

## 20091002 – Very Lazy Days

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Friday – same again. Now the problem is remembering what we did. Take the suit to the cleaners – all part of this obsession Wendy has about scrubbing me up for the wedding (good news is no new green shirt has been seen yet). Anyway back to the cleaners. No English there and she wants to know more details than a Santander Bank account application. After I manage to crucify the French numbering system, she gives up the ghost and lets me key the details into the computer for her. I think it should be ready by Saturday evening, which I find hard to believe as surely it contravenes the sacred 35 hour week. Rest of the day seems like a basically lazy day again around the caravan, French studies, lunch (it's a contagious French disease this obsession with eating), pool in the after noon with a good book (really cracking through them at a rate of knots) followed by quality bit of Reinheits Gebot in the evening and a not so quality French wine.

Saturday – same blue sky and sun yet again although it's not quite so hot, down to 26. Time for action. Long bike ride into St Aygulf. Loose Wendy on the way as she smells out a market and disappears. Give up looking for her and sit on a rock playing Sudoku (thank god for the iPhone, how laid back can you get), eventually she turns up. Then it's coffee on the beach at St Aygulf – I think the dept. of health over here has invested in universal hearing aids for all, or Teach Yourself French lessons, so that they can speak and listen to proper French – yes my request for an elongated / stretched coffee produces the correct beverage.

Sunday – same again. Yes it must be Sunday there's yet another Jane Austen series on TV – obsessive.

I try to rustle up enthusiasm for a long bike ride to the Honey Festival at Roquebrune, but Wendy's having none of it – too far. I take a bike ride down to the local supermarket, which obligingly and in conformance with the 35 hour week is closed. Interesting that the last hope of keeping the word enterprise alive in the French language is open. Yes, you guessed it, the bakers, open and selling bread like they're giving it away – I have to join the queue. Mind you the lawn mower shops and florists come a close joint 2<sup>nd</sup> and in the enterprise stakes, yes they're always open for business too. Then it's yet another lazy day reading, French studies and pool.

Monday – same again. Drove down to Hyeres to look to look at our next camp sites. Well you can forget hyeres, lovely location but all the sites are crap. Then we look around Lavandou, again similar story very expensive and cramped sites, really makes us appreciate the site we are one. Then we have to drive back along that road from St Tropez to Frejus. Never again, if I ever suggest it then please send me into a 1900 nuthouse for a full frontal lobotomy. Why would anyone with money want to come and live here.

Well after having looked at lots lots of sites around Cote d'Azur then, with a few exceptions, compared to the rest of France they are crap. The whole place is just greedy. If I think of all the sites we have visited in France, I cannot think of any that are as bad as around here. Sure our existing site is nice and perhaps two others but the rest are just examples of rampant greed. Very disappointing, just a pity they have the very good weather, which draws people here.

Tuesday – same again. Lazy day around the caravan and pool. Meanwhile the twins (see below) apparently had a major row yesterday that all the campsite heard, we missed out, and now the sacred bond has been broken and they go to the showers on their own.

Wednesday – same again. Wifi is down as there was a power cut overnight. 3 trips to reception and more promises than you can bank. Afternoon tea and cakes on the patio with neighbours Al and Shelia – actually beer for me and Al, followed by wine. Then after a bottle of wine and Wifi still not working I make my final assault on reception to hear the latest promises. Demain, demain, always demain, just another mediterranean word for manjara. Receptionist get most upset when I tell her the service is crap; all the usual excuses and denials, but at 29 Euros a week this is an expensive service and I expect it to work. In the end, as an act of desperation, she gives me my money back for the whole week. Why, oh why does life have to be like this. You don't mind paying for a good service, but why do you have to complain and fight to get your rights. Whatever happened to the concept of quiet enjoyment. The meak may well inherit the earth, but they won't get their money back on crap wifi. We had the same problem last year with Passman Wifi and I have had two other instances of major problems with this service. Don't use PASSSMAN wifi.

Thursday – same again, although there are a few clouds and it's a little bit cooler - 24. I know it's Thursday because Wendy's all excited it's shopping day. I'm dropped off at McD's for coffee and Wifi whilst Wendy goes out to enjoy herself. Free Wifi for only the cost of a good cup of coffee. Meanwhile back at the campsite we've been infested with men (I use the word lightly) in bright coloured lycra suits – like downhill racers in condoms – complete with expensive cycle helmets (not like our £5 Argos ones) and mountain bikes with that many gears you need a calculator. It must be "tour de Frejus" again – all the cycle tracks will be closed to us lesser mortals. Better not go cycling this weekend someone will most likely stick a number onto our shirts.

Talk to some more of our Dutch neighbours. Amazing that within 2 sentences of conversations with Dutch people they all seem to bemoan the number of immigrants. They all seem quite racist. When I pointed out that there cannot be anybody left in Holland as all the Dutch are here, they immediately retort "no it's full of bloody immigrants and foreigners living off the state".

Only In A 35 Hour Week

French army Maneuvers – we seem to be in the midst of a battle zone. Tanks, armoured personnel carriers (mind you if you work in personnel you probably need an armored vehicle to protect you from the rest of the real world), and not to forget enough helicopters to compete with the dragon flies. All well and good but it 28c and these guys are that nesh (good old word means winging about the cold weather – being married to Wendy, and living in Belthorn, I use this word daily) they're going round with scarves on.

Bread gropers – yes Wendy's joined the legion of French women in the supermarkets that spend their time going round groping the French baguettes. I leave you to conjure up the image and consider the Freudian implications!

Meanwhile I'm glad to say that the French have excellent black puddings, no big globules of fat, very lean. And in a somewhat perverted twist they also do them with apples, onions or nuts in!

Well let's talk about some of our neighbours, we give them all nicknames, part of the childish way we pass the time. Hopefully none of them ever read this.

On the corner there's "the twins", so named because they go absolutely everywhere together, including the toilet and have extended conversations in the showers about the quality of Female razors – if you'd seen them you wouldn't want to ask or contemplate it.

Then there's "gobby 2" so called because she's on the same pitch as "gobby" was and can be heard all over the site.

"Satellite man" who roams about the camp site bemoaning the fact that his small satellite dish can't get East Enders – lucky blighter – told him he needs to get a big one, size matters.

Then there's our new French neighbours, "Monseur Poo", carries his rat like French dog over to a spare pitch in order that it can crap somewhere – disgusting!

Then there's "deaf jock" who as well as being hard of hearing seems to loose track halfway through a sentence. No we're not really on a Wallace Arnold site but at times it seems like it. The average age does worry us, but at least it makes us feel young – no doubt it'll all come to us in the fullness of time. Meanwhile we're here sat watching the world go by from our patio.

## 20091009 – Provence And The Mistral Yet Again

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Friday – same again. Blogging lessons in McDonalds. Then in the afternoon we go in search of some speed discs for the back of the caravan. Yes, the French have done it

again and want caravans and cars over 3.5 ton to have signs on the back displaying the maximum speed 80 / 90 – just like a long distant lorry driver. Just more red tape. But they're really useful because when I forget the maximum speed I can stop on the autoroute; put on my hi vis jacket and Wendy can do hers just in case; put out two emergency triangles and nip round the back of the caravan to see what is my maximum allowed speed.

Anyway we tour around several shops; crucify the French language many times and ultimately after many redirections find a Renault (they have to good for something) truck repairer who has some. Now I'm legit but seriously jealous of all these HGV's who also have a 60 sticker – never mind by next year they'll probably be mandatory on every vehicle.

Saturday – same again. We we're going for a bike ride but Wendy thinks it'll be too hot. So we drive into St Rapheal and wonder down the front seeking out a restaurant serving fish and chips, complete with Watneys Red Barrel and "Only Fools and Horses" on a big screen. No joy here. Instead we settle for a beach side restaurant serving grilled sardines. In conformance with French eating regulations and in order to pass our first French Immigration test we manage to spend 90 minutes on lunch and wine. But at least I get my grilled sardines, ordering some butter is just another example of the breakdown in communications – why don't they teach the French proper "Teach Yourself French" and then they'd be able to understand proper French like what I speaks.

Anyway a very pleasant, if somewhat expensive lunch.

Sunday – same again. We have to take down the awning ready for departure. All managed without a cross word, swearword and no need for a divorce lawyer – really getting into it. Get everything packed up ready for the off tomorrow. Then in the afternoon we visit our neighbours for a farewell drink (no nick names here – they read our blog). We have a very pleasant farewell do and Wendy staggers back, somewhat the worse or Champagne and Cassis, but she manages dinner without falling over or falling asleep.

Monday – same again but it's howling gale and has been all night, we've both been seasick with the caravan rocking. We've not yet got to Provence and already the Mistral strikes.

Now let's just explain the delights of getting your caravan off our pitch. Firstly we need to ensure that we don't hit the strategically placed olive tree on the right; then if that doesn't get me I have to avoid the embankment on the left; then I have to avoid the pitch number on the left; then I have to avoid the drainage ditch just in front; meanwhile I need to be in 4 wheel drive in order to reach escape velocity. I avoid all that but then a dip in the road gets me and grounds the rear of the caravan – magic.

Can't go forward, can't go back. Mess around with jockey wheel, caravan mover, oaths and incantations to finally get caravan out on the road and hitched up. Just typical, rather than spend a bit of money sorting out the pitches they provide free labour to get you off or let you struggle.

Then we drive up to Provence in the Mistral. We feel like a kite in a howling gale. No fun in this, especially when a HGV flashes past, complete with their 60 / 80 /90 stickers, and sucks you into their slipstream. Why is it that every time we go to Provence the Mistral is howling. On this sample I assume that the Mistral is always blowing in Provence. I really cannot understand why anyway with money and half a brain, other than a miller, would want live in Provence.

Anyway we finally get to our new campsite – Carpe Diem. Yes all the rejects and escapees from Colombier (Twin Axle and Dutch) are here, apart from the twins (sadly missed) and Monseur Poo. We're quite remote from the rest, how sad. Interesting how Twin Axle (AKA Gobena 2) is on a small pitch in the crowded part and has ignored some of the larger pitches

Lovely site, good sized pitch and best of all free wifi on pitch – oh yes there is a god after all.

Tuesday – clear blue sky but we're freezing to death its only 17c. Had the heating on overnight for the first time.

Pleasant stroll into Vaison la Romaine. But dam me we've missed the weekly market, how unlucky can you get. Usual tourist shops selling a range of nice new Provencal ready-made bric-a-brac, could put them straight in the boot ready for a car boot sale. Why do people buy so much expensive tat, things they don't need? How do these shops survive other than by having a massive markup. Remember Occam's Razor!

Then for a bit of a challenge, when we get back to the site we decide to put the awning up in the Mistral. Best described as an interesting experience, we survived it without resorting to divorce lawyers. Mind you help from our Danish neighbours did really save our bacon. I know I'm somewhat jaundiced about the French but in our "vast" experience of caravanning I can recall frequent help from Brits, Dutch, Germans, Swiss and even Brits living in France, but not once can I recall help from the French – they really have never forgiven us for Agincourt, Waterloo and frequently saving their skin in two world wars. Or is it the language barrier in that a lot of the older French people don't speak English and are therefore reluctant to engage. Perhaps their lack of English that makes it difficult for them to wave or nod a thank you?

Wednesday – sun and a few clouds only 16c. After lunch – gives the shops time to open – we drive through the Cotes du Rhone vineyards to Carpentas. Then spend 20 minutes trying to find somewhere to park. Judging by the number of parked cars this place must

be good – wrong again. Marginally better than the worst town in France, Beziers. After a walk around looking for a sunny street café for coffee we give up and head back down the tourist routes through the vineyards.

Mind you we have encountered three French drivers today who will lose the French citizenship if the government find out they have been courteous and given a wave of thanks – it's really a bit unnerving.

Then it's bread and cheese for dinner – hooray.

In the evening we improve International relations by having our Danish neighbours (Knud and Uda) around for drinks – he looks Danish – and of course they speak excellent English. Like a lot of people on the European Caravanning circuit they're out SKIing (Spending the Kids Inheritance). Their goal is "that if there's 3 bottles of wine left for the kids when we kick the bucket they'll be lucky". It's really interesting talking to people from different countries and amazing how similar we all are in views and prejudices – perhaps it's an age thing.

### Only In A 35 Hour Week

Priorite a Droite (loony system which gives priority to traffic joining a main road from the right) – yes here we are in the 21st Century in the heart of the EU and they have small villages where Priorite a Droite (PAD) exists. I've been doing some research to find out what the rational reason for this is. Some seem to think it down to Napoleon, you remember that French geezer who we gave a good trouncing and then sent to a Club Mediterranean Holiday Camp with a free lifetime membership. Anyway back to PAD, it seems he had a thing about slow Ox drawn carts having to stop.



Other feeble arguments are that it forces drivers on the 'main' road to be more attentive than they may be otherwise, and it prevents long queues on minor

roads where there's a heavy traffic flow on the main road being joined. It achieves the same effect as traffic lights or a roundabout without the expense of installing either of those things, also argued that it is a traffic calming measure, long before they were thought of.

The French don't seem to have realised that if you have to put up large warning notices (some places do) for a system that isn't instinctive then there must be something basically wrong with that system. Because PAD has been abolished in nearly all of France every roundabout entrance still has a sign "Vous N'avez pas la Priorite" to remind everyone they need to "Give Way". Amazing in Sablet, yet another PAD ridden village, the roundabout has "Give Way" signs, how's that for confusion!

In essence there isn't any point, and a mixed system is not only downright dangerous but completely bonkers as well. I think this is another case of a letter to the EU asking them to issue an edict giving the French 6 months to either install PAD everywhere – yes I do mean everywhere, including motorways - or abolish it everywhere. Failure to comply will result in expulsion from the EU. Let them take PAD and their holes in the ground and join some third world organization.

Forget the letter to the EU apparently the lunatics in Brussels have already given a grant to a town in Germany to do away with all its road signs and introduce priority from the right as a road safety measure. Unbelievable! Is this the lunacy that we will succumb to if we sign up to Lisbon and more EU madness.

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## 20091015 – Autumn Sets In

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Thursday – yes it must be Thursday as Wendy's gone shopping. The highlight of her week when she gets to roam the isles at her leisure and terroise the shopkeepers. Meanwhile I have to suffer all on my own back at base camp with a coffee, book and the Internet.

Weather this week seems to have taken a real flip into Autumn. Yes, we're still getting brilliant blue skies everyday but both here in Provence, and back on the Cote d'Azure, the temperatures have dropped from an average of 24c to 16c. Everynight we need the central heating on.

Friday – blue skies and sun but 14c and wind. Visit picturesques village of Seugeret, picturesque but not much there. Then Chateaux Neuf de Pape, not a bit like St Emillion mostly shut. Then Orange what a disappointment, cold and shut. All in all a waste of petrol we should have stayed around Vaison la Romaine, it's lovely.

Found two bottles of wine that look very reasonable and promising. One from Vaison la Romaine and the other from Costieres de Nimes. Unfortunately for me I've got to

sample both tonight if I want to buy a couple of cartons tomorrow (yes you may find it hard to believe but the supermarkets are all shut on Sunday) – oh well I'll just have grin and bear it. Good news is it's baked beans to go with these quality wines – oh what fine dining we enjoy.

Saturday – blue skies and sun again but still only 14c. The Mistral set in again overnight, but at least our new awning was still erect in the morning – always a good sign, French for it must be masculine "le auvent"

At least during the day there's no Mistral. After a leisurely morning we have a walk around – actually up would be a more apt phrase – the medieval fortress in Vaison la Romaine. A somewhat steep and rugged climb, but very pleasant. Much better than any of yesterdays visits. Well the campsites still pretty busy, mainly the Dutch – as usual – then Germans and French. Only two GB caravans on the whole site.

PS the wine was very disappointing. One was just ok but the other truly excelled itself and ended up as drain cleaner after I struggled through one glass.

Sunday – blue skies and cool yet again. Thank god for central heating overnight and a 14 tog quilt.

Well so far we've not really named any of our fellow campers, but here goes.

Of course there's "Gobena 2" – a kindly soul but a bit like a stuck record, keeps telling you the same thing over and over again.

Then there's "Sitting Bull", and his squaw "Teas Maid", so called because he wanders around in a very thick brightly coloured Indian shirt and sits out with his squaw on the far side of the field every day drinking tea.

The "Escapees" who shuffle around in his and hers matching yellow dressing gowns (probably given away free to anyone who had the brass balls to wear them) and slippers, you immediately think they're on the run / shuffle from Queens Park Hospital. This site is great but at this time of year it's a bit of Wallace Arnold stopover. Mind you it does make you feel young – no doubt our time will come!

Added to the wine cellar with a couple of 5 litre boxes of Ventoux. Meanwhile I'm just draining the last of the Cotes du Luberon.

When we get home we're going to have to think about where to store my wine collection as I've been told that the garage / frost is not good for wine. It's a choice between the spare bedroom, where will Wendy iron, or throwing Kurt out on the streets – at least that will stop him moaning about having to pay board.

Awning down in record time without the need for a divorce lawyer. Everything packed up and ready to go in the morning. Then in the afternoon sit in the sun and out of the wind reading. Very relaxing last day even if it is somewhat cool.

Only In A 35 Hour Week

Laid Back – yes one of the nice things about France is that it's so laid back, sometimes a little too much so. They saunter across zebra crossings doing the Mediterranean trot; they have their long leisurely lunches; the supermarket checkout girls (yes I know that's sexiest but I've never seen a male on the tills) who leisurely serve you whilst discussing god knows what, but based on the UK experience it's probably their latest sexual encounter last night; nothing is hurried until the French get behind the steering wheel and then of course it's every man (or should that be person) for themselves; aggression; piping; overtaking in the most ludicrous places. If they want to kill themselves that's fine by me - probably stops the gene pool being polluted - just don't do it in front of my car or involve anyone else.

Smell, what smell – do the French have a sense of smell or are they just too laid back and complacent to complain? Why do I ask? Well go into any of the cheaper supermarkets such as Intermarche and SuperU and even occasionally Le Clerc and not to mince words they stink. I'm sure that their head offices insist on a consistent aroma, all part of their branding, and therefore insist they all use "Flash with bouquet of Raw Sewage" to mop their floors with – it's probably so much cheaper. I have a natural dread of Supermarkets but these I especially avoid. They're just revolting.

French Viagra – what is it with all these French Viagra spams, trying to sell "Soft Viagra". At least in the UK they try and sell you the hard stuff. Soft seems too defeat the objective, or is it a special French thing?

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## 20091019 – Homeward Bound - Unfortunately

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Monday – yet more blue skies and sun but very cold overnight. I just hope the overnight temperature hasn't ruined my mobile wine cellar.

We're off to Santenay just South of Beaune, on our first leg home. Motorway nearly all the way; complete with SatNav; detailed handwritten instructions; personal navigator; and of course my own unique sense of direction, so how come we get lost on the motorways around Lyon? I truly despair but I have to say that having two exit 8's does make life a bit complicated!

Our overnight stop at Santenay is lovely. Right in the midst of the vineyards. Lo and behold as we draw up to the site who do we encounter but Gobena 2, who immediately enters into extended irrelevant conversation with Wendy – Gobena 2's

been here for two days and doesn't like it. I of course ignore this and set off to identify a suitable pitch. Now I can't blame Wendy for "loose talk" this time, as I kept our next destination on a strictly need to know basis and Wendy wasn't aware of our ultimate destination for the day until she opened a sealed envelope with detailed instructions on how to get lost on the motorways around Lyon.

Bottle of Beaune for dinner. Very expensive at E6.50, but what a disappointment. Weak, insipid, almost a Rose in colour. Never again.

Tuesday - Wake up to blue skies and a very cold and frosty morning, so its porridge with maple syrup for breakfast. A good hearty meal to start the day.

Overnight a German panzer troupe have arrived on site – two very big motorhomes. They pop round to say sorry that they are so close to us as it was dark when they arrived – just like the French would. Don't really know what the problem was as they were well away from our plot, but had a very pleasant conversation in English and German with the two families involved. Yet another example of the friendliness of the rest of Europe (excluding the French). I really am beginning to wonder whether my initial theory is correct (the French are just miserable, resent foreigners in their country and are Xenophobic) or is it their lack of English that limits them?

Drive up to Chalons en champagne without a getting lost or needing a divorce lawyer. Lovely municipal site that would be well worth a few days.

Wednesday – first overcast day we've seen for a while. Set off up to our overnight stop, just South of Calais. Pouring down with rain. I can tell we're getting near to England.

Arrive just after lunch in the pouring rain to waterlogged pitches, oh joy. Try to reverse caravan onto pitch but even in 4 wheel drive it just skids all over. End up needing the mover. You really would think that all pitches around here would be gravel / hard standing but no they are World War 1 mud. Pitches aren't level but I believe we have a great view of the sea, if only we could see it through the rain. I then have to break out some crampons in order to climb a muddy embankment to get to the power. Then joy, it's reverse polarity (I should have known with this site) so I yet again have to risk life and limb to get to the power. 17 bloody Euros a night for this dump and to shower you need a token. Then to add to the joys a TGV line runs straight through the middle of the caravan. Signs on the site should tell you not to lean out the window as you'll get hit by a passing train. There's a gypsy site 400 yards away that's hard standing and is starting to look attractive.

Oh and the WC Chemique is right down the opposite end of the site where there are no caravans. It's just a motorhomehole in the ground and a hosepipe. If you wanted to turn someone off cravanning then take them to this site or take them to any site in

the pouring rain, but add the two together and you've got enough for long term commitment to a mental hospital, never mind putting you off caravanning for life.

To summarise, do not go to L'ete Indien. It may be open until late and it may have wifi on pitch (chargeable) but basically it's a dump.

After we dry off we set off to the big Carrefour near the Tunnel in order to top up with some more booze. Unbelievable how difficult it is to find these hypermarkets, they must lose business from people who just give up. There are some good deals on but in future we'll just top up in the local supermarkets, it really isn't worth the hassle.

Thursday – yet another blue sky day. Thank god it's not raining. Great crossing, catch an earlier ferry. As we approach the UK the skies turn to grey, but thankfully it's not raining. We've only travelled 10 miles in the UK when we encounter two major roadworks; warning that there's a 47 minute delay en-route; M25 closed between two junctions. Welcome home. Can we do a hand brake U-Turn on the motorway?

Eventually get to the Crystal palace caravan site. Up to the usual excellent standard. We're right under the Crystal Palace transmitter, so no doubt we've both been sterilised.

Only In A 35 Hour Week

Proud To Be British – I know I seem to frequently go on about toilets in France but I must say that generally you don't see much graffiti. That is until you get near Calais where the British job has left his imprint on Europe. 90% British graffiti, really does make you cringe.

Room With a View – yes it's another toilet comment. Picture window at ground level, so as you use the urinals you can look out onto the picnic area, what a good idea you may think, relieves the monotony whilst you relieve yourself and of course picnickers can look in – unbelievable! Must be the only country in the world where exposing yourself is the norm.

## 20091023 - What Crystal Palace

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Friday – clear blue sky day. In the morning we tidy up car and caravan ready for winter storage. Showers on site are up to the usual Caravan Club standard. We're actually trusted to turn them on and off, and even select our own temperature – the joys of being an adult.

After lunch we set off to explore Crystal Palace. But there's nothing there, apparently it all burnt down in 1936, no one told me, and the museum is only open Saturday and Sunday. No wonder it's free.

Saturday -

Only In A 35 Hour Week

Well we're back in the land of the hard workers – 37.5 hour week – that's if you're not a striking postal worker!