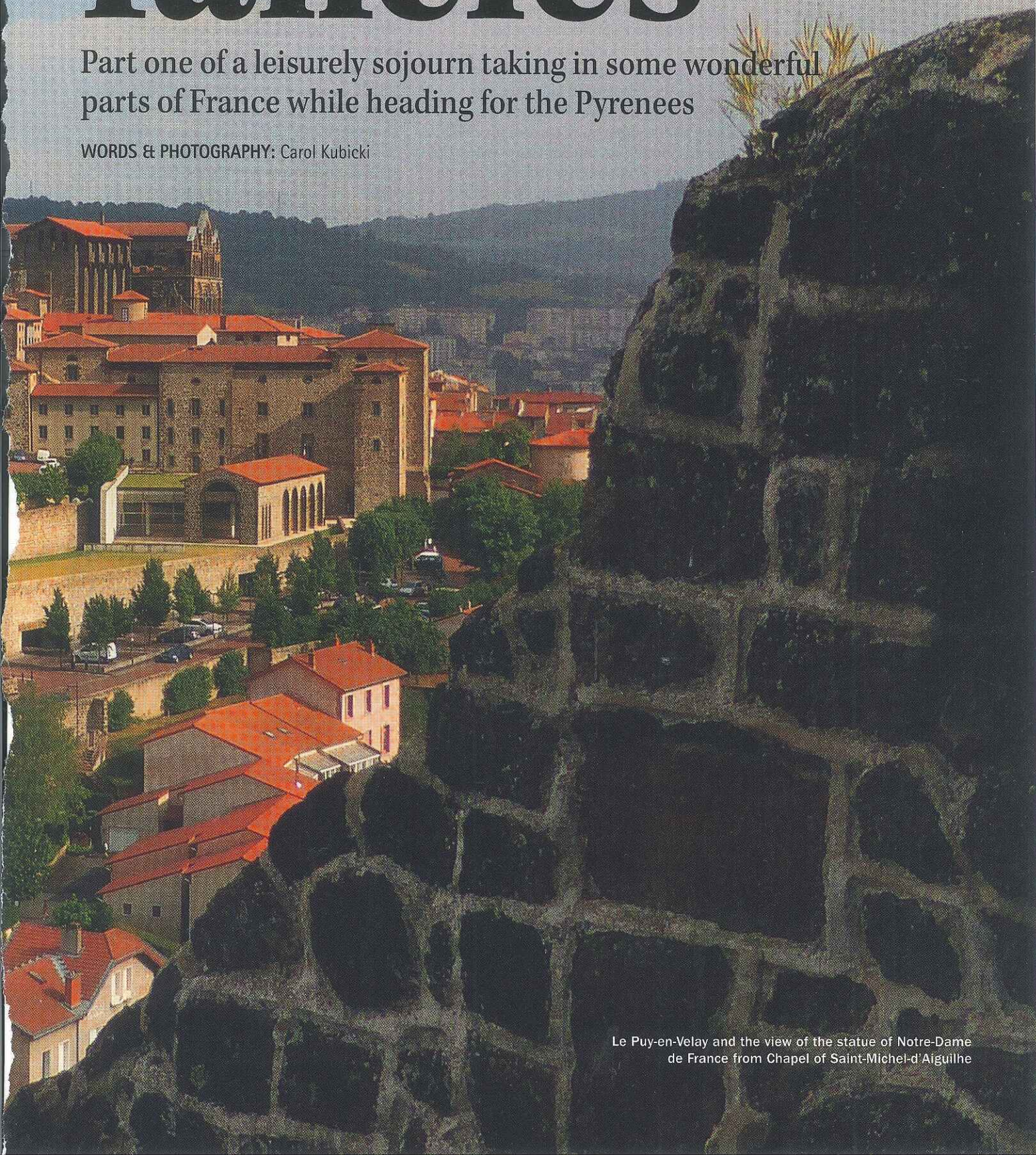


French **fancies**

Part one of a leisurely sojourn taking in some wonderful parts of France while heading for the Pyrenees

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



Le Puy-en-Velay and the view of the statue of Notre-Dame de France from Chapel of Saint-Michel-d'Aiguille



Carol Kubicki...

...and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Sundowner to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

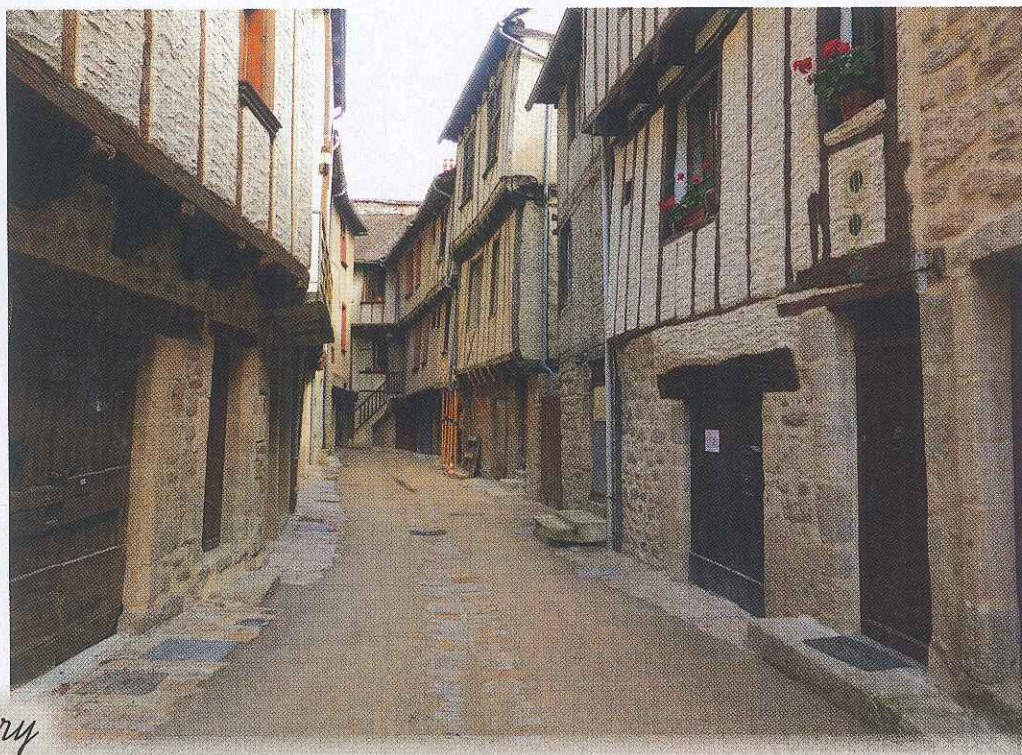
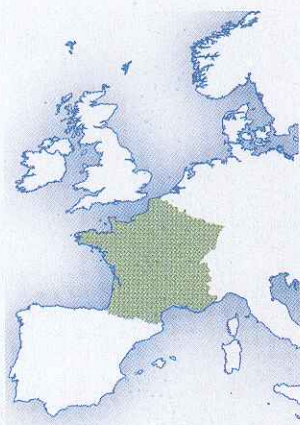
It was all about timing. We wanted to combine three things: making best use of the ACSI low season discount card on campsites; celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary; and getting to the Pyrenees when most of the snow had gone. A clockwise circuit around France in June fitted the bill for the three-and-a half-week holiday time we had.

Living in Greater Manchester, the Hull to Zeebrugge ferry is the most relaxed way for us to get to mainland Europe. I had a new toy to help on the trip, a tablet with OsmAnd navigation software. As well as finding the way, OsmAnd found parking spots, supermarkets and places of interest, so lunch on our first day was in the tranquil setting of Vauclair Abbey, a ruined Cistercian abbey about 15km (9.32 miles) south of Laon.

I was intrigued by a nearby road marked

Chemin des Dames (ladies' path). It follows the ridge between the valleys of the Aisne and Ailette rivers and had originally been surfaced to make the journey between Paris and Château de Boves, near Vauclair, easier for the daughters of Louis XV. The paved road also helped Napoleon's army in the Battle of Craonne in 1814. As there were several major battles along this strategically-important route during WWI, there are cemeteries and monuments to see along the way.

During the evening on the municipal site in Sézanne in the Champagne-Ardenne region, I played with OsmAnd's settings and we set off confidently next morning. A mistake soon became apparent as roads became narrower and OsmAnd took us deeper in to the Forêt de la Traconne. A locked gate blocking our way sealed what we had suspected. It seems the shortest



Our trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2007 Devon Sundowner on VW T5 2.5TDI 130bhp. Our 2-berth VW T5 is called the Blue Bus. The great design makes good use of the small space that suits an active couple



2007 Devon Sundowner

THE JOURNEY

We drove from Greater Manchester to Hull for the overnight P&O Ferries crossing to Zeebrugge and, eventually, on to Entraygues-sur-Truyère. We spent 12 nights on sites

THE COSTS

Fuel average 32mpg	£115
Ferry P&O Ferries Hull to Zeebrugge return with evening meals	£466
Site fees (most with ACSI discount)	£109
Tolls	£14
Attractions Rocher Saint-Michel d'Aiguilhe	£5.60

820 miles

Total £709.60

TOP TIP

We used the ACSI Camping Card guide and DVD and the Caravan Club Caravan Europe book for France

route isn't always the quickest!

Navigation issues aside, France was turning out to be perfect for our type of touring. After a leisurely breakfast in the sunshine, we would drive in stretches of no more than two hours before finding somewhere interesting to stop for lunch and to stretch our legs.

A riverside stop in Auxerre provided another good rest stop. We picnicked on the banks of the Yonne and strolled around the pretty town with its narrow streets, cafés and timber-framed houses.

We were heading for the Morvan Regional Natural Park and the town of Lormes in the heart of this wild and wooded area and our timing was perfect; the town was celebrating Pentecost with a fair and was pleasantly lively. The campsite is set on a small lake, l'étang du Goulot, which is popular for fishing, swimming and boating.

Armed with a sketch map of the Gorges de Narvau, on the edge of the town, we set off for a walk. The gorge is wooded and rocky and we returned to Lormes along a lane of picturesque watermills.

We walked up the hill to the church and this lofty position was also the site of the evening firework display, which we sat and watched from the cemetery wall, along with the locals. Lormes' covered market is charming and there is also a Thursday market and a monthly producers' market.

I often find touring a learning experience that surpasses any classroom tuition. Following signs for le Monument de l'Émeraude in Corbigny, we found a brutal concrete memorial with interpretation boards telling the story of the Dewoitine D.332 Émeraude. This was a three-winged aircraft which set the speed record from Paris to Saigon in the 1930s. It crashed on ►


BELOW LEFT Timber-framed houses in Entraygues-sur-Truyère

BELOW Auxerre and boats on the River Yonne




INFORMATION


**For Morvan Regional
Natural Park**

 tourisme.parcdumorvan.org


For le Puy-en-Velay

 ot-lepuyenvelay.fr

**For La Bourboule and the
Massif du Sancy area**

 auvergne-sancy.com

For Chaudes-Aigues

 chaudesaignes.com

the return flight and there are 10 plaques, one for each passenger and crew member who died.

The Auvergne in the Massif Central is well known for Michelin, cheese and the Chaîne des Puys, a line of extinct volcanic cinder cones and lava domes. I was keen to explore these fascinating features.

The Puy-de-Dôme, at 1,465m (4,806ft) above sea level, is the highest point of the Chaîne des Puys. It is also the most visited site of the Auvergne region, with half-a-million people climbing to the top each year.

You can get to the summit by taking the Panoramique des Dômes rack railway or by walking. The most popular route is le Sentier des Muletiers (mule path). Either way takes you to a spectacular viewpoint cluttered with buildings, a café and a restored Roman temple. To avoid some of the half-a-million people, we walked up in the early evening. In the slightly cooler air and soft evening light, our only companions on the track were runners.

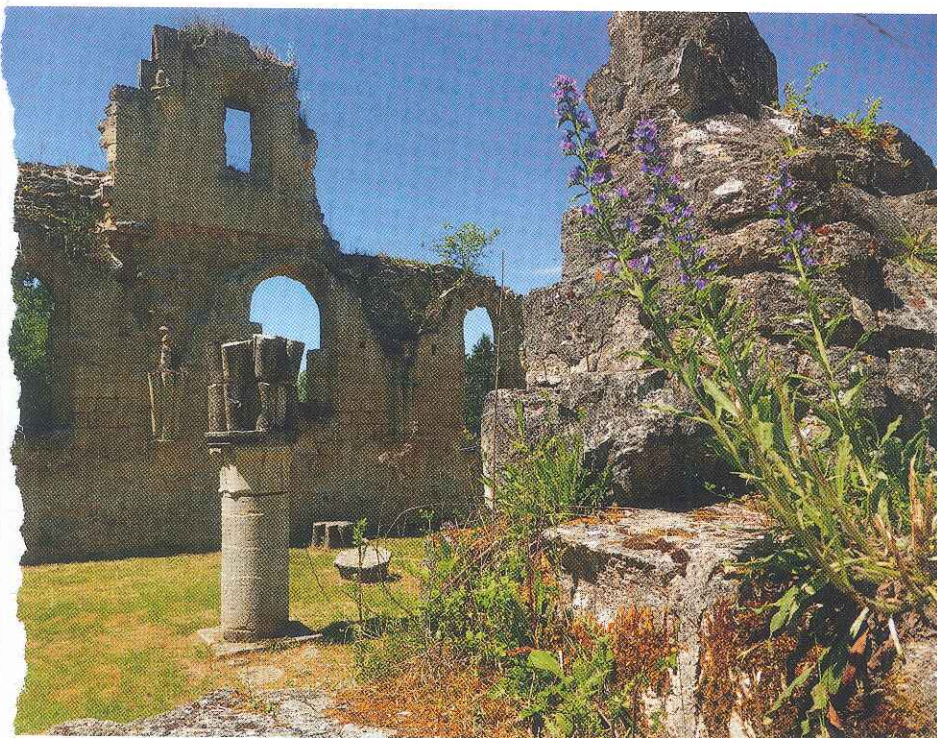
We lingered longer than intended in the Auvergne. Although the best view is undoubtedly from the large roadside car park, we spent a day walking around the Roche Tuilière and Roche Sanadoire.

These spectacular volcanic crags are superb examples of symmetrical basalt columns, a pattern mirrored in the grey roof tiles of local farmhouses. After scrambling around the rocks, we took a lane through the woods behind Roche Tuilière and passed a small monastery with just two black habits hanging on the line to dry.

Moving south, we camped on the hillside above the charmingly-faded spa resort of La Bourboule and the upper Dordogne River. We explored the lovely town and had a day walking on La Banne d'Ordanche, where only sheep shared the rocky summit with us.

Other remnants of the volcanic activity are the spa towns, where warm water emerges straight from the ground. This was a reminder that, not very far below, is a boiling mass of magma, nearer in some





“Distraction came in a **colourful** array of stalls full of the **interesting** mixture of antiques and bric-a-brac”

spots than others. We stopped in Saint-Nectaire, a village strung along the valley and famous for a sharp, semi-soft cheese.

Chaudes-Aigues is the spa town to beat them all. Here the spring water emerges at 82°C and is the hottest in Europe. Even on a sweltering afternoon there was steam rising from the constantly gushing and unguarded tap in the village centre outside the Geothermia museum. The ancient lavoir (washhouse) is also fed by spring water and appeared to be still in use. It was tempting to stay and do our washing!

Le Puy-en-Velay is famous for green lentils and has surely the most bizarre and theatrical townscape in all of France. Imagine *Star Trek* meets *Monty Python*. Le Puy has three rocky volcanic protrusions, each one topped with a religious building or statue and providing a superb view over the town. We paid to climb the 268 steps up one of the craggy lava peaks to the atmospheric Chapel of Saint-Michel-d'Aiguilhe.

Chatting to a regular visitor back at the campsite, we learnt that the next day was Le Puy's Saturday morning market. We could have stayed even longer in the Auvergne but, if we were going to reach the Pyrenees, we needed to move on.

We left with enough local produce to

sustain our memories and our Blue Bus set off south across the wild high country of the Margeride. We were following the route of the Christian pilgrims with their bulging backpacks heading for Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

The municipal site at Entraygues-sur-Truyère, at the confluence of the Lot and Truyère rivers, turned out to be too good for a one night stand and detained us for a few days. Our timing was perfect, once again.

Walking across the pedestrian bridge over the River Truyère on our first morning to buy our breakfast bread should have taken 10 minutes, but distraction came in a colourful array of stalls full of the interesting mixture of antiques, bric-a-brac and car boot sale that is a French *brocante*.

The Tourist Information in Entraygues should win awards, with a well-organised section showing all the walking and cycling leaflets which could be bought for just 50 cents (36p) each. I chose number nine, a 13.5km (8.38 miles) walk up the steep-sided valley and was then offered the leaflet in English. This meant that I didn't have to rely on my patchy French to navigate.

We followed tracks and lanes through varied woodland and ate tiny wild strawberries. Each sunny spot was alive ►

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Vauclair Abbey, a Cistercian abbey about 15km south of Laon and a good, short stop; Le Puy-en-Velay's lively and colourful market; Panoramique des Dômes rack railway

LEFT Camping Le Val Saures, Entraygues-sur-Truyère



WE STAYED AT

Campsite Sézanne, Route de Launat, 51120 Sézanne

☎ 0033 326 805700

🌐 sezanne-tourisme.fr/
Municipal-Camping-
Sézanne

📅 1 April – 30 September

£ Two adults, pitch and
electric: €11.31 (£8.18)

**Camping de l'Etang du
Goulot**, 58140 Lormes

☎ 0033 386 228237

🌐 campingetangdugoulot.com

📅 1 May – 30 September

£ Two adults, pitch and
electric: From €13 (£9.39)

Camping Les Dômes, Les
Quatre Routes de Nébouzat,
63210 Nébouzat

☎ 0033 473 871406

🌐 les-domes.com

📅 25 April – 4 October

£ Two adults, pitch and
electric: From €19
(£13.72)

Le Panoramique, Le Pessy,
63150 Murat-le-Quaire

☎ 0033 473 811879

🌐 campingpanoramique.fr

📅 7 February – 30 September

£ Two adults, pitch and
electric: From €17.05
(£12.34)

Camping de Bouthezard, 1
Chemin de Bouthezard, 43000
Aigulhe

☎ 0033 471 095509

🌐 aquadis-loisirs.com/
camping-de-bouthezard

📅 3 April – 25 October

£ Two adults, pitch and
electric: From €14.25
(£10.28)

Camping Le Val Saures, Saures,
12140 Entraygues-sur-Truyère

☎ 0033 565 445692

🌐 camping-valdesaures.com

📅 1 May – 30 September

£ Two adults, pitch and
electric: From €11 (£7.93)

ABOVE The town of Lormes in
the Morvan

BELOW LEFT La Bourboule spa
town on the River Dordogne

BELOW RIGHT Marbled white
butterfly above the Lot valley

with butterflies and grasshoppers. As we climbed higher, the trees gave way to hay meadows that had been cut and baled.

At the high point we encountered a stooped, elderly lady herding goats and sat among the flowering heather with a fantastic view across the Lot valley, the Puy-de-Dôme distinctive on the horizon.

An easy cycling option from Entraygues is along the flat and quiet D107 on the north bank of the river Lot. We cycled a 30km (18.64 mile) round trip to Vieilleville but if

you have more energy, a further 14km (8.7 miles) would get you to Coursavy.

Vieilleville has a small château, a picnic site and an attractive aire. A few kilometres short of Vieilleville is a café and canoe centre, another popular local activity.

The cycling left us with enough energy to follow the old town trail around the restored medieval timber-framed houses with corbelling features supporting the upper floors, covered passageways and the old port.

What I liked about Entraygues was that, despite the photogenic vestiges of the medieval town and the strategically-placed château at the convergence of the two rivers, it wasn't a museum piece; people lived and worked here.

Lingering in Entraygues meant that our time here coincided with the day of our wedding anniversary.

What better way to celebrate than with a meal on the terrace of a hotel in the town's pretty Place de la République, toasting 30 years of happiness with a wonderful bottle of house red?

But, time flies and we had little time for reminiscing as we really did have to get a move on to the Pyrenees... **MMMM**

