

# France – Monaco, Provence, Languedoc PART 2

## Thursday – Day 8

Time to move on! The day has thrown up a brilliant blue sky, with not a cloud to be seen. We take our time over breakfast and I find the scenic route to **Avignon**, courtesy of **ViaMichelin**. There are many turns, road numbers and towns to be written down but hopefully I've got it all in order.

Nathalie comes in for your usual morning visit and chat. We chat about travel – they have done quite a bit and the fact they rent an apartment in the snow every year to go skiing – it is only an hour from their home.

It comes time to load up the C3 and hit the road. Nathalie asks if we will take the highway and we laugh..... we *never* take the highway.... we have way too much fun getting lost on the back roads. We say our fond goodbyes to Natalie, take lots more photos on this splendid morning and hit the road.



First deviation is we decide to go to Cannes, given it is such a gorgeous day. It's a beautiful drive down the coast, through **Cagnes sur Mer** and **Antibes**. There are people out walking all along the Promenade.... probably thankful to see the sun for the first time in a while. We certainly are.

We get to **Cannes** and do a couple of laps of the waterfront..... it is spectacular in the autumn sunshine and the temperature gauge is showing 21°. There are a few people in swimming and many sunning themselves on the beach. The cafes are full and the fabulous people are just *everywhere*.



We leave Cannes and start our climb into the mountains. We pass through **Grasse**, which is a wonderful village with views back towards the coast. We climb quickly and in no time are in the mountains, at around 1100m. The scenery is spectacular and the snow line obvious on the rocky outcrops.



We get to **Castellane** – a beautiful village surrounded by mountains with a river running through. It is picture postcard perfect. The most interesting feature is the church, set high on the mountain behind the village. I ponder what in dickens they were thinking when they built the church up there!



Onto **Comps** and into the **Gorge du Verdon** – a 28km stretch of the most magnificent gorges, with the river rushing through. Unfortunately, we miss a turn and see less of the gorges than we planned or would have liked.



Time is slipping away and we make an executive decision to head to the highway. In reality, we've covered about 20% of the distance we need to get to Avignon, after 4 hours of travel! We cut down through **Draguignan**, hit the freeway and Fangio puts the pedal to the metal on the A8. We pass through/by **Aix-en Provence**, the light starts fading and we finally hit the outskirts of **Avignon** shortly after 5pm. I'm thinking we should make our accommodation around 5.30pm but the traffic becomes bumper to bumper as soon as we leave the freeway (A7).

The B&B we're staying at is on **Isle Bathelasse**, which sits in the middle of the **Rhone River**, and there's only one bridge in and out. We find our B&B, **Domaine du Rhodes**, just a tad before 7pm. We enter and find Francois, breathing a sigh of relief! She is delightful and tells us the traffic is bad due to it being a holiday tomorrow. There is a separate door to the accommodation and a wonderful dining room to the right and lounge room to the left. We meet Dale and Louise who have not long arrived.

Francois shows us to our room, **Matisse**, and it's just lovely. A large room, walk in robe, lovely bathroom and furnished with family heirloom pieces. We make our way downstairs and Francois recommends two restaurants for dinner – an Italian and French. We pick the French and she makes a reservation for us, as well as gives us business cards for both, with directions on the reverse side.

I chat with Dale and Louise while Dave unloads and carts the ports up a few flights of stairs. Dale is a retired investment banker and they've bought a ranch in Arizona, where they've settled. They've been in France for nearly four weeks, travelling around and are good company to chat with.

It's time to go for dinner and we drive off the island and over the other side of the river to **Villeneuve Les Avignon**.

**AOC** is a fabulous French bistro style restaurant, with the kitchen in the dining room, to one side. The menu is comprehensive but we can't read it, except for identifying the odd ingredient. The waiter comes and asks how we're going... not well, we can't read the menu! He says "then, I will help you" and he does. I order pork belly, Dave the beef and our waiter recommends a "full bodied" red. Great choice. They have an extensive wine cellar and all the wines are available by the glass.

My pork is possibly the best I've ever had but Dave's beef is disappointing..... really stringy and tough. It's a great spot though and we have a fun night.

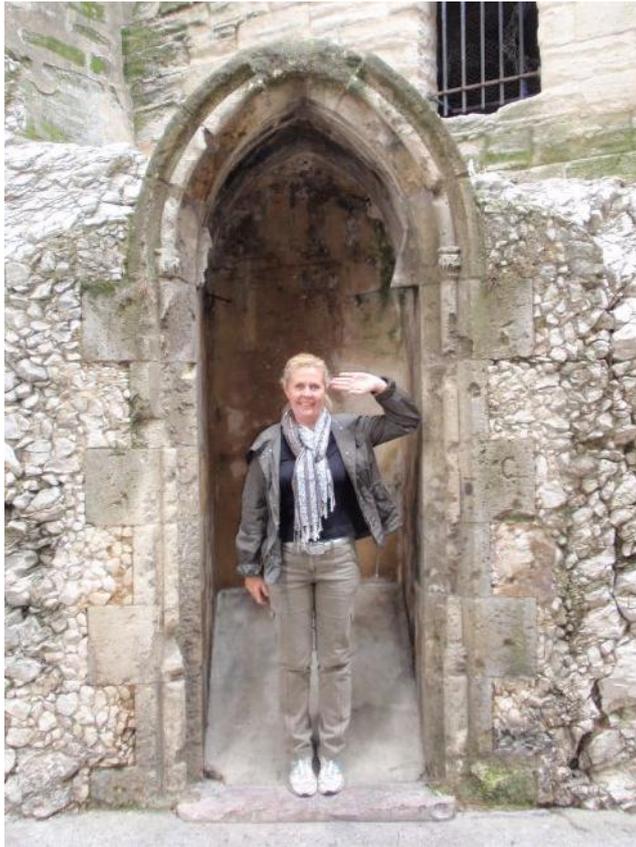
## **Friday – Day 9**

We take breakfast, joining Dale and Louise. Francois is at the table and her husband, Paco, also joins us. We have lots of chatter and they are so helpful with their recommendations. I was planning to go to **Carpentras** markets today but both Francois and Paco shake their heads..... they are large markets and not that good. They recommend we go to Uzes tomorrow. Done deal. They also give us a plan for Sunday, along with a map. Mont Ventoux maybe Monday? Pending good weather?

The place is fogged in, although it's supposed to be a fine day today. We decide we'll go into Avignon and walk around the old town. It's a walled city and looks lovely. Pierre also recommended we visit the Palais du Papes (the Pope's Palace) so we'll do that as well.

We are joined at breakfast by three other couples, two French and their friends from Spain.

There's plenty of free parking, just outside the town wall, which makes it easy. The old town is a delight.... beautiful architecture, outdoor cafes, lots of neat shops. The town is just gorgeous and we enjoy walking around the meandering streets.



It's quiet, a combination of the off season and the holiday. We walk and walk and walk and then go to **Les Halles**, where there is a thriving market.

We are mesmerised by the cheese shop. Unbelievable choice and it all looks so good. Next shop is a bar – the locals are standing about, vino in hand, loaves of bread, cheese and cold meats set up on the bar, having a grand old time. What a civilised way to do things! There are fabulous Bucheries (butchers), Boulangeries (bread shops), Patisseries (pastries to die for), fruit and veg, seafood.... all the produce you need. I'm really taken by the herb and spice store which seems to have a concoction to flavour or marinate every possibility.



We leave the market and wander across the square, pondering lunch. At which time we decide we'll buy some cheese and a lump of bread and go back home early'ish and enjoy our purchases in the comfort of home. We have a lovely time with the cheese man.... he knows

his cheeses, gives us samples and makes recommendations. We end up with a Roquefort, a really old cheese, another milder cheese and the runniest, yummiest looking cheese I think I've ever seen. Off to the bread man for a lump of cereal bread..... they sell it by the kg! We get some strawberries and then go to the olive shop... again, we have samples.

The olive man asks where we're from..... when we tell him, he yells out to the chap in the next store, who sells gamey things like geese, rabbits, etc and there's real performance to follow. Gamey man is very animated and holds up his wares whilst telling some sort of yarn. We've been in the market for well on an hour and leave with all our goodies, picking up a nice little vin rouge on the way out.



We trek over to the **Palais du Pape**. The Palais has an audio tour so we mike up and away we go. The heads of the Catholic church were in Avignon in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Italy was in turmoil and there was an anti Catholic movement which made it difficult to rule from Rome. There's quite a few of the Popes featured and it seems they made a tidy sum by raising the taxes to fund the enormous Palais they built, followed by its many extensions.



There is the most magnificent Cathedral du Notre Dame next door, with a beautiful gold statue of the Virgin Mary atop. The statue seems to glow, whichever angle you look at it from. We climb to the terraces of the Palais, where the beauty of Avignon stretches out before us.



Our ticket also gives us access to le **Pont Saint-Benezet**, which stretches over the Rhone. We're starting to tire and have a quick look at the Pont (bridge) before traipsing back to the car and heading home.

The afternoon light shows our B&B in the light it deserves. A beautiful old stone building, that was once a hunting lodge. Covered in the vines that are now turning as the days grow colder.



We settle in with a cup of tea and our spread of cheeses and bread. Too comfortable.

## **Saturday – Day 11**

The day is slightly overcast but not foggy. We join Dale and Louise, the French couple, Spanish couple and another French couple with a small child (who arrived last night) for breakfast. Francois' husband, Paco, also joins us for breakfast – he was born in Spain but moved to Paris with his parents when he was six.

I'm curious as to how big D&L's 'ranch' actually is..... it's 24 square miles, approximately 15,000 acres. Dale adds "not large compared to Australia." I think it's large. The boundary of their property is up in the hills. It sounds gorgeous. They are off today.... making their way to Paris where they fly out on Tuesday for Jordan. We exchange details and hope to keep in contact – we have an invitation to the ranch..... be careful what you wish for!!!

We enjoy brekkie and I get Francois to mark on the map all the places she's recommended we visit. They are many and we have a solid three day schedule ahead of us. Dale & Louise are leaving just as we pull out so we catch up again and Louise asks if we're going to the markets in Uzes. Indeed we are. So are they as Louise says she "never misses a chance to go to a good market!"

**Uzes** is about 30mins drive from Avignon and is a beautiful medieval town with a bustling cafe and restaurant scene. The streets are packed, the locals are drinking coffee and smoking like chimneys and the cars and pedestrians mingle down the main street, carefully avoiding each other, clearly by good luck more than good management.

I spy a salami stand. They have the best range of salamis you could imagine.... herb salami, poivre, chevre, chilli, beef, DONKEY!!!! We take some samples .... Dave tries the donkey and tells me it's good. Face says not so good and he quickly follows through with some smoked salami. As things would happen, along come Dale & Louise! We discuss how 'not French market' this is looking, due to stands selling things like Calvins, but it's huge so we continue along in pursuit of our Provencal experience.

The stands on the street thin out so we take a left, into the Centre Ville. The market stands take on a new life..... I have found my French markets! Cheese, seafood, meat, more cheese, soap, flowers, cheese, salamis, pottery, olives, baskets. Tres bonne!

We take in the atmosphere of this vibrant market and once again come across an amazing le fromage shop. We are sampling.... again.... and the cheese is wonderful. We look up and, lo and behold, it's the same cheese man we purchased our goods from yesterday.

We find a pottery stall – I was going to buy some beautiful pottery while in Eze but, by the time we watched the sunset, the store was closing. I haven't seen pottery as lovely since. This stall has all sorts of odds and ends.... I just want to buy a wee something to take home as a memory of our time here. I like to do this so that every time I use it, we think of where it came from. I find a beautiful bowl and a water jug.... they cost €42 (total) which I think is ok.

I am happy now. We can go! It's after midday so we make tracks as we've got a few things still on the schedule. We pick up two pears and an apple on the way out, to have for dinner tonight.





About 10 minutes down the road is **Pont du Gard**, a three tiered Roman aqueduct that was built in 19BC to bring water from Uzes to Nimes. It was part of a 50km long system of water channels, designed to carry 20,000 cubic metres of water per day, and is World Heritage listed. It is a sight to behold and we spend time walking around, taking the bridge in from different aspects.



Next stop is **Le Baux de Provence**, population 380, which is perched high on a cliff in the heart of the Alpilles, 30km south of Avignon. The cliffs in the area seem to rise out of nowhere; stark and white and reminiscent of the gorges we drove through on our way here on Thursday. Le Baux sits atop the mountain.... a(nother) medieval village with dramatic scenery and wonderful architecture.

We find a beaut spot for lunch, on a terrace with magical views down the valley and across to the cliffs on the opposite side. We order veal with mushrooms.... none left. Salmon please.... none left. You can have scallop and prawn skewer. Ok. Dave orders (finally) a steak.... can't be as bad as the last one! We order a chevre salad to share as entree. And a wee dram of vin rouge.

The prawn skewer and salad arrive together. No worries..... the salad is good but nothing like the others we had. The prawn and scallop skewer is fine but there's also lettuce and couscous.

Dave's steak is good but with the same cheap adornments in the form of lettuce and French fries.



So, the meal's not great but the company is exceptional and the view amazing. We enjoy the terrace before wandering further through the village. At the top of the village is the **Chateau le Beaux**, which had a paid entry (nearly everything does in France) so we gave it a miss as the afternoon is wearing on.

We visit a beautiful church, which appears to be cut into the rock face. The village is just delightful and we meander through laneways and peer into shops. We find another terrace, with another stunning view. How many photos can you take of one place...? seems like many.



We drive further through the mountains until the land flattens out again and we get to **St-Remy-de-Provence**. This is number four on today's list and we drive through slowly but don't stop, as the light is fading and we've had such a lovely day. St Remy looks wonderful though and is quite busy for a late Saturday afternoon. There are a lot of ruins on the outskirts as we come into town, including a pyramid. I comment to Dave that I like to take my pyramids in Egypt, although I'm sure it would have been interesting.



It's just after 5pm when we get home and the day is fading into evening. The sun rises around 7:30am and sets around 5:15pm. The dusk doesn't last long and night falls quickly once the sun goes down.

We unload our purchases, shower and settle in for a quiet night relaxing and reading. A new couple have arrived, Mike and Margo, from Canada and we have a chat to them before they go out to dinner.

## **Sunday – Day 12**

We rise to a foggy morning BUT..... the sun is showing all signs of breaking through at any time. Francois says that it will be a sunny day and we stick with our plan to drive to **Mont Ventoux**.

First town we get to is **Carpentras**..... seems quite big and looks a bit ordinary on approach but the Centre Ville is delightful, as is the way with all French villages it would seem.



Onto **Carcomb**, another lovely village, then **Le Barroux**, where we park and walk through the remains of the **Chateau Barroux**..... it opens to the public at 10:30am. Given the bells have just now chimed 11am maybe it's not open today.



**Malaucene** is gorgeous..... and busy. There are people everywhere in the cafes and there's evidence of lots of bike riding and motor bike riding going on.

Our next town is **Beaumont-du Ventoux**, a pretty village but quiet. We pass a number of cyclists on the way up the mountain and the average gradient has been 5-7%..... they are doing it tough. There's lots of evidence of the painted words of support for the Tour cyclists along the road.



The temperature is gently dropping down from 17° and it's not long before it becomes 7° as we go up and up and up. **Mount Serein** is a fabulous stop, about 7km from the peak and we have a look around. Lots of log cabins and the bestest camping ground at the end of the road..... location, location, location! They have magical view to the snow covered alps and down the valley. The camp isn't full or anything but there's plenty of people around, most of them obviously here to hike or mountain bike. The chalets look great and I peer through the window to have a look (into a vacant one) ..... the door isn't locked so I venture in for a look around. There's one room with a double bed, one with two singles, a neat kitchen and sitting area and (I assume) bathroom facilities behind the closed doors. It's so cosy and warm inside too.

We find a lovely cafe and sit outside to enjoy a hot chocolate. Dave has short sleeves on and I have a light jacket over a tshirt..... it's the warmest 7° degrees ever in the sun and we don't bother moving quickly! When we do move upwards again to the top of **Mont Ventoux**..... it is blowing an absolute gale and the cosy 7° has turned into an icy 7°... I suspect the wind is coming straight across from the snow covered alps to our east.



What a place!!! There are stacks of people up here..... lots of tourists (like us) and heaps of motor bike riders. Masses of them, most of whom have exceptionally awesome bikes. I've put on my gloves and warm scarf and am as cosy as anything. We wander around and take in the atmosphere. It is only after driving up here that you can barely understand the amazing feat of the cyclists in **Le Tour** in conquering this giant of a mountain (1912m). I comment that if we don't get to see or do anything else today it's been a perfect day.... Mont Ventoux is amazing.

We take our hats off to all the cyclists we passed on the way up and who are still spilling over the peak..... all living the dream of cycling up Mont Ventoux. An extraordinary effort.

Down the other side and we call into the 'moonscape' just a few hundred metres off the peak. A flat area, covered in rock, very inhospitable really but a great view back to the Mont.



On our way down we come to **Le Chalet Reynard**, the most popular cafe we've seen in the whole of France. The tables are full and it's like a motorbike exhibition in the car park. We stop .... you must stop..... driving past this place is not possible. We take a seat, grab red wine and enjoy the surroundings.



We sit and watch the world go by and it's such a pleasant afternoon. We ditch the plans for the scenic route home and take the direct route.

Back in Avignon the late afternoon sun is showing off the city to its most beautiful advantage. The colour on the walls of the city and bridges is brilliant and we park and walk along the river.



Tonight, we set out for **Basta Cosi**, once more across the bridge. It's another neat looking restaurant and we notice four clocks on the wall.... the same as AOC the other night. Interesting.

We share a charcuterie (smoked meat) platter and a mozzarella platter (three types of mozzarella) and it's great. Dave has a pizza and I have black penne pasta with mushrooms.... excellent! The waitress speaks particularly good English, which is a real bonus, and she's friendly and efficient. Dave noticed on the counter a reference to AOC.... the penny drops that they are the same owner, same four clocks, same layout with the kitchen in the restaurant, same look and feel.

## **Monday – Day 13**

Another foggy morning but hopefully another fine day behind it. It's cold – I check and it's 3°. We're first to breakfast and have a long and lovely chat with Francois and Paco before we're joined by Mike and Margo.

Today we're going to the east to seek out villages that Francois has marked on the map for us. She's provided us with a local map and we also bought a map of South France not long after our arrival.

**L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue** is the first town... again, picture perfect in what is now a sunny morning.

**Fontaine-de-Vaucluse** is next on the list ..... a village that has an underground spring that feeds the river **Sorgue**, which rushes through the centre of town. We walk up a path to the source and it is a large pool, seemingly still water in the rocks..... the water must be coming up extremely quickly to force it out with such a roar as it tumbles down the rocks. We climb up the rocks to see what else we can find and you can hear the roar of water coming from the rock face. I can't figure out if it's an echo or the sound of the water behind the rocks.... Dave reckons it's the latter (later reading confirms this).



**Gordes** is next, perched on the top of a hill with million dollar views. We park and take a walk around.... it's nearly 1pm and we figure if we're going to have lunch we'd better do it asap. We find a lovely restaurant, **L'Estaminet**, in the sun (except for our table). We share a chevre (goat's cheese) salad and it's possible the best we've had. The cheese is baked in filo with a round of bread in the middle, accompanied by salad.

We both have salmon, which has been baked in a bag, along with carrots, zucchini and capsicum, with olive oil. It is sublime and probably the best meal we've had in France. Gordes is a beautiful village with stunning views across the valley below.



We continue as it's 2:30pm and we've still got four more places to visit. **Roussillon** is the 'ochre' town, with red cliffs that rise out of nowhere. And matching red dirt. The houses here aren't the usual stone buildings but the same ochre colour as the cliffs/dirt.... as though they've been transported from Sedona (Arizona) rather than built here in Provence.



We reach **Bonnieux** as the light is fading..... a medieval village on a hill and can see our next stop, Lacoste, sitting atop the next hill. **Menerbes** is the last stop along the way. The grape vines are the most brilliant yellow in the late afternoon sun. As we look across the valley, we can see Mont Vontoux in the far background.... it's everywhere!

Back home again for a quiet night, catching up on things and maybe (very maybe) doing a bit of packing before our departure in the morning.

## **Tuesday – Day 14**

We wake to no fog and light cloud. Today's the day we must pack up and leave.... not happy. Avignon has been absolutely delightful and Francois and Paco the best hosts you could ask for. We've loved being here and the house is so large and welcoming..... sitting in the lounge, as we've done most nights, has been an absolute delight..... big leather chairs, lovely lighting, huge room, no noise anywhere.

We do most of our packing before going down for brekkie. Francois and Paco are at the table, finishing off their own breakfast and the Canadians are yet to rise. By the time we're just about ready to go, Margot and Mike are just arriving so we linger on..... we're not keen to leave, let alone in a hurry. We enjoy another breakfast with lots of animated banter. We spend two hours at the breakfast table, a mammoth effort even for us, before we lumber upstairs to collect the ports and bid our farewells.

When we're all packed up, Francois puts her arms out and says "So... you are ready to leave me?" "No, I'm not ready, but we have to go anyway!" We bid fond farewells and hope that we'll cross paths again... either when they come to Australia or we'll just have to make our way back here another time. Not a difficult proposition.

We are travelling to **Narbonne** and can take the highway (189km, 2hrs) or the subsidiary roads. We start on the latter as we head for **Nimes**, 31km south. After 45 minute we are still 10km short of Nimes..... this journey is going to turn into another drawn out affair and we opt to take the freeway.

It was a lovely 17 when we left Avignon and the temperature gauge has dropped slowly ever since, now hovering around 13 degrees as the dark clouds roll in and rain starts to fall. The day isn't improving.

We approach Narbonne and the temperature seems to have settled on 14°. I've mapped our destination into the iPhone and it guides us easily to **Will's Hotel**, in the centre of the city. Will's is close to the train station (about half a block away) and is a 'one night only' type of hotel. Two stars.



Our hostess, Patricia, greets us and shows us to our room. The room is neat but has an overpowering smell of bleach. At least the bathroom has been cleaned! We open the window to let some air in and have a look around. Doesn't take long..... a bed, desk, chair, hanging space behind a curtain, bathroom in a box off to one side .... the bathroom looks as though it's brand new. A bit out of character with the rest of the room but, overall, the place is comfortable and just dandy for our one night stay. Patricia asks if we want breakfast and we decide we may as well..... especially when she says "do you like great coffee?" Certainly do!

Patricia gives us a map and tells us it's easier to make our way around town on foot, rather than drive.

This joint is more expensive than where we've been staying in Avignon, where we had superb facilities, lots of room and could have stayed for a month without a second thought. It's only a few dollars more here and that's the price you pay for convenience (to the train station!) I guess, as many of their clients seem to stay here to catch the train out the next day.

We have to drop the car off by 4.30pm and it's now 2pm. The drop off is at the station, so no big deal, and we decide to go for a drive around to get our bearings and have a look at the place. The drive is uninspiring, so there must be something of interest around somewhere. We drive around and around and there's nothing of any interest whatsoever. Narbonne is everything that is bland about winter in Europe.... not a saving grace to be found.

We decide we'll drop off the car and go for a walk... the weather is threatening and the dark clouds hover but so far the rain has held off. We go to the train station and drop the car off without too much trouble.... just a little bit as we work through the drop off instructions in French. The odometer reads 10,583... it was 9,068 when we picked up the C3 so we've covered 1500+ kilometres.

That done we also purchase our train tickets for tomorrow, given we're already at the station. Not too many problems there and we purchase "primi" class, first class, given we've got a 7 hour trip tomorrow. It's only €20 extra per person (€73 compared to €53).... hopefully, it's worth it. Given it was AUD \$105pp, second class, to purchase the tickets in Australia, we've done quite well!

Off we trek to find our way through the Narbonne city streets. A few blocks from the hotel, we come across a lovely square.... things are looking up. Patricia has recommended a restaurant for dinner **La Coq Hardi** and we have a sticky beak at the menu.... looks lovely. The owner sees us peering in and opens the door to ask if he can be of assistance. We say we'll come for dinner and make a reservation. The street is very narrow and lined with shops and quite beautiful. I'm sure it would look 500% better on a sunny day and Narbonne has certainly surprised us.... thank goodness as I was beginning to think there was absolutely nothing redeeming about the place at all!



A bit further on, we look to the right and there's the **Cathedral Notre Dame du Pont**. It's quite large and we go in for a peak..... on the door there are signs "No photos" and "Please be silent". The church is magnificent..... a large altar in the middle, surrounded by huge, grey marble pillars, with smaller altars around the edge. Organ music plays quietly in the background.

We come out at another large square, lined with cafes and with the town hall (I guess) it's major feature. It really is quite lovely and I've given Narbonne a reprieve. We keep walking around and eventually go back to the hotel to do some catch up before going out for dinner.

Unexpected gems when you least expect it! **Au Coq Hardi** is fabulous..... great atmosphere in a restaurant with stone walls, delightful owner, fantastic chef (husband we suspect). Dave has jambon and I (predictably) have chevre salad; duck confit follows and the duck I had in Nice is now the second best duck I've ever had. The whole evening is just lovely and we consider this the best restaurant we've been to in France.



### **Wednesday – Day 15**

Early up and off to the train station, destination Valencia. France has been a delight and the many places we've visited simply stunning. And the chevre..... ooh la la. Is there anything better than French cheese?