

French Impressions

The
Dordogne River

from source to sea

George East

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About the Author

If anyone should know his onions about France and the French, it's George East. After he and wife Donella moved to a ruined water mill on ten acres of rivers, woods, meadows and mud in Normandy, George wrote a best-selling series of books about living with the enemy.

The couple then left the Mill of the Flea and moved on to an allegedly haunted manor-house on the vast Lower Normandy marshlands. Their next home was a rambling farmhouse half way up what counts as a mountain in Brittany. Then it was off to a remote hamlet in the Loire Valley.

Since then, the Easts have travelled through and tarried in every one of France's 90-odd departments and 22 regions. This is the third book in the French Impressions series, and George means to continue his sometimes unsteady progress around the country until he runs out of breath - or friends and readers prepared to give him house room.

Other books by George East

Home & Dry in France
René & Me
French Letters
French Flea Bites
French Cricket
French Kisses
French Lessons
French Impressions: Brittany
French Impressions: The Loire Valley
Home & Dry in Normandy (compilation)
French Kisses (compilation)
France and the French

Also:

A Year Behind Bars
How to write a Best-Seller
And the Inspector Mowgley Mysteries:
Death Duty
Deadly Tide
Dead Money

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Author's Notes

The clue to what the reader may find in this book comes with the name of the series. The following pages are daubed with my often hasty and probably inaccurate impressions of the places and people encountered while travelling along the Dordogne River. As fans of the 19th-century art movement will tell you, an impression can sometimes give a truer picture than a carefully detailed and studied work.

Sometimes, of course, it can also end up as a bit of a dog's breakfast.

Appreciations

On the technical side, thanks are as usual due to our indefatigable proof reader Sally Moore, Editrix Fran Brooks and designer and tech spec buff Nigel Rice. Thanks and apologies where necessary are also due to all those people whose lives we briefly touched on the road or in bars, restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfast establishments or campsites.

A River Runs Through It

For donkey's years, British Francophiles have been bigging up 'The Dordogne' when they actually mean lots of different places in the heartland of France.

Like Italy's Chiantishire, this part of *France profonde* has long been a favourite destination for holidaying and migrating Brits. Over the years, the borders and realities have blurred and the word 'Dordogne' has been used to evoke a mythical, magical place where the sun always shines, the food and drink is fantastic and the locals forever whimsically quaint.

In fact, though a pretty special place, Dordogne is neither more nor less than a department of the Aquitaine region.

The river of that name rises in the volcanic area of the Auvergne region as the confluence of two embryo waterways, the Dore and the Dogne. In a rather French way, this is not actually how the river got its name, but that need not bother us here.

More certain is that the Dordogne runs from its source on the flank of a dead volcano roughly westwards to where it empties into the sea a tad above Bordeaux.

On the way, it constantly changes direction, size, shape and mood as it passes through six departments and five regions. This means the river and those who follow or use it for any distance pass through a whole clutch of diverse landscapes, climates, cuisine and even languages.

In total, this seemed to me to provide more than enough justification for making the journey and passing on an impression of what we found along the way.

PS. Before we get started and before anyone writes in to complain about it, we need to have a word about my apparent inconsistency in the use of the definite article when referring to various departments and regions of France. For instance, I call the departments of Dordogne and Lot 'The/the Dordogne' and 'The/the Lot' yet Cantal does not earn the definite article. Nor would I dream of imposing a 'the' on Puy-de-Dôme or Charente-Maritime. Similarly with regions, one normally thinks of The Limousin and The Auvergne, but saying or writing 'The' Aquitaine and 'The' Poitou-Charentes feels clumsy or just plain wrong. I mean, can you imagine someone asking where you went on holiday last year and you replying 'Oh we thought about going to The Normandy, but ending up having a lovely couple of weeks in The Brittany.'? See what I mean? On this side of the Channel, there seems to be no confusion or debate. Regions win a 'the', while counties do not.

I am told we use 'the' for a number of reasons, including when we know the thing being spoken of ('the moon is very bright tonight') and when there is only one of the objects in that place or surroundings ('we live near the church'). Why the custom with regions and departments of France, I haven't a clue.

So please don't ask me for any justification of this tradition or why I observe it. It is just how it is. It might not seem a big deal to you, but you might be surprised at how many people get really shirty about the use of this normally inoffensive three letter word when talking of specific bits of France.

Some fascinating facts about the River Dordogne

Length: More or less 483 kilometres, or about 300 miles*

Starts at: The Puy de Sancy, Auvergne

Finishes in: The Gironde estuary

Departments passed through on route to the sea:

Puy-de-Dôme

Corrèze

Lot

Dordogne

Gironde (the largest department in Metropolitan France)

Charente-Maritime (the second largest and most populous department)

Regions passed through:

Auvergne

Limousin

Midi-Pyrénées

Aquitaine

Poitou-Charentes

The Dordogne is one of the few rivers (like our own Severn) to have a tidal bore.

This does not mean an old sea dog banging on about springs and neap tides, but a rush of water or 'high tide' coinciding conveniently with the water-sporting summer months of July and August.

**Because of the meanderings of the river and our frequently going off-piste, the distances I record as having travelled on each leg should not be regarded as remotely accurate or useful. They are no more than a rough guide.*

LEG 1

Le Mont-Dore to Mauriac

Distance: 85 kilometres

Region: The Auvergne

Departments: Puy-de-Dôme, Cantal

Puy de Sancy

At first I think the man in the car park is a member of the French Magic Circle, demonstrating his skills to impress fellow motorists.

Then I see he is actually assembling an assortment of travel items, including a collapsible wine rack and what we used to call a hostess trolley from the boot of his tiny Fiat. As he casually produces a sizeable table complete with bench seat, a parasol, wine cooler and condiment rack I realise what is afoot. It is approaching noon, and he is preparing for an informal picnic.

It is a truism disguised as a stereotype that the French take their lunches very seriously, regardless of where they take them. Clearly, this man is merely making sure that the furniture, furnishings, implements and accessories do justice to the spread his wife is working on.

As we pass, I compliment Madame on her breasts as she performs a double mastectomy on a chicken with a casual flick of her Sabatier knife. Being French, she looks at her generous bosom and then the bird, and nods gracious acceptance of the compliment to either or both. Her husband does not pick up on my feeble gag as he is occupied with an extravagant floral table-top display. I am disappointed when he produces the bunch of tiger lilies from the back of the car rather than inside his jacket, but still clap my hands in admiration. He puts the spray of flowers in a vase, then acknowledges my applause with a small and perfectly serious bow.

The car park is full of similarly intricate preparations, and though it is only mid-July and the holiday season is not yet upon us, this indicates that the highest dead volcano in France is a popular attraction.

Taking their name from the Roman god of fire, volcanoes are basically holes in the earth through which liquid rock gushed a very long time ago. They often look like barren and topless mini-mountains or giant, burnt-out firework cones because of the build-up of lava and cinders over aeons. 'Puy' is an old French word for a volcanic hill, and the *Chaine des Puys* stretches for around 50 kilometres in the midst of the great plateau of the Massif Central. The Puy-de-Dôme department is named for the highest volcano in the chain.

Depending on their age and inclinations, the half million visitors who arrive in this part of France every year like to photograph and be photographed, picnic on, climb or even attempt to drive up these sleeping giants.

At 1886 metres, the Puy de Sancy ('mountain of the cross' in ancient Occitan) is the highest point in Central France, topped elsewhere only by the Alps and Pyrénées. It is one of three former volcanoes which make up the satisfyingly street-gang-sounding Mont Dore Massif. It is said the Alps can be seen from the top on a clear day, and during the winter months the slopes of Sancy become a favoured ski slope. Most importantly for our purposes it is also where the Dordogne River first sees the light of day.

The river officially starts its three hundred mile journey to the sea where two springs unite somewhere up the slope. Our self-appointed challenge is to find both sources and log exactly where they become the Dordogne, taking a souvenir sample of the confluence. To be honest, we could just ask in the information office or look at the very big map outside which pinpoints the location of both trickles, but that would seem like cheating.

Instead, we, or rather I, have chosen to fight our way up the south face. I suggest roping ourselves together and taking ice picks and oxygen supplies, but my wife

points to a young family pushing a pram and accompanied by a very old lady on double walking sticks high above us on the snowless *piste*.

But before we do the hard bit I suggest we take a ride up to the very top of the mountain. It is my first visit to a ski slope and I have always wanted to travel in the sort of cable car on the roof of which James Bond was often to be found fighting the relevant arch-villain.

Though she has not got a good head for heights, my wife reluctantly agrees. I decide not to tell her about the seventeen passengers killed or seriously injured in an accident here in 1965. Even in France I reckon safety measures must have been tightened up since then.

We labour up the slope to the nearer of the two boarding stations, and find it closed for repairs. This does nothing to reassure my wife, as she points out that if something needs repairing, it must have become broken. This would not be too much of a problem with a washing machine or set of hair straightening tongs, but a breakdown could have more serious implications for people dangling in a small, swaying box hundreds of feet above the ground. This being summertime, she adds gloomily, there is not even any snow to help break the fall.

*

At the other boarding station, a ragged queue snakes back from the entrance, and most of its constituents look ill-at-ease or even openly agitated. I assume I am picking up on their disquiet, then realise their discomfort is not caused by the prospect of travelling several thousand yards up a mountainside in a flimsy-looking cable-car. It is because they are having to queue before boarding. This is something so contrary to French instinct, nature and social conditioning that the sum of their anxiety is palpable.

Thankfully and before mass hysteria breaks out, one of the two working cars reaches the end of its downward journey, and the queue disintegrates as people surge forward so as to be first on board and gain a favoured position. The action will also gain them the bonus satisfaction of blocking the exit route for disembarking passengers. This love of obstructive behaviour is another very French trait. It is common everywhere that people meet, but best seen in supermarkets where shoppers gain status by the imaginative use of their trolleys to block aisles. Though I am sure it is not true, an embittered British expatriate with permanently lacerated knees once told me there is a popular late night TV programme on *Canal Plus* which is based on our *Supermarket Sweep*. The difference is that rather than rushing round to collect free groceries, the contestants try to stop each other's progress and cause maximum damage and injury on route.

Being in no hurry, we stand back and wait for the scrum to subside.

Finally arriving at the entrance, we find it guarded by a very large man in official costume. He is holding his hand out, and I assume he is expecting a tip. He looks disdainfully down over his huge walrus moustache at my handful of very small change, then points wordlessly at a well-hidden notice which explains that entrance is by ticket only. I ask him where we may get them, and, still without speaking, he points one immaculately oiled and twirled end of his moustache over my shoulder. I turn and see a building cunningly obscured behind a row of snow ploughs and a mountain of as-yet unassembled chair lift components. To be fair, as my wife points out, the word BILLITERIE is written in very large letters above the door.

*

At the desk, a friendly young lady asks if we want to come back from the top, and I say we would just like to be sure of getting there in one piece. She has the grace not to yawn at hearing a variation of the same line a hundred times a day, smiles and gives us our tickets.

Back at the entrance, the big man with the big moustache is contemplating with deep affection a baguette stuffed with what looks and smells like alternate slices of garlic sausage and goat's cheese in a garlic sauce of minced and puréed garlic with extra garlic dressing. The man and his meal obviously have an assignation which will be consummated in the very near future, and he is indulging in some literally lip-smackingly lubricous foreplay. The sandwich is made up from a whole *gros pain*. This is one of the biggest French loaves and resembles what we would call a family-sized bloomer. In his hand, it looks almost like a dainty bridge roll.

Long aware of the perils of coming between a Frenchman and his food, I smile ingratiatingly and proffer the tickets. The giant murmurs an excuse to his lunch, then he holds a massive hand up to my face, pointing at his wrist with the sharp end of the loaf.

Already suspecting what is afoot, I look at his watch and see that it is seconds away from noon, so our plans for a trip up the mountainside, like the cable car itself, must be put on hold. A surprising number of French businesses still shut at this sacred hour, and I even know of restaurants which close for lunch. Obviously, there will be no more rides up to the top of the volcano for at least a couple of hours.

Before we make our way down the slope to find somewhere to while away the time by eating and drinking too much, I say I hope the cable car got to the top before noon, or the passengers would have had to stay in suspense until the end of the lunch break. The attendant again smiles apologetically at his baguette, then looks up at the distant car, which is moored at the docking station above. He does not speak but looks thoughtful, and I hope for the sake of future travellers that I have not put any ideas into his head.

*

We have eaten very well at a nearby village, and the food as well as our surroundings seemed somehow more alpine than French.

Though we are in the middle of France, the wooden, chalet-style houses and sloping green unfenced fields surrounding the base of the dead volcano suggest we might be in Sound of Music territory rather than a prime French bottled-water zone. Stretching into the far distance, green and pleasant hills are dotted with cows and mountain goats, some even having bells around their necks. As there does not seem to be too many places where they could get lost in this most open of terrains, I wonder if the bells are to keep the tourists happy.

Eagles dare overhead, and, in spite of the time of year, ribbons of smoke curl from wooden chalets into an untroubled and almost painfully blue sky. Most things to do with nature here seem on a grand scale, and green is the predominant colour.

As I navigate a hairpin bend and try to get round the corner before a giant Euro-lorry forces us through the barrier and into the abyss, I reflect on just how varied the

different parts of this great country can be, even if driving standards and attitudes are constant.

*

Back at the boarding station, a ragged queue has formed, but those in it look much less ill-at-ease. Clearly, they have all had a good lunch. At the gate, our silent giant has been replaced by a very voluble small man with a walkie-talkie radio-receiver strapped to his hip. As he is equipped with this most prized of status symbols, he must be senior to the giant bouncer. As any frequent visitor to French tourist attractions will know, the walkie-talkie is similar to an officer's swagger stick in symbolic rather than actual function. Replaced in usefulness by the mobile phone, it may have a flat battery or not even be switched on, but it bestows and denotes authority, and shows the bearer is empowered to boss people around at a distance as well as close to hand.

After a lengthy wait for no apparent reason - par for the course in most tourist attractions anywhere in the world - we shuffle forward and I pass our tickets to the new guardian at the gate. He looks at them and then at me as if surprised, then nods to a platform where steps lead up to the gondola. It looks smaller and much more frail at close quarters. It also appears full, but pressure from the queue behind forces us up and into the glass and metal lozenge. Although we have not yet taken off it is swinging quite markedly, and from the inside appears to be made of much more glass than metal. Obviously, the organisers are making up for the loss of the car under repair by filling this one to and beyond capacity.

After a deal of pushing and shoving, we find ourselves in a corner, noses to the glass. Just when I think no more people can possibly be forced in, the whole vehicle tips alarmingly as the man mountain and his moustache squeeze through the door. Thankfully he has consumed his oversized sandwich. A ripple of nervous laughter runs through the car as the giant cleaves a path through the pack and begins directing individuals to move to different parts of the cabin. He is obviously trimming the vessel before we set sail.

Either because he has not taken a shine to me or more likely because I am obviously the second heaviest person on the premises, I am detailed to go and stand in the opposite corner to him. I note that he is orchestrating our movements by waving a walkie-talkie like the one we saw on the hip of the small man at the door. Either there are two units, the big man has suddenly been promoted above the small one, or was still hungry after lunch and has eaten his rival.

As the passengers are shunted around, I note that the conductor is keeping an eye on a strange device at the business end of the car. Its main constituent is a brass pointer, with the tip swaying back and forth along a curved and calibrated scale. At either end of the scale is a red section. I ask the *conducteur* about it, and he tersely explains that the needle indicates both the wind velocity and the angle at which the cabin is hanging. If the needle reaches and stays in the red, we will not be taking off.

Eventually, the swingometer and the driver are satisfied, and he throws a switch and presses various buttons. It is all very much like a scene from a stage production of *The Time Machine*. For a moment, nothing happens, then we all stagger forward as the cabin lurches backwards before moving up and away from the platform. We

rise steadily on the wings of a collective sigh of relief, and it is a strange sensation to be moving through thin air so slowly and at such an angle.

But not all of us are enjoying the journey. With her back to the window and eyes tightly shut, my wife is holding me more closely than I can remember since the early days of our relationship.

Many people think that the name for a fear of heights is vertigo, but that word refers to a sensation of dizziness which can sometimes result from looking down from a high place. Sometimes also confused with agoraphobia (related to a fear of open spaces), acrophobia or a morbid fear of heights is believed to be the most common of phobias. A phobia is technically an irrational or abnormal fear, but I cannot see that being afraid of the consequences of falling from a great height could be described as irrational. A glance between my feet and through the glass floor of the gondola confirms the increasing distance between us and the ground.

It is a shame my wife is not enjoying the ride, as our position gives a unique perspective of the glorious scenery. From this angle and height, the undulating and far-reaching landscape of green seems to stretch forever below an upturned bowl of pure, uninterrupted blue.

Our slow and silent progress continues, and my wife only opens her eyes when I tell her we are within jumping distance of the disembarking platform. Then, like a horse refusing a jump, the car lurches, dips, swings wildly from side to side then stops dead.

There is a chorus of screams and shouts, amongst which I seem to recognise my own voice, but an octave higher than usual. Then a grim silence falls, broken only by a creaking noise and the whistle of the wind blowing through the cable wires.

In a suspense movie, this would be when a rasping twanging noise indicates that the strands of the main support cable are beginning to part. In our real-life drama, the driver talks very quickly on his walkie-talkie while several passengers flout the strict laws by lighting up. I note that none of the non-smokers complains or attempts to open a window, and I consider asking the sweating man next to me for a drag on his roll-up.

As I think about breaking my three-year abstinence from the weed, the car lurches again. There is a hum from the control box, and we start moving again. I am relieved to note that we are moving in an upwards direction.

We dock, and there is a more than usually frenetic scrum to be the first on to the landing platform. Departing completely from the norm, the people waiting to travel back down are making no attempt to push their way on board before we get off. Also unsurprisingly, no explanation or apology is given for the heart-stopping interlude when the cable car came up short of its destination.

As I help my wife out on to the platform and she tries not to look down through the gap between car and ramp, I recall a statistic concerning the French and how few of them leave the ground. It is a matter of record that eighty six percent of French people have never flown.

Previously, I had thought this was because they felt no need to visit far-flung and exotic lands on holiday with so much choice at home. Now I think their reluctance may be because they have travelled in a dodgy cable car.

*

Today is clearly a day for first-time experiences.

I have never before journeyed in a cable car, and this is the first time I have travelled down a ski slope without skis or snow.

We are safely back in the car park after a winding trek over more than a mile of scree, which makes walking downhill in desert boots quite challenging. The reason we decided to descend by foot was officially because I had mistakenly only bought us one-way tickets to the top. In truth, I think we both preferred the slow slog downhill to the prospect of using the cable car to get back to where we started. The benefits of taking the hard way down included working up an appetite for dinner, seeing some interesting high-altitude vegetation, and finding and posing for snaps beside what I hope is the source of the Dordogne river.

As we pass the little Fiat, I see that the temporary dining room has been conjured back into the boot, and the magician and his wife are taking their ease in a pair of camping chairs. He is looking very serious and studying what I take to be a newspaper, so I assume he must be catching on up the latest bad news of the severe financial mess France is in. As we draw closer, however, I see that what is absorbing his total concentration is the dinner menu for the restaurant at the exit to the car park.

I wish him success, and am relieved to see that things are very much back to normal and down-to-earth.

Wet, Wet, Wet

The Massif Central is officially the wettest place in France. This is partly due to it being a meeting place for clouds from the cold Atlantic and warm air from the Mediterranean. In the dampest parts, more than two metres of water can fall from the skies in a year. This is good news for those companies which make a fortune bottling and selling water.

Put basically, mineral water is the result of a never-ending natural cycle. It is spooky to think that virtually every drop of water on the planet has gone through the process of falling from the sky as rain before evaporating back into the atmosphere. As it rises, the evaporated water forms rain clouds and so it goes on and on.

Part of what makes mineral water so special and costly is that it spends much longer in the water cycle. On its journey it takes a detour through the aquifer (permeable rock beneath the surface of the earth) before emerging through natural or artificial sources. Depending on the geology through which it has passed, the water will have gathered a number of minerals. To qualify for the top title and price potential, any mineral water has to conform to a concentration level set by the World Health Organisation.

Another pretty obvious requirement is that the water is not contaminated by agricultural or human waste products. The volcanic deposits insulating the sources in this part of France provide a perfect shield, and by the time the water has worked its way back to the surface, the only additions will have been the very welcome minerals of calcium, potassium, bromine, sodium, bicarbonate and or fluoride.

Sniffy Francophobes allege that the French got a liking for bottled water because the stuff coming out of their taps was undrinkable. That is partly true, but although France has some of the cleanest tap water in the world nowadays, the Gallic enthusiasm for mineral water is unabated. Year on year, the consumption of tap water goes down, and more than a quarter of French people say they never drink it. Sixty-four percent say they drink mineral water at least once a week. In fact, only one percent of all domestic (tap) water produced in France is used for drinking.

Based on those figures, it means a lot of French people only imbibe any form of domestic water in their coffee, and rely on the bottled stuff and other liquids to slake their thirsts.

On average, every French adult drinks around a hundred litres of still or fizzy mineral water a year, and France is second only to Italy in consumption terms. These staggering stats also help explain why the only form of litter consistently seen in any part of France is the empty mineral water bottle.

As an example of the level of production achievable, the local S.M.D.A. (Sources du Mont Dore et Auvergne) belongs to the giant Danone organisation, and is the company responsible for the Evian and Volvic brands. SMDA exploits the three main Mont Dore springs, and just one hundred employees knocked out a third of a billion litres of bottled water in 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Perhaps to the regret of mineral water makers, it does not rain all the time in the Auvergne. But given the precipitation statistics it was perhaps not a good idea to choose to spend a night in the open at a point not much lower than the summit of the Puy de Sancy.

The thing I find about camping is that it is even more dependent on the weather than cricket. If the sun shines, it is one of life's pleasures to bask lizard-like with glass in hand beside your tent while pretending to be roughing it.

On the other hand, few things I have experienced are less pleasurable than laying on a sloping piece of land beneath a sheet of leaky plastic as muddy water flows in one end of your sleeping bag and out the other.

In my childhood, we camped so much because it was all the family could afford in the way of a holiday. The joke was how we went home and told everyone how much we enjoyed it.

In those more spartan days, the essential point of camping was getting near to nature. Now, the objective seems to be to keep it at bay and recreate the environment and gadgets you left behind at home. A lot of tents seem better appointed and even roomier than the houses in which some people grew up a few decades ago.

I find it interesting how a visit to a campsite can also demonstrate basic cultural characteristics. As it is the French who like to make a big deal of a picnic, it is the Germans and Dutch who go overboard when camping or caravanning. After years of observation, I can differentiate between the races without having to look at their car licence plates. Generally, Dutch pitches will have been made to look neat and yet homely, and strapped to the back of their campers will often be a couple of classic canal-side sit-up-and-beg bicycles with baskets on the front, ready for the owners to pedal into town for provisions.

Dutch tents will invariably be of the lofty standing-room variety. This may be no more than a practical consideration, as I have yet to meet a Dutch man or woman on a campsite that I did not have to look up to. Often, little gardens will have been created with neat lines of knee-high white plastic fencing. So far I have not seen any tulips or a miniature windmill, and I think the displays are made as much to please the eye of passers-by as to mark out territorial boundaries.

On the other hand, the thing about Germans laying out towels at poolside to claim territory has its equivalent at most European campsites. The one we are staying at tonight is sparsely populated but gives a perfect example of cultural differentials.

Near the entrance, a French caravan had been apparently abandoned, and is almost blocking all access to the rest of the site. Beyond that, a Munich-licensed camper had created a no-go area by winding the sort of brightly marked tape you see at murder scenes around the trees surrounding that corner of the site. We will not set up camp beside his foreboding campervan as I fear we might wake up in the morning and find our pitch has been annexed.

*

An hour later and it is difficult to see our neighbours as we are surrounded by a thick and clammy wall of white. I suggest it is mist, but my wife says it is not-so low cloud, and that she hopes we are not on the flight path to Clermont-Ferrand airport.

*

Early morning, and we are heading for the nearest town to find a hotel room in which to dry out and sleep for more than twenty consecutive minutes.

The rain started as I pushed the last tent peg in, and persevered until I pulled it out again. In between, we had a spectacularly sleepless night caused by leaks from above and below.

Our ancient tent was no match for the downpour, and worse, the inflatable mattress sprang a leak. It took around an hour for us to reach ground level, and those who know will agree that a partially inflated airbed is more uncomfortable than a totally deflated one. After see-sawing about while trying to trim our prone positions by re-positioning our bodies and adding and subtracting rucksacks and other weights, I gave up and reached for the foot pump.

It is one of those all-rubber affairs with a dome-shaped bit on which to jump up and down. From it a length of tubing leads, with a selection of adaptors to suit the size of the inlet valve on the mattress. We long ago lost the correct adaptor, and the only one which fits is too small. This means that for every stamp of the foot, half the air which should have gone into the mattress escapes through the gap around the adaptor. Because of this shortcoming, the pumper also needs to adopt a crouched position during the operation. Being cocooned in a sodden sleeping bag in the middle of the night did not make the operation any easier, and there was another problem.

The necessarily jerky action makes the pump squeak like a tortured mouse, and the escaping air wheezes like a 40 fags-a-day man coming to the final stages of the London Marathon. What my silhouette looked like through the thin canvas wall of the tent as I rose up and down over the mattress with my own gasping matching that of the air pump is anybody's guess.

When we checked out in the morning, the campsite manager observed dryly that I must be tired, as the owner of the German camper had complained about the grunts and squeaks and gasps coming from our tent throughout the night. When I asked about the French couple on the other side, the manager said the male half had mentioned the noise in an admiring way, and said it had changed his mind completely about the English and their attitude to sex.

Le Mont-Dore

As with people, I find some towns immediately appealing or not, and often for no obvious reason. I don't think I would want to spend the rest of my life in Le Mont-Dore, but I'd gladly drop by to say hello when passing.

Just up the road from the ski centre of Sancy, the town looks like it makes a nice living from the people who choose to spend some part of their life whizzing down the slopes of a dead volcano.

The surrounding area is not short on *pistes*, and offers 45 kilometres of downhill runs, plus another twenty-five of cross country treks. Thus the no-nonsense, cheerful little town has a long history of catering for well-heeled visitors, and the number of designer shops and the cost of the goods in them shows they know their market well.

The skiers are actually relatively recent visitors, having replaced the prosperous but constantly indisposed people (which France seems full of) who since Roman Times would flock to immerse themselves in the town's wonderfully over-the-top bath house.

As the thermal springs feeding the baths contain bicarbonate of soda and arsenic, it comes as a surprise that the punters like to drink as well as sit in the waters. Probably to justify the treatment fee, all the thermal bath houses in this part of France look like a cross between an over-the-top 1970s bingo hall and a Byzantine knocking shop.

Originally known as Mont-Dore-les-Bains for obvious reasons, the bathhouses were serviced by twelve thermal springs, and specialized in the treatment and alleged cure of many ailments, including bronchitis, TB, Asthma and rheumatics. Nobody enjoys ill-health more than the French, and it has been so for a long time. Roman baths relics can be seen in the town park, and famous visitors who came to take the waters included the Duchesse de Berry, who led a failed insurrection against Louis-Philippe in the Vendée.

But the main reason I found Le Mont-Dore so attractive may be because it is home to a real cracker of a bar. That's always a very positive and persuasive point when I am recalling or reviewing a town. This one seemed full of character and characters and somehow seems out of time and as if it belongs to a past that perhaps never was. Sadly I shall never be able to call in at Gauguin, Van Gogh and Toulouse Lautrec's locals in Paris, but I reckon this one is exactly the sort they would use.

The single room is large, but crowded with interesting people and things. Under a collection of mismatching carpet squares, the floor is laid with obviously original hand-made tiles which would fetch a literally breath-taking price in the Fulham branch of the We Saw You Coming Antique Emporium. On them sit a dozen Egyptian-themed original art deco tables which would probably fetch enough money in any London auction room for the bar owner to shut up shop and retire.

Hanging from a wall is a hugely framed mirror doubling as a menu board. Details of the dish of the day and other special offers have been written on the glass in what looks like period whitewash. The price of the midday special of *cassoulet* and complimentary bottle of wine is also pleasingly old-fashioned.

Two of the other walls are thickly lined with black-and-white photographs of Parisian scenes and household names of the increasingly distant past. Yves Montand and Alain Delon are frozen for ever at their most cockily handsome. Alongside them, Edith Piaf stares owlishly at the camera, and below her is a line-up of some of the most seriously talented and acclaimed French jazz stars of the pre

and post-War years. Continuing the theme, a battered upright piano in the corner is obviously there for work and not merely show.

But the crowning glory is what must be one of the very few surviving original zinc bar counters in all France. Once upon a time, thousands of Parisian drinking haunts boasted these chest-high, metal-topped counters for which they were named. Nowadays and like stand-to-deliver toilets, the zinc bar is making a comeback in trendy locations, but this one is clearly the real thing. Just to make it absolutely right, on the bar is a period help-yourself-hard-boiled egg rack. On the wall behind the bar there are no optics, but proper chromium pourers in the necks of dozens of interesting-looking bottles.

Also in exact keeping with her surroundings is the owner of the bar. Madame's taste and status is obvious from the quality and understated style of her dress and jewellery. The lady of the house is of about the same vintage as the art-deco furniture, but her face is so strongly planed in cheekbone and jaw line that it seems unlined.

Seeing my admiring stare, Madame glides along the bar towards us, and I am tempted to lean over and see if she is on castors rather than feet. I make our order and we take a seat to drink in the action.

Above us, the ceiling is an inimitable shade of old gold, brought about only by the smoke of a million cigarettes. Sadly, those days are gone, and the dwindling number of French smokers are forced to sit outside. It is still raining, but I am pleased to see a hardy trio are taking part in a smoking competition. This is another disappearing French art form.

The coterie at the wrought-iron table beneath the awning have very different smoking styles, but are surprisingly similar in appearance. They do not appear to be related, but obviously share interests and philosophies. Each is expressing his bohemian sensibilities with carefully distressed leather trousers and waistcoat over collarless shirts. Each is wearing a fedora hat from which dangles the sort of grey and lank pony tail nurtured by men who wish to make up for what they have lost from the top of their heads.

One is artfully smoking what looks and smells even from a distance like an unfiltered *Disque Bleu*. Another is examining the glowing end of a small cigar, while the third member of the group wields an unfeasibly large hand-rolled cigarette which probably contains more than just tobacco.

The *Disque Bleu* man favours the Yves Montand approach, with cigarette dangling precariously from his lower lip. The small cigar man is using his stogie to punctuate his animated discourse, while the man with the monster roll-up needs both hands to support it.

As we watch the show, a man in chef's whites emerges from an alleyway next to the restaurant across the street to join in the group discussion. He favours the 1940s movie Parisian private detective style, extracting a cigarette from his tunic and inserting it into the corner of his mouth with one hand, while the other produces, snaps open and ignites a Zippo lighter in one smooth motion.

Seeing her new customer, Madame glides from behind the bar, and I see the label of the bottle she carries bears an illustration of a green fairy. Now I know we are in for an interesting evening, as what is in the bottle was almost synonymous with the classic Parisian zinc bar.

Absinthe is or was an anise-flavoured drink much favoured by 19th-century Paris-based artists and literary luminaries. Later artistic big hitters who were on intimate terms with the Green Fairy included Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemmingway. A

favoured way of drinking it was from the glass but via a sugar lump, Absinthe is actually no stronger or less strong than many spirits, but has been credited with sending its habitués blind, mad or both. Such was the power of perception over reality, that the Green Fairy was banned in France in 1915.

Whatever its strength, Absinthe, like the smell of Disque Bleu and the Paris Metro makes my heart fonder for all things French. As Madame returns from the terrace, I invite her to leave the bottle at our table, and bring a glass for herself if she can spare a little while to tell us of her splendid bar's history.

She graciously agrees, and as I reach for a spare chair, someone strikes up on the piano. The tune is a between-wars jazz classic, and the atmosphere it generates lacks only a fug of cigarette smoke. Outside, it is still raining, and I am glad it is. Had it not started we would be under canvas rather than inside this delightful bar, and I know where I would rather be in any weather.

Le Mont-Dore to St Nectaire

I am negotiating a hangover as well as the steep and winding road which will take us westward on the trail of the Dordogne river. We had intended to seek out the Grand Cascade, a waterfall which is one of the area's major attractions, but feel we have seen enough of falling water for a while.

The road out of the town flanks a sheer drop, and the potential for near or even actual death experiences means most of the French motorists using it will be driving with even more suicidal abandon than usual.

Rounding a hairpin bend, we come across a breakdown truck and I brake sharply to avoid skidding through a ragged gap in the crash barrier and providing the truck's owner with some extra income. I fleetingly consider that this is why it is parked in such a mad place, then see the vehicle is already working.

Pulling over, I get out and peer over the edge and see that the truck's winch wire trails down the steep, tree-lined slope to where an upturned car has come to rest against a mortally damaged pine. On the road, a group of men in high-visibility jackets and hard hats are busily lighting each other's cigarettes and snarling up the traffic flow by showing green and red flags at the same time at each end of the single lane between the lorry and the rock face of the mountain.

Another couple of workers are on an official smoke break by the crumpled barrier and giving advice to a man abseiling down the slope. I note he is the only one not wearing a hard hat, then realise he is one of the pony-tailed trio from the terrace of the bar last night. I recognise him not only by his hairstyle, but the way he is holding his cigarette with what he obviously considers to be his spare hand.

As we squeeze past the truck I see that the owner of the bar is sitting in an old Peugeot shooting brake parked alongside the barrier. Next to her is another of the trio of smokists from last evening. She looks concerned, and our eyes meet as we pass although there is no sign of recognition.

Escaping from the bottleneck I consider the possibilities of the tableau. Perhaps the owner of the upturned car is the third member of the artful smokers group, and the man abseiling down the slope was ignoring the health and safety regulations to rescue him. Or perhaps it is his car and he is intent on saving on what would obviously be substantial recovery costs. It might even be that the stricken car belongs to owner of the bar, and her customers are helping her out.

An impatient toot from a lorry trying to attach itself to my rear bumper jars me from my reverie and I speed up and away from the mystery. I will never know who owns the car at the bottom of the ravine, how it came to be there and whether or not the driver is still inside. Or, if so, is badly injured or even still alive, This lack of closure is both the good and bad thing about making fleeting contacts and observations while travelling through France and other people's lives.

*

This is a truly remarkable part of a remarkably landscaped country.

In the French way, there were no warning signs as we approached the breakdown truck, but there was a diversion sign at the crossroads at the top of the steep climb. The fact that the diversion is *after* the event it is meant to be diverting traffic from is quite normal in our experience.

For once I am grateful for the whims of the diverters, as had we taken the direct route to our destination we would have missed a really dramatic panorama. A roadside sign informs us we are in the land of lakes and volcanoes, and it is, like the diversion, unnecessary. The great blue dome of the sky is starkly pierced by volcanoes and granite outcrops, and in between are the mirrored surfaces of great lakes. There is no sense or sign of human habitation, and we could be time travellers venturing into an ancient world.

At 400 hundred square kilometres, *Le Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne* is the largest in the country, and the sheer scale makes the word 'park' seem a bit of an understatement. Once this place would have been the haunt of mammoths and mastodons; over the eons, dinosaurs have mutated into the two hundred species of birds which call this place home.

Raptors competing to make a living here include royal and black kite, kestrels and peregrines, harriers and ospreys. On the ground, otters are common, and even Atlantic salmon besport themselves in the Allier river before making off to open waters via the Loire.

As we devour this feast of nature, a pair of Golden Eagles appear high above. Then, as if they have seen us and are curious, they plummet down to investigate.

As with humans, the male is the show-off, and the larger bird is performing increasingly more daring and impressive aerobatic feats. Surely, I say to my wife, he is trying to impress us or his mate, or is in the pay of the Massif Central tourist authority.

When he swoops down in an apparently suicidal dive, I see that his wingspan is easily wider than our car. In fact, he comes so close that if I were quick enough I could reach out and fleetingly touch this lord of the air. Then he is gone and we are left breathless by the sheer majesty of the spectacle and his lordly insouciance. For thousands of generations, mankind has marvelled at birds in flight and dreamed of following them into the sky. I raise a hand in salute, and fanciful though I am being, it seems to me that the great bird ducks its wings in haughty response before soaring up and away towards the far horizon.

St Nectaire

To give him his Sunday-best title, Saint Nectarius of Auvergne is said to have been the first evangelist to set foot in this part of France. He suffered a particularly nasty martyrdom and was thought highly enough of to have not only a town but also a cheese named for him.

In France and even with a cheese for every day of the year to name, this counts as a real honour. The town has an upper and lower part, with the commercial centre sited suitably in the lower part, whilst the church looks disdainfully down from Haute St Nectaire.

Before making the climb, we pool our cash to buy a sliver of the eponymous cheese from the grocery store by the car park. We find the owner busy with a coach load of eager customers, and looking at the price per kilo I doubt he would have been able to cut a slice thin enough to meet our budget.

For many tourists, a church is a church, and something to be necessarily ticked off before leaving an ancient town. I find nearly all old churches interesting, especially those which have changed little down the ages. Like pubs, an ancient church links us to the past, has its own character and ambience, and the best seem to hold the past within their walls.

This one certainly has a long provenance of spirituality, as it stands on the site of a temple devoted to Apollo. Neither the press of tourists in their violently coloured anoraks nor the recorded Gregorian plainchant issuing from hidden loudspeakers diminishes the atmosphere. Standing in front of the altar and in spite of the distractions I can smell the incense and hear the devotions of congregations long dead.

One of the reasons for the atmosphere and the throng may be that this place has more than a whiff of *Da Vinci Code* allure to it.

The church is said to hold the secret of where a vast treasure is buried nearby, and has the added mythological status of a dragon guarding the hoard. Adding to the menu of myth and legend, somewhere beneath the church is the entrance to a magical grotto where the waters turn all they touch into stone.

I think the real treasure is closer to home, as the tourists are queuing up to put two Euro pieces into a slot machine in return for a St. Nectaire medallion. Elsewhere are other bargain buys. Nearby is a cabinet containing busts and statuettes of the great man, including a copy of his arm. A guide tells me that the original relic is kept on the premises, but not for sale.

Murol

Like cures for baldness or devices promising to increase the size of one's privatest of parts, many French markets do not live up to hopes and expectations.

The typical small-town, rain-swept French square holding a handful of stallholders intent on making any customers as unhappy as they are inevitably falls short of the popular image. This is a more than common sight in the north of the country in the winter months.

Perhaps for no other reason than where it is, Murol market could have sprung into life from the pages of a holiday brochure or a Peter Mayle book. It is also a classic example of French organisational thinking.

Arriving with the sun, we find the market clearly popular. There are dozens of stalls and hundreds of visitors. Being British, we assume that the area of narrow cobbled streets which the traders and their stalls occupy will have been pedestrianised for the duration of the market.

We realise this is probably not the case as a battered Mercedes comes charging towards us, scattering shoppers and even stallholders in all directions. In Britain there would have been considerable antipathy and a good chance of a punch-up. Here, none of the pedestrians makes a complaint or even scowls at the driver, who is a portly red-faced middle-aged man who would be a shoo-in for Mr Toad in any production of *Wind in the Willows*.

As he whizzes past I extricate myself from a display on a tripe stall, shake my fist and mouth a selection of suitable Anglo-Saxon suggestions. He merely gives a grade five Gallic shoulder shrug and looks at me as if I am mad as he aims for an old lady resting on her Zimmer frame.

After paying for the tripe clinging to my jacket, we make our way along the rows of stalls. The goods on offer and how they are priced are another fine demonstration of cultural differentials. In Britain we like to think that the market is the place to go to buy things cheaper than they would be priced in shops. In France, the opposite applies. People actually come to market prepared or actually keen to pay more for a handful of bananas or a loaf of bread. Somehow, being bought in the open air directly from a human being adds to the status and thus the price. There is also the food snob bonus of being seen to be paying top dollar for goods which must be fresher or better than could be had in the local superstore.

At the Murol market, there is actually an air of an auction taking place, with customers competing to secure the limited supply of certain goods. This is because it is summertime and there are many tourists amongst the locals. The syndrome is most evident at the cheese stall. Murol is yet another town with a cheese named for it, and it is a sort of younger brother of St Nectaire. This gives the cheese stall here top status, and it is under siege. Most aggressive and careless with their money are the obvious tourists, and we watch a scrimmage of puce-faced men with ill-advised shorts waving large denomination notes to show they mean business. Two look ready to come to blows over a wodge of Roquefort which they could buy at half the price at the nearby Carrefour supermarket.

Next to the cheese stall, a man in a suit is sitting at a table bearing the logo of the Credit Agricole bank. There is a surprisingly orderly queue waiting to be interviewed, and I suspect they are seeking mortgages to enable them to buy a man-sized slice of St Nectaire.

Further on we stop at a stall selling what we would call clogs. The old French word *galoche* is where we get 'galoshes' from when talking about rubber overshoes. For

some reason, that is also what a particular brand of surface-to-air anti-ballistic missile is known as in Russia. To make things even more complicated, *galoche* is also slang for what we would call a French kiss. Having said that, however, nowadays the younger and cooler French person is most likely to call a French kiss a French kiss. This trend has not pleased those who try to defend the language against English invasion.

The wooden-soled *galoche* has a rubber upper, and as an overshoe became known as a galosh in Britain from around the Middle Ages. The stall is not doing much business, and this may be because of the breath-taking price of the footwear but more likely the somewhat off-putting appearance of the stallholder. If the manic car driver looked like Mr Toad, this man could have stepped from the pages of any Scandinavian fairy tale featuring trolls. He is short and stocky, with a deep chest and wide shoulders. From a grizzled spade-shaped grey beard, exceptionally big ears and nose protrude. I cannot see his feet, but I would bet they are also oversize and would have to be to act as a counterpoint to his massive upper body, especially if there were a strong wind to which his ears were exposed. I hear him talking to his partner, a woman remarkably similar in appearance but with a much less bushy beard, and it is definitely not a form of French I have heard before. Then I see a sign on the stall and realise the couple are Basque.

Like the structure and roots of their language, the origins of the Basque race is a mystery. Their homelands straddle the border between France and Spain and they are a truly ancient race. The word 'sabotage' comes from protesters throwing a *sabot* rather than a spanner into the works, but I do not know the connection between the Basques and the sexily supportive female undergarment. The only other Basque word I know is 'bizar', which, quite bizarrely, means 'beard'.

Our eyes meet and he smiles, tweaks his beard and nods at mine as if to identify our bond in a generally beardless society. Then he looks down at my feet before reaching for a large pair of galoshes. I smile weakly, but am lost. As well as being good at shoemaking, Basque salesmen are obviously good at spotting a sucker.

*

France is full of castles, but many of what the French call *châteaux* are usually no more than very big houses with lots of spires, towers and other twiddly bits. Here in the Puy-de-Dôme department we are in proper *châteaux-fort* territory, where a castle is a castle, or as we might also say, a fort.

For sure, the word 'foreboding' could have been invented to describe the brooding castle high above Murol. Its first incarnation was in the 12th century, when it was built on a basalt outcrop to keep an eye on several important routes though the liege lord's territory. It was jazzed-up over the years and became an even more intimidating and impregnable fortress. In the years of the Revolution it was a bandit's hideout, then a prison before falling into ruin in the 19th century. It is still an awesome sight, and I think Guy de Maupassant got it just right when he gave his first impressions in 1885:

'It astonishes the eye more than any other ruin by its simple mass, its majesty, its grave and imposing air of majesty. It stands there, alone, high as a mountain, a dead queen, but still the queen of the valleys stretched out beneath it.'

Lake Chambon

Someone said that all lakes are the same but a bit different. I suppose he or she meant that they are all, at the end of day, just holes in the ground which have been filled with water.

We have walked around, swam in and boated on hundreds of lakes in France, and I take the critic's point. Most will have a story, but they have often been dreamed up to make the place seem more interesting.

There is one in Brittany which is said to mask the gates of Hell, and many preside over buried treasures and whole drowned villages. The true back-story about Lake Chambon is that it was formed around 30,000 years ago when one of the newer volcanoes - the Puy de Tartaret - first erupted. The convulsions caused a huge landslide which in turn formed a dam which created the lake. It is a good size at nearly 150 acres (60 hectares), but at only 15 metres (less than ten fathoms) at its deepest point it is more of a giant puddle than a lake.

When we arrive, the main attraction to a group of elderly English tourists is not the lake, but an obviously brand new automatic public toilet which has been erected on the shore.

The shiny cubicle has a door as flush and tightly fitting as the entry to an air-lock on a space ship, and a panel beside it is covered with buttons and lights and dials. Being a French installation, there is no information in any language with regard to which button does what.

As the boldest of the men in the party tentatively prods at the buttons in random order, a man in official overalls approaches with a determined step. A general sigh of relief goes up and some of the ladies begin to uncross their legs. Obviously, relief is at hand.

As we watch expectantly, he marches to the back of the cubicle and disappears. We wait for a long moment, but when nothing whirrs or flashes or makes any other Dr Who-type noises I walk round to investigate. The man has been doing what all French men like to do in public, and has reached the shaking stage. He then nods affably at me as he zips up and strides back towards his van.

I ask him if he knows how to operate the machine, but he gives the universal Gallic shrug and says we will have to go to the town hall. I ask if that is where the instructions are kept, and he says no, but there is a toilet there they might let the ladies use.

La Bourboule

If there is a place where old hotels go to die, La Bourboule must be strongly in the running. Going by the average age of the residents, not a few people must also choose to end their days here.

Once upon a time, La Bourboule was a very swish place, but times and tastes change. The population of the town has halved since 1930, which gives an indication of when things began to go downhill. Or rather, not downhill.

Nowadays and in an apparent effort to re-invent itself for modern tastes, it bills itself as a ski resort. This is a bit of a liberty as there are no ski-slopes at La Bourboule. There is, though, a *telecabine* (cable car) which goes up to the Plateau de Charlannes 1300 feet above the town. A half mile to the west, a small dam across the Dordogne has created a picturesque lake. All in all, this is a pleasant part of the river's progress westward.

There is not a jogger in sight when we bowl into town, but a few elderly people are taking a promenade, or at least putting one foot in front of the other. Earlier, I noticed a prominent notice by the town boundary sign which read STATION OXYGENE. If it marks a supply site, this probably gives a further clue about the age and condition of many of the residents.

We roll along the main street and it soon becomes clear that the town is almost a stereotype. It is obviously a place of faded splendour where wealthy French and English people of a certain age would come to take the air and the waters, eat very well and have a punt at the Casino. The anglicised names of many of the former hotels lining the main street are still vaguely visible on the upper storeys, and Grands and Supremes abound. Eerily, most of the soaring frontages house shops, cafes and bars at street level, but have been abandoned to time and nature from the first floor up. It is disconcerting to see a smart *boulangerie* at eye level, and above it a gaunt, peeling frontage with empty eye-sockets instead of windows. It makes the names in faded lettering a poignant reminder of the good old days. It is also a reminder of how all things die, and how great empires, dynasties and even the grandest of hotels come to the end of their days.

*

There is something decidedly English about the park at la Bourboule. It is all very neat and symmetrical, with exceptionally well-tended lawns. There are winding paths, a boating lake and even a miniature train which leads to the *telecabine* station. The *parc Fenêtre* also boasts a vegetable garden, and it is growing the first runner beans I have seen in France. Being in a posh health spa, the rods up which the tendrils crawl are of ornately-fashioned silver metal rather than common bamboo.

We walk through the gardens to the cable car station and - much to my wife's relief - find that it is out of action. A very nice man in overalls takes the trouble to climb down from the top of the gondola and apologise for our wasted journey; he even offers us a free ride if we return when the season begins.

After meeting the affable man we encounter a very rude woman. The difference and perhaps the reason for her hostility is that she works in the tourist office.

The *bureau de tourisme* is housed in the town hall. The gingerbread and gilt building is almost as grandly over-the-top as the casino and spa baths, but there is

certainly no welcome mat at the entrance. As we enter, the immaculately coiffed and made-up but severe looking young woman looks up from her computer, scowls, then returns to her work. Frozen out, we look through the hundreds of brochures and pamphlets but can find none in English.

Eventually I stand at the desk and clear my throat with increasing volume until the young woman looks up. Having established that she cannot or will not speak my language, I say we cannot find any brochures in English. Her lip curls and she says that they are in French as we are in France. I accept this as a reasonable point, but mention that several million foreigners who cannot speak the language of God do visit her country every year. In fact, I say, I have heard that La Bourboule has long been known as the English Town.

The woman's eyes flash, then she gives a silky smile, parts her blood-red lips and says with deep satisfaction, 'Pas encore, monsieur, pas encore...'

*

I think it worth mentioning at this point that it is still not unusual to find a French tourist office where the only language spoken is French. This is not so much because of xenophobia but just because that's how it's always been. It is a tradition many French tourist and holiday venues like to maintain.

Although France is the most visited country on earth, all tourist notices and information and services seemed aimed very primarily at the natives. This is because ninety percent of French people holiday at home. It is also because the French know just what a beautiful and attractive country they have, and believe we should all be grateful for being allowed to visit and spend lots of money there.

Things are changing and my initial observations and conclusions were made a generation ago, but I still reckon the interview for the manager of the tourist office at La Bourboule went something like this:

Interviewer: 'I see you have all the qualifications and certification, so now for a couple of questions to test your aptitude and potential suitability.'

Interviewee: 'Of course.'

Interviewer: 'Very good. Do you like meeting people, especially foreigners?'

Interviewee: 'No and no, and especially foreigners.'

Interviewer: 'Good, good. And can you speak any foreign languages?'

Interviewee (*hesitantly as if admitting to a guilty secret*): 'German, Dutch and Spanish fluently, and a little Japanese.'

Interviewer (*sadly*): 'Ah. I see. And what about English?'

Interviewee (*even more guiltily*): 'Yes.'

Interviewer (*hopefully*): 'But could you pretend to speak nothing but French when on desk duty and be really rude to any foreigners, especially the English?'

Interviewee (*brightening up*): 'Of course. It is in my nature.'

Interviewer (*happily*): 'Wonderful. The job is yours.'

By accompanying the Dordogne on its endless journey we have travelled not only through France, but also history. It has been a memorable and deeply rewarding trip, and a privilege to spend some time with one of the great rivers of Europe.

Recommended Reading

Constant and very welcome companions on our journey were three wayfarers who followed the course of the Dordogne more than a hundred years apart.

Three Rivers of France by Freda White (Faber and Faber) was first published in 1952, and covers the Lot and Tarn as well as the Dordogne. It has become a travel classic and as one critic said, wears its learning lightly.

Michael Brown published *Down the Dordogne* (Sinclair Stevenson) in 1991 after walking the four hundred miles from the river's source to Bordeaux. He writes in an amiable, non-fussy way and the book is packed with information about the history of the towns and villages occupying the banks of the Dordogne.

At the end of the 19th century Edward Harrison Barker went on the road to explore what was then known as Guyenne. He writes beautifully of the people and places encountered along the Dordogne as he effortlessly connects the distant past and present. We found his easy style, subtle humour and candid observations an absolute delight. The two books of his we took along the journey were *Two Summers in Guyenne (A chronicle of the Wayside and Waterside)* and *Wanderings by Southern Waters, Eastern Aquitaine*. Harrison is one of those rarest of travel writers - like Eric Newby - who actually make you feel you are at their side.

Finally, what we found particularly rewarding by reading these books was how much and yet how little the people and places along this great river have changed.

Other useful sources of written information were Val Gascoyne's *Dordogne/Lot (Lifeline)* Jan Dodd's *Rough Guide to The Dordogne & the Lot*, and the *Michelin Dordogne Berry Limousin* guide. A good wheeze we employ when venturing into unknown territory is to throw ourselves on the mercy of the people living there. Useful websites with forums on which to ask for help include AngloINFO's Dordogne franchise (www.dordogne.angloinfo.com). Very helpful and detailed information about this part of France can be had from www.frenchentree.com French Entree also offers some interesting regional recipes, particularly those from Amanda Lawrence. Amanda lives and works in the Quercy, surrounded by the vineyards of Cahors, and can be found on www.frenchvie.com

Some Fascinating Facts about the Author

Books written about France: 11

Magazine and newspaper articles about France: 827

Words written about France: 2,348, 659 (approx)

Distance travelled in France: 678,962 miles (approx)

Regions visited: 22

Departments visited: 100

Fines for traffic/other offences: 9

Times eaten out in France: 2,456 (approx)

Bottles of wine drunk: 5,987 (very approx)

Times intoxicated by and in France: Innumerable

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