

Travels with Anzie – Our First 72 Hours in Southern France

March 2, 2019

Friday was a long day. Up at 2:30 AM. Ibou, property manager for his uncle, was at our door at 3:00. Helped us carry bags down four flights. Contacted our taximan, Hassane. when he was 15 minutes late. There's American time. Then there's Senegalese time. Ibou can speak Wolof, the local language, which is a help.

Our plane was full going to Casablanca. Four-hour layover for flight to Montpellier. No drinking fountains in the airport. I asked the cleaning lady in the Men's Room for a water fountain. She took my plastic bottle over to a sink and filled it. I thanked her, and proudly carried my bottle back to Anzie. She was delighted ...until she took a sip. It tasted like 10% chlorine! Of course, I could have bought a bottle. But I couldn't pay in Moroccan currency, and the minimum purchase with a credit card is 10 euros/11.30\$US. We bought a disappointing lunch at airport prices. I ordered an Italian sub, which turned out to be oily tuna fish between two slices of bread.

The flight to Montpellier was only half full. Ever since her knee replacement, Anzie has discovered the advantages of ordering a wheelchair. It comes with an attendant, who wheels her through customs directly to our gate. That's not all! The attendant wheels her to the front of every line, with me right behind. At the gate Anzie's handicap allows us to be among the first passengers on the plane: "Anzie", says I, "Don't forget to limp!"

Montpellier is a snap. Wheelchair with attendant waiting as we get off the plane; breeze through baggage claim; out of the terminal and across the street to the Car Rental Agency. Without our attendant, we would have been lost at least twice. Well worth the five euro tip.

Our car is a brand new Renault Clio with 34 kms. on it. Other years we have ordered a diesel, because the diesel was a cheaper rental, and diesel was 15% cheaper than regular gas. Not any more! The French government is in the process of outlawing diesel, because it pollutes. We're impressed with the Clio. It used to look like, and was about the size of, a running shoe. Not any more! Plenty of room for our bags, all the up-to-date electronics. including GPS. I used to feel cramped. N.A.M.!

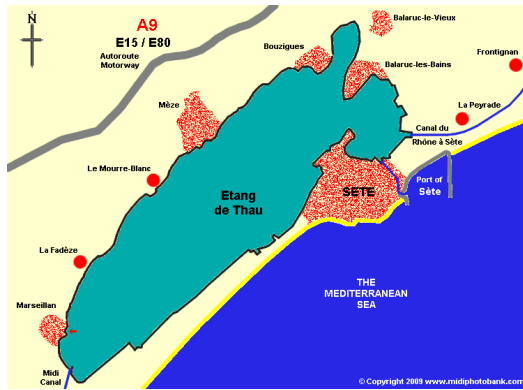


We arrive at 7:30 PM in Pezenas. We're welcomed by the owners, Gizelle (three cheek kisses) and Claude. In the kitchen we find a tray with ham, cheese, a baguette and a bottle of wine. Gisele then arrived with a just baked quiche Lorraine – delicious. My last big job is lugging our suitcases up the stairs. Anzie hits the sack immediately. I proceed to celebrate our arrival with nibblies and a half-bottle of delicious red.

Up the next morning at 10:00. Off to Carrefour, the big supermarket chain. Spent about \$250. Told the checkout lady that they could close the store now. With us they had already reached their profit quota for the day. Boy, it's great to be back grocery shopping in France! Countless delicacies to choose from: 20 patés, 40 cheeses, duck, rabbit, the list goes on. The only foodstuff that's easier to find in the U.S. is a tender steak.

Spent the evening meandering through the narrow streets in the medieval section of Pezenas. We dined at a restaurant whose singular attraction was a menu sign advertising fondue. We accompanied our three-cheese fondue with a charcuterie platter of thinly sliced cold cuts and a great artisanal IPA-like beer. Yes, the French are getting into micro brews. I should have asked for a card from that place. Over the entrance was a sign: "RESTAURANT". We'll find it again.

The next day we head for the Med. We stop in Marseillan. Why? Because we heard that Noilly Prat, the famous maker of sweet and dry vermouth, has their factory here. The town borders the Thau Etang - a huge lagoon – 18 kilometers by 6, but shallow, 5 to 10 meters deep, separated from the Mediterranean by a long thin strand of raised sand. The region has been inhabited since neolithic times, although it was the Greeks and Romans who were the first to extract salt from the sea in the etang. Nowadays, as well as salt, the Etang de Thau is an important region for oyster and mussel farming.



We found a fine little restaurant in the port “ **La Maison de Camille**”. We had a galette (a savory crepe) and salad coupled with a fine rosé. I asked the owner the location of Noilly Prat. He pointed across the canal from us. He then praised a new drink, the “Marseillan”: equal parts sweet and dry vermouth over ice. He then comped us a sample. Very good! Turns out Noilly Prat was closed, so was put off for another day.

Yesterday was Mardi Gras. All the shops close at noon, and the mayor offers drinks at 1:30 and the fun begins with a big parade and a float with an 800 year history. The parade features a symbolic horse (Le Poulain) reputed to represent the favorite foal of the Prince de Conti from the time when Pezenas was the capital of the Languedoc region. Le Poulain is pushed through the old streets of Pezenas (usually by the rugby team of Pezenas) accompanied by a local flute and drum band as well as plenty of beer and pastis.



BUT, it was also Chuck's birthday so we back to the Etang Thau and the town of Bouzique to the restaurant **Cote Blue**, famous for oysters and mussels. The restaurant was originally started in the late 1800's, by one of the first people to farm mussels. Then oysters. Slowly moving from a small store selling the shellfish, to a little place local people could have fish and chips, to now a well-known restaurant. After an amazing birthday lunch we finally visited Noilly Prat. But that will come in our next story.

A la prochaine,

Chuck & Anzie

Well, that covers our first three days. If the rest of our three months is anything like this, I'll have to buy a bigger belt and worry about my liver.