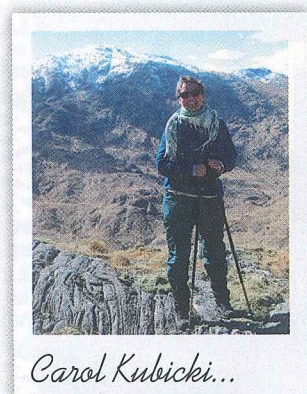


Falling for FRANCE

Part two of stocking up with wonderful memories on this clockwise tour to the French Pyrenees

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



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

After taking our time in the Auvergne and the delightful Lot valley, we pointed the 'Blue Bus' in the direction of the mountains and into the Midi Pyrénées region, an area renowned for bastides, walled towns from the Middle Ages, built to a regular grid-pattern of streets, with a central marketplace.

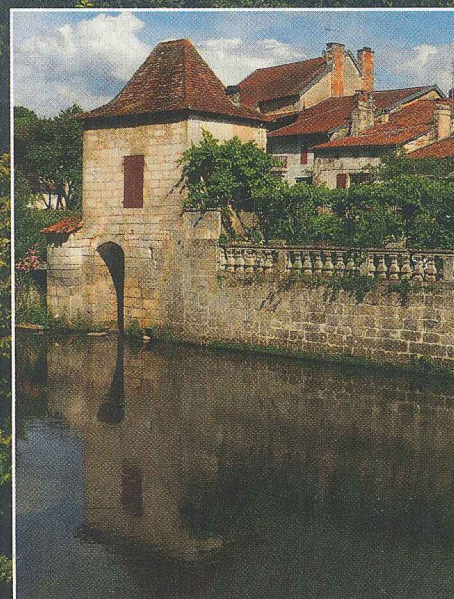
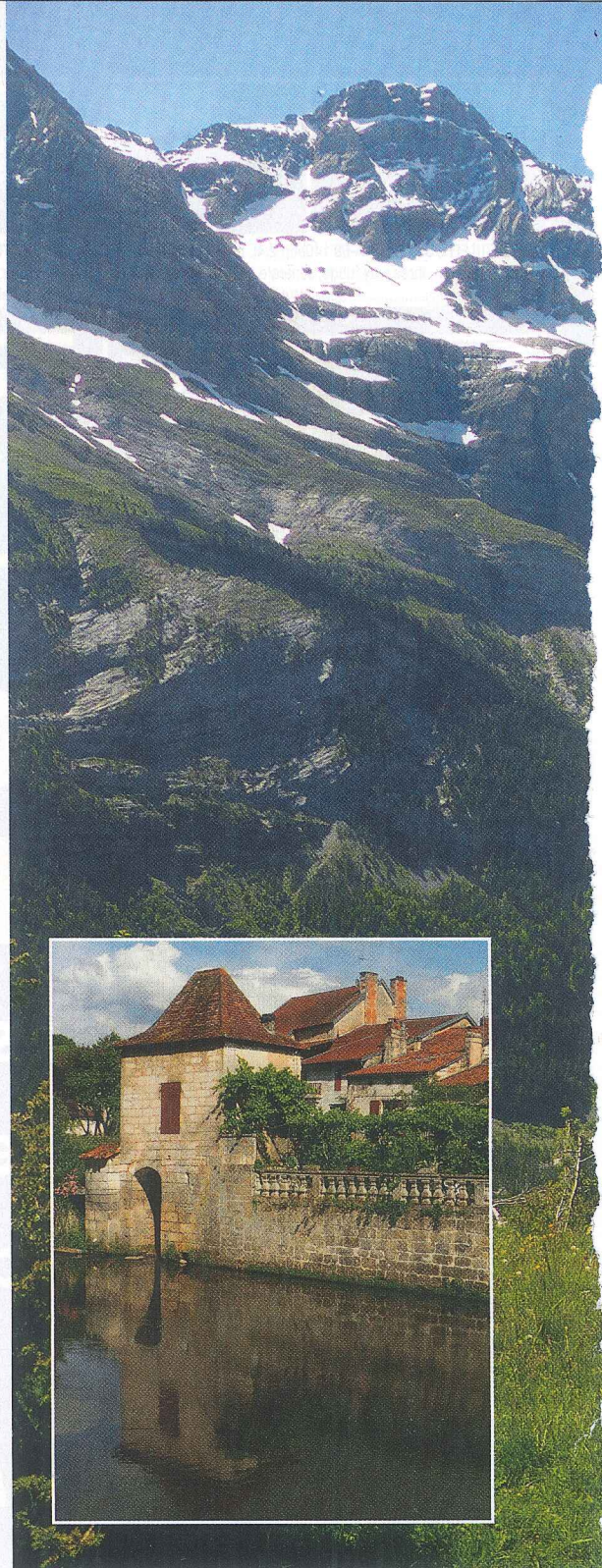
Our route passed Cordes-sur-Ciel, a pristine example perched on a hill, with plenty of parking outside the town walls. Walking through the town, along steep, cobbled streets in the midday heat, I marvelled at the beauty of the apricot-coloured stone glowing in the sunshine, the pots of flowers and the spectacular views glimpsed down alleyways.

At the top, surrounded by the bustle of shops selling arts and crafts and cafés, stands a remarkable, large, covered market hall. The history of Cordes is one of boom and bust: the town initially grew rapidly, necessitating building of new walls to accommodate the growing population.

In the fifteenth century the woad dye industry created prosperity, as well as unpleasant smells. Hardship came when the Canal du Midi trade route bypassed the town. Fortunes then returned with industrial silk embroidery.

During WWI the women of Cordes produced silk-embroidered postcards which soldiers sent to their sweethearts and the last embroidery works produced the famous Lacoste crocodiles. After 1945, the town became a hangout for artists and, in 1993, the name was upgraded to Cordes-sur-Ciel. The name symbolises the mist that can surround the hilltop in spring and autumn, looking as if it is above the clouds.

With time just on our side, we at last had the Pyrenees and Gavarnie in our sights. At



RIGHT Cirque de Gavarnie

INSET Brantôme and the River Dronne

1,375m (4,511ft) above sea level, Gavarnie is a pleasant mountain resort with a large aire and a basic campsite. Le Pain de Sucre, an idyllic, well-kept site, is about 3km (1.8 miles) away.

The natural amphitheatre of Cirque de Gavarnie was the reason for our visit; it is part of the Unesco World Heritage Site. My first glimpse of it took my breath away; the scale of the 6.5km (four mile) wide cirque – inside which is Europe's largest waterfall – is magnificent.

The direct route to the cirque is a lovely half-day excursion through meadows and ➤





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 Setting off from the Lot valley, we spent 12 nights on sites in this second part of our 26-day trip around France

THE COSTS


Fuel average 32mpg	£205
Ferry P&O Ferries Hull to Zeebrugge return with evening meals	£466
Site fees	£177
Tolls most of this was the 250km section from Saumur to Chartres	£42
Attractions Two adults: Abbaye de Flaran and La Collégiale Saint Pierre (€20)	£14.93

1,460 miles

Total £904.93

TOP TIP

Check out the Voies Vertes cycle routes when in France

 voiesvertes.com

woodland, with plenty of places to leave the track and find a quiet riverside picnic spot, the impressive view of the cirque constantly in front of you. The trail extends to the Hostellerie du Cirque and can be crowded with people and donkeys carrying those who cannot manage the walk.

We decided to take a longer hike up a good stony path to the Plateau de Bellevue, an alpine meadow on the west flank of the valley. Here we luxuriated in solitude, soaking in the stunning views across the valley to the cirque, with a blue sky backdrop and snow on the rocky ledges. Undoubtedly, this was the best picnic spot of our trip. When I could tear my eyes away from the panorama I watched the acrobatic Alpine choughs and was treated to a display by a griffon vulture.

Vultures soared on the thermals and the pasture was full of flowers and alive with butterflies and insects. The tempo of our lives had slowed after two weeks on holiday and we sat taking in the vista for hours.

However, we had a circular walk planned and eventually followed a narrow path down, through shady pine and beech woodland. We crossed a narrow footbridge over the stream and joined the main trail just before the Hotellerie du Cirque. From inside the cirque, the vastness of the space and the mighty power behind the waterfall could truly be sensed.

After filling our lungs with fresh mountain air we returned to the heat of the valley and chose Camping les Trois Vallées in Argelès-Gazost. This site has a complex of swimming pools and unisex facilities that put our bathroom at home to shame.

It is also next to one of France's Voies Vertes off-road cycle routes. This track winds along a disused railway line following the foaming water of the Gave de Pau for 17km (10.6 miles); it's a pleasant and relaxing way to reach Lourdes – no traffic with vultures and kites soaring overhead.

Information boards encouraged visits to the villages close to the path. Notable

BELOW Brantôme's abbey and the River Dronne





“Here we **luxuriated** in solitude **soaking** in the **stunning** views across the valley to the cirque”

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Gave de Pau cycle route; Cordes-sur-Ciel; the countryside around La Romieu

BELOW Geu church window and lizard

among them was peaceful Geu, with a pretty church and where we explored the ancient lavoir (communal washing place), complete with a large stone plug. By contrast, Lourdes was mayhem and we only stayed to buy ice creams and to mend a puncture.

It is worth exploring the spa town of Argelès-Gazost, which is surrounded by mountains. We bought pungent goats' cheese here and a bottle of the 'lethal' Généri liqueur in a shop packed with local produce. We also explored the lovely circular park surrounded by villas, trying not to disturb people practicing tai chi in the sunshine.

We took the Blue Bus back to the mountains for another excursion, climbing the steep road to Vallée du Marcadau, beyond Caunterets to the Pont d'Espagne; the car park here has spaces for motorhomes.

Marcadau means marketplace, referring to when the valley was the French and Spanish farmers' market, as the border lies at the head of the valley. This valley abounds with wild flowers, spectacular cascades and well-signed walking routes.

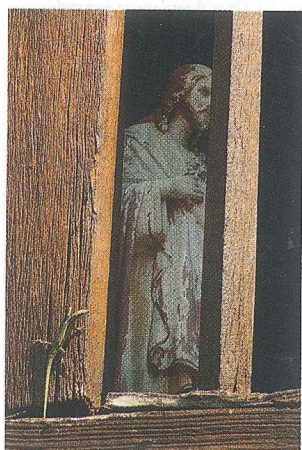
We followed the mule track to Refuge du Clot on the left bank of the Gave du Marcadau, stopping to photograph the dramatic cascade at the Pont d'Espagne.

We enjoyed the view of meadows and mountains from the refuge over a coffee before carrying on to Pont du Cayan to picnic among the brilliant pink azalea bushes, surrounded by craggy ridges and blue sky. Crossing the river, we continued upstream a little further through the trees to Pont d'Estaloune. Here we sat and watched a dipper bobbing in and out of the furiously-flowing river; I named him a white-water dipper!

Eventually, we reluctantly planned our route north. We drifted towards Auch, driving through rural areas and stumbling upon the beautiful Abbaye de Flaran in Valence-sur-Baïse, south of Condom.

This honey-coloured abbey has a simple design, in keeping with the original Cistercian philosophy. The medicinal herb garden was humming with insects and glorious fragrances, but it was the exhibition of artworks that made this abbey exceptional. The works, all bought by collector, Michael Simonov, proved more interesting than we expected, with paintings and sculptures by Dali, Monet and Picasso.

About 20km (12.4 miles) from Valence-sur-Baïse is the picturesque village of La Romieu and Le Camp de Florence, a large, Dutch-owned campsite. The Collégiale ➤





ABOVE CLOCKWISE
La Romieu; café on the Gave
de Pau cycle route; produce at
Villeneuve-sur-Lot's market

BELOW Abbaye de Flaran
and herb garden



Saint-Pierre church is incorporated into La Romieu and is on the Via Podiensis pilgrimage route from the Auvergne, so we encountered pilgrims on their journey to Santiago de Compostela.

Wandering through this delightful village we noticed stone cat figures sleeping on walls, peering over ledges and creeping across window sills. These relate to the legend of the cats and Angeline, the woodman's daughter. Legend has it that Angeline loved her cats and was distraught when, in 1342, a famine meant that the villagers were hungry enough to eat the local moggies, so Angeline's parents allowed her to hide two cats in the attic. When the crops started to grow again, they were eaten by the unchecked rat population. Fortunately, Angeline's two cats were male and female and had produced many kittens. Set free, these hunted the rats and so saved the village from further starvation.

The rivers came thick and fast as we headed further north. The Garonne, the Lot and the Dordogne were crossed in a day, with a pause at the handsome town of Villeneuve-sur-Lot, where we struck lucky with our timing as it was market day.

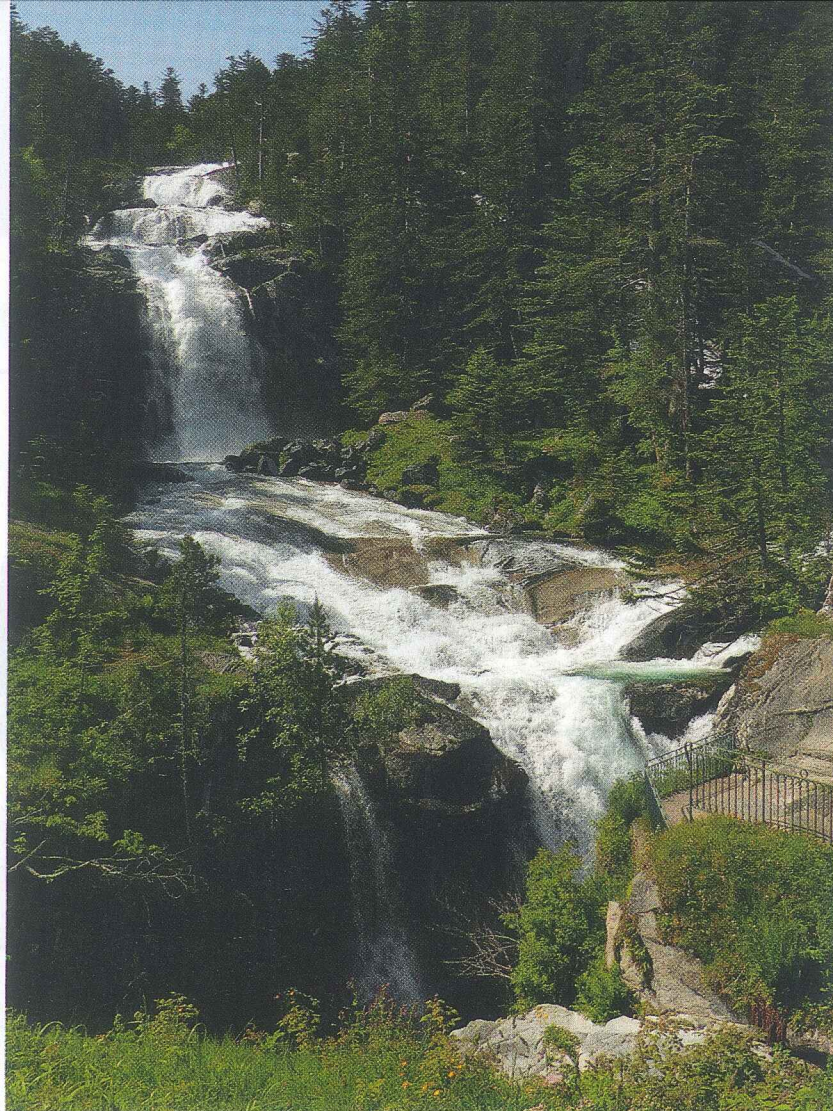
Brantôme, on the River Dronne, is dominated by an impressive Benedictine

abbey. We'd had enough abbeys for one holiday and, instead, wandered the narrow streets and through the park, watching the boats and the ducks on the river.

I remember the first time we found our way to Saumur. Now it seems that, wherever we have been in France, the road eventually leads here. On this visit we enjoyed cycling on the well-signed Loire Cycle Path, which is not always as flat as you might expect. A spectacular thunderstorm broke as we were between villages, so we raced to a café just as the downpour started.

The cathedral at Chartres has been on my 'to do' list for some time. Due to frittering away time in the Auvergne and the Pyrenees, only a few days of our holiday were left. Chartres was achievable, so we paid €32 (£23.88) for the privilege of using the autoroute to get us there. Expensive as this was, it was worth the effort.

Notre-Dame de Chartres is an awesome example of Gothic church architecture. Although immense from the outside, its real splendour is the interior. Light is filtered through the vivid colours of the thirteenth century stained glass windows, giving an ethereal glow. I sat in the dim light marvelling at the west rose window, turning to watch two priests practicing a service



ABOVE The dramatic waterfall at Pont D'Espagne

ritual in candlelight at the altar. The stained glass throws vivid patches of light onto the polished marble floor tiles.

We emerged into the daylight unusually subdued before wandering a little more around the pleasant streets of Chartres.

North of Chartres, another Voie Verte follows the Eure valley for 24km (14.9 miles) from St-Georges-Motel to Beuil. We found a campsite near the start of this track and had a superb day cycling through this pastoral part of Normandy.

The day started well with a stop at the Café de la Gare in Ezy-sur-Eure, run by the charming Annie and supervised by an angry little dog, Ivory-la-Bataille, the next village, provided unexpected pleasures with a small market, an old abbey gate and handsome houses and gardens to drool over. Even the rain couldn't dampen our spirits as we climbed the hill back to the site.

With the photographs and memories safely tucked away, the time had come to take the 'van to a hypermarket to stock up on French goodies we can't live without. There was room for more red wine, olive oil and our favourite toiletries to last until next summer and, of course, some cheaper diesel – à la prochaine fois. [www](http://www.outandaboutlive.co.uk)

WE STAYED AT

Le Moulin, F-31220 Martres-Tolosane

☎ 0033 561 988640

📧 domainelemoulin.com

📅 31 March – 1 October

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: €18.90 (£14)

Le Pain de Sucre, 65120 Gavarnie

☎ 0033 562 924755

📧 camping-gavarnie.com

📅 1 June – 30 September and
15 December – 15 April

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €13.90 (£10.37)

Camping Le Trois Vallees, 65400 Argelès-Gazost

☎ 0033 562 903547 📧 l3v.fr

📅 10 April – 18 October

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20 (£14.93)

Le Camp de Florence, 32480 La Romieu

☎ 0033 562 281558

📧 lecampdeflorence.com

📅 1 April – 10 October

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20 (£14.93)

Camping Brantôme Peyrelevalde, Avenue André Maurois, 24310 Brantôme

☎ 0033 553 057524 📧 camping-dordogne.net

📅 2 May – 3 September

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €16.50 (£12.31)

Camping de L'Île D'Offard, Rue de Verden, 49400 Saumur

☎ 0033 241 403000 📧 saumur-camping.com

📅 March – November

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €17.50 (£13.06)

Camping 4 étoiles le Domaine de Marcilly, Route de Saint André de l'eure, 27810 Marcilly sur Eure

☎ 0033 237 484542

📧 domainedemarcilly.com 📅 All year

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €18 (£13.43)

Camping La Paille Haute, 145 rue de Sailly, 62156, Boiry Notre Dame

☎ 0033 321 481540

📧 la-paille-haute.com 📅 1 April – 31 October

💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €23 (£17.16)



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