

Friendship Force Cornwall exchange to Pau, France. Sunday June 19th, Liz

13 members of Friendship Force Cornwall all gathered at Margie's house on time and with the correct sized luggage!

We set off at 7.20 a.m. and headed for Bristol Airport in a minibus. There was very little traffic and we arrived in plenty of time for our Easyjet flight to Toulouse. Due to Margie's excellent organisation, the entire departure procedure went very smoothly. We had a comfortable flight and arrived on time, the only delay being a wait for the aircraft steps to arrive!



The journey from Toulouse to Pau was a pleasant one. French buses have a lower speed restriction than ours which gives for a more relaxed ride than we sometimes have in the UK.

We reached Pau at about 7.00 p.m.

Pau is a beautiful city with many, many trees and a mixture of modern and elegant period buildings. Subsequently, we've learned that quite a number of the period houses had been built by the British.

Our hosts had gathered to welcome us at the Place de Verdun in the centre of Pau and after very warm greetings we all departed for our various homes and prepared ourselves for the long busy programme that had been organised for us.



Monday 20th June - Margie

Having been whisked off the coach straight after arriving in Pau on Sunday evening to enjoy a superb eight-course meal prepared by Josy, the ED, there was hardly time to take in my new surroundings before we were off again first thing in the morning. This was the pace of the programme, which FF Pau kept up throughout our stay and which allowed us to see and experience so much. Arriving at Oloron-Sainte-Marie in glorious early morning sunshine, hosts and ambassadors gathered in front of the famed portal of the town's cathedral.



Our enthusiastic guide explained the significance of the scenes of medieval life carved in the Pyrenean marble and inside we were treated to a visit to the "treasure", where the most remarkable chest of drawers housed a wonderful collection of ornate priests' robes.

Oloron is home to a Lindt chocolate factory, whose sweet scent pervades the air. After a tasting, some bought chocolates, forgetting that the outside temperature was not conducive to keeping them solid, especially in cars, which would be parked in baking sunshine for the rest of the day!

A short drive took us to the inn in Sarrance for the Welcome lunch. In true French style, we enjoyed a delicious meal, washed down with the local Jurançon white wine. Sarrance is a medieval village, whose Church was a stop for pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela.



After lunch we split into two groups to visit the Fort du Pourtalet, high up in the mountains overlooking the Aspe valley, which it protected from invasion by Spain. During World War II it was used to house political prisoners



Reconstruction of the fort has only just begun, having been derelict for many years. Spurred on by our very enthusiastic guide, we climbed the 600 metres and 250 steps in the brilliant sunshine to discover its secrets, the most fascinating being the huge bread oven which, despite the copious lunch, some of us were slim enough to access through a tiny corridor which encircled it. This visit certainly tested our stamina and after another delicious meal hosted by Monique, ensured a sound night's sleep!

Tuesday 21st June

Harry



Henry IV of France was "quite a lad", as we found out at the Chateau de Pau. Born there in 1553 he was brought up to mix with the common people - and he certainly had his way with the ladies. He went on to bridge the religious divide, introduce superb tapestries into his state rooms and build their first straight staircase (i.e. not spiral). His legacy is everywhere: Henry IV Tearooms, Henry IV Pharmacy and much more.

The lady Deputy Mayor, Mme Castera, welcomed us in the splendid Council Chamber and we were pleased again to taste the lovely Juraçon wines.

Lunch was a picnic in the Stade des Eaux Vives, in blazing sunshine. The *living waters* from the Pyrenees are diverted into a championship course for white-water rafting and slalom canoeing. Youngsters on training programmes and the whole professional set-up were very impressive.



Until you visit the Musée des Parachutistes you do not realise just how much can be presented on this subject, from commandos and mine detection, through gendarmes, to artillery and infantry. The films were indeed quite soporific as Yvonne demonstrated sonorously, after a tiring morning and in need of a siesta.



We split into groups for the evening. Way out in the country FF Pau member and former Parisian restaurateur, Pierre, seated seventeen altogether to a wonderful meal. The roast pork with cherry jam was excellent, with the cherries and lovely vegetables from his garden, of course. His ice cream blended with Port wine was delicious.

The meal was interrupted dramatically by an *orage*. This storm of thunder and lightning seen from the balcony outside raged around the nearby hills.

Some fine singing from the Pau group, led by Jacky, Pierre and Michelle, rounded off the evening nicely.

Wednesday 22nd June 2011.

It was a dull start to the day when we left Martine and Roger's remote farmhouse, tucked away in the foothills of the Pyrenees some 20 to 25 kilometres from central Pau. The remainder of the group with five of the hosts were in the main car park at the Place de Verdun where we climbed on board the coach to go to the coast at Biarritz and then on to St. Jean de Luz, south towards the frontier with Spain.

We stopped en route at a Service Station, part of the company running the toll road system in that part of France, and, interestingly, it was called "Aire d'Hastings" after the nearby village of Hastings.



The Village was founded in 1289 on the order of Edward 1st of England who was also Duc d'Aquitaine and established by John Hastings who was his resident agent, or Senechal. There was a small explanatory museum about the Pilgrim route to St. Jacques de Compestella in Spain. This, of course has echoes throughout much of Cornwall and South Wales with the numerous Churches and ancient celtic monasteries dedicated to St James.

After a couple of hours of coach travel we arrived at Biarritz where the skies were still grey, wet and windswept. Nothing daunted, however, we walked up to and around the lighthouse where we had a panoramic view of the whole bay and then along the promenade to the little harbour, getting some idea, en route, of why Biarritz became so well known- mainly, as so often, because of the upper class holiday makers from England who started the fashion some 200 years or more ago!



We left by coach for lunch at St. Jean de Luz in a very pleasant restaurant which, in the Occitane language (the Languedoc Region, of course), was called "Txantxangorri" translating as Robin Redbreast.



After a delicious lunch of trout and almonds we had a couple of hours strolling through the little roads and alleys of St. Jean de Luz where Carol was able to buy a Basque T-shirt, a pair of espadrilles and a brightly coloured, plastic cafe-style table cloth to use in the garden at home! We also visited a very splendid, triple-galleried church, Saint Jean Baptiste, where Louis XIV was married in 1660. Evidently the men folk were seated in the Galleries and could look down on the local ladies - for what purpose we know not!

We arrived back in Pau after stopping on the way home at the intriguing little village of Espelette, owned by the Ezpeleta family in the 17th Century. The area is famous for the peppers it grows and all the main shops and houses were decorated by rows and rows of red peppers hanging on the Walls.



Back in Pau we spent the evening at Maite's house. We were joined there by Martine and Roger who brought with them a delicious veal and courgette risotto and salad and, of course, some of his super farm made organic Jurançon wine. We had a good time - chatter, laughter and good food!

Thursday - Shirley & Pam

Thursday was a free day which we spent with our host. Doreen drove us out into the countryside to the home of Jeannie and Michael Tessier and their son, Oliver – home being the most beautiful house (recently renovated, but over 400 years old) set amongst their vineyard. When we arrived we were joined by Mike and Yvonne with their host, Alice and her friend, Pierre. We were shown around the garden which contained incredible hollyhocks, banana plants together with two very unusual pine trees.

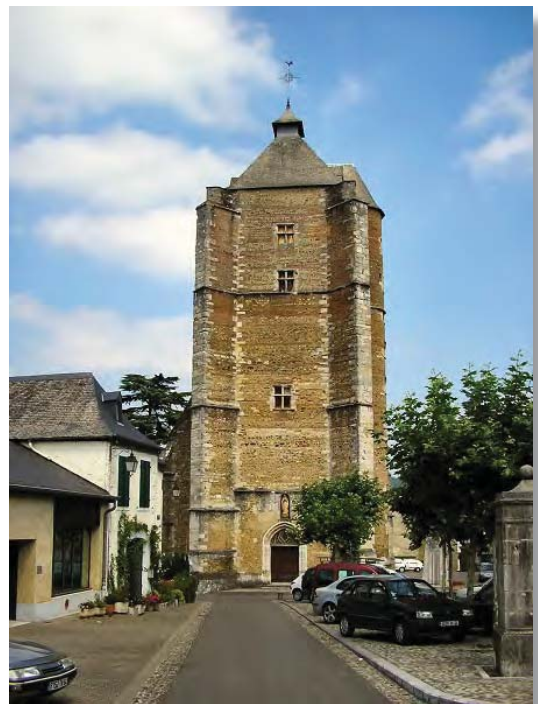
Following the walk around their garden, we tasted three of their wines accompanied by canapés. Oliver then took us to see where he produces their wine – the presses, big stainless steel vats and wooden barrels. Afterwards we went to the vineyards and were shown how the vines were pruned and their health checked. At the end of each row, a rose bush grew – if the rose bush looks healthy then the vines are healthy!



After a long and delicious lunch (also sampling their own *Jurançon* wine again!) we were taken on a walk around neighbouring vineyards.



After leaving the vineyard, we were taken to their village - Monein - to visit the church.



The Church has visitor access to the roof where we could see the woodwork of the roof and enjoy the sound and light show. At the end of the day we returned to Doreen's house for yet another delicious meal.

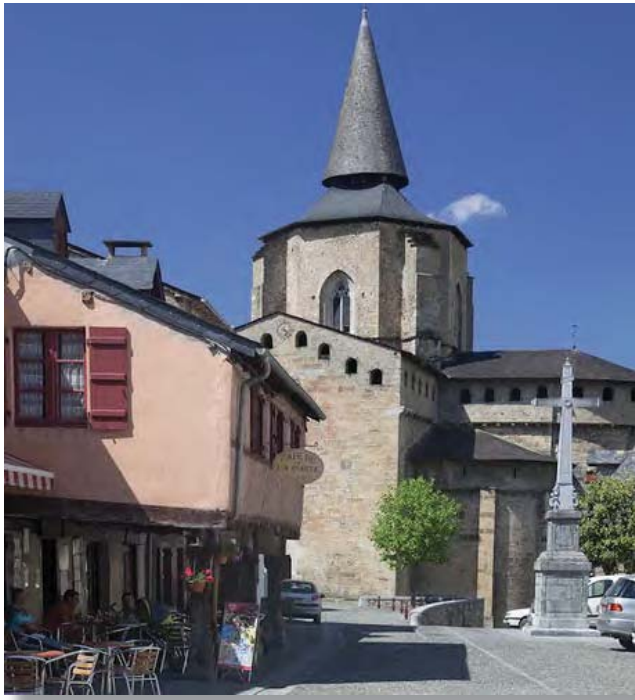
Friday, 24th of June - Roger and Margaret

A Day in the Mountains

Another 8am start! Today is Sarah's birthday, so we give her a birthday card signed by everyone and then sing happy birthday.

On the bus, we watched a DVD of the Béarn region on the way to Cauterets, where we stopped for a coffee and a quick shop in the market. Cauterets is located 32 km southwest of [Lourdes](#) in the beautiful valley of the [Gave de Cauterets](#) and borders the [Pyrenees National Park](#).

At 11.15 we arrived at the 1400m high Pont d'Espagne after some skilful driving through the clouds up the twisting road. From the car park we walked up the track, passing spectacular waterfalls, to the picnic area. We continued up to the glacial valley, spotting mountain goats on the way. The views of the mountains were wonderful. After walking around the idyllic valley bottom and being challenged by a herd of cows with their calves, we dropped down to the picnic area for lunch in the sun. After lunch, we drove to the medieval village of Saint Savin, where we viewed the 14th century fortified church and then took a break in the 15th century café bar.



Since we had a little time in hand, a change of plan took us to Lourdes for a quick tour of the open air church and the grotto.



Saturday 25th June - Sandra

The final day; where did the week go?

We had to be up early to meet at the Cathedral at Lescar for 9am, where Didier Raillard, one of our hosts had kindly arranged for us to visit the church.



It was important to be on time, as the church was very busy that day and Didier had gone to a lot of trouble to arrange the visit. It was an interesting Cathedral with many beautiful mosaics, stone carvings and a depth of history starting in 1120.



We wandered for a little while in the historical part of the town before making our way to Morlanne.

The plan was to see the Chateau and then picnic in the gardens of the castle. Unfortunately the Chateau was closed, but we could still look around the gardens and then picnic overlooking a beautiful valley.



After a leisurely picnic, provided by our hosts, it was time to visit the ham museum.

We then had a little time to go home to rest and then pack before the Farewell Party, which was in a local restaurant famous for its beers.

It was a very hot night, but that didn't stop us from enjoying ourselves.



Thanks were given from both presidents and gifts exchanged. It was sad to say goodbye to our new friends, but I know that we would all love to see them back in Cornwall in the future.

Our last day in Pau came all too soon, with the fond farewells to our beloved hosts, who had pulled out all the stops to entertain us, showed many of their magnificent sights in architecture and art, with a fascinating connection to their vibrant history. An unscheduled visit to Lourdes, indescribably moving, will resonate in all our hearts for ever.

They had opulently housed, watered, fed and feasted us with ultimate charm. So, it was no wonder that we all felt quite sad that it had all come to an end. On the other hand, we were glad to be able to “space-out “ a bit on the way home, in readiness to face our domestic responsibilities again, after a very enjoyable, carefree week away, with a very full programme.

It was a warm and heart-felt “adieu” with the temperature creeping up to 30° C and rising, as we left the “Place de Verdun”.

Following the toll-routes and a fairly direct, but uneventful itinerary, we arrived at Toulouse Airport at 13.50 hrs.

Our E.T.D. was 16.20, but before that, we were treated to a new, self-managed, fully electronic passport control system before boarding.

As we touched down in Bristol at 17.30, with our recent “rêveries ravissantes” of the beautiful Pyrénées-Atlantiques, we were greeted with the equally lush and green countryside at home, with sunny summer weather to welcome us back.

After a swift exit with our luggage, our mini bus speedily drove us home, as we were all keen to pick up where we had left off, only a week ago, but it seemed a lot longer in our minds, because...time flies when you are having fun, which is what Friendship Force is all about.

Else Hedges - van Elk.

