

A Holiday in Provence

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Meady-Ochre 2002

Wednesday October 2nd 2002 Getting There

And the first day was a day on the train; we knew that the last would be like unto it, so in effect an eight-day holiday became a six-day one. Trains however, are sitting and relaxing and something we are used to, not unnatural and nerve-wracking and high-in-the-sky like those other things. Of course something unpleasant may happen to the odd one, and quite often they get delayed or break down, but it's not like having your wings fall off at 50,000 feet over the Atlantic, is it?

To be honest crossing London was quite a drag, literally, as the tubes were on strike, and we had heavy cases with little wheels on a bottom corner. These look useful, but in practise require a balancing act and a perfectly-balanced case to stop them tipping over at every opportunity. Dragging them half a mile along a busy London Street through a throng of pedestrians and pigeons and London mess is not to be recommended. However, we had plenty of time, most of it being spent on a bus which probably did not average above walking pace, but carried our load for us.

And then comes that brief interlude in a tunnel, hardly as much as you would notice, and you erupt from the earth into broad green fields, and the chance to practice your 'Une tasse de café, s'il vous plait' on the same staff you ordered a cup of coffee from in plain English half an hour earlier.

A briefer interlude at Lille, than a final rather more exotic train ride on the TGV, different from British trains because it is altogether posher, goes faster, up and down hills, and you share a compartment with a bunch of cheerful and noisy femmes who are rejoicing because they are going on holiday, and this rejoicing entails passing paper cups of vin to all who happen to be near. Flipping past the windows at immense speed are wonderful scenes of the French countryside, usually involving amazingly picturesque villages, stunning medieval manor houses, castles and churches, and interesting-shaped mountains on the horizon.

The chatter and the vin continue, but a curtain of darkness gradually falls over those heart-rending landscapes. They are something from an encyclopaedia pored over long ago at a grand parent's house, a dim remembrance from an almost inaccessible youth, that suddenly flares into light. If you have not seen them before, long ago you caught the flavour, different, a familiar strangeness, a place you would go one day. And now here you are! The train slows, the wheels squeal, and you disembark. This is Avignon.

And so it is that, having bade goodbye to Newcastle in the North of England, in the grey of the morning, the evening finds you sitting under an awning in a café in the square before the Palace du Papes, watching a troupe of young persons fire-juggling. All exceedingly civilised. And for the first

time ever I managed to make a joke (sort of) with the waiter, in French, and they laughed.

Thursday October 3rd Of Roads and Off-Road

We spent the night in the cheap hotel by the goods station, that we had visited last year, the one with the free-range rabbit and the friendly grey cat. Set against these attractions are the fact they gave us a bedroom, that was certainly in structural terms an afterthought, for its door opened about 3 feet (90 cm) up in the side of the attic stairs, so if you forgot this fact and inadvertently stepped (on a nocturnal trip to the *salle de bain*) one would tumble a floor or two. And of course, we were directly adjacent to the goods station, so every half hour or so an immensely long freight train would pass at a proximity that meant one heard it in stereo, as if it were trundling into one ear and, some time later, emerging from the other. Still, last time we had all this and a thunderstorm as well.

The next problem was hiring the car; we had been clever and arranged to hire from the company just over the road from the hotel. However, they had moved, without telling us. Nevermind, a friendly employee of the company who had taken their place happened to be driving to their new office, beside the out-of-town TGV station where we had arrived, so he took us down, following a brief delivery tour of the ancient heart of the city which we didn't object to at all. The car was a brand-new (only 800 km on the clock) Citroen with air conditioning, which was wonderful (although we never worked how to operate it). Off we went, quite blasé about the wrong-side-of-the-road bit these days.

First port of call a monastic site we had glimpsed last year but not stopped at, only just out of Avignon. This is the Chatreuse de Bonpas (left); as the name suggests a Carthusian monastery (like our Mount Grace), one where the monks always lived in their own little cells, sort of a regimented community of hermits. We had the place to ourselves; there was bright Provencal sunshine and woodsmoke on the autumn air, and a lovely Romanesque chapel. Inside the chapel was a fascinating display of children's artwork which seemed to be related to prayers to Our Lady; they all showed accidents or disasters of some sort - lots of explosions and fires - presumably with the aim that their prayers would avert these, or possibly give thanks that their outcome was not as dire as might have been. My favourite was a beautifully-drawn scene in which someone, possibly the artist, had been knocked off their bicycle by a Citroen 2 CV (the cyclist being marginally the more vulnerable in such an encounter); I would have liked to know the story behind it.

Back to the monastery; whilst the girdle of precinct/curtain wall and two fine gatehouses survived, apart from the chapel (which was not the monastic church) there was relatively little. After the Revolution church and monastic buildings has been replaced by a country house; where they had been was a terrace with a large swimming pool.

It was lunchtime, so onwards a kilometre or two to Caumont with a picturesque medieval gateway and a pizza house where Elaine managed to leave her camera (successfully retrieved a week later), and then eastwards through some of the stunningly-attractive villages we had seen last year, to the Grand Luberon. This is a ridge of hills around 1000 m high (think Scafell Pike, Helvellyn, that sort of thing), but the map showed a road obligingly running along the crest, a minor road admittedly, but apparently no more minor than the rest of the sprawling network that linked the villages hereabouts. The west end of this road descended into Lourmarin but the junction with it was only there on the map; we drove backwards and forwards up the main road, and could find no sign of it. So round to Auribeau, where the map showed another road up to the ridge; what was indubitably the road shown turned out to be a rough track. However, it had to be the right one, so on we went. It became something like a rubbly stream bed; this was rapidly becoming an adventure; common sense called out, somewhere in the background, that this was a brand new car. Reason answered that the track was so narrow and steep it would be hard to turn round.... the views became spectacular, and anyway, when we got to the top we would find a broad metalled road there, wouldn't we? We didn't, only a

similar ribbon of rubble and stones, labelled a 'piste'. A perspiring cyclist, whom we watered, told us that cars did use this track, and in fact, we met plenty (including, quite shockingly, the front part of an articulated lorry, thundering along in a storm of white dust). Despite the elevation, the vegetation and woodland were a bit like being on the English Downs, and the track, if mostly second-gear work, was gently-graded; but it was 20 km before we could get down, when at long last we encountered a tarmac road plunging down to the south-east to take us to a major river crossing over the Durance, and on to Barjols, and our destination, the vineyard of Saint Ferreol, near Ponteves.

Saint Ferreol was wonderful, a big farm of 18th-century buildings arranged around a courtyard, with its own dovecote, and the vines in their autumn colours all around; we had a gracious first-floor room in the oldest part of the group (the original farmhouse); opening the shutters gave a glorious prospect of the arched entry to the courtyard with beyond cedar trees and on the horizon the four ruined towers of the chateau in Ponteves, a typical hill-top village maybe a kilometre away.

October 4th. Vertigo

This was a day in which I experienced more vertigo than at any time in my life. Natural vertigo, not from travelling in unnatural flying devices, but vertigo experienced with ones feet planted firmly on the ground, staring down at very steep angles at more ground a great distance beneath one.

America has a grand canyon which is said to be a very dramatic place. I believe that (even my daughter has been there) but I have not seen it. I have seen many pictures, and even video, and it looks impressive, but none of these give a real impression, they are just images on a flat surface. Today we went to France's own grand canyon, the Grand Canon du Verdun and it was, well, lots of things; delightful and terrifying both spring to mind, in the way they did with English 18th-century guidebook writers who got amazed by lots of places we now take for granted and drive to on Saturday afternoons.

Looking at a map of the Grand Canon, lines on a flat safe and level piece of paper, is very deceptive. You have Moustiers, near its mouth, and the Pont de Soleils, two third of the way up and the first point you can cross the thing and come back along the other side. The distance between the two is no more than around 20 km, less than the distance along the Tyne valley between Riding Mill and Newcastle. We often drive to Newcastle on one side of the Tyne and back on the other; either route takes about 20 minutes. There and back in an hour if the roads are quiet (and the traffic police are on holiday, having turned their wretched cameras off). So why did people say you needed a full day to drive this French equivalent? The map gives a clue; the sinuosities of the roads on both sides look like something out a medical textbook diagram of the brain, and of course, they are not level.

Anyway, we got there, after an hour's drive through countryside full of interesting places and things one would stop to look at if one had time, which even on holidays, one doesn't. At its foot the canon issues into a large (artificial) lake, at the head of which the ground just rears up with tier after tier of limestone crags, split by a great rift from which the river flows; it is a sudden beginning. The road crosses the very mouth, then twists and spirals as it gains height in increasingly exciting scenery, before starting to thread its way along the rim of the great gash, with the river visible far below. At one point there is a long detour from the main road, one-way traffic, that runs from belvedere to belvedere, eyries on the brink of stomach-churning space. At one rock-climbers perform acrobatics on the giddy cliff face, pretending to be utterly cool and totally ignore the gawping tourists.

Back on the main road, a short side branch zigzags up the hillside to the little village of Rougon, overlooked by fragments of a castle on top of a rock tower; a surprisingly easy scramble gains the top of this, gaining a dizzy prospect and a superb view straight down the canon (left). It is said that the river has continued cutting down as the rock was thrust upwards, resulting in its deep and vertical-sided entrenchment. This is the sort of thing one reads in geography textbooks, but seeing it from this viewpoint one can actually believe it.

Then came the really exciting bit; descent into the gorge itself. It was really quite easy; a side road takes you almost to the bottom, then an easy footpath leads down to the river; the path downstream promptly leads to a stair up to a tunnel. We had read about this, and brought a torch. Several hundred metres of easy walking (bar the odd shallow paddle) with the odd window out into the gorge leads to the surface again, an easy path, often amongst trees, with beetling crags high overhead. A constant worrying thought is what happens if some motorist at one of those belvederes high above lobs a rock down? Notices said a second tunnel was not essential ; we plodged through it anyway, but soon afterwards decided it was time to turn back, and this time chose the surface route, which included a short traverse across a slippery slope where a wire had thoughtfully been installed and quite a bit of up and down scrambling.

Then back to the twisting roads and giddy glimpses, to the bridge across the river and then back, in a roundabout way, down the other side. Here the road, like the path in the bottom of the gorge, became semi-subterranean, through a series of tunnels with windows (each with a convenient layby) out onto the face of the precipice. The afternoon light was by now fading, and the cliffs on the far side of the Canon turned a glorious rose pink; further on down a descent of a thousand twists and turns we saw the chateau of Aiguines silhouetted against the sunset. We chatted to a young German couple Nick and Katerina who, like us, were stopping at each parking place to gawp and exercise their shutters at the views, and ended the day in a thoroughly civilised manner by having a meal with them in a restaurant at Moustiers. Moustiers apparently has a Romanesque belfry, but all-pervading landscape fatigue even dampened basic antiquarian desire; I didn't even think about it....

Saturday October 5th. Cistercian Simplicity

A gentler day. Still in some sort of shock from yesterday's scenic extravaganza, had a tardy petit déjeuner, then wound our way south-east to the Cistercian Abbey of Le Thoronet. Provencal Cistercian Abbeys are quite unlike those that survive in England. For a start only outlying bits of the buildings are ruined; church and main claustral buildings (bar the frater) are roofed and intact. Everything is stone vaulted; the architecture has an absolute Cistercian simplicity, and both the colour of the stone and the light are breath-taking. Here at Le Thoronet hardly anything has changed since the it was built in the 12th-century; not a traceried window inserted, not a chapel added. No decadent tower building; over the crossing was nothing more than a substantial square and functional bellcote, tastefully finished with a plain spirelet. The cloisters, the east and west walks stepping downhill, are wonderful; again decoration is kept to a minimum, simple volute-like leaves on the capitals, nothing more; no mouldings, the arches are with plain square; no mouldings, no ornament. A hexagonal well-house projects from the north walk, containing a (restored) stone fountain.

Thoronet had to be the antiquarian high-spot of the day, but the remainder was a pleasant wind-down through three small country towns. Entrecasteaux has a restored chateau alongside an extraordinary fortified church that manages to have a town gate contrived in the basement of its north aisle (left). Carces had remains of a castle that took some seeking out in a warren of small winding streets and yards. Cotignac has a pleasant leafy main street overshadowed by a beetling cliff largely

of limestone tufa, which is honeycombed with rock-cut houses; linked by staircases and balconies. Sadly this is only accessible in the company of guides, and the tourist office had closed down for a fortnight's break, so we just had to stare up and wonder. On top of the cliff are two so-called 'Saracen's Towers', supposedly of the 13th century. They have massive battered plinths, and entrances high above the ground, obviously built when defensibility topped all other priorities.

Today we got back to Saint Ferreol in time for Elaine to go shopping, and for me to venture into Ponteves with my sketchbook; its chateau is largely 16th or 17th century, with odd brick bits, quite unrestored; somebody with a wheelbarrow was engaged in digging debris out of a vaulted basement.

Sunday October 6th. We meet Mary Magdalene

And goodbye to Saint Ferreol, with six bottles added to our load.. South now, to the town of Ste Maximin-la-Ste-Baume, where the great church rides like an ocean liner above the red roofs. Its fame is as the (supposed) burial place of Mary Magdalene. I have never met a biblical character before, but she was still there, in the crypt; behind what looked like an ornamental wrought-iron gate, a head-and-shoulders bust in gold with a glass face through which the eye sockets of a blackened skull peered out; the stuff of Gothic fantasy and heavy metal album sleeves. Mary Magdalene, saint with a disreputable past, yet one of Jesus' friends. Was this really her? Actually, I don't think she's really here at all, just someone's old bones. My tolerances, sympathy and respect for history just cannot extend to all this relics business; that would be a bridge too far.

But to tell the truth, Mary Magdalene and the crypt felt little more than a museum piece. Upstairs in the nave, we stayed to morning Mass; simple and clear, its main difference from a low-church Anglican Communion was that these are rarely said in French.

Outside, the west end of the church is blatantly unfinished; a porch was never built. An archaeological exhibition in the nave tells us that an early Christian baptistery as found just to the south of the west end, but nothing is visible now. On the north are a beautiful cloister and monastic buildings, all 14th century, and largely part of a hotel, although wandering visitors are tolerated/

Our route now took us north-west again, through Jouques where a whole series of highly-picturesque ancient buildings were strung out along a ridge, and where there was obviously ongoing conflict between local residents who put up private notices and barbed-wire entanglements, and local officials who erected public footpath signs determinedly pointing along the same alleys that were being declared private... The church was interesting but locked, and to get to the ruined chateau beyond one would have had to traverse something like a First World War front line of tangled wire, so we retreated.

Next came Peyrolles-en-Provence, which sounded a prosperous place. The map in the square showed a chateau, but we couldn't find it, but we did stumble across a delightful little quatrefoil-plan chapel of the 11th or 12th century which instantly reminded me of the long-lost St Mary's Church in Hexham in the four-apsed form which an early chronicler describes it. It was, inevitably locked, and although there was a notice describing how the key could be found with the mayor, running it and him to earth could have been a long-winded procedure so away we went again, west along the south side of the Durance, through less exciting countryside in which traffic became heavier and modern industry and communications were beginning to make their presence felt. Then the westernmost bastions of the Alpilles, miniaturised by quite spectacular mountains, began to rear up on the left, and we spotted a crag, virtually overhanging the road, crowned by a ruin. Turning off the main road (not easy with all that traffic) brought us into the little town of Gorgon, with remains of town walls, and a maze of old streets rising up to a church at its east end, with beyond it the crag with the chateau ruins. Entering through a gatehouse all jumbled up with houses, steep grassy slopes take you up to the summit, or

almost the summit; shattered walls, with a big battered plinth, and quite a lot of herringbone masonry was not easy, as we had become part of an incessant stream

Then the last lap to Saint Remy and motel-like tourist accommodation at the heart of an industrial estate, albeit in a little tree-shaded oasis. Booked ourselves in, then off to one last antiquity, or rather 'Les Antiquities' as they are known, a Roman monument and triumphal arch beside a road on the outskirts of town. Roman - and both standing intact, 10 or 15 metres high. Roman? In England that would have to be at the oldest Victorian (and bearing up well to boot); I suppose it is a combination of the stone, the climate, and the fact that they were built on such a massive scale no-one could ever be bothered to knock them down.

Monday October 7th The Banks of the Rhone

Another fine morning, so west to Tarascon, on the east bank of the Rhone, with its massive chateau rising straight from the rock on the river bank. The core is four ranges around a courtyard, flanked by a variety of towers, but the whole thing is carried up so high as to appear one massive tower of gleaming white stone (convincingly pock-marked by artillery bombardment), with the usual machicolated parapets, the courtyard, sizeable though it is, being reduced to the proportions of a light well at its centre. This was a royal fortress, built in the first half of the 15th century; newel stairs link huge rooms, empty but for the odd tapestry, some vaulted, some with moulded and painting ceiling beams. Long after its glory days were passed it was used as a prison, when earlier English visitors carved a doggerel verse on one wall:

Here be 3 Davids in one mess
Prisoners we are in distress
By the French we was caught
And to this prison we was brought

In another room a quantum leap in graffiti-craft has left us with a spectacular series of medieval ships and a great chateau, all painstakingly incised.

Then across the Rhone and north for a few km, to (eventually) find St-Roman-de-l'Aiguille,. This is the first time I have ever been able to combine two of my basic urges, for medieval monastic architecture and speleology, for the whole of this bizarre 12th century abbey is underground, carved out of the rock. Despite the tourist office at Tarascon having told us the site was freely accessible, it was not; it was open in summer months only, and defended by a massive metal fence, and with that an enclosed (and locked) stair to take one to the summit of the sheer-sided hill top knoll the whole place is carved out of. The clandestine visitor has to be agile and determined..... The site does not follow any formal layout, but the church is obvious, distinguished by a little bit of built vaulting, and a Romanesque abbot's chair cut into the rock. There are enough entrances, and the light is bright enough, to not necessitate any artificial lighting. There are a whole series of subterranean chambers, one a wine press, and outside; much of the exposed rock surface is covered by rock-cut graves. About 10 m of sheer rock all round provided an adequate defence, and prompted late medieval reoccupation as a chateau.

Back to Beaucaire and its chateau, gazing across the river at Tarascon. This one is largely of the 13th century, and quite different in character, the hilltop having an irregular girdle of curtain walls and tower, much more ruinous. The inner ward on the hilltop is only open to visitors to its 'Eagles of Beaucaire' display so we had to pay up and watch bird-handlers in Roman attire put a whole series of

birds of prey -hawks, vultures, eagles, owls - through their paces; actually, these were all pretty impressive, even if the long eulogies on each species were a bit hard to follow. The French are still a bit prone to shoot anything that flies, so their birds need someone to speak up for them. After the birds had done their bit, we were allowed to explore the inner ward, and ascend the Triangular Tower, the high-point of the ruin, and one section to remain intact. The accommodation of the ribbed vaults to the unique triangular plan is interesting.

A fast drive on good roads took us north to Villeneuve, sister city to Avignon and facing it, as Beaucaire does Tarrascon, across the Rhone. Neuve though the ville may be, these are relative terms; it seems to be fairly full of wonderful medieval things., We only had time for one-and-a-bit, the one being the Carthusian monastery of the Val de Bénédiction ; in some ways familiar territory for those who know Mount Grace it has the usual L-plan serving hatches to the monks' houses. No less than three cloisters, and a church containing a papal (Pope Innocent VI d.1360); the monastery began as his own summer residence. On the hill above is the chateau, girdled by an embattled curtain with mighty drum towers flanking the entrance. We managed no more than a glimpse of the interior (it was about to close) which contains an 11th-century monastery and all sorts of other interesting buildings.

The Rhone here has a long island in the middle; after some travails we found our way onto it, and spent the dying hour of daylight sketching Avignon and its Pont, the Palace du Papes behind catching the last glow of sunset. Night fell, and we tried to enter Avignon to feed, but the one-way system shot us back out over the river again so we gave up and drove back the way we had come to Beaucaire and Tarascon where the necessary sustenance was located.

Avignon from across the river

Tuesday October 8th Where Roman meets Romanesque

Arles has come down in the world a bit; at one point it was capital of not only France, but Spain and Great Britain as well; it is a rather special place with more layers of visible history than anywhere I have ever seen. We entered the old town through a ruined medieval gate and, passing a church or two, found ourselves confronted with the amphitheatre, an immense structure; like the Grand Canon, photographs do not convey its size. Oval in plan, with its external elevations standing two out of the original three arcades high, inside 20,760 seats (so the guide says) enclose a great oval of sand. The modern seats and the scaffolding that supports them to some extent obscure the structure beneath, but make the place feel more than just a disinterred antiquity. At weekends they fight bulls here (in the Provencal manner, for fighting read snatching a paper rosette from the horns of the beast) but today there was only a solitary cat, determinedly digging a hole in the sand for the usual purpose that cats dig holes for. Its purpose completed, it awaited the applause of 20,760 imagined onlookers... Beneath and behind the seats are a warren of passages, arches and vaults, some low, some high. Old pictures show the amphitheatre as it was before being cleared in the 19th century; inside were 300 houses and a

couple of parish churches, a town-within-a-town, the outer perimeter, embellished with three 13th-century watch towers that still remain, being the town wall. As if this was not enough, the Romans built, virtually next door, a theatre, which is rather more ruined, but still dramatic. One bay of the original external facade is preserved by having been utilised as one side of a medieval tower; the pair of towering pillars that remain were only the bottom rank of three that backed the stage.

The Roman remains have either been cleared or just thrust up through the debris of the succeeding centuries. One pair of columns and a fragment of the richly-carved pediment of the Forum still tower above the cafes of the central square, incorporated (and held up) by later buildings; nearby, inside a 187th-century church, one can descend a long flight of stairs and enter its basement, the cryptoporticus, a series huge dank and dimly-lit vaulted tunnels of a scale commensurate with meeting the 2nd century equivalent of an underground train in; all sorts of further vaults and chambers open off (including an apsidal early Christian chapel); one suspects that this is only a taste of Arles subterranea.

Back on the surface, the most spectacular monument of the Middle Ages is the church of St Trophime, lofty and vaulted in the usual manner, but with a spectacular western portal with a wealth of figure carving, half of Scripture seems to be there, so fresh and unweathered as for its eight centuries of age to be barely credible. There is more spectacular sculpture in the cloister, which is situated on the south of the eastern arm, both in the wonderful capitals, arranged in sets telling different stories, and the full-height figures on the corner piers.

There was a lot more we did not have time for; friaries and monastic houses down narrow streets where there was barely room for pedestrians and a single line of cars, all inevitably driven by budding rally drivers; we did manage to find the Baths of Constantine, more immense Roman ruins down by the waterfront. Les Alyscamps, an ancient cemetery in the form of a long walkway lined by Roman and Early Christian sarcophagi, with the Romanesque church of St Honorarius at the far end. The only disappointing thing about Arles was the 11 euro menu in one of the cafes in the square; the attitude seemed to be, if your attitude to food is sacrilegious enough to choose the cheapest, then you deserve what you get: the best thing you could say about the poisson was that it was certainly mort.

Wednesday October 9th. The Alpilles

The last day, and the first to dawn wet and windy. Elaine headed for the market, I for St Paul de Mausole, a medieval monastery on the edge of town, now incorporated in a major mental hospital. Here Van Gogh voluntarily sequestered himself for a year after the famous incident in which he parted company with his ear, to a regime including enforced cold baths (we saw the bath) which failed to blunt his faculties, for he turned out over a hundred of his finest works. But as well as Van Gogh there is a Romanesque church and cloister - more beautiful carved capitals with at least the east range of the monastic buildings remaining more or less intact. It was a dark morning, and the church, instead of reflecting luminous sunlight from its honey-coloured walls, was barely light enough to stop you walking into them.

Then back to the outskirts of Arles for a monastery on a rather larger scale, the Benedictine Abbey of Montmajour, a great irregular and blocky mass of buildings rearing up on a limestone ridge. Here the Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance all combine. There is a huge church (except that its nave was never completed) raised on a wonderful crypt with an apse and ambulatory, another Romanesque cloister, a massive 14th-century tower house adjoining the cloister, and to the west the ruin of an immense early-18th century wing, testimony to a late and short-lived phase of monasticism snuffed out by the Revolution. Oh, and more rock-cut graves, and, in the cliff below the main buildings, a

rock-cut 10th-century church; all this, and a few hundred metres away, a further Romanesque chapel, a bit like the quatrefoil-plan chapel at Peyrolles except that in this case it had sprouted a conventional nave; once again it was surrounded by a swarm empty rock-cut graves.

We then meandered westwards along the southern flanks of the Alpilles, pausing to admire the ruins of a Roman aqueduct threading its way through vineyards, totally unconserved and unimproved, but infinitely better-preserved than anything say on Hadrian's Wall. Then to les Baux de Provence, where we had spent some time last year. Here the Alpilles are at their most dramatic, twisted and jagged craggy hills and ridges, with the village and ruined chateau clinging to an unlikely summit that the road has to make all sorts of ingenious twists and turns to ascend. Les Baux is however under siege from tourists; you have to pay to park by the road, even half a kilometre away, and the village is crammed with sightseers and souvenir shops. From all sides however the chateau draws the eye, an eyrie, half cut into the rock, half built upon it, hanging in the sky and omnipresent. Not far away we found the Cathedrale d'Image, a modern tourist attraction, a sort of surreal cinema contrived from a stone mine, a series of giant square-cut galleries in a beautiful homogenous white limestone showing no sign of bedding or joint planes, in one section of which every-changing images are projected on walls, floor and ceiling.

Eygalières was the next port of call, yet another hill-top village spiralling up medieval streets to the ruined stump of the donjon of a 12th-century chateau, topped by a lofty white Virgin Mary. Many of the houses had external stairs to what had obviously been first-floor accommodation, in fact to the Northumbrian mind they looked thoroughbred bastle houses. Once again we met the demerits of being out of season - the local museum was closed, the 17th-century Penitents Chapel was locked.

Then east again in the gathering dusk, passing a wonderful ruined chateau high on a rugged hill, just too far from the road to think of walking to, to Lamaon and the Grottes de Cales. A noticeboard and map set us off on a path up into the woods, to find the Grottes, which are in fact a medieval rock-cut village; a grassy col in a rocky ridge, closed at each end by a wall with a gateway, is flanked by crags that are honeycombed with rock-cut dwellings, some with worn stairs leading to upper floors. They were last inhabited in the later medieval period, but are thought to have much earlier origins.

The map indicated that one could continue beyond the Grottes to encircle the ridge and return to where we started; it was almost dark, but we pressed on, stumbling across yet another of the Romanesque chapels so freely scattered around the landscape here, before ending up surely off route, trying to find our way through woodland to distant street lights, which entailed threading our way around the outsides of people's gardens before at last finding a tarmac road and a long walk back through the village to the car; at least we got there before the rain started.

Later on, we sought food, without success in Chateaurenard; high above the floodlit towers of the ruined chateau peered down through the slashing rain; briefly attempted to find a route to drive up to it but found ourselves in a maze of steep hills and narrowing allies, sans success. One that will have to be saved for next time, no more antiquities this time round....

Thursday October 10th The Return

Not much to report; the same high-speed glimpses of middle France as we flash northwards on the TGV, the fact that the left luggage lockers at the Gare du Lyon, although prominent on direction indicators, are actually (if indeed they exist at all) in a different space-time continuum and this inaccessible to mortal flesh, and a second rapid train journey from Gare du Nord at least to the tunnel, passing a huge hilltop fire with a volcano-like plume mushrooming above; never found out what it was. Once back on English soil, of course the train slowed down to eventually shuffle its way into London; a last couple of photographs through the bus window as we crossed Waterloo Bridge, of a

sunset sky with its new addition, the great millennium wheel. And finally, vandalism to overhead lines at Biggleswade (could be the chorus of a song....now, there's a thought), the official explanation for the familiar delays that put the inevitable hour on the last lap homewards to Newcastle..