

THE PRITCHETTS ON TOUR



CHRONICLES OF SALLY AND TONY PRITCHETT'S
ADVENTURE TO UK, FRANCE, SPAIN, PORTUGAL, SCOTLAND

NEWSLETTERS
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Finally Retired

Retired at last! Following farewell drinks with friends, family and staff (no tears) on Friday 20th July, we finally closed the door (without us having to lock-up) and headed home, redundant. I must say we were touched by the number of friends who turned up to wish us well. We were delighted that five of our grandkids shared the occasion with us. It also served as an opportunity to welcome the new owners and introduce them to local business people. Our best wishes go to new leaders of Nerang Real Estate, Andrew and Kirsty Parkes. We wish them all the success and pleasure that we have enjoyed over the fifteen year term of our custody of the business. We had a great team and we hope they will flourish under their new leaders.

Today, we are in Mooloolaba. We have just had lunch with Murray & Lorraine Patchett who have been staying in our unit for the past week, prior to them leaving for Newcastle and then home to Wellington. Murray and Tony sat next to one another right through high school and he was Best Man at our wedding forty four years ago. We've only seen each other once since then, although we have exchanged letters and Christmas cards every year. It was great to catch up. Sadly, Murray nowadays is wheelchair bound due to MS but remains as positive and full of humour as ever.

We plan to stay here for a couple of weeks and expect to catch up with more friends during that time before returning home to pack and prepare for our departure for Europe on 25th August — we have a one night stopover in Japan and dinner with Kazumi, then on to London for five days before heading into France. Destination in France is still unknown — it will depend on our shopping list of prospective barges for sale. We reckon it could take several weeks and possibly criss-crossing France more than once before we decide.

We've seen several barges we really like and even made offers on two that my cousin, Paul Pritchett a boat builder from NZ inspected on our behalf while he and Pat were on holiday in France recently. However, on both occasions we missed out because the sellers accepted other offers, yet neither is unconditional so there is still a possibility that one or both may come back to us with an agreement to sell. Fingers crossed, as it would be wonderful to finalise the purchase before we leave and have a barge ready for us to move aboard as soon as we arrive.

Once we're underway we'll post regular updates on our website to keep anyone and everyone informed as to where we are, where we intend to go next, what we've been doing etc. So, start planning a visit! I promise you will find a week cruising a canal in the beautiful French countryside one of the most relaxing and enjoyable spells in your life. You will be expected to hop on a bike occasionally to fetch a loaf of bread, some cheese, or a bottle of wine from a nearby village, of course.

The Journey Begins

We left Gold Coast on a wet miserable morning wearing three layers of clothes. We arrived in Tokyo to 30+ degrees. Kazumi arrived at our hotel soon after we did and took us out for a delicious meal of sushi and then moved to another restaurant to ply us with Japanese noodles – which we were far too full to eat, though they were tasty.

The flight next day to London was comfortable to say the least, the seats were so spacious and the food and service was superb. However, a twelve hour flight is still

twelve hours of monotonous hell no matter what class you're in. Landed in London at 2:30 in the afternoon (four hours after we left Japan in clock time) where it was sunny and very warm. So as soon as we got to our room and were able to divest our (excessive) luggage, took to the streets and strolled over Waterloo Bridge and round the Embankment and back to a pub for a couple of well-earned pints.

Monday was a Bank Holiday. They're a sleepy lot, the Brits. We were up early and the morning being fine and clear, we set out for walk along the Embankment to encounter little traffic and very few people. Nothing seemed to be ready to open before 10 am. Without intending to we found ourselves at the end of a small queue waiting for the ticket booth to open its doors for the London Eye. Within ten minutes we were in one of the first capsules doing the round. Everything everyone says about the Eye is true. It's a must. The views are superb. Could look down on the river with all its activity, a birds eye view of Buckingham Palace and one could see as far as the Wembley Stadium.

Every trip to London warrants a cruise down the Thames to Greenwich and a stroll through the pretty village and the sprawling park, up the hill to the Royal Observatory. We enjoyed the young Australian's commentary on the way down as he pointed out the pub where Great Expectations was written, where convicts were dispatched to Australia and the scene where they shot the motor boat chase in James Bond "The World is Not Enough." Our last visit must have been before Dava Dobel's fascinating book Longitude was published for we had somehow hurried through the rooms containing Harrison's clocks without appreciating their significance. Not this time. We paused for an hour or more admiring the incredible craftsmanship that developed such historic timepieces – and ticked another goal fulfilled.

As noon approached we stood near the meridian line and waited for the time ball to drop, as it has done for hundreds of years. I was impressed to discover that in resetting my watch in the plane to London time, it was accurate to within five seconds.

By mid-afternoon the crowds had built enormously. There were, reportedly, 310 people on the boat back to Charing Cross yet the company is in the hands of receivers and due to shut down with all staff (only two per boat) sacked as of 3 September. At £9 return and boats every 40 minutes it doesn't make sense – go figure. I can't believe a cruise on the Thames is going to become a thing of the past.

An obligatory trip to the theatre rounded out a perfect day. We saw Les Misérables – a first for us. I cannot explain why we missed all the previous opportunities to see it. Needless to say the West End production was magnificent if not the most uplifting way to end the day.



We walked home through the crowds. The hotel is in a great spot - walking distance to so many places. One block to the Embankment, 2mins Covent Gardens and a quick walk to Leicester Square.

No trip to London would be complete without shopping. Walk... walk... eventually sore feet demanded a new pair of runners, after that it was see London from top deck of a big red bus, caught in a traffic jam for over an hour but passed lots of famous landmarks. A visit to the British Museum to admire the Elgin Marbles was memorable. Too vast to be able to inspect more but just to be inside the place was awesome.

It's difficult choosing the right clothes to wear. Mostly it has been very mild but then the sun comes out and you find you're wearing too much. Locals say we have been here for their entire summer – four days!

London's double-decker buses are one of the easiest ways to get around — not as quick as the Underground maybe, but the views and experience of being part of all the live activity cannot be bettered.

The changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace is always a drawcard for huge crowds but the ceremony never disappoints. Neither does a visit to Harrods, especially the food hall.

Another opportunity to buy tickets to the theatre presented itself when our bus stopped right outside the box office on opening time. *Billy Elliot* would have to be one of the best shows we've ever seen. True to the movie, but more emotionally charged. The young performers especially were enthralling. We're beginning to like this retirement thing...

En France

Week 2 – Aug 31st to Sept 8th (*Sally*)

What a full-on week it's been. Don't expect a newsletter every week. Once we have settled into a more sedate lifestyle newsletters will be less frequent.

We left London on Friday the day of the memorial service for Princess Di. I went for a last walk and once I was in Trafalgar Square thought I'd get a photo of Admiralty Arch from the other side. Well, it was a different world, the traffic had all been stopped for security



reasons even though it was still hours before the service and the whole Mall was deserted except for the occasional pedestrian. What an opportunity. I walked the whole Mall, up the middle, to Buckingham Palace, photographed the three van loads of police, the security on top of the Palace and the myriads of TV vans parked in St James Park. Saw squirrels galore — one even ran up on the fence to beg from me, swans and other waterfowl, all in the heart of London. A lovely way to finish our stay in such a great city.

We then took a taxi to Waterloo Station to board the Eurostar to Paris. Such an effortless way to travel. I had a glass of champagne before we even left the suburbs and our dinner as we enjoyed the scenery of Kent. We were in our hotel in the Latin Quarter within 3 hours, time to settle in and catch the Métro to Opéra to meet Delphine and Francois for dinner. She is still the same delightful character she was when she was with us all in Australia in 1994, and on our canal boats, and Francois is a really nice bloke.

Tony decided that Saturday we were off to Dijon to look at our first boat. He was determined not to miss out again so our first day in Paris was not in Paris but on another TGV train to Dijon. We both were concerned that we may not find *Sable* as she was travelling on the canal towards a little town called Suerre, but we took a taxi and as we crossed the bridge into Suerre, *Sable* was sailing under it. Two hours later after an extensive tour of the boat the deal was struck. I think *Sable* was ours from first sight, there isn't anything about it we would change at this stage... except the linen. The owners have a DOG... Lily is the joy of their lives and lives in their bed. Lily is also a b... great Doberman. I didn't dare look at Tony's face as we watched this dog burrowing not onto but into the bed until only her backside was showing. I am shopping in Lyon for new sheets etc. All the photos are on the website so I won't go on. Sunday we made up for not sightseeing the day before. I had gone for a walk in the morning and discovered how close we were to all the sights plus not one but two markets in our street. Came back to the hotel drooling over the fruit, vegetables and cheeses. Can't wait to have my own kitchen again. Which by the way is a great kitchen, gas stove top, fan forced oven, plenty of bench space and a good fridge and freezer. But I did say I wouldn't go on.

Sunday we walked up past the Pantheon and over to St Sulpice of *Da Vinci Code* fame. I hope they are charging an entrance fee as they are totally redoing one of the towers and it looks very expensive. From there we carried on to Montparnasse as Tony wanted to find an Orange shop for his phone and laptop. From there we walked to Hotel Invalides where we

went in to view Napoleon's tomb and a display of his regalia. And then on to the Eiffel Tower. We had been saying that the crowds were thin wherever we had been and now we saw why, they were all at the Tower. Crowds and crowds but we decided to join them and got right to the top for fantastic views in all directions. Saw barges moored neared the base and that is one place that we definitely want to go to. Just to sit there with a glass of wine and watch the lights on the tower at night would be very special. From there it was home after a very long but satisfying day.

Tuesday, Tony went off to buy his phone card and I explored the Marais area, walked and walked the streets of this old Jewish Quarter, not at all touristy so more interesting and shops that are more for the Parisians. Funky fashions the teenagers would love, a chocolate shop with the window full of wine bottles, all chocolate, and a tea shop that sells 400 varieties of tea. We then met up at the base of Sacré Coeur at the café that featured in the film Amélie and after lunch meandered slowly up the hill to the top. Glad we lunched at the bottom, the top is a cacophony of overpriced restaurants and artists all plying their wares. We didn't linger there but moved on and paused for the views and obligatory photos before heading home.

Tuesday we headed out to La Défense which is the huge arch one can see from the Arc de Triomphe. We were going there to meet Delphine as she wanted to help Tony sort out his internet connection. And what a surprise it was. Huge commercial area, very modern buildings and open spaces with views back down to the Arc. And great shopping centre. Tony and D were over two hours at Orange and I still think it is not working. I spent the two hours strolling the centre. Just as well I'm not shopping, as the selection was fantastic.

Finally got away from there and back on to the Métro to Gare de Lyon to pick up a car and negotiate the roads to our hotel and then out of Paris which was safely achieved [enough said].

We stayed at Troyes, a delightful old town full of half-timbered houses and the most magnificent old churches. The town speciality is sausages, knitting mills and, from the parcels two young girls had in the foyer, factory shops. Wednesday, we drove to Auxerre which we visited ten years ago and then retraced our steps down the Yonne to Autun, staying at Saulieu and visiting Vézelay with his historic pilgrims' Cathedral. It is an important meeting point for pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela. It looked to us like a long, long way to Spain.

We planned on Thursday to drive to Roanne and set up a base until we heard from the Laines on *Sable* to say they were at Paray le Monial and we could catch up with them earlier than Saturday. Well, I don't think they thought we would be there within twenty minutes but we were and spent two nights aboard learning the ropes. We have left them now so they can pack in peace and we take possession next week we hope. Can't Wait.

We had to return our hire car to Lyon, so on Saturday we arrived in Lyon, in gorgeous weather, in time to watch the Wallabies trounce Japan in the World Cup. Pity we didn't take PD's offer of a couple of tickets to the match. We're pleased we didn't spend 295Euros each for tickets to a game that was rather unexciting. Not Lyon though, it's a wonderful city and in WC fever, very exciting!

Sable Casts Off

Week 3 – Sept 8th to Sept 15th (*Tony*)

Lyon has to be one of the loveliest cities we've ever visited. Generally speaking we don't enjoy cities, preferring the serenity of the countryside and small towns and villages. But Lyon really appealed. Geographically, it is set at the confluence of two rivers — the mighty Rhone, flushing cobalt glacial melt from high in the Alps and the sombre Saone, olive green and lethargic converging from the northwest. The old picturesque city,



dating back to Roman times, nestles in the hillside on the right bank of the Saone. The throbbing hub lies in the narrow strip between the two rivers whilst the new flourishing commercial heart spreads west across the Rhone valley. Anyone who knows me, knows I detest shopping. Lyon almost converted me. The shops, especially mens and womens fashions, including shoes, bags and accessories are so beautifully presented and reasonably priced we wished we'd left our laden, overweight baggage at home and replaced our entire wardrobe in Lyon.

We enjoyed dining out in what is reputedly the gastronomic capital of France. One meal was particularly memorable. Not only the food was delicious — our waitress was young and gorgeous and extremely professional. Her only blemish occurred as she cleared our table, knocking over my wine glass and spilling red wine over my trousers. She was mortified. I calmly tipped the carafe of water over my pants to prevent the stain spreading while the French lady at the next table exhorted the waitress to, "Take his trousers off!" To which Sally replied, "The last person who did that had to marry him." We all ended up having a great conversation and lots of fun before we teetered off to our hotel, me looking as if I'd peed my pants.

We loved Lyon so much we extended our stay an extra day, then caught the train to Roanne. Sable is moored in the boat harbour there, along with twenty or so other boats. It is a delightful town and the people in the port are so friendly and helpful. Bob and Bea were stranded there for seventy-one days prior to our departure from Aus after the canal wall breached, requiring major repair works. We plan to return Sable here for the winter. It's a great location, right at the end of the canal system yet handy to everywhere — Spain, Switzerland, South of France, when we get our car late November.

Today, Saturday, Bob and Bea are leaving for Paris then on to home in Florida with their big Doberman, Lily. Everyone knows what I think of dogs, but I have to say Lily is one of the best trained and best behaved dogs I have encountered. So far I've admitted to a change of heart over three aversions... am I going through a transition here? Every boat owner we've met here has been cruising the waterways of France for six years or more. Perhaps our plans to spend fifteen months here is going to require revision...

Sable is absolutely exactly what we dreamed of. Bob is an ex 747 captain and has documented and systemised everything, so as long as I don't forget the pre-float check list before we head off all should be fine. *Sable's* spacious, comfortable and well fitted out. However, we did get

on the scooters this afternoon and zipped over to the other side of town to buy new pillows, under-blanket etc. The rest of the afternoon was spent vacuuming dog hair from every possible surface, crevice and covering we could think of. Tomorrow we intend to head out into the waterways of France to begin our adventure. And the only thing missing is you.

We're Afloat

Week 4 – Sept 15th to Sept 22nd (Tony)

It's hard to believe we have been a week in our barge, cruising. And every day, the weather has been absolutely glorious. We slipped out of Roanne sharp on 9 o'clock Saturday. New friends came down to see us through the first lock, after that we were on our own. From Roanne to Digoin the canal is fairly ordinary, by comparison with others, and as we will repeat the run up and down this section a few times we put in



a couple of longish days in order to allow us more time to slow down and enjoy the countryside further on. This is Charolais country, gentle rolling hills and lots of trees, and green, green fields.

Roanne is at the very end of the major canal system in France. To go further south, it is necessary to enter the Saône and then the Rhone Rivers to the Camargue, then one can easily move via canal again into the Canal de Midi, which effectively links the Mediterranean to the Atlantic (at Bordeaux). We're not bold enough yet to take on the Rhone — it's a very big river but it is not beyond our boat's capabilities, just ours for the moment.

Digoin is a junction point. The canal north goes up to meet the Saône at Chalon sur Saône which is another major junction for several canals, to Burgundy, Champagne, and the river itself. We have opted to head west along the Canal Lateral à la Loire to Décize then up the Canal du Nivernais. We did a section of about half this canal in 1996 with the Stentons, Overells and Woodhouses. We will reminisce those happy times as we pass through.

So, we are heading for a little town called Vermenton, about 158km up the Canal du Nivernais from Digoin where the British proprietor of a hire-boat company based there is going to put us through the necessary training and evaluation procedure for us to obtain our ICC (International Certificate of Competency), in other words boat licence. You are supposed to have it, although everyone says it is only required for insurance, and Bob said he was only asked twice in ten years (both times in Paris) to show any papers at all. However, we'll feel ever so much more comfortable having done the course. I'm sure by the time we get to Vermenton we'll be quite confident. We've done bloody well thus far, negotiating dozens of locks and narrow bridges with only a couple of very minor "touches". And Sally has got the hang of the ropes, pretty well to perfection. A 47 tonne ship, 20m long, in locks that are barely a metre wider than the barge is heavy work. And there's more than 100 locks to go!

As soon as we have achieved our competency qualifications, we will continue on to Auxerre, the home of Chardonnay (they call it Chablis) where we expect Sally's sister Myra will join us, having just completed a mammoth trip through China, Mongolia, Bhutan, the silk road, Pakistan and various other ...stans that I can't spell let alone identify on the globe. She'll be ready for some restful cruising I'm sure.

After that, we hope to join back up with the Loire near Fontainebleau and return down the Canal Briare back to Décize and so on back to Roanne before the canal locks are closed for winter on 1st November.

Sally has enjoyed getting back into the kitchen and cooking up delicious meals. It is pleasing to be no longer spending hundreds of euros a day on hotels and meals. In fact the last three days we have spent a mere handful of coins buying essentials — croissants, cheese, paté etc. I'll overlook the cost of topping the tanks with 600 litres of diesel, that's an occasional occupational necessity! Actually, *Sable* is very economical to run. And everywhere there is water and electricity, sometimes free, but usually no more than 8€ a night.

Baye to Clamency

Week 5 – Sept 22nd to Sept 30th (*Sally*)

Autumn is coming slowly to France, the canals are all lined with trees and daily we see the fall of walnuts, chestnuts and acorns. The Virginia Creeper blazes brilliant red on walls and buildings, the blackberries and rose hips are thick in the hedgerows and huge orange pumpkins are in all the shore-side gardens. The trees are still a palette of green, only the beginning of yellow and brown showing, but a cluster of leaves falling and the stacks of firewood at every door to warn us of colder times to come.



We are enjoying this wonderful Indian summer, it is 7:30pm and so light outside, almost tempting us for a walk, but we might have done enough of that today and a glass of red and dinner sounds a better alternative.

The climb to the summit at Baye was an interesting experience. One can say every day is an experience. We left Chatillon en Bazois and at our first lock we both commented that the lock was very high, almost overflowing. Well in hindsight it seems quite obvious that if the water is high then the gap between water and bridge is less. Oh dear, we could see it coming but no way could we stop, even though going very slow, so we watched in horror as our mast went BOP (Bob said he had intended to shorten it anyway) then feared for our wheel house... phew, a scrape and that was all. A stunned silence as we surveyed the damage, when we got to the next lock, consternation on the faces of the *éclusiers* who by now realised someone had stuffed-up big time, leaving a lock valve open all night. The lock keepers have a fairly responsible job of keeping all things equal, and obviously in letting one stage of the canal overflow it meant the next stage was too low. We quickly learned some new French words, "Il n'est pas l'eau suffiance." Discussions, inspections, quick trips to the next lock, everything but apologies and we stayed put for two hours while the canal refilled and we were able to proceed. Tony productively employed the time trimming 180mm from the shattered mast base. Eventually we got to Baye, the summit of the waterways system where there are two huge ponds built to feed the canals. What a magic spot, you literally felt that you were on top of the world.

We continued the next day with the descent to the Yonne valley. Three tunnels then a staircase of sixteen locks in a space of 3,200m. Not helped by having to share the lock with five Belgium boys out for a good time. They had stocked the boat with the beer, but were light on food.... We entered the first lock at 10am, they entered their first beer at 9am. And so we proceeded down the locks. For some unexplained reason these locks are only 30m long and Sable at 19.88 and their boat at 10m made for "Close Encounters". However we made it and when they elected to stop we decided to carry on to the next stop at Chitry le Mines where we all boarded our first hire barge eleven years ago. Well, it was a long day, twenty-eight locks in all and when we arrived at Chitry there was Ted Johnston, from Nerang... but even better there was his sister in law, who now runs a café, and she whipped up Steak and Frites in ten minutes flat. Heaven on a stick...

Since then it has been a trip down memory lane, and as we expected not a lot has changed. Still the same beautiful countryside. Little villages, farmhouses, tranquil and peaceful scenes. I stand at the front of Sable at least once a day and say, "How beautiful is this?"

Friday, we arrived at Clamecy, an old town with the medieval centre still preserved, steep, narrow winding streets, overhanging half-timbered houses and a cave where we managed to stock up our wines. We had already decided to have a rest day there but that was extended to two days as the overnight rain raised the river and officials closed the canal to all traffic. We used the time to do some exploring of the countryside on our motorbikes and some cleaning and maintenance. Saturday and Sunday were as perfect, weatherwise, as could be possible. We were enjoying a leisurely lunch out on the foredeck but then hurriedly prepared for departure as soon as it appeared the canal was going to be re-opened in the afternoon and soon found our way down the river, well on the way towards Vermenton by nightfall.

Clamecy to Sens

Week 6 – October 1st to 7th (*Tony*)

If our departure from Clamecy was rather hurried it was only because we needed to get at least half a day's cruising downstream if we were going to make Vermenton in time for Tuesday's training course and test for our ICC. We reached Chatel Censoir well before nightfall and managed a climb up to the ancient church and to wander through the village. The next day was relatively easy, passing through several exceptionally pretty locks, one in particular had barely changed since 1996 and although no longer the *éclusier*, I'm sure only the same lady could be responsible for maintaining the old drays full of beautiful begonias.



Vermenton has a large basin full of boats, most belonging to the hire company that operates out of there but there were also many privately owned barges already moored up for the winter. Our trainer, the harbourmaster, was a nice English bloke now married to a French lady. He guided us through the course, brushed up our rope-work and after lunch took us out on *Sable* to undertake some manoeuvres, but dispensed with lock work considering the fact that we had just managed more than a hundred! On completion of the written exam we were adjudged competent to be in charge of our ship and awarded our certificates. The evening was sublime, so again we fired up the gas barbecue and dined on deck. Five minutes after we had packed everything away, right on dark it started to rain. It poured all night but the next day dawned fine and clear and as soon as the fog lifted we were on our way.

Auxerre brought back many fond memories — the narrow winding streets, especially the pedestrian arcades full of enticing shops and throngs of young students from the university. Three stunning cathedrals highlight the panorama from the river as one enters the city and they remain floodlit at night to provide a scenic vista that would be hard to better anywhere. Myra, Sally's sister from Christchurch, arrived on the train at the end of an extensive tour of Central Asia, relieved to be back in civilisation. She is enjoying the calming lifestyle of barging, and better food.

Next morning we cast off and casually eased downstream, now in the River Yonne flowing at about 6 kph. By mid-afternoon we reached the start of the Canal de Bourgogne and entered one massive 5.5 m lock to moor for the night in the boat harbour at Laroche-Migennes, a busy, modern town at the hub of a major railway axis. Trains of every kind roared along the tracks across the waterway from our mooring all night. Saturday morning we returned back through the lock to resume our journey down the Yonne, to Joigny, another picturesque town dominated by several churches and famous for its steep narrow streets with centuries old half-timbered houses. We arrived in time for the girls to get to the big weekly market where they bought more food and provisions than we're likely to eat in a month. But everything is so fresh and delicious it is impossible to resist. The weather was so hot and the sky so cloudless, we erected the sun-shade over the deck to enjoy an al-fresco lunch, moored to the

side of the main street in the centre of town. After lunch we crossed the road to a pub where we were given the best seats in the bar in front of a giant TV screen to watch the rugby. We left, depressed, sulking back to Sable where the cooks turned on a repast of mussels in white wine sauce followed by fresh, really fresh, raspberries and strawberries lashed with fresh cream. Now dark, it was time to pack away the awning and gluttons that we are, ventured into another pub (we couldn't face going back to the same one) to watch more rugby. Thank God, we left at half-time convinced the All-Blacks had the measure of the French. An hour later, in our beds, the jubilant singing, whistling and drumming of departing patrons awakened us to the reality. We slipped out of town the following morning under a blanket of fog, as early as was deemed prudent ...

So here we are, Sunday evening, after another day of sunshine and clear blue sky, in Sens a beautiful city steeped in ancient history. It was one of the first centres of Gaul and apparently Thomas a'Becket lost his shoes or underwear here (history is not my thing...).

Sens to Briare

Week 7 – October 8th to 15th (*Sally*)

Well what a week of contrasts. From the beautiful old cathedral cities of Auxerre, Joigny and Sens we travelled further down the Yonne where we found ourselves sharing the river with large sand barges. We are used to being one of the larger boats of the live-aboards and suddenly we were like a toy boat compared to these. In most cases they are a double so you have a fully laden 30m barge being pushed by another of the same size. But one beauty on the Seine was six barges, two wide and three deep all being propelled by another from behind. The mind boggles at trying to manoeuvre that one.



The scenery was still superb, tree lined river with more autumn colours and more bird life but nowhere to stop until we reached the confluence of the Seine and Yonne for the night before we tackled the Seine. Fortunately just a short reach before we turned upstream into the Loing and started our journey home. Only one lock on the Seine, but as we were approaching it we glanced behind and bearing down on us at about twice our speed was a fully laden double sand barge. Sable took very quick evasive action. Once past and safely in the lock we realised there was room for us too so we followed in behind.

St Mammes at the mouth of La Loing is an interesting port, lined with barges in all stages of repair (or disrepair). Some are obviously doomed for scrap, many operating as commercial barges but a great many have been converted to living homes. Can't see them moving far as they are huge and cumbersome but certainly plenty of living space.

Our journey up the Loing was meeting a mix of barges and hotel barges. These are commercial vessels converted into luxurious hotel accommodation for four to six couples but they take up as much room and are as unmanoeuvrable as the sand ones so it has been pleasant to continue to the quieter reaches where we are almost the only boat on the waterway. At every port we come to it is obvious that folks are battening down for winter and as a result it is more difficult to find moorings.

Montargis was a wonderful stop, the canal goes through the centre of the old town and several little canals run through the streets. Our guide book called it the Venice of France, but then admitted that was probably an exaggeration. Old cobbled streets and a huge collection of restaurants. We chose one, only to find it and nineteen others had combined for GASTRONOMIE dans le Montargois. One was meant to enjoy five courses for a set-price 44€. We managed two and rolled home leaving a room full of French folk all still going. Wonderful food and things you wouldn't even attempt at home.

Myra has taken to riding the tow paths, so we set her off the next morning and met her for lunch at the next town. Market day, so in spite of having just shopped we had to do the market. Impossible to resist the fresh veg, cheese etc. Myra found a store selling rabbit, so it was rabbit in red wine for dinner. Yum...

Finally reached the top of the Loing at Rogny-Les Sept Ecluses. The seven locks from the 16 hundreds are preserved as a monument. Fascinating to think that was built all those years ago. Da Vinci is even credited with having something to do with the invention of the lock gates. We had trouble finding a mooring so the lock keeper let us into the first pound and we moored under the old staircase of locks. A little like being able to sleep in the Museum.

From Rogny to Briare is a beautiful quiet world, our sort of travelling. You are surrounded by water with all the ponds that have been dug to feed the canals, avenues of gold trees as autumn finally shows her colours, glimpses of chateaux here and there and hardly a soul in sight. Magic...

Our destination was Briare, where the canal crosses the Loire. Surely one of the highlights of the whole canal system. We walked the aqueduct, cycled it, and finally took Sable across. It is incredibly beautiful as well as an amazing piece of engineering. 600m long, 5.5 wide and 2.2 deep with footpaths on both sides and columns designed by Eiffel at either end.

Before we left Briare we decided to take a day of relaxation (as if every day isn't) and caught a taxi to La Bussière, a tiny village with a chateau we thought was worth a visit. When we got there the whole village was caught up in a country fête, so we watched the pit-sawing of timber, a blacksmith at work, apple pressing, bread baking in an old army oven, and most disgustingly the filling of yards of liver sausage with a funnel and buckets of chopped liver. There were two streets full of stalls plus people in national costume playing strange instruments and crowds and crowds of people still arriving at four o'clock in the afternoon. Perhaps they were seeking solace for having lost the rugby the night before.

Briare to Décize

Week 8 — October 15th to 22nd (Tony)

If we had previously thought the Canal du Nivernais was beautiful, it was only because we had never seen the Canal Lateral à la Loire which is wider, deeper and even more picturesque especially now as the trees are slowly mellowing into those gorgeous autumnal tones of gold and yellow and occasionally brilliant red. It also has long, meandering stretches of 10km or more between locks.



We left Briare on a picture perfect day and after exploring Chatillon sur Loire which appeared to have some of the oldest houses we have ever seen, we continued to Belleville a relatively new town developed to house the workers at the nearby nuclear power plant whose gigantic cooling towers imposed their presence on the landscape for miles around. But it was a pleasant overnight stopping place with excellent facilities, including free electricity which was so fresh we barely needed to plug-in.

The next day was another cloudless sunny day. We cannot believe how fortunate we have been, weather-wise. By 3pm we had reached a spot close to Sancerre, famous for its wine, an old fortified town atop a high hill overlooking the Loire Valley. Back in the 1500's the town-folk had mainly converted to Protestantism which didn't please the king. The town was besieged. The siege lasted for 222 days before the few citizens who hadn't starved to death surrendered, the town was sacked and the survivors fined an astronomical sum. Today, the town is a popular tourist attraction with lots of restaurants and caves au vins representing many of the 350 local vigneronns. It also provides some of the most sensational vistas over the landscape. I rode one of the motorbikes up there and had half-an-hour to admire the scenery and glimpse grape-pickers harvesting the last of the crop, whilst the girls pedalled their way up on bicycles. But then I had to carry the dozen wines purchased home in my backpack.

Wednesday was only the second day we have had rain, and the first we've had to put on wet-weather jackets. But the next day dawned fine and clear again as we approached the confluence of the Loire and another big river, the Allier. Here, a massive double lock lifts you up a total of 9.3m and then spills you into another canal-bridge almost as impressive as the one at Briare. These giant structures are a credit to the engineers who conceived them 150 years ago. A few kilometres further on we cruised up the embranchment to the boat harbour across the river from Nevers. The ancient cathedral dominates the skyline of this old, lovely city. Myra was supposed to leave us here to head back to Paris, then home. So we decided to take a day off and catch the train with her to Bourges. We rose early and got a taxi into town at 8am only to discover that the railway workers had extended their strike. We spent the morning wandering around Nevers, but despite the cloudless sky and bright sun the wind for the first time bore winter's chill. We succumbed to the comfort of Sable where we spent the afternoon reading. Myra departed the following morning, her plans to visit Tours in disarray

as the train services remained disrupted. Hopefully she has made it to the airport in time to catch her flight home. Surely it will not be crowded with despondent Kiwi rugby fans. Saturday evening we found we had the best TV reception we've ever had, probably because for once, the satellite dish wasn't peering into a copse of trees. So we nestled down on the couch and watched crap TV (viz. RWC final). Sunday morning, the grass outside was covered in frost.

We have now gone full circle around half Bourgogne and made it back to Décize, now just a few days away from Roanne.

For the statisticians and mathematically minded the following may be of interest:

- We have so far travelled more than 650km (116km to go)
- We have negotiated more than 230 locks (22 remain ahead)
- Sable consumes less than 4 litres diesel/engine hour (1eng hr = 1.6 hrs real time at 1400rpm)
- Sally and I have consumed more than 516 kg fine French food and wine (or so it seems) yet have lost 2kg and 3kg respectively.
- More than 100,000 leaves flutter daily from the trees onto Sable (fortunately most blow off).

Roanne

Week 9-10 — Oct 23rd to Nov 1st (*Sally*)

Did I say autumn was slow in coming to France? Winter is coming in at the gallop. Our first night after leaving Nevers we woke to a frost that had left a thin sheet of ice all over the boat AND made the ropes that I handle frozen stiff. An extra hour in port helped with some of the thaw and we made an early stop at Décize where we had turned into the Canal du Nivernais just over a month before. It is a pretty town mentioned by Julius Caesar so has an interesting history.



We cycled into and around the town, exploring the ramparts, cobbled streets and the various river banks. We didn't anchor in town as there was an enormous canoe/kayak festival on and we felt that chugging through the centre of that with our Australian flag flying would do little for inter-country relations.

From the next morning we were on our way over familiar ground retracing our steps from the first week. We felt a little like the last swallow to head south as there were almost no other boats on the canals but the scenery while not new was just as interesting and picturesque.

We bypassed the entrance to Roanne to spend a night at Digoin, an interesting town with a rich history as a river port on the Loire. In its heyday 700 barges a year would tie up to its quays either bringing spices, cloth and manufactured goods up from Nantes or taking coal, stone, tin and gravel downstream. The voyage downstream could be done in ten days, the return would take sometimes several months and would have been frightfully dangerous. All that was replaced by the Canal when it opened and now of course by road and rail. The Loire is the longest river in France, beginning in the mountains 300 km south of Roanne and flowing more than 1,000km to the Atlantic at St Nazaire. Our day in Digoin extended to two when we woke to a cold raw day that had us scurrying for an extra layer of clothes. We wandered down to the Office of Tourism and she suggested a nice walk around the parkland to view the varied trees and plant life. EXCUSE ME... We turned the other way and found a shop that sold fluffy slippers.

Two more days on the water cruising gently up the Canal de Roanne à Digoin, both feeling quite sad that our first cruising adventure was over and yet relieved that we were home in Port Roanne. Now moored to the quay we were overwhelmed by the welcome. We hadn't been here an hour before we were whisked off to happy hour at the local harbourside bar. About thirty boat people there and we are struggling to keep track of names, nationalities and boats. I have started a book to aid the memory and so far am onto our second page. Roanne is a very popular port for wintering and, like golf clubs years ago, has a waiting list of people trying to get in. We are here only because months ago Bob and Bea had begged our neighbours to allow them to raft-up to their barge. Christian and Charlotte are Swiss, about the same age as us I guess, and a lovely couple. Christian was formerly a Minister of Finance for Switzerland. They have elected to be harbour side, so we are moored to the quay and they are rafted-up outside Sable.

There will be up to 100 boats in port when the last few arrive: Americans, Brits, Dutch and a couple of Swiss, Kiwis and Australians. We are definitely the new chums as most of the people we meet have been on their boats for years, some are on their second or third boat and more than a few have no other home. The community has a lot of social functions, we played boules on the shore on Sunday afternoon, all went to a barbeque Tuesday; and Wednesday we attended French lessons in the Maison du Port. As well as that we have signed-up at a local gym to work off a few calories and intend to spend some time exploring the town and countryside before we head to Spain in about three weeks.

Thursday, November 1st is a public holiday. It is All Saints Day, a day for remembering departed relations and everywhere there are chrysanthemums for sale, enormous pots with perfect flowers in every colour imaginable bursting out of the doors of florists and in roadside stalls. One never gives chrysanthemums as a gift as they are the flower for the dead.

Switzerland

Week 12 — November 5th to 12th (*Tony*)

We've just spent the weekend in Switzerland. You've got to hand it to the Europeans, they have sorted out train travel. Just jump on a train and presto, a couple of hours later you are in another country. Swiss trains are like their clocks, precise and high quality. Perhaps the French could improve slightly, or maybe our lack of language skills got us on the wrong track. We caught a train that was supposedly going to Geneva and we were close enough to see the city in the distance



and its famous water jet in the lake but when it reversed back out of a station and then veered off in the direction of Mont Blanc we realised we were not longer destined for Geneva. Apparently the train split in two at one of the stops and we were in the wrong section! Anyway, we saw a lot of beautiful Swiss countryside before we got off at the second stop and caught another train back towards Geneva that terminated in an outer suburb. We were grateful for the help rendered by an exchange student from Brazil who was escorting her parents back to Geneva for their flight home, otherwise we would never have managed the two tram changes to get us back to where we were supposed to be in order to catch the train to Bern.

Two hours late, we arrived in Bern to find Sophie, gorgeous as ever, to meet us. She led us off on a brisk walk around this beautiful city, Switzerland's capital, with its world-heritage listed main street and renowned old astronomical clock that has all these gizmos that go off on the hour. The shops are mostly along overhanging arcades and we were amazed at the number of crowded coffee lounges and quality restaurants. After a warming drink it was onto another train for the short ride to Burgdorf where Sophie's mum had prepared a delicious four-course meal featuring rösti, which Sally and Sophie didn't quite master when they tried to make it a year ago.

Next morning Sophie's step-dad, Robert, fresh off the plane from an around the world business trip, took everyone for a drive around the district including a fascinating visit to the Emmantal cheese factory. Then, back to his fabulous home high on a hillside overlooking Burgdorf and picturesque farm country for an authentic Swiss fondue. After several times delaying our departure time for a later train, in each case preceded by another glass or two of wine, we staggered aboard a train bound back to Geneva, the doors closing on our arms before we had time to complete the hugs and kisses Sophie and her parents deserved. We will return. And hopefully, Sophie, Elisabeth and Robert will join us for a stint on the canals in France next summer.

There is no doubt about it, Switzerland has to be the most scenic country on earth. The autumn colours were gorgeous and we were surprised to find winter less advanced than in France where by now the trees are losing their leaves rapidly. Nevertheless we awoke in Geneva on Monday morning to a clear, fine day to find fresh snow on the mountains.

Life in Roanne is pleasant, improvements and maintenance tasks around Sable, visits to the gym and social engagements defray any possibility of boredom. We're looking forward to picking up our car in a couple of weeks and heading south to warmer climes; but most of all we can't wait for springtime, cranking up Sable and navigating the canals again.

Winter in Roanne

Week 14 — Nov 13th to 25th (Sally)

Well what an interesting social time we have had lately. As we are continually being told, we live in a floating village and we certainly are getting a taste of village life, even to having our own bar, "*Les amis du port*," and a less inviting bar would be hard to find. One small room, not enough glasses to go around, a couple of bare tables, but we make it come to life on Friday nights which seems to be the only day which madam makes any money. However it is a good chance for the Boating Village to get together and organise the week's activities.



But first of all the weather, and our first taste of snow. We woke one morning, and just as we were discussing whose turn it was to get the croissants we noticed snowflakes falling. Within ten minutes it was a blanket of white, very pretty, and incredibly cold. We never did get to have croissants and the only time I left the boat was to take a very quick photo. It soon cleared and since then we have had rain, several days of wind and a couple of good frosts. Plus a little sunshine in between.

Friday night was dinner with Jeff and Jane on their boat *Whisper*, joined by an Australian couple who live on a bigger boat than ours which fills me with admiration as Katinka has MS and gets around on a little fold-up battery-operated scooter. She does all the wheel work while Scott handles the ropes. We had a good time and enjoyed a meal of Chilli.

Saturday we were invited to lunch with Max, an American who has bought a French residence in a small village outside of Roanne. Early Saturday Max arrived to collect us and take us to his place where he had prepared lunch, a great dish of... Chilli. The property he has bought is very interesting, built in 1741 as a hunting lodge, then the owner at a later date built the adjoining chateau and then stables, bake house and servants' quarters. Now it is a square of buildings around a central courtyard and was bought some years ago by a Brit who renovated the chateau as a B&B then sold off the other buildings as part of a Body Corporate set up. Max has a part of the hunting lodge, and we saw photos of the ruin he started with before he restored it to a very interesting, comfortable holiday home. He has spent five years on it and a considerable amount of time in salvage yards and antique shops so the finished result is interesting and authentic. He's now building a garage for his car and boat, so after lunch Tony suggested he help put the roof sarking on, a suggestion that was agreed to immediately so some of the chilli was worked off in the country air and Max got most of his roof done before we came home.

Sunday we biked across the river to a Food Fair that featured food and wine stalls from different areas of France, and even one from Germany. The first stall was the German wine and Christmas cake. While sampling they asked where we came from and when we said Australia, a lady on the stall started talking about her trips to Australia and did we know Currumbin and did we know the Neumanns? A small world. The Food Fair was a great success

and we came home with various purchases which kept us in beverages if not in food for most of the week.

The next Friday we were invited to dinner by Cora Michel, a local identity with an extremely vibrant personality. Born in USA, raised in Croatia, educated in France, fluent in five languages, Cora is now married to a Frenchman, Thierry, and they live in a village about 15mins from Roanne. Cora teaches English at the local school and university, Thierry runs a woollen manufacturing plant and they are renowned for their hospitality — and the size and scope of Thierry's wine cellar. Cora likes to invite various folk from the port to partake of their hospitality, and it was truly a night to remember. The ten of us, eight from the port - two Dutch couples, one American couple and us - sat down at eight o'clock and eventually rolled out the door at 2:30am.

Cora and Thierry live in a 400 year old property that they are still in the throes of renovating. The village has narrow one way streets, you have to negotiate a left hand right angle turn into a courtyard, a very tight turn indeed, and then you are into the house which is one delight after another. Metre thick walls, huge rooms and a myriad of possessions. They discovered in one room a Louis 14th fire screen, complete with the Royal Crest which now sits in front of the huge original fire place.

However the pleasures and delights of the house fade when compared to the main attraction of the property — the WINE CELLAR. Thierry started collecting wine when he was eighteen and now has a cellar that had a smile on Tony's face that could not be erased. His comment, "I'm not dead yet I've seen Heaven" We eventually got to bed at 3:00am, after five courses (I did manage to count those) and innumerable bottles of very fine wine. Truly a night to remember.

The only other social occasions this week have been entertaining Christian and Charlotte, our Swiss neighbours, for dinner; Sunday lunch with Jeff and Jane; boules this afternoon; French lessons last Wednesday and packing for our trip south tomorrow. We are on a train to Montpellier, as long as they aren't on strike AGAIN.

Languedoc - Rousillon

Week 16 — Nov 26th to Dec 9th (*Tony*)

We set off from Roanne in freezing cold by train to Montpellier where we picked up our car, a Citroën C4 hatchback. Practically all accommodation in the city was booked out for some expo but we somehow wangled a couple of nights in a very central, cosy hotel. Montpellier is a city that appeals to everyone. Its architecture is an eclectic mixture of old and new with wide boulevards and winding narrow lanes full of interesting



shops and eateries. But most of all you can hear people having fun, playing music, laughing, calling out greetings across the street, a stark contrast to the ghostly silence that prevails in most urban areas in France. Sixty five percent of Montpellier's population is under 25 and 65,000 of them are university students. You can almost smell the testosterone.

Beziers on the other hand is old, tired and filthy — meaning dog poo! Beziers could easily claim a prize for the greatest spread of doggie doos in France; Perpignan would come a close second. It's hard to admire a place when your eyes are glued to where your feet are about to tread.

We rented an apartment in Sète, looking out over the Mediterranean, for a week. A lively town set on a high promontory attached to the mainland by a long, narrow strip of sand, Sète is famous for its fishing industry. Watching the fleet and its trailing flocks of thousands of seagulls return to port late in the afternoon to disgorge the day's catch is a tourist attraction in itself.

An excursion up to Millau to appraise the incredible viaduct built over the Tarn was an absolute must. By far the highest bridge in the world, the scale of the structure is difficult to comprehend let alone photograph — impossible to fit into a single snapshot without trick photography, or a helicopter. Yet far from imposing on the landscape, it suspends itself gracefully like a spider's web across the vastness of the gorge. I salute the brave, innovative engineers who resolved the technical difficulties of spanning such a massive ravine — it kept me awake for nights figuring out the intricacies of how they did it — even though I knew — it just seems so brazenly ingenious, and risky!

Another day we drove up to Aigues Mortes to view the quaint, perfectly retained fortress town built by King Louis IX (St Louis) in the thirteenth century, near where part of the Rhône River drains into the immense, marshy Camargue (its bulk discharges into the Mediterranean near Marseilles). It was a political success for the kingdom but became an economic disaster when in the middle ages the place was left stranded three miles from the sea as it receded (yes, global climate change was an issue, even then). Thereafter, strategically, it wasn't worth attacking; and so it remains, unscathed, almost pristine, far from the route taken by most tourists in the south of France. For us it was also an opportunity to check out the canal through the Camargue and down through the estuaries all the way to Sète and the start of the Canal du Midi.

We paused in Capestang, on our way to Toulouse, to investigate *Oppidum d'Ensurene*. This ought to be a major tourist attraction but receives no mention here at all other than a couple of road signs. Built by the Romans, this huge radial drainage configuration first caught our attention, by accident, about a year ago when we searched Capestang on Google Earth. And behold, looming out of the landscape several kilometres east of the town was this colossal geometric design. We gazed in awe from high atop a lookout where some clever Roman must have observed the natural dish-shaped formation of the land and conceived a plan to convert it into a catchment for their water supply. Check it out, it's amazing.

We also stopped by to introduce ourselves to Richard and Linda, former owners of *Vertrouwen*, the first barge we had set our hearts on buying, but missed out. She is still presently moored in Capestang, looking beautiful, but we're pleased we bought *Sable*.

We have been exposed, literally, to this region's unique climate. Sheltered from the north and west by mountains, the weather has been like a GC winter, with clear sunny days, although sometimes the wind can be fierce and cold. After climbing over the range our descent into Toulouse brought us down into the foggy, damp, cold climate that the rest of France knows in winter; a bit like driving into Dunedin really... Toulouse, France's fourth city, is big, bustling, boring. Perhaps I'm unfairly judging her because (a) we couldn't get through the Airbus factory (foreigners have to provide their passport details three days in advance) and (b) the unkind weather. Next stop — Perpignan, then Spain.

Christmas Greetings

Week 18 — December 10th - 21st (*Sally*)

We continue our news from Spain, where we have been for the past week. I would like to say sunny Spain but there has been a cold snap all over Europe and we have definitely been on the receiving end of it, not as bad as if we were on *Sable*, in Roanne, where we see the temp last night was -9 deg and news from neighbours report a sheet of ice on the harbour. Brrrr.



Tony's impressions of Toulouse are not truly accurate, it was cold and rainy as it receives breeze from the Atlantic rather than the Mediterranean but it is still a lovely city, full of interesting old streets and great restaurants. We ate well on all three nights, firstly a cassoulet which is a specialty of Toulouse. Probably not a good idea for two people sharing a hotel room to feast on a meal composed of three rich meats and beans, lots of beans. The fish meal on night two was just as delicious but lighter and by the time we had our third meal out in a row we were ready for some home cooking, or more precisely some non-home cooking.

On the road from Toulouse we stopped at Carcassonne, a place we had always had on our list along with every other tourist who comes to this part of France. Being Saturday it was more crowded than any other site we have visited but nothing like what it must be like in summer. Places for 2000 cars and another park for buses etc. It is still a lovely place and we enjoyed our time exploring the streets and the chateaux.

Our last week in France was spent in Perpignan, very close to the Spanish border and in some ways more Spanish than French, but an area so rich in history that one can only see a fraction of what it has to offer. We marvelled at the grapes planted on the most impossible slopes, and in the most inhospitable soil. Apparently the Greeks first planted vines here 700 years BC and some of them looked that old. The slopes are so steep that everything has to be done by hand, and you would not dare drop a tool or yourself or it or you would end up in the sea.

We followed on the trail of Hannibal and his elephants; also the Cathars and the places where they were mercilessly hunted; Spanish and French wars and more recently the villages that were the refuge or inspiration for some great modern painters. Ceret where Picasso spent many years, Prades where Pablo Cassals took refuge from Franco and our favourite — Collioures the home to Matisse and Derain and their school of Art, but our best days were when we took a picnic lunch and drove into the countryside to enjoy the scenery and the fabulous views.

We are constantly aware of how lucky we are to be seeing all these wonderful places outside of the holiday season — sitting on Collioures esplanade, with not another person in sight, a picnic on a deserted beach and walking alone through cobbled streets that in summer would throng with tourists.

We had a particularly magic day in the Pyrenees. We drove to Villafranche sur Conflent, a village that features as one of France's most beautiful, and caught "le Petit Train Jaune" which takes one high into the mountains. For a start there were only three people aboard so we had

a carriage to ourselves. We were fascinated by villages clinging to rocky crags, our first glimpses of snow, then suddenly we were out on a huge plateau of deep, fresh snow. Absolute magic, we were at 1,500 metres where the train stopped long enough for photo opportunities before returning and although we loved the day we both agreed that is as close to winter as we wish to get.

Our first day in Spain was interesting as the prevailing wind, the Tramuntana, was blowing. It is a cold northerly wind that can blow for 3, 6 or 9 days, and had been strong enough to shred all the street banners that had been erected for Christmas. Fortunately we must have been at the end of the cycle as the next day, Tony's birthday, was calm though still cold. We celebrated in true Spanish style with a very long, delicious lunch. Palamos where we are staying has a wealth of restaurants, impossible to choose, so we went for position, overlooking the beach and harbour. The menu was even harder to select from so we went for the seven course degustation. Good choice, it turned out to be nine courses, as they included an aperitif plus dessert plus wine plus two glasses of champagne all for 80€. All the courses were seafood and all the varieties were very small — clams, whitebait, mussels, anchovies, prawns etc. A great introduction to Spanish cuisine. Looking forward to sampling many more great dishes over the next month. Now of course we are awaiting the arrival of Miles, Nicole and Louis who will be with us for Christmas in Barcelona.

As we celebrate a typical Spanish Christmas we will raise a glass to our loving family and to our good friends. We wish you all a happy family time and hope that all your dreams and plans for 2008 come true.

It is likely that our internet access over the next few weeks will be limited so you may not hear much from us for a while. But, we shall return...

Costa Brava

Week 20 — Dec 22nd - Jan 4th (*Tony*)

Happy New Year everyone, and may 2008 be a wonderful and blessed year for you all. 2007 was a great year for us, one of the best ever. Mind you, years of planning went into making it happen, but now we are looking forward to the realisation of our goals for 2008, and receiving many visits from friends and family. Our diary is nearly full!

Our week in Barcelona was fabulous. What an exciting city! Our very



comfortable 10th floor apartment in the once-Olympic village afforded superb views of the beaches and city and was conveniently located with an easy walk to the Métro which we used constantly as the bus drivers were on strike for the first four days of our sojourn. There are too many highlights in Barcelona to be able to mention them all. Gaudi's architecture ranks supreme above all else. His Sagrada Familia temple is quite breathtaking and exquisite. His style and attention to detail is so unique and innovative, what an impressive structure! But I found all his works truly inspiring, especially la Pedrera — to the point I have a yearn to produce more building designs of my own... back to the drawing board! Sally and I thoroughly enjoyed a conducted 'Catalunya gourmet discovery' walk through the old city where we were introduced to many traditional foods and customs and shown specialty shops and markets that in some cases have existed for more than 150 years.

The arrival of Miles, Nicole and Louis was eagerly awaited and having them here to share Christmas with us was very special. A visit to the 'have to be seen to be believed' markets on Christmas eve with everyone assigned a task to purchase something special for Christmas dinner ensured that we ended up with more food than any family of five could eat at one sitting. So Xmas lunch consisted of Miles' seafood (mussels and vinaigrette salsa, prawns, crab etc) followed by Nicole's cherries and grapes and Louis' strawberries and lychees followed by a walk to the beach, a game of boules and a nap. In the evening Sally served roast turkey with a banquet of vegetables, and for dessert I produced a traditional yuletide chocolate log that was irresistible. We lived on left-overs for the next four days!

Our days in Barcelona were filled with activities including a wander around the 1992 Olympic park and a trek to Gaudi's Parc Guell, not to mention numerous meanders through the delightful lanes in the old part of the city. Sunday, we ventured back to Montserrat, a monastery perched precariously on a granite outcrop halfway up a mountain topped with an amazing ridge-line projection of huge organ pipe pillars. A modern centrally heated cog-wheel train transports you to the monastery site and a funicular cable car then lifts you almost to the summit. The views were stunning. We now appreciate the value of scarves and gloves. Another return trip to Barcelona to capture more of its charms and to attend, live, a football match in FC Barcelona's (100,000 seats) home stadium invoked memories that all of us, but Louis especially, will hold forever. Tick...

We have moved back north to a unit in Empuriabrava from where we have made daily excursions to various attractions of the Costa Brava region. We all tramped through a large bird sanctuary where storks and other water birds abound. Cadaques, an old fishing port was interesting as was a trek to Cap Creus lighthouse (the most easterly point in Spain). The rock formations and rugged landscape were fascinating. Miles and the kids leave in the weekend for Roanne and, hopefully, a few days skiing in the Alps before they head to USA and then home. We have an apartment booked south of Valencia, close to the beach. We will spend a week there and then continue further south to Granada, Malaga and Gibraltar.

We have been pleasantly surprised by Spain — not that we held any preconceived expectations. To be honest, I didn't know what to expect but Spain seems to have a strong economy and the people appear to enjoy a higher standard of living than those in France. Obviously there was a massive upsurge in the economy soon after Franco's reign with a building boom along the Costa Brava coast in the 70's and 80's which produced a plethora of Gold Coast-style development. A lot of unit blocks are now looking rather tired and from all accounts real estate prices have taken a dive in the past six months. There is plenty of renovation work going on but very little new construction. Practically all development is devoid of landscaping, a feature that Australia has to concede gratitude for, thanks to our town planners. Nevertheless, there are many unspoiled coves and beaches along the coast which are a delight to discover.

Most surprising is the quality of Spain's wine. Their Cava (Champagne) is delicious and cheap. And their red wines have really impressed us — smooth, delectable and inexpensive. Our internet access is now limited to infrequent visits to internet cafes so you may not hear much from us for a while.

Costa Blanca

Week 22 — Jan 5th - 18th (*Sally*)

Spain continues to delight and surprise us. We had no preconceptions of the country so everyday has brought new discoveries to enjoy and new sights to see.

Having said goodbye to Miles, Nicole and Louis after a wonderful two weeks with them in Barcelona and on the Costa Brava, we continued south while they set off north to spend a few days on Sable at Roanne and then



to go skiing in the French Alps. Our day took us 600km south, from the Costa Brava through the Fragrant Coast, so called because of the acres of orange groves that take up every available inch of ground between the mountains and the sea north and south of Valencia and finally to the Costa Blanca, an area of coast stretching from Denia to Alicante where the mountains plunge into the sea creating a series of picturesque coves and bays. Denia, where we had a near-new unit, is a busy fishing port and from there we were able to make trips into the unspoilt villages nestled in the craggy mountains behind the town as well as two day-trips to Valencia.

We have found sunshine; we left the Costa Brava having experienced 3 degrees the day before as we crossed the Pyrenees then travelling south the temperature increased by the hour until, as we reached Valencia, it was 23deg. Bliss. Since then we have had lovely days. Dare I say our Spanish winter has been a lot better than the rest of Europe has experienced, and from what we've heard, the present Gold Coast summer.

Fiestas: Spain loves their fiestas. Twelfth night, 5th January, we arrived in Denia, to be told it was the Parade of the Three Kings. We hurried into town so as not to miss the start at 5.30pm. In true Spanish time it got underway at 7.00pm, but what a parade. It was lead off with the standard bearers of Roman legions, then a company of Roman soldiers, more soldiers on horseback, merchants in horse drawn carts, two troupes of dancing girls, lamas and camels, another troupe of Roman soldiers, four separate bands to accompany them, and finally the three kings, each in their own float with two attendants throwing lollies to the crowd which was nine deep all along the streets. What a start to our time on the Costa Blanca.

We then found that Denia has its own fiesta where the local lads do their own form of bull fighting. They take the bulls down to the port and taunt and tease them until the animal charges; they then either scramble to safety over a large vaulting horse or leap into the harbour. All good fun and no-one gets hurt unless the bull follows them into the water.

Not far from Denia is the town of Bunol, where their fiesta specialty is the tomato fiesta. Truckloads of tomatoes are bought into town and the whole village becomes one enormous tomato fight. I couldn't help but wonder how many of our eight grandsons would be involved in either of those days and came to the conclusion that they all would.

Meanwhile Valencia was preparing for its special day, or should I say week. The night of March 29th and the week preceding is when the whole town sets up hundreds of huge papier mache figures lampooning politicians or other prominent people. On the night of the 29th these figures are set alight one by one and by midnight it seems that the whole city is alight. Small wonder that we noticed plaques on most buildings in Valencia to proclaim that they were insured against fire.

We have discovered that Spain is a country with an abundance of mountains and no rivers. We have continually been overawed by the mountains which form a backdrop to our travels, and in the whole length of the country we have barely seen one river. Plenty of river beds; but no water in them and in many cases the river bed is not only dry but has been planted in crops. The agriculture is fascinating. The crops have gone from acres of vines, then to olives and finally orange groves all planted on highly terraced slopes. But the most amazing is Almeria, the south east corner of Spain where they have transformed the most barren, arid area into the winter garden of Spain. As far as you can see, from the mountains to the coast, is one vast hot house. Plastic sheeting by the mile, they talk about 50,000 acres under cover but we think even more as they are building new ones everywhere, even levelling off plateaus in the lower slopes. It is obviously a great success as the markets are full of grapes, strawberries and all sorts of fresh fruit and although one could hardly call it attractive it sure beats some of the overdevelopment we have seen.

A newsletter would not be complete until I had mentioned food. Yes we are enjoying Spanish food, especially the tapas. Our first tapas in Barcelona were at a bar where one helped yourself to the variety that were spread along the counter then at the finish they just counted the toothpicks. In Valencia we were served portions of fried fish, salads etc and now at our favourite bar here in Andulucia we get a selection of small dishes with a serving in each. All very tasty and an easy way to sample lots of dishes.

We are now on the south coast of Spain in the delightful village of Nerja. A typical white washed village, spilling down to the sea, narrow cobbled streets, tiled doorways and flower-filled balconies. Everything we imagined a villa in Spain should be. From here we have made day trips to Malaga, Gibraltar and of course the Alhambra at Granada. We explored the fort at Malaga, saw all the sights at Gibraltar including a close encounter with the Barbary Apes and spent several hours inside the Alhambra. I wouldn't even try to describe that except to say if you are going to see Spain it is one sight that you must not miss.

We leave on Saturday to Cadiz where we will spend a week before moving on to Portugal.

Portugal

Week 22 — January 19th - 31st (*Tony*)

Following our lovely week in Nerja, we moved westwards, to Cadiz. After crossing through a range of hills north of Gibraltar, the southwestern corner of Spain opens out to flat arable farmland for as far as the eye can see, a stark contrast to the rugged, barren country everywhere else. The ancient city of Cadiz sits on a small rocky outcrop at the end of a long sandy isthmus and is easily explored on foot. Its links to maritime



history are legendary. The city outgrew its fortress walls long ago and the population is nowadays spattered among a number of dense residential settlements around the harbour, wherever land firm enough to build on could be found. Our unit was actually in El Puerto de Santa Maria, half an hours ferry ride across the bay. The port remains one of the largest in Europe. And finally, a mighty river — deep enough for large ships to navigate all the way to Seville. Both Cadiz and Seville flourished from their predominance of the trade between Europe and America in the first couple of centuries.

Cadiz, Huelva (north on the coast) and Seville are the points of an almost-equilateral triangle with each side approximately 120km. The delta within is low-lying, most of it intensely farmed, much of it marshland. Fortunately, a large chunk has been preserved for its natural heritage and now forms the largest National Park in Europe. We drove more than 200 km to the park headquarters to join a tour of the park in a 20-seater 4-wheel-drive bus which took us down the beach and over sand dunes and around swamps. We saw deer, wild pigs, marsh horses, eagles, flamingos and just about every sort of waterfowl. A long, tiring but fascinating day.

To visit Seville we took the easy option, jumped on a train then boarded a double-decker bus. Seville hosted world expos (1929 & 1992) and many of the unique and extravagantly designed buildings remain part of the city's landscape. An exciting place to visit, like Barcelona, but thanks to its wide streets and extensive parklands, a more relaxed atmosphere seems to prevail. Seville's cathedral would have to be one of the biggest in the world (Sally assures me it's the third largest). Its treasures, crafted from gold and silver plundered from the Americas during Spain's early conquests, are mind-boggling including one altar made of solid silver.

Crossing into Portugal leaves one in no doubt that you are in a different country. The architectural style of the developments along the coast of the Algarve is much more sympathetic to the environment. Practically every building is no more than two-storey, single, duplex or triplex units and quite attractive. The beaches are wide with golden sand and face south. It's not hard to understand why the Algarve is such a popular destination for summer holidays. In fact, everywhere we've been in Portugal homes, outside big towns and cities, are mostly detached cottages on simple allotments with front yards and gardens. And mature trees! In all Spain one could count on fingers and toes the number of mature trees taller than 6m.

When we drove into Faro we thought it was just another typical, tired old town. However, we

found a vacant car space in the main street (a rarity anywhere in Europe) so parked the car and walked a few metres and found a fabulous hotel. After checking in we turned the corner and discovered a refurbished town centre with a maze of pedestrian malls, lots of restaurants and stylish shops. Sales are still raging here as retailers desperately try to off-load excess stocks of winter fashions. In no time Sally and I spent less than AU\$500 on a pair of top quality leather jackets.

Heading north from Faro we drove through a range of hills covered in native cork forest. We have yet to see how they actually strip the cork. It was odd to see trees denuded of bark to about 2m from the ground and occasionally we came across stacks of bark waiting to be processed. It was heartening to see an effort being made to weed exotic species (mainly eucalypts) from the forest, allowing the native corks and other trees to regenerate. After the hills, the country opened out to a vast plateau of rolling, fertile farmland.

We drove into Lisbon but it is far too big a city for our liking. I am sure it has lots of charming features but we couldn't face the frenzy and chaos so we threw a u-turn in the middle of town and continued to Sintra. Good choice. Sintra is overlooked by an amazing Moorish castle and fortress perched atop a high hill. What a bastard of a job being a builder in the Xth century! As it was late in the day, we took a taxi to the top and after roaming the ramparts, we strolled down through the centuries-old gardens to where thousands of locals were enjoying Sunday drinkies in the town centre's many bars and restaurants. We happily joined them.

The eroded cliffs at the cape and extraordinary rock formations at Peniche proved a worthwhile deviation. And quite by accident, we stumbled upon Nazaré, a beachside resort town with a funicular cable car to the top of the cliff and its old original town perched high above the Atlantic with views to die for.

We stayed a couple of nights in Azeiro, another interesting town, where we found a hotel equal to any. From there, we visited Porto, Portugal's second city, the easy way — by train and bus. Porto is huge and has some amazing buildings as well as numerous stunning bridges across the D'Ouro River. However, the highlight naturally, was a visit to a Port vintner's caves, with tastings of course!

We loved Portugal and our sojourn there was all too brief. It is certainly worthy of a more extensive return visit some time in the future. Everything, except diesel, is cheaper and best of all — there's no dog shit!

North Spain

Week 24 — February 1st - 15th (*Sally*)

Santiago de Compostela (The end of the Rainbow). After seeing many pilgrim sites on the way to Santiago: Vezelay, La Charite, Moissiac to name a few, it was interesting to finally reach the ultimate destination, the Cathedral at Santiago and the tomb of the apostle James the patron Saint of Spain. We saw some of the pilgrims who had completed the walk to Santiago in the cathedral and a few more around the city and this was



in the middle of winter. We were informed that in a Holy Year, when St James day falls on a Sunday the city receives 11 million visitors. How lucky we have been to have spent this all this time in this wonderful country and never felt harassed by the crowds which must be part of travelling in Spain in summer. As well as the cathedral there is a very well-known university and the city has a large number of students who study in a wonderful selection of historic buildings. We loved our two days in the city before moving on to explore the rest of northwest Spain.

We left Santiago in rain, (in our 75 days away this was only our fourth day of rain) and headed for the Atlantic coast where for some reason, we are not sure why, we ended up at Gijon, a small town on the coast. What a delight to find a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition in the town. Such was the quality of the exhibition one would travel a hundred miles to see it, comprising two levels of drawings and working models developed from his designs. It was unbelievable, and the fact that we found it in such an out of the way place made it even more amazing.

The next day was Bilbao, and the Guggenheim Museum, which we have long wanted to see. Not only did it live up to all expectations but we got the added bonus of a travelling exhibition of "300 hundred years of Art from America".

Our stop that night was Zumaia, another small coastal village where we stumbled into a Saturday night Carnivale. Everyone in town was in fancy dress, and out to have fun, whole families in matching costumes dancing in the streets, so we found a seat, ordered a drink and a Tapas and became part of the festivity.

Sunday we reasoned it would be a good day to go to San Sebastian; no traffic, easy to find a park. Wrong... We arrived in the middle of Carnivale, and as soon as we did find a park we were the spectators to a fascinating procession of brass bands and dancers dressed in flower bedecked costumes and masks doing a dance which required lots of bows and curtsies. It looked like something out of a BBC period drama. While we watched 12 o'clock struck and they all dispersed never to be seen again. We then wandered into town found a hotel and were told that at 5 o'clock it was all starting again. And sure enough it did. At 5pm we found a viewing spot and for two hours the streets were full of floats and huge throngs of dancers all dressed in quite elaborate costumes. We reasoned that every schoolchild in San Sebastian was in the parade. The one that took our eye was "Grease" complete with the pink car, John Travolta lookalike and several troupes of different coloured costumes. The boys had jackets with GREURE written on them, which we had to presume was Basque for Grease yet they

were all singing in perfect English all the hits from the show. Broadway composers and Andrew Lloyd Webber have as much to do with the spread of English as Microsoft as everywhere we went you can hear their songs.

There were also several ethnic groups, Bolivia and Ecuador. The Bolivians were the most appropriately dressed in heavy felt national costumes which gave much more protection from the wind than the traditional carnival garb.

Monday after an interesting day exploring the city we were preparing for a quiet night in town when we stumbled onto another parade; drumming troupes, groups in national Basque costume and some dressed in what had a close resemblance to the KKK. We asked at the Hotel the significance of that parade and his answer was "Nothing, there is always something on in the city." Certainly makes it interesting for tourists.

Carnivals, parades and fancy dress aside, one goes to San Sebastian for the food. We used as a guide the latest pages from the Qantas flight magazine (thank you Deb) and set off to discover in their opinion the cities' best Tapas bars. Jackpot with the first one, a wonderful selection and I even had the recommendations. The next bar was called Txuloti, shouldn't be hard to find with a name like that. Wrong again, we found 3 other bars starting with Txul before we gave up on that one. The Basque language is incredibly difficult, it looks like a language invented by someone who got all the high-scoring letters in scrabble. I can imagine some scrabble player with T,K,Z,X,Q,U,E,E saying "I could really make something of this if I could just get rid of these E's."

Next morning we drove inland to explore more of the interesting countryside. This area of Spain is almost a complete contrast to the other parts of Spain we have seen. There are still the mountains, one cannot get away from mountains in Spain, but it is green, so green, and with trees. As we travelled along the coast with Atlantic Ocean on one side and green foothills and mountains on the other we both remarked on the resemblance to the West Coast of NZ. We went as far as Logrono, the wine growing area of Spain's Rioja and were interested to see the high plateau that stretches as far as one can see but after a picnic lunch overlooking a small wine village we turned north and made our way through the Pyrenees to France.

After a night on the coast just south of Biarritz we turned inland again to explore the French Basque area and made our way to St Jean Pied de Port, another stop on the pilgrims' way.

Our hotel there boasted a Michelin star restaurant which was something to look forward to as we drove up and up into the mountains. We actually reached 1,300 metres, and stopped almost on the Spanish border (but not for long as it was slightly chilly) to admire the panorama of the snow clad peaks. We were in snow at one time but our trusty little car by now is used to high altitude, we have certainly given it plenty of practice, and she carried us safely through the peaks and green valleys. It was a beautiful day full of great scenery and a fitting end to our holiday. We concluded our day with a memorable meal where every course was a work of art and as usual we ate too much.

Scotland

Week 27 — Feb 16th - Mar 7th (*Tony*)

It's hard to believe it is almost a month since we got back to Roanne from our trip around Spain and Portugal. And what an unforgettable journey it was. The circumnavigation of the Iberian Peninsula covered more than 12,000km, yet because we were never more than a few kilometres from the coastline there remains a vast inland area unvisited. Some other time...



We both felt happy to be back in our barge and in the couple of weeks following our return we have been busy carrying out maintenance and improvements — there's always something to do on a boat! I have installed some shelving in the empty space in the stern. Now it is a neat and tidy storage room with all kinds of gear and spare parts stashed safely and where they can be easily found. Previously stuff was heaved on the tiny floor and piled up the sloping walls. It is amazing how much more equipment has now been stowed there. I have also created a computer desk within an existing cupboard which allows us more space around the dining area. And the other day Sally got out the 'toy' sewing machine which came with the boat and has started to put together a patchwork quilt. We're having fun and not at all bored. We dearly miss all our friends though. There is a lively social network among the bargees in the port and we have met many wonderful people from diverse countries. Thierry (we wrote of dinner with Cora and Thierry in November) invited ten men from port to a wine tasting at his home a couple of weeks ago. It was a memorable night with twelve guys sat around their enormous table sampling wines under the guidance of a local vigneron. Roanne East Rotary Club members are also very friendly and hospitable though the language barrier makes it difficult to communicate as well one would like. But our French is slowly improving. We have bought a set-top box to enable us to receive local TV and we hope that will immerse us in the language.

Having the car has also been great for we have been able to venture out into the countryside and environs around Roanne and discover many lovely villages and places that were beyond our range on bicycle (it's still too cold to contemplate cranking up the motorbikes). We were surprised to find ranges of hills, quite high in places, stretching out for miles in most directions. Some of the bargees in port belong to a walking club based in Renaison, a town nearby, and we have joined them a couple of times for very pleasant all-afternoon ambles through farms and over hills and dales between villages. It seems everywhere in France there is a picturesque village with another just as pretty within walking distance.

Last week we drove to Beauvais (north of Paris) and for a modest fare flew to Glasgow. We stayed a night in Glasgow. What a fabulous city it is nowadays. The place was buzzing and every second business seemed to be either a pub or a restaurant. It was difficult to choose but we somehow managed to find a place for a drink and another for a tasty meal, with more drinks of course but walked so far we had to get a taxi back to our hotel. Next morning we set off for Cumbria, a three hour drive through idyllic countryside, sheep everywhere. The Fells, cast in the delicate light and colours peculiar to the Lake District, were incredibly beautiful. It

was a real delight to catch up with my niece, Morgan and her husband, Shawn, a sculptor and stonemason. One of Shawn's sculptures, a large ram carved from portland stone, greets everyone entering their town at a major roundabout. We overnighted with them at their place in Cockermonth, a pretty town with almost as many pubs as shops, or so it seemed. It has recently been voted the most appealing town to live in in the north and one can see why. Next day we set off, with Morgan, for Edinburgh to see my sister Geraldine whom we haven't seen since a visit to Skye in 1988. After a long stint in hospital it was pleasing to find she was about to be discharged and moved into a flat in a quite central location where she will enjoy relative independence but with regular care and supervision. We were impressed by the care and generosity of the health system in Scotland. We took her shopping for some cushions and plants for her new unit and the next day we drove her up the coast, over the Forth bridge and on to St Andrews, a really gorgeous town full of beautiful buildings and historic ruins, and of course its Royal and Ancient Golf Links.

Although a little damp and rather cold we enjoyed a stroll up to Edinburgh Castle and down the Royal Mile before we had to head south, back to Prestwick. We chose a route that took us wide of Glasgow and out to the west coast through typically picturesque Scottish countryside, paddocks rimmed with either stone walls or bramble hedgerows. Everything was so green and wild daffodils, which you hardly see in France, were everywhere and within days of bursting into bloom. Spring must surely be only a week or so away.

Back in France Sally and I both acknowledged that this is the place to be. Apart from better food here — the cost of living in the UK seemed exorbitant — it just feels like home now... Forsythia is in full bloom and many prunus and wild cherry trees are blossoming along the roadsides. Each day we can see leaves beginning to emerge on unidentified shrubs growing on the quay-side. Despite that, it snowed again one day early in the week when all Europe was caught in a cold snap. But frosts are now infrequent and hopefully we will soon be bathed in warm sunshine as we prepare to set sail. We hope to get Sable under-weight before Easter even though the canals do not officially open until 1st April. By then we hope to be well on the way to the Somme, via Paris, to meet up with good friends Peter and Margaret James prior to *Our Other ANZAC Day* tour of the battlefields of the Western Front.