**Diary of a Lockdown**

**Monday, March 16:**

Here in Pézenas, southern France, first day of government-dictated self isolation. Everyone is supposed to stay home. Only five reasons one is allowed to be out and about:

1. To go to work only if you can’t do it from home.
2. To purchase food or other necessities.
3. For health reasons – doctor, pharmacy, etc.
4. To care of family members or those who need assistance.
5. Brief trips around the neighborhood for exercise, to walk domestic animals. Does not include any group activities.

When outside your home you must carry an “Attestation”. This paper has on it your name and address, today’s date, and your signature. Where else but France would one be required to carry a self-certified form?

So, today we took our attestations, and drove south 30 miles to Narbonne to a large Carrefour super market, what is known as a “hypermarché”. They sell everything from food to clothing to office supplies to booze …. As we entered the mall, we encountered a line at least 100 ft. long of people waiting to enter the store. Guards were allowing 20 people at a time to enter the store.

So we turned around, got in the car, stopped for gas at the Carrefour station -- much cheaper than anywhere else – and headed back to Pezenas and our local supermarket, Le Clerc. It was somewhat crowded. And yes, many of the shelves were empty. And yes, Anzie went into the same panic buying mode that she witnessed around her. She bought enough toilet paper to last us until September. But we’re only staying until end of May!

I swear! I saw people’s carts filled with enough toilet paper that you’d think they were going to build a toilet paper fort around themselves to protect them from the virus! Not to worry. Those empty toilet paper shelves were restocked in five minutes.

**Tuesday, March 17**

We went for a long walk, which included a stop at our neighborhood outdoor grocery stand. We bought fruit, veggies and cheese. One of the female clerks was dressed in St. Patrick’s Day garb. I complemented her, and called her attention to my bit o’ green T-shirt peeking out from my V-neck sweater. I bemoaned the fact that we had planned to celebrate at an Irish bar in the Polygon mall in Bezier – another victim of the pandemic.

That’s right. Here we are in France with everything closed. No bars, cafés or restaurants, theaters, museums, cinemas, gyms … So far we haven’t found any restaurants even doing take-out. Why? you may ask. Why are we staying in France when we can’t even partake of food and outdoor cafes for which France is so famous? We are asking ourselves the same question. We’ve decided to hold off making a decision for 14 days, to see how things change, and if they do. Gizelle, our landlady, told us that there would be no penalty if we decide to leave early.

**Wednesday, March 18**

Drove downtown. Parked in the main boulevard, Jean Jaures. Bought hamburger at a butcher shop. The shop allowed only two people at a time, and since there was another customer, I had to remain outside. We then strolled through the streets to see what was happening. Nothing much. Stopped at the SPAR market to buy wine and other essentials. We were pleasantly surprised that this little in-town convenience store offered so much. At least the weather was bright and sunny. When we arrived home, I changed into shorts for the first time, and took the bike out for a spin. Rode into downtown. Discovered that even the parks were closed.

I was stopped at a park entrance when a gendarme drove by and stopped. I was ready with my Attestation. He took his foot off the brake and drove away. I obviously didn’t look very French.

Tomorrow, come hell or high water, we will tour around the countryside by car.

BTW, just found out that over 4000 people were fined for disobeying the quarantine on the first day. At $40 per, that’s a bunch of money! Today the fine goes up to $150!

**Thursday, March 19**

Went to the supermarket. A lot fewer people than Monday. Still some empty shelves. Downtown much quieter. Maybe the news of Police crackdown had some influence. Gizele came over with a wonderful apple tartin. We watched as Claude, suffering from terminal cancer, rode his bike. After a relatively short distance he turned around and came back. He was really pooped. “Je suis foutue!”, says he about his condition. “I’m fucked!” We also found out that we couldn’t even take a drive. Being out of the house was only for officially permitted reasons.

**Friday, March 20**

Did some writing and reading. Also some cooking. Anzie made a loaf of banana nut bread. Biked a lot today.

**Saturday, March 21**

“Nothing is open. Maybe we should go home”, groaned Anzie. I was against it. “Let’s give it a few more days. And see what shakes out.”

Then I pondered: What are we doing here? Not much. We can’t really go anywhere. Everything is closed. Gizelle assured us that it would be alright if we left early. Besides, if we wait too long, maybe we won’t be able to leave. Or even get back into the US. I told Anzie about my change of heart.

She made reservations to leave out of Montpellier next Wednesday, March 25. It took her over two hours on the phone. Thank God for Skype! We informed Gizelle and Claude of our plans. We also told them that we would be back next year.

**Sunday, March 22**

Watched FRSUU church service on live-streaming. Although it lacks the communal feeling of being there, from where we sit, it’s pretty fulfilling. Our names were mentioned in “Joys and Sorrows”, praying for our safe return. We thank you.

**Monday, March 23**

More of the same.

**Tuesday, March 24**

Packing up. A suitcase already in the car. Then 6:00 PM we received an e-mail informing us that our flight from Montpellier to Paris the next day was cancelled! We got on the phone with Delta to confirm we could still fly from Paris. Ultimately we decided not to take a chance on another flight out of Montpellier. Instead we would drive to Paris and DeGaulle airport, drop the car off there and fly out Friday, March 27. The rental car company, Eurodrive, was very accommodating. Their only caveat was that we must turn in the car NLT 5:00 PM. So we decided to make a long day of it with a ten-hour drive.

**Wednesday, March 25**

As soon as we awoke, Anzie expressed her fear that doing that long drive in one day would be pretty iffy. I agreed, as I always do, love slave that I am. So we reserved a hotel room in Clermont Ferrand, about the halfway point. We packed the car, bid *Adieu* to Gizelle and Claude, and hit the road at about 11:30.

It turned out to be a beautiful trip! Sunny, crystal blue skies, we motored at 80mph thru hilly, then mountainous scenery. We topped out at about 3300 ft. with the snowcapped mountains of the Massif Central to our west. We crossed the amazing Millau bridge, an engineering feat accomplished about a dozen years ago.

We reached Clermont Ferrand about 4:00 PM. It was a ghost town; an occasional car or pedestrian; no one at the hotel. We had to use codes to get into the parking lot and the hotel where a key had been left for us. We saw no one. For dinner we ate snacks we brought from home. And then, to bed.

**Thursday, March 26**

Breakfast served on a tray left outside our door. Paid our bill at the front desk with the cashier the only other person in the building. Made our way out to the highway, which was also desolate; the only other vehicles were commercial trucks, and not many of them compared to normal traffic. Thanks to GPS, we made it to our IBIS hotel right across the street from the terminal. We turned in our car without any hassle. Ordered a pizza by phone, which we picked up in the lobby. Stayed in our room until bedtime, and slept well.

**Friday, March 27**

Woke up, packed up, breakfasted on the snack bag we had brought from home. No other food available. Checked out, and struggled with our four suitcases and two handbags into the terminal and onto the intra-terminal shuttle train. The whole airport is pretty much a Ghost Town. Found a cart onto which we loaded everything. Arrived at Check-In, and sighed “We’re in the chute!” Not so fast. Our Check-In agent called someone re our reservations, and stayed on the phone for at least 20 minutes. Thoughts going through our minds: “OMG! Another SNAFU! They’ve cancelled our flight! We’ll have to stay here in France until God knows when!”

Then our agent, wearing a mask, shouted “Aha!” into the phone. We could tell by her eyes that she was smiling. “What’s happening?”, we asked as she put down the phone. “Oh nothing,” she replied. “Just a technical glitch.” No other explanation. My stomach muscles de-clenched as she proceeded to process our tickets.

Anzie still has pain in her knee that was replaced last September. That’s the excuse she uses for ordering a wheelchair and attendant every time we fly. The real reason is that the wheelchair allows us to bypass lines at Customs and any other waiting lines we come across. Plus, the attendant knows exactly where to go and the quickest way to get there. Of course, under the current circumstances, the lines are 3-4 people. Still, we don’t have to worry about getting lost. Well worth the $5 – 10. tip, depending upon time, distance and attendant’s empathy.

Near our gate we found a little Convenience Shop selling beverages and sandwiches. Credit cards only. No cash, which could be contaminated.

Our Air France flight was very pleasant. For a relatively small upcharge we had Business Class seats. The staff was very helpful. We discovered they were all volunteers. They were given the choice as to whether or not to work and subject themselves to possible contamination. Anzie went out of her way to thank all of the flight attendents for volunteering. Saying how kind they were cause we just wanted to get home. One attendent was delighted with the compliment. About an hour later she returned with a gift for Anzie: a gift box contained a small sachet bag in which she found a beautiful polished stone from Madagascar.

We landed at JFK, in the good ol’ US of A! As we came down the jetway, there were staff all in white and masked who took our temperature via thermometer to our foreheads. We passed, got a card to show customs and made it into the terminal. Our 7:00 flight was canceled and we had to wait until 10:10. The rest is anti-climactic. Flew to Logan. Probably a total of 12 passengers. Arrived 11:30 PM.

C&J Bus Lines not running, so we had reserved a Newburyport taxi. Arrived home at 1:00 AM Saturday.

Now we must self-isolate for 14 days. Our friends are making it easy for us; we found that our kitchen was well-stocked. And, yes, we have an adequate supply of toilet paper.

May all of you keep safe, keep well.

**Chuck & Anzie**