

Travels with Anzie – Southern France 2021

31 August 2021

It's the people. Not the places. This is our fourth visit to this area. The first time we were more interested in seeing the sites, the places. There are plenty: the Mediterranean, the Pyrenees, Provence, the cities: Montpellier, Toulouse, Carcassonne, Narbonne, Pezenas ... the list goes on. During our last two sojourns we have been fortunate enough to develop friendship with locals. Surely the geography, the surroundings are attractive. But it's our friendships that bring us back.

The French approach Covid is a bit different than that in the US. More on this later.

Getting acclimated to the French/European technology is always a chore. More on this later.

Friendships

This is our third stay at the Gite St. Christol. The owners, Claude and Gisele, were very welcoming from the start. We are close in age. Claude Vielleveigne is a "vigneron", grower of grapes – over 200 acres of every grape I've ever heard of. He doesn't make any wine. He sells his crop to "cooperatives" who make the wines. I expressed my fascination with his trade and my desire to learn more about it. We invited each other to dinners. One time Gisele invited us over for oysters and wine. Then she announced it was her birthday. We felt truly honored.

Claude died in February 2021. He had battled cancer for over two years. In 2020 we arrived early March, expecting to stay for three months. Unfortunately, by the end of March everything was shut down, and we decided to return home. Before we left Claude had lent me his bicycle, which I used almost every day. One day I arrived home on the bike, and Claude decided to try it. He biked about 100 yards, turned around and came back. He was breathing hard. As he turned the bike over to me, he said "Je suis foutue!" "I am fucked!". He continued to work the vineyards via tractor. Gisele explained that his passing was peaceful, without much pain. Both of them had survived the deaths of a former husband/wife. She seemed relieved to talk about it. I ended the conversation explaining that they had made us feel almost like family. We all hugged.

The previous year we decided to attend the Trivia Night at the Theatre Illustre, a bar/restaurant/theater where plays were staged and bands played. We didn't realize until we sat down by ourselves at a table that the audience was composed of teams. We weren't there for more than five minutes before a French gentleman, Silveste, invited us to join his team. We immediately rose and joined his team of five, including couples Beatrix and Roger, Jacky and Vivien. They all spoke a modicum of English, while we could converse pretty well in French. With more beer I seemed to become increasingly articulate.

The trivia MC presented each clue in French and in English. All in all, our team didn't do too badly. Anzie and I were able to contribute big time on one question: Name two U.S. Presidents with the same last name in the last century. We still came in 13th out of 16 teams!! A week later we all met for lunch and our friendship has grown. When we arrived we met Roger and Beatrice for lunch, then they took us to their house for coffee. They're artists who have supported themselves and live well through their art. They have stores in 3 tourist towns where they sell items, mainly miniatures that they pick up every year in a 4 month trip to Asia. The French love them. They also paint silk scarves and shawls on silk and sell them wholesale.

Then we met at the Saturday market for coffee with Roger and Beatrix, and Jackie. Vivien is home fighting cancer.

Covid a la France

You might have heard that, shortly after we arrived, France considered closing its borders to U.S. tourists. If we had something to do with it, we apologize. The European Union has strongly recommended its countries to bar unvaccinated US tourists; but only Denmark and the Netherlands have gone that far. And as Delta spreads in the US, more countries are seriously considering the ban. The French regs are a bit more stringent than ours. In order to enter any public place – even church - you must show your QR code, issued by the French ministry of Health, that signifies that you have received both jabs. The “QR Code” is one of those squares filled with black and white blotches that look like Rorschach had a mental breakdown. This even includes outdoor cafes!

Luckily, our travel planner was aware of this reg. and planned accordingly. She contacted a pharmacist we knew in Pezenas, telling her that we would visit her asking for said French QR code. Sure enough, the day after we arrived we visited the pharmacist, showed our US vaccine cards which she entered into the central French Health Ministry site, and we received our QR codes within ten minutes. Many thanks to our travel planner, Anzie. Most restaurants, not all, have asked us to show the cards. We have also put this on our phone – easier.



Also, masks must be worn in all public places. Many people wear them while walking outside in public areas, or else they carry them slid up their arms ready to wear in the next public place. Anzie loves it cause it hides her double chins ;)

French Technology

Every year we are confronted with changes in French technology, be it the automobile, the dishwasher, clothes washer or whatever. This year we picked up our rental car at the Montpellier airport, as is our custom. The first time we looked at the car we complained to the agent: "But we ordered a four-door!" Agent: "But it is a four-door!" Us: "But there are no handles on the rear doors." Agent: "Yes there are!" And she shows us. The handles are disguised as part of the door trim. See pics below.



So we proceed to drive out of the lot. I try to put the car in reverse. There's no reverse. I drive back to the Agency. "There's no reverse." "Yes there is." And she explains that I must raise the bottom of the gearshift handle on the manual stick shift to attain reverse.

At our new home we need instruction on how to operate to dishwasher and the clothes washer. The clothes washer takes 2 ½ hours to complete a wash. It goes: Chug-chug, stop... chug-chug, stop. Door locks are another puzzle. But, with the help of our French friends and acquaintances, we work things out.

Saturday Market

Downtown Pezenas is divided by a quarter-mile long central boulevard that is bordered by all sorts of shops, bars and restaurants. Every Saturday morning this open space is filled with vendors of all sorts of merchandise: clothes, produce, meats, fish, seafood, etc. I bought a golf cap for \$12. We bought ready-to-eat Thai food. We passed up the Paella. Next time. Musicians are abundant, playing for tips. We stopped for refreshment at an outdoor café. A German at the next table complained about people who complained about smokers. I could see Anzie getting huffy and about to voice a rebuff. I caught her eye, and she let it pass.

At any rate, the Saturday market is a don't-miss.

Tuesday we visited the seaside town of Meze. We lunched on fresh oysters, mussels and fish, plus a pitcher of rose, of course

On Sept. 10 we leave for two weeks in the Bordeaux/Dordogne region.

A La Prochaine

Chuck & Anzie