

Odd-essay or Saga MMVII

With our Motorbike and Sidecar, plus camping kit, Olé!
We set off across the Channel on the 29th of May.
It had been our intention to bumble around in France,
To enjoy scenery and nature (especially the plants.)

Just inland from Surtainville, at Bricquebec, we stayed that night.
The castle faces a small hotel, which suited us all right.
Though I practised carefully, my French, upon the waiter,
A bigger dictionary would have been handy, (then and later.)

To study local wildlife, we'd planned to stop in The Brenne --
There`s plenty of rare things there, (Paul Weston had given us `gen').
The weather decreed otherwise, the heavens chucked down rain:
Lots of things got rather wet: (the intercom didn't work again.)

Thundering down into my seat, the deluge poured without a check;
Then, very slowly, seeped along 'til it reached both feet and neck.
Luckily, at Chef Boutonne, to dry it all we were enabled
With clothes and seat by heaters, in our room (for the disabled!!)

In Rouillac's Roman Theatre, last year, we weren't allowed
They were setting up a concert and preparing for a crowd.
This time we went around the hill, and knew we'd got it right,
"Wear hard hats," said a notice on the fence, "keep out, building site".

We passed amongst the famous vineyards of St. Emilion,
With Chateaux that look very small, and grapevines by the billion,
Then into the Gascony region's huge, old, "Forest of Landes",
Hot and seemingly endless, with its trees in marshes and sand.

We were the only guests at Brocas; Chef couldn't have a break;
So, determined to show off his skills, produced Morels and Steak.
Small, elegant helpings, posies of flowering herbs on the fish,
(What waste to trail those sauces, in arty designs round the dish!)

We headed south for sunnier climes; the bike, it knew its way
Over the Larrau pass to Spain, on a lovely balmy day.
Cliffs sprouted white flowers, like ready-made bride's bouquets,
We found eight different orchids - it was one of those special days.

At Ochagavia, in Navarre, is a very old Hotel;
After several visits, we get on with its lady well.
She talked about interesting places that were not very far
And she wanted to ride, "Like a Duchess", in our sidecar.

She liked my flowery shirt and my wild orchid book;
I picked two common orchids, so she could have a look.
At home I wouldn't do it, but I thought, "for goodness sake,
There must be a thousand orchids drowned under their new lake"

It does give the impression that no-one seems to care
So I made her up a posy, (of flowers that are not rare)
As I gave them to her, I said "Just one little thing,
I think to pick them is illegal; Please, don't tell the King",

Next day we spotted, on the map, a peak with all-round view
TV mast marked on top (there must be a road for the crew)
"Right", said Dave, "let's go take a look, and have a wilderness play"
So up, up on the poor-surfaced road, rare flowers by the way.

Lake and gorge, we saw from the top, Vultures wheeling below.
Two young Germans, with parachute, watching, judging time to go
The vultures found a thermal; he threw himself into space;
When he was a dot, his girl drove off to find his landing place.

The Ebro valley's hot and dry, we called at a café
As soon as he'd taken our order, the owner rushed away,
Brought classic-bike mags. with our drinks, and, while we wet our lips,
He drooled all over our outfit whilst kissing his fingertips.

He photographed it (open and shut) said, "Fantastico!"
Those I will show my friends when I go to my "Club Moto".
Southwards we journeyed, across the plain and over the hills
Past hundreds of wind turbines --- "Quixotes" amongst the mills.

An old friend called the resorts of Spain the "Costa del Cemento."
We avoid them, but the *Mountains - they're* the reason we go.
Canyons with Vultures and Eagles, circling the cliffs above,
Sparkling rivers, with Dragonflies and flowery banks we love.

Baking, treeless country with thin, stony soil, called garrigue.
Although it looks so barren, it's full of plants that intrigue:
Aromatic shrublets, rosemary, juniper and pines
Mingle their perfumes with lavender, curry and thymes.

There's a limestone plateau, near Cuenca, thousands of feet high;
Water has worn, over eons, sculpted shapes to trick the eye.
The pavement's known as the "Sea of Stone" and rising from its floor
Are gigantic eroded rocks - (think, "Stonehenge meets Henry Moore".)

Made by watercourses, now vanished down to depths below,
The cracks and fissures in the rock are sites for plants to grow.
Pine trees, lilies and gladioli, plus orchids galore,
Snapdragons and sapphire-blue peas I'd never seen before.

While paused to "suss" out flowers, at a likely looking spot,
A couple from Germany came by and asked, "What have you got?
We saw you earlier on today, (We photographed your bike),
And we guessed that, as we do, it's the flowers that you most like".

We led them, in dappled shade, to the golden Wintergreens,
Showed them the spotted orchid and two different Helleborines.
They spoke to us in English; with our finds they were delighted;
Rare Wintergreens and Spanish orchids made them quite excited.

Whilst he lay upon the ground, with his camera close-up kit
I took a photo of him, suffering, like David doing his bit.
The most exciting flowers are always in prickles or marsh.
The way we treat our husbands, you must agree, is harsh.

Dainty purple orchids dotted a grassy, pine-forest glade
Then, on a slope above us, pink peonies glowed in the shade
And flowering amongst them, frilly, tall, pale, graceful and rare
The special "Orchis of Cazorla", - we'd never seen it there.

Tragacete's Hostal Serrania's a place that we know well
It's nice to be greeted by name, "Suzanne and PAPA NOEL!"
The granddad explained to us where the best flowers grow
And told about the butterflies, many years ago.

High above the village, where the Rio Jucar rises,
There, in a rocky valley, are botanical surprises.
Just see beside the water, pouring through the "Narrows of Hell",
Barbary, Monkshoods, Golden Garlic and great white Asphodel.

I saw the source, when I was ten, of the Yeo at Milborne Wick.
Seeing the birthplace of some great river still gives me a kick.
Jump across the Loire, step over the Tagus, sixty years on,
Or gaze upon orchids in the bogs at the head of the Garonne.

The many wild orchids of Europe have their roots in the ground:
"Frog" and "Butterfly", "Monkey" and "Lizard", are types that we have found.
In some of these, named for creatures, resemblance may be slight,
But in the "Bee" and "Spider" sorts, the name's absolutely right.

The main parts of their flowers can be ivory, pink or green,
But one big petal's brown and velvety, shaped round, like a bean.
They look so much like insects; the real ones are misled;
Attempting to find a mate, they pollinate orchids instead.

I've got quite good at spotting them at fifty miles an hour
(They often stand out as a perky, different, kind of flower)
But one uphill tramp, on a hot day, when I'd begged Dave to stop,
Revealed creamy flowers with a huge, real, bumble bee on top.

We found thirty different orchids, in marsh, garrigue and forest,
Including a freak plant, with two "spiders" on one floret.
You may think from these details, that by orchids I am obsessed;
But, I do assure you; they are not my only interest !!

Leaving Tragacete, heading (North) for Nuevalos,
The inviting end of a gravelly track we happened across.
Ready highlighted on our map, (we'd seen it years ago)
Surface now improved, it went (South East) by the Rio Tajo.

The track, thirty kilometres long, has some picnic sites
Midweek, we'd seen not a soul to share its scenic delights.
Halfway along, a police car arrived, coming from behind.
Two British tourists on three wheels they were surprised to find.

"WHERE are you going?" they asked, "To Molina, Senor", I called.
The driver rolled his eyes to heaven, looking quite appalled.
"You must go back," he counselled. "Molina's THAT way, you're wrong!"
I scrambled from the sidecar and took our battered map along

"We are not LOST, Senor", I said, "We know just where we are
We continue on this track until we meet the road with tar.
There we'll go left for Molina; here we study flowers and birds".
He shook his head in disbelief, the English are surely absurd?

I tried to buy cherries, from a lady at Nuevalos,
She said, "No, these are my present, safe journey, Adios!"
The bag was as big as my helmet, I can well recall,
It weighed about two kilos. (We took four days to eat them all.)

That same morning we climbed up, just North-East of Calatayud
To Roman city Bilbilis, (now looks like a hill of mud.)
The "diggers", to access the top, have bulldozed round and round,
Leaving lots of Roman debris lying on the ground.

They have crunched regardless, through buildings of stone and brick
There's thin red shards and part of a dish, two centimetres thick.
White marble chunks and some small bits, of plaster painted scarlet;
I wonder who chose the decor, Centurion or Harlot?

Happy days, on our way home, we spent in the Pyrenees.
There was no need to hurry and we'd only ourselves to please.
We climbed into France, along a bit, and back down into Spain,
Enjoying flowers and scenery, then over to France again.

The sky, most nights, looked threatening; it didn't seem wise to camp,
At L' Isle Jourdain, the Lake Hotel kept us from getting damp.
It was their restaurant's closing night; we said, " That doesn't matter,
We'll walk to town and dine" – Then the first rain began to splatter.

The proprietor kindly phoned and ordered a takeaway,
In double quick time, a Pizza van hurtled round our way.
We sat on the terrace and ate a huge, big "Marguerita",

And finished our Spanish cherries; none were ever sweeter.

Not far away, a thunderstorm was an awesome sight;
With sheets and forks of lightning lighting up the night.
We both enjoyed the spectacle, all mirrored in the lake,
And we sat there contented, 'til I could hardly stay awake.

While in Spain we'd met, an English couple, Sally & Len.
They have a house in France and invited us there, to meet again.
We were shy of ringing them, but concluded that, if they
Regretted their invitation, they'd tell us they'd be away.

After plucking up courage, we called them up on the phone,
Len said, "You're welcome, but Sal's away and I'm on my own"
Two nights we stayed at their lovely home, near the river Tarn,
And entertained each other, with many a traveller's yarn.

The nearby town of Cordes-sur-Ciel is truly "in the Sky".
The traffic's nearly all one-way -- it's easy to see why.
On three levels it's fortified, on a pointed, oval, mound;
Climb steep and narrow cobbled streets; you'll get a view all round.

There are many tiny alleys, steps and gateways through the wall,
At the summit, a church and ancient, timbered, Market hall.
Café tables in that market must be a money-spinner;
(Note the beams are netted, so pigeons can't bomb your dinner).

An insect bit my ring finger, which swelled up purple and fat,
A French wedding ring is called "Alliance" – (I had not known that.)
We went into the city, to find a jeweller, because
My ring must be cut off, before my circulation was.

The jeweller in Cahors was certainly a swish one,
With diamonds as big as grapes and a bell to gain admission.
From her manner, I could tell, she was used to different clients,
I paid her for a dreadful thing – she severed our alliance.

If you are ever passing near the valley of the Lot
I recommend you go and see the wondrous Pech-Merle "Grotte".
That Cavern is a marvel of natural formations,

Buy post cards and a guidebook to show friends and relations.

There're Stalactites and Stalagmites and Helictites that twist,
Like "temples", "curtains", "straws" and "waterfalls", not to be missed.
It's more than a kilometre to walk around its halls,
Known worldwide for the paintings on the ceilings and the walls.

How they must have revered that cave, twenty thousand years ago,
When artists from the ice age created their picture show.
On its walls and ceiling, between the `stal' formations,
In charcoal and red ochre are lively decorations.

Painted using spongy moss, frayed sticks or tufts of hair,
Outlined there are Mammoth, Ibex and Bison, Reindeer and Bear.
Oxen, fish and women, stencilled hands and rows of dots,
Plus two delightful horses, covered in "Rocking-Horse" spots.

Six hundred metres in, within the limestone mountainside
The long series of galleries and passages divide.
What drove artists to paint in such an inaccessible spot?
So far from the daylight, by the glow of fires or fat in a pot?

The shiny, slippery rocks made it so difficult to access,
Who ever saw the paintings? Who were they done to impress?
Now, chopped through Stalagmites, are steps, handrails, lights and a bridge:
I felt, as I followed the crowd, "I'm committing sacrilege".

We met a friendly Dutchman with his charming, happy, wife.
Else, who speaks six languages, enjoys her last few months of life.
She spoke about her family and how she loved to dance,
She and her husband were travelling, knew it may be the last chance.

The fire brigade, or "Pompier", in all French fire stations,
Are paramedics, summoned first to trauma situations.
In the early hours of the morning they were called to our hotel,
They rushed Else to a city hospital, she was so unwell.

After treatment, she returned to the hotel the next night,
"I'd like to take a little walk," she said, "I shall be all right."

As the four of us sauntered along, the "Pompier" drove by,
They hooted when they saw her; she went and kissed each one goodbye.

Next Sunday morning we broke camp, set off once more for the Brenne
Happily, we did not know, fate had other ideas, again.
The motor missed a beat and later cut out altogether
To complicate our problems was a worsening of the weather.

Several times this happened, with difficulty restarted,
But we had a sinking feeling; she was somewhat half-hearted.
From rain a tourist office saved us; we asked the girls inside
To book us a Hotel, which we reached just as the engine died

Dave examined all the wires and junctions underneath the tank,
"Phoned a friend" (Who is an expert) did more tests, but drew a blank.
Which new "black box" it needed, could not be told at a glance,
Such spare parts for our old classic were unlikely in all France.

He rang the breakdown insurers; then re-assembled it all,
Reorganised our things and awaited the answering call.
Tent and riding kit were packed, in sidecar, out of the rain -
Didn't know how long 'twould be before we saw it all again.

We had nearly four days to reach the channel coast,
But couldn't take much luggage, so had to choose what we'd need most.
There was a carrier bag and top box, into which we had to crush,
Clothes, maps, phone and paper work - with just room for each toothbrush.

They sent a great big lorry, long enough to take a bus
Drove off to La Roche Posay, with sidecar outfit and us.
To get the electrics sorted out we knew there was no chance
So our lovely sidecar-outfit was left behind, in France!

Spent four hours at the garage, waiting for "rescue" to ring
At 7pm the garage closed; we hadn't learnt a thing;
A mechanic took pity and booked us an hotel,
And through the kindness of his heart, delivered us as well.

Guidebooks say La Roche Posay is a town with ancient walls

But we can't go and look, we're stuck, waiting for rescue calls.

At 11am they tell us a taxi will be sent,

To take us to another town and a car that we can rent.

At 5.15 a taxi arrived, (We had agreed to pay)

Then we learnt, to our concern, the car's fifty miles away.

We had to give Dave's details, on the fading mobile 'phone

To the car rent people, it was time for them to go home.

The French, when listing numbers, do not say "nine, two, seven, one"

But want them quoted, paired, like ninety-two, seventy-one,

And that's four twenties-twelve and then sixty-eleven (too much!)

At school we didn't talk of credit cards, licences and such.

The kindly taxi driver girl sorted questions out all right,

"The car key's left at a café" (Hertz had closed for the night).

We found the Opel Corsa in the middle of the city

I thought, "I've got to navigate; heaven, on me take pity"

How selfish was that thought of mine, though we had no chart,

Big cities always frighten me -- a country girl at heart.

To navigate will be the same; I ought to manage well,

I should think of David only - the driving will be hell!

Evening sun was behind us, where WE were I wished I knew,

Must be facing east - EUGH! So many streets in Chateauroux.

Several stations on our map, had to guess which one was ours,

I thought it very likely we'd be driving around for hours

Dave had to extricate the car from a very small "hole"

In front, - a `Versailles tractor'- behind - a telegraph pole!

Well used to driving on the right, of his bike he's now bereft;

You can't change gear with the armrest when your seat is on the left.

He eased the cursed Corsa out onto the big ring road,

We didn't get honked at often, but our nervousness, it showed.

Headed north on the road to Blois, there one could cross the Loire:

Crossing there would be no fun in an unfamiliar car.

We reached a hotel at Contres without a contretemps,

Then re-designed our journey, many kilometres long.
Next day, northwest to Chaumont and we crossed the river there;
We, at all costs, avoid Le Mans, so picked our route with care.

I had to explain, that evening, when we'd returned to Bricquebec,
That the bike had merely broken down and it was not a wreck!
It left us just a short trip to Cherbourg on the morrow;
To leave that car, though our salvation, would not be any sorrow.

After five days of hassle, we thankfully boarded the boat,
And to hear Dorset accents again brought a lump to my throat.
So, with no motorbike and sidecar or camping kit, the Boon
At last reached home in a taxi on the twenty second of June.

Grateful thanks must go to my chauffeur, roadie and financier,
And after all this, I hope he thinks, "*I STILL FANCY HER!!!*"

Epilogue

Three weeks after we had left it, at La Roche Posay,
Our sidecar outfit reappeared, (Kit and paint intact,) Hooray!
The faulty component Dave traced, after much endeavour,
Now with a replacement, she's going as well as ever.

Total miles: - 2889 (Bike 2946 @ 45mpg, Breakdown 10, Taxi 107, Car 380.)

Wells - Poole 57 miles

Ferry to Cherbourg

FRANCE

Bricquebec 17 Hotel le Donjon 91 euros (Nice use again)

La Flèche 184 Le Vert Galant 110

Chef Boutonne 146 Hotel des Voyageurs 91 (Much improved, English)

Brocas 180 133

SPAIN

Ochagavia 122 Hostal Orialde 90 (Nice good welcome)

Nuevalos 214 Las Rumbas 77 (Better than usual Hotel)

Tragacete 115 Pension Serrania 78 per night (Two nights, great welcome,

Tragacete 75 as usual!)

Nuevalos 152 Las Rumbas 77

Ochagavia 204 Hostal Orialde 86 each night

Ochagavia 92 Local potter, see new lake

Ainsa 166 Hostal dos Rios 94 (OK town Hostal, use again, same name
Adjoining Hotel more expensive)

FRANCE

Isle Jourdain 157 Hostellerie du Lac 62 plus Pizza (Nice ordered Pizza Res. closed)

St. Antonin-Noble-Val 111 camp plus meal 40

Milhavet 44 With Len Parsal (Nice house good welcome)

Milhavet 0 Car to Cordes (Meal for three 56, cheap two nights!)

Cabrerets 96 Hotel Auberge de la Sagne 106 each night

Cabrerets 91 (Pech-Merle Grotte, Else the Dutch lady)

St. Germain les Belles 123 Camp plus meal 56

Tournon St Martin 111 Auberge du Capucin Gourmand 104 (Nice old hotel)

La Roche Posay Hotel L'Esplanade (Nice, helpful, go back to thank and see town)

Contres Hotel de France 105 including meal in village

Bricquebec Hotel le Donjon 91

Cherbourg - Ferry to Poole, Taxi home

Average half board including wine coffee 79 euros. (£56.40 for two)