

1999 TOULOUSE

Monday, March 8, 1999. Flew to Toulouse where Evans met me and brought me to 7 Rue Clemence Isaure, where they have rented a charming apartment on the 3rd floor of one of the old "hotels" of Toulouse. The wealthy pastel merchants who traded in fabrics and dye in Toulouse several hundred years ago until the indigo trade ruined their business built these "hotels". These baronial palaces usually four stories high were built around an interior courtyard. Because the buildings front right on the street, it makes the narrow streets of the old city somewhat dark, but Charity and Evans are lucky to be on the third floor where the sunlight can come in. Evans says that in the summer, the inner court is like an air-conditioner, cool in the southern France heat. Also in summer a luxurious vine that covers the walls but is now bare of leaves embellishes the courtyard. The apartment has 2 bedrooms, computer room, kitchen, and living dining room. They have furnished it attractively with second hand furniture that will be sold when they return to the United States. Very high ceilings, arched tall windows, and views out over the tiled rooftops of the old city make it all quite lovely.

We walked to a nearby restaurant where we had a cassoulet for lunch, a Toulouse specialty of duck, beans and sausage, all washed down with a bottle of wine. Then it was back to the apartment for some R & R.

After snacking on Brie cheese and foie gras, we went to their wine class, where the oenologist, Andre, educated us on the history of the wines of Medoc, and then we tasted six of them and analyzed their contents. All very informative.

Tuesday, March 9. Evans took me on a walking tour of Toulouse, which is a beautiful city with a history dating back to the Celts before the Roman conquest. It is a brick city, many of which are long and narrow in the style of the old Roman bricks. Toulouse is the aeronautics capital of France, being where the Concorde, and now Airbus are made. It is also an attractive university town.

Our walk took us first to the Pont Neuf, an ancient bridge over the Garonne, built in a curious manner with round openings set high in the superstructure to accommodate the extra water when the river is in flood. We went to the Eglise Notre-Dame-de-la-Dalbade, where the present building dates from the 16th century and is of beautiful brickwork, with a Renaissance doorway, and a rose window of curious design, almost like Christmas tree ornaments, and which may be Moorish influenced. We walked down a narrow street of shops and looked at the 18th century Capitole, the City Hall of Toulouse, named for the "capitouls" or consuls who used to run the city. Behind it is the 16th century Donjon that now houses the Tourist Office. Next down the Rue du Taur where in 250 the martyred Saint Sernin, who refused to sacrifice to pagan gods, was dragged to death by a bull. The Taur ("bull") church is fairly small but breathes of the air of antiquity. Inside is a virgin in a red brocade dress with a face so darkened with age that it looks almost black. Further down the street is the magnificent Basilique St Sernin, named for the martyred saint, the largest Romanesque church in France, dating from 1080. The beautiful brickwork, octagonal tower and protruding bays make this an architectural treasure. It was time for lunch at Le Carpaccio where we had salads.

Next we went to what I will always think of as the "mixed up" church, the Cathedrale St-Etienne. Built over the centuries from 1078 to 1800 it combines many different styles. As funds ran out various parts of the nave and chancel were left incomplete and when the next construction started they just began again without trying to incorporate the existing building. As a result it is the most ungeometrical church building I have ever seen. Even the 15th century doorway is not lined up with the rose window above it. The nave and chancel are not lined up as it was planned to demolish the original nave, but they were eventually joined. The choir was constructed starting in 1272, but was never finished. There are tapestries showing the life of St Stephen or "Etienne" and there are lovely stained glass windows

Then on to Les Jacobins, a Dominican monastery founded in 1215, to combat the spread of heresy. The monks are long gone and the basilica is used for special exhibitions and concerts, but enshrined in the nave is the body of St Thomas Aquinas. Behind is a peaceful cloister planted in boxwood. Nearby were buildings of the University, and we found a few doorways open so that we could inspect the courtyards inside. The University is almost as old as the Sorbonne. I found a wonderful shop of Thai artifacts but resisted buying a bronze guardian figure. It would not be an appropriate souvenir of France.

1999 TOULOUSE

And at last we were climbing the two steep stairways back to the apartment to rest. Tonight we are dining at a three star restaurant! Les Jardins de l'Opera near the Capitole. The food was really wonderful and we walked home feeling we couldn't eat again for a week.

Wednesday, February 10. Evans and I made an excursion to Carcassonne, an hour away. This is a medieval fortress city in a strategic position between the Pyrenees and Black Mountains and also between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. The Romans started the city in the first century; the Visigoths captured it in the fifth. In the 8th Century the city fell to the Franks. The area became a Cathar stronghold. The Cathars were a religious sect believing in the separation of good from evil, God versus Satan. They were obsessed with their fear of evil and sought to free man from the material world. They made their own interpretation of biblical texts and rejected baptism. As a result they came into conflict with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1209, the Albigensian Crusade brought crusaders from the north to free the region from its heresy. Carcassonne was besieged and fell after two weeks due to the lack of water. Simon de Montfort was appointed Viscount of Carcassonne. He was a cruel leader, burning many of the Cathar towns in his attempt to stamp out the heresies.

The magnificent medieval city is very photogenic. While we waited for the English tour of the chateau, we looked into the lapidary museum, which turned out to be a collection of early statuary, gargoyles and tombs. Then we went to the Basilique St Nazarre with its Romanesque nave and gothic transept. In the 19th century it was restored by Viollet-le-Duc, who made some mistakes in the restoration like adding crenellations along the top of the wall-belfry. The church's 13th century stained glass rose windows were the most striking feature.

Then it was time for our tour of the chateau and a walk along the ramparts. The chateau's earliest remains date from the 3rd century and higher defensive walls that were built in the 13th century. The ramparts were interesting. They had a false door at ground level and when invaders would batter it down it led into an ambush where they could kill the intruders by throwing huge stones down upon them. The guide pointed out that boiling oil was not used; it was too valuable a commodity. The town gradually fell into disuse and by the 19th century it was being pillaged of its stone for other purposes. Viollet-le-Duc came to its rescue and did a restoration, which despite its many errors, as in the restoration of the church, at least saved the chateau from complete destruction. As Carcassonne stands today it is like a fairytale medieval castle.

After lunch, Evans and I took the scenic route back to Toulouse, looking for a Bastide town, but we were not really successful. The Bastide towns were built after Simon de Montfort destroyed the Cathar settlements, to rehouse the refugees. We found a number of small towns with high two-towered bell towers, and, as we got nearer to Toulouse, some bell towers of red brick with the octagonal tops, in the Toulouse style, but the other marks of a Bastide town, like the central square, grid like streets, and fortifications were missing. If they had been Bastide towns they have lost their identity.

Connie was home from boarding school and it was great to see her. She boards 3 nights a week and this has really helped her proficiency in French and has helped her make friends. She is at the top of her class and was the TOP student in French Literature.

Thursday, March 11. We left at 6:30 to return Connie to her school, Annunciation, a Dominican school that is in Seilh, a suburb of Toulouse. It has an attractive campus and Connie is very happy there.

Then Charity and I headed north to Albi. After the Albigensian crusade to stamp out the Cathars, the Catholics built the massive Cathedrale Ste-Cecile here to impress the citizens with the power of the catholic church. To stand near it is to be overwhelmed by its size. You feel like you are standing by a huge brick fortress. Inside you are immediately impressed by the painted decorations, which cover every surface and are in a remarkable state of preservation despite their age of 700 years. The nave is enormous and in the 15th century an ornate flamboyant gothic carved rood screen was added cutting the church in two. The large choir sits behind the screen, adding to the pomp and ceremony the church uses to impress its congregation. Walking around the area the exterior walls of the screen are adorned with carvings of figures from the Old Testament. The work is remarkable in that these look like painted wooden carvings but are actually made of stone. The interior of the choir is decorated with carvings of characters from the

1999 TOULOUSE

New Testament. These are the best examples of Gothic sculpture in France. Over the main altar in the cathedral is a mural, a tempura painting of the last judgment, unfortunately missing its central panel, removed when the chapel of Saint Cecilia was added in 1693.

Next we went to the Palais de la Berbie, the bishopric palace, now converted into an art museum. The bulk of the collection is the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, who was born in Albi. We rented a wonderful audio guide which not only described in detail that was represented in each portrait, but also the techniques being used. The best part of the audio guide was that you could jump around and do the paintings out of order or repeat them, unlike the museum audio guides I have rented in the past. Toulouse-Lautrec was a cripple and he died while in his thirties. He took many of his subjects from either the bordellos of Paris or the theater world and their simplicity and realism are impressive.

After lunch we headed for Cordes-sur-ciel, getting off first in the wrong direction from Albi. The French road system is difficult to follow. You really have to know where you are going before you read the directions! At last we cut across some beautiful rural countryside to get to Cordes. Cordes is the oldest Bastide town, built in the 13th century and is sort of a miniature Carcassonne. There is a long climb up a cobbled street from the lower city to the town, which has had four walls, new ones added as the city grew. It is very picturesque with many Gothic houses being preserved, some with elaborate carvings on their exterior. The town has become a mecca for artists and there are many art galleries among the souvenir shops, but today most are closed since it is out of season. We actually had the town almost to ourselves but in summer it must be very crowded.

We got back to Toulouse to find Evans still busy with the family taxes and trying to straighten out computer problems on the internet. Finally about 8:30 we went out to a nearby restaurant for some food.

Friday, March 12. Evans walked me back to St-Sernins church, where I had a chance to examine its interior. The crypt was interesting with small casket shrines holding the relics of saints. The church is the largest Romanesque building in France and is lovely and majestic, but I should have been seen it before I went to Albi for the St Cecilia Cathedral makes every other church pale by comparison.

We met Charity for lunch at the Victor Hugo market, where upstairs there are several restaurants. We ate at the popular restaurant, le Louchebem, which is quite simple in appearance but has excellent food at lower prices.

Then Evans and I went to the Foundation Bemberg Art Museum, a small but very well displayed art collection of Renaissance art and also it has an Impressionist gallery featuring the works of Bonnard. The building is housed in an elegant "hotel" designed by Nicholas Bachelier, the great Renaissance architect of Toulouse. Then it was back to the apartment for a rest.

In the evening we went to an accordion, piano, and violin concert by Azzola and Bossati.

Saturday, February 13. Evans, Connie and I headed south toward Foix where we got caught in a huge traffic jam due to a bridge being out. Finally crept by the large chateau in the center of town, whose foundations date from the 10th century, and headed into the country where up a country road we came to Roquefixade, a bastide, but this one, unlike Cordes seems unchanged since it was founded in the 12th century. High on the cliff above the town were the remains of a Cathor castle.

We drove on to Tarascon, where in the Bellevue Restaurant overlooking the rushing Ariège River we enjoyed lunch and then went on to the Grotte de Niaux, the object of our trip. Because of the limestone terrain there are many caves in the Pyrenees, which attracted the Paleolithic people into the region. No electricity is allowed in Niaux Cave so every two people carried a lantern. The walk in was slippery and very rough underfoot. Fortunately I had Evans' arm to keep from falling. We walked about 800m underground, passing some curious notations on the wall, which may have been a message in some prehistoric language. Finally we reached the "black room" where the guide showed us the remarkable late Paleolithic drawings. Bison in great detail, horses and antelope. What a thrill it was to see these drawings in the flesh, ever so much more impressive than in their pictures. It is incredible to think that early man could draw in such detail and also by torch or firelight. The "room" we were in was large with a very high ceiling almost like

1999 TOULOUSE

a cathedral and we wondered if there was some religious meaning to the drawings. On the way back to the surface by the same slippery route, we did pause to look at some of the cave's features, but aside from one massive column there were few stalactites or stalagmites. There is no evidence Niaux was ever inhabited but the nearby Grotte de la Vache was. However, when we got there it was closed. We drove further south through higher and higher snow covered mountains, until we were above the tree line and finally we crossed into Andorra at the Pas de la Casa, 6861 feet high, where there is a ski resort. The Pyrenees are beautiful and after an even higher pass, 7823 feet, we started descending into the valley toward Andorra la Vella, the capital. There isn't much to see in Andorra except beautiful mountains; its main attractions seem to be to skiing and shopping at the free port shops. We did stop briefly at Saint Joan de Caselles church with its three-story bell tower but since it was closed we could not get into the chancel to see the remains of the Romanesque crucifix found in 1963. Driving on, we again got caught in very slow moving traffic, and Evans, who has no patience with traffic jams, and no enthusiasm for Andorra, decided to turn around and head back to France. At the border we again got stuck in a traffic jam and Connie and I jumped out of the car to see what the shopping was all about. I bought a pair of earrings and Connie bought a CD. Meanwhile the traffic had cleared so when we walked to the frontier we found Evans was already there. We drove down through the mountains stopping at Le Clos Cerdan in Mont-Louis for a paella dinner (we are very close to the Spanish border). Then on to Prades where we checked into the Hotel Hexagone, where the rooms were compact but spotless.

Sunday, March 14. We set out with student driver, Connie, at the wheel up a twisty mountain road and took a wrong turn, but this allowed us to enjoy the valley of the Castellane River, where we found a spa town and the ruins of a castle. Back on the right road we climbed higher and higher through shrubby chaparral type growth called garrigue, and at the pass on top of the mountain found a menhir and dolmen, from ancient, perhaps pre-druid times. We were headed for Sournia, but on top of the mountain discovered the picturesque bastide of Campoussy, which is remarkably preserved and where the grid of streets around the central square is clearly defined.

This whole area, including Andorra is Catalan country where the people speak their own language (somewhere between Spanish and French) and long to have their own country. We listened to some Catalan music on the radio.

Coming down off the mountain we drove through wooded countryside, for we are getting further inland from the arid Mediterranean climate. And so we came into the Corbieres Mountains and the valley of the Cathars, where every peak seems to support the ruins of a Cathar castle. Lunch at the Relais de Corbieres in Saint-Paul-de-Fenouillet. This is a wine growing area and we drove through vineyards to the Chateau de Queribus, the last Cathar Castle to fall to the crusaders in the 13th century. We drove a long way up the mountain but still had a long climb to the ruins itself. I seem to be back to the same breathing problems I had in Tibet but I was determined to make it and with many a pause to catch my breath managed to reach the top. There was a lovely view, somewhat obscured by fog, and the castle is interesting to see close up. In the distance could be seen Peyrepertuse castle on the other side of the valley. Peyrepertuse is actually two castles and would have been interesting to visit but I had had my aerobics exercise for the day. Driving up the valley we passed Puilaurens Castle, which is reasonably intact with crenellations along its parapets. It was used as a fortress until the 17th century when it fell to the Spanish. Much of this territory was part of Spain, or the Kingdom of Aragon, until the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659.

We drove through the Defiles de Pierre Lys, a spectacular gorge, and came to Alet-les-Bains where we found the ruins of an abbey which was founded in 813. The original Romanesque church was expanded in 1318 when the church was awarded cathedral status and a gothic church was built around the original one. In 1577 the Huguenots destroyed the abbey but the ruins that remain are beautiful. Huge round openings where rose windows once were, Corinthian columns with animal and plant designs, remains of chapels, all in red and ochre sandstone. The town has half-timbered houses and the remains of the old city wall.

We drove back to Toulouse and found Charity and her two colleagues, Ellen Taylor and Pat Morgan, who had been on an excursion to Biarritz and Lourdes, and the four of us women went

1999 TOULOUSE

out for crepes while Evans took Connie back to school.

Monday, March 15, 1999. Slept late and then worked on my journal while Evans dealt with the washing machine repairman. We went out to lunch and then checked out a bookstore (but found little in English). Then we went to the Musee des Augustines, the largest art museum in Toulouse. It is housed in an old Augustinian Monastery dating from the 14th and 15th century. From the large cloister, where an herb garden had been painted, we checked out the outstanding Romanesque sculptures collection and then the gothic section, which contained capitols, rescued from several of Toulouse's churches. There is a second cloister dating from the 17th century and the nave of the 15th century church of the monastery where a number of paintings by such painters as Rubens and Murillo are displayed.

Back to the apartment for tea and a rest before going out for a last wonderful dinner. We went to La Dourade Restaurant on a barge tied up on the quay near the apartment. The reflections of light on the Garonne made it all quite attractive. I had a great mussel appetizer followed by a duck breast. I have eaten more duck in the last week than in the last 10 years!

Evans took me to the airport and after a few wrong turns we found the Novotel Hotel. I caught a 6:30 plane to Paris the next morning and then came home on Delta. Still not a reconfigured plane so I was in the former first class section, with a seat whose footrest would not come up until the stewardess fixed it.