were away on a circular tour of the countryside and more white villages, all in the natural park of the Sierra Margarita. We started to the west, towards the larger town of El Bosque. This first leg took us through a particularly lovely stretch of countryside, with the typical rocky peaks, low green forests and green scrubland of the region. The remains of many castillas were visible at the hilltops.

South then to Ubrique, and we nearly completed the circle back up to Grazalema before cutting north towards Zahara. We stopped for lunch under trees in a big recreational car park overlooking a large reservoir, the Embalsa de Zahara, with water of a deep turquoise blue. The water level was very low, and there were notices forbidding “navigation”. We wondered why the appearance was drought-like, now in the spring, when water would normally be abundant. The drive up to Zahara was narrow and very winding, but from what we had read, easier than an alternative run with reportedly “precipitous” climbs.

Zahara, along with Grazalema, is one of the most noteworthy white towns, and we got a good view of it from a neighbouring peak with the remains of a castle on it. But the town’s roads looked too narrow for the van and too steep to walk on this hot afternoon, so the view sufficed well enough. The town is spread horizontally across the steeply peaked hill about half way up, and the peak is topped, as ever, with a castle tower. From the other side of our viewpoint we could see the blue reservoir, and across the ranges and as far as the horizon grove after grove of olive trees, with the pale earth speckled by the dark green trees.

From Zahara we took a main road to the east, so it was a fast run to Olvera and an aire that was in the books. This turned out to be a great find: associated with (but not too close to) a neat little restaurant/café, it had big marked spaces each with its own power and water supply, plus wi-fi at the restaurant, all in the €7 fee. We caught up with the emails over a welcome cerveza at the bar.

The next morning we embarked on our planned walk up to the village – or as far as we felt we could go – with the building heat making it harder work than expected.

But we did just make it all the way up to the church and castle at the top of the hill, very steep in places. Great views from the top, again of peaked hills scattered over the ranges, most topped by castle towers, and all surrounded by olive groves.

The very name of the village, Olvera, is a shortening of its original name, Olivera, based of course on the olive plantations and industry. The original settlement was in Arab times, and the castle adjacent to the church is built on 12th century Muslim remains. The parish church itself is referred to as "Neoclassical", and is more impressive from a distance than near to. Inside, it has the usual glittering altarpiece, though not as big as some, and all the vaults are filled with coloured statuary featuring Mary in various garb including a wedding dress.

Just south of the nearby town of Antequera is an astonishing sight, the natural park of El Torcal. This is a 13 square kilometre hilltop of amazing limestone rock formations and caves. Every piece of rock is slotted and grooved, and piles of stones rise upon each other in an apparently unstable heap. In some places the formations form vertical cliff faces, and in other places they are simply a jumble with pillars. The limestone is formed from the shells and skeletons laid down when this was the bottom of the sea, in the Jurassic era some 200 million years ago. About 20 million years ago the layers of limestone were compressed and fractured, and subsequently exposed to weathering and erosion. This ongoing process is known as a karst or karstic landscape. From here, there was a good view of the valleys below, mostly quite green right now.

The other ancient sight to see near this town is the archaeological site of the Antequera dolmens. Three dolmens have been discovered, and the site recently attained Wold Heritage status, with a fancy new heritage centre and all. They date back to the Neolithic era, about 6,500 to 7,000 years ago. Like most Mediterranean examples they are composed of an inner space enclosed by heavy stone lintels, or dolmens. They were used for several purposes, including as tombs, ceremonial sites and places for ritual ceremony.

We visited the two main ones, the Menga and Viera dolmens, which are two of Europe's largest and are still impressively covered by a 50-metre earth tumulus. The interior chambers are reached through stone-framed entrance ways. These particular dolmens probably continued to be used through the late Neolithic, Copper, Bronze and Iron Ages into antiquity and the Middle Ages. We

also had a look at the third dolmen, a few kilometres out of town, but it was not much more than an open trench.

For the night we chose, out of a limited list, an aire in Almaha de Granada, a fair way south-west of the major and historic city (which we explored quite thoroughly several years ago). On the way we passed through more vast olive-growing areas, again as far as the eye could see, up to the horizon on all sides. Several large areas were obviously only recently planted with new or young shoots. We wondered just how on earth the olives were harvested, all at about the same time of the year. Thousands and thousands of pickers must be required. Andalusia produces about 75% of Spain's olive oil, which of course is widely exported. Much is sold with the claim that it originates in the country that packs and distributes it.

The next main target was, generally, the Sierra Nevada, the main mountain range in Andalusia. We aimed to drive along its southern side. There is a choice of roads: the Michelin yellow "main" road, and a collection of smaller "white" roads that are more intimately associated with the mountains and which probe into the multitude of gorges and chasms between the peaks. We chose the latter, as usual.

We first had to traverse some hilly but not very interesting countryside, passing hundreds of enormous wind turbines on the hills and in the windswept valleys, We went through the big white town of Lanzaron before embarking on the Sierra roads, starting to twist and turn as the narrow but well-surfaced road wound up into the foothills. The landscape became increasingly dramatic and craggy as we drove up the sides of the gorges to the villages at the end of each. The deepest intrusion was to Trevelez, but this turned out to be the least attractive: it featured blocks of holiday flats more appropriate for the Costas. The centre of the town did have several shops selling the local specialty, textiles – rugs and the like – but others were selling more touristy tat.

Then came another driving day, trying to cover some ground to the east and north in this very big country – after four weeks in Spain we were still in Andalusia. With no special sights to see in mind, we first made for what seemed could be an intriguing place. The term "spaghetti western" is pretty well known, and it is the desert-like territory east of the Sierra Nevada that in the 1960s and '70s attracted several American film directors, such as Sergio Leone, seeking settings less developed and cheaper than in the American West. The local people have now cashed in, of course, maintaining some of the film sets and developing them into tourist attractions with names such as "Texas Hollywood" and "Fort Bravo". We thought of having a look round, but these are now big-day-out attractions for families: at over €22 euros a head that was too steep for us, and so we satisfied ourselves by taking some telephoto shots from outside the fences.

We gradually descended back towards the coast through rather unprepossessing landscape, with rounded hillsides covered with stones and coarse scrub, reminiscent of parts of southern Greece – a similar climate, of course. In some parts, yet more olive trees were being planted in patches. The final descent to the sea was through a magnificent section of winding roads in the Parque Natural de Cabo de Gata, on a superbly engineered series of viaducts.

The next stage of the run was north-east along the coast of the Costa de Almeria, which becomes the Costa Blanca north of Cartagena. We were then in the province of Murcia. By Spanish standards this is an undeveloped part of the country's coast, but the seaside villages are rapidly expanding, with new apartment blocks being built in their scores, amassed along the hillsides. Several, however, are yet to be occupied, and looked bit forlorn.

Some of the small seaside towns were nevertheless quite attractive, and even the beaches – still very quiet – were tinged with golden sand rather than the grey that is typical further south.

We detoured inland for a bit, mainly to avoid a toll motorway, driving past vast expanses of muslin or shade-cloth covered fruit and vegetable plantations. Finally we returned to the coast in a very undeveloped region, and to a documented parking place for motorhomes close to the beach.

It turned out to be a large open space, which we shared with a couple of other vans. Behind us were more shade-clothed fruit and vegetable farms, backed by the hill ranges of the Sierra de Almeria, and on the other side of us was a strong wind coming in over the sea. The "beach", such as it was, was grey, dirty and covered with large stones, so swimming was an unattractive proposition, not seriously considered! The port of Mazarron was visible to the north-east.

We wondered who maintains all these fruit farms on a routine daily basis. We did see a group of young Africans living in a large tent by the plantations, presumably migrants doing the work – despite the fact that this part of Spain has a very high unemployment rate among the native Spaniards! We bought a large bag of tomatoes for a Euro from a Dutch expat living in a shack nearby. Lorca is in the smaller province of Murcia, and we had left the interests and countryside of Andalusia for the poorer economy and bleaker and generally less dramatic scenery of Murcia.

We passed through landscapes that we have been a better bet for the "wild west" movies than those we saw in Andalusia. Stony peaks perched on stony plains. A few villages sat on such peaks, all with the typical castle and church at the top. The colouring of the buildings and dwellings also changed, from the dramatic white of Andalusia to the colours of the desert, light brown, dark red and ochre.

To be fair, the landscape did become a lot more dramatic as we neared our planned camp site in the Sierra de Alcalaz: thick forests of pine and deciduous trees, gorges and even a river with running

water in it, the Rio Mundo. But by this time we had just crossed the border into Castilla la Mancha, a more romantic-sounding province, and where had spent time in 2011.

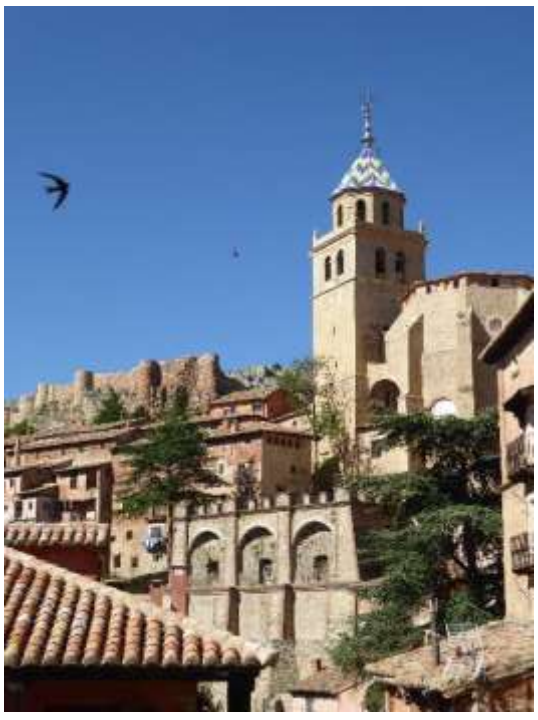
We settled in a compact but very well-equipped camp site among the trees in a shady valley, and got stuck into camp site stuff like doing the washing in a machine and enjoying access to free and fast wi-fi in the van.

The first part of the next and most interesting driving day was generally north, initially through the western part of the Sierra de Alcaraz, generally typical of high sierra country. This means steep cliffs, some gorges, rocky outcrops and winding roads. A lovely drive, much enjoyed – as we had heard over the weekend – by motorcyclists, always a good recommendation.

This road ended by joining a less interesting main road up to the large town of Albacete, an industrial centre of no scenic or cultural interest but at least providing work for those who need it, in this still rather depressed region of Spain. From there it was north again, more main roads through flatter terrain, with many new olive groves climbing up the hillsides. We moved gradually into yet another sierra, the Sierra de Cuenca, with little villages propped up on roadside cliffs. Some dramatic limestone cliffs reminded us of those we had admired earlier in the trip. We bypassed Cuenca and, later, Teruel because we had taken in both during our previous visit to Castilla-La Mancha in the van.

The white villages had disappeared by this time, and as we had already noted the buildings took the colourings of the rocks and stones which were their main materials. We saw that many of the dwellings in these villages were deserted; one village had active dwellings along the side of the road, but up behind them the rotting walls of other houses were punctured by blind, black empty windows. As we approached Teruel, the terrain became ever more rocky and high sierra-like.

A few kilometres west of Teruel we finally came to our intended camp site, Camping Ciudad de Albarracin. We had stayed here in 2011, six years ago almost to the day. The site manager even showed us that his computer had recorded and kept the details of our visit back then.



The little town of Albarracin lay two kilometres away, and the town itself offers some tough climbing. In consideration of Norma's knees we decided to drive down from the camp site into one of the town's several car parks – the situation there was that the tourist season has not really arrived, and the streets, lanes and car parks were pretty uncongested.

Albarracin, as we well remembered from our previous visit, is an outstandingly lovely hill town. The old town, topped by its cathedral, hangs on to the side of a steep rocky hill. Up behind the town ranges a brilliantly preserved battlement with towers, with a castle keep right at the top of the rise, dating from Muslim times. The cathedral has some Mudejar (Moorish) work, including a glazed dome, but the renovations that prevented us seeing inside last time (five years ago!) were still in progress. The only way we could get inside was with a guided tour that also

took in the whole town, and that did nothing for our enthusiasm. The main thing we missed, in fact, and was something that can be seen in Googled images, is an outstanding altarpiece.

We walked just about all the narrow cobbled streets and alleys. The buildings have all been preserved or restored to their medieval form and in period colours, reddish tones of the countryside's cliffs. Many dwellings have several stories as they ride up the cliff face, and the top two or three stories commonly have long balconies. As to be expected, it is all incredibly picturesque and photogenic.

Then the next day, away in good time for a cross-country run across the Maestrat, or El Maestrazgo. The name comes from the *maestres* (masters), lords of the Knights Templars and the Knights of Montesa. During constant conflict they built countless fortified settlements in this upland region, straddling Aragon and Valencia. The topography is quite barren but dramatic, stony ground, with tall cliffs, steep gorges and tall rocky outcrops. The roads are narrow but nearly all well surfaced, and the traffic was very light – all making for a good day's drive across what is now known as the Sierra del Rayo.

Then again into sierra territory, with roads winding both laterally and vertically, crossing three passes ("*Puertos"*) at around 1,700 metres. The villages again displayed the colours of the terrain, and were accordingly almost camouflaged. All were exceptionally quiet. Some older ones were deserted and crumbling. We stopped for lunch at the pretty village of Villaroya de los Pinares and found a panaderia tucked away, providing much-needed bread. The bell tower by the church was festooned with ribbons, which we deduced were the result of a recent fiesta – we learnt later that such decorations were typical of the region.

The village of Mirabel has been exceptionally well preserved and where necessary restored, and we wandered around the little cobbled streets and alleyways, again almost completely deserted except for groups of old men discussing the matters of the day. It looked much as it must have done in medieval times. There were some substantial mansions fronting the main square – one was for sale, with a sign suggesting it would be a good site for a hotel. From the vast size of the car park outside the village they must be expecting tourists one day – we were the only visitors this time, this day.

Moving on east, through Forcall, we viewed perhaps the most spectacular of the landscape before descending to our destination, the largest and most prominent of the fortified hill towns, Morella. There is an aire a kilometre or so out of town, which had visited before, and we settled in there on what is otherwise an unused picnic area, shaded by trees which look like olives but which are probably not. We should learn more about trees, we decided.

The following day it was sunny early, cool first thing as usual in the high sierras – we were still at nearly 1,000 metres. We left the sight of Morella towering over us in the morning sun, and started

our descent back again to sea level on the coast, and the delta of the River Ebro, a vast wetland, now covered with an endless array of rice fields. It's also a wildlife reserve, but at this time of the year there were only white herons and seagulls easily visible.

For our stay we returned to the main town of Sant Carles de la Rapita rather than going further out along the narrow delta roads with their fringing ditches. Just south of the town there was an ACSI camp site (a chain of sites that offer discounts in the low seasons), and we were able to make camp right on the waterfront.

It turned out to be a pleasantly low key site, with no luxuries to offer and popular among local families (plus several German and Dutch) with permanent or semi-permanent caravan setups. Our position was unbeatable, with only the sound of the low wind-driven Med surf on the stony "beach" to disturb us, and we decided to stay put over the weekend, until it was time to hit the big city of Barcelona.

Entering and going through Barcelona was a typically big city stressful drive, but finally we got to our target, the CityStop aire. This is fundamentally a huge open car park, surrounded by high walls, but with all sanitary facilities and power. The walls are covered by graffiti, but of a seriously professional nature for the most part. The car park is used for long-term parking and storage of trucks, buses and motorhomes, with the latter mostly in a dedicated part. As to be expected, it was blistering hot by the time we arrived at about 1:00 pm, with the sun's heat bouncing off the surface and the walls.

But because we wanted to make some changes to our flights home, we were off into the Metro system straight after lunch, pretty easy to use once we had got used to the slightly confusing signage. We emerged from underground at one of the biggest interchange stations, and despite having a couple of tourist maps we had difficulty establishing where we were and how then to get to the Singapore Airlines office, which we had worked out was close by. It turned out that the metro station had several exits, the two main ones being three blocks apart! With the aid of Google maps we finally got oriented, found SA, and got new return flights organised.

Their office was in the precinct known as the Quadrat d'Or, or "Golden Square". This is because it holds so many of Barcelona's "modernist" buildings, the variant of Art Nouveau that was born in this city and said to be an expression of Catalan nationalism. Several architects, including Antoni Gaudi, created many buildings of this kind for wealthy clients. Modernism of this kind, we have to say, is not of our taste, and we see some of its quirky features as quirkiness for its own sake. But, then, we are not experts (but we know what we like!).

Being in Barcelona we had to do at least some limited sight-seeing, so we returned the city the next day by metro without problems. The trains themselves were excellent, clean with good guidance inside and arriving at very short intervals.

Our first visit was to the very famous Temple Expiatori Sagrada Familia, the least conventional church in Europe. It is regarded as Gaudi's greatest work. In 1883 Gaudi began what was to be the completion of a neo-Gothic church on the site, but he soon extemporised and changed everything. It is said to be crammed with symbolism inspired by nature and driven by originality. It became his life's work: he lived on the site for 16 years and is buried in the crypt. But he was nowhere near finishing it – this task is still under way, financed by public subscription. There's a long way to go – the high pillars are mostly completed, but as of today the tops are being worked on using cranes. There are many smaller pillars to be completed. The nave hardly exists, beyond a start on the walls and some short concrete pillars weeping rust from the reinforcement rods.

The two completed facades, along with the pillars, are what most folk come to see. "Most", in this context, is a lot – there are good local estimates of an annual average of 8-11,000 tourists *a day* visiting the church. We got there at 10:00 in the morning – by 11:00 it was getting hard to walk around, among the seething crowd. Well, it didn't turn us on, but we must surely be in a minority.

From there we dived back into the metro and took the train to the city old quarter. This was much more to our liking, especially as our first visit was to the beautifully simple, by Catholic standards, 15th century Basilica de Santa Maria del Mar. It was built remarkably quickly for its time, so is wholly Catalan Gothic, maintaining its unity of internal and external style. The choir and its decorations were burnt out in the Civil War, which opens out the interior and adds to the sense of simplicity and space.

From there we simply wandered round the old town, the Barri Gotic, starting with the cathedral. To enter, Norma had to buy a light shawl to cover her shoulders, which she gave to a grateful beggar afterwards. This is a compact but impressive Gothic cathedral, begun in 1298, but the attractive façade was only completed in the late 19th century, albeit to 14th century plans. The choir stalls were particularly beautiful, and the pretty little cloister houses a family of geese. Also beautiful was the circular crypt, centred on the alabaster sarcophagus of Saint Eulalia, martyred by the Romans in the 4th century. We wanted to visit the museum of the city, which overlies some reportedly impressive Roman ruins, but it was closed for renovations.

The most famous street in Barcelona is Las Ramblas, a tree-lined pedestrian boulevard that ranges along the west side of the old town down to the waterfront and wharves. Hot and tired, we sat at a café bar on the centre strip and became revived by very cold beer. We sat there for an hour and a half, and much enjoyed watching the hordes of people walking by, from many nations in the world – mostly western it did seem. *(Two months later, a terrorist drove his van down this same strip and killed or injured nearly 150 people where we had been happily seated.)*

Down at the harbour end of Las Ramblas, by the tall pillar supporting the statue of Christopher Columbus, lies the terrific Museo Maritim and Drassanes. The great galleys that were the basis of Spain's maritime power in the 16th century and around were built here in the "drassanes", the shipyards. Many of these great vaulted buildings still survive, and some have been restored, being the largest and most complete surviving medieval complex of their kind in the world. The originals date back to the 13th century.

Some now house the museum, where we learnt a huge amount about galleys and their history. The most famous to be built here was the *Real*, the flagship of Don Juan of Austria, who led the Christian fleet to victory against the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The museum's main feature is a

full-scale replica of this ship, built in 1971 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the battle. The ship's overall length is 60 metres, the deck 52.5 metres, and the galley weighs 212 tonnes.

Being a royal galley it was beautifully decorated, and this replica reproduces the elaborate ornamentation, including paintings and sculptures. Apart from two large lateen sails, the vessel was propelled by 59 massive oars, 30 on one side and 29 on the other, where food was prepared. Each oar measured 14.5 metres and weighed 180 kg, and was pulled by four rowers. Life was tough for them, as they were shackled in place for the duration.

Another interesting exhibit was a model of the tubby little sailing ship, the nao Victoria, which was the first to completely circumnavigate the world between 1519 and 1522. She was the only one of Magellan's fleet to return to her port of departure, finally with a crew of 18 men but without Magellan, who had died on the way.

THE PYRENEES

The next day's driving was mainly in the foothills of the Pyrenees, crossing many cols on the way. To start with we got out of the big city without problems, then went through some fractured terrain where hides the magnificent Monserrat monastery (which is hard to visit, and we have been there before), and bypassed the big industrial centre of Manresa. After that we enjoyed some lovely driving, with views all framed by the sharp ridges of the faraway Pyrenean mountain range.

We passed by Cardona, with its impressive 13th century hilltop castle, rebuilt in the 18th century and now a parador. After a three-day shop at the Lidl in Solsona we came down to a reservoir, the dammed river El Selse. Upstream we had some fantastic views of the gorge, at the deep bottom of which the river flows, the bright turquoise colour of snow melt. We were beginning to see snow on some of the high peaks of the mountains, but it was still very hot in the sun.

We cut west over the 1380-metre Coll de Boixols and the slightly lower Coll de Faidella as part of our first real Pyrenean experience this year, with plenty of winding, hair-pinned roads and craggy foothill mountains separated by wide and fertile valleys. Little villages with ochre roofing and tan walls huddled among the crags.

After Tremp the roads were faster and easier, if less fun, and we finally made it to a camp site among olive trees near the village of Alquezar. On leaving a couple of days later, there was a lovely view over the village. It looked beautiful in the morning sun, with the castle dominant from the top of a craggy crest, and concentric circles of stone houses between the castle crest

and our viewpoint, all with corrugated Tuscany-style clay tiles.

We bypassed Huesca via the motorway to its north, as it stood in the middle of flat and uninteresting countryside, and then took a lesser road north-west into the foothills again. A deviation north again took us the Castillo de Loarre, sitting all by itself in scrubby terrain, sitting high on its inevitable crag and almost invisible from very far away because of its natural colouring, blending into the background. Inside the curtain wall is a fortress complex founded in the 11th century over Roman ruins. It was built by King Sancho III el Mayor de Navarra as a bastion of his defence against the Muslim powers.

The complex includes the remains of a keep, monastery and church, and dwellings for various nobles. From outside it all looks very complete, but it has only been superficially "restored", and was a bit of a scramble for Norma up and down the numerous sets of steep stairs. But the views all around were magnificent, and we tend to enjoy groping around ruins of castles that have not undergone much in the way of restoration.

The next sight to see was again set well off the main road, the Monasterio de San Juan de la Pena ("*Saint John of the Cliff*"). We found soon enough that there are in fact two monasteries: the "Nuevo" one, and the "Viejo". The latter is of course the original, and is a fantastic structure built right underneath an overhanging cliff face, virtually an enormous open cave with rounded edges.

The cave may have been used by Christian hermits as long ago as the 8th century, but what became the lower monastery of the cave's two levels was originally built as a primitive rock-hewn crypt in the early 10th century. A century later the upper level was built, and emerged as an early spiritual and organisational centre of the medieval kingdom of Aragon. It introduced the Latin Mass into Spain. In the upper floor is a simple stone church, and a pantheon beside it contains the stacked tombs of early Aragon kings (including Sancho Ramirez). On the other side of the church is a lovely little Romanesque cloister, with beautifully carved capitals on the columns.

The new monastery building, a kilometre away, is a huge, austere structure, now very comprehensively remodelled inside and intended for use as a hotel.

We camped nearby, but when we set off the next morning for a pass north towards the Pyrenees, after checking out for an early start, we were informed that the roads out of the area were all shut! There was no prospect of getting to the French border except via a long circuitous route that was not an option anyway. It turned out the problem was "cyclistes" – in practice, two races with hundreds if not thousands of competitors in each. We

watched them for a while, then decided the only realistic option was to return to the camp site, where – on the basis of some wandering around yesterday – we re-established ourselves in a much better place with some decent shade for most of the day.

The next day we did finally get away towards the north along the valley of the River Gallego, with its series of dams and resulting pretty reservoirs. And thus, crossing the easy Col de Pourtal, with only a notice about speed limits to show for it, into France and the Pyrenees. Our intention was to take a tour through the gorgeous western part of the French Pyrenees, then return to Spain to take in new territory for us, the Pyrenees Orientale, in the east.

Continuing north on the same road we then ran along the beautiful valley of the River d'Ossau: winding roads, a few gorges with overhanding cliff faces, and in more open land, lots of sheep and other livestock. All the countryside was much greener this side of the border, with good-looking turf all the way up the hillsides.

We then turned east along the approaches to the Col d'Aubisque, with increasingly rocky and mountainous scenery. We had traversed this road in 2007 but in the opposite direction, so even if our memory had been better, it all looked very different anyway. This col is one of the steepest (over 13% in stretches) and highest in the Pyrenees, and is great fun to drive – and cycle. Cycling season was getting going in Europe, and the Tour de France was the next month, so there were scores of cyclists struggling up the pass on one side and zooming down the other side.

At the summit, where one of the Tour stages finishes, there are set up a trio of "giant" bicycles. These are brought up here with some ceremony early in the cycling season. Along with scores of cyclists, motorcyclists and a few "campingcars" (as motorhomes and campervans are known in France), we enjoyed the all-round, highly dramatic scenery from our altitude of 1,716 metres.

The run down the east side of the col is not for the faint-hearted, with the narrow road cut into the side of the mountain Corsica-style, with little protection downwards and a rock face on the other side. A notice at the top told us that access to this road was forbidden after dark.

At the top of the next col, the Col de Soulor at a bit over 1,400 metres, there was a pack of wild (?) horses, with a handful of donkeys, wandering through the parking area and over the meadows. Flocks of sheep could be seen in the surrounding grasslands. A griffon vulture soared overhead.

For the night, we made for an aire at Cauterets, just through the town at the start of the road to Pont d'Espagne. This is an attractive and prosperous-looking spa town, with its wealth deriving from the miraculous qualities of its water and the money coming in from its ski resorts in the winter. We

happened upon some kind of “music” festival, in the afternoon, thus clearly aimed at kids – the music did continue into the night, but was muted.

We drove out of Cauterets to the north, retracing our steps because that’s the only way to go, and back up to Soulom. We enjoyed more shady gorge scenery, with a briskly-running river at the base, carrying apparently endless snow melt. There, we hooked right and turned south again, this time towards Gavarnie.

The Gavarnie road is a good one, commensurate with the heavy tourist traffic – which, thankfully, had not built to its peak at this time of the year. Gavarnie is just the same as we remembered from ten years ago, right down to the shoe shop where we then bought walking boots, and this time found sandals for Norma that were – unusually for her – a perfect fit.

We parked in the campingcar space just on the north side of town, and walked down through it and out the other side along the lane that leads towards the fantastic Cirque de Gavarnie. This is an almost full circle of high mountains, with their chain of nine knife-like peaks of around 3,000 metres forming the border between France and Spain. Among the tallest waterfalls in Europe is the Grande Cascade (just visible in the photo above), falling over 400 metres, and flanked by several smaller cascades along the cliff faces. The only clouds were streaming from the tip of the peak beside the Breche de Roland, which used to be a path between the countries.

We then drove further up beyond Gavarnie and called in to a parking place in the mountains where we had spent time in our previous visit. However, while the views were as staggering as ever, the place was now associated with the building of a large new ski resort, and had lost its peaceful nature. It was also very windy, so after lunch we carried on up to the end of the road, high in the Parc National des Pyrenees and to the Pic de Tentes overlooking the Vallee des Especieres. This was another path through the Pyrenees, and one used by pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago.

We enjoyed yet more amazing mountain views, which were becoming enhanced by the many herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. The livestock were being brought up in large numbers at this time, and we saw many heavy trucks carrying the animals to the high pastures and many others, empty, going down to get some more. The sheep, in particular, were not road-trained, and we had to edge carefully past

some that were lying in the middle of the road and intent on staying right there.

Camping up there in the national park was forbidden (except in a tent at least a kilometre away from the car park), and in any case would have been pretty rugged, so we returned to a quiet €8 aire we had noted on the way up. We found a slot in the shade, and had a quiet hour or two in the sun, enjoying the scenery all around, before dinner outside.

From there we cut east for one of the most enjoyable drives of the whole trip thus far, up and over the grand Col de Tourmalet. Approaching east-bound is steep and amply bestowed with tight hairpins through beautiful green pastures in the lower reaches, with more rugged mountain scenery in the upper third or so. There were lots of animals on both sides, both cattle and sheep. The other creatures to be seen in hordes were cyclists, all the way up the climb. As we reached the peak of the col it was clear that this was a competitive event, one of several that take place this time of year, and which are aimed at serious amateurs – many of a certain age. We stopped and watched many of them as they finally completed this very hard climb, to 2,115 metres. Some looked exhausted and could hardly speak; one man carrying some weight simply put his head in his hands with relief. The celebrations were heartfelt!

The eastern side of the col drops more gently through even greener pastures, with the beauty sullied by the appalling ski resort town of La Mongie, with the worst-looking buildings and apartment blocks we have seen in France. Why up here?

That took us up and on to the second major col of the day, the Col d'Aspin, with its top at 1,490 metres. It's another steep one, but the major fun was at the top. A large herd of cows had simply decided to stroll through the parked cars and a picnic laid out by some cyclists. They were beasts not to be ignored, and a lady found herself being nudged firmly from behind by a cow who believed she was in her way. Even Norma, whose close relationship with all animals is well known, had to back off from an over-aggressive cow despite sternly telling it off.

The descent from this col is even more tortuous than the ascent, and we were discussing where we would aim for the night. There were three possibilities still in France – by this time we were close to the border and to re-entering Spain – but the first two did not appeal, being basically parking lots in villages. The third we knew from our guide was very high and therefore probably pretty cool, and open to storms – but it was in a ski resort out in the mountains and promised dramatic scenery.

And so it turned out. The resort was closed and quite low key, and indeed was invisible from the parking place for campingcars, which was quite an expanse of tarmac where two or three others were already parked. In the winter, we presumed, the area would be packed with campers using their vehicles as chalets for the skiing.

The outlook was absolutely outstanding. We were parked on the edge of a steep gorge, with the opposite face only a few hundred metres away. Towering over us was a sharp, ragged line of peaks reaching the sky at around 3,000 metres. Along the bottom of the gorge busily ran a fast white stream through the rocks, fed by the melting snow in the multitude of crevices and cavities along the mountain face, both above and below us. The GPS confirmed our height as 1,850 metres.

It wasn't too cold, but indeed, as soon as we arrived, thunder and lightning did roll in. However, it was soon past, and we watched with amazement as a large flock of sheep emerged from the depths of the valley up on to the almost vertically steep terrain on the other side from us, and walked along in an apparently organised but relaxed way along barely perceptible paths to swathes of greenery where they could graze. Their progress across the face of the mountains was a marvel to watch, as they formed into lines for some paths then diverted up and down the mountain face before regrouping into further lines. We saw a mother wait patiently for her youngster, who had strayed a fair way off course, to catch up.

We had decided to stay in this marvellous location, and our only activity was a morning walk to the lower reaches of the ski slopes. Nothing was operating at the time, but we anticipated that some of the large number of ski lifts and gondolas may open for summer visitors. Otherwise we were mostly reading, but we did spot several griffon vultures (we deduced) soaring across the slopes of the rocky face on the other side of the gorge.

The time came to move after a few days, but the clouds from the valley below built up very thickly. On the way down the hillside we approached and went through the cloud layer, from sun to mist, like an aircraft on approach in heavy weather. We broke through below, then down for a short stretch to the long Tunel de Bielsa. This was operating a one-way system, although there are two lanes available, so there was a bit of a wait.

On the other side both the weather and the scenery were changed, as would be expected, and we were now back in Spain. We stopped for provisions in the first available Supermercado, which was not very "super", and then down a main road to Ainsa before turning left and east back into the mountains again, in the part of the Spanish Pyrenees that we had always intended to visit. We crossed three *colls* on a minor but (inevitably in Spain!) good road, with pretty but not outstanding scenery, before dropping into the Valle de Ribagorcana.

We next intended to drive in the general direction of Carcassonne in France but we took, as usual, a scenic and more interesting route, first straight up north along the green and gentle valley of the River Naguera Ribagorcana. This took us higher and through the long Tunel de Vielha, over five kilometres, into sunshine and the town of the same name. A minor road east took us into the Reserva Nacional de Alta Pallers-Aran, basically the Aran valley, formed by the Riu Garona, which flows into France as the Garonne. The region was essentially cut off from the "outside" world – certainly through the winter – until 1924, when a road was built through the Bonaigua Pass. And then there was the tunnel through which we had passed earlier.

We crossed the Bonaigua Pass at 2,072 metres, reported in bikers' blogs as being of Alpine standard, and it did indeed feature plenty of hairpins and sweeping bends. But we rated it less

spectacular than the Alps, although it's certainly a great drive and with little traffic, too. There were a few wild(ish) ponies pottering about at the summit, and cows wandering over the road on the way down.

Down from the Bonaigua we entered the valley of the Noguera Pallaresa. The river was flowing strongly downstream of a very full reservoir and dam, and over its rocky bottom it provided perfect conditions for rafting, so there were dozens of rafting operators getting ready for the season. Over another col to the east, then, the Col del Canto, where we had lunch at the summit watching a large herd of horses.

From there it was back down on to main roads through village after village and hill after hill, with the Sierra del Cadi on our right, then bypassing Andorra well to the south and crossing back into France as we did so.

FRANCE AGAIN

And thus we reached the little fortified town of Mont Louis, surprisingly high, at 1,600 metres. It occupies a strategic site at the confluence of three valleys, with the Aude to the north. To the south-west is the valley of the Segre, a tributary of the Ebro, where near here flows through the upland basin of the Cerdagne. To the west is the valley of the Tet, whose course we had roughly followed on the way here.

The importance of the town was established by the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659, which restored Roussillon to the French crown and made the Pyrenees the legal as well as the natural boundary between France and Spain. Louis XIV wanted to strengthen the boundary, and got the famous military architect Vauban to establish Mont Louis as a fortified town where it seemed to be the most obvious route for a Spanish incursion. It is still completely contained by its massive ramparts, and protected from its upper side by the even more solidly fortified Citadel.

The motorhome aire is right by the outside walls of the southern ramparts, near where the narrow roadway passes over a bridge and through a gateway into the town. We walked up into the town, described by Michelin as "austere". Apart from the Citadel, the town was and is an urban village, intended for support of the main fortification. The little church is as simple as the other squared-off stone buildings, but the whole scene tells the visitor that this place is for defence, not picturesque attraction. At this time of the year it was being fitted out for the tourist onslaught in a week or two, and even then, several buses were unloading groups of tourists. Entry to what might have been the most interesting part, the Citadel, is not allowed except for special tours – it is now the headquarters for training French commando forces.

One of the tourist attractions is pony-trekking, and many horses were being unloaded as we arrived. Their resting territory is the moat, immediately next to which we were parked, and we enjoyed their company as they roamed around. Norma sneaked them bits of old bread, which they enjoyed very much.

We'd had good weather for the day's drive, but this being the Pyrenees, in the late afternoon the clouds came over and we experienced the typical thunderstorm. It was again short-lived, however.

The next day after some research we set off due north towards Carcassonne, and this turned out to be a wonderful drive. Low clouds were descending as we got under way, but they didn't affect us after the 1,700 metre Col de la Quillane as we dived into the far upper reaches of the great River Aude. The road closely followed the track of the fast-flowing stream as it gradually increased its body of water, bending and bending. The roadside cliffs became higher and steeper, not to say closer, until at the Gorges de St-Georges the cliffs were so close, and the overhangs so intrusive, that the road became one-way for a while. A dramatic and enjoyable drive.

Once through the twisty bit in the mountains where the river was spawned, the road became easier and the bends more open, but still following the Aude. This took us past Limoux and close to Carcassone (which we did not revisit), where we left the Pyrenees after some memorable travelling.

We had already established that there was a good-looking aire in the village of Auterive, a car park on the bank of a canal running alongside the shallow River Ariege. This was a pleasant location, and in the afternoon we took a walk up into the old part, with the Mairie and a peaceful little church with a calm and attractive interior. It was all very low key, with many of the shops closed and shuttered, along with many of the houses. Almost everywhere looked much in need of care and repair, which Norma thought was sad, as it was fundamentally a nice little place. Nevertheless, when many families gathered for some kind of children's party in a public building in the park that we overlooked, they looked relatively prosperous and happy, so we thought maybe the old part of town was simply being neglected for lack of funds.

We woke the next day to a clear blue sky, and could see from our position that the main car park in the town centre was the site of market day, and we walked down to it. The experience confirmed our now favourable perception of the town. There were throngs of folk with money to buy from a wide range of stalls, including the usual clothing and shoes, but also some good provisions. Many of the locals were trailing trolley bags and clearly shopping for the week, which explained the lack of standard food shops – apart from butcher-charcuteries – that we had seen when walking around yesterday. We bought some bread, cheese and meat, justifying our use of the convenient and free aire.

We drove away to the north-west through classic rural French countryside and small villages with stone-walled houses. Long straight roads were lined by trees, leading to wide open spaces with cereal crops ready for harvest. We were on minor roads for the most part, winding over hills, quiet and completely free of tourist traffic that we could tell.

However, the weather broke during the afternoon yet again, with heavy rain and wind, but no thunderstorms for a change. We did not have far to go, though, before getting to our planned stop, on the shore of a dammed lake, Lac du Labouzas. Motorhome parking places have been arranged along a strip of the northern shore of the lakes, some dug into the bank and some on a rise

separated by hedges. Power is available for most spots. We settled into one with a great view, over a grassy strip, of the lake only a few metres away.

The weather, unfortunately, did not improve, and heavy rain continued on and off. And it became very cool, too. We had anticipated that this would be a busy weekend, with lots of celebrations for the start of the French summer (the first of July), but there was little sign of it by 6:00 pm. Indeed, there was rain and mist all the next day. This was a great pity, because this is a starry aire with a lovely outlook over the lake. Sitting out in the sun would have made it perfect. It cleared for long enough in the afternoon for a short walk around, but that was it.

During the afternoon a travelling van with an opening side, market style, came to supply some provisions, something we rarely see but very welcome. As the locals gathered round to chat, we noticed again their incomprehensible dialect, nothing like standard French. We were in the region of Languedoc, literally “language of the oc”. This was the language of old Provence, quite different from the “langue d’oïl” that was spoken north of the Loire and was the fore-runner of modern French. “Oc” and “oïl” both mean “yes”.

Specifically, too, we were in the Haut-Languedoc, wild, mountainous and sparsely populated, as opposed to the hot plains of Bas-Languedoc to the south.

Under a mixture of blue skies and white clouds we were away after a few nights for a long but very enjoyable day’s driving. We started due east, along the Monts des Espin – “mountains of pine trees” – very well named because as we drove through hilly, winding roads we were surrounded by cliff-tops and hillsides so densely forested that from a distance they looked as if they wore a velvet cloak. Pine trees were prominent, but the shades of green varied, so there were several other varieties there too. In cleared areas at the bottom of small valleys, farms nestled.

Reaching a motorway we turned north, and through continuing lovely countryside but at much higher speed we got up to the walled village of La Couvertoirade. This lies high up on the lonely Larzac limestone plateau, or Causse de Larzac. We were now in the region of the Grandes Causses, to the west of the wild Cevennes and on the southern fringe of the Massif Central (which has always been one of our favourite parts of France). Over the millennia, major rivers including the Tarn have carved deep gorges into the vast plateau, creating between them the plateau segments known as causses.

Several fortified settlements were established in the 12th century on these causses by the Knights Templar, the religious military order closely associated with the Crusades. One such was La Couvertoirade. The ramparts, however, were erected in around 1450, 140 years after the Templars had been suppressed and their possessions taken over by the Hospitallers, the knights of King John of Jerusalem.

Within the walls that now fully enclose the citadel-village, having passed through an impressive gate guarded by twin towers, we found a mass of robust stone houses with stone roofs. Nearly all had stone staircases leading to the upper and main floor, with the ground floor having originally held livestock. Many now have doors to enclose tiny European minicars. There is a simple but pretty little church with a single vaulted nave. With several dwellings displaying colourful flowers, and the many restaurants also tastefully decorated, the whole scene is hugely picturesque and a justifiably popular tourist destination. Fortunately for us, we are still just before the start of the notorious French summer season.

From there we drove through Millau, admiring again the amazingly high and long Viaduc de Millau, the cable-stayed bridge that spans the valley of the River Tarn near the town. It is the tallest bridge in the world, with one mast's summit at 343 metres above the base of the structure. It is the twenty-second highest bridge deck in the world, being 270 metres between the road deck and the ground below. It was designed by the English architect Sir Norman Foster and French structural engineer Dr Michel Virlogeux, and inaugurated in 2004. It also costs money to cross, but in any case we were not staying on the motorway but diverting generally east to traverse the Gorge du Tarn.

We made this run back in 2007, but in the opposite direction, so the run seemed fresh and new again. It is an awe-inspiring experience. It is a sinuous canyon from 25 to 50 km long (depending where the ends are defined), with limestone cliffs rising each side to a height between 400 and 600 metres above the River Tarn at its base. We started at the downstream (west) end, diving through short tunnel after tunnel as the cliffs grew higher and encroached even further on the narrow road. About half way along we came to the beautiful little village of La Malene, perched largely on the northern cliff face, with towers dominating its fortified manor house. Down on the river, dozens of people were off on rental canoes (strongly built!) to navigate their way downstream while trying to avoid the many rocks in the fast-flowing shallow river.

We went on to camp overlooking a large, high (1,000 metres) dammed lake, the Barrage de Naussac. The weather was well settled by now, and it got hot in the afternoon as the sun set over the lake. We had a splendid position half way up the terraced site, with a lovely view. An easterly wind came in overnight, and blew quite strongly during the day. We were still on one of the plateaus that are such a feature of the region. We were

essentially where the Haute-Loire, Lozere and Ardeche regions meet, and the plateaus are notorious for the winds that sweep across them. But the sun still shone over the lake and the little farms that ring it.

During this year's trip the emphasis has turned out to be on the environment, using where possible minor roads in the countryside and mountains, rather than on sites of cultural and historical significance. Many of the latter have been our destinations in previous years. Thus, we have enjoyed several great drives. But the driving we did this day was among the best.

We started generally east, entering the Departement of the Ardeche on the region Rhone-Alpes. The River Ardeche flows for some 120 km from the Massif before it joins the mighty Rhone and runs on to the Mediterranean. Initially we followed a minor stream as we drove through lovely countryside, heavily wooded for the most part, with green grassy meadows down by the water. The stream met the young Ardeche as the river entered the gorge for which it had been originally responsible, with the hillsides becoming higher, steeper and even more thickly forested. We could just see Alpine mountain tops in the far distance to the east. There is a very minor road that follows the gorge down at the riverside, but in this case we took the high road for the most part and enjoyed the expansive views at the top of several easy cols.

At times when we did descend to the river, we could see, once again, hordes of canoeists of varying skill trying to navigate through the white-water shallows and arrays of rocks. It seems that this is the safest time of the year, because later the water builds up to levels too dangerous for the unskilled.

The Ardeche has a very long history, with evidence of prehistoric settlement, and in later times required the building of defences and castles – the ruins of which could be seen on every peak and rocky outcrop.

At Privas we cut north and traversed the Col Escrinet, a highly picturesque run on generally major roads, then more big roads as we crossed the Rhone and on to the east to the town of Die. From Die we turned north on smaller roads and began another of the finest runs in Europe. We were driving up into the magnificent regional park of Vercors, mostly wilderness, a vast plateau with pine forests, mountains and gorges. The approach from the south took us up the Col de Rousset, with a "wow" factor matched by few if any other cols in Europe. From the start, the climb looks impossibly steep up what appears to be a vertical cliff face, but the road – well surfaced – makes its long twists and turns up a height of well over 1,000 metres in about two kilometres as the crow flies – but a lot more by road! The neighbouring cliff faces as seen across the gorges appeared to swing across the windscreen as we hooked around the serpentine turns.

From the top of the col, where the road passes through a short tunnel, there are stunning long-range views to the east and the west. It was then an easier run to the village of Vassieux-en-Vercours, in the heart of the plateau on a flat plain.

The Vercors was an important base for the French Resistance during WW2. Almost impenetrable from the south, the resistance fighters established themselves in the mountains with a view down to the valley from which they thought German forces would come, perhaps after an invasion from the Mediterranean coast. Meanwhile, they carried on their customary harrying of the Germans and the Vichy regime, and became known as the Maquis de Vercors.

In 1944, wishing to divert German attention from the planned Allied invasion from the Channel, de Gaulle broadcast a plea for an uprising of some 4,000 *maquisards* in refuges in the Alps. The centre of the resistance became Vassieux, where the citizens declared the Free Republic of Vercours. It lasted a month. In July German forces landed in overwhelming strength, mostly by glider. They demolished the town and brought about widespread death and destruction among both the maquis and the local inhabitants. The local people felt betrayed by a lack of support from Free French forces, but the lesson was learnt that small guerrilla groups could not defeat the Wehrmacht by using German tactics. They would do far better by cutting, running, and reverting to true guerrilla warfare. It was also made even clearer than it already was that the Germans would implement reprisals with inhumane force following any such uprising.

The story is told, although only in French and in a long-winded English audio guide, in a small museum of the Resistance in Vassieux. Just outside there is a cemetery, and at the top of a nearby pass a memorial.

We drove over that pass and down into a little valley where there was an aire in a horse-riding centre in the summer and a ski resort in the winter. It was all very low key, with a few chalets sprinkled around a large grassy central square that housed a compact football field and an equestrian centre. But it suited us well, and we sat in the sun until it set behind a few clouds. Meanwhile, a large herd of cattle, up in the meadows for the summer, wandered down and then away back over the hills, and some of the horses wandering free in the hills also came down for a while.

After waiting for some unsettled weather to pass we left this interesting little aire and pressed on up north further through the Vercors.

After some heavily forested countryside and a climb up a couple of cols we suddenly emerged near the top of the plateau to a stretch of scenery for which no words can do justice. We were at the head of the Cirque de Combe Laval, an extraordinary semicircle of vertical cliff faces. These days it takes quite a bit for us to say “wow” at any scene, but this was simply staggering. The road was cut into the western cliff just a bit down from the very top, so apart from looking down from this eagle’s nest into the green valley over 1,000 metres below, we could gaze up and more clearly appreciate the height of the cliffs and the scale of the cirque as it seemed majestically to enclose us.

This first viewpoint was just the start of the Route de Combe Laval, and the road wound round the northern face of the cliff through tunnel after tunnel and bend after bend. Many parts of the road were one-way only, so we were pleased that at this time of the day and season, there was very little traffic. We had not expected the drama and beauty of this drive, which although not that long at 8 km or so, is yet another of the greatest we have ever done. It is also an extraordinary feat of engineering.

We drove steeply downhill after this cliffside road to the villages of Pont-en-Royans and St Nazaire-en-Royans. Part of Pont is built into the side of a cliff, and its feature is the layers of shallow houses piled along and into the cliff face, referred to as "the suspended houses". At St Nazaire the river widens into a lake, where in high season many people would be enjoying various kinds of aquatic activity. But everything was very quiet. Soaring above the village and over the waterway is L'aqueduc de Saint-Nazaire-en-Royans, but we did not stay long enough to find out any more about it or its present use. English explanations for any features in this part of the world are very rare, and we didn't see any British cars or motorhomes

The valley, created by glaciers countless years ago, like others of its basis is very fertile, and the many different crops looked very green and healthy. Among them are thousands of almond trees – the area is known for these nuts, and one village had a "giant nut" at its outskirts. Past more gorges, and the valley then opened out as we ran along the River Isere. We then cut north-east up through the Chartreuse national park, originally named after the liqueur made by very reclusive monks in an abbey here, but no longer. Both the valley and the liqueur are green.

This route took us to Chambery, where were we not intending to stop, but of which we saw a lot more than intended. On the town approaches a big sign told us the road ahead was blockaded and not passable for three days because of the Tour de France. "Deviation" signs took us on a tour of the city but then disappeared. We groped for a while but found ourselves doing a complete circle; we finally got out to the main road north with the aid of our fantastic digital mapping program, Autoroute.

Up through Aix-les-Bains, strung along the eastern shore of the Lac du Bourget. Norma commented on the outwardly poor shape many of the hotels were in, an observation consistent with what we had been told about the difficulties facing the tourism industry at present. We were planning to stop at an aire in Annecy, at the head of its eponymous lake, which we remembered as a very attractive little place indeed. As we closed with the town it became apparent that some kind of special occasion was being enjoyed; there were thousands of people massed in the streets and parks in what by now were very pleasant sunny conditions, so we continued our drive away to the north.

We did not have far to go, because just past the village of Sillingy Norma spotted a bunch of motorhomes in what turned out to be a very pleasant aire with plenty of space. It was placed at the head of a string of recreational lakes, so in the late afternoon we enjoyed a walk around them.

Early evening gave us the usual thunder and a shower, but we needed a rest and a drink to get our heads around what had been quite a day!

After a peaceful night we then travelled on a minor road along the green valley of the Valserine with Jura mountain ranges each side, steadily rising until we crossed over the range on the west side before Les Reusses. The weather from the south at some periods in this part of the world must be ferocious, because most houses – and virtually all the older ones, including churches - have a cladding on the southern face of the buildings. This appears to be of galvanised panels or sheets, some painted, but all deteriorating in a way that gives them an odd and rather unpleasant multi-coloured appearance.

Back on the plains, we reached an aire we had stayed at before, on the banks of the Lac de Saint-Point. This is in a very pretty location, and from our place we had a good view over a bed of reeds to the water of the lake. A few small sailing boats were out, probably from a sailing club further along the lake, but although the complex including the aire and a camp site had several pedalos and other basic watercraft for hire, there were no takers that day.

The next part of the route was along the course of the River Doubs, looking really pretty in its upper reaches, shallow and glittering in places, and reflecting the sky in intermittent calm pools. At one point it has cut through rocks over the ages to create the Defile d'Entreroches, a short gorge with weird overhanging caves and shapes cut in the stone.

At no fewer than four towns along the way we repeatedly faced *routes barrees* and deviations, as always with no indications where the signs were taking us or how far out of our way. The worst was at Noirefontaine, where we could find no way through at all. We changed course completely and headed up very steep minor roads into the hills, yet again at one point facing another barred road. We even found ourselves ducking into Switzerland (through open borders) for a short while. Latterly we placed our faith in Tomtom to get us to our desired destination any way she pleased.

This destination was another aire we had visited before, in 2013, and is a pleasant little place with space for only seven campingcars, as the French call them. Electricity is laid on. It is by a canal, with a nice view of the water from the van, and just across the road is a canal lock. All very quiet, though. We were by then about half way up eastern France, near Belfort.

After a pleasant stop and some restocking at a convenient supermarket we set off towards the north again, through rolling green French countryside and farmland and to the start of the Route des Cretes ("crests") in Alsace. This starts with the Col du Bonhomme near Cernay, and takes a winding route north along the western side of the Vosges. The route was created in the First World War to try to prevent the Germans from observing French troop movements.

It's now a lovely and justifiably popular run, which we have traversed twice before: the first time in the classic Ferrari that we had just purchased in England in 2001, and again in the van a few years ago. Funnily enough, this time we saw a Ferrari 328 GTS identical to ours parked by the roadside at the top of one of the cols; we had parked nearby in ours all those years ago, and an enthusiastic small boy had his picture taken standing next to it.

The route is heavily wooded in its lower reaches, but opens up in the heights. Unfortunately, with the heights, in these cloudy conditions, comes mist and even fog, blanking out the views for much of the time. There are more ski resorts up there now than we remembered, and there were hundreds

of walkers around every hilltop. We didn't realise at the time that this was the start of a long weekend, with the next day being a public holiday – this accounted for the multitude of walkers and cyclists.

The road is paralleled on the eastern side of the Vosges range by another lovely but completely different run that we had taken in the van some time ago, the Route du Vin, which runs through a series of beautifully decorated flowery villages, many of them fortified, including the outstanding town of Colmar. Many towns in Alsace have a Germanic name, denoting the fact that for centuries Germany and France have battled over the fertile and lovely region. Doing the complete circle would complete another of the great drives of Europe, but we were running out of time by this stage in our travels.

Continuing to the north-west we came to a region criss-crossed by canals. We had once thought of buying a canal boat and spending summers in Europe aboard peacefully exploring them, but decided on a motorhome instead. But we still enjoy camping by the side of canals and watching boat-people manage the locks. Our planned destination was on the side of the Canal de l-Est, which runs alongside and is fed by the great River Moselle. Is was a pleasant place to stay, with the spa town of Thaon-de-Vosges close by, but we heard just after we arrived the boom-boom sound of a highly amplified band getting set up. We chatted with an Australian couple, Stephen and Peta in their fifteenth year of ownership and travel in an immense *peniche* canal boat *l'Histoire de l'Eau*, which had moored close to us. They reminded us that the next day, 14 July, was France's National Day, Bastille Day, and a public holiday in France. Public celebrations could be expected. We googled what might be expected here, and confirmed that the town would be hosting massive celebrations and fireworks this night.

Bastille Day celebrates the beginning of the end of the Ancien Regime of Louis XVI and Marie Antionette. In May 1789 the discontented urban masses took to the streets, and on 14 July attacked Les Invalides – where they seized weapons – and then stormed the Bastille prison, the ultimate symbol of the despotic regime. As we now know the Revolution didn't go entirely to plan, resulting in the Reign of Terror, and it wasn't until the highly respected Napoleon Bonaparte took control in 1802 that local conditions settled down. (Napoleon himself, of course, then set out to conquer the world, starting with large chunks of Europe.)

We decided that the fun and games would be too close by, and we drove for about 20 minutes to another motorhome park by the side of the same canal not far to the north. This was a different kind of place, a huge park with facilities, with vans parked closely side by side and a complex mechanism for paying for entry and opening the gate to get in. But the view over the canal was still pleasant. There were few boat movements – our Australian friends from yesterday had forecast that many of the lock-keepers would not be working on the 14th. We didn't avoid fireworks, because during the night there were lots of bangs and flashes, but there was no boom-boom music.

We walked up to the village the next morning to get a baguette, and came across a local Bastille Day event, replicated throughout the country, whereby the efforts of firefighters – *pompeurs* – and others are celebrated and awards distributed. Attended by the suitably pompous mayor and family, plus other worthies, the firefighters paraded while a tiny brass group played bits of the Marseillaise. There was much saluting. The spectators were well outnumbered by the participants. All great to see.

A day later we were away to the north-west and through Lorraine, bypassing the big city of Nancy to the west. From previous trips we were pretty familiar with northern France and its most prominent cultural and historical highlights, so the plan was now to make two transit runs en route for Dieppe.

So, we immediately dived into classic French countryside and farmland, punctuated all the way by village after village until we reached Dun-sur-Meuse. This was another canal side stop, one we had enjoyed the previous time we were in the area and stayed a few days. This time it was much busier, packed out indeed, but again the passing boats and those moored to a floating wharf on the canal side were of interest. We were intrigued, once again, by the strange mode of fishing so popular in Europe, whereby long rods are set out with some kind of bait on a line, the rods set in holders, and the fishermen simply sit back and wait. We have never, ever, seen a decent fish caught this way.

The route also took us through battlefield country, so we passed several German, French and British cemeteries. We also travelled along the Chemin des Dames, which runs for about 30 kilometres along a ridge between the valleys of the rivers Aisne and Ailette. In the 18th century it was a route popular with the two daughters of Louis XV, because it was the most direct route between Paris and the Chateau de Boves, near Vauclair, belonging to a mistress of father Louis. The strategic importance of the ridge was established by Napoleon in 1814 at the battle of Craonne, and was confirmed in the three battles of the Aisne in WW1. In the second battle of the Aisne in 1917 the French forces took huge losses over 12 days in unsuccessfully attacking well defended German positions along the ridge. The battle was considered a disaster by the French, and hundreds of their men notoriously refused to march again.

Our destination was the ancient village of Coucy-le-Chateau. The medieval walls include a ruined castle, and are punctured by very narrow and low arched gates. We negotiated one with great care, and drove through the town to a small but well set up aire. Working out the electronic payment system and getting connected with electricity was complicated – but once done, we enjoyed the view up to the castle ruins on the hill.

Then another transit run through northern France to Dieppe. We started with the usual line of villages – some very pretty, with flowers on most buildings – on minor roads. Then a short stretch of brand new motorway after Beauvais, back on minor roads and with only one *route barree* deviation to Dieppe.

The aire there is fairly new, with big marked spaces, and right by the ferry port. There was a herd of goats in a reservation between us and the high white cliffs right behind us,

We went for a walk round the town, which we have visited in more depth previously, and learnt about its interesting maritime and wartime history. It was one

of France's most important ports during the 16th century, with ships sailing from here to West Africa and Brazil. On 19 August 1942 some 7,000 Allied troops – mainly Canadian – came ashore at eight points along the coast around Dieppe. It was the first action on French soil by the allies since Dunkirk, but as a sort of dress rehearsal for the Normandy landings it was a disaster. Over half the potential invaders were killed or captured. We saw again the memorial to the Canadian troops on the sea front.

This was busy with local holidaymakers, flying kites in the cool wind and lying on the vast grassy strand behind the wide stony "beach". We visited the central Norman-Gothic church, Eglise St-Jacques, which has been battered by wars and the weather so much that it looks in danger of falling down, as bits keep falling off. Reconstruction efforts are trying to keep up.

Generally, the town has a run-down and bedraggled air, with only a few quite attractive buildings among the mass. There were some fishing boats in the harbour, but they were well outnumbered by the huge number of small craft in the marinas, in both tidal and locked-in water. What do they do, these boats, for an outing in these waters we asked ourselves.

The next day we sailed across a peaceful Channel and back to England at the port of Newhaven. We spent some highly enjoyable time with Michael's sister Kate before dropping the van back at its comfortable storage place on a farm in Dorset, all ready for more touring adventures in 2018. Some of the drives we have had this year, however, will always be hard to beat for quality and excitement.

Our route in mainland Europe for 2017, as plotted by our Microsoft Autoroute digital mapping program: about 9,000 km in all.