

## Provence, June 2008

Susan + Kevin + Dominick

Our bike tours are always a mixed blessing for me. On the one hand, I get to spend nearly every minute for a few weeks with my most favorite people in the world while eating great food and visiting some lovely area. On the other hand, I experience anxieties about packing the bike and equipment (will the bike break and are we forgetting any important camping gear), long distance traveling (no longer a joy for anyone involved), and hoping that nothing goes too wrong. I'm not going to suggest that my anxieties are well-founded or even justified, but I'll admit that I was almost physically ill as we got close to our departure date for last year's trip. This year I used logic to reduce my anxiety. I told myself that if something bad happens to the bike, we can always rent a car and travel around the south of France. It could be worse.

Susan, Dominick and I arrived in Marseille and were thrilled to see all five of our suitcases slowly taking their own tour on the airport's conveyor. A short bus ride to Aix-en-Provence, then a twenty minute slog across town pulling the suitcases found us checking into our hotel. Although they didn't have a place for us to assemble the bike and couldn't store our luggage as promised, Susan managed to find another hotel that could meet our needs. We moved the next morning and started to assemble the bike on a very nice terrace.

Now for our reality. This trip almost ended before it began. Assembling the Rodriguez triple with S&S couplings and a Burley Solo cargo trailer usually takes us about three hours. This year we moved like a NASCAR pit crew and were on schedule to be finished in two. When I kept trying to pull the rear wheel into the drop-outs without success, it slowly dawned on me that something was wrong. The derailleur-side drop out had been crushed to about half its normal opening width. "Well, this isn't good" was all that I could think. The hotel owner confidently told us that he had the tool that we needed to pull it open. No, we didn't let him get anywhere near the bike with his crow bar. However, we did manage to find a very nice bike shop across town, so rear triangle in hand, we hopped in a cab to our one hope. With visions of disaster dancing in my head, the owner climbed the stairs to the attic operating room after telling us "No guarantees." The drop outs are very strong, but are fairly brittle and could easily snap under this kind of treatment. About four minutes (and a few gray hairs) later, we were thanking him, and he was telling us "No charge." We had the bike fully assembled by dinner, with the rear quick-release as tight as I could make it, just in case.

We all committed to getting an early start each morning. The weather was expected to be sunny for most of the next three weeks with temperatures hovering around 90 degrees each day. Being from Florida we are somewhat acclimated to riding when it's hot, but we knew that we would have some decent hills to climb and only occasional shade. Our route took us from Aix-en-Provence, north-west to Avignon, south to Carnon-sur-Plage, north-east through Aigues-Mortes to Arles, then a few days in the Luberon before heading back to Aix. We could only manage about 25 to 30 miles in the heat each day and took a couple of days off to sight-see and relax around the campground pools.

Our first days on the road involved a lot of climbing, culminating at the Chateau des Baux, a spectacular fortification at the top of a hill. We locked the bike against a fence near the main entrance and spent a few minutes trying to dry off and re-hydrate before entering. We quickly passed by the tourist shops in the renovated section to get to the ruins at the top. Part stone construction, part troglodyte excavation, les Baux had it all. The tallest trebuchet

in France is located on the hilltop with a daily firing by a hairy guy in a wool tunic and chain mail. We saw the guy, but were heading out so we missed the firing. Still in use, the cemetery overlooking the valley below was the best part. Sitting on top of many of the monuments were lovely memorials of colorful ceramic flowers in vases.

The decent from les Baux was a nice change after two days' of climbing. After getting settled into our campground in St. Remy, we walked a path with markers showing some of the views that Vincent Van Gogh painted during his stay at the local sanitarium. Many of the Impressionists painted in Provence because of the quality of the light. It's hard to explain, but the sky seemed bluer, the plants greener, and each sunflower did seem to have a drop of sun at its center. An art fair was being held in St. Remy as we passed through. We found two paintings (one by an artist who uses a magnifying glass and paints with a brush with only three hairs!) and managed to pack them for traveling using found cardboard, two pizza box tops, and a roll of clear tape. They fit snugly in the trailer and survived the trip unscathed.

The Van Gogh path ends at the ruins de Glanum, a Roman town that was rediscovered in the early 1900's under a farmer's olive orchard. The farmer's loss is our gain. The footprint of the whole town and many of the walls and ornamental detailing survive. The original fresh water spring is still there, though it probably wasn't covered with algae 2,000 years ago. This place was really civilized (except for the whole slave-labor thing). They had running water located in a covered channel under the edge of the main road. The best detail, however, was that the sanitary waste water ran in a separate channel also located under the road. After a few hours walking around and a snack on a terrace overlooking the site, we headed back to the campground for some serious pool time. This would become our modus operandi. Ride, sight see, pool. By the end of our tour, Dominick would be all brown except for his little Speedo.

Our next stop was at the Pont de Gard Roman aqueduct, one of the biggest draws for this area. Our campground was again a short walk, so we left the bike and trailer at the campground without too many worries. This is an aqueduct of three tiers that is about 150 feet tall and extends 850 feet across the valley. When completed, about 40 million gallons of water flowed along the concrete lined trough to Nimes each day. The quality of the stonework is truly amazing. All of the stones are dry-laid, without the use of mortar, and the joints are incredibly tight and uniform. We got a thrill the next morning when we started our day by riding over the road bridge (added in the 1740's adjacent to the original bridge) on our way to Nîmes.

Our first stop in Nîmes was at the Maison Carree, the best preserved Roman temple in the world. The fluted columns, Corinthian capitals and ornamental ceiling were still quite sharp and showed the incredible skill of the craftsmen. The outside was being cleaned, so parts of it were surrounded by scaffolding. One side was already clean and it was so white that it almost glowed in the bright sun. The Roman coliseum was another treat. It is in such good shape that it is still used for special events. A stage and lighting structure were erected in the center and the surviving seating was augmented by the installation of metal bleachers. I would have liked to have seen it without any modern additions, but I think that it is much better to gently modify these buildings so they can have a life whose utility goes beyond catering to tourists.

The next day, Susan's keen eyes spotted signage for a bike path for the final 12 miles into Sommières. This part of France has few dedicated bike paths, so the few miles that we spent on them were a treat. We think that French drivers are very respectful of cyclists, but

not having to worry about cars at all is sweet. I spotted a little stone bridge across a narrow stream that got me off the bike for a photo. It was only about 18 inches wide, made of single stone blocks laid side by side to form a graceful arch. It couldn't have been very old, and yet it seemed as if it could have been built 2,000 years ago.

At the campground in Sommières we found ourselves again chatting with Vanna and Jeremy, a nice English couple we had met in Nîmes. They were the first bike tourists that we had seen and they had a smaller version of our tent (so they must be wonderful people). We chatted them up and learned that they use their bikes for all of their transportation needs back home. They even have a pull-behind cart to haul their garden produce. They told us about their many bike tours (mostly they are hikers) and I embarrassed myself by showing them some of the stuff that we have made to improve our touring. Vanna showed us her custom clothes line, a soon-to-be improvement for our next trip. The campground pool in Sommières was epic. It had side-by-side slides and a corkscrew slide that Dominick and I spent hours on. I don't know how many times we climbed the stairs to the top.

From Sommières we headed south to Carnon-sur-Plage on the Mediterranean. We figured that it would be wrong to come to the south of France and not go to the coast. If only we had known, we would have pushed on to the next campground and saved ourselves some heartache. After about 33 miles of hot riding without shade, we spent the afternoon at the beach. A lovely morning was ruined with our discovery that some enterprising thief visited several tents in the middle of the night. The side of our tent was slashed open in a large 'J.' At least four other tents were also hit, with a rude awakening for all. The interesting thing was that each different style of tent was slashed in a different location, always exactly where the sewn-in pockets are located. Our thief had a working knowledge of tent design and had clearly done this before. Nothing was taken from our tent, but one nice young couple had all of their vacation money stolen. Susan and I agreed that nothing would be gained by going to the police; especially since the young couple would certainly be filing a police report. All that we could do was pack up and head to the fortified village of Aigues-Mortes.

Our first course of action in the campground at Aigues-Mortes was for Susan to use our sewing kit to repair both the tent fly and the inner body. It took her a bit over an hour using a single-thread whip stitch that she did from end to end, and then went backwards to the start. From a few feet away you can't even tell. We will need to replace the fly since her fine work won't keep the rain out. Of course, once you have been victimized, you can never go back to believing that bad things happen only to other people.

Fortified villages usually have protective ramparts built in a rough circle around an already forming village. The protective ramparts at Aigues-Mortes form a large rectangle, with streets layed out in a neat grid. The village is so large that each side has several guard towers built along each wall. The view of the long, straight walls from a distance was most impressive. We were not very interested about walking through the village (one old village filled with tourist shops is much like the next), so we toured through the La tour de Constance and along the ramparts. The Tour de Constance is a round tower with 18 foot thick walls and two 30 foot diameter x 40 foot high chambers, one atop the other. The spiral stair to the roof and the internal passages are actually built within the thickness of the wall, leaving beautiful chambers with ribbed stone arch vaulted ceilings. The cool thing about the ramparts is that they were designed to protect from attacks from both outside the walls and from the village within. Apparently some religious conflicts found one group on the wall besieged by some other group from the village. Boy, I'm sure glad that we no longer have to worry about such stupidity.

The ride from Aigues-Mortes north to Arles took us south through the Petite Carmargue, a region with huge rice farms and not much in the way of trees. We had been seeing tons of postcard images of white horses majestically crashing through the ocean surf. Well, this is where the images come from. Not to wreck the magic, but the only time we saw the white horses was when they were being ridden in a line of twenty tourists in floppy sun hats. Not very majestic, but maybe the effect would have been better if there had been some ocean surf around for them to crash through. Somewhere along this ride Susan and Dominick picked up some friends who proceeded to dine on their limbs and heads. It took days of applying anti-itch cream before they had any relief from the constant and all-consuming scratching. I don't think that I have ever seen Susan so close to losing control of herself. Besides their heads, the welts on their arms and legs did not heal until well after we got home. I have no idea why I was spared.

Arles has another beautifully preserved Roman coliseum. This one is also used for special events; it was set-up for bull fighting. Apparently, the Carmargue bullfighting style is a cat-and-mouse game without the ultimate sacrifice by the bull. The raseteurs remove tasseled rings from the head of the bull, while the bull attempts to gore the raseteur. Some bulls learn the game and become famous for being able to rotate their heads away, keeping the raseteur from snatching the rings. Still not my idea of a good time, but at least they don't have to worry about those pesky blood stains in the sand.

The Eglise St-Trophime in Arles is a beautifully preserved church with the most obvious advertising for the Catholic Church that you will ever see. Directly above the entry door stand the twelve apostles with Christ sitting in judgment above them. To one side is a line of robed men and women on their way to heaven. From the number of figures it is clear that more men get to heaven than women, which seems a bit unfair. On the opposite side is a line of poor wretches with a heavy chain linking them around their waists and the flames of hell rising around their feet. It was pretty obvious which travel agent I would want to buy my ticket to the afterlife from.

Our time in Arles also included brief tours through the Cloitre St-Trophime, a cloister filled with carved decorations, and Les Alyscamps, a necropolis going back to Roman times. The cloister was magnificent, but the necropolis includes the Allee des Sarcophages (a road lined with tombs), which was kind of creepy. At the end of the Allee, the Eglise de St-Honoratus has a dimly lit lower level for access to the crypt. We didn't stay long.

On our way to Tarascon we stopped at the Abbaye de Montmajour. This was the single most spectacular collection of buildings and ruins that I have ever seen. Everywhere you looked was either a beautifully restored stone religious building or a nicely dilapidated ruin. Sometimes both were together. With the brilliant blue sky, every moment was photogenic. There is an abandoned cemetery that was cut out of a rock outcropping just outside the Abbaye's walls. Each of several dozen graves is about 2 feet deep and has the stereotypical coffin shape. I could not convince Susan or Dominick to climb into one to check the fit.

Tarascon would have been a lovely town to walk around, but we were beat from the ride and couldn't manage more than a short walk around King Rene's Chateau. The scale of the building and defensive walls is still impressive. It must have made quite the statement of power and wealth in its day. Dominick checked out a sculpture of the Tarasque monster, a spiked turtle with a lion's head. It seems to have been the local excuse for medieval parents needing to motivate their children to be good.

We spent the night in Cavaillon when a short burst of mistral winds swept through the area. These are occasional strong winds that bring cold down from the mountains to the north. For us it meant that we got to wear the light wool sweaters that we had been carrying around for the past two weeks. Only Dominick ever put his rain jacket on and that was only for a few hours. Susan figures that, because of the hot, dry weather, we never used about 20% of the gear that we were carrying. However, I didn't have to be a Boy Scout to learn that you should always be prepared.

Our last few days of riding were in an area called the Luberon and it had some of the most scenic landscapes of the trip. Long climbs were rewarded with vistas across valleys dotted with vineyards and fields of sunflowers or lavender. To balance the wonders of nature, most views had the obligatory stone village stepping down the hillside. Vying for our cycling dollars, the region has developed a well-marked 160 mile loop from Cavaillon to Forcalquier which could be expanded by another 90 miles for riders wanting additional climbs. I had to resort to pushing the bike up a few short stretches, but most of the route was doable.

Our favorite decent of all time came on our last day. Following a 10 mile long climb, the road turned into this lovely winding descent. We swooped left and right for a time following a small river to one side. We stopped for a rest at a borie by the side of the road. A borie is a small shelter built entirely of dry-stacked stone (walls and roof) used by farmers when they have to stay in their fields for extended periods. This one was quite large, with two six-foot diameter rooms and a built-in fire shelf. Although made entirely of small stones, these shelters are supposedly quite water-tight.

Well, all good things come to an end. We returned to Aix and spent the afternoon taking the bike and trailer apart. There was an entire day to spend walking through Aix with a new quest – searching for a few new dresses for Susan. Over the past few years she has found several dresses on these trips, so finding more has become another goal. With three dresses and a few other souvenirs packed away, we looked forward to getting home. Our connecting flight in Paris was in the international terminal at Charles de Gaulle Airport. This is the replacement terminal for the precast concrete building that self-destructed a few years ago. The new building follows the same oval tubular shape, but they used a steel frame with interior wood finish. The new space is very nice, but the original design matched the excitement and energy felt while traveling.

The return trip was thankfully uneventful, except for the requisite delay in Atlanta. Dorothy was right. There's no place like home.

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