

## Freaked out in France

**Narbonne, June 1998**

Narbonne was even further away than Como, 28 hours on the bus! Bolero (or European Bike Express as they now call themselves) are wonderful, there is no doubt about that. Anyone who will take cyclists and their bikes to the continent is to be commended. And they do it in the best possible way - extended legroom, frequent stops and onboard catering. A veil is best drawn over the onboard toilet, which should only be contemplated in dire emergency.



one of Bolero's frequent stops to pick up cyclists gives us a chance to stretch our legs

In those days Bolero employed two 'hostesses' who brewed endless cups of tea and coffee, served snacks and generally kept everyone's spirits up. We also stopped at motorway service areas in France where we perked ourselves up on wonderful coffee and cakes and relieved ourselves in capacious toilets ruled over by grim concierges. Nowadays the catering has been consigned to 'private enterprise' which is not at all the jolly scene it once was. They do their best, but a one-man band has neither support nor moral encouragement, and in addition Bolero expects the poor chap to get up out of his bed(seat) in the middle of the night, rope up and go mountaineering on the top deck of the trailer, throwing down luggage to departing cyclists. Dickens would have approved.

### **The Cuban Missile crisis . . .**

One month before this holiday, in May 98, we had already met the Cuban who was to become a big part of our life, though we did not know it then. Wolf always said we got her free with the Packard Bell, our first internet-capable computer. I remember standing in the shop saying, “What do I want the internet for?” and Wolf saying, “always get the most technology you can.”

I joined an internet seed swap scheme and started corresponding with a gardener called Ivan, in Miami. One thing led to another, his computer broke down and his wife's friend contacted me to say Ivan would be back in touch as soon as he could, and meanwhile could she write to me?

I already had an email friend in Los Angeles, of whom both Wolf and I were very fond. Her name is Akary and I am still in touch with her today. I said to both these ladies, that if they ever fancied a trip to England they were welcome to stay with us. Why not? Surely one good thing about the computer is that it puts us all in touch with each other, and we can experience each other's cultures. That was the theory anyway.



The Cuban took us up on it, insisting, when she arrived, that we call her 'Sugar', a stipulation which led to some embarrassment in public places. She said she fell in love with the sheep and did not want to go home. Little did we know she was already plotting her return. This holiday would be one of the last occasions on which Wolf and I would enjoy each other's

undiluted company. By August, she would have persuaded her husband to fund her in England, and moved in with us. But that is another story . . .

### **An ill wind . . .**

That year also I had made the acquaintance of Wolf's ex-mother-in-law, as he always called her. He referred to her daughter as 'My

first dozy wife' until I pointed out to him this inferred I was his 'second dozy wife' - which may have been true, for all I know. Dot (the ex-mother-in-law) had hitherto only been known to me through her long conversations with Wolf on the phone. She and her daughter had a stormy relationship, and when it got worse than usual, she sought him out for consolation. He always listened to her in patience. But in '98 she decided to put in an appearance in the flesh.

She was a pleasant enough woman, a little too fond of the drink, but that can be said of a lot of people. Though in her sixties, she still dressed in the manner of her youth, wearing calf-length white leather boots and wool dresses with wide ornate belts. She dyed her hair blonde and pinned it in a chignon, and had a passion for appliquéing flowers to everything. She adored Wolfram, that was clear, telling me how she and her daughter had gone on holiday to Majorca, where they met Wolf and his mother. I think Janet (the daughter) was only fourteen at that time, but don't quote me!

All that can be told in another place. For the present, Dot was riled with Janet for refusing to let her go on holiday with her and her husband, and she had come to us with a proposition: she would pay for Wolf and me to go and stay in the same hotel the daughter was staying at, simply to annoy her! Of course I refused. At that she changed tack, saying,

"Oh no, you misunderstand me! I would like to pay for you and Wolfram to go on a proper holiday, and stay in a hotel, instead of going on bikes and camping."

"But I like cycling and camping," I said. "I would hate it in a hotel."

"Well think about it," Dot said, "because I would like to do something nice for you to make up for what my daughter did to Wolfram" . . . . post-war reparations?

### **Sunset over the Med . . .**

Wolf and I talked it over when she had gone. No way did I want to stay in a hotel. I would be bored out of my skull. I loved our holidays, setting off into the unknown under our own steam, having adventures, being together in the open air.

"How about this," I said, "Let her pay for a gîte somewhere, and we can use it as a base and go out cycling every day."

“Yes but it won’t be as much fun as travelling properly,” he said, “but she won’t take no for an answer, and that seems as good a solution as any.”

“Where would you like to go? Any ideas?” I asked him.

“I’d like to go to the South of France, and show you sunset over the med.” This was another place he and his friends had driven down to from Germany. Something unknown to us. We can’t drive from one country to another. Well, we can now, with the Chunnel, but not when I was growing up.

I consulted the Bolero brochure and decided on Narbonne. From there we could cycle to Carcassonne. I knew nothing about the Templars, beyond what Dad had told me when he pointed out the stone lantern on the gable end of St Ives mansion (Bingley) and told me it was a Templar symbol. It would be interesting finding out.

Another search turned up a gîte in a village called Lastours, not far from Carcassonne, and around 50 miles from Narbonne, an easy day’s ride.

Dot seemed a bit disgruntled when she heard that we wanted two weeks in the gîte, but she had offered, though it was a case of being hoist with her own petard. We invited her to come along - there were two bedrooms in the cottage. But she declined.

When we were packing, Wolf said he was taking his tent.

“Why? When we’re staying in a gîte?”

“I don’t know. I just want to take it. Anyway, we’ll need it when we cycle down to the med to see the sunset.” I had learned that it’s best not to argue with Wolf when he’s set on something. And the way it went, it was the most remarkable foresight.

### **We try cassoulet . . .**

We were pretty shattered when we disembarked in Narbonne at 11am on 14 June - my 57th birthday - after 28 hours cramped on a bus! But once we had loaded the luggage up and straightened the handlebars, we were raring to go. We had not bargained for what met us on the road though - a roaring gale. We struggled against it until four in the afternoon, then as we were coming into a small town (Capendu) we stopped for a conference.

“We’re not going to make Lastours today,” I told Wolf. “We had better look for somewhere to spend the night.”

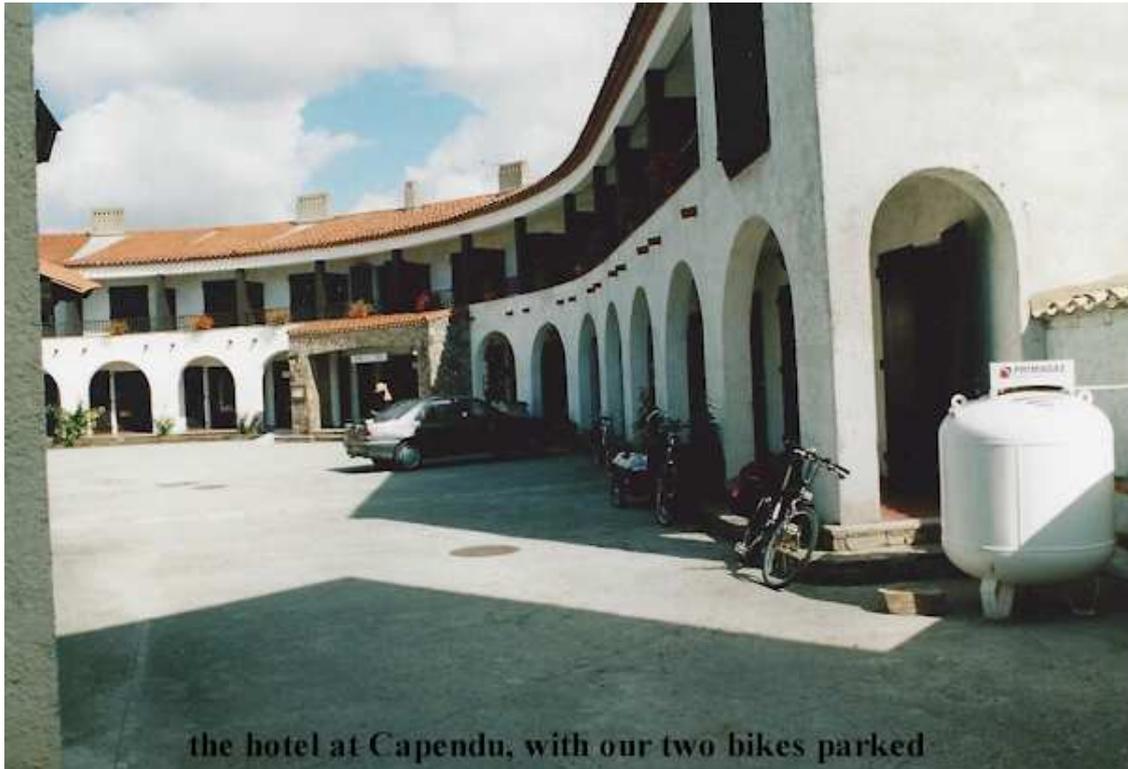


**First day - Narbonne to Capendu**



**Second day - Capendu to Lastours**

We were on a busy road, full of traffic, and it didn't seem likely we would find a campsite. Anyway, I was far too tired to go looking for one. We found a hotel not far off, and enquired about a room.



the hotel at Capendu, with our two bikes parked

I loved the Spanish look of this hotel, with all the rooms overlooking the courtyard, each with its own balcony. The proprietor showed us to a room on the first floor, entirely filled by two large beds. We asked the price. He told us, adding with a strange look, one might almost say 'leer' -

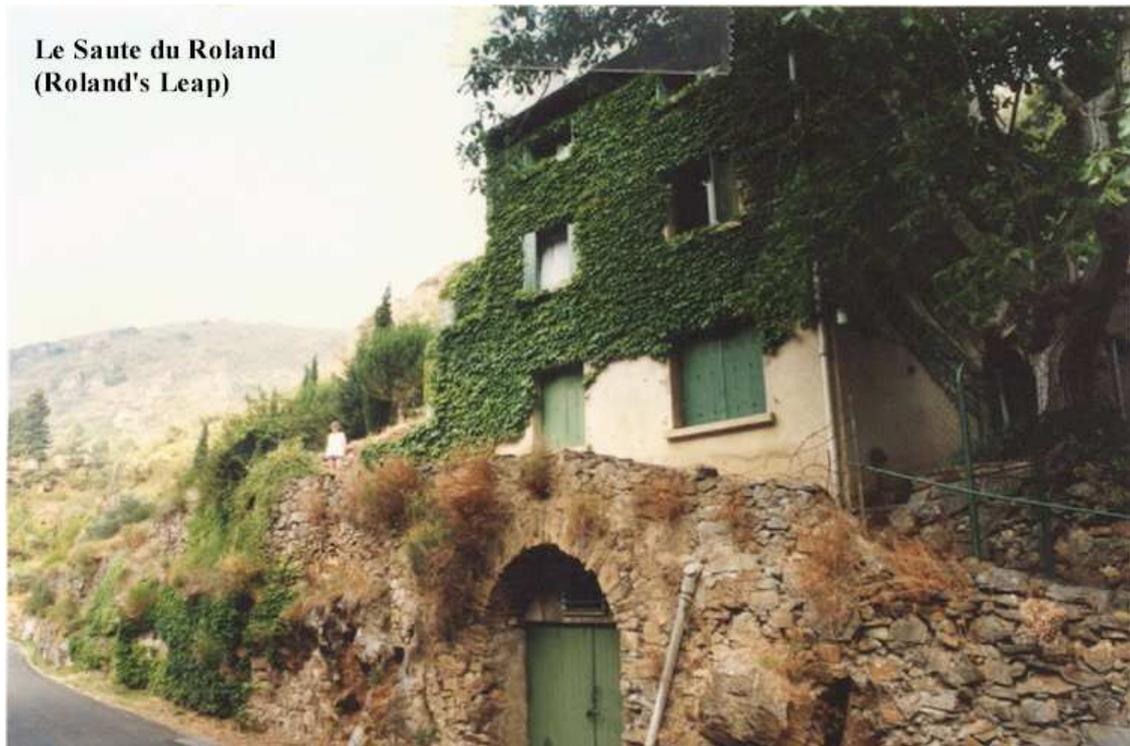
“But it will cost more if you use both beds.” No fear of that!

We ate in the hotel's restaurant. Since I had read about cassoulet, and it is a speciality of the region, I wanted to try it. It was horrible. Far too greasy. Anyway, it's one of those things you have to do in life - eat regional food. More examples of that were to come.

### **and this is where the story really starts . . .**

It took all day to reach Lastours, as once we left the main road we were into winding country lanes which gradually became hillier. Our instructions were to call at the Baker in the village and pick up the keys. We made it by 5pm and a day late - we must have cut it pretty fine. I don't know what time he closed.

The house turned out to be through the village and a long way further up a winding road, in an isolated position with no other houses around. This is the picture of it posted on the internet.



and this is the view from the downstairs window, (shuttered in the picture)



The property was securely fenced, and the entrance further down the road. Try as we might, none of the keys we had been given fitted the lock, and we had to return to the baker, who insisted that

we had all the keys and must continue to try. Back we went and eventually succeeded. Very tired by this time, we dumped our stuff and went back into the village in search of something to eat and drink.

As we returned up the road, neither of us felt easy about the house, but said nothing. That's always the way with us, if one of us has a problem with something, we don't want to spoil things for the other. But as we drew near I said something odd:

"Do you think we could drag one of the mattresses out and sleep on the hillside?" And Wolf replied, just as if there were nothing odd about it,

"No, that hillside is riddled with ants. We would be eaten alive." He was right, for when we explored the house we found explicit notices stating that shutters must be kept tight closed at night or when we left the house, I surmised because of ants.

We felt even more uneasy as, after eating, we went upstairs to bed. There was a locked door on the landing, presumably leading to an upper storey, but that did not make us feel any easier. But we were tired enough to fall asleep immediately our heads hit the pillow. Until I woke up.

The darkness and stillness were intensely palpable, and I wondered why I had wakened so suddenly. Usually, one assumes there must have been a noise, and so waits to see if it is repeated. There was nothing. I did not remember the dream I had just had until later. I have two memories of that night - that it was dark, and that when I looked down I could see Wolfram's face looking up at me, and his eyes were open. *When I looked down?* I had not realised until that moment that I was sitting bolt upright. I had no memory of sitting up, only of wakening.

I felt perfectly calm. I was not afraid. I never am when Wolfram is there. Until I opened my mouth and tried to speak. Then all hell broke loose.

I had a feeling of extreme terror, I was babbling words I could neither understand nor recognize, and my right hand was clawing at my mouth. There was also a thought, or message, in my head, saying *'It is something to do with being tied up and left here to die'*

God knows how Wolf felt. It was bad enough for me, coping with the terror and trying to gain control over my own voice, but

what was it like for him with his wife apparently going off her head?

When I could, I got up off the bed. I was shaking uncontrollably, was icy cold, and had difficulty remaining in charge of my voice. It was obvious I had been taken over by some spirit, and it took all my strength to resist it taking over my body.

I wrapped myself in a duvet and sat in a chair downstairs, trying to stop the shaking. Every so often it would stop and I would feel a little warmer. Then it would return, and with chattering teeth I asked for Wolf's help.

"Talk to it and ask it what it wants, and what happened to it," I stuttered out. But at that point he lost his head. He commanded it to depart, in very loud German, and it did. I knew it had left me, but I was sorry we had not found out more about it.

It was then I remembered that just before I woke up I had been having one of my 'subterranean' dreams, where I have to wrestle with a spirit in darkness. I have had these before, when asked to clear an evil influence from someone, or when a person has brought one with them to a tarot reading. Always in the past I have defeated the spirit and then woken up. This time, since I was woken out of the dream, the spirit must have won. For the first time ever.

"The trouble is," I told Wolf, "we don't know whether that is what happened to someone here (tied up and left to die) or if it is going to happen to us, and we can't take the risk. People know we're gone for two weeks, if someone broke in now and tied us up, no one would start looking for us, and we would be dead when they found us." Wolf agreed.

"As soon as it's light, we'll pack up and go," he said. "Thank God I brought the tent!" I saw then what a good idea this had been, and a tribute to his own psychic powers. But I still had another suggestion to make.

"I noticed as we came up the hill that there's a campsite," I said, "could we perhaps stay there, and come here to cook our meals? It would be a shame not to see this region." When you think of it, this was a really stupid idea, since the bandits, or thieves, or whoever were coming to tie us up, could just as easily come when we were cooking a meal as any other time! I think it

shows that I was still under the influence of the spirit, who perhaps wanted to keep me there.

“No way!” said Wolf, “I want to get right away from this place. I’m not stopping till we’re back on that main road.”

I had to agree he was right. But more was to come.

We were so afraid of that place that as soon as light came we started to pack, and we packed faster than we had ever done before! We were on the road and back at the baker’s at seven. My French was still a bit rusty, it was the beginning of the holidays, and I was searching for words as I handed him the keys.

“Monsieur,” I said, “here are the keys, I am sorry but we cannot . . .” he finished the sentence for me - “stay in the house - yes.” And took the keys in the most matter of fact way. This had obviously happened before! I tried again. I knew the owner had a house down on the coast, and it seemed a shame to trouble the family in England, with whom we had booked, when he was on the spot -

“Will you let Monsieur X know that his house is unoccupied?” The answer was a curt “Non,” as he let us know that this conversation was now closed.<sup>1</sup>

We cycled away down the road that led back to (we hoped) civilisation and normal life, but I was worried about leaving the house empty. Accordingly, when we saw a phone box I phoned England. I did not want to make a meal of things, and I did not want to ask for our money back. I felt we were on shaky ground when the problem was a ghost, and I suppose it helped that it was not our money anyway, so I merely reported the facts. They replied that they knew nothing of a ghost, which I do not believe for a moment. That baker had seen it all before.

I don’t know why we did not head west for Carcassonne, which after all I had wanted to see, but we never even considered it, by common accord heading east for the sea. We reached Lezignan-Corbières before nightfall, where there was a campsite. We set up house there - the bike trailer upturned made a table for the stove - this was our kitchen, and a convenient banking made a nice spot for my office! I used a little writing thing called a Psion - it cost us

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<sup>1</sup> *While writing this, I have searched for Le Sauté du Roland on Google Earth, and it is unbelievably far out from the village. You can see maps in Appendix A*

£300. You can get a whole computer for that now. Like everything else it went out of favour, and was consigned to history.



camp at Lezignan, me in 'office' in background, kitchen to right of tent.



We spent three days recovering from our ordeal in this lovely spot, and suffered no permanent ill effects, though the experience had shaken both of us. Leaving Lezignan, we continued east towards Narbonne, but not being fans of large towns, we diverted and made for the coast, without any clear idea where we were going.

It was then I realised Wolfram's eyesight had undergone further deterioration, and was getting

to the point of plain dangerous. I could see I was going to have to up my campaign to get a tandem, which he had always refused to

do. He had his pride. Even my offer to let him take the front seat, and continue shouting instructions from the rear (which he would at least be able to hear, not always the case in heavy traffic on solo bikes), did not sway him.

He was registered blind, of course, but had always managed well at navigating the bike. Earlier in the trip, he had told me he did not want to ride on the small backroads any more, which are what make cycling the pleasure it is. He was finding it difficult to see where he was going and preferred that we take the major roads in future, which was what we did en route to Narbonne. This was, for me, an absolute nightmare. On the country roads you have shade, for they are often lined with trees, but this he said was the problem. Coming out of bright sun and into shade, or vice versa, temporarily rendered him completely blind. But out on the main road, there was no shade at all, and it was getting damnably hot. Plus the noise of traffic all the time.

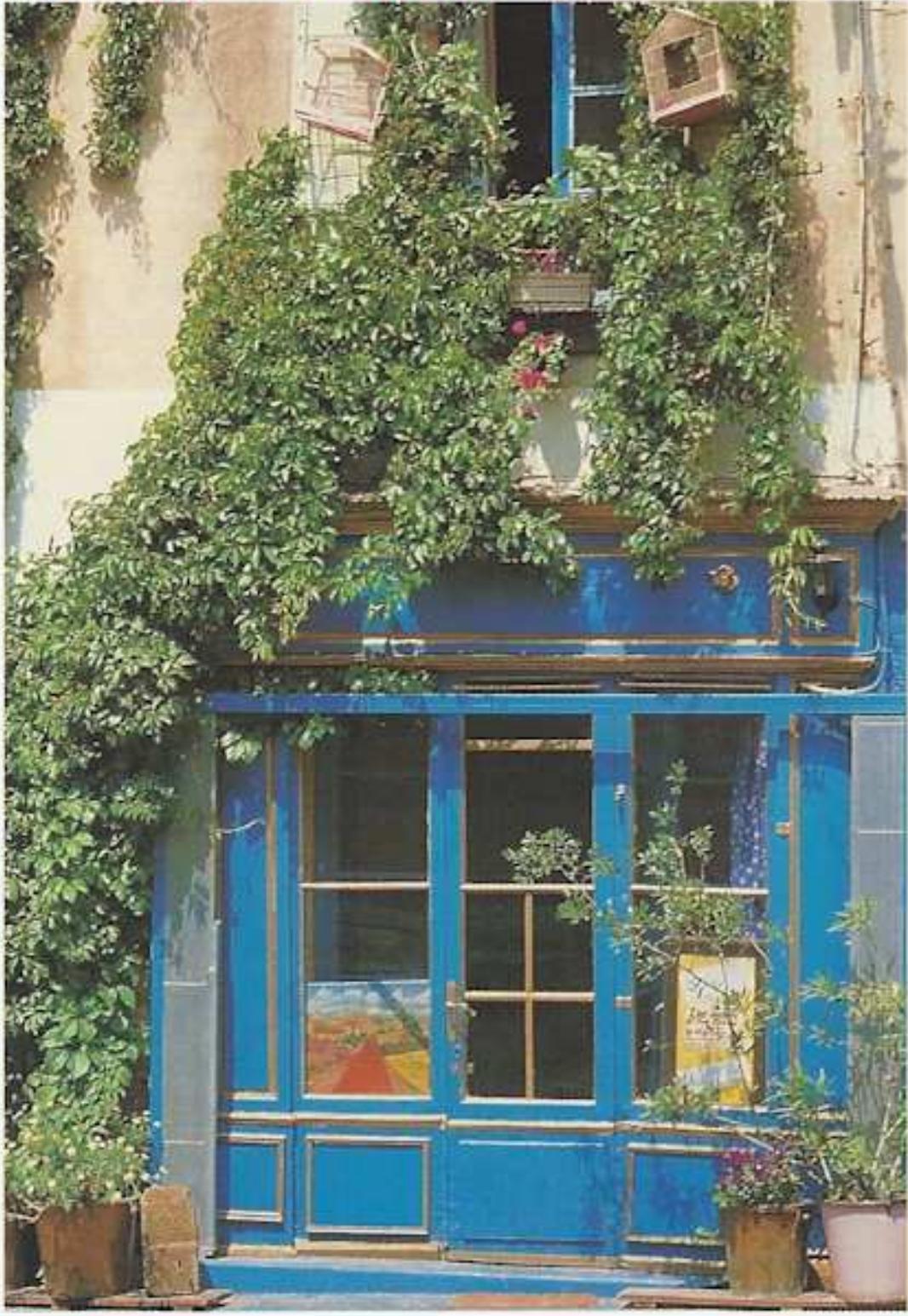
The point where I realised he was getting dangerous was when large lorries started coming alongside, and I noticed with horror that he was drifting towards them. As a cyclist you learn not to look at large vehicles, for precisely this reason. And it was happening to Wolf. The sooner we got off these main roads the better.

We needed a lunch stop along the way, and that was our first introduction to 'Bavette'. This is another regional dish, a sort of bastardized steak, not that pleasant. Pity we did not like it, as it turned out to be all that we could get in most places.

As we got nearer the coast, hotels and eating places got scarcer. There were signs advertising them everywhere, but all were closed. It began to dawn on me that the whole of France flocks to its south coast - but not until August. I reckoned that was the only time the place came alive and things opened up. Bad luck for us. We were getting hungry.

We hit the coast at a place called Bages, where I bought the charming postcard on the next page. We were now out of the roar of the traffic and into tranquil byways. Consulting the map I saw that there was a campsite at the next place, Peyriac de Mer, and we headed there. Unfortunately when we arrived the site had been taken over by a school for three days, and we were not allowed to stay. The next site was further down the coast, at Sigean, listed as an 'African Reserve'. We found a shop that sold food, and decided

## *Image du Midi*



to spend the rest of the day exploring Peyriac, and make for the campsite later.

## Enchanting . . .

There are some places you find in life that are special. You form an affinity with them and you wonder if perhaps you were there in a previous life. It was like that with Peyriac. Wolf and I simply fell in love with the place.



Peyriac is surrounded by *étangs* - or lakes, with wooden walkways like these (above) built into them. The map will help visualise it. There are more pictures on the next page.

1. Wolf on the road into Peyriac. He had very long hair at this time and it was curly.
2. View over the lakes from the top of a little hill.



The trailer behind the bike has all our camping kit and food supplies in it.



From behind, Wolf must have looked like a girl with his long, curly hair, albeit a very muscular one, because men overtaking us in cars often honked their horns at him - it wasn't me they fancied! I enjoyed watching their expressions change as they caught a look at him in their rear view mirrors! His beard was as long as his hair! Quite a shock for them!



We had lunch in this little cove, but had to retreat when the mosquitoes started biting!

### **The camp at Sigean . . .**

The camp had a swimming pool and a restaurant, neither of which were functional. It was the same story here as everywhere else, they only open in the ‘Season’. Which is not now. The only place you could pitch tents was the furthest point from the toilets. It was so far we actually had to use our bikes to ‘go’.

Although charming to look at, the pitches were as hard as concrete underfoot - it was like sleeping on someone’s drive! I was so stiff by morning, Wolf had to pull me out and lean me against a tree to warm up in the sun.

Since the restaurant was closed, we had to go looking for somewhere to eat. We were directed to cross the motorway and go up some steps on the other side. Once there, we found a kind of basic transport cafe where some very unsavoury individuals were hanging out, playing pool and drinking. It was the kind of place where you did not feel safe. The food was nothing to shout about either. The dreadful Bavette was the only hot item. We ate it.

On the way back Wolf was mutinous.

“I’m sick of this,” he said, “If I don’t get a decent meal soon I want to go home.” I felt much the same way.



**The camp at Sigean**

Next morning we had a conference. It was now Saturday. There would be a Bolero bus departing Narbonne at midday Sunday. We could be on it. We agreed the Med had not been a success. I for one missed the green. Everywhere was arid and dry. I couldn't think what people saw in the S of Fr and why they raved about it. Give me the Ardennes any time - where we finished up on our 95 trip - forest all the way.

“Let's give it a go,” said Wolf. “Come on, let's ring 'em up and see if there's a spare seat tomorrow.” We were incredibly lucky. They had room for us.

“This is getting to be a habit,” I said, “It's the second time we've gone home early.”

“Well,” said Wolf, “we can do what we like, can't we? Let's get back to that allotment, and some real life!”

### **Hotel de France**

We went back through Peyriac and had a good look round the town. We found a restaurant - guess what - closed! This cat looks as fed up as we felt!



We booked in at the Hotel de France - wonderful luxury!



In the evening we went out and found the streets of Narbonne full of music! Restaurants were also open! We tried the Mexican one, but the food was seriously lacking spices. I sent for the waiter:

“Shall I come in your kitchen and teach you how to cook Mexican food?” I said. “Where are the spices in this?” He shook his head.

“I am sorry, Madame, but if we made it too hot the French people would not eat it.”

“Thank God we didn’t go to that Chinese restaurant,” I said to Wolf, “The one called the Golden Baguette. Since when did the Chinese eat baguettes?”

But our stomachs were full, the evening was warm, the streets full of people enjoying themselves. We were happy.



Happy!



Next morning we were up early and had many hours before our bus came. We explored the town.

1. Wolf and bikes outside Cathedral

2. Orchestra in town square



Many more lovely pictures in the slide show!

**“This is not my country” . . .**

It’s a wonderful feeling when you’re in a strange land and the Bolero bus pulls up! You know you’re going home, and that’s a wonderful feeling. Whereas the journey out can be a bit of an ordeal, you can survive anything when you’re on the way home.

We crossed on the ferry, and when the bus pulled away at Dover, and I was looking out of the window at the English countryside, a voice in my head said,

“This is not my country.” I tried to dismiss it, but I had an uneasy feeling that the spirit from Lastours was still with me. It was a woman, I knew that much. I didn’t say anything to Wolf. Even if she was still there, she had given me no further trouble.

### **“But I don’t like brown” . . .**

When we got home, Wolf decided he wanted to panel the sitting room. We have only the one room and a kitchen downstairs, so it is our only sitting room, and it is where he has all his musical equipment, so in a sense it is his room. I work in my office upstairs, which was once the back bedroom, and we sleep in the front bedroom, cold and inhospitable.

“I want to panel it,” he said. I asked for more information.

“But it will look like a shed,” I said.

“No it won’t. Can I do it?”

“We’ll have to price it up first.”

We went to B&Q and worked out the price of the panels. I worked out that if we ran them horizontally instead of vertically it would be affordable. He made a start on the back wall, but it did not look right.

“The back wall can stay, but make the others vertical, like you wanted in the first place.” It cost a fortune but it looked good when it was done. To break it up, we covered the chimney breast in cork tiles, then varnished the whole lot over with the same wood stain, so it was a uniform colour. The panelling came up to the picture rail, and I suggested he put a narrow shelf along the top, to finish it off. We painted this a chocolate brown, as also the gas fire, central heating radiators, doors - everything was chocolate brown, while the panels had a warm golden tone.

When it was finished, I looked round. I thought it was great. Then something struck me -

“But I don’t like brown,” I said, “I’ve never liked brown since I had to wear it as school uniform.” What was going on? I somehow knew it was the ghost, creating the kind of surroundings **she** liked. Time for a quick visit to my hypnotherapist friend in the next street.

I told her the story.

“I think the ghost came home with me,” I said, “I think she has attached herself to me. What do you think I should do?”

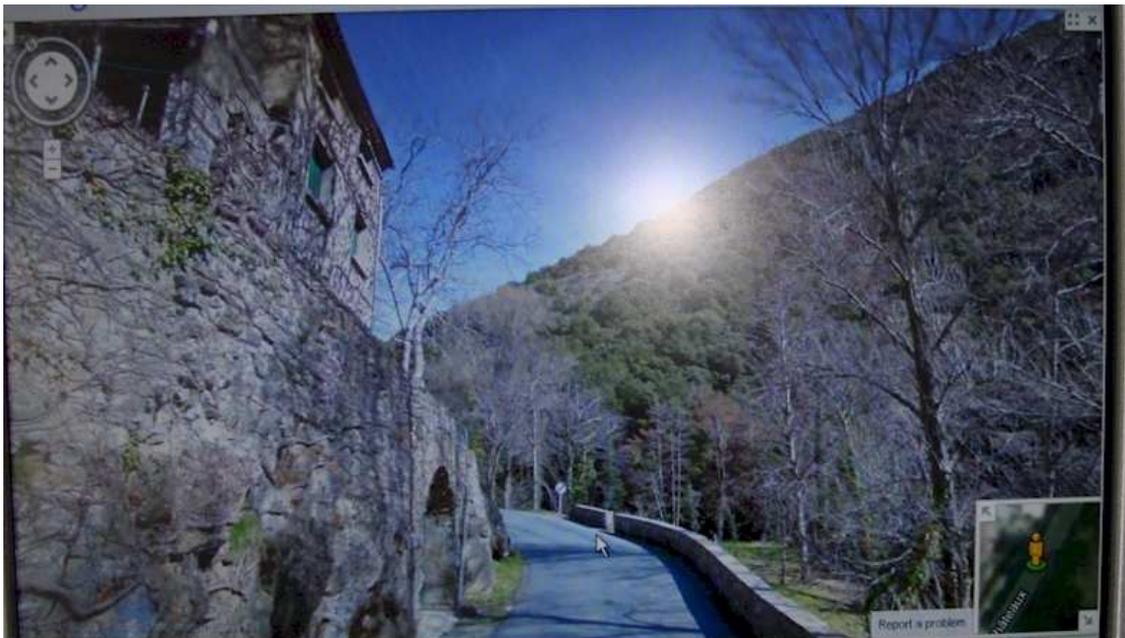
“How do you feel about her?” asked Iris.

“The way I look at it, she’s not doing me any harm, and so long as that’s the case, I’m inclined to leave her. If things change, I might have to think about getting rid of her.”

“I agree,” said Iris. “That’s exactly what I should do.”

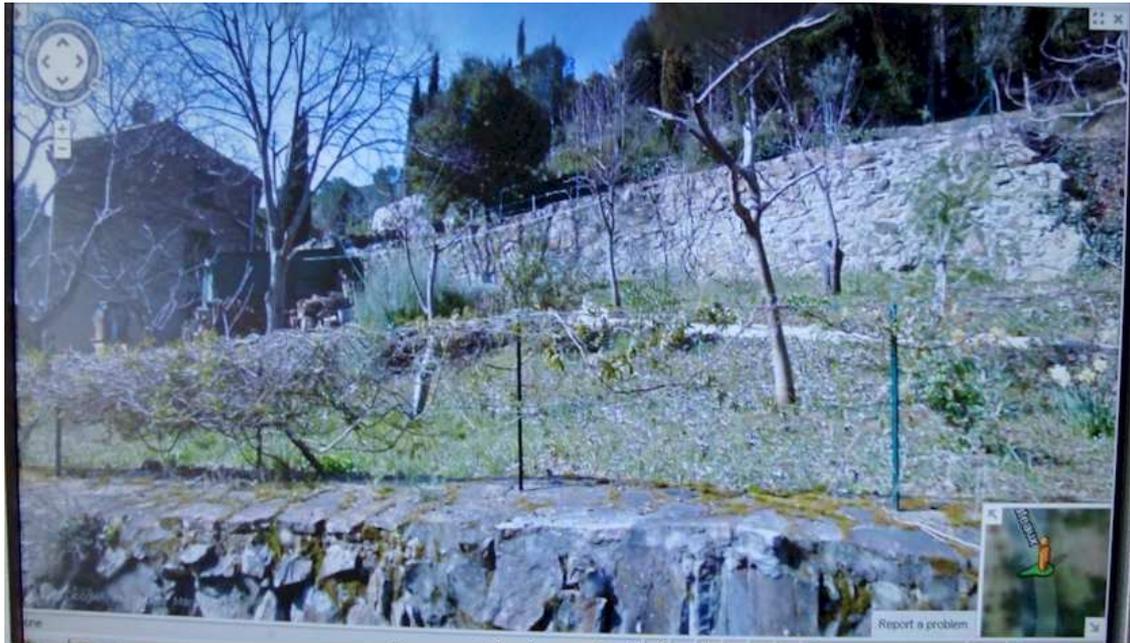
And so I came home from France with more than I bargained for. But now I’m writing this, it occurs to me that it was Wolf’s idea to do that panelling. So we must have been sharing her . . . only he never said! And it’s too late to ask him about it now.

## **Appendix A - maps of Lastours**



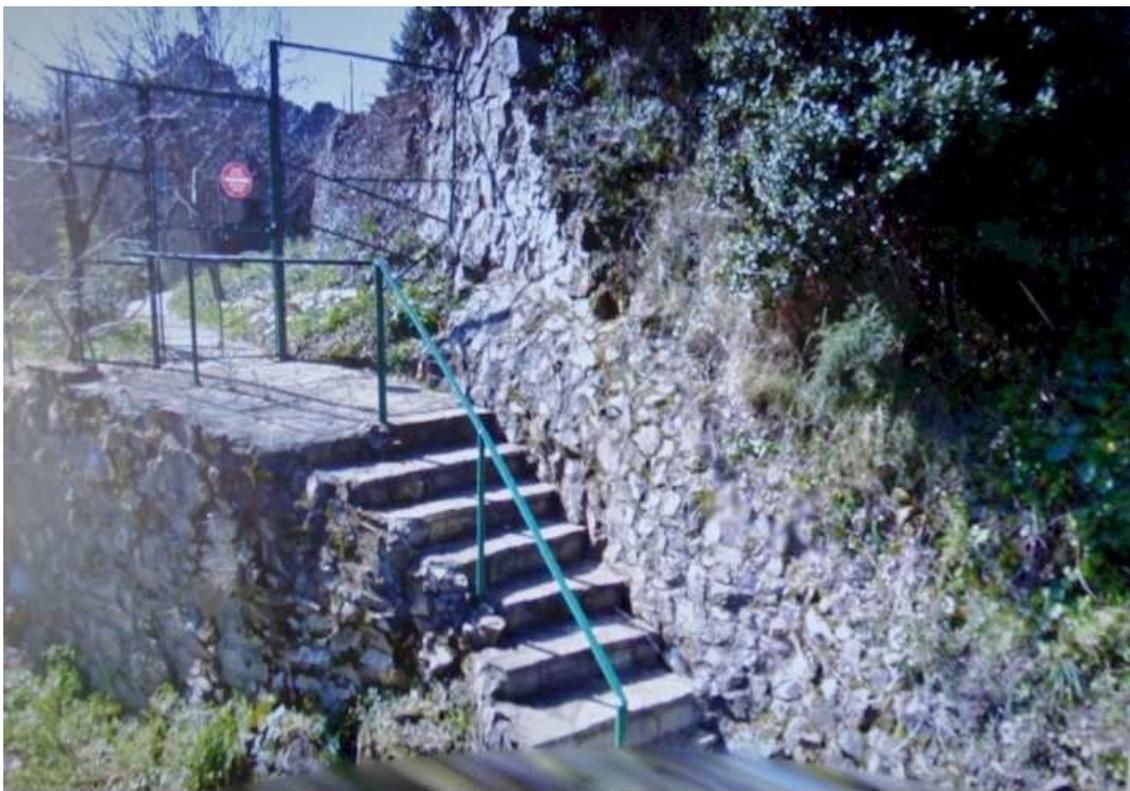
Le Saute du Roland identified on Google map

Compare this with the brochure picture of the house on page 7.



going past the house to find entrance

moving past the house, this was the fenced off garden.



the impenetrable gate

. . . and the gate we could not open!



Above - the lonely piece of road where the house is.  
Below - now look how far out from the village it is.



THE END