

## 7 - THE DORDOGNE REGION: 2

Sunday, 31 May

This morning I woke feeling groggy and exhausted, for I had slept badly during the night. I put this down to yesterday evening's heavy meal or the coffee that I had drunk afterwards – or else the pain of sunburn on my neck and shoulders.

Today began with heavenly weather. I got up early and had a shower, taking great care when drying myself afterwards. I then sat down to nothing more than a cup of tea, for I still felt full after the previous evening's meal. Afterwards I chatted again to the jolly French couple and Annie (the young lady who was in charge of the youth hostel). By the time I made a move to leave, clouds had gathered in the sky and it began to rain quite heavily. The French couple, the American girl and the German youths left, and so I was on my own. After I had washed some clothing, I sat down on the veranda and wrote my diary.

At about midday the rain eased off a little and so I ventured out to buy some bread. I then returned to the restaurant for some lunch. Today's meal began with soup; this was followed by an *hors d'oeuvre* of lobster and fish, then a main dish of chicken and potato (which later I discovered should have included beans). This, with some cheese served afterwards, was all washed down with a glass of red wine. The meal finished with an apple and a cup of coffee. When paying afterwards, I added the five francs that I did not have with me on the previous evening, and also a tip.

Back at the hostel I attempted to fix a set of brakes on a bicycle belonging to Annie, but failed to do so. I then went off on my own bicycle for a short spin, but found myself going up and down steep hills. The outing turned into an ordeal of pushing the bicycle uphill and therefore walking for most of the time. I found this exhausting after the previous day's long journey and the lack of sleep overnight. As it now began to turn hot and clammy, I had to go slower and slower, and then to finally stop and rest.

As the afternoon wore on, the weather began to clear up. The clouds vanished and the sun came out; by the time I returned to the hostel it had turned into a beautiful afternoon and the little town looked heavenly. On the river young people rowed boats or canoes, and some German girls in bikinis lay on the bank near the hostel, sunbathing. In the hostel I met the American girl again; she had just returned from a long and enjoyable walk. I then spoke to a very pleasant young German lad, Martin, who had just arrived by bicycle with his wife.

After I had taken some photographs of the old quarter and of the hostel itself, I retired to the cool interior and ate a simple evening meal of my own making, which included a bowl of strawberries and cream. When I later sat

down to write my diary, Martin appeared and we had a long and interesting conversation until nearly midnight. I complimented him on his English, for he spoke it very well despite finding it difficult. Before retiring to bed we exchanged addresses. He invited me to stay with him whenever I came to Germany, and asked me when I might come.

Exhausted by this stage, I went to bed and soon fell fast asleep.



Monday, 1 June

This morning I surfaced at about nine o'clock, feeling much more energetic. It was a fine hot summer's morning. In the dining room I joined Donna (the American girl) and Annie for a good breakfast. After we had finished eating, Donna let me use some of her sun tan lotion, which I applied to my burnt back. I was very grateful to her and felt much more comfortable almost immediately afterwards.

I left at about half past ten and went off on my bicycle, staying close to the river where the land was flat. I now made my way southwards along the lovely road that I had taken when approaching Beaulieu. After Liourdres, I continued south-westwards to Puybrun and cycled around the picturesque farmland north of the river. The countryside here was enchanting and unspoilt. Very people were about, probably because of the scorching heat. Poppies, buttercups and wild flowers grew in abundance by the roadside and crops flourished in the fields. The little stone houses and their outbuildings, the farmyards and the tiny villages in this enchanted region all had great charm; I found it hard to resist stopping every now and then to take

photographs. Because of the heat, I was reduced to cycling at a snail's pace – the ideal speed for appreciating my wonderful surroundings.



*The villages of Tauriac (above) and Magnol (below)*

I passed through the little village of Tauriac, complete with its rusty pump and filled-in well in the main square, and paused to admire the lovely old buildings and houses, the gardens of which were full of colourful flowers.

Next I cycled to an even smaller village named Magnol, and from there made my way down to the river bank by a narrow road with grass growing in the middle of it. Here, away from everything and everybody, I lay down in the shade under a tree by the water's edge and fell asleep for an hour. When I woke, I ate my packed lunch of bread, cheese and beer, rested for a while, then set off again at half past two. I made my way back towards the main road, stopping en route at Mazeyrolle and Moutou.

From Bétaille I cycled up towards Queyssac-les-Vignes but, as the road went uphill, I had to get off the bike and push, for the going was very hard. The farther I went, the hotter I became and the more thirsty I got. An elderly lady stopped to chat to me and gave me directions to the various villages. She wanted to know all about me and the troubles in Ireland. Farther up the road

the descent downhill began and I stopped near a house in order to stuff my trouser bottoms into my socks as I did not have bicycle clips. A young woman had just entered the house and now a man got out of a car and approached the hall door. We exchanged greetings and I mentioned how tiring the heat was. He offered me a drink and I readily accepted his offer, for I was very thirsty by now. He very kindly brought me into his little house, introduced me to his pleasant wife and young son, sat me down and poured me a glass of fruit juice with water and ice – just what I needed! We then started to chat and soon I was given an invitation to join the couple for dinner. I was also offered a lift back to the hostel. I thanked them and politely refused their kind invitation, but it was futile, for they insisted that I stay and eat with them. However, I told them that I would continue with my cycle run and return to the house later. Before I left, I was given a cap to keep the sun off my face.



*Carennac village*

As the couple had advised me to see Carennac, which was not far away, I cycled back down the hill, headed farther southwards, then crossed a bridge and arrived at the pretty little town. I spent about half an hour rambling through the streets, admiring its interesting old buildings, the church and its



cloisters. From here I headed westwards along a country road that skirted the river to Mézels. I then returned to the house by crossing the river again, cycling through some more flat pastureland as I approached Vayrac, then taking the main road to Bétaille, which I also stopped to have a look at.

I arrived back at the house by half past seven and sat down with my new friends for an excellent dinner: a starter of stuffed tomatoes and sausage meat, a main course of egg and potatoes, a selection of cheeses, and finally a dessert of fruit salad with biscuits. This I washed down with a glass of white wine, followed by two glasses of red, and then some mineral water. The conversation was long and varied; although I spoke a little hesitantly, I managed quite well and made myself understood. As my hosts spoke a little slower for my benefit, I was able to understand nearly everything that they said to me. Interestingly, this couple had also been in Africa, and had experienced the hospitality offered by the people there.

Towards the end of the meal, an elderly man arrived for a chat and a glass of wine. At nine o'clock I left, once again declining the offer of a lift, and cycled back to the hostel quickly in the dusk. I arrived in Beaulieu by about ten o'clock and sat up for a while to write my diary while drinking another bottle of beer, for I was thirsty again,.



Tuesday, 2 June

A fine morning. I woke from a good night's sleep just before nine o'clock and took a welcome shower. Martin (the German lad) did the same, then offered me a packet of *brioche*s that he did not want. I bought them from him and breakfasted outside in the sunshine on tea, yogurt, the *brioche*s and some tea. Afterwards I wished Donna goodbye, as she was leaving, then cycled to the post office, where I bought some stamps for two more of my films. This took a long time, for the lady was determined to check the price of the stamps and consult various documents that she had.

It was almost half past ten by the time I got going; today I decided to visit some of the places recommended to me by the couple on the previous evening: the Gouffre de Padirac (a 'gulf' or cave with a lake) and the town of Rocamadour, which they insisted I must see. Once I set off, it clouded over. This did not bother me unduly, for it meant that I would be cycling in a more comfortable temperature. I cycled down the uninteresting main road to Biars-sur-Cère and Bretenoux (two towns that did not strike me as being very interesting) and then, passing the castle of Castelnau-Bretenoux, I skirted the noble Dordogne until I came to Gintrac, a tiny rustic village nestled at the foot of the mountains, where I could see farmyards and hear the clanging of sheep- and cowbells.

Next came the steep ascent of the mountains south of the river. I reached the top by about half past eleven and made my way to the Gouffre de Padirac, passing some relatively uninteresting scenery. As I reached the place just before twelve o'clock, I was not surprised to find that it was about to close for lunch. It looked like a real tourist trap, with restaurants, hotels and car parks. As the entrance fee was 18 francs, I began to have second thoughts about visiting the place.

However, as I was feeling quite hungry by now, I decided to eat. Finding a restaurant with an excellent menu for only 25 francs, I decided to have lunch here and eat my picnic meal in the evening. I went inside before anybody arrived and sat down. I ordered the *salade riz*, which was quite good, then the delicious *coq au vin à l'ancienne* with potatoes. The chicken was served in a pot with thick gravy, which I mopped up afterwards with chunks of bread. I finished with an apple and drank a bottle of mineral water as the wine was too expensive for my pocket.



*Near Padirac village*

At one o'clock I left the place, with the intention of returning to the grotto before it closed at six o'clock, for I wanted to see the town of Padirac, then Alvignac and finally Rocamadour. The route turned out to be not particularly interesting; sometimes I felt that it resembled certain parts of Ireland. Padirac was a tiny village, pretty but not exceptional, and Alvignac was much larger

and relatively uninteresting. Rocamadour, on the other hand, was simply breathtaking.



*Rocamadour*

A view of this town appeared suddenly after the town of L'Hospitalet: a dramatic gorge with a green valley at its base and a most incredible little village of stone buildings clinging to the sheer face of the bare rock. I stopped to take it all in and photograph the magical scene before freewheeling down a steep road that served as a scenic approach to the village. At one point the road went through a tunnel in the rock. At the bottom of the valley I had another dramatic view of the village, with its tiny buildings, various churches and a little château at the very top.

I left the bicycle outside the stone gateway and wandered along the main street. Although very touristy with its collection of hotels, restaurants, bars and countless souvenir shops, it was very pretty and interesting. I had been warned about the prices and had been told not to buy anything here.



*Rocamadour*



The sun very kindly came out now and lit up the various buildings. Overall, the place resembled a Himalayan village, though the architecture looked more Swiss than French. However, it had a certain atmosphere and charm of its very own. I was quite enchanted by the place. Once I had walked along the main street I left the village to walk along the dramatic gorge, then returned to sit in the shade and drink my bottle of beer. Later I climbed the *grand escalier* and visited the fascinating little churches, especially that of Notre Dame. Like a Russian Orthodox church, it was very dark inside and was full of lighted candles. Certainly the church was very old and its architecture was interesting. A plaque listed the names of kings and various important people of the past who had clambered up the steps on their knees (by way of penance) when making a pilgrimage to this holy place.

After I had examined everything and taken some photographs, I climbed – fortunately in the shade – to the château at the very top. This turned out to be rather uninteresting, though there was a fine bell tower to one side of it. As there was little else to be seen from the top, I went down to the main street of the town, which the tourists were now leaving.



*The castle at the top of Rocamadour and the view from it*

Satisfied that I had seen everything of interest, I collected my bicycle and headed back for Beaulieu at about half past five. It was now far too late to visit the Gouffre de Padirac, but I did not care in the least as I had really enjoyed seeing Rocamadour. I made my way back the same way as I had come, stopping at Alvernac to buy a banana and a bottle of beer.

Just before I reached Padirac I came across some lovely fields where there was a strong smell of freshly-mown grass. As they looked so inviting, I stopped here for my improvised evening meal, sitting on the grass by the side of the road. As soon as I had finished, I pushed on at a good speed, stopping at one point to give way to a flock of sheep with clanging bells hanging round



their necks. On another road nearby, I encountered a farmer with a few cows. It was fine for cycling now, though it had begun to turn cool. As I approached the river, I turned westwards at Gintrac and returned to Beaulieu via Caremac and the lovely farmland north of the river. Just as I approached Beaulieu, it clouded over, there was thunder and lightning, and it began to pour with rain. I put on a spurt and arrived at the hostel before getting too wet.

After I had taken a shower, I chatted to Annie and a young French man who had just arrived (we were the only people staying here). Afterwards I sat down to write my diary but, as sleep overcame me, I put it away and went to bed. A very enjoyable day.

Wednesday, 3 June

By contrast, today was very dismal, for it rained all the time. After I had washed and shaved, I went out to do some shopping and returned for breakfast. As there was nothing to do, I then sat down to finish the previous day's entry in my diary.



*Church of Saint Pierre, Beaulieu*

As the rain eased off by about half past eleven, I sauntered out and ambled about the old quarter, stopping to visit the old *abbatiale* or Abbey Church of Saint Pierre, begun in 1150. The interior was dark and plain, and it smelled of dampness. Behind the altar, in sharp contrast to the dull grey stone, was a glitter of gold. This was the elaborate altarpiece of a side chapel, carved in a rather rustic style with the faces of the angels coloured. Although there was little to be seen, the church had a certain charm and the sculpture around the doors outside was interesting.

Afterwards I searched for a restaurant and found a small place in the old quarter, just opposite the church, called *Le Vieux Logis*. It lacked gimmicks, was not touristy, looked reasonably priced, and was obviously frequented by the locals. When the lady in the bar told me that the menu was 25 francs, I decided to try it. She directed me into the restaurant, where I joined a large group of lively French tourists and a few locals. The tourists were all very good-humoured and laughed a lot.

A plump woman served us all in a rather offhand manner. She plonked a full bottle of cheap red wine down on my table. When I asked if I could have half a bottle, she told me that I could drink as much as I liked. Although I was anything but impressed by her manner, I was quite amazed at the excellent food that followed. Firstly I was served soup, then two slices of *charcuterie*. After this came pieces of liver and mushroom in a sauce and then the main course was served: pork and beans, also cooked in a sauce. Next came a selection of cheeses; I had to make up my mind quickly as the plate was whipped away and passed on to the tourists. Finally I was offered a choice of fruit: an apple, an orange or a banana. I took an apple and washed it down with a little water. By this time I was completely stuffed and pleasantly drowsy after the wine.

When I made to leave, I was told to pay at the bar – they certainly relied on people's honesty here! In the bar, an elderly French couple ordered coffee for me, which I gratefully accepted. When I eventually paid, I discovered that the bill only came to 28 francs. I left feeling very full and happy.

Back at the hostel, I sat outdoors on the balcony and began to read some French magazines with the help of my pocket dictionary. Later, two German girls arrived by car, cooked themselves a meal and then, as it was still raining heavily and there was nothing else to do, joined me and also began to read. Conversation was a little difficult as neither of the girls spoke much English or French, and my German was rudimentary. However, we managed to communicate by using all three languages!

We stayed put until about seven o'clock, when I brought them down to the dining room to share some tea and strawberries with them. Afterwards they thanked me and went to bed, for they would be starting off on the following morning for the south coast at five o'clock.

Later the rain eased off a little and so I managed to take a walk for an hour, once again through the sleepy streets. It seemed that there was absolutely nothing to do or see here in the evenings. The cafés were almost empty and there was not a cinema in sight. It appeared that the locals spent their evenings eating and watching television.