

Travels with Anzie : Lagrasse, France

17 January, 2014

Meet Bea and David. In August, 2012 they were guest at our B&B for one night. We really hit it off. They live in Merseyside, just over the river from Liverpool. David is an architect; Bea works at a university.

“So,” asked Bea, “Do you operate the B&B year round?” “No,” replied Anzie, “We close it in the winter and travel South. For the past few years we’ve been going to Mexico.” “Well,” Bea responded, “We have a place in Southern France that we’d be happy to rent during the winter.”

That’s how it all started. Over the following year we ironed out the details over the Internet. We would rent their place January through March. Then Bea came up with a suggestion: “How about we exchange houses in April?” We knew that they had kids and grandkids who live in Cambridge, MA. “Great idea!” we responded.

Bea and David stayed with us again in May, 2013. We often expressed our amazement that we felt so close after having only known each other for one night. They brought champagne and OJ so we could have Mimosas together for breakfast the next morning – Anzie’s birthday.

B & D sent us copious notes on details about the house, where to go, what to do, etc.

Lagrasse

A medieval village with population of about 700 year round residents. However, the population can double in the summer as tourists from around the country and world arrive, drawn not only by its history, but also by the many art and music festivals. There’s a gallery on every tiny street. Many homes turn into B&Bs – or chamber d’hotels - in the summer.

Location: one hour SW of Toulouse; 40 minutes SW of Carcassonne; less than an hour N of the Spanish border; 40 minutes from the Mediterranean. We’re in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Rock and limestone or granite hills surround us. These are often capped by enormous rocks carved in fantastic shapes by eons of rain and wind.

Everywhere we look we are struck by the fact that everything looks like it’s been here a long, long time. And it has. Although the Abbaye Ste. Marie d’Orbieu was allegedly “founded” by Charlemagne in 799 A.D., there is convincing evidence that proves the Abbey existed even before then. B & D’s house, near the large gothic church, dates back to the mid-14th C. The walls are 2 ½ ft. thick.

Lagrasse is certified as one of the 135 “Most Beautiful Towns in France”, and rightfully so: narrow cobblestone streets, ancient houses and an open market that dates from 1315. As you can see from the accompanying photos, the town has a quasi-elliptical shape formed by the Orbieu river on one side, and on the other by a wall, towers, turrets and a moat – which were removed and filled in 1818.

The Benedictine Abbey sits on the opposite side of the river. In the 9th – 13th C. it controlled properties extending into Spain, including 100 churches and ten monasteries. It possessed huge political power in the 13th C. during the crusade against the Albigensians or the Cathars (more on this later). (Read Kate Mosse’s book The Labyrinth if you are interested in the history of this area. Great book – a novel.)

Currently the Abbey houses less than 20 monks. The appearance in town of the occasional monk walking or on bicycle in his off-white robe and black beaver hat contributes to the village’s picturesqueness. And it is a hoot to look over the Abbey walls and see them playing soccer. The Abbey grounds are well-maintained, including the gardens. It is well worth a visit.

Lagrasse is located in the Languedoc region. Not all that long ago, when France was a mixed bag of conflicting fiefdoms, this part of France spoke a different dialect than the North. Here, “Oc” meant “Yes”, as opposed to “Oui” up around Paris. The old language is known as Occitan. It appears to be a mix of French and Spanish. The towns and street signs show names in both languages.

Wine and olives are the regional products. Lagrasse is situated in the Corbieres wine region. The reds and rosés are pretty darn tasty! Our current objectives are threefold: 1. Explore the area. 2. Study the history of the Cathars. 3. Learn about the local wines and food. Though the latter seems to take up much of our time!

We’ve made some progress on the third objective. Our 90 year-old and charming neighbor, Mr. Durand, is a winemaker. We’ve visited his caveau, and were pleasantly surprised to discover his vin rouge to be excellent. At \$8.50 a bottle, it’s our “plonc of the month”, or should we say evening.

Everything is expensive in France. Wine is one of the only bargains we have found. We may have to go on a liquid diet.

So ... what are we doing to keep ourselves busy? Almost every day we get in the car and explore. This is fascinating country, both from the standpoint of scenery and charm. The French describe the land as “garrigue” – scrub land. Admittedly it is rougher, sharper, drier, wilder than Provence to the East. We are surrounded by limestone and granite cliffs, evergreens, wild rosemary, oaks and plane trees. The rest is vineyards and olive trees.

We arrive in an interesting village and walk in and around the countryside. This is our exercise; no Planet Fitness around here, or Weight Watchers for that matter! Then we find a quaint restaurant for lunch. Eventually we make it back home for a light dinner. Then we read and write. Starting next Monday Chuck is taking Art Class with an Irish artist. Anne is contemplating taking up knitting with the help of his wife. When the weather improves, we have bikes in the basement. Anzie says, "With these cobblestones and hills? No way!"

A la prochaine,

Chuck & Anzie