

Now for an idea of an actual trip here's the record of our first 2009 trip to FRANCE.

## **LOG OF A FRENCH MOTORHOMING TRIP**

It's Friday, May 15<sup>th</sup> 2009. We're off today for Rosslare and The Irish Ferries, Oscar Wilde, which is meant to depart at 17.30 to arrive at 11.00am on Saturday morning. We arrive 2 hours prior to departure to be told it isn't in, has had a mechanical problem and won't now be departing until 20.30. Having sat on the dock at Cherbourg only last year and having been told a similar story I reckon I know better, so we leave the docks and go and do some shopping. We had planned dinner on the boat on each occasion. Last year I felt that dinner at half past midnight was asking more than of my digestive system than it was capable of providing, so went to bed empty and annoyed. This time we cooked a snack meal sitting in the queue back on the docks. At about 9.30 a three second flash on the electronic notice board tells us that our sailing to Roscoff has been cancelled and we will be going to Cherbourg instead, leaving at about 9.30.

Since it's that time already we optimistically add a further hour while some passengers leave the queue and head for Cork and Brittany Ferries sailing the following day. This time guess proved remarkably accurate but as we drove to the embarkation point, our supervisor told us that this was the Roscoff sailing. He obviously hasn't been told about the change we thought. Wrong again, he had: we hadn't!

So we are now told as we get on board that Roscoff is on again with arrival scheduled for 4.00 p.m. Saturday which makes our planned pre weekend shopping stop at the Geant Centre in Morlaix very tight.

Moral of this story is twofold. If you expect ferry companies to ship you out on time or keep you informed of their delays, you are likely to be disappointed three times out of four. As a result always carry food and anything else you may need to get you over delays that can easily last several hours!

In fairness, after a very rough crossing, we actually docked at 3.30 but due to a slow passport and customs check we were delayed a little further, however we still didn't make it to the shopping centre as the Sat Nav had been unknowingly fed the wrong GPS co-ordinates and sent us off on a wild goose chase.

Next lesson: if you think your map reading is better than the Sat Nav instructions, you're probably right so go for it. You can always point out how unreliable the Sat Nav voice is if she occasionally beats you, and on this trip to France she is quickly christened as the bitch, in French pronounced La Beetch!

After a somewhat acrimonious half hour, we did eventually stumble upon a small supermarket in the middle of nowhere. Easy parking and we saved a fortune on account of their rather mediocre selection. We now reset the sat nav to take us to an ACSI camp site, Camping Les Madières, which was located down some very narrow lanes just outside Pordic which overlooks the bay of St Brieuc. (No.783 in the ACSI Guide 2009.)

The 'bitch' only got us lost once doing this with an incorrect roundabout exit which was confused further by some road works.

The campsite owner turned out to be a delightful Frenchman with very good English, a very warm welcome, take-away food cooked to order and delivered to our door, and a small but peaceful campsite. The heated swimming pool looked to be a good size but doesn't open until June. His GPS co-ordinates were correct: N48 34.957 W002 48.290 and he has a stock of a very pleasant Grand Vin de Bordeaux, La Chapelle Saint Martin. Selected and recommended by La Table des Sommeliers, as well as my better half: she who must be obeyed. (Well sometimes anyway!)

At only €6.00 per bottle it seemed like a good deal.

Some rain in the early hours of Sunday morning woke us but by 9.00 a.m, there was plenty of blue sky. We left at about 9.45 a.m. and got back on course for Tours, our next stop after a further problem with the GPS Sat Nav as the 'bitch' tried to make us do a left turn onto a two way road from a blind exit which was clearly marked as right turn only.

We eventually found a semi legal about turn a couple of miles down the road and got back onto our proper track. About two hours later we hit torrential rain which continued down to Tours where the 'bitch' again gave us an incorrect turning instruction. Fortunately this time I overrode her instructions together with my wife's concerns, and found the campsite in a suburb of Tours named St Avertin without too much difficulty.

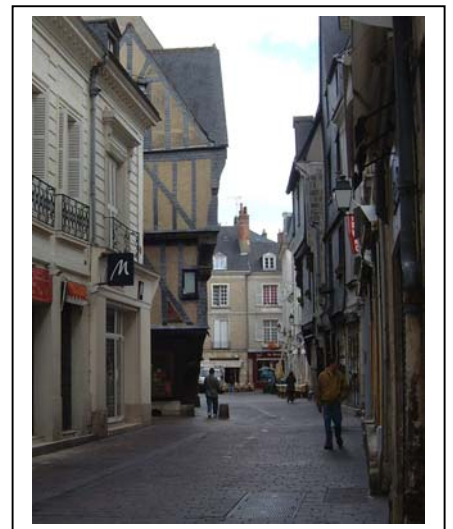
Les Rives du Cher at St. Avertin. (No. 958 in the ACSI Guide 2009.)

It has three reasons for being the best choice: Location, Location, Location.

Quite good hard standings and plenty of trees, but the toilette blocks, (the Sanitaires in French) while adequate are really a bit basic in this day and age for a three star site. These blocks really need to be totally refitted but as the site was 80% full on a Sunday night in May this is obviously not likely to be seen as a priority. The site manager speaks good English and both he and his wife are extremely helpful although her English is not quite as good as his. They also provide a baguette and croissant service at reception with previous day orders strongly recommended.

As the day progressed the rain eased and by evening we had clear skies, 75F. and the hope of an improvement for Monday. We had a short walk across the two bridges and past the river fountains and then into the village of St Avertin which has a few nice smaller food shops, including a patisserie, a butcher and a tiny supermarket.

First view the following morning was of clear skies and a golden pink sunrise. Beautiful, although as the day progressed there was an increase in cloud cover but 70F. and no rain made it an ideal day to go into the city of Tours. A 500 metre walk took us to the local bus depot and for €3.20 return each the No 5 bus took us all around the houses and then into the city centre. The bus stop is directly across from the very elaborate Hotel de Ville, (the Town Hall.) A mixture of old and newer buildings in the traditional style combine with very spacious roads to make Tours a very beautiful city. Indeed the approach road to the



Street in Tours Old Quarter.

Hotel de Ville is so wide that a two way bus lane fills the centre of the road with two traffic lanes on either side and many trees. At the city centre there are also several pavement cafes and many more to be found in the old quarter as well as a further selection on the two roads that lead down to the railway station which is also something of an architectural gem.

We are not normally very good 'tourists' but if this is your first visit to Tours you should try to use the little white tourist train. It leaves from a spot close to the main tourist office which is across the road from the train station.

This will introduce you to the city better than any words of mine and give you access to the pedestrianised areas of the old quarter as well.

We had wanted to try the small bistro across the road from the camp site on three separate occasions but this was closed yet again leading us to think the proprietor/chef has lost interest in his enterprise, so we followed the camp site manager's recommendation and tried the little local hotel in St Avertin which is about a 400 metre walk from the camp. A friendly but definitely unpretentious little establishment offered a remarkably good selection of very adequate choices from which we chose starters of one Tomato Vinaigrette with Mozzarella cheese and one Smoked Salmon. This was followed by two Rump Steak and Frites and one chocolate Mousse and one Nougat Glacee all of which were delicious. Better still was the house wine, a very pleasant red and a total bill of just €29.00: what a pity we can't get decent food for that sort of money at home.

Before we leave the St Avertin site the van will need a quick check to top up water levels, empty the grey water and toilet cassette. It's always worth doing these things when the facilities are available, and the motorhome services at Les Rives are particularly good.

Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May started as another bright sunny day with clear skies but as we had to move on in order to meet friends in Cannes we didn't mind too much when it clouded up and eventually turned to rain again.

We also had a further falling out with the 'bitch' who tried to send us off in the wrong direction yet again. I really think that whoever

programmed her had some real issues with the Tourist Office in Tours, but on this occasion I had looked at the map and then followed the signposts which eventually lead us around Vierzon and Clermont Ferrand and then to site no 1020 on the ACSI guide.



The Hotel de Ville, (Town Hall) Tours.



A corner of the 'restaurant square' Old Quarter, Tours.

En route we found a motorway stop worthy of mention. For just €10.50 they offered a selection of crudities and a seriously nice looking carvery with a freshly cooked ham on the bone as the star attraction. We will be watching for any other motorway stops operated by L'Arch to see if they are of a similar standard. As it was we were too early for lunch so settled for a serious temptation: a raspberry tartlet and coffee which were excellent.

After we left the A72 our drive became a truly wild goose chase over many miles of very narrow hilly winding roads that eventually led to an even narrower tarmac track up a hill to a very uncared for site.

The proprietor was charming and spoke excellent English but the site was filled with all sorts of broken down caravans, some of which had been encased in timber presumably to disguise their ancient origins, whilst others appeared to have been abandoned by their owners rather than go to the undoubted trouble and cost of getting them down the hill again.



This 'shed' is an encased caravan: it was one of the more organised corners of the campsite!

The view from the site was beautiful in daylight but became a mass of lights after dark.

There were a couple of other site occupants who were even quieter than us, but apart from them the locals drinking were the only real sign of life. In fact one could be forgiven for noting the likeness of the site with its 'bar' to an Irish illegal drinking den of fifty or more years ago, hidden sufficiently off the beaten track, (and nearly 2000 feet up) not to attract attention from the local Gendamerie!

The view from the site is incredible but the access, the ambience and the facilities make one wonder if an ACSI inspector has ever actually found it, much less approved it!

If you like away from it all, back to nature, drinking holidays and have plenty of levelling blocks and a smallish camper this could be a unique experience. On the credit side I must note that the bar has an extremely pleasant atmosphere and the outside sitting area is equally good, but on one point this proprietor has nearly every other campsite beaten: his washroom contains a washbasin, a toilet and a shower in a single wet room configuration. What a pity there's only one for the entire campsite.

My wife's last comment on the site was that this was a place we would certainly remember, if not for the right reasons, but I'll also remember the owner: a really nice guy!

When we left the following morning it was to a really beautiful drive in warm sunshine, through deeply wooded hills and valleys that looked as though they had remained largely unaltered for several hundred years.

Eventually the 'bitch' struck again and got us lost with a series of misdirections. As a result we didn't regain the motorway at the next junction until we ignored her and found a signpost hidden behind a tree about 100 metres beyond where we had done a U-turn while following her instructions. We then did a further motorway jump down the A7 to Avignon and after some further 'do a u-turn' instructions made necessary by first of all giving us an incorrect left turn followed by an illegal one, we had to cross the new bridge into Avignon, find a roundabout and return out on the correct side of the road.

The Bagatelle campsite (No 1238 on the ACSI guide) is worthy of mention. A carefully planned forest of tall trees located immediately on the western bank directly across from the City gives easy walking access for visitors to Avignon which was of course the location of the Pope's Palace during the early middle ages. Located directly across the river Rhone from the campsite, the Palace is within the walled centre city which is largely a pedestrianised area with loads of restaurants and small shops, together with an architecturally interesting Theatre and Hotel de Ville set in a beautiful square. A very elaborate old carousel or roundabout twirling around with prancing horses adds a very special touch of magic to the atmosphere.



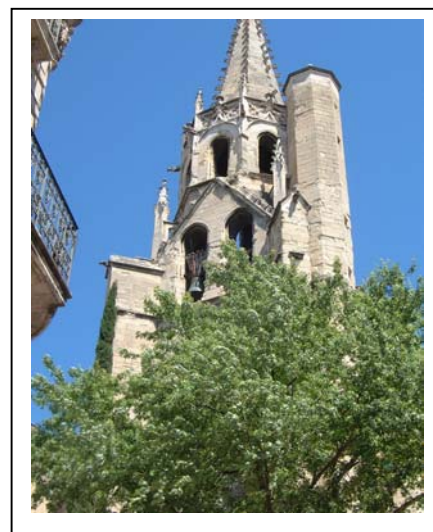
The Pope's Palace viewed from the Bagatelle campsite just across the river. The new bridge is just to the left.



Avignon's old town square is the location for the Hotel de Ville, Theatre, many restaurants and this delightful carousel.

Avignon is a not to be missed spot, and its adjacent campsite is also special due to its location and Le Pavillon Bleu, its riverside bar/salon de the (tea) panoramic: and restaurant which is open to the public. Truthfully you will probably eat very much better in many of the city's beautiful restaurants just across the bridge but it's so nice to find a campsite that actually operates a proper food facility other than in July and August, so it was nice to avoid the second bridge crossing and support the camp effort whilst watching the various river craft.

The Bagatelle campsite has a three star rating but in many ways could be regarded as a four; the sanitaires are not new but are bigger, more elaborate and busier than most larger campsites we've been on,



and looking at the occupancy rate for the night we stayed there (about 85%) I would guess that booking a space may be essential in high season.

It is perfectly possible to spend several days exploring Avignon with points of interest and photo opportunities everywhere. We liked it so much that we decided to include a return visit after we'd been down to Cannes. Re-crossing the bridge to the campsite we spotted the nose of this hotel boat coming upstream and decided to watch its progress.



It came, and it came, and eventually it went, but I still haven't worked out how they manage to turn it around at Avignon, but they do!

We headed on again the following day with a comparatively short run to Mandelieu la Napoule which is located about five miles east of Cannes. It might have been a short distance but it was a very slow journey due to the traffic. One automated motorway Peage we had to use had a backlog of what appeared to be several thousand cars and took nearly 25 minutes to get through. We eventually found the campsite, Les Philippons in Les Adrets-de-L'Estérel. Once you've reached it this is a small family run affair with a covered veranda style restaurant and a decent sized swimming pool.



It didn't look too busy when we first arrived so we were amazed at the number of occupants it had by nightfall, many joining together to enjoy the food, the company and the ambience of Provence.

However some words of warning. This site should NOT be approached off the first turning from the N 7 after leaving Mandelieu. The 'bitch' did this to us after giving the wrong exit instructions off the A 8 and then when we had got to within one kilometre of the site giving us a u-turn instruction instead of the left turn we



At Les Philippons the Reception, restaurant and swimming pool are separated by a road from the camping area.

needed. Some of these roads are extremely narrow with very sharp bends. Our 7 metre long van would have been in serious trouble had we met any of the fast moving vans and motorbikes we later saw using the road. You should also be aware that longer vans will find this a difficult site to enter given a sharply climbing acute right hand bend at the barrier controlled gate, while many of the emplacements will require very careful negotiation to enter and exit. As an added extra the public road separates the reception, pool and restaurant facilities from the campsite proper.

As a separate note we have now lost so much faith in the Garmin Sat Nav system that my wife had by now promised to throw it over the next suitable cliff! Many of these problems seem to have stemmed from the time of the last on line update and there have been several cases where the spoken word has not matched the instructions displayed on the map.

As we've just shelled out for a 'life of the machine' update service I intend to send them a copy of our recent experiences using it!

In the meantime we will obviously need to purchase some really large scale maps of the areas we wish to visit as the nearly continuous string of incorrect instructions are destroying a lot of the usual pleasure we get from motorhoming.

At this point we were collected by friends and spent the next few days actually in Cannes where we discovered the reason for the motorway jams: a national holiday weekend coincided with both the Cannes Film Festival and the Monaco Grand Prix. The resulting chaos created traffic jams on the seafront at the Eastern end of Cannes between 4.00 and 6.00a.m., which meant levels of horn blowing made sleep nearly impossible and that was before the police arrived with sirens blaring to try and sort out each incident!

Watching the entertainment from several floors up, it soon became obvious that most of the problems were being created deliberately by drivers who simply stopped in the middle of the carriageway to chat and entertain their passengers or negotiate with other 'pedestrians'.



Cannes: crowds, traffic jams, cruisers & cruising, and money: lots of it everywhere, but no motorhomes if they can manage it!

Returning to our van we went shopping for various supplies and then headed for Grasse. Thanks again to the 'bitch' or perhaps more precisely her absence, as she now lost her voice, we got not so much lost as totally fed up with going round in circles trying to find a particular campsite, so we eventually decided on a 'plan B' and headed for Frejus and a site we had wanted to take a look at just outside there. On this occasion the printed instructions on the guide were incorrect and the Garmin ceased to function, not only loosing the voice but not even showing our location on the map! We did eventually find the site by a process of elimination and spotting a campsite sign.

Camping Caravanning Le Frejus is no 1255 in the ACSI Guide, has a rather slow booking in procedure in spite of the size of the queue when we arrived: there wasn't one!

It has a good Sanitaire block, well designed and with modern fittings, although it could have been a little cleaner when we first saw it at around 5.00 p.m.

Some on-site food services were suggested but not available on the night we were there, but the swimming pool and water slides looked particularly good and were very much in use, although there is no poolside area that can be accessed by non swimmers unless you want to paddle through the footwash.

We used this time to put through a call to a friend at home who is something of an expert with Garmin sat navs. He managed to talk my navigator, she who must be obeyed, through some of the problems the 'bitch' had given us. The result was her sweet tones were back with us the following day and apart from an argument when she wished to use the motorway and we wished to use the coast roads, she behaved nearly perfectly for the duration of the next day.

We moved on again the following morning haven taken some time to slightly top up our water tank and clear all the overnight tree debris off the wind-out awning. In fact we woke up around 6.00 a.m. due to a short but sharp shower which meant that a quick closing of overhead skylights was needed, but then as we had only a short trip planned we took our time and travelled most of the way at between 50 – 70 k.p.h. You would however have to be blind not to notice the very large number of parking areas along the south coast where motorhome parking is totally banned not just overnight but at any time. The 'free-loaders' have done a great job for which everyone else is now paying the price. What a pity the authorities across Europe cannot jointly understand that most motorhome owners are responsible people who would rather pay a parking charge for a designated space rather than being unable to legally park anywhere for mile after mile. Such a policy would also benefit local business.

We headed for Cavalaire sur Mer and looked at a few different campsites. We eventually picked Camping de la Baie which was not only an ACSI site (no. 1247) at just €15. 00 per night plus tax, but more importantly it was in easy walking distance of the Port and centre ville. It also had a very pleasant and efficient reception service together with some excellent facilities including a restaurant that for a change was open. Not too surprisingly with about 95% occupancy this site was also extremely busy for the end of May.

Some further phone calls fixed a rendezvous with another friend and

his family for Thursday lunch in Hyeres and weather permitting this will allow us a two night stay in Cavalaire. As there were some very strong winds building up as darkness came I was extremely glad to have my awning in and hope that the morning might bring an improvement. Our prayers were



Entrance area at Camping de la Baie: very open & busy for early May.

answered and the following day was spent exploring Cavalaire sur Mer and relaxing in the sun with a book during the afternoon.

Our evening meal in the Port consisted of a 'pave de beouf' (a sort of filet steak) in a mushroom sauce with chips. This was followed by a choice of a large ice cream (trios baules or balls of your choice) or a Catalan Crème, which was effectively a nicely crisped sugar topping on custard known to us as a Crème Brulee. At €20 each plus wine etc., this was actually one of our better meals out, although we wouldn't have advertised that all the beef was sourced in France – definitely not up to an Irish steak by any stretch of the imagination, and truthfully some of the food we had out was not only indifferently sourced, cooked and presented, but by no means cheap by comparison with its Irish equivalent.

This brings me to a word on shopping and prices. The biggest French supermarkets are generally much bigger than their Irish equivalents and their prices are, with some obvious exceptions, slightly cheaper than in Ireland. Wine, bottled water, coffee, most fruit, vegetables, most shellfish and home produced items like cheese make supermarket shopping a delight for visitors, but the quality and price of meat for example falls a long way short of what we are used to finding at home.

If you've seen all the T.V. programmes about how cheap property is in France take it with a pinch of salt. There must be some bargains of course but mostly in areas where there is a declining population or a need for development for some other reason. All property markets are controlled by the simple process of supply and demand which is why an 800 sq ft flat in Cannes can fetch more than €1.5m and a rustic barn or broken down building in the middle of nowhere might be offered for under €100,000. Considering the recession in the U.K. and Ireland, the property market in France looks very stable at present.

We moved on again the following day and met up with some special friends in the Geant Shopping Centre just outside Hyeres. (Exit 8 off the Toulon to Hyeres autoroute.) We had a pleasant snack lunch in the Cafeteria there (which to give you a guide was a little over €10 each) and made arrangements so that we may have another motorhome parking spot for next year! Then having done a small shop during which we acquired 8 large scallops for €6.40 (a bargain!) and some mushrooms for about the same price as home, we said our goodbyes, walked back to the van and retraced our journey of the previous week to Avignon.

One thing about computerised French campsites is that once your details are on their system they usually work as something of an 'open sesame' and in this case we were asked if we would like to return to the same space as we had occupied the previous week while others arriving at around the same time were told there was no space for them. I've seen this happen before and remember one occasion when I suspect that at least one would-be camper may have been refused space on grounds of suitability. Apart from the tattered commercial van he arrived in, it may have been difficult to distinguish who



Campsite restaurant overlooks the river, and is also open to the public.

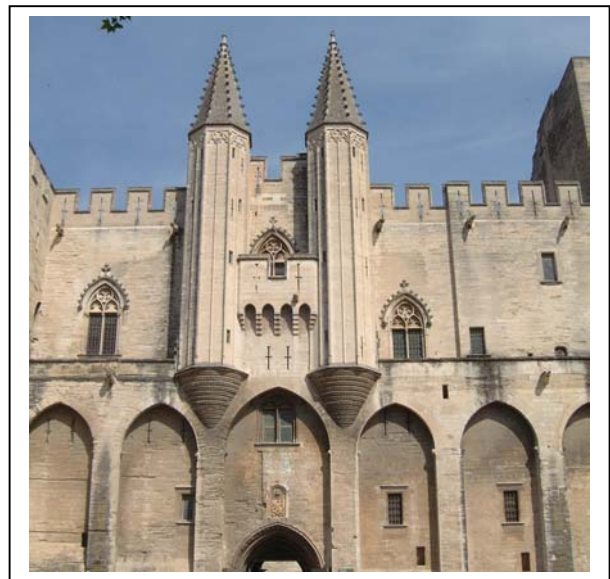
was the actual driver, a very long haired odd looking individual or his equally unkempt looking dog. Had I been able to spot a ‘Drugs R Us’ sign on the van, my money would have been on the dog!

After a fairly lengthy day of driving and another warm but quite windy night brewing, we got lazy about going out and cooked the scallops with mushrooms, cream and a touch of garlic. With the addition of some new potatoes and a raspberry tart and coffee to finish, we had not only the best meal since we landed in France, but probably the best scallops I’ve ever tasted.

The following morning somebody else was determined to visit the Popes Palace in Avignon. Personally I had my doubts about the value of this but my business manager was determined we would make it and we did. The experience confirmed my doubts, particularly when we were told that the original structure and internal décor had been substantially damaged by a fire in, I think 1461. Unfortunately the 500 plus years since haven’t led to a proper restoration leading one to belief that the Church of the middle ages was without funds as the huge sums collected had been diverted into a number of inappropriate political misjudgements plus sponsoring the odd war here and there. The €10 a head you’ll be asked to contribute to look over this sprawling mess is of dubious value.



Part of the huge palace, this shot shows the gold statue on top which acts as the perfect tourist attraction.

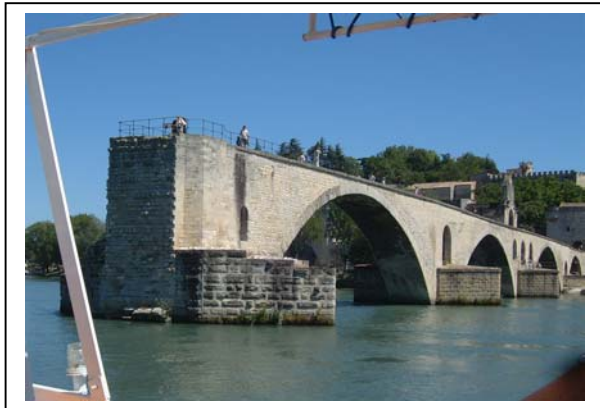


Entrance to the Pope’s Palace. The external shell is a better viewing proposition than the internal tour.

By contrast we discovered accidentally the façade of a beautiful church in its own little square. Examining the beautiful craftsmanship of the entrance doors we discovered we could go in and found one of the most magical church interiors we’ve ever seen. As we sat at the back to take in the atmosphere, the bells struck for midday, upon which two priests appeared and began to celebrate what we believed to be a sung Latin mass: it certainly appeared to be a Gregorian chant in which the small number of parishioners at the front participated with the responses. The quality of the singing and its effect was absolutely enchanting to us, the observers. A magical moment.

We decided to stay in the main square for lunch and had one small dish of Ravioli and an even smaller slice of quiche. This was followed by one lavender mouse and one isle flottante. Both nice but not by any means exceptional unlike the bill (L'addition is the word in French). And with the addition of one glass of house wine, a small bottle of water and 2 coffees plus 'servis' we had spent €49 for a snack lunch.

We thought we might as well go completely mad after this and so we headed for the river Rhone and spent an hour and a further €16 on a boat trip around the islands and remains of the actual bridge of Avignon. Also in ruins and left in a broken down state for many centuries. This was a pleasant and relaxing experience by contrast with the Popes Palace and a better way of spending money than anything else we did that morning.



The original bridge at Avignon. There's an extra charge to walk it but you're going nowhere.



Our river trip was on a smaller boat than this one which was getting ready to do a dinner trip later in the day.

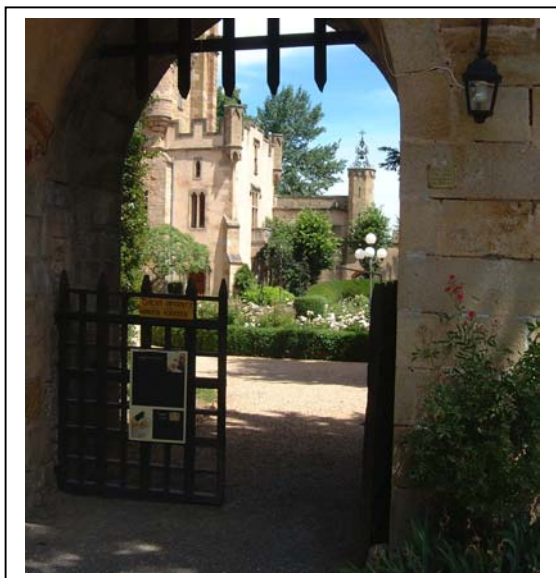
Back at the campsite I was thinking of sitting down to have a quiet read when two camper friends discovered us. They were as always an absolute pleasure to spend time with, so we finished up eating together and talking over all sorts of camping matters. They had been away for more than two months at this stage and were very well versed on areas of which we have by contrast little experience, particularly wild camping, the use of aires and the France Passion scheme. They are particularly enthusiastic about the vineyards in this scheme, but the most important thing they said to remember is the need to have some food in you before you go to a tasting session. They told of more than one 'degustation' that started at 6.00p.m. and was still going strong more than four hours later; mind I have the feeling that their very delightful approach to 'socialising' combined with some enthusiastic purchasing could have helped to stretch out an otherwise much shorter session!

All good things have to come to an end, and this was the case with both our great company and our nearly perfect weather the following morning. I got seriously wet pulling in and drying the electrical cable and then stowing the levelling blocks.

I was also charged with walking into reception to pay the bill. Just €41 for 3 nights. Great value for a well located site with excellent amenities: they even have some showers with full tap control, good pressure and a hose so you can direct the flow to all the right places. What a contrast with those places that give you a button to press every ten seconds for a dribble of luke warm water!

We headed off in something of a downpour, had our usual argument with ‘La bitche’ which she lost: we followed the signposts and this worked fine most of the way across onto the A75. This trip on mostly National roads took several hours and one road closure which we couldn’t solve so we asked the gendarmes for advice. Once they discovered we were real tourists they couldn’t have been more helpful and following their advice, one spoke a little more English than I do French, we easily found the alternative route he recommended.

We came eventually to the site, Chateau de Grange Fort near Les Pradeaux. (No. 1007 ACSI Guide) A very nice site run by a Dutch family of whom the younger generation speak excellent English. The location is a little remote but the ambience of the site and the views from it are memorable. During our visit the site was busy with about 65% occupancy. Dinner is available in the Chateau but needed to be pre-booked which we weren’t able to do, so we managed with a swiftly concocted lamb stew which with some new potatoes was quite edible. Deciding that this was a rather special site we opted for a stationary day and spent a good part of it in the chateau’s courtyard cum terrace. For the price of an optional cup of coffee (€2.00) this gave us access to probably the most exclusive and luxurious coffee terrace we have ever been in.



Chateau de Grange Fort is one of those memorable campsites that will need revisiting!

We sort of got more into the ambience of the whole estate and so opted to book dinner in the chateau for that evening. This was an even bigger surprise as the dining room, located on the ground floor is a huge room with vaulted gothic style side walls and ceiling that are decorated in a medieval style.

There were 12 guests for dinner this night and we all shared a big central table, although there were several other tables all decorated with beautiful glassware, flowers and trimmings of every sort. Madame must obviously be a long standing collector of all sorts of bric-a-brac which really gave the huge room an incredible atmosphere.

The meal was perhaps a little slow in arriving on this particular night, due we later learned to a staff shortage.

A slightly smoother delivery from one end of the table to the other would perhaps have been appreciated. However the quality was superb with a large meat pate in the shape of a cake and topped with a fancy apple puree for starters. This was followed by a sliced duck breast on a bed of spicy creamed potatoes with peppers and other pieces of chopped vegetable and an alcoholic sauce to top it off. The desert was a seriously large slice of home made cheese cake with a Grand Mariner sauce, ice cream; cream and tiny balls of what might have been frozen melon.

This meal took quite some time to arrive and get eaten, mainly because the wine flowed and the guests who were all seated at the big central table, interacted with one another. We were fortunate in having a German couple opposite us who spoke perfect English and could also understand and translate for us most of the Dutch which was the predominate language of the evening. After the coffee was served, Madame presented each couple with their bill which included their choice of wine and coffee. The food was charged at €25. 00 per head which in view of the quality of both the setting and the food, for what was effectively a medieval banquet experience, seemed extremely reasonable. This is a campsite you really should experience.

Throughout our trip the weather had been perfect, and even though we now headed for a new site about half way between Tours and Le Mans, Du Lac des Varennes just outside Marcon. (ACSI Guide No. 814.) the heat of summer was definitely following us. The last two nights we've had temperatures of 30C. after 9.00 at night leading us to wonder how will we manage when we get home.

This site was nicely located, with plenty of open space and not too busy, and with our ACSI card cost just €11.80 with electric connection. The croissants available from reception were amongst the best we've had in France and the constant sound of Cuckoos from sunrise to sunset explains why we very rarely here one now in Ireland: they've all moved to France along with the Gulf Stream! Not so stupid after all.

The Sanitaires are very new and in extremely good condition. On the slightly negative side there are only two standard toilets on the men's side, but three squats or holes in the ground. The French have been known to refer to these as 'Turkish' toilets so not only do they not accept responsibility for the idea, but mostly they prefer to use the standard model when given the choice. Given that using a squat is an easy way to dirty your clothing, rinse your shoes and get stuck in a crouching position, it does seem that it's about time French Sanitaire regulations were dragged into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They could also include instructions to ensure that all cubicle doors open outwards: since many facilities are cleaned with a high pressure hose this would ensure the entire cubicle can be cleaned. The 'dirty parade' are well aware of this blind spot leading to some occasional unpleasantness, and while I'm on the subject of cleaners why do many campsites close their sanitaires between 7.30am and 9.00am for cleaning just when demand is at its maximum? Even the cleaners would possibly prefer a 9.00am start.

Since I've started into the matter of Sanitaires perhaps this is a good moment to add a few comments for newcomers to Continental campsites.

My advice is to always check out the facilities before you actually need them.

They vary from delightful to totally unusable with all points in between.

A few simple rules however starting with an often overlooked one:

Treat yourself to a wash bag or toilet bag with a hanger attached. This is necessary as many sanitaires have nowhere to put anything except the floor or over the top of the door. A hanger can usually use the door handle but make sure someone trying to open your door from outside won't deposit everything into the nearest puddle! You can then hang your towel around the toilet bag otherwise it's around your neck!

Always take toilet paper with you; even in places that provide it there's no guarantee that somebody else hasn't had the end of the roll. Also always take it off your roll and put it in a safe pocket. Drop the roll you've taken with you and it'll most likely live up to its name and roll under the partition wall. Even if you do manage to retrieve it after an unplanned excursion it's unlikely to be of much use to you.

Using the showers (Les Douches) the most important thing to watch out for is your clothes. I keep a track suit top and bottom for travelling to the sanitaires together with a pair of flip flops. You cover the clothes with the towel and avoid shower compartments with no clothes protection partition at all. Even so you are going to have wet clothes to put on again every so often.

If you like a basin of water to wash in, you might like to include in your toilet bag a universal sink stopper, as continental basins are rarely equipped with one, and a final reminder: don't forget the soap and shampoo, leave them behind you in the shower and you're unlikely to see them again.

I suppose that using public washrooms can be a little disconcerting to those of us who like some privacy and cubicles and doors with large spaces under can provide some two way traffic. I well remember two brown eyes looking in at me from under the door, and saying 'Bonjour M'mselle, c'va,' to the small dog who appeared. As I spoke the dog was dragged out from behind by the owner with so much haste I thought they must be insulted. Perhaps I had got the sex wrong!

I also remember a door, on the bottom of which some wag had written 'Beware Limbo Dancers!'

We started our move northwards the following morning with a mixture of free motorway (A75), Peage and national route driving which eventually landed us at the Ferme de Prunay some few miles to the west of Blois. (ACSI Guide No. 957)

This is a smaller but very spacious farm campsite with a pleasant feel and a very good swimming pool and bar, but perhaps a little isolated. We chose it because it seemed to be in the middle of Chateau country of which we were interested to see some more, but I was glad we were able to do a supermarket shop before we arrived on site.



Ferme de Prunay, a genuine farm campsite. The owners have limited English but more than compensate with a helpful and very warm welcome.

This gave us a choice of meats and pasta with which to round off our journey home, although the main wine and coffee shopping won't be done until Friday just before we get to the ferry.

The site owners live and work on site and although they don't speak much English they are extremely pleasant and welcoming. They also carry a huge amount of information on things to do in the locality and have a special visitors discount card available if you wish to become a real 'tourist' for a day or two.

Since this is what we had come to do, the next morning saw us leaving them and heading about 10 kms to visit Le Chateau de Chaumont-sur-Loire. As we crossed the bridge over the Loire to the Chateau we noticed an extensive Aire de Camping which was not only within walking distance of the Chateau providing a valuable parking space for all but the early birds, but also within easy reach of several small cafes and an Auberge with an outside eating area which looked very nice.



Le Chateau de Chaumont-sur-Loire: make sure you get a discount card from the campsite before going!

The Chateau is a very imposing structure set in beautiful grounds and gardens, but with a long sloping climb up that some elderly and unfit will find fairly exhausting. The entrance gates being just off the village main street and the chateau a good half mile up the slope, it took us a good ten minutes to reach the upper level of the grounds by which stage somebody needed a coffee.

Having paid our discounted entrance price of €23 for the pair we entered the chateau to discover that we would have to wait for a guided tour. Personally I'm not much into hanging around waiting for something to happen, so to gain access to the locked parts of the chateau visit, we attached ourselves onto the end of a passing French guided tour with about 50 visitors, and a guide who'd obviously been trained to talk for France. After about 20 minutes she was still stuck in the second room and was showing all the signs of having been vaccinated with a gramophone needle, so we decided to use our own initiative and walked through on our own. We were obviously spotted on security cameras as a security lady dressed as a visitor came to check us out, but when she decided we were harmless returned to reception where we passed her on our way out.

Our impression was that the nights spent on the Chateau camp site were a much better investment as the ambience and the dinner there were a far more memorable experience. Looking at the huge structures and the money the larger ones must have cost, I can only say that I'm now viewing the French people responsible for the guillotine with a certain level of sympathy I never had before.

We had a quick lunch in the village because the Chateau choice looked larger, more elaborate and a lot more expensive than the small snack we fancied, and then continued our journey northwards.

Our last day of travel before actually heading for the Geant shopping centre at Morlaix and then on to the ferry at Roscoff took us to Camping Du Port. This is a nice site right on the water's edge at Landrelle/Pleumer-Bodou about 25 kms or so North East of Morlaix. This is a very remote location with some quite narrow access roads but still full of houses, and even the site was quite busy for early June, however its big benefit to us was a restaurant that was actually open.



On site we were again spotted by fellow Irish motorhome owners who told us they had had quite a good meal there the previous night, so as this was our last night out on French soil for at least three months we gave it a go.

Camping du Port is about one hour of slow driving out of Morlaix, and is one of the nicest very quiet seaside campsites in the area.

The main course was O.K. but the dessert was huge and delicious and the 'deux grand caffee noir' were excellent. Servis, water and wine came to nearly €50.00 for the two of us and rounded out a very enjoyable holiday during which we had travelled about 2200 miles in France.

We had a lazy start to our last morning, did a small shop at the Geant Centre in Morlaix, (GPS coordinates are N48.57458 & W3. 85192) and then on to the ferry at Roscoff. This time the boat came in as we arrived but had already discharged its vehicles earlier in the day and had been anchored offshore to allow another ferry to use the dock. As a result loading started well before the expected time and we were on board sitting having a coffee and reading a book nearly an hour and a half before departure time.

During the crossing I got the chance to talk with one of the senior officers and asked him about the delay in the outward journey. He admitted that this had been a very difficult day for him due to circumstances beyond his control: the hydraulic system that opens the bow doors had broken in the closed position. He also explained that since it is not possible to dock stern first at Roscoff, they were actually planning to turn all the vehicles around within the vessel and then discharge them via the stern doors at Cherbourg. It was only at a very late point in the day that the engineers managed to resolve the hydraulic problem and Roscoff was back on again. However he assured me they had kept the Port Authorities notified of the developing situation. I was able to tell him of our actual experience sitting

on the dockside and I am now planning on writing to Rosslare Port Authority concerning their public information board displays which were totally inadequate.

Since writing this we have returned for our second trip of 2009 and this took us into Spain as well as back into France and we really can't recommend continental motorhome holidays highly enough. Do go and try it for yourselves!