



Living the dream

Friends and family were astounded when I announced my intention to retire to the south of France. Now five years on I am still here, and loving every moment. Getting accustomed to the language has been a big challenge, and it was quite a shock when, recently, I presented myself at the local doctor's surgery for a repeat prescription to find that hand-language and my dictionary produced a thorough medical examination and a sack full of medication! Seeing my predicament, a friend introduced me to a local choral group. I was the only English speaker in a 40 plus strong group. My French improved, and in return I helped with the pronunciation of English lyrics. I also highly recommend having a dog. I have a large unusual Japanese Akita dog - Kit - who is a great attraction, and useful for making contact. So, you may think that by now I must be fluent. I'm not, and I doubt I ever will be! But the journey is fun, it's exciting, and it's full of adventure. Carol Seaforth

Bagnoles or voitures?

Sauntering back home from town recently, clearly with nothing better to occupy my mind, I decided to conduct an unrepresentative if not wholly meaningless survey of the condition of cars parked en route.

At the end of my trail, from Blvd. Gambetta up the length of Rue de la Porte d'Alès and in and out of a few side streets, I'd clocked 79 vehicles. Of these, 75 were scratched, bumped, or dented - usually all three. Could this be a record, I wonder?

Yours statistically. Bob Davis, Nîmes

Poppy day

Remembrance Day Service is being held at the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Mazargues on 8th November at 10h45. I do hope that you will be able to come and lend your support to one of the most important occasions in the calendar, as well as contributing to the very worthwhile Poppy Appeal.

Simon Taylor, British Consul General

Minerve and La Malvoisine

I'd hate to get you into trouble, I'd hate to be behind the CRS - the riot police - bursting in at 3am and arresting you for affray and putting the lieges in mortal danger. But if after reading this you can't wait, you just have to hotfoot it to Minerve to test my theory, there could be grave consequences. And no pinning the blame on me, thanks.

It's worth a visit, Minerve, a village in the extreme west of the Hérault département. Once it was a place of such influence that it gave its name to the Minervois, an area rich in olives, apricots, peaches and subtle, heady AOC wines. And medieval siege engines.

Siege engines? Oh yes. Approach Minerve from the east and there it is, perched on the edge of a deep limestone gorge, facing the village. You might mistake it for a crane at first, but if you find the path (signposted 'Remparts') that leads down from the village, crosses the usually dry bed of the river Briant and zigzags up the other side, you'll reach this massive wooden structure.

It's a replica of the catapult set up by Simon de Montfort, who, during the Albigensian

Crusade, besieged Minerve and the heretic Cathars holding out there. They believed their village was impregnable, perched on its sheer promontory high above the confluence of the rivers Cesse and Briant. They prepared to sit out the long, hot summer of 1210, relying on the well, known as St Rustic, to hold out too.

Instead of wasting his resources on assault, de Montfort trained his catapult, nicknamed by the villagers La Malvoisine, which you could translate as 'the neighbour from hell', on the well. It was cumbersome work. 100 men and 10 horses could hurl two boulders an hour, at best. But it did the trick: by July the well and its access were smashed. The parched population gave in. Rather than recant, 140 Cathars chose the flames. A monument in the village square commemorates their martyrdom.

Theoretically that catapult ought to work, you know. All the parts are there, even a goodly pile of jagged rocks. It would be a simple matter to - but that's my theory. Actually I think someone's got there before me: if you examine La Malvoisine closely, it's been sited the wrong way round. Deliberately, I'm sure. Minerve is safe.

Christopher Campbell-Howes

La Madeleine

Inspired by the little madeline cake a new cocktail has been created to celebrate the unveiling of La Madeleine - a fine sculpture that is now in the Marseillan headquarters of Noilly Prat.

Over sixty international architectural students' designs were accepted to represent the ethos that is Noilly Prat as part of a competition. The winner of the *Prix de la Sculpture* was a British team of four architecture and interior design students* in their early twenties. A construction budget of 28,000€, and a prize fund of 6,000€ was presented.

La Madeleine now graces the inner courtyard of the *chais*. Made of oak strips cut, steamed and shaped to mirror the Noilly Prat barrels the sculpture is functional as well as attractive.

* Kevin Green, Greg Nordberg, Frances Reynolds and Ned Scott.

The Doll and Teddy Bear museum

I recently visited the *Musée des Poupées et Nounours* housed in an ancient 12th century house in the heart of Lézan (30). More than 1 000 teddy bears, dolls, and a variety of toys and childhood memorabilia dating from the middle of the 19th century up until the present are on view, and it was like stepping back to my childhood all over again! It's a museum for all ages, and well worth a visit.

Open in the winter at week-ends from 3 pm - 6 pm or by appointment.

Jane by email

Anyone who loves dolls' houses and old bears has to visit. The toys are lovingly preserved and there is always a warm welcome. Editor Musée des Poupées et Nounours, 4, rue de l'Estrangladou, 30350 Lézan, <http://myoldbear.free.fr> Tel. 04 66 83 19 57

Le Bookshop

Come and discover the 'new' English bookshop in Montpellier. What used to be Book in Bar has now become "Le Bookshop" and we are delighted to welcome you for a coffee, tea or some English reading. While keeping the same concept of bookshop and tea room, we've rendered the top floor more spacious with a comfortable reading corner, and by emphasizing the authentic beauty of the shop. We're bringing the entire stock up to date and we would like to emphasize that we will continue with the personal orders, cultural activities and the warm welcome you are used to. We hope to see you soon at Le Bookshop Dario Viallet and Marit van Kalleveen.

Assistant d'anglais à domicile recherche familles francophones

Je suis à la recherche de familles francophones qui aimeraient recevoir un assistant d'anglais à domicile. L'assistant d'anglais propose 15 heures de cours / soutien / conversation anglaise par semaine à la famille qui l'accueille bénévolement en retour. Il s'agit d'un échange de bons procédés pour développer à peu de frais ses compétences linguistiques et vivre l'anglais au quotidien. Plus d'informations sont disponibles sur le site de l'association ALIORE : www.aliore.org (voir la rubrique Langue et Culture) et au 09 51 79 79 72 (demandez Soizick).

Atout Fil fashion contest, organised at Vauvert, takes place in April 2010. It brings designers from all over the EU. Each artist's creation is modelled and judged during an evening famed for its success to both jury and spectators. The competition is open to professionals and non-professionals alike. This year's theme is "Mythique ? Atout Fil." The Last date for delivering your dossier 7th December, 2009. Information and enrolments: www.atoutfil.com.



Send your letters to:

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