

# EUROPE DIARY 2015

## Sunday 19 April

Up very early again, and with gratitude to our marvellous dog-sitter Lynne, off to airport for the 6:00 Emirates flight to Dubai and on to London. Fond farewells also to Dino dog, who we dearly hope survives until we get home again.

24 hours later but still the same calendar day we get to Heathrow after a typical Emirates flight – efficient, pleasant service, reasonable facilities for economy class, and some recognition for Michael's gold frequent flyer status including lounge access. Norma's strained back survived quite well, and we both watched lots of video and movies.

Free local bus to Hilton Garden Inn, which used to be Jurys Inn when we stayed there a while before. Substantially done up, now a very pleasant hotel – and at a very good price, £55, or about \$100, typical of what we were paying for country motels in Australia a few weeks ago. Beer and cider in bar before bed.

## Monday 20 April

Good sleeps and awoke to a very fine morning, clear blue skies and sunny. Left in good time to walk to Hatton Cross tube, but it turned out to be one of those bad-tube days. Substantial delays meant that we had a dreadfully slow run into central London, two hours in all, getting to Waterloo and on to the train with three minutes to spare. Very stressful! But train run as smooth and on time as ever, and picked up by Richard Light for lift into Milton Farm and the van.

All seemed well, after what we heard had been a mild summer. After watering up and some basic sorting out, away down to Southampton via some delightful villages and too-narrow roads courtesy of our new satnav, yet to be confirmed as better than our trusty Kate.

And so to our regular free camp by the River Itchen, looking scruffier by the year, with wrecked boats and sundry rubbish scattered over the mud flats at low tide. Lovely all day, though, and continuing warm into the evening.



## Tuesday 21 April

Van in for service at Adams Morey. Lift into Southampton, and re-taxed the van at the Post Office without problems. Lunch at Pret a Manger and bought some books on Greece without any surety that we'll get there!

Van OK, with farewell from very helpful service manager Gary, and down to Havant, near Portsmouth, to visit Norma's cousin Colin. He seems to be building a new life for himself following the death of his twin Chris, having always appeared to be the subservient number two. Ate out at a nearby Chinese, very good really. Stayed the night in his driveway.



### Wednesday 22 April

Relaxed start, then to Portsmouth docks to wait for the afternoon ferry to Caen. Away on time at 2:45 pm, and out through Solent in much better weather than we had in our foggy approach in *Cera* all those years ago. But quite windy, and swell and waves built up during the crossing. Sat and read papers and magazines most of the way, taking a while to eat dinner in the restaurant, not very good.

## FRANCE

Arrived on time 8:30 English time, 9:30 pm French time. Norma had researched a motorhome aire very close by, and we travelled the short distance in the dark and soon settled in for the night.

### Thursday 23 April

Peaceful night, apart from a little noise from the ferry. Local police pointed out in the morning that the aire was not free, and we had to shell out the €10 for the night.

Away about 10:00, and via Rennes and some good freeways through some pleasant countryside for over 300 km, a longish drive for us, to Bouchemaine, just south of Angers, and a lovely aire by the river Maine just upstream of its junction with the Loire. The site appears to have been a general camp site in the past, but now reserved for camping-cars.



Weather continuing very pleasant, quite hot in the sun, and spent some time sorting things out and even sitting in the sun for a while. It's incredible how much stuff we have accumulated in the van over the years!

Cooling later, and barometer dropping after a long spell of fine weather.

### Friday 24 April

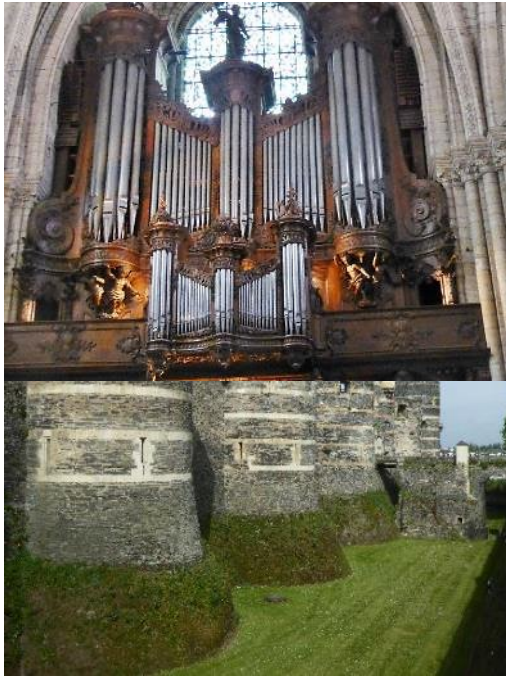
Cloudy early, and only a glimpse or two of the sun all day, but remaining dry.

Walked into the attractive and very quiet little village and bought the mandatory baguette. Had a look at the unique type of punt-like barge seen on this part of the river, long, black and low, with a sloping cabin at the stern and a mast lowered forwards to be raised – like the rudder – by tackles. Quiet afternoon reading, quite a change after recent weeks!



### Saturday 25 April





Cloudy again early, but some sun by 9:00. First, a short drive into Angers, the historic capital of Anjou and home of the Plantagenet family. It straddles the Maine a bit further upstream from where we stayed last night.

In 1129 Geoffrey Plantagenet married Mathilda, the grand-daughter of William the Conqueror, who had inherited both England and Normandy. Geoffrey's son Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had divorced Louis VII. Henry became Henry II of England, so, based in Angers, the couple became rulers of territory extending from Scotland to the Basque country. In 1203 Eleanor retired to Fontevraud, not far away, which we were to visit shortly.



We walked across over the river from the camping-car park to the splendid Angers Chateau. The site, on a rocky rise, has been occupied since Neolithic times, and the chateau was built over Roman foundations. Louis IX built up the castle as a military base in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, using for the formidable walls alternating layers of dark schist and pale limestone. Very impressive and unusual. The towers were originally finished with typically French conical tops, but these were later removed to improve its defences.

The walls enclose royal and seigniorial dwellings, a chapel and several gardens with decorative topiary, flowers, shrubs and even a small vineyard. We walked the walls and went down through the great hall

and chapel to a new building to the rear. This has been built to hold and display the outstanding Apocalypse tapestry, the oldest surviving set of tapestries of this size, extending over 100 metres. The tapestry was commissioned in 1375 by Louis I and took seven years to make. It went through turbulent times and was mutilated, but it was restored in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when its value was realised.

It tells the story of the Apocalypse according to St John, or the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. It is superbly done, and presented with style consistent with its worth, in panels showing each part of the story of the battle between Good and Evil. It starts with the opening of the seven seals, with each seal a plague. The first plague is the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, seven



corresponding to trumpets sound, and seven angels rescue the earth. The "7" motif recurs throughout, with seven-headed dragons and other monsters battling with the good guys.



Afterwards, walked up to the cathedral which, while fine in its way and with an impressive western façade, was rather dark, and we did not

enjoy the discordant modern music being played on the organ. So then back to the van, lunch, and off on our way to Saumur, some 50 km away.

The route took us along the northern shore of the Loire. We had not known how shallow the river is (at least in this region). The water flows in little ripples past sand dunes and wooded islets, and it all looks as though a person could walk right across. It certainly explains why the boats we saw were of exceptionally shallow draft, and we saw more of them carrying tourists through the narrow channels.

Approaching Saumur and in the need for some stores, we happened upon the immense “shopping centre “Centre de Saumur”, part of which is the gargantuan E LeClerc supermarket. The only problem with shopping at such places is one of choice, with metre upon metre of shelves stuffed with appealing produce. Anyway, we undertook a good stock up at a total price – including plenty of wine – way lower than it would have been at the Mona Vale Woolies.

We had intended to visit Chateau Saumur, which had been shut for renovations when we visited in 2005, and was again closed when we returned in 2007 in the van, and again this year . . . covered in scaffolding and screens. So we continued along the river to another beautiful camping-car aire, once again with a history as a camp site but now restricted to motorhomes. It’s an expansive, grassy space among the trees, with only a few vans sharing it with us. Lovely, at only €5 a night. Warm initially, but cooling down by 5:00, still with blue but cloudy skies.



#### **Sunday 26 April**

Rain started overnight, and by 9:00 it was pouring. Moved from our grassy position to nearer the tarmac. Remained very wet all day, easing at one point in the afternoon to just allow a walk up and down the main street of the village of Dampierre-sur-Loire. It’s looking pretty run down and struggling, with a sad-looking supposedly 14<sup>th</sup> century church and a small chateau with attached vineyard. Several vigneron shops, but none open on Sunday – although one did open its doors as we passed, having seen us coming!

#### **Monday 27 April**

Dawned dry but with a cold wind, the conditions of the day. Although our main purpose in running through the Loire valley was to visit chateaux and other sights we had not been to before, we did return to l’Ábbaye Royale de Fontevraud because we were so impressed the last time. It is the largest and best preserved medieval abbey in Europe, with a fascinating history. The Fontevrist Order and the abbey were founded in 1101 as a community brought together by the itinerant preacher Robert d’Arbrissel, both hermit and orator. He integrated a disparate group of disciples using generally Benedictine principles. In four closely neighbouring monasteries he settled two groups of women (irreproachable virgins and “repented girls” or married women), men, and the leprous or otherwise sick. The head of the order from the start was a Prioress as the “mother” of the Abbey and its Order, all of whom over the centuries were impressive women of high or even royal status.



The abbey and its school became a favourite sanctuary for the female aristocracy. It was favoured by the Plantagenet family, who felt themselves to be more French (from Anjou) than English, and chose Fontevraud as their last resting place. Eleanor of Aquitaine retired there late in life, and on her death joined in burial her husband Henry II and son Richard the Lionheart. From 1804 to 1963 it was used as a prison, but was then restored by the French State.

The abbey church is clean and bare within, with a graceful, wide nave and many columns of white stone. Four Plantagenet tombs are the only physical features in the nave near the transept, with the famous four carved and painted figures of Henry II,





Eleanor, their son Richard, and Isabelle of Angouleme (mother of Henry III). As the Plantagenet empire on the European continent crumbled, later members of the family were entombed in England, in cathedrals such as Westminster and Worcester. The British Government several times in vain tried to have the effigies shipped to Westminster.

The church adjoins an exceptionally large cloister, where on one side there is a spacious chapter house. This is decorated by frescoes depicting the last days of Christ, and in each picture there is a portrait of one of the prominent abbesses. The vaulting on the lovely refectory is reminiscent of the church. Some of the food was prepared in the highly unusual tower of Evraud (inexplicably named after a legendary outlaw). This is a tall conical structure with an opening at the top, with several hearths around its octagonal base, each with its own conical chimney. It is now regarded as a building for smoking fish and meat, an essential food preservation method of the time.

Not far away are the town and chateau of Chinon, which on our visit brought to

pretty much a full set of all the chateaus of the Loire we have visited during our several visits to the region over the years.

The chateau sits along the line of a rocky spur high up behind the medieval village below. Long the site of a fortress, the defences were built by Henry II to protect Anjou from the Capetians (the family of William the Conqueror) as part of the dynastic struggle between them and the Plantagenets. It fell into a decline and was largely ruined by the acquisition of building materials by the locals, but has



been recently partly restored and rebuilt. It is a pleasant place to visit and stroll around, but in its efforts to attract tourists it presents some confusing stories. For one thing, its promoters have decided to present the castle in the context of the legend of King Arthur and his knights, the round table, Camelot and all that. Aimed firmly at children, the feeling is of Disney, and while amusing in its way

we couldn't see the point of it.

The other story plugged in the castle and the town, with more justification, is that of Joan of Arc, a genuine hero of France. Although she is featured in displays, there is no coherence to the story as it is told here. The main point is that in 1429 Joan of Arc picked out the then dauphin from assembled courtiers in Chinon, before leading the recapture of Orleans, and helping to end the hundred years' war with England.



The village below can be reached by a highly convenient lift down the cliff face, welcome because Norma's back and knees are giving trouble. Like every place we have visited this early in the season, it was exceedingly quiet, and it was a peaceful stroll along an old town that has retained its medieval and Renaissance appearance largely unsullied by development.

It was then a very pleasant drive on almost deserted roads through quiet, low-rolling typically French farmland down to the tiny village of Agressais, where a goat farm has established a small aire for up to five motorhomes or so. It is also part of the Passion France network, where farms, vineyards and the like offer free overnight parking to self-contained motorhomes in return – under no obligation – for the possible sale of their produce. No produce was offered here, and we were left to peacefully enjoy the scenery from the rise on which the farm was set.



We didn't get to discuss the affairs of the day with any goats, which we thought were confined to some



very large sheds, but two hairy donkeys were friendly and enjoyed Norma's company for a while. The evening was clear, but cool.

### Tuesday 28 April

Very cold overnight, but clear and sunny in the morning with an extremely cool wind. Late start after some writing, then away taking a bit of a detour to revisit St-Savin. This didn't work out that well, because

the magnificent World Heritage Benedictine monastery church is under substantial refurbishment. We could only get into part of the nave to see the astonishing 12<sup>th</sup> century frescoes way up in the vaulting, and the decorated columns were again to be marvelled at, but that was all.

So then on cross-country further to the south-east. We took a look at an aire at the village of Bellac, but although it has a pleasant setting in a green park it was a bit too shady and closed-in on this cool day.

So on down on some rather boring long straight roads to an aire we remember well, near the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, obliterated in Nazi reprisals in June 1944. Sunny on arrival, and a cosy 24 degrees in the van.

### Wednesday 29 April

Another very cold night under a clear sky, and running the heater last evening and this morning flattened the service battery! Decided not to revisit the moving "Martyrs' Village", so headed off ESE across Limousin, bypassing Limoges to the north. A very pleasant day's run along generally quiet main roads, with hills building up the further east we drove. Lots of timber country among the farmland.

All very peaceful in the villages, with many houses shuttered or boarded up. Did a stock up at a Carrefour Market in Aubusson, being aware that Friday (May 1) is a holiday here.







Soon into Auvergne and steeper hills, and latterly, some good long-range views of the volcanic domes to the west of Clermont-Ferrand, Puy de Dome. Pulled in for the night at a large gravel car park in the woods on the approach to Orcines, obviously the base for several walking tracks.

Sunny all day, and got quite hot in the closed-up van in the late afternoon. Joined by half a dozen or so French vans, all choosing to share our little corner of the vast car park – very reminiscent of our experience when cruising!

#### Thursday 30 April

*... and yet another van squeezed in during the middle of the night. What was he thinking?*

A short drive round to the south side of the prominent Puy de Dome, and after some dithering, took the cogwheel “rack” railway up the mountain, which we did not regret. The car park is vast, and includes an aire for camping-cars, but it was only sparsely occupied and there were not that many people joining us in the train. This confirms that we are very early in the season; but also that this makes touring and visits more pleasant than among the hordes of high season. The literature states that some 500,000 people visit here each year!

The Puy de Dome (1,465 metres) is the oldest of the domes and peaks comprising the region known as the Puys. They extend over an area of about 30 by 5 kilometres, along the fault line that is their basis. There are a total of 112 extinct volcanos, all more than 50,000 years old. They vary in configuration, some with enclosed craters, some with no craters – such as this one – and some leaving just the cone with the outer landscape worn away. Except where rock or lava is exposed they are – at this time of year, anyway – covered by bright green vegetation and dark forests, a spectacular sight.

All these features can be seen as part of the 360-degree view from the top, which also embraces the city of Clermont-Ferrand and several villages. The very top is capped by a communications tower and buildings, but we walked from the upper station, shop and restaurant around the meadowland just below these facilities. There was a bitterly cold north wind howling up there, so the walk was as brisk as we could manage!

Once down, we enjoyed a great drive through hilly countryside, seeing plenty more volcano cones and domes. We happened upon the lovely little hill town of Orcival, to which we would have made a special effort to visit, had we heard of it before. It is centred on the Basilique



Notre-Dame d'Orcival, completed about 1130, with a style of Romanesque architecture typical in the Auvergne. Its graceful but massive structure includes powerful buttresses and sturdier columns and arches. In the chancel, in a glass box, is a small gilded statue of the virgin and child, both facing forward (“in majesty”). Her face on the left side is of a peasant, and on the right of a society lady, an affirmation of universal mankind.



The village has plenty of small hotels and restaurants and is apparently busy in summer, but once again, for us, it was very peaceful.

More country driving, then, further south and a view of more volcanos including the north-facing face of Mont Dore, the highest of all and showing snow in patches. Above the tree-line, the landscape is moor-like and brown, but as we descended through more pretty villages the trees and shrubs showed signs of early green spring growth again.

Late afternoon we pulled into an aire we had visited before in 2011, at Tourzel-Rontieres. This has a lovely view to the south including more domes. The wind seemed a lot less cold, and we had good 3G mobile data reception on our new affordable data roaming plan, so it seemed time for a lay-day tomorrow. And we are both enjoying good books by P D James and Donna Leon.

### Friday 1 May

Rain in overnight, and continued off and confirming our decision to stay put. Four us, but plenty of space, even if the layout hard to make best use of it.

A couple of matters sort of unrelated to thing: Norma has been under discomfort with back and other pains, which we suspected were due to a mosquito-borne fever caught in Australia; this was really confirmed when after a heavy night sweat she felt much better and is now fine. A bad thing, or at least a nuisance, is that the service battery that runs the 12V accommodation, including the diesel heater, lights, and water pump for the taps, is expiring, so we have to ration our use of these features for a while and, when cold, rug up.



on all day,  
or five vans joined  
of the aire makes it

the touring. A good  
considerable



### Saturday 2 May

Off at 9:00 with the sun shining, and a lovely run through pretty spring countryside into the mountains of the Auvergne, green pastures alternating with high cliffsides, some with prominent caves near the top. Some wild fields were covered with daffodils and cowslips, and there were bluebells along the rocky roadsides. Some rushing streams were evidence of the end of the snow melt and the emergence of spring. The woodlands glowed bright light green, layered by horizontal leaves searching for the sun.







Villages along the way featured solid buildings of lava stone and bulky little Romanesque churches. We had a brief stop in the village of Cheylade, high in the mountains, for a baguette and eggs, local brie d'Auvergne (excellent), and a local terrine based on pork but with some kind of fruit incorporated. During the lunch where we enjoyed some of this, Norma also enjoyed meeting some of the handsome brown, long-horned local Cantal cattle. They eat the grassy fields that are covered by wild flowers and produce the flavoursome milk that makes Cantal cheese.

Higher we went, up to the snow line towards the 1,800-metre Puy-Mary and the Pas de Peyrol in the Monts du Cantal, but were then faced by a sign saying the pass was *fermé*.



But the surface looked good and there was traffic coming the other way, so on we pressed – but sure enough, along with several other cars, bikes and vans, we were faced by a big digger parked across the road and a sign, “*Route Barrée*”. Looking around, and higher up at a good few heavy snow patches, we surmised that there had been a land-slip further up the road that had closed it for a good while.

This necessitated a backtrack and loop around via Murat to a bigger road, which at its highest point dived into a tunnel that runs under some extensive ski areas, Super-Lioran.

At this point we were near the geographical centre of the huge Massif Central, a much older mountain range than the Alps, the Jura and the Pyrenees, having been formed between 225 and 345 million years ago. The Loire and Dordogne rivers both arise here.

Then down out of the most mountainous region of the Auvergne to the big industrial centre of Aurillac, which had nothing to show for it except that we could refuel – after finally finding a petrol station that would accept our Australian credit card. (Most service stations in France are shut over weekends, and pumps can only be operated via credit cards. In this instance we avoided the scam which caught us last year, whereby during the process you are asked on the screen whether you want the payment converted to Australian dollars. If you say yes, it happens all right but at a scandalous rate of exchange.)

By this time the rain had returned, and we chose to stop and came upon a very pleasant aire at Montsalvy, unplanned, but as we drove past the village it looked worth a walk through in the morning (weather permitting).

### Sunday 3 May

The mildest night for a long time, and although overcast early it brightened into a warm and sunny day, with lots of rabbits out in







the adjacent field for an early morning run.

Montsalvy, our first exploration of the day, turned out to be a very pleasant little village. We walked up through the arch in the wall of the typically medieval village wall, and soon came to a good-looking *boucherie*. We did need some provisions and the very cheerful butcher cut some slices of veal and turkey for us. We were a bit surprised that he and other shops were open this Sunday morning, but it was the case for all the other places we passed through. Up the narrow streets we found a solid-looking but closed chateau and a little church with pleasant cloisters.



Off again through hills and valleys, with patches of cloud lingering down in the latter. We dived down to Estraygues-sur-Truyere, with the river flowing swiftly through it under some arched bridges. We cut west then, now in the heart of the Auvergne in the Midi-Pyrenees, through some gorgeous countryside, and stopped for lunch at the village of Vieilleville, on the river Lot, in an excellent small and most convenient aire. The old schoolhouse was for sale, partly renovated, and appealing for buyers at €65,000, about \$100,000, tempting but not too so!

And so to the beautiful medieval village of Conques. Built on the side of a steep hill, this is one of the jewels of the Auvergne. It clusters around the splendid Abbaye de Ste-Foy. Sainte Foy was a teenager who became an early Christian martyr. Her relics were first kept at a rival monastery in Agen but were stolen by a monk from Conques. This attracted pilgrims, and the village became a halt on the long road to Santiago de Compostela. It still is, and back-packers were lounging round the streets and near the hostel that is part of the Abbey complex.

The Romanesque abbey church itself is highly imposing, elegantly austere and given a special feel by its relatively short but very high nave and a crossing near the centre. It dates from the period 1050 to 1135. It is entered under a marvellously carved tympanum, with the devil dealing with some pathetic-looking baddies and monsters, and Christ in heaven above looking after the goodies.



The Treasury, which is said to be one of the most important in Europe, holds some magnificent pieces, with a gold A-shaped reliquary held to be a gift from Charlemagne enclosing a bit of the original cross, and other gold, silver and bejewelled caskets, crosses and reliquaries of the 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most important is the gold-plated wood and silver figure of Sainte Foy, decorated over a long period with more and more jewels and precious stones, dated generally from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century. The figure is seated, sitting upright and with facial features of a mature woman rather than a teenager. The head and hands are older than the body, probably dating back to the last years of the Roman Empire.



After another pleasant drive – this is a truly gorgeous part of the world - the next village was Estaing, which lies in Aveyron on the on the river Lot, which further downstream widens and joins the Garonne on its way to the Bay of Biscay. The church is set





Pyrenees and where we are now.

high above the village, and with its surrounding buildings presents an impressive view on the approach to the town (which is really too big to be called a “village”). The chateau, down by the river, was shut. Again, we walked around, but many of the facilities were under reconstruction and so the place looked on the scruffy side in its interior. But the riverside was nice, and lots of people were sitting out there enjoying the sun. As, indeed, we were. We felt – and hoped – we were getting into the south of France and a warmer weather system.

French regional names are very confusing. Some are based on history, such as Aquitaine, others on geographic features, such as the Massif Central. A large part of the Massif is now formally in the region of Auvergne, which includes the “*département*” of Cantal, which is where Conques is. However, Conques is often regarded as being in the *département* of Aveyron, which is in the region of Midi-

Next in line was another of the Aveyron towns, Espalion. It was time to stop for the night, and we finally found, after some groping, a quiet car park with a section reserved for camping-cars. We were the only one, and it stayed that way. We went for an evening stroll, but were not greatly impressed, with the main feature, the cathedral, being a 19<sup>th</sup> century building of red sandstone.

### Monday 4 May

Weather changed during the night, unfortunately, with heavy and very noisy rain, hail most probably. Overcast and cool in the morning, although it did lighten up during the day.



Overlooking the town and the car park, high on the top of a volcanic cone, is a ruined castle, and we resolved to try to get up to it. On the second try we found the right road, and about 250 metres from the top we parked in the required spot. The 250 metres were very steep indeed! The view was lovely, but the entrance fee way too high for ruins, even if we could dress up in period clothing and buy wooden swords.

So off south on a fairly easy run to the big city of Rodez, in the centre of Aveyron. As in all such towns it was a bit of a struggle finding somewhere to park, but we found a place on the street not far from the centre. We walked up to the Cathedral Notre-Dame, started in 1277 and with its 13<sup>th</sup> century style continued during the 16<sup>th</sup> century of completion. The church was really the only thing we had come to see, and were pleasantly surprised to find an impressive and interesting structure. Right by it is a magnificent 15<sup>th</sup> century belltower, with richly decorated upper stories. The exterior of the cathedral is unimpressive, with most of the sculptures missing from the arches, but there is lots of interest inside. First we saw the brilliant carving of the organ case in the north transept, and there is Gothic influence in the chancel, which soars. To the east there is a very long choir, into which we could not go, and to the west there is essentially a mirror image of the other half of the church, with pulpit and another altar.

From Rodez to the south-east we chose what turned out to be a more challenging drive than anticipated! Through twists and turns we worked south through the outer reaches of the Grands Causses, which are vast limestone plateaux. Driving through them by the lesser roads we were on means going up, down and up again, worrying about big trucks and speeding cars, not that there were many of either, fortunately. We (and the satnav) got lost at one time, but eventually we meandered our way down to the river Tarn and then east towards Millau. We had planned to stop at the busy aire in Millau, but becoming stuck behind a





**Tuesday 5 May**

Wind continued most of the night, but well down by dawn. Turned out cloudy most of the morning, and hazy.

But we enjoyed a wonderful drive through the eastern range of the Grand Causses, with quiet twisting roads through increasingly rugged-looking scenery. This becomes the Cevennes, written up in 1878 by Robert Louis Stevenson in his book, *"Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes"*.

There were less attractive surrounds as we finally dived out of the massif at Ganges, and then into Languedoc-Roussillon on our way to the big city of Nimes – and the inevitable battle with confusing roads, traffic engineering and traffic. We went on south-east, fringing the north of the Camargue, and down through industrial complexes, oil rigs and the like, through the marina town of Martigues and to the little fishing and tourist village of Carro, due west of Marseilles in the Gulf of Lions.

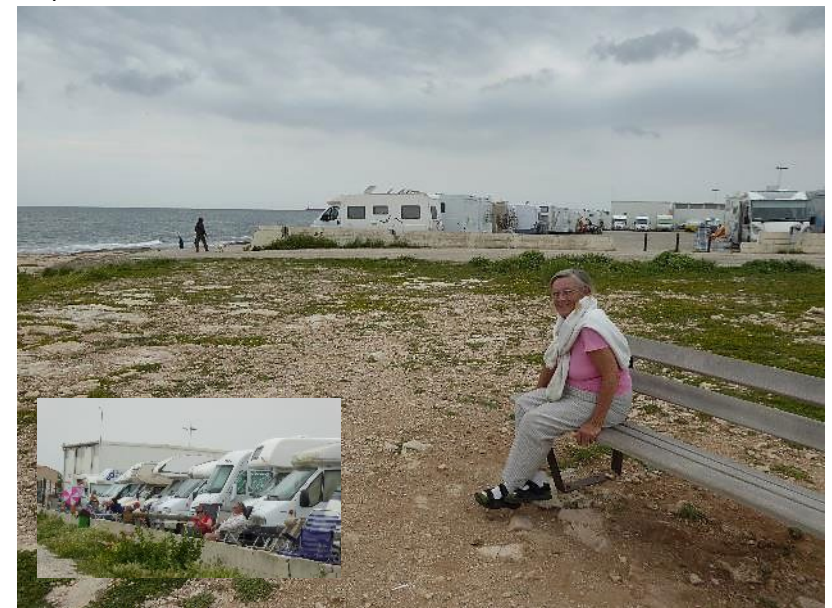
It was still pretty windy, but after managing to work the automatic parking gate we did get a reasonable position in the packed aire on the waterfront, although without much of a view of the water. Had a quick walk into the village.

**Wednesday 6 May**



big van that could not work the entry system, and not liking the look of the packed aire anyway, we pulled out and drove down to La Cavaliere, where another aire was in the marvellous Europe by Camper database but not in any books. This required the same ridiculously complicated system to get in, and was expensive but the only show in town and with power.

But very windy, and too much wind gets on Norma's nerves. Apparently Millau is a favourite hang-gliding and paragliding centre! Says something about the wind. The weather map shows a strong low off Brittany, which is driving sou-westers in our direction.



Sunny morning with less wind. Walked into the village again, past the fish market, predominantly showing – we thought – last night's catch after a few days missed because of the wind. Usual not very good Med selection, and very expensive: averaging around €15 a kilo and up to €24 a kilo for a Dory.

Then a pleasant day's run through Provence-Alpes-Cotes-d'Azur, culminating in a climb up from Le Muy to the house of Rudy and Lilian Zeller in the Provence hills near Bagnols-de-Forêt. Good welcome as ever, catch-up chats over aperitifs, entrees, and a big dinner of Swiss white sausage and rosti.





#### Thursday 7 May

Bed in the mezzanine as before (2012), a not very comfortable settee convertible. Huge breakfast! They – or at least Lilian – probably don't eat that much on their own, but she does believe in feeding up their guests!

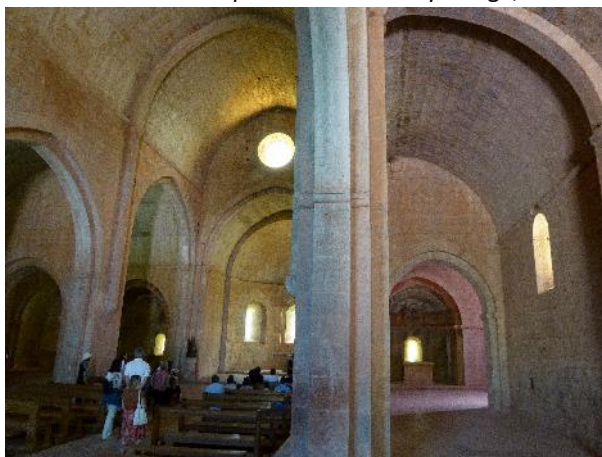
The excursion of the day was about an hour to Abbaye du

Thoronet, near Lorgues. This was an outstanding visit to one of the three Cistercian abbeys in Provence, built between 1160 and 1230. At this time the Clunistic monastic order founded by St Benedict in Cluny had drifted away from his principles of humility, obedience and poverty, becoming more interested in wealth and power. The monk Robert de Molesme founded a monastery in Citeaux, with the Cistercian order returning to the Benedictine principles.

Describing the complex, the literature variously uses words like austere, simple, and pure. It is all three at least, with a marvellous abbey church and beautiful cloisters. A guide for a small tour group demonstrated the wonderful acoustics, with a long echo from the domed arches behind her. The stonework of the church, including its barrel vaulting, was cut and assembled without the use of mortar. There is slightly more ornate moulding, with cross vaulting, in the chapter house and cloisters. In all, a beautiful and peaceful monastery.



We had lunch at a *creperie* in the nearby village, with dark crepes and



different fillings, quite good but filling. Back to the house for a sit in the sun, followed by a big dinner.

#### Friday 8 May





Today we went down to the coast at Frejus and St Raphael, and wandered along the waterfront and through some marinas – where we could, that is, because on this public holiday there were swarms of people there. Picnic lunch in a waterfront park.

Evening, we took them to dinner at a local restaurant in Bagnols – just acceptable, but emerging from what Norma diagnosed as a pretty awful kitchen! We had swordfish, wrapped in salty bacon that only made the over-salted fish an even saltier meal. Anyway, lots to talk about, old cruising days and all. Rudy wants another boat, maybe in North America, but Lilian enjoys their “two lovely houses” and is not so sure.

### Saturday 9 May

Away with fond farewells, up the hills through Grasse and back down to the coastal road – avoiding the toll road – through Nice and Menton but bypassing Monaco. Very busy and with some complex navigation, but lots to see including some good views over the Côte.

