

20100413 – Escape At Last

Tuesday – set off on the long haul down to Dover, 300 miles at 52 mph it's purgatory. Boring and very stressful; too much traffic; road works everywhere, 8 major and I lost count of the minor. Judging by the number of roadworks in the UK you would think we had no unemployment, but the majority of the roadworks are silent and unmanned, perhaps they are self repairing. Weather is brilliant sunshine but it's freezing and I have to don my North Face fleece.

We've seen the rise of the cones, they're everywhere, but now we seem to be experiencing the obsession with Hi-Vis jackets. Yes they're a good idea where appropriate. But does everyone need one? Of course there's a whole pecking order now. Lowly workers and drivers in Europe don the cheap and cheerful scummy bright yellow, while those higher up the pecking order don bright green and of course the real upper crust / management elite wear bright orange. When will bright blue and regal purple emerge?

Wednesday – early ferry and after a pleasant crossing we are "abroad". It must be France as there's holes in the ground they call toilets. First blog and first winge about the sanitary arrangements, I'll try to resist any more.

Drive further than we'd planned which saves us a day's overnight. Roads are nearly as boring as UK, but at least there is no stress, so little traffic. Anyway I've come up with a new idea for caravanning. Wendy tows the caravan and I set off a week later in the SLK, with the roof down of course and my Biggles flying helmet and goggles, and catch her up at the final destination ☺.

In the evening we nip to the local supermarket for some wine. When we're parking up this strange geezer with a plastic box full of old batteries in his hand stares at us. Get out the car and he shuffles over, he's either on the scrounge, for more batteries; xenophobic Gaullist and wants us out of his beloved country; or escaped. He starts ranting on in French, as they do, except he's rambling about a friend in England and coupons? Now is a great time to play the Englishmen abroad card "no understandee, no comprehendie". So off we set through this giant shopping plaza with this madman in tow. Now rambling about "figurer, figurer" and stroking his chin like he wants a shave. Explain I have no razor with me! Meanwhile he's asking everyone he passes if they speak English and they look at this motley crew as if we're all mad. After about 300 yards he finally finds someone who is daft enough to admit to speaking English. He explains to her and she explains to me that I look exactly like a friend of his from England, after which we are allowed to continue our shop in peace, whilst he wanders off with his box of batteries muttering to himself.

Thursday – leisurely start and a 200 mile drive down to just south of Chalon-sur-saone – Burgundy wine country. Again a very relaxing drive but I think those bloody roadworks have managed to swim the channel. The only difference is there is no hold up or congestion. Lovely weather all the way down and gradually gets warmer.

Are all lorry drivers gay? You're pottering along the motorway with your home in tow at a steady 54 mph, well within the 90kph limit, low and behold every lorry driver wants to spend ten minutes overtaking, and then cut in front so close that your nose is up their exhaust pipe. Bigger safe stopping distance.

Arrive on site which is 98% empty, so get to choose a superb pitch; set up and then sit out in the sun for afternoon coffee. Listen to the birds; feed the ducks; watch the squirrels. This is the life, thankfully 700miles away from the hullabaloo surrounding the great debate. A lovely sunny afternoon, just like home!



Friday – a lovely blue sky day, but a bit of wind keeps the temperature down. We’re off to Beaune, a lovely medieval town complete with defensive wall around it and more tourist information offices than tourists. Of course it’s also famous for its wine, but much too expensive for me. The best of all has to be the Hotel Dieu – the start of what was hoped to be a 14th century hotel chain – somehow the brand name never caught on, mind you I don’t think they had the owner permission to use it. The roof is absolutely stunning, made of coloured ceramic tiles. It was founded after the hundred years war – sure knew how to have wars in those

days – as a hospital, mainly for NHS patients. The ward in it is splendid and could even put some NHS wards to shame, in fact it was still in use until 1971. Six euros well spent.

Oh and as usual the skinflints managed to park for free.

Saturday – break out the shorts and get the first UV of the year on them knees. Drive up to Salon-sur-Saone for a bit of retail therapy. Need to work on the timing though as all the shops were open☹. Never mind Wendy tries on every top in Saone and then goes mad and buys one. Meanwhile she finishes kitting me out with a lightweight jacket, very trendy, I even get a say in it.

Then it’s “coffee Long” on a pavement cafe with a spot of French people watching. Is it two cheeks offered (on the face of course) or three. I’m sure there are strict protocols. Even some men do it, mind you in a country where men have handbags are you surprised! This is the life.

In the town square there’s a display of very old Citroen CV3’s, owners pride and joy – give me a Mercedes SLK anytime, much more comfortable.

Get back to the caravan for a late lunch out on the patio and some duck feeding. Then in true French fashion I wait until 17:00 on the dot for an aperitif – well glass of wine. Meanwhile in sunny Madrid Anna is stuck in the airport because no planes are flying into the volcanic dust over the UK; very little money; all hotels booked; no space on trains; no space on buses; no flight out until Wednesday. She’s in despair and very upset. Spend two hours trying to get her some transport but no chance the worlds come to a grinding halt. Man versus nature yet again and nature hands down. Hopefully makes us realise how puny we are.



Sunday – another day for displaying the knees. Not a cloud in the sky and not a breeze.

This is the view from our lounge window. Ducks haven’t turned up for breakfast yet but the rest of the birds and wildlife are in full voice. Really makes us appreciate how fortunate we are and what a great

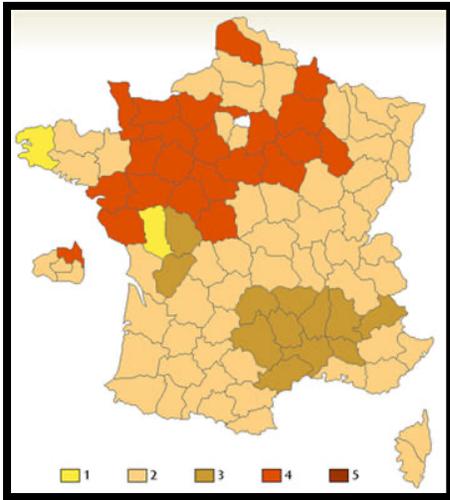
move early retirement was. Just think I could still be working for the evil empire and be missing all of this. How can you ever put a price on it?

It's a lazy day around the caravan.

20100424 –Sunny Days Are We Dreaming

Sunday – yet another hot blue sky day.

As a treat for bad behaviour I get to go to another market. Really big one this time. I must admit they are fascinating. I can just see us going around Blackburn market and then sat out at a street cafe, people watching whilst listening to a typical French accordionist – charming.



As I now look like a refugee from a night ransacking a Next store I get to finish off my ensemble with a Panama hat. Keeps the sun off and stops my pate dazzling the natives.

Meanwhile I've been observing and studying this French air kissing lark – not, thank god, that I expect any French bods to have the sudden urge to air kiss me. If you look at the map on the left you can see how many times you are meant to air kiss a cheek. We're in a 3 kisser region – just think how much time is lost. For the avoidance of any doubt - as I know they have some strange customs over here - that's the cheeks on the face. Makes it all very clear but what happens if someone from

a 4 kisser region meets a 3 kisser, do they not bother at all; kiss the least; kiss as per the region they're stood in; kiss the most or split the difference and kiss 3.5 times? On top of that how do you know what region they are from. Perhaps they should have the kiss count tatoed on their foreheads or discreet dots on each cheek. Is there a regional difference with which cheek they start with?

Further complications with all this kissing as it seems there are first class friends (kissed – matter of opinion) and 2nd class (handshake – best not to be on good terms with anybody). Big question is how you know who's who and an even bigger problem for the aged is how do you remember. Perhaps you could have a list tatoed on your arm.

Monday – yet another blue sky day with breakfast on the “patio”. Then we're off to visit Mont Ventoux, but as is typical in Provence we don't get more than 10 miles before we're assaulted by yet another market. By way of a change we have a wander around, by now we're on first name terms with most of the stall holders! But these markets are so colourful; with wonderful smells – apart from those dammed olives; plenty of free



samples, saves on lunch; eventful and great for people watching. This time we lash out on a street cafe complete with live guitar music whilst people watching.



Finally get up to top of Mont Ventoux but they haven't bothered clearing the snow on the North side, all 40 yards of it, so we can't drive down there. After Mont Ventoux we drive through the lavender fields to Sault – now there's a one bouledrome town if ever there was – dead as a dry sausage. Unfortunately the lavenders not yet in bloom so we don't get the full visual and nasal affect. Then we drive along the Nesque Gorge. It's stunning, reckoned to be second only to the gorge de Verdon.

What a great day out. Next time we'll see whether we can set a new record and drive more than 10 miles before

stumbling across yet another market.

Tuesday – yet another blue sky day. Plan is to have a lazy day with an afternoon bike ride and avoid any markets. 30C on the “patio”. We ride into Montoux. Why? Well like a mountain it was there. For a small town it sure has a lot of sports facilities but not much else to recommend it. I manage to loose Wendy, but given the differences in speeds we cycle at that's not unusual. I end up with a permanent crick in the neck looking back to see where she is.

Then it's back for afternoon tea on the “patio” and at last I'm within 10 pages of finishing the slowest book ever, “A Man In Full” by Tom Wolfe. I don't know what it is about this book; it's not that bad I abandon it; in fact it's quite good but has taken me nearly 6 weeks to read, even longer than “Seven Pillars Of Wisdom”, now that was a slog.

Our Geranium, mosquito deterrent, is starting to flourish. That's my belated wedding anniversary present to Wendy (3E don't anyone ever think I'm tight). I would have bought it on our anniversary, but out of consideration I didn't want to embarrass her by being the only one to buy a present – truth is the age thing (memory) struck and I think I forgot.

But now it's aperitif time. 3rd bottle of Coteaux D'Aix-En-Provence, all under E4, but regrettably none of them up to the usual standard of this great fruity appellation. Oh well the trials I endure.

Wednesday – yet another BSD.

Now I know I bang on a lot about how fortunate we are, but as we were sat having lunch I really started to sum up in my own mind what I was missing by not working. Yes I could have had the pleasure of the cut and thrust of the monthly board meeting; watching the stilettos slither in between the shoulder blades; listening to the endless sycophantic reiteration of what the MD had just said; 8 hours meeting when 1 would have done; or doing a yet another interactive power point presentation extolling the virtues of our Alarm Receiving Centre to a potential national customer, complete with ARC tour and small talk lunch; or worst still, visiting my



largest national customer to explain why someone in the call centre just hadn't bothered to call the police; or trying to debug some program code; or meeting with Human Remains to figure out how to get shut of the operator who couldn't be bothered to call the police; or figuring out how I could screw more out of the 70,000 loyal small customers because the National customers are too big and powerful and want everything for nothing. And yet I used to relish every day!

Instead what am I doing? Well I'm sat on the banks of the river Gard, in the shadow of the 2000 year old Pont Du Gard, having a lunch of fresh fruit considering in minute detail how fortunate I am to have exited the rat race and thinking about the guys who designed this magnificent edifice. Do you think for one moment they ever thought that 2000 years later people would be coming to marvel at it?

Afterwards we go around the museum. What a fantastic display.

Then it's back for a relaxing dinner of bread, cheese and wine on the patio. How fortunate can we be!



Oh and we set a new record today. 28 miles and not a market in site.

Last night the frogs (proper frogs not Napoleons descendents) were in full croaky voice and I'm sure those on the pitches furthest from us would not have got a moments sleep with the row they were making.

Thursday – yet another BSD. Weekly shopping day, fortunately Wendy troupes off on her own, while I do some French, reading the news about Gordon Browns stupid outburst. Just another lazy day, plenty of French and plenty reading. After the midday sun I set off for a bike ride around the region and pick up yet another kilo of fresh strawberries on the way back. The two ladies at the roadside stall were most impressed with my plastic ASDA shopping bag.

For aperitif time we (well actually I) have a St Emilion Grand Cru, way over my usual budget but courtesy of my spendthrift wife – special offer at Lidl. Meanwhile Wendy's screaming. Why? Merely because our tea, a rabbit, still has it's head on and the eye is staring at her and no one bothered to take its false teeth out – modern women! When I was a lad rabbits came complete with a snare around their neck; fur coat; gizzards; teeth; eyes; were free; very tasty and sometimes still warm.

Friday – grey with occasional sun. Drive down to Cavaillon. Well we all make mistakes. No photos, couldn't find anything worth photographing.

Saturday – sun and clouds, but thankfully no rain. Disaster strikes, the free WiFi is down. They try the usual TOTO but to no avail. Told that there is no one on the hotline, it's a bank holiday weekend – yet another – and no one is in☺. Obviously not heard of 24 * 7 support contracts. Have a walk into Pernes... and mooch around the market, followed by coffee and some more people watching.

Take the awning down, no WiFi so we're off. We were going to stay until Tuesday but vote with my feet. Mind you have to say it is a great site, very quite and secluded pitch. Best to avoid the area around reception though as the frogs chorus after dark is deafening.

In the evening we try the restaurant, a good choice but it's all microwave meals reheated. Wendy is not impressed.

