

"You're the Guy with Parkinson's"

POEMS, PROSE AND PONDERINGS
ON THE CAMINO IN SOUTHERN FRANCE



BY WILL BOAG

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Day 1 - Le Puy En Velay to Le Saint-Privat-d'Allier

As we stood on the Romanesque porch of the 12th century Cathedrale Notre-Dame du Puy high above the medieval town of Le Puy en Velay, we felt we were looking out and back in time amidst a myriad of old stories. One of those tales is the iron statue of Notre-Dame de France made of 213 cannons (designed by French sculptor Jean-Marie Bonnassieux) taken in the Siege of Sevastopol (1854-5) and also looking over Le Puy en Velay. Down below is the beautiful Fountain Crozatier in the centre of town, sculpted by Charles Crozatier. Built in 1857 it is a pyramid in shape, comprising basins upon basins and punctuated by bronze statues, which act to illustrate the theme of the country's many rivers and personified cities.

Looking in, the Cathedral is highlighted by the stunning coloured cloisters that are connected to 13th century fortifications, below which, the pilgrims are blessed prior to their pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela. While many are there to complete the journey, others are there to finish as much of the journey that time allows, before other commitments call from, what now seems, another world apart.

We crept out of the alluringly ancient town as the old village slept, its lanterns bringing the cobblestones to life, their worn surfaces telling us of many carts and feet from times gone by. Up into the surrounding hills leaving behind echoes of the past, along narrow pathways teetering on the yellow and white bracken-covered hillside, and up eroded rocky crevices onto level ground. Just us, stillness with intermittent warmth from above, and a cuckoo bird, our only companions until we met Sylvian going the other way. An engaging French girl, she travels parts of the chemin (way) as she gets a chance.

A silent cafe bar had breakfast ready, and soon the fine aromas broke the silence as they brought more thirsty walkers to their waiting tables. We chatted with an Austrian girl who was learning the hard way, carrying a 12kg backpack full of 'necessities'. We hope she takes our advice that she has too many 'luxuries' and lightens her load, or her road will be briefly travelled like many before her. A gradual uphill path opened up in front of us towards a steep rocky hill trail where large pine forests have laid a matted path of needles. The slope down to our night's resting place became rockier, with crevices becoming deeper, wetter, and we, slower, as our need for self-preservation governed our every move.

A Korean couple's small cart was not built for preservation, its axle taking a different path to the main body. The Korean man seemed to be getting no satisfactory answers from the half axle he held high (as if to say, 'where does this go), as he informed me he would be okay. We continued on, giving great respect to 'our' axles, protected by our faithful walking poles. We crossed narrow creeks and soon arrived at our 'four-bed room', where we will sleep with a French boy and pray he's not old enough to snore.

Unaware, we exit the womb, still unaware we return to the womb looking for answers that one day may give us understanding



Bonjour

*At first it was a French 'fille' that we met
Sylvan came back each year to walk some more,
Celina fully loaded wiped her sweat
No shoes for her, she sat, her feet were sore.
Korean man, his cart had lost its wheel
Would take no help so we went on our way,
A French boy joined us for a local meal
Then slept with us, in our 'albergue'.
A social start, we love to meet new people
Confirms the bond that's sealed along the way,
On glancing back the medieval steeple
It's where we started, Le Puy en Velay.
We'll walk on country paths and village street
The mighty Pyrenees our goal to meet.*

Day 2 - Le St Privat d'Allier to Saugues

We experienced dormitory bliss with the morning discovery that we had an undisturbed sleep, Alphonso 'was' too young to snore. We probably woke him as we snuck out through the lounge and kitchen to the only bathroom, next to four slowly waking young mademoiselles. We did not wish to be six and seven in the shower queue thus our urgency and stealth, especially if they have injuries that are pleading for soaking therapy.

Fortified with last night's meal of local produce – the famous Le Puy lentils, asparagus and mushroom risotto, a scrumptious pear cake but without the sauce that I consider mandatory, we set off to the pre-dawn chatter of little birds eager to make the most of their primary daily hour. Up into the hills beyond, alone, at zero degrees, what a wonderful time of day, that we had to travel half way round the world to experience.

The initial flat terrain promised easy walking but it can be a common mirage on these marathon-like walks. Instead it was up, up, and more up, zig-zagging and criss-crossing valleys and gorges, a veritable roller-coaster ride, but at a much slower pace. After some hours, we gazed from the neighbouring mountain at our lodgings the previous night. It is common to get into such an easy comfortable rhythm that walkers rarely look back, thus missing out on vistas that can be so different from the ones in front. Looking back we saw the sun undisturbed, alone in the sky, and keeping us warm.

There were a few other walkers today as they caught up with us soon after we took a very avoidable wrong turn. So far, nearly all of them have been French, patient with, and accepting of, our paucity and dismantling, of their beautiful language. We re-met our Austrian friend, Celina, who, after taking our advice, is now down to nine kilograms and will be shedding more, close to the 'making it to Santiago de Compostela weight'. She's also lessened her load by ditching her foot-damaging shoes and walking barefoot – maybe, a 'tidge' too far.

We are being spoilt by our hostess tonight as she rushes around doing anything and everything for us. Caught up in this much appreciated cause are two very helpful German bikers with their detailed maps and 'translation' services. It is not often that we see bike riders, because they, as you might imagine, travel many more kilometres each day, and because their experiences are different, walkers don't appear to have a strong connection with them.

We, as walkers, have time to look about, converse with others forming connections deep or casual, and take immediate and impromptu photos. The bikers, however, don't have these luxuries, and seem more intent on getting from one place to another in the shortest possible time. We are now off to 'our' next place after another 'plat de jour', and are ready to test Corrie's nagging knee and my bulging bursa, tempting us to give them both a mild drug overdose.

While a safe temporary drug hit can allow, or even heighten the experience, a permanent drug removes the experience altogether



Jewels

*So moving forward, straight ahead, let's go
Our future tense, impatient to a fault,
Prevents us seeing 'jewels' we'll never know
They may as well be locked up in a vault.
So take your time to have a look around
Walk backwards for a while so you can free
Those gems there that are waiting to be found,
Who knows what lies behind, you did not see.
The track it winds now in a different way
The sun is beaming out another light,
The clouds removed have changed night into day
The winds sway crops and put the birds to flight.
It also exercises brain and mind
Some jewels uncovered, so much more to find.*

Day 3 - Saugues to Les Faux

We left the spectacular views from yesterday's hilly walk as we prepared for today. Lots of walkers mingled, ate, drank and were loud together. Our news to Brigitte that we were leaving early, rattled her, so she decided to give us our breakfast, tonight, which was fortunate, because we couldn't rely on much being open tomorrow, she said. A more gently undulating topography should make our knees and bursas happy. With forecast minus degrees, we look forward to the heat of the sun which will hopefully have the sky to itself.

Our early departure is for varied reasons: silence, but for the birds; we are moving slowly so it takes us longer; people can read my Parkinson's sign if we leave first; and it also means there is the possibility to have a chat. 'Bonjours' and 'bon chemins' are most of our chats, bits of sign language help, while leaving with a couple who spoke English, made it simple.

We walked through a few delightful villages, their gardens showing off golden daffodils as they farewell the few departing tulips that have been displaying their rich rainbow colours. Some dogs greeted us in their various ways - quiet collie-type dogs with a variety of others barking for them, and three vicious sounding dogs thankfully falling silent once we had successfully passed.

Between villages, the lower landforms were lusciously grassed, while the hills above were forested with thousands of commercially grown pines with the beech and birch trees stubbornly holding their ground amongst them. On our final downhill stagger to home we met a Spaniard going the other way. He began at the end of the earth – Finisterre, and was on his way to Rome. Esteban was excited to meet someone who spoke Spanish (my wife Corrie), and it was lovely for all of us to reminisce on Bilbao, a memorable town on the 'Camino Norte', a hard but enticing journey along the exquisite Spanish north coast.

Our home is Les Faux, meaning 'the dwarf beeches'. Up to five metres high they act like a 'sun' umbrella in summer, while in winter their branches twist and bend, a bit like someone with Parkinson's dyskinesia, but frozen in time. The forest of Verzy, with more than one thousand of these trees, is the world's largest. Records of these trees found in the village's abbey, note they were there from at least the 6th century. The abbey's monks have been thought to have increased the numbers with their horticultural skills, after bringing them from the east during one of their prolific journeys.

Because of their unusual and varied shapes, they have names to explain their appearance - the umbrella, the bride, the ox-head and the young lady, are just some, the latter reflecting the myth or not, of Joan of Arc resting in the forest. Near Domrémy, where Joan was born in 1412, grew a beech tree which villagers called the "Ladies' Tree" or "Fairies' Tree." "My Godmother," Joan said, "even told me that she had seen fairies there, but I do not know if it was true".

Twisted limbs reveal a tortured life, or maybe a sign that fairies are gathering



Pre Dawn

*It's great to leave before the light comes through
It's when you see those things not normally seen,
The eerie quiet gave voice to those that flew
New sounds were heard, from birds that had not been.
The scents had changed, wafting through the day
A contrast to the time that went before,
Your feet became your eyes that felt the way
The holes, the rocks, the slope and so much more.
The sky has changed, no longer there to see
The trees not there, the flowers fail to show,
Nocturnals now begin their nightly spree
Beneath the sparkling stars and soft moon glow.
The sun appears, and dark becomes the light,
A new adventure, 'cause the day was night.*

Day 4 - Les Faux to Aumont-Aubrac

The icy cold has retreated with the welcome cloud cover adding a cosiness for 7kms until we turned off the track for breakfast. After tasty croissants we headed back to the track, but 2kms later, were somehow back in the same place! Our big dipper from the second day has turned into roundabouts on the fourth, but good 'things' often happen when the circus is in town.

The second time around these 'things' did occur. Firstly I convinced a Swiss man that a red and white cross meant you are going the wrong way, whereas a white and red line meant you were on track (i.e. the camino, or chemin in France). It appears he has been following crosses for days and couldn't work out why he was getting lost. Secondly, a photo I wanted to take the first time round had been untakeable as it had been surrounded by buses and cars. They had gone when our roundabout stopped.

We fell into a gorgeous rhythm as we rolled onto undulating pathways through precious grasslands soon to be caressed by deep creviced walkways, challenged by loose-rock paths and tree-rooted tracks, as these once underground branches seemingly reached out to grab the earth, their last hope of survival. So we confidently used their tenacity to secure our footholds on this well worn and complex path.

It was on these variegated trails that we met the elderly Vancouver couple, our age, and reminiscent of our Canadian friends in Spain last year. I walked with her and talked photos and relationships, while Corrie walked with this Canadian hockey player (still), swapping bad-knee stories. Then there were two less elderly men from the Alsace who helped me with French meal times: petit dejeuner, dejeuner, dîner, and soupe (soup at midnight for the farmers who work in the evening cool). We also met up again with our young Austrian friend (who is back in her shoes), and we talked about the Austrian love of beer and skiing, the latter's price for a 'day pass' in Australia is close to a season pass in Austria.

A very social day but it did not distract us from the quiet, clean, and pretty stone villages on the Le Puy Chemin, with the blossoms peeking out to see if milder temperatures had been turned on, while the reliable and hardy daffodils and tulips never needed to peek. It's a special feeling, walking in this lovely part of the world. It was a day of contrasts matching the feeling and structure of a sublime Shakespearean sonnet. While I am not writing much poetry on this walk, I see it in the people, I smell it in the flowers and I feel it in the fresh French countryside air and ancient villages, food for sonnets to come.

Our three course dinners continue to surprise, delight and enthuse our appetites. In an elegant, rural getaway, we fine-dined with potato and zucchini soup, roasted chicken surrounded by a welcome medley of roasted vegetables, and the best ice-cream ever.

Make the most of a second chance



The Wrong Way's Okay

*"You're going the wrong way, if cross you follow
Two lines, one red, one white are what you need",
He scratched his head thinking it may be hollow
A sign so simple but he could not read.
He kept his path however still not sure
And thought that getting lost was just a lesson,
So off he went to learn, he wanted more
This path, it's not the place to make a mess on.
But then I thought, it simply was his way
Discovering things that no-one else would see,
Just who am I, his mind I want to sway
So on I went to let this man just be.
Whatever way you get there, does not matter
As long as getting lost, your dreams don't shatter.*

Day 5 - Aumont Aubrac to Nasbinals

No bars for 12kms, and with no breakfast supplied in our gite, we were left with a little more to ponder in our simple daily goal of meeting Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As we walked out foodless into the misty haze, a van pulled in to deliver pastries to the boulangerie next door. These pastry shops are not normally open until well after our starting time. We crept in, the owner treating it as normal business, so we now had croissants for our first bar stop of today's walk. Bars mostly sell drinks only, and welcome you bringing your food.

We celebrated my birthday with a croissant and tea and a very tall middle-aged Frenchman, as we conversed, he in French and myself in English. He asked if I would take his picture as he positioned me in the 'picture taking spot', then tore some bread and dunked it into his coffee as though I wasn't there. I found it interesting how well you can communicate (even though you both have different languages), and, how extensive the discussion can be.

It was a gorgeous, not so cold morning. We walked once again across undulating terrain with a few hills (less challenging than some previous days), the mist and fog hanging like an infinite curtain focussing our attention on things close by. It is not the weather I would normally venture out in, so this walk offered up so many challenges, daring us out of our comfortable rooms to share one of nature's many and varied productions.

I faithfully do my voice exercises every morning so another reason to go early. Through more villages, silent, no matter when you enter their walls, peering along lonely streets watching for the chemin sign that will guide us out of town once more. At the entrance of one of these hamlets a young French couple were travelling unusually slowly, the woman cutting the air like a scythe as one leg moved in an arc to lessen a crippling leg pain.

It was similar to the injury that Corrie had earlier. So my pointing to her knee, adding English words, and she pointing to the pain spot, adding French words, got us into a fifteen minute conversation. After this silent talk, we had shared knee stories, 'charaded' the problem and our successful remedies, ate their biscuits and cheese, laughed as though we were friends, and all, with nearly no verbal contribution. We left them behind, as they were used to doing to us, looking back across the now low and extremely rocky terrain.

We were soon passed by Bruno, a young chemical engineer from Switzerland who has taken twelve months off to travel. This, the end of it, will take him 1500kms to the west coast of Spain. In perfect English he shared his great love of birds. He had already recognised over two hundred species in France. Wrens and finches are big in France, as well as the skylark, that travels high in the air making lots of noise but becoming noiseless close to the ground. He added, that there are snakes, but they only emerge when the sun is out - don't like the cold!

It's not the language, it's the connection



The Universal Language

*The question is: 'should we before we travel
Take time to learn the language of that place',
Instead of making sounds that soon unravel
Thus paying no attention to that race.
Or do we keep our ignorance to our selves
And utter not a word lest we reveal,
We have no books, just dust upon the shelves
As well as pointing out that we don't feel.
A Frenchman, not an English word to spare
He pointed to his camera bag then me,
And showed me to a place to take his picture
Then posed, and click, no word from him or me.
Charades, a global language we can use
A clever option there for those who choose.*

Day 6 - Nasbinals to Saint Chely-d'Aubrac

The poppies' place is being taken by France's ubiquitous wild daffodils as we were surrounded by hundreds of acres of this gorgeous flower. The dandelion, its only competitor, is succumbing to its dominance, camouflaged as it is with the same colour. But the poppy lives on in the minds of millions, as people across the world remember the fallen. Six thousand people attended the service at Villers-Bretonneux, the site of one of the key battles on the Western Front. This battle, led by Australians, saved the town and helped change the course of the war. Pascale Boistard, France's Secretary of State for women's rights, paid tribute to the contribution of the Anzac soldiers. "When the French think about the Anzacs, they think of their courage, and they are eternally grateful," she said. It was here in Villers-Bretonneux, the Anzacs retook the village for the French as they halted the enemy advance.

As we begin our walk on a grey day, I spend some time thinking about the close relationship France has with Australia through the experience of fighting. It is a day to reflect on the ones that died and those still living with those memories of death, as well as the good memories (in this case, strong and everlasting relationships) that can sometimes come from otherwise devastating events.

We head out into the breezy hillsides later than usual, because it is a short walk of 17kms, and realise (for a change) there are other people also walking. Some have their rain gear on just in case and others with rain pants on their packs, and a few that don't believe the forecasts anymore. Like a massive carpet, the grassy hillsides provide a wonderful cushion for walking, and keep us away from the deep ruts that have been forged by millions of boots and shoes from decades past. With a smattering of old birch trees clinging to the hillside just above the valley below, fields of daffodils all around, buttercups adding yet a third yellow flower, and high thinly grassed hills in the background, we find ourselves alone in our tireless thoughts and intimate space.

Soon we are in volcanic rock country again, our grassy way becoming like a dry rocky creek bed as we now, much more carefully, tread our way up and down challenging pathways. Giant volcanic rocks appear like types of memorials for the death of past landforms, as the loose rocky path reaches a creek that it follows into the valley below. We have been travelling at about 1000 metres for some days now but it appears we have today, gone well below that mark. We walk slowly alongside the river La Boralde that leads us to the front door of our delightful gite for tonight. A Belgian couple who own our lodgings, welcomed us, reminding us that shoes must be taken off before entering, as madame easily carried my heavy case to our room upstairs.

La Boralde, meanwhile, rushes past noisily, maybe hoping it will never have to again wash away the blood of war – lest we forget.

What is meant to protect us may also destroy us



Volcanic Stones

*These black and bubbly rocks a new landscape
A suffocated burst from deep beneath,
Their colours all the same but not their shape
Desire was there to simply lay a wreath.
Memorial to fallen former ground
Their spires no architect could easily plan,
Their worshippers from nature all around
Some walkers there but others perhaps ran.
The earth, it has its own memorials
Regeneration comes in different ways,
And nature has its testimonials
While one thing changes, another duly stays.
Volcanic stones, I marvel in their beauty
Reincarnate, it is their earthly duty.*

Day 7 - Saint-Chely-d'Aubrac to Espalion

Patricia and Michel from Belgium hosted us in their four-room 'gite' last night. It was a full house where they wined and dined us along with three middle-aged Frenchmen. Classical music wafted throughout the house as we were welcomed at their table. It was a wonderful night and though our new friends conversed mainly in French, they took the time to speak in broken English for our sake, especially when we demonstrated some understanding of their French, and joined in. These affable men had left their wives to do other things because walking was not their go, but will meet up with them further along the track.

The Frenchmen helped us with places to stay along the way, and explained the more difficult sections. Patricia cooked for us in the same room as we ate, so she was part of the conversation. We are getting used to the French evening meal. Tonight we started with a (soup or salad) – entree (ours was pate, tiny apple slices and orange and tomato sauces), – main (ours was pork in delicious onion sauce, potatoes baked in butter, and mushrooms), – cheese (four cheeses, date sauce and bread) – dessert (ours was rhubarb cheese cake). Red wine was served throughout, and bread left on the table cloth. They also saved implements by using our main plates for cheese. Michel waited on us, and also served the 0600 breakfast with Patricia's stunning home made yoghurts and jams.

We left once again prepared for predicted rain, but fortunately it didn't listen to those predictions and generously waited for us to complete our walk, while raining a little in the late afternoon and night, leaving servings of soupy mud. Hills and valleys again today and our morning dish was a fourth yellow flower that appeared en masse. I'm not sure what all this yellow means but for us it symbolised sunshine, and it's what we are getting a lot of. Just three villages today (instead of the usual five or more), luscious fields, an array of trees (some breaking through their buds), some with flowers such as apple blossoms, and others dressed in their various green leaf designs - a pleasant midday serving.

Spectacular rain forest type cover with little streams playing in their undergrowth and the more grand river Lot at Sainte-Come-d'Olt was today's main serving, while the 'charolais' cattle reminded us of the delightful French cheeses which are a course on their own in most parts of France. A final very long and steep challenging hill tested our stamina as we reached its welcome summit and then stumbled down into our valley home.

We were so happy with our adventurous day that a disagreement in price (spoken in French by madam through her interpreter son) did not spoil our appetite. Dessert was waiting for us when our new hostess, (we're their only guests) came to our room, (actually her room, thus the higher price) with tea, cakes and fruit. She came in a traditional maids outfit to lighten the mood following our earlier misstep. I think they knew we hadn't yet finished our meal.

Having a seat at the table makes all the difference



Bon Appetit

*In France there are some simple rules for eating
Remember when invited to their table,
The partners face each other with their seating
Arms rest on top but only if you're able.
'Bon appetit' is first and then you toast
And look each other squarely in the eye,
Rest fork on plate and table as do most
At end, both at an angle, there they lie.
And when you eat your lettuce - fold so small
Your bread on table lies, then eat small bits,
And with it mop the plate and clean it all
So stay there lest your hosts do lose their wits.
The French are not reserved, so have your say
Already made their night, now make their day.*

Day 8 - Espalion to Golinhac

Breakfast was delivered at 0525 by the owner (in her 'French maid guise'), who then immediately went back to bed. 'Chambre d'hote' owners (those who let rooms in their home) have gone out of their way to provide unusual requests. This was one of those. In this case, Jacqueline had walked the camino and understood our need for early food. We usually don't eat until after our first 5kms or so because we are not hungry, but in the case of the last two mornings there has been no cafe for more than 10kms. Our unusual request for a dry day however was ignored, as we wandered out into heavy rain.

The last day of the Massif Central had more in store, as it joined forces with the wet to dampen our criticism of poor weather reporting. Water streamed down the normally difficult ascent, as our blasé walking days suddenly came to a halt. Two French pilgrims, (one pulling a cart), joined forces with us as we planned strategies. We helped each other through creviced paths and up eroded banks, all the time trying to avoid new waterfalls. It reminded me of my nephew who organised an event for hundreds, called 'tough mudder', where people organised themselves into teams to compete in a rugged obstacle course. The focus was not so much on winning, as ensuring all your team finished. This, was a 'mini-mudder'. Once we reached the top it was similar coming down, the focus more on ensuring no slipping, as it is mostly downhill where the serious accidents occur, so it was very slow. The weather seemed to be playing games with us, stopping while we had a welcome coffee in one of those villages that the French call 'beau'. You guessed, it started raining again as soon as we walked out of our 'cosy cafe', or was paranoia setting in?

Over the ancient bridge of 'Beau Veriere' and up into our last long 'Massif' climb, a few more smaller hills and villages, and we arrived eight long hours later. Usually it takes six hours for us oldies to walk this distance of 24kms. Regina, a councillor in the village, or officially, 'commune' council, was our hostess, and even though her English speaking husband was at a work meeting in Paris, this French 'German teacher' spoke enough for us to converse.

She gave us the usual French welcome of cakes and tea and we sat at her table chatting about her council work, her recent renovations and her two dogs, while taking in the views over the now misty Lot Valley. She then personally led us to the local restaurant where the diners next to us were a foursome, with the fourth member, a Labrador, sitting obediently happy at his place at the table, eating when his master offered. Despite the 'tut tuts' from a non-European, I believe it is allowed in some places in France.

Regina later invited me back to her home so I could write my blog. The French people's immediacy in hospitality and friendship, even though you might struggle with their language, is superb.

Reach out your hand no matter whose it is



A French Apology

*The price agreed by him was not by her
Another room was clearly in her mind,
She spoke no English so to him deferred
It did cost more, the best room we would find.
Twas hers no less, and therefore cost more rent
So she moved out into a tiny space,
Then we agreed it would be francs well spent
So settled down and took it with good grace.
The son and mother now were feeling bad
He drove us to a restaurant he knew,
Then drove us home now feeling very glad
Dessert she had, good feeling was hers too.
Then breakfast, served in bed at five by her,
To get it wrong at first, we now prefer.*

Day 9 - Golinhac to Conques

Breakfast was served at Regina's (says she is the queen of the village) table, another breakfast feast, and lunch made to take with us. She took us up to their backyard, in itself a steep climb, between two massive boulders to her superb view of the magnificent Lot valley. I could not, at this moment, imagine one that could be better. These boulders appeared like monuments, maybe of a long forgotten time, where years of heavy rain have exposed them in their full beauty, by divesting them of their protective soil coating. This delightful woman then walked us through town to make sure we were on the right track. We hugged and kissed. How close you can become with a near stranger, on 'the chemin'.

We hear the cuckoo every day, and it greets us once more. The myriad of smaller birds are free to be heard, as there doesn't seem to be any larger, noisy birds, with dominating cries that would drown their gentle sounds, or even harm their very existence. In some parts of Australia, the noisy sounds of non-native birds such as currawongs, 'white' cockatoos and 'minor' birds, often don't allow the intimate voices of the little ones to be heard.

We saw our first crops of the trip so far, but not sure what they are. This first 200kms has been mainly lush pastures for the dairy cattle, horses and goats; pine forests for timber; and birch and beech forests. Yellow flowers have been prolific, the absolute standout being the daffodil, a flower I was fond of as a child where my father grew them amongst his fields of tulips, the main flower seen in the village gardens that we pass every day.

We chatted and walked a little with the three wife-less Frenchmen who were at our table three nights ago, and practiced our 'bonjours' and 'bon chemins' on the dozens of French people we see daily. We said our usual hellos to the fat spoilt cattle, sang with the birds, and patted a donkey that followed me for some way wanting to engage or be fed!! Meanwhile a Danish mum and daughter told us they were trying to complete the trip in their holidays.

We're now at the 11th century village of Conques, whose stunning ancient stone houses cling to the steep hillside while displaying their envious charm to us and the many other daily visitors. We carefully and tiredly walk down the long cobbled pathway to our new home, the abbey. Up and up its wide stone spiral stairway (just another hill) to our room, we were dead-to-the-world overlooking the abbey graveyard, which makes us feel right at home.

This tucked away village is located at the confluence of the Dourdou and Ouche rivers. It is built on a hillside and has classic narrow medieval streets. As a result, large vehicles (such as buses) cannot enter the historic town centre, but must park outside, leaving the village to the people. The town was largely passed by in the 19th century, and was saved from oblivion by the efforts of a small number of dedicated and long sighted people.

As the mist lifts, mystery becomes reality



Conques

*There hidden in a valley fast asleep
Its misty blanket tucked around its neck,
The monastery spire the first to peek
To see its sheer steep hills, its upper deck.
Awaken to its intertwining streets
With valley views beneath the thinning mist,
As morning shows its never-ending treats
The houses hug so close they might have kissed.
It's Conques, the untouched medieval place
Where rivers meet to celebrate this treasure,
Those grey slate roofs its slowly ageing face
So many tales, some sad, and some of pleasure.
The mist wafts in as dusk returns once more,
The village rests, and dreams of times before.*

Day 10 - Conques to Livinhac

Our first night in an abbey, and sixty of us sat at eight tables. Our table had a close-knit french speaking group, so Corrie and I just imagined what they were saying and had our own little conversation as though we were part of theirs. Dinner over, and because they were so helpful to our needs, the least we could do was go to their church service. The angelic sound of one of the young priest's voice was enough for us to enjoy being there, and it is good for my speech therapy to sing. We didn't know the words, so imagined them as well, in this delightful internationally flavoured chant.

As we left for another climb up our 'spiral hill', Evelyne (a volunteer at the abbey) who had been meeting our needs so tirelessly, noticed the 'Walking for Parkinson's' sign on my back and wanted the blog name. A few people are slowly enquiring about our walk.

Breakfast at 0700 is the norm, but on request, they allowed us in early. The two Danish women also appeared for an early breakfast and we set off at about the same time. Their long legs soon had them out of sight, as a few others including a German man and our three French friends, one after the other overtook us, but not before we had poled ourselves up a kilometre out of the valley of the fairytale Conques. Pockets of mist floated between these ancient houses as we climbed, the streets unusually people free, so a real feeling of the 11th century echoed through our being.

Onto the top of the first hill once again looking out onto the luscious fields and multiple dairies above the Lot valley, our familiar grazing residents are there. The usual small gathering of charolais cattle; a few horses; a couple of goats; four terrifying dogs (behind a fence), many others quiet or friendly, one asleep on the road; three mules; and one coffee shop in the back of someone's shed (the tractor now stays out in the weather); were our sightings for the day. Out of the French woods, fields of wheat are beginning to appear, their final product spread across our table tops at every meal in all their varied shapes and sizes. The produce for the wines that are at every afternoon meal have not yet appeared, obviously not conducive to this environment, or as profitable as other products.

We eventually start a hilly walk, then down to see the river Lot once again, and finally nursed our aching bodies up into the village of Livinhac which seems (I'm sure it's not) so ordinary, after 'Conques and friends' have enchanted our curious minds. Martine told us to ring when we got to town so she could drive from her little 'chambres' in the countryside to collect us. We hope she will take us back to the 'chemin' in the morning, as I imagine our Portuguese and Spanish guests hope also. Livinhac-Le-Haut is the birthplace of several great thinkers and philosophers such as Pierre Laromiguiere, so it will be interesting to see whether great thinking has caught on here.

Angelic sounds do not always represent angels



Imagine

*Imagine if we had the power to be
The person who could do most any thing,
Contented so our mind could wrestle free
Away from thoughts that misery can bring.
Imagine that we were not meant to suffer
There is a purpose we're not meant to know,
And even though it means that life is tougher
It also maybe means we're meant to grow.
Imagine that the steep hill leads somewhere
It keeps the mind alert, the body strong,
And when you reach the top, or nearly there
You have more words to sing another song.
Imagination then may free our mind
So many possibilities to find.*

Day 11 - Livinhac to Figeac

Main course was a beautiful French dish, the famous 'cassoulet', a rich, slow-cooked casserole containing meat, pork skin and white beans, originating in the south of France. This dish is named after its traditional cooking vessel, the cassole, a deep, round, earthenware pot with slanting sides. Aside from the food, we also shared camino stories – Salvadore with his Spanish walk and Emanuel his Portuguese. To include everyone in the conversation, Corrie translated Salvadore's Spanish into English and our English back into Spanish for him. Emanuel then translated both these into French for Martine who spoke a little English, and I'm just here to report on their cleverness.

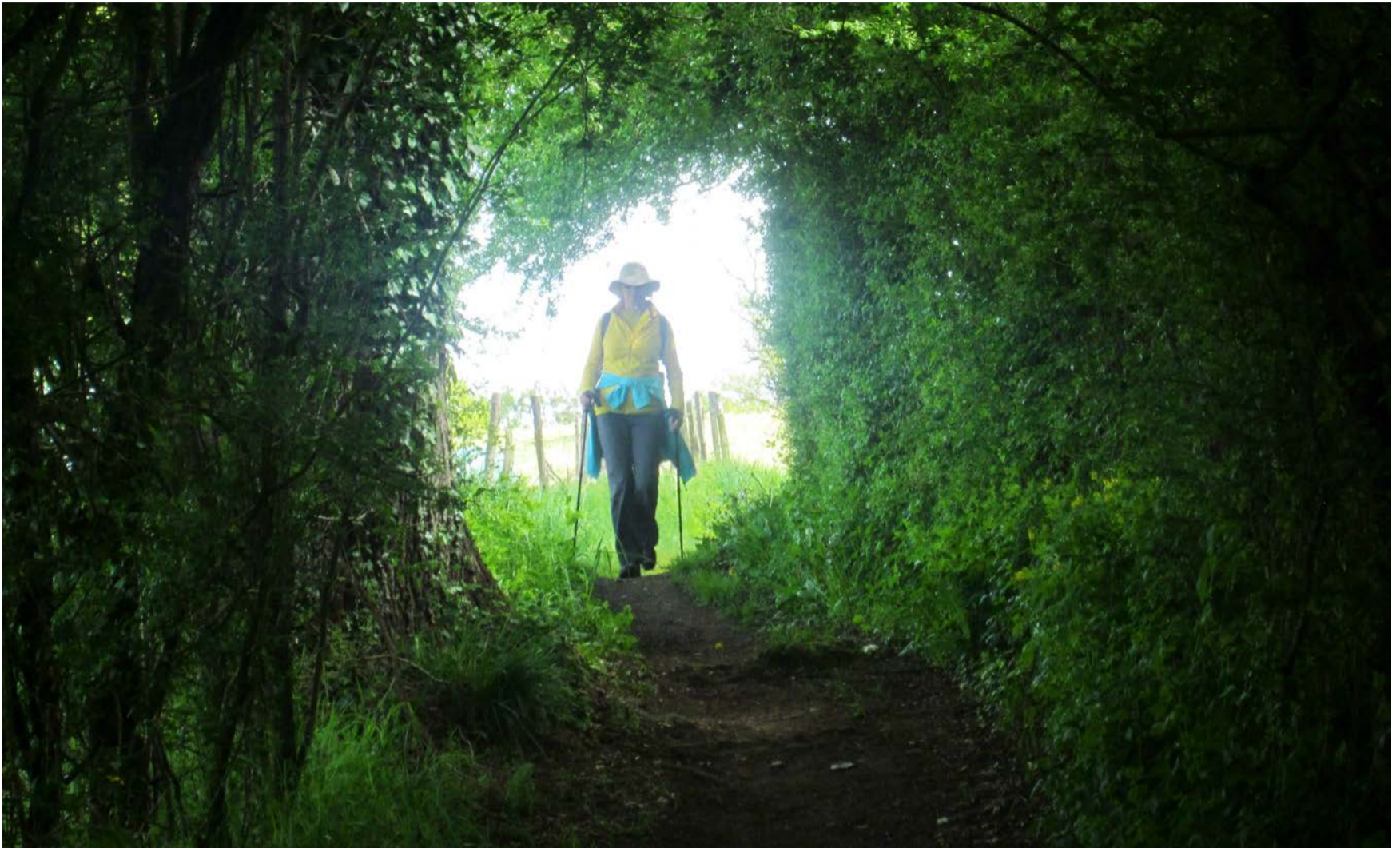
She 'did' drive us back to where she collected us in town, hugs now and three kisses, with Martine insisting it is the French way, regardless of the Parisian insistence on two. We found our now familiar red and white sign, and headed off on our day's walk. We are getting used to starting the day with long uphill walks. They get our cardiovascular system working well while generating much needed warmth in the cool mornings. We soon settled into an easy walking rhythm with gradual slopes and flat ground.

Much of the track was too boggy to walk through, so walkers had made small detours along farm edges or high narrow paths up the bank from the mud, where we hung firmly on to fence posts, or used our poles to stop us falling. A lot of narrow tunnel (thin hedges carved this way by pilgrims as they walked) pathways ushered us by on this, the hottest day yet, twenty five degrees, but still cool in the many shaded sections.

Rounding a corner I 'bonjour'd' a woman. When she spoke to me in French, I replied that I was from Australia. Anne replied in English that she was from Shropshire and her husband Malcolm was putting his previous woodwork teaching skills into practice by renovating an old stone building; converting a barn into a workshop; and restoring a gorgeous bread oven. All this was happening under a large oak and chestnut tree, the adjoining home of the sparrows, bats, nightingales and other small birds on the 'chemin'. After an hour of tours, coffee and cake, and swapping our French experiences, we left this English/French home to rejoin the international language of walkers.

As we walked down a small stretch of highway, a wild deer jumped on to the road, dodged some cars and scrambled up a steep embankment to be met by a fence, scampered back down, luckily with no cars to dodge, and into the narrow lines of bush mostly separating fields, so not sure where its home is for the night. We soon found ours, right on the bank of the river Lot that has been with us for many days now. We are looking forward to what 'our lot' will do on the rest day tomorrow where we will explore the town and spend time with some special neighbours and friends from Sydney and France. I wonder how many kisses they give!

The human condition has us oscillating between light and dark



Cassoulet

*The Cassoulet from south of France does brew
A wholesome dish, it's one that warms the soul,
With pork, or goose or duck or mutton too
And with white beans - a slow cooked casserole.
In haute-cuisine, veggies are also there
And savour it with local Languedoc wine,
Try chicken legs, another kind of fare
If sausages, ensure they're from the swine.
The backbone of the dish are french beans - white
In Castelnaudary like Carcassonne,
The beans cooked in a broth 'til they are light
Toulouse has herbs and spices, they're homegrown.
It's Cassoulet, the french dish of the peasant
And guaranteed, the real one has no pheasant.*

Day 12 - May Day in Figeac

A 'boulangerie petit déjeuner' started our day, and probably the only thing that could take us back out into the incessant rain. A short walk took us around this beautiful riverside town and then back to make more bookings, catch up on emails, do some local research, and wash mud from our clothes and shoes. It's May Day, and mostly younger women and a mum with her boy are on the streets of Figeac, under cafe awnings and umbrellas selling flowers in the rain for the celebration explained below.

May Day, May 1 (La Fête du Muguet) in France is a public holiday to campaign for, and celebrate, workers' rights. It is also an occasion to present lily-of-the-valley or dog rose flowers to loved ones. People in many areas give bouquets of these delightful flowers to those they cherish. This custom is particularly common in the area around Paris known as Île-de-France. Families with children in country areas get up early in the morning and wander into the woods to pick the flowers. Individuals and some labour organisations in urban areas sell bouquets of lily of the valley, while trade unions hold parades and demonstrations to campaign for workers' rights. People may also use these events to campaign for human rights in general, to demonstrate against racism, or highlight social issues.

King Charles IX of France was presented with lily-of-the-valley flowers on May 1, 1561. He loved the gift and decided to present these flowers to the ladies of his court each year on that day. Around 1900 this caught on, and men started to present a bouquet of lily-of-the-valley flowers to women to express their affection for them. These days the flowers are a more general token of appreciation between close friends and family members.

The eight-hour working day was officially introduced in France on April 23, 1919, and May 1 became a public holiday called Fête Internationale des Travailleurs (International Workers' Day). During World War II, the Vichy regime enriched the holiday's name to Fête du Travail et de la Concorde Sociale (Work and Social Unity Day), however it officially became known as La Fête du Travail (Labor Day) on April 29, 1948. Since then, it has been an occasion to campaign for, and celebrate, workers' rights. The day is famous throughout the planet and is also known as Labor Day in other parts of the world.

This beautiful town on the banks of the tree-lined, stone-walled river Lot, also has a hero of a different kind. Jean-Francois Champollion, along with the help of Napoleon, championed the field of egyptology, where Napoleon's war of the late 18th century unearthed many artefacts. Champollion, an archeologist, deciphered their hieroglyphs.

Soon we will catch up with our lovely Sydney friends and talk about France, its walks and villages, as they also have a home here and are heading off to walk in the Pyrenees tomorrow.

The only human right that can't be removed is 'what you choose to think and feel'



The Bar and The Boulangerie

*One great reward for walking the camino in France
Is to stop for a pastry in their 'boulangerie',
To buy baguettes, croissants and pan au raisins
They're flaky and tasty, they're fresh from the bakery.
But you need a coffee, and this is not what they make
Popularity such they don't have time to prepare,
So you buy your croissant, and to the bar you take
And meet with pilgrims who always have tales to share.
The sad fact is they're closing down too fast
As locals move, there aren't many jobs anymore,
So the 'supermarche', its net so widely cast
Is slowly choking the villages' corner store.
So when one you sight no matter how hungry you are
Go in for your pastry then take it across to the bar.*

Day 13 - Figeac to Cajarc

Meeting with our friends was great. We dined with our Aussie, French speaking friends at La Dinee du Viguiier where your coats are taken (but given back), where your meals are described to you in detail by two waiters, where only the men are given the menu with the prices on, and where you sit four people at a table that could easily fit eight. This was the restaurant that our friend Gordie 'had' to take us to. It was superb, even the bread rolls were a dish in themselves. We talked about meaningful things; the 'chemin'; and bits and pieces from home. It was very special, very entertaining and very expensive. Forget Paris with two kisses and the villages with three, it was a kiss and a hug and wishes for 'good walking'.

Yet another steep kilometre climb tested our digestive capacity as we began a nearly 30km walk because of necessity (the distance to the first accommodating village). We missed a 'chemin marker' and walked an extra kilometre following the 'chemin signs' but a variation (alternative route)!! We were walking towards 'old sol' when we should have had him/her at our back. I knocked on doors but no-one seems to live in their homes. I stopped cars. The French don't mind being stopped or where they stop, middle of the road, on steep hills, even on roundabouts, but that was as good as knocking on French doors. Not a good start.

So we went back to where the 'mistake place' was, and found the sign that had all but vanished. Off again through stunning countryside, lush rolling hills, narrow stone lanes, along iris-flanked village paths, tree tunnel tracks through forests, and long flat grasslands by the river until the village of Bedeua. There was an alternative path that we didn't want to take, but we took anyway, because we've only followed the 'chemin sign' since we started back in Le Puy.

We entered the land of fairies, long thin bending branches with bearded moss hanging down, rocks of all sizes dressed in the same attire, and goblins all wearing.... nah, no goblins. All of this draping down to the river's edge along narrow curvy, up and down paths. We thought we were in heaven but I also thought we'd better check because we hadn't been there before. So I asked a French couple who were coming towards us, if we were on the right track. They checked out our home for tonight and apologetically told us we would not arrive for a good half day. It was 1715, we had walked nearly 30kms and that alternative path was the wrong one.

Corrie began to weep, I fell to my knees and grasped the man's leg, told them that le sac was in the village we were heading for, and that we'd have to kill ourselves if we couldn't reunite with le sac tonight. This lovely couple didn't witness any of the above however, but she said they had a car and would drive us to our new home. It was heaven, and they were our guardian angels. We're about to sit at the table with our eight new friends for dinner, the aromas from which tell us of yet another delightful dinner, so we're glad that we're alive!

Getting lost provides a unique opportunity to exercise the brain



Lost

*“Get lost”, is not a phrase we like to hear
Its connotations rarely raise a smile,
Not wanted, is the implication there
So go, get out, leave and walk a mile.
But “I am lost” is something else again
It happens in the bush and can be scary,
Depending on the weather and terrain
The walker must take care - always be wary.
But we got lost, it helped we had a track
The problem though we knew not where we were,
The good news was some locals took us back
Then drove us home, some miles we would defer
While we were lost, a fairy grove we found
We’ll never lose that vision, or its sound.*

Day 14 - Cajarc to Limogne-en-Quercy

We met up with our Korean friends at dinner and talked about his broken cart (gone to the grave now), and their work for the government in Paris, where they live in a world of two cultures. At the table also were two Swiss women (one German, one French), one French woman and two younger women who were private investigators in Paris. We all joined in with our different languages while Anne, the owner chef, weaved her magic. The investigators were mainly involved in French 'affairs' and spent a lot of time counselling the aggrieved party. It is amazing with such little deep connection with strangers, you can feel like good trusting friends by the next morning.

It was a flat road for some time before our usual morning hill climb. We talked briefly with an Englishman and his French co-walker, overtook a young woman on her mobile, and passed a walker using a small horse to carry his gear. As we walk we are seeing hills of bushy trees, the first time in a long time we are seeing nature doing its own thing.

Down a long stony narrow pathway and into a clearing with tables, chairs and a fountain supplied by the village up on the hill. We sat for a rest as a young quiet Frenchman and a group of young French girls joined us. We talked for a while with one of the French girls, about sore bodies, whether Australia had 'caminos', and about France. Her friend was having trouble with her back and spent time lying flat on the ground so we gave them the phone number of the 'back-saver transport', the one who is carrying our packs, and her aches improved a little.

We left them in this small oasis and walked on gradual sloping landforms, through hobbit-type country where trees have beards and rocks are softened with moss. A young French couple caught up with us and we walked and talked together through some kilometres of stunning 'oak tree woods' sheltering the myriads of truffles below. I was surprised not to see the oft' talked about truffle poachers in this huge smorgasbord.

Arriving in town we went the long way (not wrong) to our small self contained garden studio where Geraldine apologised for not providing the 'short way' instructions. Between renovation duties she was involved with in her home, she more than made up for her tardiness. I had left my treasured power point plug at the lodge before last and needed to write, so she lent us her computer where we could write emails to book lodgings and confirm case transport. She then asked her friend who had a 'mac air' like ours, if she could lend us a French connection, you know what I mean! I can now write this blog on time thanks to the wonderful Geraldine.

We left our 'cook your own food' place with a cupboard shop, and submitted once again to her generosity, and luxuriated in being driven into this very curious French village by our generous host.

Connecting with another provides endless opportunities



Connection

*Connecting is a natural human desire
We look for it in so many different ways,
At work, at home, at play, someone to admire
A feeling deep and strong that always stays.
It's a lot to do with the way you talk to another
The interest shown in what they have to say,
Then also let them in beneath your cover
And show them that you have a different way.
The camino adds another new dimension
Aware of what is common to one and all,
It helps connect, and then removes the tension
They'll quickly help if you trip and take a fall.
If you want to get close take time to deepen your talk
Put a pack on your back and take a very long walk.*

Day 15 - Limogne-en-Quercy to Vaylats

Geraldine drove us to the shops for our dinner options. They were the pizza bar, kebab shop, or restaurant, in this old village being restored to good health, still not ready for tourists but just right for us. We ate our huge kebab while wondering what the square will look like when it is finished with its superbly shaped church, its hundred year old plantain tree, a gite and a kebab shop. After dinner we decided not to have Geraldine collect us and walked back still wondering and checking out the track signs for tomorrow.

We cooked our breakfast, then onto a muddy path for many kilometres, the sort of mud where you seem to get taller with every step. We walked through oak forests and skinny woods with some small grassy oases here and there. A day on our own just taking in the surroundings passing no one, and enjoying a different feel altogether. We departed from the track to seek out our room for tonight in a quiet village, where the owner of our hotel was cleaning our attic. It included a lounge room, dining area, kitchen and large balcony overlooking the main plaza, all just a spiral staircase below.

We were still conserving battery power not knowing if we would be able to retrieve our old one or buy another, until Sylvie said: "I have a package for you". Another lost and found moment. There, in an A4 envelope was our A24 size adaptor which meant we could continue taking photos and writing blogs to our hearts content. It was collected by our bagman, taken to our cabin in Limogne en Quercy addressed to Geraldine, where we had just left, so they took it to our lodgings in Vaylat where we are now. Sylvie was delighted, we were ecstatic, while the bagman was very happy that he had completed his complex brief and delivered.

Doing our usual 'pre-chemin recce' we came across a Californian couple who've been walking in every direction for the last fifteen years, he, with a mechanical contraption on his leg to keep his cartilage in place. They were wandering along looking for their 'guest house' nearby. Seeing their looks of despair we convinced them to come back to our pad and check with Sylvie. They looked quite agitated and I could see Sylvie nervously pointing in the other direction saying it's a long way. He lost control for a moment but when Sylvie rang for a 'cab', he had a chance to debrief with a beer, and he was okay.

Later, the young French girls we met yesterday were met again, and as residents of the village now, we were able to direct them to a large, old convent. The nuns here used to be self sufficient in years gone by and had built a dam to collect water for their gardens (they have no underground water in France). Renovations are underway to bring life again behind its sad walls as they open the accommodation doors to elderly women from 'four departments'. We're off to visit this very interesting convent and gardens before we cook our first meal on the track in our little stone house on the village square.

The gift of giving someone all your love



In Foreign Lands

*It's great to take a walk in foreign lands
Especially when you walk with many others,
Up hills, thru mud, round rocks and sliding sands
You get rare chance to talk with sisters and brothers.
Cultures apart, no need to speak their tongue
Ages apart, no generation gap,
A warming greet and then some mime and song
A common bond, it flows just like a tap.
And then you're on your own, another space
The silence brings you to another world,
That deep within that knows not how to race
Allows that spirit free to now unfurl.
If there's a sunken mystery to be found
You have a chance, to find it on this ground.*

Day 16 - Vaylats to Cahors

Final instructions from Sylvie – how to lock the main door, where to leave the key, and the best way to join the track, led to more discoveries about our rafter room. Our fascinating lodgings are the remains of a castle, the leftovers from ‘looters’ during the French Revolution of 1789. In contempt of the regime of the time and because they could, people took stones from castles to build their own homes, this was one of those castles. Maybe that is where the term: ‘your home is your castle’ comes from. I can’t remember a time when I simply lay in bed not wanting to sleep, looking at the heavy beams above like a huge wooden web, while at the same time glancing down at the lounge area through the railing in front and marvelling at the solid stone walls all around. I awoke, not really wanting to leave but we had miles to go before....

The full moon lit the pre-dawn sky and watched us through the oak trees and around stone houses, casting shadows before us as we strode out to make use of the quiet cool. With our energy levels high from the night’s rest, we left to get a few kilometres under our boots. No villages all day we had been told, so we had a break on the side of the track up against a tree, ‘bon chemin’ing’ a few walkers as they went past at different speeds depending on the state of their bodies.

On the move again and past two friendly French men. Corrie a little behind me found their pace a little more conducive and stayed with them awhile. They were doing a ten day stint and finishing tomorrow. As she moved up to join me, gathering clouds started to sweat a little and, alas, we had earlier removed our rain gear. Before it got too heavy the Lot Department supplied us with a sheltered bus stop just before a massive mob of sheep bleat us....., sorry....., to it. We changed, then handed our ‘Lot change room’ over to three French women who were also unprepared.

Slight rises and falls made it an easy walk today and we know that the really hard stuff is behind us and our bodies are doing well. We passed four French women on a rare downhill slope, one of them walking backwards because her knee refused to do it the right way. This decline was part of a long final stretch into the commune of Cahors which lies in a wide valley where the river Lot does a u-turn around its fortunate inhabitants.

Our lodgings are three stories up a wide spiral of stairs in a large room in a rustic run-down part of the old city. No tourist would, I imagine, wander these tough lived in streets that refuse to join the rampant renovators’ race. Pierre is our landlord and what a character he seems to be, welcoming, engaging and with a few local generations responsible for his being here. We chatted for a while as he told us about the many Australians that have also struggled up his stairs. We’ll spend two nights here, as this ‘commune of Cahors’ suggests there are good reasons to, and....., I see poppies.

If we didn't build castles, maybe there would be no need for them



Castle Cafe

*We build a castle to protect our land
To keep our foes from taking what is ours,
And safe assured as long as it will stand
Our foes retreat, our sweat drips from our brows.
They come again and find the weakest point
And target this until it breaks away,
Now once inside, new leader they anoint
For good or bad the foes have won the day.
We steal the stones the castle left behind
And build our own in order to protect,
Our fragile souls so deep down in our mind
And strengthen them, ensure they don't defect.
Our weakest point, now strong like all the rest
No more defence, content within our nest.*

Day 17 - Cahors

Our “day-off-breakfast” started at 0830 with a French Canadian couple and Pierre, in his luxurious dining room. Pierre, the owner of all knowledge, was also interested in the bits we had to share, that he didn’t know. We are aware that English is often spoken for our sake so we let them know that we get the gist of their conversation, so as not to take away the richness of their more familiar tongue. We finished our croissants and orange juice, did our daily hill-walk up the walnut spiral staircase and then onto the lanes of Cahors.

A delightful commune to spend time strolling around the river’s edge, visiting the two busy markets, and just being in these very old and silent streets. Many of these houses are not restored but neither are they dilapidated. Pierre tells us that mostly older people live here, some are ‘chambres’ for guests like us, next to us were terraces for people who have a mental illness, and I saw a smattering of young folk, seemingly residents of some sort.

These bars remind us of something that Cahors is famous for, its ‘black wines’, which are referred to by many as the darkest in the world. They are also amongst the strongest and richest and will keep for a very long time. I was curious that we had not seen any vines and asked Pierre if he knew the answer. He told us that we also won’t see them on the way out, because we will be going roughly south and the vines are going west.

On our walk along the main street dividing the old village from the new, we passed a large statue of Leon Gambetta, a big name in town. He is special because he preserved Cahors’ self-respect through the gallantry of the resistance he organised during the Franco-Prussian War and by his tact in persuading extreme partisans to accept a moderate Republic. We had lunch in the u-shape, after which we had another walk round the river Lot passing under two beautiful bridges, the most esteemed being its famous fortified 14th century Valentre bridge.

As Corrie took some more euros from the teller machine on the way to the tourist office we remembered someone telling us of another side of Cahors, but a long time ago. It was infamous for having bankers who charged interest on their loans. The church in these times said that using money as an end in itself (usury) was a sin. Because of this, Cahors became synonymous with this sin, and was mentioned in Dante’s Inferno, alongside Sodom, as wicked.

Visiting the tourist office I asked if there was a famous poet or writer ever here and I got both in the name of André Breton. He is known best as the founder of Surrealism and his writings include the first Surrealist Manifesto. He also was an admirer of Freud and based a lot of his surrealist ideas on Freud’s writings on the unconscious mind and dream interpretations. My dreams lately have been coincidentally very vivid and real, so it might be time to try to interpret them and thus enrich my walking experience.

The mentally ill have a great friend in technology - we all now appear to be talking to ourselves



The Cahors Inferno

*I've heard of red and white and rose wine
But black is one I never contemplated,
We lived in style, five star it was to dine
With drugs outside neighbours are lowly rated.
This sinful town - the banks charged fee for loan
The Devil's bridge - it had a certain magic,
A street assault - I tapped my little phone
Surreal it was - the beauty and the tragic.
Andre Breton, he fought for recognition
That he was first with fact and fantasy,
To produce art with feelings and cognition
Unconscious thoughts with some reality.
This ancient town has 'lots' of great appeal
Cahors with contradictions....., so surreal.*

Day 18 - Cahors to Lascabanes

Bit scary leaving, as we witnessed an attempted assault on a local kid by two others and police arriving to sort out some trouble a street away, so I carefully checked out the narrow dark lanes as we were leaving in the cool of the dark. Out of the streets and onto the banks of the river Lot again there was a train crossing the bridge, birds chirping and cuckooing, the river weir splashing noisily as it only can, and without the noise of the day. We were back in the 14th century, as we crossed this ancient bridge, no 21st century sounds were there to bring us forward in time. Andre Breton might call this 'surreal', while Sigmund might say: that these feelings are arising from your unconscious".

In the 14th century we would never have been able to climb the imposing hill that shadows the bridge and hides the sun from the commune in the evening. The sheerness of the hill would not allow for even a winding path, so hundreds of stairs had been carved out to gain access to the part of Cahors that is first to see the sun peaking down into this river-bounded town, a stunning sight.

This high thin ridge led us away on yet another leg on the 'Chemin de le Puy', a few rises and falls as we went between open sunny stretches through shaded woods. In one of these small oak-tree forests a deer ran out, our noisy poles startling it while drinking from the tiny creek just below. Another jumped out in front of us from a similar forest showing off its multitude of 'little maple' trees. The bright green leaves on a near black trunk provided a startling contrast, their twisted branches mimicking the 'Nataraj', or those delightfully displayed arms of an array of ballet dancers, displaying yet another dome shaped stone building, used to shelter shepherds at night.

They weren't shepherds but these two big South African men coming up behind us latched onto my wife as did the two Frenchmen from yesterday. I once again left her to entertain and be entertained. They swapped stories about the camino Frances in Spain (one of these senior executives had done the walk three times); retirement options; and their beloved home..... Cape Town. We paused at a cafe where we joked, looked at photos of Cape Town, talked about Parkinson's and the work/play balance.

Just as we were leaving, a Swiss man turned up with Corrie's gloves that she had dropped earlier. He caught up to us later and we chatted for a while. Our new 'short term friend' was a regular camino walker so our pace was only good enough for a little chat. We took a dive down into the French oasis of Lascabanes where we took yet another rare type of track, across a farmer's field, separating his wheat from his spinach. We later caught up with a very dedicated Parisian pilgrim singing sacred songs and moving his fingers deftly through his rosary beads. He left us soon after as he continued onto St Jean, while we went on to meet Claire and Elain, owners of our home tonight.

Reflection puts things into perspective



A Twisted Tree

*A tree can talk to us in many ways
Its trunk is always there for us to hug,
The branches, they reach out to us unfazed
The twigs will feed our fire when there's a shrug.
The leaves will come and go if that's their way
Others are always there, they never go,
While flowers do show an optimistic spray
The fruit will nourish us and help us grow.
But there's a twisted tree unlike the rest
Its branches never seem to have direction,
However it is perfect for a nest
Its folding arms show nothing but affection.
It may not look the way it's supposed to be
But this is not some ordinary tree.*

Day 19 - Lascabanes to Lauzerte

La Grange de Grizou had only one guest tonight, us. Alain asked us to leave our pack where pilgrims have to leave their shoes to help keep these 'gites' clean. He was very particular about packs because infectious bugs were rife in the area. We walked into this beautifully renovated stone house, under sturdy oak beams and into a spacious room leading to our bedroom on the left, the large dining room and kitchen with a server to the right, all behind sets of glass doors leading to a large balcony, the oak forest trees just feet away through which we could see the clear sky. Alain, a psychologist, and Claire, a yoga teacher, have recently married and left the bright lights of Paris to chart a new course in life.

Their delightful 'chambre d'hotes' is their new project. Their adept cooking skills, wonderful company, and love of people, combine to make this a place that must be on every pilgrims' list. Speaking in English (Claire did not speak it, but said she would be perfect if she could), allowed us to exchange thoughts and ideas on psychology; while learning that the deer has been culled over the years, but can now eat the shoots of the new oak trees because there are plenty; and talk pharmacy with Alain's friend Michel. We had a very entertaining night over a regional veal dish (Blauquette de Veau), a walnut flour dessert, and wine.

We kissed and hugged like old friends as the sun speckled through the oak leaves on one side, with rain once again testing our waterproofs on the other. Soon into our stride amongst flashes of lightning with their accompaniment of drums of thunder and daunting grey clouds spilling their offerings. A cool breeze challenged the French humidity, our most unwelcome friend just about every day. The light and sound show (like the extremes of Aida) played over dinner, and ended just as we were getting used to our new weather phenomenon.

Some difficult ascents and descents were balanced out by long narrow paths trickling in and out of cosy woods and through the middle of private pastures. This feature of our walk is more peculiar to this 'Chemin de la Puy' as it occurred much less frequently on the Camino Frances. As we wondered where our next village might be, we happened upon a young local farm girl who had set up her cafe bench near her tractor, maybe this was payment for a right of way. We would normally have stopped but the timing didn't fit.

Lauzerte soon came into view sitting on top of a hill (villages have been mostly in the valleys on this walk) but we haven't introduced ourselves yet as our little room is half a kilometre off the 'chemin'. A quiet bitumen road led us to our room in one of the few four-room cottages like siblings, from their parents, the delightful and familial small hotel. Wifi has just begun to work after two unsuccessful endeavours to get it elsewhere. Tomorrow we will visit the hill-top town of Lauzerte and see what we can find, and maybe we'll meet up again with the two women from Canada whom we chatted with today.

Savour the moment, for that is all of which you can be sure



Walking

*Why would you choose to walk instead of rest
When pain is telling you to take a break?
Why would you up and leave a cosy nest
When there's a cold or flu you need to shake?
Why would you venture out in pouring rain
When you could sit and talk with your new friends?
Why would you risk your back that has a strain
When you could medicate until it mends?
You do it cause you have a bigger goal
You do it cause you promised that you would,
You do it cause you simply have control
You do it cause you told yourself you could.
We also 'love' to walk, me and my wife,
It adds a new dimension... to our life.*

Day 20 - Lauzerte to Moissac

We climbed the hill to the stunning medieval village of Lauzerte. Some street lights still on, the first person was setting up for market day, but no-one or nothing else could show that it was the 21st century, so my imagination had a great time. Corrie and I were the only people on the street in what I imagine would be a place usually filled with tourists, so we took our time. Most of the villages we pass through are deep down in a valley, but this one was like a large inhabited rock in the middle of nowhere, maybe the Uluru of southern France.

The ups and downs are still there but they are getting shorter, which puts this walk today in the fairly easy category, all relative of course, e.g., my Parkinson's body sometimes prefers hills. Still some forested areas but now into fruit tree country, a smattering of grape vines, fields now of poppies and lots of small but lake-size dams. So you might picture more sharply shaped hills with a lot of water run-off, so carefully built and landscaped to give them the appearance of small lakes. Most of the walk was through open country, with rain forest type vegetation left in some places to decorate and shade the path.

We overtook two French women having lunch on the grass overlooking a small stream. We see them often, but only swap bonjours. A young woman offered us coffee from the back of her farm house, but we wanted to get through a long shadeless area and it's difficult to get your well-honed rhythm back once you take a short break. The surrounding wheat fields bent in the breeze, their wheat heads lying parallel to the ground giving it a soft carpet look, while the odd tall poppy refused to be squeezed out. When it was time to stop, we had coffee with our Swiss friend in a stunning old building, the blue shutters at varying degrees of openness indicating it was very much lived in, high up on its cone-shaped hill. A rarity to find a table and chairs, let alone coffee, so we took time out getting used to having a break when the rare comfortable venue shows itself.

As we neared our village for tonight, Moissac, we were greeted from behind by those two South Africans I said we would never see again. They're much faster and walk for longer. We actually passed their lodgings because of our early start, but won't be seeing them tomorrow because Stanley is off to Cape town and Johnny to Johannesburg. One last meeting will occur when we dine together tonight. Johnny said they would come to get us, probably not knowing that we are 300 metres up a 'very steep hill' (even by camino standards), so we'll go down to meet them across the river.

There are important waterways in Moissac: the river Tarn flows through the centre of town, as does the Canal de Garonne which is the extension of the Canal du Midi from Toulouse to Bordeaux. Together, these two canals are sometimes known as the Canal des Deux Mers (canal of the two seas), connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea.

Mortality lies imperfectly on the light shallow bed of the sea, while its immortal reflection lies almost unattainably asleep on the dark ocean bed, while the river of meditation attempts to connect both



How The Seas Join

*We happened on a path by this canal
And thought it just another waterway,
So ordinary looking, quite banal
Closer inspection showed a cycleway.
The Atlantic, a mighty open sea
Is where began this special water ride,
To finish in the Mediterranean
The closed sea, with no current or tide.
It's good to open up your mind to change
The open sea is always on the move,
To close it will produce a lower range
The closed sea will keep you in the groove.
We took the middle path and crossed this way
No cycle path for us, we'll walk today.*

Day 21 - Moissac to Auvillar

The young French cafe owner animatedly described the menu to us, and what we did not understand, was translated by a French woman patron nearby. Even the cheeses were described minutely and the order in which to eat them and which one should be dressed in marmalade. At a delightful dinner with our Cape Town companions in the dimly lit plaza of Moissac, we talked about: the special people we had met; walks from the Himalayas to the Turkish coast; relationships; how tears can make you strong; situations, and your response to them that can change your life; using your abilities wisely in business; Nelson Mandela (close to Johnny's heart) and Parkinson's. We hugged these two larger than life men and said our goodbyes, as they go home tomorrow contemplating when and where their next walking adventures will continue.

The sun came once more to breakfast where Anna entertained us with her wit and charm, while a young woman sang to the tunes of her loved guitar, as others drifted in to nourish themselves for the day ahead. We talked with Anna about her friends with Parkinson's and gave her my blog address. We kissed our hostess, said 'bon chemin' to the others, and started 'downhill', one advantage of sleeping in our 'home high on a hill'.

We checked the right path with a Canadian couple and spent the day walking with them along the river Garonne - 'the canal of two oceans'. This waterway, one Sydney ferry wide, winds its very long way from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, probably wishing for earlier times when it mingled with the villages and their residents along its banks. Now in active retirement it spends its days as a huge play yard for boating tourists, fisher people and beavers who swim close to the canal's edge.

Majestic maple trees lined the canal and its metre wide walkway, both sides stretching out but just failing to keep the sun from sneaking through to witness the wet spectacle beneath. After many kilometres of this shaded paradise there was no escaping the long walk home in above thirties temperature. The lack of shade was balanced by the musical clatter of poplar tree leaves that entertained us as I shared my success with 'speech therapy', which could help their friends with Parkinson's retain their voice in the latter stages of Pd.

As we walked, we had short conversations with three different Frenchmen and a woman, and greeted many others we have stayed briefly with along the 'chemin'. Past: plantations of apricot and cherry trees reaching out to ripen; carefully covered rows of strawberries protected from the elements; fields of corn dwarfed at this stage by the high luscious wheat fields; the few surviving poppies adding their dazzling red glow to this flat, calm sea of green. In the meantime, the chestnut tree displayed its pink and white delicate flowers as we approached the cable bridge over the river Garonne which led to our 'gite' at Auvillar.

The wine is the whey of the cheese



A French Menu

*The cheese may come soon after the main meal
Before or after you have had dessert,
Cow's or goat's, or sheep's milk, what you feel
Important to contrast, don't need expert.
Before dessert, a little salad too
After, some fruit or honey and some bread,
Continue with the wine you've been used to
Or riesling, brings the cheeses to a head.
When eating with our friends, Johnny and Stan
The waitress told us which cheese to eat first,
This seemed to us a very good french plan
Then followed with the wine to ease our thirst.
Twas such a special night to end the day
To sit and talk and eat the right french way.*

Day 22 - Auvillar to Castet-Arrouy

No signs again of modernity as we left this old town with its circular market place, with its gorgeous array of plantains with their branches reaching out to their brothers and sisters as if to say: “come on let’s show them what we can do”, as they decorated the pretty stone facade behind.

Down, and out of town, mostly through farms and along its poppy edges, the often slashed grass cooled us from below as it acted as a shock absorber for some stiff muscles. The undulating landform was fascinating as it rose gently, dipped sharply, sometimes double dipping or rolling down in rounded waves, the poppies appearing to be a bloody barrier waving madly.

We soon arrived at the magic ‘one short street town’ of St Antoine, the home of artist Roland Bierge, who with Mark Chagall painted the ceiling of the Palais Garnier. It is painted in sections and features scenes from operas by fourteen of the world’s greatest composers. An enticing, ‘stay here for a week’ - ‘chambres’, a bar-restaurant decorated with a colourful ‘trompe l’oeil’, and a clear view across those ‘feng shui’ landscapes, were enough for us to place lingering here, above the potential heat wave. We had coffee with our pre-bought ‘pain aux raisins’ on this three metre wide street from heaven, and watched the young children walking to school being mothered by the bar’s owner who kissed them, tidied their clothes, and reassembled their hair.

We continued on, glancing back to see a lone figure closing in quickly. Even from a kilometre away we knew it must be ‘Felix the Swiss glove finder’ who seemed to be the only person who caught up to anyone. This said though, he is in no hurry, because when he likes a place he stays awhile, so we’ll probably get to see him again, for a second. Our next home is looking down on us once more, so another strong double-stick climb makes it easier. Along a similar street to St Antoine with a dog and a woman, alone claiming street rights, we stroked one and asked directions from the other. We thought we got it right (the directions that is), but could not leave until we had French lessons to get the village name right.

We ate lunch in the triangular tree-shaded square, the angles being filled by a church, a shop and our lodgings. Two large black dogs patrolled our lunch borders greeting walkers as they arrived spasmodically. Our owner arrived. I suspect he’s the mayor because it’s after his name, a strong indication. At the same time an elderly woman fainted and fell badly, damaging her nose in the church graveyard, and luckily the paramedics kept her from this fate.

While they and the graveyard were fighting over ownership rights, a local girl stayed by her side. We have noticed on this walk whether it be a person with a disability, someone like us wanting a water bottle filled, or an injured citizen, the French are there for the long haul. As we continue ‘our’ long haul we will take this lasting impression with us.

A feeling that it's right encourages the plantains to link their arms



A Feeling Village

*At times an instant feeling says: "it's right"
Hard to describe the thought process inside,
A sunny day, a cloudless starry night
It's personal, to others can't confide.
A sense of peace, a cosy bustling sound
People you meet, the words that you exchange,
A park, a street, a shop that you have found
Familiar sights, or those that might seem strange.
In Saint Antoine, this town had just one street
A 'trompe-l'oeil' told a story in the bar,
Outside, two chairs for us to drink and eat
And share that road with locals - not one car.
A little creek did nonchalantly wind
Beside this town, a feeling in the mind.*

Day 23 - Castet-Arrouy to Marsolan

We ate dinner in a gorgeous triangular park. The cafe owners brought it across the village road to the eight of us – three French men, (one with his daughter), one French woman, one Polish Frenchman and us. They talked in their tongue over dinner and we are accustomed and comfortable with that, while also enjoying the sounds of their beautiful language. The Polish amateur tenor however, spoke very good English, and he would often talk with us or translate what he thought would be of interest. Later, he sang for us.

He thought that Europe was struggling to be a nation with a similar overall culture but divided in so many other ways, but it would eventually become one undivided country after some generations. I asked him about the memorials for ‘les enfants’ and he said it was for all the sons and daughters lost during the wars. He went on to say, that the reason France is sometimes hesitant to enter conflicts today, is because of the huge losses they suffered during those devastating conflicts. We chatted about music and song and then went back to our room that looked over our very unique dinner venue.

Albert and Isabella were quietly superb. We wished we could have talked more with Albert but our French is too poor. Isabella translated for us as our charades improved with both of them. We were in fine form over breakfast and by just taking time to get to know each other made communication easier, as we became more familiar with their personalities and gestures. Albert was a former town mayor, and we discovered that Isabella who comes to stay with her boyfriend whenever she gets a chance, is from one of our favourite places in France – Bayonne. I will send her a poem I penned about that special place.

The stars were spectacular, so vivid and bright and I will have to check with my astronomer friend to understand what we were looking at. Out into the fields once more, down shaded lanes, past chattering birds sitting above an equally noisy brook, with no other sound but our persistent pole stabs. The farmers are out now gathering zucchinis, luscious strawberries and artichokes, as poppies gather in the corners of the wheat fields latching on to their last small holdings tenaciously, knowing that while they won't be picked and eaten, they might be, sadly, sacrificed for this produce, plowed up and buried.

Because we spent time on a quiet roadway today we caught up with a ‘chemin’ bike rider, and spent some time swapping ‘photo taking opportunities’, while enjoying his company in the welcome shaded spot he had chosen. It was another thirty-plus-day but the shaded dips in the road and the strong cool breeze reduced the potential discomfort. We're at home now, too early to check out our room but time to: have a chat with another early comer; check out the essential laundry facilities and where there might be room to hang our clothes; investigate the huge garden; and rest our weary legs.

While we look to make enemies, the dog just wants to be our friend



Le Chien

*I'm French and a dog, I go by many names
I prefer Michel but most just call me 'chien',
'Lunatique' on our gate, it keeps the baddies away
And I hear my dad tell folks that I'm his best friend.
Others walk by and say: "bonjour mon garçon"
Then I'm confused 'cause I know that I am a 'fille',
I've had gender issues, so not sure what side I'm on
With so many names, how's a dog s'posed to feel.
So I sit at my window with shutters open wide
And ponder my life like the pilgrims walking by,
I want to come out, I'm told there's no place to hide
My paw is a sign, I want out, I'm sick of my lie.
"Pas de noms", I ask, "pour moi je veux juste une vie"
It's not about you anymore, it's now about me.*

Day 24 - Marsolan to Condom

Dinner time. Our Canadian friends from the canal; a Swiss man 'becoming a friend' who is interested in my Parkinson's walk and 'wants to be keen' on writing poems of the walk; a French father and daughter; a French woman taking time out from family for two weeks with a woman friend; a blind man, his wife and daughter; two men from Paris out for a week's walk; two young French women; and us. These were our companions at our usual three course meal, as we talked mainly with this lovely French woman at a table on the lawn.

Walking through much larger land holdings now with huge delightfully undulating wheat fields all cornered and sparsely decorated with poppies; rows of fruit trees that drift into the valleys; beautifully built lakes; small streams with their thin forest cover; all with spacious farmhouses watching from their tree lined oases above. A long chat with two Frenchmen (walking 'two week' sections each year) ensued as we bathed in our surroundings.

Later, walking in an unlit forest, a large black dog sat, watching. He appeared to be waiting for us and slowly followed for a few paces. He then ran in front doing his ablutions, looking back now and then, as though to check we were following. As he turned a corner still on the pilgrim track, I said to Corrie (as though the dog was a 'private eye'): "Let's take another track" – he didn't follow. So we turned back and took the right track with him for another 1km into the medieval commune of La Romieu. I tried the 'wrong track trick' again but he wouldn't follow. He instead led us into the commune and disappeared.

We soon came to the small hill village of Casteinau-sur-l'Auvignon, a valley away, that had been a famous resistance stronghold during the war. Such brave and clever people doing extraordinary things, not just for the French, but for allied forces and the Jewish people. We wondered whether that black dog was possibly a reincarnation of a resistance fighter. She waited for us, checked we were on the right path, gave us silent signs, kept a safe distance, and then when we wanted to thank her she disappeared into the ether. And maybe, just maybe, I have been walking in the heat for too long. Another luscious valley away, and we're at Condom with its notable very small population.

Settling in to our 'gite' home, I noticed a young French woman reading and laughing. It was an old novel talking about the insecure behaviour of men controlling their wives, so I shared a story about a Samurai warrior. "This warrior was king at home and she, his slave. She would do the domestics, entertain him with song and poetry, and provide sex, as she lavished attention on him worthy of a God. But deep inside in her thoughts she was a confident, well adjusted woman who performed unimportant rituals to please him like you might a child. Impressed with my story, the French woman said to me: "So 'she' was the real samurai." I reflected on this as Corrie gave the young 'male' owner our clothes to wash.

Actions are real if done without hope of reward



The Black Dog

*Our thoughts define that person who we are
Responsibility is ours alone,
Our words and actions may be very far
Away from any semblance of a clone.
Then those that get them closely to align
Are able to attain consistency,
Those that can't, just show that they are blind
To what is past, and what is honesty.
So what about the black dog, did he sense
Our thoughts and then direct us to our goal,
And could the wife see past this man's defence
And know it was his wisdom that she stole.
Best be yourself, and not a hypocrite
Or change yourself, and write another script.*

Day 25 - Condom to Lamothe

Us Aussies ate Italian pasta in a French village with a Swiss man. This was the 'might be friends with' man, but after 'deep dinner discourses', we are now friends. A delightfully gentle, astute and warm linguistic pastor, he lives in a town deep in the valley below the mighty Alps. These are the mountains that Corrie fell in love with when living in Europe thirty five years ago and started a love affair she has never lost. While Ben was admiring them from below, Corrie was doing likewise from above, skiing.

We talked about worldly things and about why we do these walks. We talked about life and the myriad of opportunities – some we take, some we ignore. We talked about death, its unpredictability, and the different forms of grief that are its consequence. We talked about illness and the limitations we may have in its cure. We talked about the mind, free of the same limitations, and in most cases with unlimited potential once we experience its power, and about self discipline that allows us at times, to be our own therapist.

He caught up with us the next morning, and the continuous four-hour walk together in the unpredicted cool, took us over halfway to our little house in the country. Grape vines are now decorating the undulating landscapes, rolling, sometimes gently, sometimes sharply, and planted at various angles to allow for the greatest quantity. They are now the size of tiny peas, appearing like a miniature imitation of the real ones. Wheat and oat fields still grace the landscape, two to three feet tall now, thick and luscious.

Kim and Lee, our Korean friends from the first day, were having lunch in a field as we were about to begin a long descent, so we said our goodbyes to Ben and stayed awhile with our Parisian-Korean friends as we swapped blog addresses and photos of my back. My back photos are also going out to Canada, South Africa, Switzerland, France and who knows who might be taking unknown pictures of my printed sign.

I was quietly congratulating myself for not having fallen once when two non-walking incidents occurred. Unable to trip me on my walk, the great unknown had other plans. Our inability to find a good lunch place continued as I formed a rock chair on the edge of a lake. While getting up, I lost my footing and fell back onto the rocks, my feet finding a soft landing in the lake resulting in just a few scratches. Later while helping Elena (our hostess) bring clothes out of the rain, I cut my foot quite deeply. She is now also my nurse.

We are really settled into the trip now. Our homes change while residents vary, but the common factor of walking provides us all with a job in the same industry. The beauty of it all is that it's a pretty good job, we choose our own hours, and work at a pace that we determine. Visiting ancient villages and choosing who you walk with are all optional, but for most, there is a quiet determination to complete the task.

Awareness is a great quality and a rare one



Opportunities

*The world is full of opportunities
They tempt us with their quiet invitation,
Awareness is the key to seeing these
And then decide the choice that we will act on.
A feeling then, 'does this feel right for me'?
'What consequences'? then become the thought,
'Can I do this'? let's try it then I'll see
The hard work starts to see what you have bought.
So when you walk it seems a simple choice
You take your pack and follow all the signs,
You meet your fellow walkers with your voice
Just one of many choices, like the wines.
No matter what it is that you decide
You've made a choice, so now, enjoy the ride.*

Day 26 - Lamothe to Nagaro

Elena was superb. As she was seeing to the large cut on my big toe, a group of eight walkers turned up for drinks. When I told her they were looking for her, I was stunned by her reply. She said: “your toe is my most important task at the moment, they can rest a while”. This was a good lesson for me, so when I next feel impatient for service, I will remember Elena and my big toe and hope that I never complain again about waiting. She re-dressed it before I went to bed and left me all the mending material to re-dress it again in the morning so it will be ready for what will be an extra big day.

As she was preparing dinner I asked her if she would book ahead for us. She rang immediately, put the phone between her cheek and shoulder, answered a walker’s concern, spooned food from one pot to another and booked our room simultaneously. As you can see, there are occasions when all her tasks can be accomplished together, another lesson.

Off into the rain (not really an issue), the bonus being a mild eight degrees, fairly easy walking, and no concern about running out of water. Later in the day it was showers and strong winds, with sunny spaces. The grapes were still there as were the wheat and beans, the odd poppy and mauve gladioli, a few cattle and about a dozen walkers.

There has been a common walking theme for the last few days. We walk in the open for some minutes and then a natural tree tunnel will appear before us consisting of birch, oak, maple and others that remain on pathways, as the rest is cleared for food and grape products, while the light to dark phenomena is reflected in the weather pattern. We stopped at the crowded cafe shop, the only one in the ‘over 30km walking day’ and talked with a man from Colorado and his French wife. “It’s great to see you raising awareness about Parkinson’s, the group of people across from us on that table told us about you so we have been looking out”. We chatted for a while (they were doing one of those weekly legs of the camino) and then joined the raindrops once again.

We arrived dry. For some reason the rain gear seems to be working better, as it was a bit damp inside last time. Our walking is also getting better as we approach our fifth week: earlier muscle discomforts no longer really bother us; Corrie’s knee can only remember normality; and my bursitis has totally de-flamed. We arrived home to number three Place de Cordeliers, next door to it’s exclusive neighbour, a somewhat flash hotel. On my enquiry at the hotel for the location of our less salubrious lodgings, she replied gruffly - “this is a hotel!” When I saw the paint flaking on our place next door, the assertive but not exclusively attired owner, and the large dog lounging on the footpath, I understood the hotel receptionist’s response, but we were more than happy to pay this jolly woman instead her more salubrious aggressive cousin next door.

It's not how many hours you work, it's the focussed work you do in those hours



Neuroplasticity

*Elena has a skill that is so rare
To concentrate on one thing or a lot,
They both require a focus met with care
But all must be achieved and not forgot.
Focus on one is needed to be sure
You give your full attention at the time,
Focus on many helps the brain give more
And create pathways to enhance the mind.
The crucial point is that you are aware
Of when to stay with one or multi task,
So concentrate on one with utmost care
Alter your brain to save you from a cask.
For both, you need a skill to concentrate
Best do it now, before it is too late.*

Day 27 - Nagaro to Aire-sur-L'Adour

Yvonne was so much fun. I told her about Elena, (owner of our room last night) and the care she took with my big toe. She looked at me suspiciously and said: "atencion' William, 'atencion". I was uncertain what she meant by this seemingly condemning remark so waited intently to hear what followed. She went on to say that many people with Parkinson's have a tendency to chase other women among other socially unacceptable habits (I know this to be true), and was concerned for Corrie. Added to this, both Yvonne and a French woman staying there had friends with Parkinson's which gave them inside information.

We talked about broken relationships and the difficulties in being a single parent, financial concerns and death. Besides letting out her rooms to people like us, she also cares for people who are dying, reminding her of the time when she took care of her dying mum. Such a lovely gentle soul, what a lucky mum she had, while many others will be blessed to have her company as they die.

We said goodbye to her and Gypsy who was mostly asleep while we there, probably exhausted by the fifteen puppies she has raised over the years. We walked across similar fields today with a mix of wooded tunnels, around a small village, past three girls looking as though they had just joined the trail (they were too clean and happy), a Frenchman we had bunked with previously, and an older French couple who had pointed out the sign that we had missed when we tip-toed guiltily to the right path. Up one of the few hills of today through a village with a small table in a quaint square, we drank like only a thirsty walker can. These were also the only seats of today at this pit stop. Not sure if the French have an aversion to sitting or just want to keep us on the move!

For the very first time we walked half the day without any shade along newly ploughed plains, crossing roads and disused railway lines, and thankfully under a fully clouded sky. Two kilometres from home we passed through the town of Barcelonne-du-Gers which had a series of waterways flowing in different directions under buildings and over small concrete waterfalls, while occasionally reflecting in large pools. It looked a very professional and technical water scheme but have so far been unable to uncover its mystery, but I will try.

We crossed the very wide river L'adour thinking this may have a lot to do with this recent water mystery. Isabelle met us at her gite door, provided us with the mandatory welcome drinks, as we also removed our shoes and left them with our poles in their isolated, quarantined and mandated space. Dirt and unwanted bugs are not allowed in any room so as potential diseases aren't spread. She was fond of France but loved Spain, so she and Corrie had a lot to talk about. Every year many of these 'gite' owners travel during the colder months as there are very few pilgrims to accommodate. It was on one of these vacations that she met the co-owner, now her Spanish husband.

Your passion could change your brain, giving you a sense of being and making your life meaningful



Atencion

*'Atencion'! she bellowed when she heard
My praises for a woman yesterday,
She thought that I was smitten, thus the word
But little did she know that she was gay.
Her real concern was lack of dopamine
Which will affect my need for a reward,
So get it fast by an addictive gene
Some gamble too, not easy to afford.
But there's another thing to put your cash on
And bringing you rewards that you can bank,
Doing what you love, you have a 'pash' on
And do it every day, to fill your tank.
How little did she know, her word 'atencion'
Would lead me to my other love - my 'passion'.*

Day 28 - Aire-sur-L'Adour to Pimbo

There were so many walkers in the 'gite' last night that a young French woman had to sleep in the passageway outside our door. The main problem with this, was, (being highly trained 'gite people'!), that we couldn't turn the lights on, and going down the hill (very steep and highly polished stairs) in the dark, was quite a challenge, but good walking practice.

The graceful L'Adour flows into this town in the shade of the hills, as a river, and flows out, as a lake. We leave this place of water, and walk out onto the flat plains where young corn and other crops are carefully poking their heads through the soil looking for the heat that is missing again today. Thankfully for us, these 'treeless plain pathways' were being shaded by 'cumulus and stratus', but when they parted company, it made walking a little harder.

With these landform types it means you can see walkers dotting the countryside in different degrees of stress, the varying speeds and the numerous pack colours. The stress is at its most obvious coming into a village, for, as your natural rhythm fades, pictures are taken, etc., and walkers start to feel their bodies more. They begin to limp and sway, become lopsided and walk a little like some do with Pd, causing one local to say: "I thought walking was supposed to be good for you".

As we walked into the only 'cafe village' of the day we observed the usual walker behaviours. Some search out the cafe shops, others immediately find a chair (remember, not many in France), most packs come off, a few shoes are removed, wound dressings are applied, water bottles filled, 'official' toilets are frequented, churches are visited, some take a look around the village, while one or two might just walk on through.

We chatted to two young familiar French people from our gite, 'bonjour'd' many more, and soon entered rolling tree-covered hills and valleys once more. After such extensive flat pathways for so long, these undulations are welcome, making the walk more interesting and pleasing to the eye, with little surprises around every corner and through every tree tunnel.

There were yellow and mauve wild flowers, sheep and cattle, a disused ancient village about two minutes long, small streams, wooden bridges, and a farmhouse now and then. Into a rare rain forested tunnel, large old trees covered with moss, slithers of light breaking the shaded ground, and all of a sudden, alone, thinking that no-one else is on the track.

A gorgeous town on top of a five minute hill, as steep as any we have climbed, but when you know it's the last, it's not so bad. Its church, along with one other small one we passed earlier, delighted us with their fabulous designs and their charming simplicity. The monks who established these churches in the 13th century were attracted by the surrounding fertile valley where they cared for pilgrims making their way to Santiago de Compostela.

Once you get the flow there's huge energy, depth and stillness



Holding Hands

*I wonder when they started holding hands
This simple gesture signifies a bond,
It shows your partner, that by them you stand
And of them that you are especially fond.
A touch, to tell them that you're really sorry
So softly held, to show them that you care,
A grasp, that says, there is no need to worry'
A rub that indicates that life's not fair.
But when you go 'the way', you do have sticks
So there's a need to find another way,
A look, a word, a joke, maybe a mix
So no misunderstanding spoils the day.
Remember though that when I get a chance
I'll hold her hand, and give a loving glance.*

Day - 29 Pimbo to Larreule

There was a change-over of baggage carriers today along with a holiday, and our bag was forgotten, so instead of having that obligatory shower, we looked around. We saw a beautifully designed 12th century church, with an array of superb architectural components, a simple interior ascetically pleasing to the eye. The village stretched along the top of a narrow ridge, the houses beautifully restored, their gardens alive with colour, the street beyond..... empty and silent.

We walked back to our 'chambre', more comfortable than a 'gite', less people, and therefore more personal, as personal as you can get with four French people who speak no English, us, and of course 2.5 year old Anton. Grandmama Irene was still on a 50km round trip to collect our case so Anton and I cleaned the terrace with a scrubbing brush, took our extra clothes by bicycle cart to our 'chambre', and played a quick game of charades.

We had dinner with Anton at the head of the table which the French at the table treated as normal. When he misbehaved the three 'grandmothers' admonished him appropriately, otherwise he was just another adult. I would be interested to hear from my French readers if this is a usual situation. We loved his company at the table and he and I did silly things together.

I'm becoming more flexible about leaving at an early time, to fit in with other guests when it seems right. A bit cheekily I went down at 0645 for the 0700 breakfast and was happily served by the birthday girl, Irene. After some final shenanigans with Anton we took to the road once more on a pleasantly cool walking day. Some early open spaces with mainly oat fields, their bent heads swaying in the breeze, and other new crops bordered our track as we began another day.

We stopped at three villages to eat, drink and talk with some French travellers we know, as we now encountered some very long steep hills, bringing with them streams, a large lake and shaded tunnels. Once, when on a main road, a seemingly well-to-do man stopped and we chatted about Parkinson's. He liked what I was doing as he has friends with the disease who have become socially isolated. "This will be of interest to them", he said.

Quite a few limping today and slowing down a little as the kilometres take their toll with one walker turning up in a taxi, so she must be suffering. Our Swiss friend Ben will be taking a day off because of a recurring back injury, after completing half of his 2000kms journey from his home in Switzerland. We will miss this Zen pastor, his good nature and humour.

The second 'snarling' (I don't mind the 'barking' anymore) unsupervised dog greeted us at our 'gite', which seemed a bit rough after a long walk. I am not sure why this quite pleasant owner would allow this very scary dog to be there at reception, and I hope he's not near the table tomorrow morning, otherwise it could be a 'dog's breakfast', I apologise again.

Age is just a number



Mothers

*'Ca suffit'- 'that's enough', his mother cried
An-ton, not all of six did not react,
Instead he stopped and right away complied
His 'head of table spot' remained intact.
In France authority equals affection
Kids are kids and need to know their place,
Their parents want them open to correction
And discipline must always win the race.
Expression, creativity come last
Manners and mathematics take the lead,
It's all about an education - fast
The parents are in charge and they must heed.
Belonging to a strong community
Falls short of individuality.*

Day 30 - Larreule to Argagnon

It's all happening. Other walkers are getting growled at but new measures are in place since the Aussie had complained. The owner now growls at the dog, and a big man follows up if she is ignored. People are washing clothes and themselves because mostly they don't shower in the morning, which keeps bathrooms free for essentials; others are looking for wifi positions, the best being near growler; some are swapping stories about the day behind; or planning for the day ahead; taking a look around this small village; reading; writing; or just napping.

Patricia didn't apologise, but she is a businesswoman. She placed Corrie and me at the head of the dinner table opposite her and her daughter, none of us spoke the other's tongue. She offered us the food (in large serving bowls) first; gave us pate and cheese but no-one else; offered us first dessert choice and generally fussed over us. Maybe she didn't have the words to apologise for the dog incident but I accepted this apology, done in 'her' way.

We are up early in the 'growling wifi spot', because we need to see if our booking in a few days has been confirmed for it is difficult to get a bed with a festival on. We said goodbye to the non-growling 'chat'; our French friend Daniel who has been helping us with hard-to-get lodgings; Kim and Lee, our Korean friends; quiet Mado who keeps appearing; and others we had just met.

'Nimbostratus' was waiting for us as we stepped outside into its heavy drizzle. We walked along narrow country roads and along slippery 'one-shoe wide tracks' early on, but soon went back into the tree-protected hills looking down on fields of leaves, too young yet to raise corn. On the way we met two older German women who were looking for the roadway track because earlier injuries made them vulnerable to slippery paths, and two Frenchmen passed speaking to us in Spanish and English. How did they know?

We bought 'pain aux raisins' from the 'boulangerie', and coffee at a bar, while others drifted in to eat at a proper lunch place. I told the woman behind the bar that I liked the chocolate she gave me with my drink so she gave me a handful, and as we put cheese into our bread roll she also 'gave' us her own fresh ham. Edith then interpreted for us with our French friend and we all conversed for awhile. Later in the conversation she said she would like to walk the camino one day and asked us to think of her on our walk (life was tough). How could we not?

Coming out of another one of those ubiquitous forest tunnels – this, a 'moss covered large old tree one', we waited on the side of the road as our first woman-driven-tractor approached, and she smiled and waved strongly in appreciation. So effusive was she, that she must have heard that not many drivers do this and was thanking us on behalf of them all. Soon we were home in an English woman's mansion. Not sure whether Porky, the permanent house resident, will join us or not, but if he does, I hope he doesn't recognise anyone on the plate.

An unexpected gift from a stranger can be so humbling



Sorry

*It's hard to say that one elusive word
It means you've done the wrong thing to some one,
That word is 'sorry', very rarely heard
The thing you've done now needs to be undone.
It's difficult admitting you are wrong
A fear also it may not be accepted,
So there's another way to be on song
Do something so that you won't be rejected.
When snarled at by her very scary hound
She made excuses for his bad behaviour,
Too late for sorry, pathetic it would sound
So last resort, an act would be her saviour.
She treated us as though her only guest
Then spoiled us rotten and ignored the rest.*

Day 31 - Argagnon to Navarrenx

My apologies to the pig, her name is Raquel, named after someone whose closest identity to a pig would be eating a thin ham sandwich. Raquel did not eat with us, our French friend (whom we see a lot) and Glen the owner's son, but lay asleep in her basket wrapped in a rug.

To get into the French 'system', (ie, being able to do what French citizens can do eg, be on the local council etc), you must have a title. The host's son Glen does building work, demolition jobs and gardening, but gives his occupation as a gardener so he's in the system, and he also speaks French. Nadia, a French Algerian, the other resident, plays a leading role in the Alsace education system. Her responsibilities mean she is on a tight schedule so we hope her present illness doesn't prevent her from walking, and..... we still have a lot to talk about.

We left in the rain, and because most of the tracks are on the flat or along ridges, and the steep mountains are accessed by wide relatively even paths, the going is little different than having it dry. After three hours we stopped for coffee. When there is much walking without a cafe just about everyone stops when one eventually appears, so a good chance to chat with others. It was one of those 'no food places' but the others had bought a lot of fresh bread which is often all that walkers need, because most carry fillings. We said a few words to the two German women and chatted longer with a Bordeaux farmer. He looked up at the grey clouds and told me there would be very little rain. I didn't agree.

I've noticed the care that is taken on the steeper countryside where small valleys and hills are heavily vegetated, which is not only ascetically pleasing but also prevents erosion. We had lunch on a high ridge on the edge of a freshly plowed paddock with a great view. The ghostly outline of the mighty Pyrenees could be seen through the thin veil of the distant grey screen, not far away now, but it has been snowing and therefore the track across it could be closed, but we hope not. Now rain has interrupted our thoughts and view, so we finished our cheese and banana rolls on the move.

While we are always looking for a lunch seat, the French are quite happy to sit on the grass in paddocks just off the track to have their 'dejeuner'. We often see them in groups, but single souls and couples can also be seen around 1230. Most of them don't seem to be in a hurry, with only a few travelling at more than four kilometres an hour.

Down onto the flats once more and into a large town. In the centre of this pretty place, in a narrow old street, is our new abode. Too many for dinner tonight so we'll have to find a place in town. It's like a night out because we have been eating in the 'gites' a lot lately. It also gives us a chance to explore a little and who knows what we may find. The weather is also fairly rain-free so easier to explore and... the Bordeaux farmer was right!

Creative dolphins, self aware elephants, empathic chimps, adaptable cats and wise pigs hold some of humans' best characteristics



The Pig

*The pig was not where pigs are meant to be
Especially one the size of a small cow,
Asleep beside the table where we eat
Unusual sight - she was a lucky sow.
Surprising no pyjamas, just a vest,
She didn't move the whole time we were there,
While not a word from this unlikely guest
Accepting though that genes we both do share.
George Orwell's farm had no connection here
The revolution passed some time ago,
No Stalin, Lenin, Trotsky here to fear
Instead it was a very different show.
While revolutions duly come and go
This pig sleeps on, just waking - is his foe.*

Day 32 - Navarrenx to Aroue

We were joined at breakfast by two middle-aged Germans whom we are seeing regularly now. We were waiting for the owner who was buying fresh bread, so time to chat with these women and joke about getting into 'moods' on the track and how you deal with them. We agreed that it is probably one of the best times to be moody because there is a non-conflictual solution, just slow down or speed up until you are sorted. We also talked about gite owners.

Most 'gite' owners are warm, hospitable and sociable, but some can be a little difficult. We can usually tell this by raised eyebrows from residents when they are ordered around: "you can't sit there", "you're too early", "you can't pay tonight", "don't put clothes on the heater". This was one of them. There is another simple solution to this, however, just do as you're told. Not much to ask for when you're paying thirteen euros for a bed and bath.

Corrie and I have 'a meeting' for any possible misinterpretation that could lead to conflict. If one of us has something important to say, especially if it is a controversial topic, or just needing to get the attention of the other, we will say: "I'd like a meeting", it works for us. It was either 15kms or 40kms today because of lodging locations, so we didn't need to hold a meeting to make that decision.

Another mixed landscape day, more 'cattle grazing territory' in the hills, crops in the valleys and still different walking experiences, but hard to explain because descriptions would be technical. We have been seeing a woman with an orange hat for days now but never seem to catch up with her and when we finally did, she didn't want to talk, maybe having a hard day. Not many walkers in sight today so a chance to restart my voice exercises.

Still struggling to find a resting spot when we need one, they seem to appear when we don't need them. I was ahead of Corrie so I sat on 'the village seat' and had a loving and deep connection with a local dog, a dog this friendly is a rare bonus. We left in envy of the unusual 'perfect seat spot' until, there it was, another bus shelter, not perfect, but it's top shelf for us.

Along a forest track, through a swinging gate, into half metre high pastures following a path (only visible because the grass was recently trodden), we saw a large house in the middle of the paddock. Didier, an engineer and Emmanuelle, a yoga teacher were minding the 'gite' for friends and fussed over us. We had a pick of three rooms overlooking the village and its surrounding farm land, and the promise of extra blankets. It's starting to get very chilly as we close in on the mountain ranges.

No meal provided tonight and we won't be walking to the village, as it won't be a 'walk in the park' tomorrow. It will be the first night we cook for ourselves so we need to buy something from their 'shop in a cupboard' and do our own thing, unless others turn up unexpectedly.

It can be helpful to look at your own reactions instead of criticising others' words



Us and Them

*It's all about us in so many different ways
An opportunity to hear and learn,
You're tired, you're bored, you're on the track for days
Awareness is the key to most concerns.
There's time to be assertive with your view
When it's important to highlight your case,
Then there is time to keep your mouth to you
That's when you know that it is not your place.
It's self development for those who care
A chance to change the things that you are shirking,
Confirm good things that you already share
Then trial results and see if they are working,
It's now 'bout them that daily cross your path
They'll see you true with wit, and ready laugh.*

Day 33 - Aroue to Larceveau

The dinner party did not eventuate because the expected couple did not arrive. When you're off the track in the middle of a paddock this can happen, because a walker may simply see a gite on the track and stay there. But a young Swiss girl turned up instead, and after a forty kilometre walk she wasn't going to let a walk off the track worry her. Evelyn was an exception to the 'pack rule' I talked about earlier, her pack was enormous, and looked as though she had left nothing behind. She later told us that she needed to snack all the time so her food cupboard was a must! We cooked pasta with a homemade tomato mix and ate with our very fit Swiss friend overlooking the mighty Pyrenees.

We talked about all the Swiss on the track and agreed they are the ones most likely to stay ahead of the pack. Evelyn said the Swiss are used to tough walks in the mountains but said it gets lonely when no-one can keep up. We talked with our lovely caretakers Emanuelle and Didier about their desire to run a gite after many years of walking. They had left their professional jobs for a more harmonious lifestyle, temporary caretakers for their friends' gite while he, the friend, is busy organising hundreds of people in planting fruit trees along the entire 'chemin' for people like Evelyn to eat.

After an early breakfast we two-kissed Didier, three-kissed Evelyn and zero-kissed Emanuelle not because she belonged to another culture, but because she was in her room dreaming about operating a 'gite'. We walked through the paddock and onto the roadway (also the 'chemin') with Evelyn testing us early. At one stage I overtook her by 'nearly running', so when people rave about her speed, I could say that I simply 'cruised past her' at one time. We swapped quick 'bon chemins' and she roared off leaving us on our own for most of the day, because others had taken an easier route (called a variation). Some often do this when they have a deadline or an extra long day.

We were fortunate though because it was a stunning walk up over pointed hills, along narrow ridges, through farms, all the way within sight of the memorable Pyrenees foothills. It's also back down to fifteen degrees, so the shadeless pathways are welcome now and we can gasp at the magnificent views. A few steep hills were challenging but at the top lay our reward – views of the Pyrenees, which we will nestle into tomorrow night having completed our official journey at this bustling, walking village.

We will then spend time in Barcelona, for we need to reach a big city to get transport. We are excited to be walking across the Pyrenees into Spain where we will spend a couple of days walking to Pamplona to book our passage. After that we may go to the region of Provence, visit Francoise in Tours, and maybe take in some opera and other things in Paris. But for now it's rest time, before returning for our third visit to the Saturday markets in St Jean Pied de Port.

The penultimate provides an opportunity to do the ultimate now



The Penultimate Day

*Today is our penultimate day on track
Emotions swirl with so much time invested,
The people met and left, as we look back
The miles we walked with mind and body tested.
We leave our silent lodgings with some tears,
A final iris cleanse so we can see,
What were our hopes and dreams and also fears
We faced on this, our testing, French journey.
Slowly we go, I don't want this to finish
I treat it like our near last day on earth,
A sight, a thought, I don't want to diminish
As risen sun, another day gives birth.
The penultimate poem now complete
The dawn will see us finished and replete.*

Day 34 - Larceveau to St Jean Pied de Port

Back to the good old days. Breakfast was not included so we caught the sun by surprise even though s/he would have been shrouded anyway. The landscape is starting to change as is the human contribution. The hills are becoming steeper (not the ones we are climbing), and also less productively useful. They are often bare, and without the usual hilltop trees with sheep hanging to the hillsides like goats. Behind the hills are the imposing Pyrenees as they keep us in their mighty shadow, while some of it's just as imposing inhabitants circle gracefully above. They are one of Europe's largest and rarest vulture, the lammergeier or bearded vulture with a wingspan of up to three metres, and is one of the few vultures without a bald head.

As we take in the final French landscape scenery in the French Basque region, the large rectangular red and white regional houses colour the countryside. They are kept in fastidious order with the original ones still maintaining the owner's name above the entrance. In each town centre is a large concrete wall used to play handball which does nothing for the aesthetics but a lot, I imagine, for the athletics. In the Basque region, this pelota court is still very much at the centre of the social life of each town and city.

French signs now become unpronounceably Basque as, unlike other languages, they make use of letters that they ignore, such as x's and z's. The sound of the words seem to echo a language long forgotten, reminding us of our Swiss friend's northern Swiss language, Romansh.

We wind our way along the u-shaped valleys, into the cold hills, toward dark clouds that do nothing but threaten to open up. We stopped at a house that had instant hot drinks and things to munch on (a few of these are slowly appearing to make up for the village's scarcity of shops) and, you pay what you want. After no breakfast, this was perfect, and the bonus was a non-vicious beautiful white dog that looked a little like a Japanese Kishu.

Through many more red and white villages (mostly breeding hardy sheep and cattle), between gates, over ramps into the this beautiful valley and then down the steep cobblestoned street of St Jean Pied de Port (foot of the pass) in Pyrenean France.

We left early to get to the markets but the markets never got out of bed. So we had our third and final look at this stunning old city and then an afternoon stroll up the steepest four kilometres of the whole journey. This is the beginning of the Pyrenees climb where we found a bed at our last French lodging, Hounto. Our bedroom looks out over the vast valleys, unlike last year when the fog prevented us from seeing anything but the track ahead. Tomorrow, it's off to Roncesvalles where our French friends will struggle with their Spanish and Corrie will no longer have to struggle with her French.

Time to turn the light off and light a fire



Our Final Day

*The final day it shrouds the walker weary
The sun it slides across a lonely crack,
It casts a light to make the day less dreary
As we contemplate this day, the last on track.
A day no other matches with intense
Dynamics moving us in curious ways,
The feelings and the thoughts - truly immense
On this, our very special, last of days.
There's sadness at a journey soon complete
Elation at a challenge near achieved,
Reflection on this recent odyssey
We made it and are mightily relieved.
These last slow miles will give us time to ponder
Before we both decide again to wander.*

