

Val d'Isere and Europe – 1999

The contents were all part-prepared at different times and were ultimately delayed due to the loss of Christopher's mobile phone en route.

Monday, January 4th, 1999

Up early in the morning to buy some last minute items from the ski and backpacker shops around Hardware Lane in Melbourne. Thermal underwear, ski socks, camping towels, walking boots and so on. I was surprised to see quite a few Chinese girls carefully examining backpacks, buying parkas and apparently taking an interest in 'hardy' pursuits such as bush walking.

Chuan, Christopher and I arrived at Tullamarine and presented ourselves at the Lauda Air check-in counter at about 11PM, a little late. The aircraft was quite full and we could not be seated together, not that we wanted to be. Chuan being the noisiest about his imagined rights, to his great pleasure, was upgraded to Business Class.

Tuesday, January 5th, 1999

After a gruelling 23 hours or so locked up in a tin can, we arrived in Vienna via Kuala Lumpur to be met by Po at the Airport.

Chuan with considerable foresight bought a variety of foreign currencies in Melbourne for use whilst in Europe, one set of which was Belgian Francs. When we asked 'Why did you buy Belgian Francs, do you plan visiting Belgium on the way back?' He replied, "Isn't Geneva in Belgium?"

"No, Geneva is in Switzerland and is where we are to catch the bus to Val d'Isere, after flying there by Lauda Air from here in Vienna on Saturday".

Po had arranged a Pension for us and we spent the next two days looking around Vienna. I was a little surprised to see Chuan darting here and there to take photographs of 'the old buildings'.

Vienna is quite a way from Val d'Isere. But this was romantic Vienna of the river Danube, the cultured Vienna of Strauss and the mysterious Vienna of the Third Man. Who could complain.

Some of the time was spent retracing the steps of 'Harry Lime', the black marketeer from the movie, 'The Third Man'. So we walked to the giant Ferris Wheel featured in the movie, on the way to the banks of the Danube. It was a cloudy day and the river waters were dark and uninspiring. We decided not to enter the sewers to inspect Harry's escape routes.

Carol Reed was the director of 'The Third Man' and Graham Greene developed the script.

Having coffee at the 'Café Mozart in 1949, Reed heard itinerant zither player Anton Karas, who could neither read nor write music, playing his zither to amuse the patrons for just the tips – a 'busker'.

Reed was impressed and had Anton play two of his tunes for the movie, with the pieces renamed 'The Harry Lime Theme' and the 'Cafe Mozart Waltz'. These tunes soon became world hits, ending Anton's precarious living at the Cafe Mozart.

As our boarding school projectionist, I often played a blue labelled Decca 78 rpm record of one of the tunes during the interval or at the end of the movie show on Saturday nights.



[Movie Titles with the Harry Lime Theme](#)

'The Third Man' has become a movie classic, described by movie guru Luke McKernan as a 'perfect movie'.

[There was a Third Man](#)

The closing credits are unique. As Harry's former friend Holly Martins who lead to his death waits at the end of the cemetery avenue, Harry's beautiful lover walks with dignity towards the audience, ignoring Martins for his betrayal as she passes accompanied by the dying notes of the zither. Suddenly the two words 'The End' appear on the screen and stay there for ten seconds and that's it, the movie is over.

So it was certainly obligatory for us to also drink coffee at the Café Mozart like Carol Reed and Graham Greene.

It seems Viennese have been drinking coffee for a long time as evidenced by the Café Frauenhuber, opened in 1788. Both Mozart and later Beethoven performed there to entertain the guests, no doubt like Anton Karas for a small fee.

Another café known for notable clientele was the Café Landtman, opening in 1873. Too late for Mozart or Beethoven but certainly available to Freud who visited frequently.

Both were still open to us.

We visited a museum dedicated to Hundertwasser, a highly acclaimed Austrian painter and architect. With respect to his paintings, I could see little development in his style over a period of 40 years.

He felt that the sense of touch was as important as sight and sound. Accordingly he liked gently undulating floors so we could 'feel the motion of walking'. The museum floors had been installed to his design and they could certainly be felt underfoot, but it was hard to stop the tables and chairs from rocking.

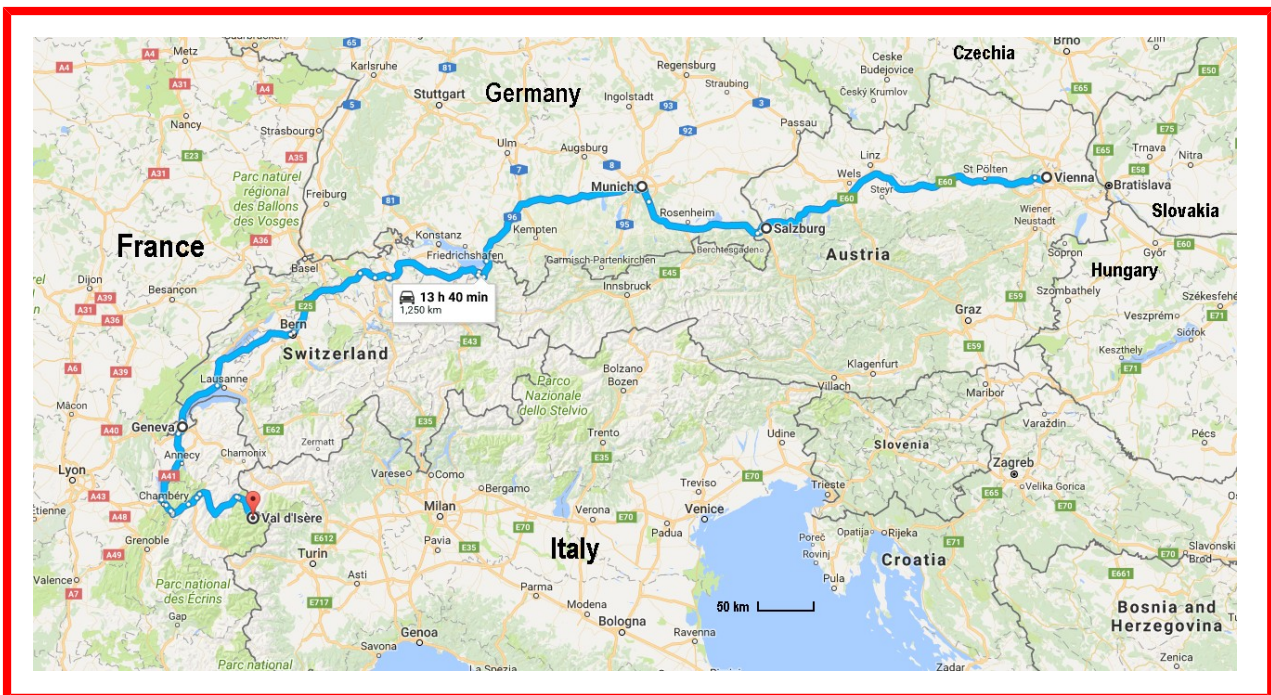
Vienna, Geneva

Thursday, January 7th

Even though we had already paid for aircraft tickets, Chuan insisted we hire a prestige car and drive from Vienna to Geneva. The distance is something like from Melbourne to Whyalla, about 1000 km, however mostly via autobahns. So with the assistance of his 'Anderson Employee Discount', we spent some time arranging a car to Chuan's liking.

It must have looked strange to see four backpackers throw their packs into the boot of a Mercedes and drive off like petty capitalists.

That afternoon we drove from Vienna to Salzburg (where both Mozart and 'Sound of Music' were born). We stayed in a family home located on the edge of a lake with separate bedrooms, toilets etc for a few (like us) guests. It was pleasant and very inexpensive.



Friday, January 8th

We visited the Salzburg city, finding of all things, Turkish Kebabs for sale in the streets and had time to visit the Hohensalzburg Fortress. A massive structure high on a rocky outcrop overlooking Salzburg. Again, Chuan seemed to be much more impressed than I expected.



After Salzburg we drove to Munich for the night. In the evening, we visited a Bavarian restaurant in search of Schweinhaxe, grilled pigs knuckles, introduced to Daisy by Uncle Francis when Ambassador to the EEC. Chuan had some and thought they were 'just okay'.

By a strange twist of fate, a Bavarian musician, like Anton once did in Vienna, was playing a piano accordion to amuse the guests at the restaurant and played that very tune, 'The Harry Lime Theme'.

Saturday, January 9th

Chuan still retained an interest in aircraft, particularly military aircraft and had discovered there was an aircraft museum at Schleissheim, a town a little out of Munich. We visited the museum and it was very interesting, with mostly Russian, British and US fighters and bombers. It was a little disappointing to find that the famous German warplanes did not seem to be well represented.



Then it was most surprising to see references to `ELDO'.(European Launcher Development Organisation). This was because when I was working at WRE in South Australia, much of the work being done was in collaboration with ELDO.

The primary project was to test launch what had been intended as a British ICBM, but later had been re-engineered as the final stage of a satellite launching rocket. It was dubbed the `Blue Streak'.

It employed liquid oxygen (LOX) as the propellant and required advanced design of a system of large diameter pipes to pump the LOX to the rocket fuel tanks within a few minutes before launch. The pipes needed to be sterile, to avoid potentially explosive contact with the oxygen and flexible enough to absorb the shock of sudden large temperature gradients.

Peter Pemberton, a fellow guest at Aquinas College, was the chief designer in this area and became a world expert in the transport, storage and fluid dynamics of LOX.

The launch site was at Woomera where I spent some time on the gantry which holds the rocket vertical during the launch process. The large stainless steel LOX pipes zigzagged down a steep slope from the storage tanks to the gantry.

There was only one test launch at Woomera, in 1964, after which the ELDO project was shutdown by the European politicians.

Back at the Museum following the signage, there it was, an almost fully equipped Blue Streak rocket, not vertical, but sitting horizontally on stands.

It was rather sad to realise that an extraordinary technological project had ultimately come to nothing but five or six scrap rockets.

[Blue Streak Story](#)

We remained in Munich for a night and then on to Geneva.

Austria, meaning Vienna and Salzburg as well as Bavaria, meaning Munich, carry their Catholic heritage on their sleeves, with shrines mounted on the outside of buildings, shrines along the road, crucifixes and other religious icons in restaurants or Pensions, just as in homes.

As mentioned, the length of the trip was something like Melbourne to Whyalla, but as it was done in a large, recent model diesel Mercedes at about 180 kmph along autobahns most of the way, and consequently reasonably painless. We only had to fill the tank once on the way, towards the end of the journey and as diesel is less expensive than petrol here, the fuel costs were relatively inexpensive.

Christopher did a good job driving but my stomach knotted when I noticed the speedo was on 180 kmh. It was in a bigger knot when he allowed Chuan to drive around a village near Salzburg.

We caught a bus from Geneva to Val d'Isere, a four hour journey at night time. So we arrived at Val d'Isere at about 10:30 PM.

Val d'Isere

The apartment is excellent, with all the cooking and other conveniences one would ever want.

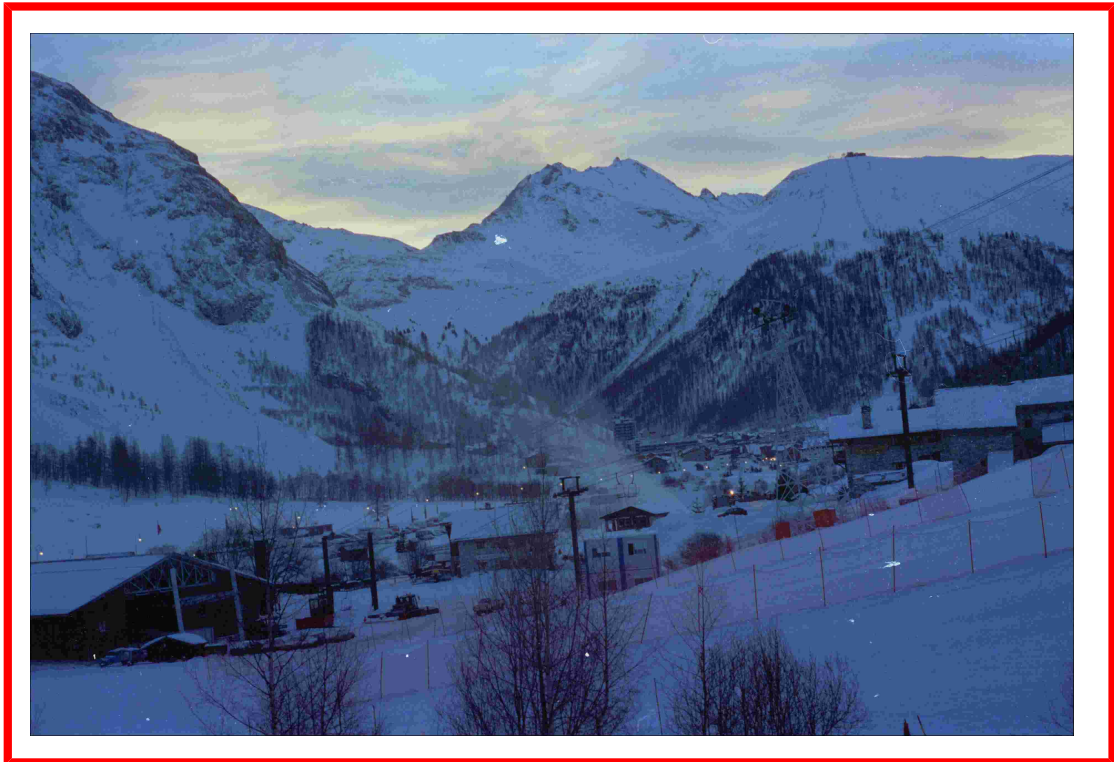


The boys have a largish room with 6 bunks and I have a smaller room with a double bed and my own bathroom. The window at the head of my bed overlooks the bottom of the ski runs.



When I wake in the morning, usually at about 7AM, without leaving the bed, I can turn my head to the right and see the lights of the little village in this valley still glimmering. While still in bed, if I look up a little to the right of the village at 7:30 AM, I can see the red glow of

the sunrise just beginning to appear behind the rocky peaks above the valley. By about 8AM, the sun itself is just peeping over the peaks and its time for me but not the others, to arise for morning exercise.



The boys do all the shopping, cooking etc and I find myself doing a lot of cleaning up - they are still really boys, dropping odd belongings here, there and everywhere.

The lifts stop at about 4:30 so we are back from the ski slopes by about 5 PM, all numb with exhaustion. Absolutely nobody moves for about an hour and then the stirring starts. Someone might go down to the supermarket for meat and vegetables, others begin preparing other parts of the meal. By the time the cooking is completed, usually a little too much, and the meal eaten, it is 9:30 PM.

Then the boys may go to the 'pub' to meet Leon and Anne Marie and hopefully some other interesting people.

I stay at home, clean up, and perhaps prepare some emails.

The skiing here includes elements of Hotham and Buller and of course elements Hotham or Buller cannot provide.

Regarding the former, you can be caught on a chair lift moving infinitesimally slowly in a gale-force wind, blasting you with ice-particles. At the drop-off point at the peak, Chuan fell on me, I fell over and when I tried to stand again, the gale then blew me over again for good measure - just to show who is boss.

If you keep your old ticket and show it next year, you receive a 10% discount and if you are over 75, the lifts are absolutely free.

Of the first four days, all days except one have been cloudy with generally a high wind at the top. So either the more distant of the very many runs have been closed or people

have tended to stay 'close to home'. The result is the runs have been moderately populated. But despite that, there are no lift queues.

As in Australia, the slopes are relatively uncrowded during lunchtime, so that is a good time to ski without interference.

I have discovered that it is a 'myth' that if you ski from top to bottom, it can take you up to lunch time. The runs are certainly much longer than in Australia, however I went as high as I could and skied non-stop under controlled conditions (that is more or less sedately) to the bottom in 12 minutes. In this case the bottom was at about 1200 metres and the top at about 3000 metres.

Leon, who is here and has been here previously several times assures me that if you go 'way out' to a certain run, it can take two hours - but from his description of it, I would think a lot of that time would be recovering from falls, contemplating the next suicide section and resting. My feeling was correct, towards the end of our stay, Christopher did try it and completed it in about half an hour.

I tried wearing thermal underwear for the first time in my life on the first day. Both Christopher and I sweltered, even on the chair lift, so we gave that away. The truth is, the temperature on the cloudy days has ranged from -2 to +6, not unlike Australia. However, we were shocked to find that at the top on the one sunny third day, the temperature was -15. With no wind, it did not feel especially cold, but I had been wondering why my gloves kept freezing to the chair lift bar and to metal part of my stocks.

For the first four days, the quality of the snow varied from 4 inch dry powder on hard pack, through somewhat 'gluggy' snow of a similar depth on hard pack (but never as 'gluggy' as is common in Australia) to just – hard pack.

The first is the best and one can generally find a run with that type of snow, although, I have not bothered searching for the best run as they are all better than in Australia.

Indeed, today against my better judgement, I followed the 'boys' in search of the best run, encountering the horror chairlift I mentioned earlier and then a series of narrow, steep trails with a six inch powder/glug mixture.

That was a disaster for me. Although I could have managed it 15 years ago, no serious skiing in the past 10 years or so meant several excruciating falls and then negotiating sections very gingerly - like a beginner. A very unsettling and ego demolishing experience.

The next few days I intend just concentrating on learning to ski.

Fortunately, I suffered no real physical injury that lasted. Perhaps my exercising for three months has meant that I am suffering less aches and pains than the others. Also, on average so far, I am up earliest, leave for the slopes earliest and get back latest, sans lunch. So physically I am standing up relatively well so far.

Po and Christopher have been buying food at the local supermarket and cooking. Mostly a 'stew' with spaghetti. So far, tasty and filling.

More practice has helped, I have skied for three days without even a 'little' fall. In addition, I have no trouble skiing from top to bottom on the longest runs without stopping for breath - unlike the rest of the team.

The last four or five days have been cloudless allowing us to see stunning mountain peaks surrounding us when we are in a valley or stretching out to the horizon when we are on a peak - peaks that are hard etched against the deep blue sky. Unlike in Australia where due to the rounded mountains, the peaks present soft edges.



Boots

The boots I hired fitted OK for length, but after a day or so, my left inside ankle bone was being scuffed. I changed, too late, to another pair which would have been OK around the ankle if I had not already rubbed it raw with the first pair. But, although they were nominally the same length as the first pair, I began 'stubbing my toes' over which I think I may lose one or two toe nails.

So with boots, make absolutely sure they are the correct length, they do not rub on your ankle bones and do not scuff your shins - the latter is from previous experience with my own boots.

Discussion

Michael Jones, Chuan, Christopher and Po could have interminable, cross-purpose, ill-defined discussions for hours after dinner. One topic seemed to be wealthy people are happier than others not so wealthy. It reminded me of Dad's reports of discussions deep into the night at the same age but in more primitive conditions in a snowbound, corrugated hut about arcane subjects such as would be the implications of zero gravity. The thought of the cold outside must do something to a person's brain - perhaps inducing it to work hard on discussions in order to keep warm.

Cooking

For the first couple of days, for breakfast we ate cereal, perhaps a boiled egg and baguettes (long bread rolls) with Brie which is soft, tasteless (to me), but most importantly, inexpensive cheese.

Lunch

We skied.

For the evening, the boys prepared a chicken/pork/xxx plus vegetable based stew which was poured over pasta. When they did the shopping at the supermarket for the evening meal, invariably they did not purchase sufficient to use their credit card. So they had to purchase extra which tended to be bottles of Merlot red wine.

At first it tasted OK for a relatively cheap wine, but drinking it in the quantities required to keep the credit cards working, it began to pall.

When Po's friend, Dr Michael Jones arrived to stay, he responded to our questions about the best food to meet our daily high energy needs, with 'chocolate or similar for instant energy replenishment and pasta for sustained energy needs during the day'.

So we modified breakfast by deleting the Baguettes and replacing those with pasta and tomato sauce. We also added a chocolate drink before we left.

But, replacing the Baguettes with pasta was not entirely due to the energy considerations.

After Michael arrived, Leon asked us over for 'wine and cheese' before dinner. We knew he had Brie, so we purchased some Beaufort cheese on the way there, a triangular section cut from a cylindrical cheese in cheese cloth - tastier than Brie, but very much more expensive. We also purchased some supplementary baguettes and the wine of course, to be able to use the credit card.

Leon also had his own Brie, Merlot and baguettes. After an hour or so of chat, eat and drink, Leon invited us to stay for dinner. So Anne Marie threw some items into their pressure cooker. While that was cooking we continued with chat, eat and drink. The pressure cooker was inspected every half an hour or so as it seemed to be inordinately slow. So we continued to chat, eat and drink until I felt I had 2 metres of baguette inside me and it was 11:30 PM. At that stage, we suggested we would forgo dinner and go home. Leon and Anne Marie seemed remarkably agreeable to that proposal.

At home, we quickly cooked yet more pasta with tomato sauce, then went to bed. Since then, I have not been able to bring myself to eat another crumb of baguette or sip another drop of Merlot.

I have decided that baguettes are made of very low quality bread which does not taste particularly well and quickly goes 'rock hard' stale. Now we buy a conventional loaf of bread at twice the price, but it tastes, has bite and remains edible for at least a couple of days.

Night life

Anne Marie, Leon's girlfriend, has worked in France for some time and speaks fluent French. Tonight she asked us all to go out to a restaurant together with Leon and her

French girlfriend. The boys jumped at the opportunity to miss cooking and to meet a 'chick'. So we all crunched our way across the frozen snow, four little boys in a row with their guardian following behind - much like Madeline. A moonless night meant the stars were clearly visible in a cold dark sky - patterned in a most un-Australian way. We passed the 'Commercial Centre', turned right across the snow over the chair-lift run 'run-off' then over a bridge which crossed a water race from a hydro electricity plant higher up. The bridge carried a sign warning against sudden floods as the plant sometimes unexpectedly releases a large volume of water. We had heard 20 children in a bus had not long ago drowned as a result of such a release.

But, it did seem highly unlikely that even the French could be so careless as to subject their citizens to flash floods with no more than a warning sign on the side of the road.



Across the road and down a short lane brought us to the restaurant, a restored mountain farmhouse building.

From what he has said, Chuan believes in always being 'pro-active' in relation to 'chicks' and he certainly succeeded in sitting next to the pretty French girl. At the dinner table we were seated four per side. Four of the boys including Chuan, together ordered a dish similar to a Fondue. Unfortunately Chuan was in an 'odd' position relative to the other

three who were symmetrically seated around the dish. So his access was limited. To gain equal access, he needed to be sitting where I was. In the end he had to concede he was in the wrong place and swapped seats with me. So then I was sitting next to the pretty French girl.

I asked if she had been to Australia.

“Non!”

I suggested that should visit there to see that our mountains were old and rounded and the edges looked soft against the sky, not like the mountains here which were young and sharp and the edges looked hard against the sky.

I cannot be sure that she understood anything I said. Ah well, not a very communicative ‘chick’ or just bored stiff by the old man speaking strangely accented English.

There was a vintage pair of skis crossed on the restaurant wall with a pair of bamboo stocks. These were the type of skis we used on the soft mountains when I was a boy. The first pairs of which we made ourselves by hand, steaming a bow into them inside a heated galvanised trough supplied by Jack Hurley, the Tallangatta Plumber two doors from us.

In addition to the vintage skis, mountain cowbells and other interesting artefacts, the restaurant included a pair of wooden clogs hanging next to the fireplace.

This reminded me of the delicate and touching Italian movie many years ago called ‘The Tree of Wooden Clogs’ in which the grandfather used the wood from one of the Landlord's olive trees to make his grand daughter a pair of clogs for Christmas. The grandfather would sit his grand daughter on his knee in front of the fire to tell her stories, usually mysterious and often frightening. He might be talking about the ‘devils’ and how they could be chased up the chimney with a special prayer. So he would recite the prayer as he stirred the fire a little with a poker without the little girl realising what he was up to.

As the few sparks wisped up the chimney he would whisper ‘See there they go now’ to which the little eyes opened wide as she clung even tighter to her beloved grandfather.

Chuan remarked that he remembered being taken by force to some interminably boring movie about clogs or something.

But this really was the first European restaurant meal which was in some way comparable in quality with Aussie restaurant food - but still relatively expensive by Aussie standards, about \$60-70 per person all up. I only had ‘Soupe de Legumes Maison’ in addition to my ‘Filet Mignon de Porc et Citron’. I was playing safe with this foreign food, I have been caught too many times by exotic names hiding hideous dishes.

At the end of the meal, the youngsters went off to the pub, but I was more than happy to come home and add some more to my emails.

So that's all from Val d'Isere for today.

Going to a restaurant last night meant the boys did not have to worry about their shopping/cooking tasks. However going to the pub afterwards and engaging in lots of dancing until 3AM resulted in some very tired people today. They only skied 1/2 a day and could not muster the energy to cook tonight. Their preferences were bed or another

restaurant. So the relatively undamaged senior member did the shopping and started cooking preparations, but the boys soon relented and Christopher took over the cooking.

Leon soon called for them to go to his place after dinner for more chat and drink.

They were very reluctant and only finally agreed as tonight is Michael's last night here. Apart from Chuan, who simply could not drag himself along, I am again enjoying myself emailing alone at home.

But, I do become tired as well and so it is off to bed for me right now.

We will be leaving here on Saturday at 1 PM, so tomorrow will be our last day of serious skiing.

Lifts

There are three types of lift from our level at about 1200m up to the next level at around 2500m. Chair lifts, a gondola and a funicular railway. Most of the chair lifts are 'old' compared to those on the Australian ski fields.

The result is they move much more slowly and so they can take up to 15 minutes from the origin to the destination. This can be excruciating if the passenger has a variety of aches and pains. For example, an ankle that has been rubbed raw by a ski boot. These types of injuries are not noticed when skiing for one is fully occupied maintaining control of two narrow boards clamped to one's feet moving at high speed over an unstable surface. But on the lift, the slight shaking tends to work its way through to every weak spot in the body. So the prolonged period on the chair lift begins to amplify the irritations until they become nagging pains.

Other disadvantages of chair lifts are the safety bar pins one's body more or less in a fixed position on the seat and one is completely exposed to the weather, for example gale force winds driving ice particles before them.

The gondolas seem to be faster than the lifts and if they have seats, one can usually arrange one's body to minimise pressure points. In addition, being enclosed, one is protected from icy winds, falling snow etc.

The funicular is a train running on a single set of rails which ascends the mountain at an extremely steep angle. All the funiculars here tunnel upwards through the inside of the mountain. Due to the steep angle, the floor of the train is like a staircase and the passengers stand on the steps.

At the bottom, the steps are angled a little from the horizontal which makes it awkward to stand comfortably. But one appreciates the over-compensation for as the funicular shoots up through the mountain, the rails become steeper and the steps then slant too far the other way. so much so that one has to lean on parts of the carriage or hold hand straps in order to avoid falling over. There is only one set of tracks entering and leaving the tunnel, but there are two trains, one at each end of the track. Somehow they pass deep inside the tunnel, but just where this occurs I have not been able to discover.

Po says the track becomes a double track for a short while in the tunnel where the two trains pass, but I never managed to observe this phenomena.

Excursions

We have been on several excursions to try other ski runs. There were originally three separate areas, Val d'Isere, La Daille and Tigne. They are all now joined together and treated as one with the generic name 'Val d'Isere'. So actually, we are in La Daille but it is only ten minutes walk to the real Val d'Isere village. However, these days, skiers never walk, they catch lifts and ski. So to visit the other areas, we may catch the lift near our apartment to reach the 2500m level, then another lift to the peak at about 2800m, then ski down the other side of the peak to another valley.

Inevitably there are several lifts starting at the bottom of that valley ascending further peaks. So we may take one of these and arriving at that peak, ski down again. We can spend the whole day ascending successive peaks and skiing down into successive valleys without ever retracing our steps. After several of these excursions, we begin to make judgements on which are the more interesting runs and at what time of the day they are best.

Types of run

Christopher likes very bumpy runs from top to bottom. The skier almost jumps from bump to bump at high speed, turning one way on the first bump, the other way on the next bump. It requires razor sharp reflexes, consummate balance and fearlessness.

Christopher is about as good as anyone I have seen doing this type of skiing.

Po and Chuan aspire to this type of skiing and no doubt with more practice will be able to do it as well. But, I think by now, I may be a little less lithe than necessary for doing bumps well.

The runs are graded by colours: Green-easy, Blue-moderate, Red-difficult, Black-very difficult.

We can all handle the red runs quite easily and also the black runs if they are not bumps from top to bottom. We leave the latter to Christopher. Usually the difficulty rating increases as the slope becomes steeper and the track becomes 'rougher'.

Snow

Due to the low temperatures in the Alps, Europeans are used to soft, dry powdery snow. If not too deep, this type of snow is forgiving of technical mistakes in skiing manoeuvres.

In Australia, due to the higher temperatures, the snow is 'wetter' and is never dry powder. If the temperature drops, the water in the snow freezes and the snow can become 'hard'. When this snow is subjected to constant skiing, it is called 'hard packed'. It can be less forgiving of technical mistakes and so tentative skiers tend to dislike 'hardpack'.

It was snowing throughout our first two days, the sky was cloudless but very cold for the third and it snowed again on the fourth. So we did experience the 'dry powder'. However for the rest of the time it has been very sunny with warmer temperatures. The result is, much of the snow is now 'hard packed'. Naturally the Europeans are complaining bitterly about the snow, whereas it does not really bother us - its just like home.

The instruction

Chuan was skiing quite well but with somewhat of a 'stem' to start his turn.

So he decided to take a private lesson. This helped and so he took a second one as well. This certainly helped him improve his style. He was intending to go on to a bumps' lesson, however a combination of increasing tiredness and onset of a cold, made him decide to abandon that plan.

Encouraged by Chuan's lessons and after finding our 'snow-legs', Po and I engaged an instructor for 1-1/2 hrs to help us correct any faults we may have. After observing us skiing, Jean Pierre told me 'You are a very experienced skier, but there are a few things we can improve'.

He then listed the following items I needed to work on:

- Approaching the turn, to be looking down the slope with the perpendicular to the line between your shoulders pointed in the direction of the turn (counter rotation).
- Weight forward on the skis.
- The knees bent.
- Start the turn by raising the body and fully weight the top ski.
- Do not prolong the turn, when you decide to turn, turn quickly.
- When the skis come around, drop down hard on the bottom ski to make it carve and check the pace.
- Keep the weight forward on the skis.
- When traversing, downhill shoulder out, knees bent into the slope - the result is your bottom will be also project into the slope.

Of course, I knew that is precisely what one is supposed to do, problem was, after Chuan had pointed out a few days before that I was leaning back, I thought I had corrected myself and was doing all the instructor said I still needed to do. So it was very useful to realise I should be still paying more attention to those fundamentals.

Po and I followed then Jean Pierre all over the mountains with him constantly correcting us.

Somehow, Jean Pierre kept addressing his remarks to me, maybe he thought I needed more advice than Po, perhaps he was deferring to the older member of the class or maybe it was just that I always seemed to push past Po to be behind the instructor. It was true I tended to follow the instructor with Po next, but it was not deliberate. When Po did manage to get in front of me, my skis somehow went faster and ovetook Po, to put me in front again.

Jean Pierre had been an instructor all his life and was remarkably fit even though he would be older than I. Nevertheless, I do not think he would quite make Dad's age.

Well, that is about all from Val d'Isere for today, Thursday.

Tomorrow night I will be spending some time packing and cleaning up ready to leave at 1:30 PM on Saturday, which may leave little time for a Val d'Isere report.

Last skiing day

Today is our last day. I started the day skiing with Po to 'nurse him along' with his bad knee. It does not appear to be really serious but has been aggravating enough to spoil the skiing part of his holiday. He really should be quite OK after a couple of weeks rest.

About midday we skied from the peak above our valley down to Tignes on the other side. It was steep and hard packed and although I had no trouble going down, Po was hesitating at each new steep pinch. But once he got going, I thought he skied it much more gracefully than I. He does have an excellent style and just needs to be a little more 'aggressive'. I feel my style is 'rough and ready', conditioned by the primitive equipment and conditions of my youthful skiing days - but it does get me through all types of snow without too much trouble.

From the Tignes valley we ascended the peak on the other side, over the peak and around to the infamous 'Silene' run, large steep bumps from top to bottom, where Christopher was skiing. I wanted to try and get a photo or two of him going over the bumps.

Po went down via the non-bumpy run and I followed Christopher. I insisted he stop after every second bump so I could catch up. Those bumps were positively evil, about half my height, threatening to throw me clear off the mountain down into the valley way below. They did catch me once, sending me shooting like a rivulet down through one of the little valleys that weave down between the bumps, on my back.

When one falls whilst skiing, sometimes one ends up on one's back, head down the slope, skis in the air kidding like an upturned tortoise down a soap-slippery slope. This is a time one really feels for the tortoise as the only way to stop is to crash into an obstacle or somehow manoeuvre a 180 degree rotation of the body so one's skis are downhill and head uphill.

Then, there is a chance of digging the edges of the skis into the snow and beginning to brake the ignominious descent. One has to be completely devoid of shame when skiing.

So, I went down a good part of Silene backwards on my back, but I was able to get my skis around and stop. Christopher thought it was the best example of 'river running' the bumps he had seen. But river running is normally performed upright - where the skier negotiates the bumps by keeping his skis in the valleys between the bumps swinging his body and skis quickly this way and that to keep in the valley. It is the most elegant way of skiing bumps and Christopher does it well.

After regaining an upright position, I skied down a little lower and set myself up to take the photographs. Christopher then came down and I think I captured a couple of good shots, although a little too far distant than I would have liked.



After a few more runs at Silene, we set off for the highest peak, La Grande Motte. Again this was two valleys away, so up to a peak on the lift, ski down to the valley, up and down again. To ascend 3/4 Grande Motte, one catches a funicular. This particular one is very large, almost cylindrical in shape fitting very closely in the tunnel. One felt like sitting in one of those cylindrical message containers that were used in large department stores. The shop assistant slips the container into an opening in the tube, closes the little door on the tube and 'whoosh', the container shoots through the tube to hit the stop in the accounts department with a loud 'clunk'.

Despite what appeared to be a tremendous speed, it took quite a while for the funicular container to reach its destination. It seemed so far through the centre of the mountain, I began to think it would take all day to ski back. At the 3/4 level, we caught a large gondola which must have held about 30 people. We were swung high into the air with the Alps all around us and eventually arrived at the top. This was at about 3500 metres, twice the height of Mt Buller but at about the same height as Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. We walked a few metres further up and from the lift station and were soon panting for breath. At that altitude, one's body certainly needs conditioning in order to absorb enough oxygen from the rarified air. But Mt Everest is over twice as high. Given our panting at 3500 m, one could readily imagine the inordinate strain on the body of Everest mountaineers.

We then began the long descent down to the Tignes valley which is at about 2100 metres.

As we were running the risk of arriving at the lifts to our own valley after they had closed, we had to move quite quickly. It was a very long, but not too difficult run down, so it was high speed turn right to check, turn left to check, turn right to check... all the way swinging to the left and right.

After a little, one developed a rhythm, Christopher first as our guide, myself second and the slightly more hesitant Po last. We swung down into the valley this way, Christopher skiing beautifully ahead until nearly at the bottom, he hit a patch of ice, skidded and fell.

I passed through it quite OK and so he was 'pipped at the post'.

Although it was quite late by then, we made the chair in time, so up to the peak above our valley and a quick and exciting ski down over hard pack to home.

That was the end of our two weeks of skiing. Now I am at about the level I was 10-15 years ago so I should be in a position to improve from this.

After skiing and prior to leaving for a restaurant at 8 PM, the boys spent most of the time sleeping whilst I did some cleaning up chores, including hand washing a few items of my clothes. There is a Laundromat, but it takes 10 Kg of clothing and costs about A\$10 a shot.

The couple of times the boys used it I did not have many soiled clothes to contribute, washing as I went along.

Leon and Anne Marie wanted to go somewhere special in order to 'say goodbye' to Po, so Anne Marie chose another French restaurant, this time right at the far end of Val d'Isere, reached by a free half hourly bus.

Come to think of it, I suppose all the restaurants here are 'French'. We are after all, living in France.

I had 'Truite Meuniere' (trout) which I would describe as OK. The meal had wound down by 11:30 and alternative pubs were being discussed, so I excused myself and caught the 11:45 PM bus back, crunching through the last few hundred metres of snow under a starlit sky and new moon.



Leaving

It is Saturday 23rd now and I know the concierge will be here in 2 hours to check the apartment as I sadly strip my bed. It was a good two weeks.

The bus will be here in a few minutes now and then we will be in Geneva. After Geneva I am not quite sure. Possibly back to Southern Germany to collect a hire car with Po's help. He gets a company discount with Hertz.

On the road

Despite the normally large falls of snow, the mountain road to Val d'Isere is kept open the year round using snow clearing machines. I noticed that at deep gully corners, where in Australia a very deep snow drift would always develop, over the Val d'Isere road was built a 'snow tunnel'. Not a completely enclosed tunnel but a 'veranda', cantilevered from the bank, so that the snow could not build up on the road. As the mountain ridges are much sharper than in Australia, the road often could not be extended to the end of a ridge then turn back on the other side of the ridge as happens in Australia. The 'hairpin' bend would be so sharp, not even a car, much less a bus, would be able to negotiate it. So, in order to provide a sufficiently large curvature, a tunnel is built through the ridge to open out on the other side well before the end of the ridge.

Another feature I notice was that we never seemed to cross a 'saddle' as often occurs on mountain roads in Australia. When on the road I could not fathom why, but it has just occurred to me that once again, the ridges are so sharp, the saddles are too narrow for a road and so the cross-over would need to occur at a lower elevation via a tunnel. But I also realise this did not actually occur with our bus as the hill-side of the bus was always on the right side, so we did not ever cross a ridge via a saddle, through a tunnel or otherwise.

The bus driving skills were impressive, the bus would be curving into a tunnel at about 40Kmph and the corner of the bus would seem to be only 6 inches from the corner of the tunnel. Or the bus would be curving around a road clinging to a very steep mountain high above a deep valley below, with the wheels seeming to be only 6 inches from the edge.

In some valleys, somewhat below Val d'Isere, the trees were still well snow covered whereas at Val d'Isere, the snow had melted from most trees. I assumed that these valleys saw little of the sun during winter and so the snow just did not melt. In Lahsa, at 3500 metres, a person can feel quite warm in the sun, but will freeze immediately they step into the shade.

It was with complete surprise that I saw a 'beware of kangaroos on the road' sign (a leaping kangaroo) but as we came closer to the sign, I realised it was a leaping deer, not a kangaroo. These appeared several times along the road in the valleys well below Val d'Isere.

After about 3 hours we were weaving along the edge of the large lake at Annecy, passed a 'Tennis Club' without courts until I noticed the courts were inside a large barn-like building. To my relief, shortly after we passed the 'Annecy Tennis Club' with proper courts in the open, through the old town and then on the autobahn towards Geneva, the setting sun seen low through the left side windows of the bus, as it should have been. Geneva is North-East of Val d'Isere.

An hour later we descended into a the thick damp fog enveloping Geneva, a rather depressing end to days of fresh air and clear blue skies at Val d'Isere.

Exercise

Since first arriving in Vienna, I have been trying to continue my 5BX exercise program without disturbing the boys. As usually there are two or more in the same room, I have been rising well before them and doing them in the bathroom as softly as I can. It is not so easy to 'tip-toe' running on the spot.

I also found that when I did sit-ups, my backbone 'knuckles' abraded on the hard floor. Although I felt it, I did not realise it had been doing some damage until I took off my Singlet and saw a large patch of blood in the centre of the back. After that, I performed the sit-up routine on the bare bottom sheet on my bed.

Until Munich I had heard no comment from the boys, so I thought I had been successfully quiet. Apparently the sound insulation of the Munich Pension was not quite so effective, for at breakfast Christopher asked 'What was that thumping noise you were making?' When I replied that it was my exercise he said 'Well, that is pretty impressive, I could hear-thump, thump, thump, thump very fast (150 steps of running on the spot), then thump, thump, thump slowly (10 astride jumps) and the cycle seemed to go on forever'.

I was surprised at that because I am well below the 5BX level I was on years ago and so thought my current exercise program was relatively tame.

At Val d'Isere I tried to continue the exercise program in order to maintain the discipline and also as a 'muscle loosener'. So I started at 8 AM every morning. As time went by, it became more and more difficult and my exercise attempts became more and more feeble. Touching my toes is the first exercise and for the first five, I could barely push my hands below my knees. By the twentieth, I could nearly touch my toes and my muscles were beginning to feel better. When it came to push ups, I would lie flat on my stomach but as try as I might, I simply could not will my arms to lift my body - it was a very strange sensation. So I had to raise my body up by degrees, first my chest, then my thighs, then my knees until I my entire body was up and straight. Then, from this position I could start the push-ups and continue them without insurmountable difficulty.

But the running on the spot became harder and harder. Towards the last day, I would have to start off very feebly, hardly raising my feet, like a nonagenarian and then try and slowly build up to octogenarian level until the best I could achieve, which seemed to be about septuagenarian level. I really felt I was 'over the hill'.

In general, although the muscles exercised by 5BX were not particularly 'strained' by skiing, there were others, such as behind the upper arms and in the lower back which had been stressed to some degree and when doing the exercise, somehow they became a little bit involved and the body tried to avoid stressing them, thereby making the exercise more difficult. However, I think the feebleness of the running on the spot was indeed, simply direct muscle fatigue from skiing.

I noticed that this morning, after one day of no skiing, my exercises were coming back to their normal difficulty. So I guess in a few days I will be completely normal. Maybe I should have taken at least one rest day from skiing. The others did in one way or another.

Avalanches

Val d'Isere is an avalanche prone area. One year, there was 26 metres of snow and avalanches were so prevalent, skiing was almost impossible. The snow falls have been becoming less and less. The average used to be 13-15 metres, but two years ago it was 8 metres, last year it was 6 metres and this year it was only 1 metre. Nevertheless, there is still more ski able snow than in a 'good' Australian year.

Despite the relatively light fall this year, every morning starting at about 7:30 AM, one could hear distant 'Whump, whumps'. We finally identified this as the ski patrol 'blasting' the avalanche prone slopes in order to 'shake loose' or 'trigger' any potential avalanches before the skiers arrived.

Another avalanche protection system were large metal barriers, about 2 metres high and 3 metres long. These were installed at intervals on very steep slopes, but not those used for skiing of course. The idea was to hold the snow in place and if it did slide, then it slid as smaller areas and so did not develop as much energy or momentum as it careered down the slope. The final protection was a transponder that skiers were obliged to wear if they skied off the defined ski runs (off-piste). Thus, if one were buried by an avalanche, there was a chance of finding just where you were reasonably quickly and digging you out. We all, as did many many others, skied 'off-piste' to some extent without those devices, as after the first few days, the possibility of an avalanche in the areas we were on seemed to be minimal.

On our way back from Val d'Isere to Geneva, we passed through several villages. Many of the roofs were still covered with considerable snow. The pitch of the roofs did not seem to be designed for allowing the snow slide off easily and it was not until we were in the wealthier areas below the mountains such as Annecy, did we see high pitched roofs. I assumed the high pitch in these cases was not to allow the snow to slide off easily, as not a great amount of snow fell in these areas, but the steep pitch was more to do with style and perhaps squeezing in an attic above the two normal floors - like the Schottes house in [ImWinkle](#), Braunschweig.

Returning to the snow covered roofs, in some of the villages where they were less sheltered from the sun, the snow had already melted from the roofs. This revealed that on the roofs in these villages were also installed 'avalanche protection barriers'. These were either small versions of the large barriers on the mountains, or wooden or metal poles running parallel to the ridge-line, spaced down the roof slope at intervals of about 1-1/2 metres. I assumed these were to avoid the situation when someone came out the door, slammed it behind him, triggered the unstable snow piled on the roof, and was immediately buried beneath a great pile of snow.

Border hopping

Upon arriving at the bus terminus on the Swiss side of the Geneva airport, Po found the prices of hire cars, for myself and Christopher outrageously high. So he phoned the French side of the airport to find they were there normal.

Alcatel is a French company and its employees receive the company discount.

To walk to the French side, about 100 m required an aircraft ticket, departing the same day. The only other way was by taxi - about a 1 Km ride by road as the road had to skirt the tarmac. The cost of the ride was A\$30. Po and Christopher took the taxi, negotiated with the French car hire firm which did not happen to have a car there at the time, so they

were facing another A\$30 taxi ride back. Rather than that, they crept a little way along the road in the dark, climbed the fence to the other side, crept into Switzerland and walked 100 m back to the terminal. It was not until later that evening, 11:10 PM to be precise, did Christopher realise his mobile phone was missing, most likely dropped whilst border hopping. We tried returning that night to see if it could be found, but missed the last bus.

Geneva

January, Sunday 24th

The boys set off to the Geneva airport this morning with a triple mission - make sure Chuan caught Lauda Air back to Australia, look for the mobile phone, collect a hire car.

If this email is received, at least a third of the mission was successful or Christopher bought a replacement phone - hopefully the travel insurance will cover part or all of it.

Well, the mission was 2/3rds successful, Chuan seemed to have caught the plane and a hire car was obtained, but the mobile phone was not found. It is not like Mao's China where the heroic party member who found the phone would have spent days searching Geneva for the foreigner in order to return it.

Po wanted to go to the Musee Croix Rouge (Red Cross Museum) before catching his train to Stuttgart that evening. So sans Chuan we spent some time there and discovered how it all started. Primarily because Henri Dumant came across the aftermath of the battle of Soferino whilst on a business trip and became so distressed at the state of the wounded just left to die, he arranged assistance himself and wrote a 'Memoir on the battle of Soferino' in which he argued for better care of civilians, prisoners of war and the wounded during war. He sent copies to all the VIPs in Europe which eventually led to the Red Cross movement and also catalysed other essentially international humanitarian movements such as various Geneva accords, the League of Nations and ultimately the United Nations.

Almost penniless and forgotten, a journalist re-discovered him in 1900 and wrote his story which lead Henri to receive the first Nobel prize for humanitarian work, awarded in 1901.

Before taking Po to the train station we had some 'crepes' for a very late lunch. I think the relatively high price was a reward for the molecular thinness of the crepes, rather than for any intrinsic food value. The Europeans also excel at the thinness of the slices of salami they can cut. I do not know how they do it, but certainly in Australia we do not have such refined technology.

It was a close call getting Po to the train. I had to run with him and his multitudinous bags on to the platform for the Basle train, he had two changes to make on the way, and see it pull in just as we reached the platform. I felt quite sad to see him go. He obviously enjoyed himself with us and his friends and they also obviously care for him. It seemed a pity to be wasting away in Stuttgart in a job which is not what he expected and not particularly thrilling.

January, Monday 25th

Christopher spent the morning buying a mobile phone whilst I visited the Museum of the Reformation and the Rousseau museum. All the annotations were in French but I was able to interpret the primary meaning.

The Rousseau museum was the more interesting with original correspondence with his contemporary Voltaire, the manuscripts of Heloise, Emile and various philosophical writings. Rousseau and Voltaire were both fathers of liberal democracy and provided the philosophical underpinning of the American revolution.

Calvin, who also lived in Geneva (the 'Protestant Rome') a powerful reformation figure who preached that thrift, hard work and a Godly life would lead to success in this world as a sign of God's blessing. According to sociologist Max Weber, Calvin's Protestant Ethic influenced the success of capitalism in the USA, however his argument has been questioned in more recent times.

If I were in Geneva again, I would like to visit the Voltaire and Calvin exhibitions at which there are good collections.

In the afternoon we went to CERN, the largest particle physics laboratory in the world. CERN also incidentally developed the idea of the 'world wide web', the way browsers such as Netscape are now used on the Internet. CERN has a particle accelerator which consists of large circular tube, held to a very low vacuum with accelerator magnets placed at strategic intervals around the circumference to give atomic particles a 'kick along' as they fly past. This tube is located in a tunnel 100m below ground and 27Km in circumference.

It is an international laboratory jointly owned and managed by 17 European countries, so it is fitting that the accelerator tunnel lies partly in France and partly in Switzerland. The work done at CERN leads the world in this area - really testing the theories of the Big Bang by examining the properties of the fundamental particles of all matter.

So far the theory fits the properties of the particles down to the first few milliseconds of the Big Bang. It is doubtful if the testing can be taken back any further that that due to the unimaginable energy required to perform the testing.

But, it all seems like Science Fiction at CERN. The place is somewhat like a University campus and so Christopher and I, dressed as we were like 'boffins' wandered through the office areas, sat in the staff cafeteria etc without challenge. We came across some terminals connected to the internet and so with a little 'hacking' we were on to the net and sent and received some of the work related emails that had banked up due to the missing mobile phone. It was a thrill to sign the email:

Damien Dunlop
CERN Laboratories
Geneva
Switzerland

We also sent one each to Po to cheer him up.



Australia day

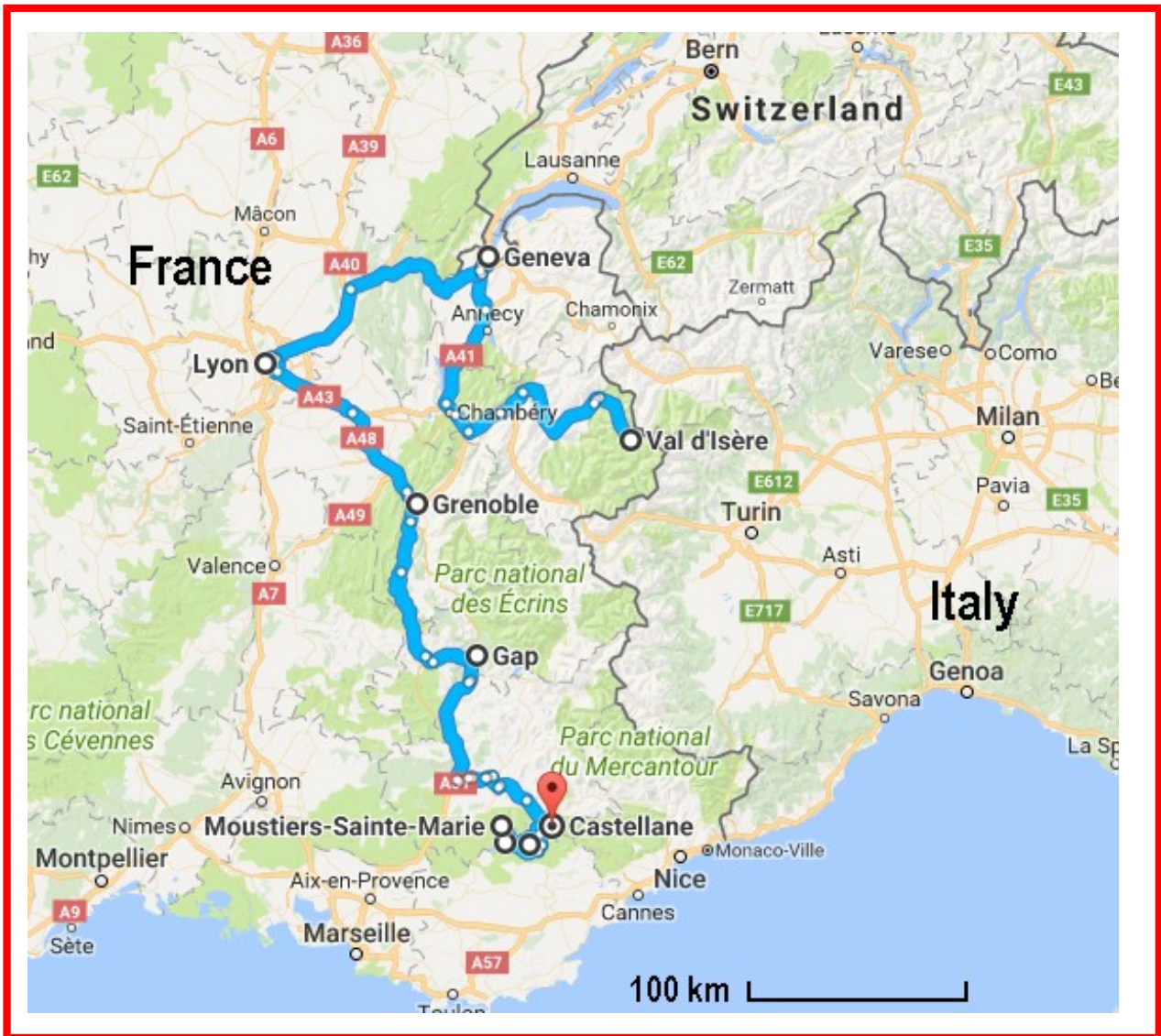
January, Tuesday 26th

We were aware there was an Aussie pub somewhere, but Christopher spent the morning without success, attempting to find a way of using his new mobile phone, for example, by being connected to the Swiss mobile phone network. But they insisted upon a permanent address in Switzerland and so his new phone is at present, as useless as his lost phone.

His lost phone has a SIM card which identifies to the world, that he is a Telstra customer. Accordingly, the European networks can invoice Telstra for his calls. But once that SIM card is not available and he replaces it with a SIM card obtained locally, the local networks have to bill Christopher directly, whom they have never heard of before, so they need more 'security'.

In the afternoon we left Geneva to travel South to Castellane, near the Verdon Gorge, in Provence.

Geneva, Castellane, Verdon Gorge



The first few hours were just autobahn driving. But we learnt one thing, autobahn driving can be expensive. These roads are marked in green on our Michelin road maps of France, Spain and Portugal. Every 50Km or so, there are toll booths which cost anywhere between A\$10 to A\$35. So a 3hr trip by autobahn can cost in excess of A\$100 in tolls alone.

The next level of road is marked in red on the road maps and we have since found that these are often as 'fast' as the 'green' roads, also being divided highways, but there are no tolls.

As dusk fell, we headed into the country side from Grenoble to Gap and then to Castellane. Off the autobahn, the roads became narrow and snow edged and it was difficult to travel more than a few kilometres before passing through another quite dull looking village. Houses and shops right up to the road edge, like some parts of Kuala Lumpur and some towns in Malaysia, with the buildings not well kept, dull grey stone and cement.

I guess the villages were there first and the streets suited the villagers just fine for walking to their neighbours or the village artisans. Then cars arrived and insisted in taking over all the space formerly used as a walkway.

As darkness descended the road became more mountainous between Gap and Castellane and Christopher began to think we should have stayed in Gap, so we could have enjoyed the sight of whatever mountainous pass we were driving through in the dark

It was about 8 PM before we were able to check in to the only hotel which appeared to be open of the several hotels we saw in Castellane, . This was strictly a 'ne parle pas anglais' hotel which also reeked of stale detergent everywhere, something I have experienced with some less affluent motels in Australia. But we had no choice, and somehow we managed to get by the language barrier with fragments of French and much handwaving.

Verdon Gorge, Moutiers St Marie

January, Wednesday 27th

From Castellane we began the 40 Km drive along the north and south rims of the Verdon Gorge. About 3Km out of town, Christopher said 'Oh, oh; I should have obtained some petrol before we left Castellane, no matter, we can get some at a town on the way'. I was a little concerned at this and was about to ask him to go back and fill-up, just to be sure. However, he was the driver and I let him be.



We saw parts of the gorge along route 935 before we came to La Palud sur Verdon. Since learning of our low fuel situation, I had noticed with some little concern that it was described by the Lonely Planet 'Guide to France' as 'the only real town along the gorge route'. This was to be Christopher's fuel stop, but it was typical of the poorer villages we had passed through the previous evening except this one was more or less closed down for the off-tourist season. There were petrol pumps, but they were chained and padlocked. There was to be no fuel obtained from there. Christopher only seemed mildly disappointed, but when I actually looked at the fuel gauge myself, it was on 'empty' - for how long I did not know and ignorance being the better part of valour, I dare not ask.

So with Christopher's assurance that we needed to be frugal with the fuel, we proceeded along a loop road which passed along the gorge's northern rim. We found it was blocked

about halfway due to rock slides or wash-aways, but the part we did traverse clung precariously to what was almost a cliff-face on the edge of the deepest gorge in Europe, cut out by the Verdon river, a river deep green in colour, from which I assume it obtained its name. I felt quite relieved when we turned back at the barrier and returned to relatively flat land.



Actually, our elevation was a little below 1000m and so there were snow drifts on the surrounding hills and the road side was frequently edged with snow. There was also a gusty wind which became very icy with the stronger gusts. But we were still very low on fuel and the guide book merely mentioned a town or district 'Moustiers-Sainte Marie' as being at the end of the gorge. So we headed for there. The gorge opened into a wide valley, wider than the Mitta Mitta valley and then we saw Moustiers - a village perched high on the face of jagged rocks overlooking the valley, with a very high arched bridge in the middle foreground, fording a fast moving torrent from the rocky peaks behind the village. Upon driving towards the village, we encountered a service station with petrol for sale - a miracle.

We filled the tank and proceeded to the village. The village itself was in good repair with most buildings a sandy yellow colour.

Christopher commented that this was the type of village he had imagined as a French village, not the dull grey villages we had driven through the previous day.



We strolled around the narrow lanes through which some small cars managed to negotiate with a sufficiently skilful driver. We noticed a Church spire high on the cliff face above the village. We had noticed a similar phenomena in Castellane and wondered why the Church was made so difficult to approach. One postulate was that during warlike times, the Church may have been the refuge of last resort for the villagers and so was made both physically and spiritually secure.

In this case we decided to investigate and found a path with a sign 'sauvage interdit'. We conveniently thought this could mean 'welcome', but discovered later it meant 'unauthorised access is forbidden'.

The path was a rocky track cut into the cliff which after many hairpin switchbacks as it ascended, came to a cave or 'grotto' high on the cliff face with some devotional candles and a small altar. The path continued until it met with a far more substantial path from another direction in the village and soon we arrived at the Church we had seen, called 'Notre Dame'. There we discovered that St Maxime, a monk from a monastery on a small island off Cannes, the Abbey of Lerin, had once come this way in about the year 432 AD and was so struck with the beauty and tranquillity of the valley, he decided to found a monastery there in the caves. The grotto we had seen was one of the original caves. After some years the 'troglodytes' established a more formal building as the monastery. At that time, the surrounding population were 'natives' who influenced by the monks, by degrees became Christians (that is, Catholics).

The region flourished and because of its 'closeness to the beauty of God', attracted many pilgrims from other regions. The barbarians swept through the valley towards the end of the 6th century and sacked the town and monastery. The town and Church were rebuilt in about 1100 and so Notre Dame of Moustieres is about 1000 years old. It is not an architectural marvel, just a handsome and functional Church, which might have been built in Melbourne to standard Church specifications, eighty years ago.

During the crusades, a local knight vowed to the Virgin that if he returned safely from the crusades, he would hang the symbol of the Virgin, a star, high above the Church. He did return and so to this day, there is a chain linking two crags high above the church with a star suspended in the middle directly above Notre Dame, fulfilling the knight's vow over a period of 1000 years.

There are many miracles attributed to 'Notre Dame de Moustieres' and the one I liked was the when a careless little girl fell off the bridge above the village over the torrent I mentioned, but with a quick intercession by her mother, emerged unscathed from the mill-race below the village - under the bridge we had first seen from the valley.

The Church appears to be still in operation with the sacristy lamp still alight, although there was no monastery visible. Pilgrimages are still made to the Church but during the summer months, devout pilgrims are vastly outnumbered by French tourists who make their own pilgrimage to Moustieres Sainte Marie and lengthen the queue to Notre Dame down from the high crags into the village streets below, well beyond the numbers or genuine pilgrims in the 'golden years' of pilgrimages.

But, when we were there, there was not another soul, so it was good to have the place entirely to ourselves.

'Moustieres' means 'monks' and so the village is really called 'The Monks of Saint Mary'.



La source

Atelier "La source"

fabricant de Falencas MOUTERANS

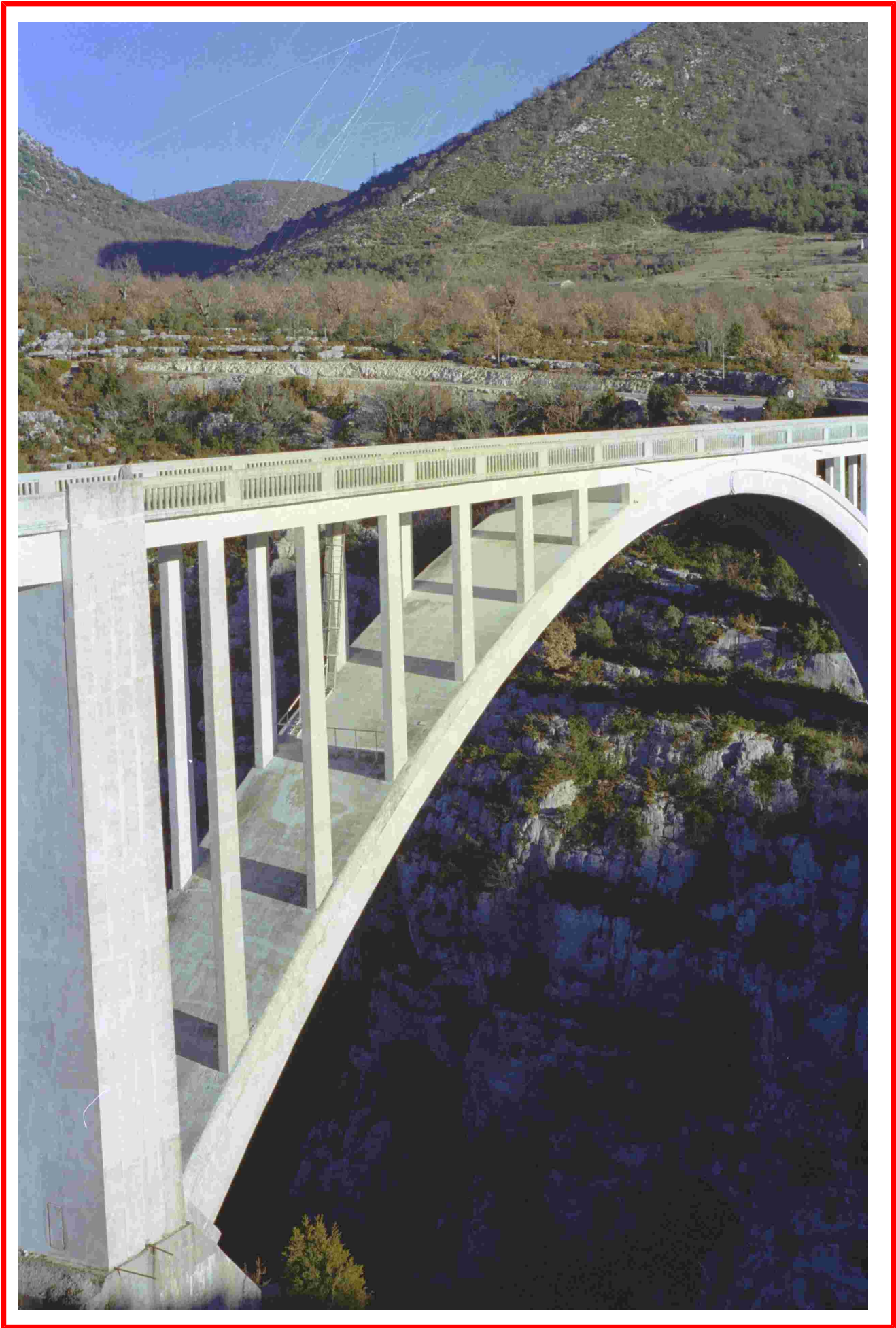
fabricant de Falencas FRAGGI stiers

We were very pleased to have stumbled unawares in such a mystical place and decided to have a late lunch at the only open cafe. We discovered that the omletets and Crepes of Moustieres owe nothing to high tech slicing as in Geneva and were satisfyingly thick.

With a full fuel tank, we were emboldened to return to the Castellane road via the southern rim of the Verdon Gorge. If anything, this road was higher and clung to the cliff face more tenaciously than the road along the Northern rim. Considering there was significant loss of life in building the relatively tame 'Great Ocean Rd' past Geelong, I wondered how many had lost their lives building this road.

We finally came to the 'highest bridge in Europe' which crossed the gorge, the Pont de L'Artuby. The Guide did not mention the height, so I dropped a stone from the middle and as far as I could tell, it took seven seconds to reach the bottom. Integrating the acceleration due to gravity twice with respect to time should give us the distance, or $d = \frac{1}{2} a t^2$. As 'a' is 32 ft/sec/sec and the time is 7, then roughly we have $d = \frac{1}{2} * 32 * 49 = \text{about } 800 \text{ ft}$.

The time must have been greatly over-estimated. Bunjee jumper organisations claim 182 m (597 ft) and from the length of the span, engineers estimate about 125 m (410 ft).



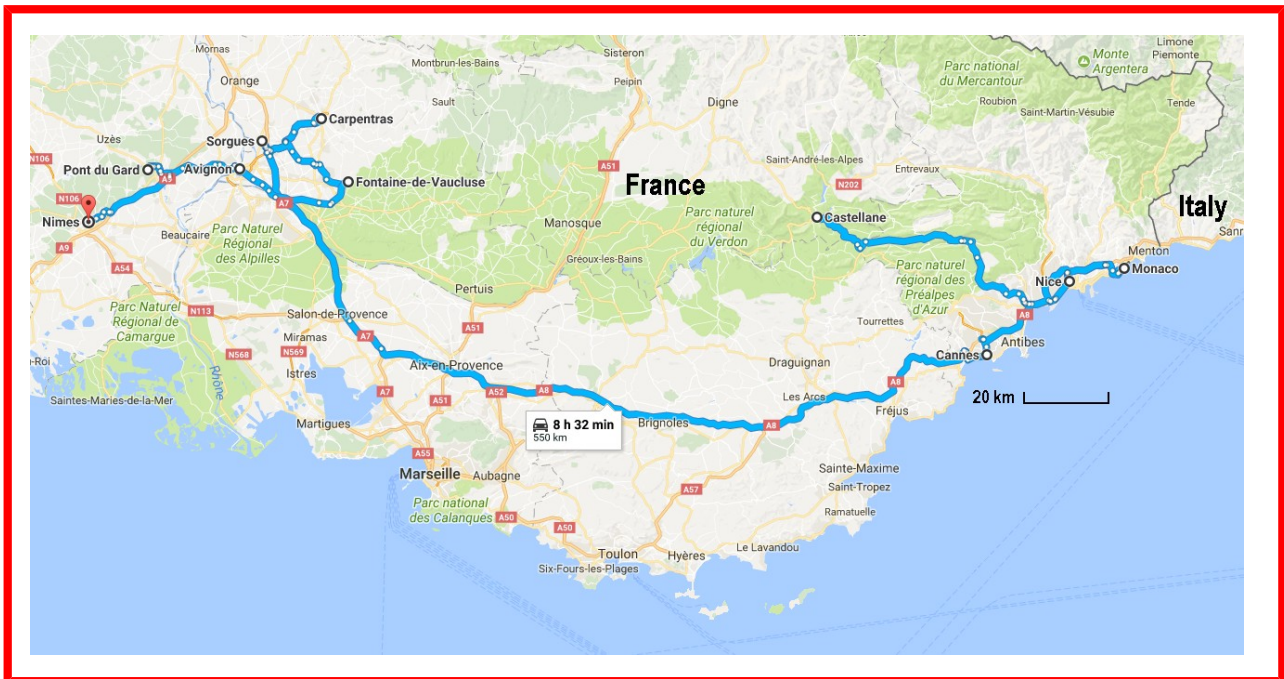
Although nowhere near as large as the Grand Canyon the Verdon Gorge was immensely interesting and even more fearsome.

One aspect of visiting the gorge area was that on the snow dotted 'high plains', we had narrow roads surrounded by low scrub without for some considerable time, noticing any other sign of human habitation. That was a little satisfying after autobahns filled with cars or side roads with one village boundary almost meeting the next.

We at last arrived at the Castellane road south of Castellane and headed for Nice, halfway between Monaco and Cannes. It seemed uncanny to have snow along the roadside and see a sign 'Cannes 50Km'. That is, we were almost within walking distance of the French Riviera (the Australian Gold Coast) and there was snow on the ground! It was nightfall and the moon had now grown from the 1/4 at Val d'Iserre to 3/4 now, before we arrived in Nice and found a Pension to stay. A quick walk through the 'hotspots' of Nice persuaded us that the Lonely Planet's description of Nice as a 'fun place' applied to the summer season, not when we were there. We decided to leave early in the morning for Monaco.

Monaco, Cannes, Carpentras

January, Thursday 28th



Up early, well 7:30AM and off to Monaco by 8:30. I was surprised to see how small an area was Monaco. I suspect one could cover the area by foot quite thoroughly in two days. It is clearly a 'village' perched on rocky outcrops against the Mediterranean over which which Prince Rainer's ancestors somehow managed to retain complete control. A total anachronism in today's world.

Christopher drove around the famous Grand Prix circuit which is in fact via a route through normal Monaco streets, not a special track such as was in Adelaide and now at Albert Park. It took us 15-20 minutes whereas with the streets cleared for the race, it takes the formula one cars a couple of minutes.

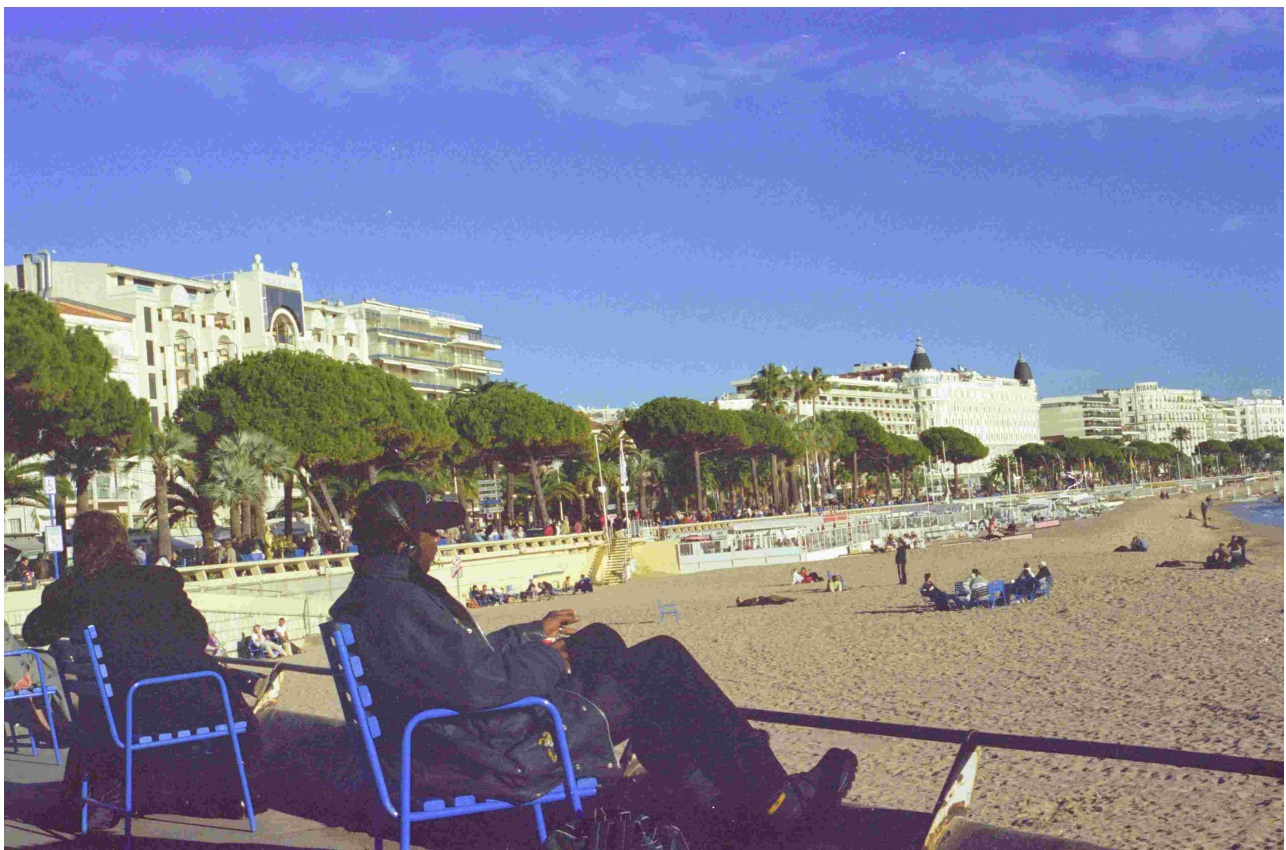
We also looked for the drive taken by Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly in 'To Catch a Thief' and also the drive in which the late Princess Grace fatally crashed her car. But we were unable to locate those.

Prince Albert, Prince Rainer's grandfather was very interested in oceanography and marine life. He sponsored many marine expeditions on his own vessels and often went himself, The result is a reasonably prestigious museum of the results of marine research and an on-going research program. It is strange to see map after map of the world describing ocean currents, iceberg flows, blue whale locales etc etc with every continent shown, except Australia. However, 'Australie' did merit a mention in the aquarium section, there were two types of sea lion on display - found only in Australian waters - and the Monaco Museum.

In the open area between the two sections of the aquarium was a large tank of Piranha. Facing out to sea in front of the tank was a bench looking out a large window high above and onto the Mediterranean. One could clearly see the curvature of the earth at the sparkling Mediterranean-blue horizon, especially as one could measure it against the horizontal bar, halfway down the window. I had the uncanny feeling that the world was indeed quite a small globe, a globe I could almost 'see around', that Spain or England were only just out of site 'over the horizon' or 'around the corner'.

Leaving the museum, we headed west again through Nice to Cannes. There we sat on the foreshore, ate a pizza, drank some coffee and watched the world go by.

There were many hundreds of other people doing the same, sometimes watching, sometimes stirring themselves to promenade and be watched.



Whilst promenading, Christopher was thrilled to evoke a 'Bonjour' from an attractive girl passing by in a car. I did not mention that I had received several recognitions of that type. As at Monaco, the Marina was jammed with very, very expensive launches and yachts.

We thought we might search for the famous theatre where the Cannes Film Festival awards are made - also from where Margaret Pomeranz broadcasts for SBS during the festival, but it was becoming late and we wanted to catch a glimpse of Bridget Bardot sunbathing at St Tropez, further along the coast.

So we followed the coast road, right next to the Mediterranean, the sea which played so important a part as the cradle of Western civilisation.

The views from the road are more spectacular than our attenuated 'Great Ocean Rd' - at one stage the traveller can look back across the Mediterranean over Cannes and up to the snow capped French Alps behind. We cannot quite match that along the Great Ocean Rd.

At first the traffic was very slow, but after a while it became light and faster, however, by the time we arrived at Frejus, just before the turn-off to St Tropez, it was already dusk and we decided that Bridget had probably gone home by this. So it was with a sad heart we turned right instead of left and headed for the autobahn which would take us past Avignon to Carpentras — about 2-1/2 hrs away.

Arriving at about 7:30, we had just enough time to find a hotel, Hotel du Theatre, and then go to a highly recommended restaurant 'Le Marijo'. At least during the off-tourist-season, many restaurants close quite early. We were the last patrons to enter, there being only two others finishing their meal. The notable entree consisted of goats cheese toasted on toast. The toast was lying on a bed of seasoned lettuce (vinegar and olive oil?) with the plate surrounded by alternating wedges of tomato and hard-boiled egg. Unlike Brie, the Goat's cheese was 'tasty', more like our 'Vintage'. So that was an interesting variation on toasted cheese and it became almost a meal with the extra salad pieces.

Carpentras, Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, Avignon, Le Pont du Gard, Nimes

January, Friday 29th

Nimes

Being Friday, everyone had been up early to prepare for the village market. It was like the Victoria Market on Sunday, but with food and produce stores as well. Another difference, the stalls were set up in the normal streets of the village covering the whole of the central part of the village.

I had a look at the St Stiefens Cathedral, built around 1200AD. It was rather gloomy inside as I was inspecting around the altar area when the interior slowly brightened with a mysterious light and I could hear Angelic voices begin to well into beautiful music. It was a while before I understand what was happening. The side chapels have buttons visitors can press to illuminate the chapel and also to play a piece of music appropriate to the theme of the chapel. Some other visitors knew about this before I did and had been pressing buttons.

I would have liked to have seen the Jewish gate but Christopher was anxious to be 'on the road'. In many cities in the middle ages or later, Jews had to live in a special area allocated to them and at night, the gates into that area would be locked in order to keep

them safely inside. However, this gate was a special gate for Jewish converts to enter the Church.

I understand the whole area is called 'Vaucluse' which is a part of Provence, so I am not sure what the connection is with the 'Vaucluse' often mentioned in Melbourne in my youth. Perhaps there was a convent called Vaucluse run by an order originating from Vaucluse in Provence.

Leaving Carpentras a little early for my liking, we went to the source of the river Sorgue at Fontaine de Vaucluse. We first saw the green river, not wide but moderately deep and fast flowing. So much water power was available the area supported several paper mills from early times up until a decade or so ago. We traced the source of the Sorgue and it was literally water gushing directly from the sides and bottom of a gully cut in limestone. Further upstream there was 'nothing' (at this time of the year), then within about 100m, water was gushing, boiling and bubbling from the ground and 300m further along there was the result, a fast flowing river.

To this day the exact source of this subterranean water is unknown.



There is still one paper mill operational, kept going as part of the area's heritage. It employs a 7m diameter water wheel with 48 paddles one metre wide driven by a flow of one cubic metre of water per second. The mill wheel which drives 75 Kg wooden mallets via a wooden cam. One can almost feel the power of the enormous wheel slowly turning but with such deliberation you know it cannot be stopped. The mallets are used to pound old rags into paper 'mush' which is then treated and collected in flat trays to make the final sheets of paper - not rolls with this particular technology.

The regular loud 'ker-plunk, ker-plunk' of the mallets falling together with the rotating shadows on the walls cast by the sun behind the huge water wheel were very reminiscent of Hitchcock's North by Northwest, where a scene of increasing tension is played set in a

Dutch flour mill. Only now do I realise Hitchcock re-created the mallet noise and shadows exactly as occurs in a real water wheel driven mill.

An interesting aside is that if the Europeans had not recently invented the shirt and had it not been so popular at the same time as they discovered the Chinese secret of making paper, then we may have waited for paper for another century or so. The only raw material available for making the paper were the off cuts from the manufacturers and cast-off shirts. The technology for making paper from wood had not yet been developed.

Following Fontaine de Vaucluse we went to Avignon for a few hours. Avignon was the seat of Papal power for 1 or 2 centuries, Rome having become too violent for the Popes to live there.

Avignon still retains the original walls around the old city, very impressive, tall, thick ramparts. Inside are various large ecclesiastical buildings occupied by the Popes and the Papal bureaucracy. And of course there is the Bridge of Avignon, made famous through the nursery rhyme. This bridge, built around 1100 joined the Papal city with the German based 'Holy Roman Empire'. However, a century or two ago, the far two arches were demolished by a raging flood and rather than replace those, a new bridge was built some distance away. It must have been a truly raging flood for the remaining arches are massive and one cannot imagine them ever being damaged by anything less than a direct hit from a hydrogen bomb. I seem to recollect that Joan of Arc had something to do with Avignon, but perhaps that was merely a visit in order to persuade the authorities to take up arms against the English. Although the sky was perfectly clear, an icy wind blew through Avignon reminding us that it had once been called 'The City of Terrible Winds'.

We then went to see an even older bridge-like structure, the part of a 2000 year old Roman aqueduct which crosses the Gard river (le Pont du Gard). The aqueduct was used to bring fresh drinking water from a large spring to the old Roman administrative centre of the time, Nimes.



The length of this man-made stream was 50 Km, parts tunnelled through hills, parts elevated above valleys. In order to cross the Gard river on its way to Nimes, the aqueduct had to be built in three 'stories'. A wider arched 'bridge' at the bottom, a second arched bridge on top of that and then the aqueduct itself, supported by arches, on top of that. It would be more than six stories high if compared with a Melbourne city building. It is an astonishing feat of engineering and it looks as if it was built only a few decades ago.

Roman engineers would have no difficulty being accepted as members by IE Aust (The Institute of Engineers, Australia).

The height of the water at the spring was only 17m higher than at Nimes 50 Km away so that implies a gradient of 17 in 50000 or about 0.03%. To have the water flow consistently all the way to Nimes without being stopped by an accidental 'uphill' part, the Romans would have had to maintain incredibly accurate control over the level of the aqueduct.

After marvelling at the Nimes water supply, what could we do but go to Nimes itself, arriving about 6PM, finding a hotel and then a Laundromat where the washers were so slow, it closed too early for us to dry them.

Nimes, Aigues - Mortes, Barcelona

January, Saturday 30th

Nimes was one of the three Roman administrative centres on the Roman road to Spain, namely Barcelona.

The area is 'Provence' to the French, but it was 'Gaul' to the Romans. I remember our Latin textbooks contained stories, in Latin, about the conquest of Gaul. Every major Roman city had a 'Forum' which consisted of three collumaded buildings side by side and joined at the rear. The middle building was a temple and the two outside buildings were really 'cloisters', columns and a roof but no walls. There was a square in front of the set of buildings and this was the 'Forum' proper.

Our Pension was about 50 yards from the temple part of the Nimes Roman Forum - the two side areas had been demolished centuries ago, but the temple was completely intact. One simply marvelled at the ingenuity required to build such a huge structure with such massive blocks of stone together with the intricate carving that decorated it.



There were two cars parked in the lane containing our Pension, so we decided to park there also. Alas, we spent an hour trying to enter the lane from the ring road surrounding the area. At every likely approach through the maze of lanes, we would always come to a final lane with 1 metre high, 1/3 metre diameter 'bollards' blocking vehicles but not pedestrians from entering. We really could not unlock the 'secret' to the route followed by the two cars already in our lane. Until the next day.

We saw a car approach such a line of bollards and pause a little while, then apparently drive straight through them. As the car disappeared and we came closer, we could see that the centre bollard had sunk into the lane with the top of the bollard level with

the surface of the lane. This left enough room for a small car to drive between the remaining bollards. As we looked at the bollard in puzzlement, it slowly rose up again before our eyes and blocked the lane as before. Just how the driver of the car was able to command the bollard to sink into the lane we never did discover.

We also inspected the Roman amphitheatre, that is, the Roman colosseum in Nimes. Like the temple, it is a massive structure and is still used for public performances such as bull fights. It is hard to believe these buildings are still intact when St Patrick's in Melbourne requires renovation 100 years after it was built.



Whilst darting down the lanes and trying to avoid the wind on the way to the Roman amphitheatre my deteriorating leather watch band finally disintegrated, so we took a detour into the first watch shop we came across and the ageing proprietor let us see his range of bands, recommended one on the basis that it matched the strap on our camera carrying case and fitted it. The complete transaction was achieved almost entirely in sign language.

We also visited the archaeological museum which contained further information on the aqueduct at the Nimes end and how the water was distributed in lead pipes. Did many Romans die of lead poisoning? We could not completely translate the French descriptions, so we cannot answer that.

There was also a reconstruction of a Roman house that had been excavated, complete with an intricate mosaic floor and sophisticated pottery. Even mirrors, small wooden 'jars' and spatulas, used by ladies for containing and applying makeup.

The Romans were apparently adept at subtle erotica with ladies gowns draped in such a way that one could bare ones breast discreetly and fleetingly if one wished. Many of the

statues had frozen these moments for all time. The women's faces on the statues were also beautiful by our standards, perhaps by any standard.

One gained an appreciation that Rome truly was a very sophisticated culture. I think I would have enjoyed being a Roman Consul.

Like Avignon, Nimes was beset by very cold winds, so cold that the puddles of water along the side of the road were frozen. They could not be escaped, they followed one down the narrowest lane and the broadest boulevard.

I am coming to the belief that the Mediterranean climate is not warm summers and mild winters (like Adelaide). It may have warm summers but the winters consist of freezing cold winds - the mistrals blowing down the Rhone river valley. Perhaps the description of the 'Mediterranean climate' applies to the African side of the Mediterranean.

Following the reformation, Nimes had a sizeable Protestant population. One result was that for nearly 100 years, starting in 1685, many Huguenot (Protestant) women were required to renounce their Protestantism. If they did not, they were imprisoned, mostly at what used to be a crusader fortress at Aigues-Morte, directly south of Nimes on the Mediterranean. Some of the women were incarcerated for 40 years.

F. Mistral wrote in a memoir 'One day, with two beautiful women from the Protestant community of Nimes, we returned to visit the great tower of Aigues-Mortes and whilst reading the names of the unfortunate prisoners scratched by themselves in the stones of their dungeon, 'Poet' they said, suffocating with emotion 'do not be surprised to see us crying like this!

For us Huguenots, these poor women, martyrs for their faith, are our Saintes-Maries'.

Another result was during the 18th century, the Protestant middle class were banned from government and certain other types of work (similar to but worse than for Catholics in an earlier Australia) so they turned to trade and manufacturing. In the latter capacity they developed a soft but tough twilled cloth called serge, which dyed blue was popular with the fishermen of Genoa.

When Levi-Strauss, a Bavarian Jewish immigrant to the USA began to produce trousers in the 1850s for gold rush and other workers, he realised they needed something really tough, so he began importing 'Serge de Nimes' which became to be known as Denim.

Aigues-Mortes being the departure point of the crusaders seemed a 'romantic' place to visit so after Nimes, that is where went.

The entire crusader fortress, walls and towers are completely intact and surround the town itself. Most of these types of structures have been demolished, usually by thoughtless peasants and others wanting to use the stone for their own buildings. But Aigues-Mortes was built in the middle of a marsh, a long way from any other habitation and so this protected it from 'vandalism'.

Looking at the fortress from afar, one could easily imagine a troop of fresh crusaders galloping in through the entrance gate with pennants flying or preparing to board ships in the channel adjacent to the fortress.



Within the fortress walls was an early gothic church, smaller and much simpler in design than the later gothic churches. Again it was not difficult to imagine the crusader prostrate before the altar preparing himself spiritually for his 'holy' mission.

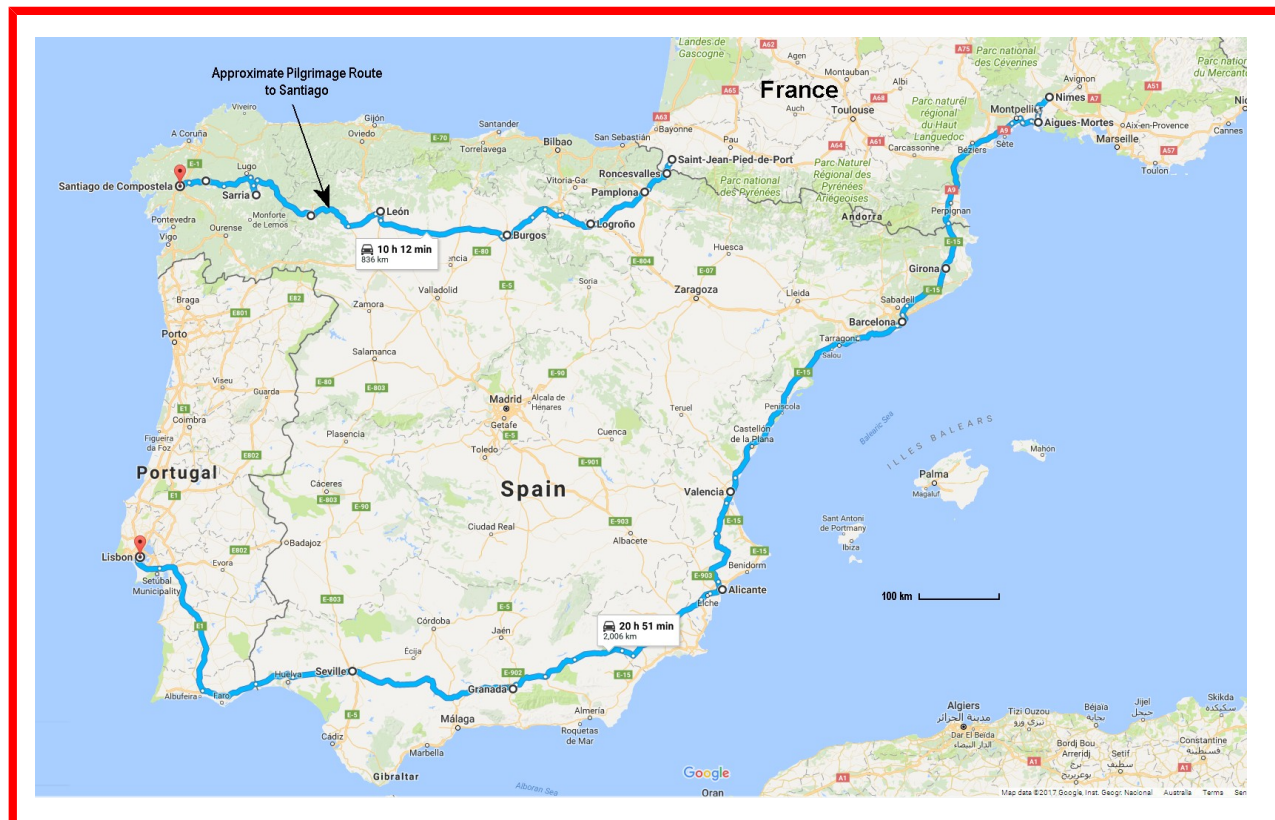
But then we were off to Barcelona, past the last Roman administrative city of Gaul before Spain, Narbonne and within site of Carcassonne, the origin of another type of crusade.

In this case, the Pope called for a crusade against the Albigensians, who were achieving moderate success in the spread of their 'heresy' - that the visible world was locked in a deadly battle between Satan and God, humans being the agents of Satan. The only way to salvation was abstinence from all pleasures, particularly sex. Only after several incarnations could we achieve the 'purity' required to escape Satan and enter the kingdom of heaven. The nobles of the time were only too happy to adopt the cause as they could see the capture of valuable land as a reward.

St Dominic was the crusader's spiritual guide, urging the crusaders to carry the fight for God and a particularly cruel Simon de Montfort the military commander. After a long siege of the major Albigensian strongholds, hundreds of 'perfects' were burnt at the stake for heresy and in 1209, at Beziers, over 20,000 Albigensians were slaughtered. The final massacre took place in 1244 when the last 200 Albigensians refused to renounce their 'faith' and were burned in a mass funerary pyre.

Quite a different story from the one I learnt about the Albigensian heresy as a boy at ACK.

Barcelona, Alicante, Granada, Seville, Lisbon



We arrived at Barcelona at about 7PM, found a pension then went looking for somewhere nearby to eat.

It became evident that most Spaniards spend their leisure eating and promenading. In the old town where we lodged, the streets are mostly narrow curving lanes flanked by three or four story buildings. The same type of lane in Melbourne we would hesitate to enter at night, but here, young groups of girls would dart from this one and disappear down that one with gay abandon.

The lanes can be also quite noisy with loud voices as boys call from the ground to their (usually girl) friends peering over a balcony three or four stories up. These lanes are the normal streets. Indeed, when at night the lamps come on, they look quite pretty curving away from a square. When we went looking for a restaurant, the lanes were full of people walking here and there and after we left the restaurant at about 11PM, the streets were still crowded, especially La Rambla, the primary street in our area for promenading.

In contrast to the evening, at about 2PM the streets become strangely quiet as the Spanish take their siesta, not so much to sleep, but to spend the time over a lingering long lunch, with maybe a short nap after lunch. The streets do not liven up again until about 4PM.

Although we did not have the freezing Mistral in Barcelona, when walking around the air was quite chilly. Then I had an idea for tomorrow. I had brought some thermal underwear, protection against what I thought might be the extreme cold at Val d'Isere, but at Val d'Isere, I found I was sweltering in them, I guess this was due to the exertion of skiing, so I wore them only for the first day. I decided to try them again tomorrow in Barcelona.

Returning to searching for our dinner venue, Christopher chose three or four restaurants from the Guide from which to choose our dinner venue. However at 9:30 PM at each one of them, we found a long queue curving out into a square or along the lane. These queues were longer than Melbourne's Yam Cha queues. As if a Yam Cha queue extended from Exhibition St to Russell St. So we went to the one with the shortest queue and it really was not long before we were inside the restaurant with the record for the being in continuous business for the longest period in Barcelona. 'Can Culerettes' started in 1786. In France, we could usually work out what the menu meant, but here, there was no way we could decipher the Spanish. The restaurant must have been familiar with this problem and was able to produce an English version after we tried to ask what such and such an item was.

Since Val d'Iserre, I had found that far more food was entering my body than was leaving. I did not understand why but in Barcelona I suddenly thought 'Perhaps it is the lack of rice'. So I ordered Paella, which has a rice base. It was much 'chunkier' than the usual Paella in Australia but was piping hot and good. Sure enough, as soon as we got back to the Pension, my bowels started to work. So now I know what Chinese really mean when visiting foreign places and they say 'I must have rice, I must have rice'. It is not sheer cultural insensitivity or ignorance at all, it is simply a case of constipation.

But, having tried various Austrian, Bavarian, French and Spanish dishes, nothing comes near well prepared Chinese food for quality and cost-effectiveness.

Barcelona

January, Sunday 31st

The Barcelona Cathedral is only a few lanes from the Pension, so I went to 11 O'clock Mass. It is a mighty Gothic Cathedral, built in 1298 and in some ways, more sophisticated than the Roman buildings. I had to conclude that the builders of the middle ages also knew how to build truly impressive structures. During Mass I was able to embed myself in Spanish culture for a little while, including shaking hands with those around at the 'kiss of peace'. Why is going to Mass an integral part of Spanish culture?

As the Spanish Philosopher Miguel Unamuno once said 'We are all Catholics in Spain, even the atheists'. There were all types of people going to communion, white people, tinted people, black people, local people and tourist people. These large cathedrals certainly create a lot of interest, there are always groups of tourists looking at this or that.

This particular Cathedral included a shrine to Cristo (Christ) of Lepanto, I guess this was to commemorate the Catholic armies' decisive victory over the Moslems at the battle of Lepanto, about 1000 years ago.

This cathedral being the Cathedral of Barcelona is the Bishop's Cathedral and is very ornate with the external facades covered in gargoyles, figures of Saints and other embellishments.

After Mass we went to the Placa Rieal (a square) for 'brunch' sitting in the sun at the outside tables of a restaurant that had advertised 'bacon and eggs'. Somehow that sign triggered a craving in me for the same. Occasionally, the wind caught the fragrance of an underground drain via a nearby grating. It was very much like a Singapore drain but that did not stop me salivating over the thought of bacon and eggs.

Beside our table happened to be two girls, one with the Lonely Planet 'Guide to Spain' at her elbow. The same edition as ours. So I commented 'That guide is very good do you think?' The girl replied in perfect Australian 'Yes, I really like it'. She was working in Paris for a couple of years and her companion was her French girlfriend. Unfortunately they were leaving Barcelona that day, so we (Christopher) could not arrange to meet later for a drink in a pub.

They soon left and another pair of younger girls took their place, one being Chinese or could even have been Anglo-Chinese. As soon as they spoke it was obvious we had another pair of Australians next to us - this must have been the 'Australian Corner' of the 'Placa Rieal'. Christopher tried conversing with them but they were not very communicative - they looked as if they were not long out of school and probably told by their Mums about the extreme danger of talking to strangers in a foreign country.

The bacon and eggs arrived and were the best meal I had eaten to date.

Every city in Europe we had been to so far had a few beggars squatting in odd corners with their hand out. One such even chased us down the street in Nimes asking for money for food. Our response 'Je ne parle pas Francais'.

This particular one seemed quite young, healthy and vigorous enough to run after us in order to accost us - we were not running, he just recognised a potential 'mark' and chased after us some time after we had passed him.

Barcelona was no exception in relation to beggars, but where we were spending most of our time, the air was full of the sound of very high quality music, played by buskers. At our brunch we were first entertained by a pianist with a portable piano (synthesiser) who played various classical and jazz pieces including a Scot Joplin rag played with a tango rhythm. Whilst playing a Spanish dance, a group of youths passed by and spontaneously started to dance on the street to the music being played.

After he packed up his kit in order to move to his next venue, we had a strolling Flamenco singer pass by.

On three separate corners between our pension and the Cathedral there were two guitarists and a flautist. They seemed to spend almost the entire day playing for we passed them many times as we went too and fro. Finally, as one of the guitarists was playing a particularly lovely piece, I bought his tape, displayed as one of the optional ways for passers-by to make a donation.

Playing the tape later, I concluded that the three of them were in the same group along with a couple of others. That is, there were two guitars, a flautist and some others recorded together on the tape.

The thermal under wear was also working, why had I not thought of that when we were freezing in Geneva, Moustieres and other places?

After 'brunch', we visited an archaeological museum which was a continuing excavation of the early Roman buildings, now well under the existing streets of Barcelona. The Museum had succeeded in developing an excellent exhibition, well documented and with the use of walkways, very accessible even though we were essentially in a cavern below Barcelona. The excavations included a winery and a cloth dyeing factory.

To the Romans, wine was part of their staple diet, as rice is to Chinese. This tradition has continued down through 1600 years to current day Spain. So wine is served at every meal as a matter of course. The normal everyday wine is quite light, like Rose. Because wine is more or less taken for granted, there is no 'mystique' about it as in Australia and so there is only one region that has received the government's seal of approval as a consistent, high quality wine producing area. In Australia, as wine is something 'special', then considerably more attention is given to quality and the development of quality 'brands'.

Not far away from the Barcelona Cathedral and the subterranean archaeological site is another Gothic Basilica built by the merchants of Barcelona, possibly viewed with a little concern by the Bishop of Barcelona as potential competition. With its flying buttresses internal rather than external, this Basilica looked quite plain from the outside.

Nevertheless it achieved beautifully clean slim lines inside with perfectly proportioned spaces and height. We visited in the half light of the evening when the organist was quietly practicing one piece after another. Quite a lovely experience.

There is a Mozart concert to be held there on Tuesday 2nd Feb and we may just stay for that.

Upon walking back towards our Pension at about 6PM, we came across 'buskers' of quite a different type. In the Placa Sant Jaume a brass band was playing some plaintive Spanish music and there were about eight different groups of middle-aged Spaniards dancing the Sardana. The dance is a group dance with everyone in the group holding hands to form a circle, stepping in and out, to the right and to the left. Their personal belongings, bags, overcoats, shopping were piled up in the centre of the group as they dance around the pile. People could join or leave a group at any time making the circle larger or smaller. Some ladies were working through the onlookers asking for donations.

The music and dance is a traditional Catalan folkore and in reality, these were just ordinary people who could come to the square at this time every Sunday to enjoy dancing their traditional dance. The donations were just to help support a folkloric organisation founded to preserve some of the Catalan folkore.

In the evening, at 8:30 which is the earliest restaurants tend to open, we returned to the one with the longest queue the previous evening. Even at 8:30 there was a queue, but it only took a few minutes to be guided in and be seated. This restaurant was 'Les Quinze Nity' also in the 'Placa Reial'. I asked specially for rice this time, however the meal which was menued as 'Pork ribs from the oven' was not at all pleasing and the 'extra' rice was slightly re-heated rice from the refrigerator. I was glad to leave that restaurant as soon as I could and decided that the queues were no indicator of quality, it was merely an indication of the number of guide books that mentioned their name.

February, Monday 2nd

Christopher set the alarm on his CE PalmTop machine for 7AM as we needed to shift the car from the place in the lane where we had parked it by 8AM or risk having it towed away.

Not for the first time Christopher's 'high tech' alarm was ineffective and it required myself to wake in accordance with my own 'internal' alarm for us to arise in time. We had been warned by the Guide that both Avignon and Barcelona had relatively high petty crime rates and that it was unwise to leave anything in the car - something we took great notice

of. Nevertheless, when we arrived at the car it had been broken into and the car radio stolen. In addition, the driving side lock had been smashed and we could no longer lock the car.

In a way this experience was fortuitous. We had originally arranged to drop-off our car of French origin, somewhere in Spain because there was an additional drop-off fee for Portugal, the place where we were to start returning to Australia by Lauda Air. When we returned the car to Hertz to exchange it for one without a broken lock, they exchanged it for a car originally from Portugal. So we were helping them return that car to Portugal and so there would be no drop off fee. In addition, we were originally going to catch a train to Portugal, so using a Portuguese car also saved us a train ticket.

The temperature at the Hertz Barcelona airport office was below 2 deg C. The replacement car had a dirty windscreen and when we used the 'squirter' to clean it, the water immediately turned to ice as it hit the windscreen. Only after some time with the car heaters at full blast that could clean the windscreen without it icing up.

The car we left behind was a Fiat Punto, a very small, uncomfortable car. We could only maintain a reasonable average speed when going uphill, by screaming it as fast as we could down the preceding hill. But it did keep running without any problems and it was very economical on fuel - an important factor in Europe where the fuel costs are high and the daily fuel costs of a hire car can easily exceed the daily hiring cost.

The 'new' car, a Seat Cordova?? was an 'upgrade' by one level and we soon realised that although it was more comfortable and could climb hills with relative ease, the fuel consumption was nearly double that of the Fiat.

Our first tourist call for the day was the 'Sagrada Familia', a Church that has been in construction for over 100 years. This was not unusual for large Cathedrals in days long past, but large buildings are usually constructed at most in a couple of years these days.

The 'Sagrada Familia' is somewhat different. It was commissioned to the now world famous Barcelonian architect Antoni Gaudi in 1882 when he was 31. He spent the next 31 years on the project until he met an accidental death in 1926, hit by a tram. Gaudi was one of the leaders of Art Nouveau in Spain and this certainly influenced the design of church. Although the underlying design conforms to strict geometrical shapes, the embellishments are very 'Art Nouveau', somewhat as if made of pastry or candy, similar to the pictures once found in a child's fairy story book. The structure is only about 1/2 to 2/3 finished, but already it is massive, striking and draws architects from all over the world to see it. Christopher and I ascended one of the 'steeple' by lift and half way up we were both beginning to feel that what we were about was not such a good idea. But we made it to the top and looked out over the city and the church building works. We both felt our stomach rise as we looked down from the relatively narrow steeple. But we became very brave and decided to walk down the internal circular staircase. The diameter was only about one metre at the top of the steeple.

Eventually we arrived unscathed at the bottom and marvelled at our bravery. But the Church is one of the wonders of the world, a large real-life Cathedral that, as I mentioned above, looks almost like a Cathedral from a fairy story picture book. It seems a terrible shame that the life of such a gifted person as Gaudi should be cut short by such a banality as being hit by a tram in 1926.



We dropped in at an internet cafe for a lunchtime coffee and to check on any urgent email. Unfortunately Christopher used up most of the time and just as I was going to prepare to send some email, we lost the connection.

Christopher also discovered that this was the place to meet 'chicks'. There were certainly a lot there, mostly recent University graduates I would think, self confident and very willing to talk. The clothing style varied from the very 'practical' to 'display' clothing. The former consisted of walking boots, jeans, parka-like top with a hood and a small pack for carrying the maps, tourist guides such as the Lonely Planet, bottles of water, chocolate and other life-sustainers. As for 'display' clothing, one tallish and particularly striking blonde girl was dressed in 'chunky' high heels and an elegant sleeveless black dress with a short skirt.

Another was dressed in tight grey slacks and a body hugging top which gave us all glimpses of her midriff as she moved about. I was quite puzzled as to how the girls in

their 'display' clothing could keep from dying of cold. It took thermal underwear plus my normal 'practical' clothing to keep me warm.

There were a 'smattering' of Chinese girls, usually dressed in a 'practical' way with their little backpacks and a few Japanese groups, but not as many as we see in Australia. Many Spanish girls also have very black lustrous hair and so one may see a head of black hair in front and think 'Oh, a Chinese girl' only to find out upon closer inspection that she was a Spanish girl.

After the 'Sagrada Familia' we decided to visit a public park also designed by Guadi.

Leaving the internet cafe and driving to within about 300 metres from the gate of the park, we accidentally took a left turn in the car, rather than a right turn. That was a very bad mistake. There are so many one way streets and so many narrow streets, one finds oneself being continually 'blocked' and having to try another diversion which takes one even further away from one's intended destination, only to have to take yet another diversion . It took a full TWO HOURS of continuous driving and map consultations before we arrived back we started and turned right instead of left. But it was worth it, the Guadi park was complementary to his work on the church and we enjoyed looking through the detail of that park.



We then checked at the Post Office to see if Christopher's SIM card had arrived - it hadn't. So back to the Pension to plan the next couple of days.

For dinner, I told Christopher that I was absolutely sick of 'foreign' food and we had to go to a Chinese restaurant. He looked up the local restaurant guide and found the 'Pagoda', the supposed best 'Hong Kong style' restaurant in Barcelona was less than 50 yards from our Pension. So that is where we went. At last, a decent meal - it was heaven for me. Christopher was less enthusiastic but agreed it was nice to taste some familiar food again.

The proprietor was from Hong Kong, coming here as a student 30 years ago. He told us that many Australians came to Spain and visited his restaurant. I guess Aussies in general have been spoilt with good quality food when compared with Europeans and they

know they can always rely upon a Chinese restaurant. Another thing he revealed was that in the last week the whole of Europe had been beset by cold northern winds followed by heavy snowstorms as far south as Italy. Lipo had called us on the mobile earlier to mention that he had returned to Val d'Isere to be with Leon for the weekend and 50cm of snow had fallen during the week making the weekend skiing ideal. But he did not mention that the whole of Europe was experiencing snowstorms. So it may be that my grumbles about the so-called Mediterranean climate may have been due to a relatively unusual cold snap.

After returning to the Pension, Christopher spent a considerable amount of time on the phone to Telstra, trying to discover what had happened to his SIM card. In Europe and perhaps in most countries with a Postal Service as in Australia, there is a system called 'Poste Restante'. This means one can address a letter to the main Post Office in any city and that Post Office will keep the letter/package for at least two weeks for collection by the addressee. I had suggested to Christopher that he ask Telstra to send his SIM card by Express Post to the 'Poste Restante' address in Barcelona.

It transpired Telstra had sent it 'Air Express' via DHL and not 'Express Post' by Australia Post. Of course, DHL had never heard of 'Poste Restante' and did not know what to do with the package when it arrived in Barcelona. We obtained the tracking number and so would be able to arrange to collect the package.

But, this made me reflect upon the damage politicians could be wreaking by 'privatising' everything. The traditional postal service has built an international service over a period of say 150 years with many types of special services such as 'Poste Restante', requiring the establishing of reciprocal arrangements with sister organisations throughout the world. The politicians are likely to wreck the system developed over many decades and replace it with essentially ignorant private contractors such as DHL who really, only have a presence where IBM and other US multinationals have a presence.

When a company such as IBM signs a world-wide contract with a courier company such as DHL, IBM says 'We have offices in x, y, z,... and we expect you to be able to deliver to these offices'. So DHL says 'Yes sir' and also creates DHL offices in x, y, z at least for the duration of their contract with IBM. But long established services such as 'Poste Restante' are simply well outside DHL's perceptual range.

We decided we were running short of time if we were to arrive in Lisbon in time to catch Lauda Air and so sadly, we would have to miss the Mozart concert at the Basilica. But first, we wanted to visit the Picasso museum which housed many of his early paintings as well as some later paintings and etchings.

After seeing his earlier paintings, I have no doubt he was a genius. In his early paintings he demonstrated that he could paint in almost any style as well as or better than the masters of that style. He must have found painting in any style he wished so easy, he had to move on to his own 'distorted' styles. He was also of course influenced by his contemporaries who in Spain were all experimenting with Art Nouveau. Although for me, his distorted portraits, when looked at as 'graphic designs' are appealing, they do not have the emotional power of his earlier work. But, being able to come close to many Picasso originals made me realise that there are some things one cannot express but through painting them. The conclusion I am being drawn to is that if one wants to fully express oneself, then one needs to be an accomplished conversationalist, musician, painter, sculptor and poet. Picasso was most of these.

After the Picasso experience, it was coffee with a roll then head south to warmer climes, collecting the SIM card from DHL on the way. Our first destination was Alicante, about 300Km South of Barcelona. By the time we were half way, I noticed blossoming orchards along the side of the road. Now perhaps, we were heading for the real Mediterranean climate.

Barcelona, Alicante

February, Tuesday 2nd

We arrived at Alicante, a coastal town with a well preserved Muslim built fortress, at about dusk and checked in to the Pension de Monges. This Pension turned out to be a little 'special'. One could not help noticing a large number of paintings on the walls of the proprietor-family living room and in the hallway of the Pension itself.

Our room, although very small in the way of Pension rooms was elegantly furnished. Matching bedspreads, bedheads and curtains, striking tile patterns in the bathroom, gold plated taps and they had even gone to the trouble of gold plating the flexible hose to the shower head. But the 'piece de resistance' was the delicately patterned pillowslips and sheets. I have never seen another Pension with anything but (usually faded) white sheets.

Despite the surroundings, it was a one hour sleep night. Christopher was again discussing with Telstra why the long-awaited SIM card did not allow him to collect or send our email. The answer, the Spanish mobile network that is allied with Telstra has voice facilities (that is phone) but not data. So obtaining the SIM card was a complete waste of time and effort.

That discussion did not subside until about 3 AM. Christopher gently snored off to sleep, but I tossed and turned, listening to another guest in the terminal stages of a severe smoker's cough, almost shaking the very building with his exertion. I do believe from the faint but bilious whiff of stale cigarette smoke that seemed to be seeping into our room, he was even then smoking, possibly attempting to soothe his stricken lungs. In the midst of much tossing and turning, my last memory of the time was 5AM.

Alicante, Granada

February, Wednesday 3rd

We were definitely in Mediterranean climate area, no more biting wind, warmish air, blossoms on trees, a sandy beach on the foreshore. If we could have seen over the horizon, we would be looking directly at Cannes on the other side, just as when we were in Cannes a few days before, we said 'Spain is directly opposite us if only we could see over the horizon'.

We inspected the fortress built by the Muslims during their period of conquest of Southern Spain, later captured by the Christians, then bombarded successively by the French, the British and Castellan rebels.

It is a massive structure built as usual high on a rocky outcrop. The fort now houses a permanent exhibition of sculptures and that is why, I earlier included being an accomplished sculptor as one of the factors necessary for a person to fully express themselves. Some of these sculptors by Spanish masters I have never heard of, except

for Salvador Dali who was represented, were inexpressively beautiful and simply glowed with feeling.



We returned to the Pension to collect our belongings and I began to take a photograph of the moderately rising lane over which hung the sign marking our Pension. Just as I 'clicked', a girl dressed in black leather rode her motor scooter up the centre of the lane away from me, with long reddish hair flowing down over her blackjacket. I hope I caught the moment as it was a thrilling site that lasted only three seconds. Then, a perfect picture of an elegant Spanish gentleman walked down the lane in the opposite direction, towards me - sombrero, vest, shining shoes, dark glasses, dressed to kill. He greeted me and in surprise, I recognised him as the Pension proprietor's 35 year old son to whom I had been talking within the Pension only ten minutes earlier. I was left wondering who was responsible for the 'gallery environment' of the Pension. Was it the elegantly attired son, or was it the father who not only made something special of his Pension but did the same of his son.



On to Granada. On either side of the road dry barren, rocky outcropped hills, like the 'bad lands' we had so often seen in movies of the 'Wild West' or in some of Clint Eastwood's 'Spaghetti Westerns'. We seemed to be climbing as my ears were 'popping'. We were climbing, snow drifts were beginning to appear in sheltered areas. We entered Granada at dusk with the massive, snow covered Sierra Nevada glowering behind.

Granada, Seville

February, Thursday 4th

Our primary reason for visiting Granada was to visit the famous Alhambra originally built as a Moorish Fortress and luxurious pleasure palace in about 700 AD. It remained in Moorish hands until the final accomplishment of the Christian Reconquista in 1609 under Ferdinand and Isabella, forcing the last Moslem ruler, King Boabdil to leave his palace and Spain forever.

Unfortunately, we did not recognise the point along the road which entered into literary culture as the title to Salman Rushdie's novel 'The Moor's last sigh' (El Ultimo Suspiro del Moro'). The point where Boabdil is said to have looked back at La Alhambra for the last time.

The judgement of the Reconquista by an American travel book 'A year in Spain', published in 1829, is somewhat ascerbic

"Though the victory of Ferdinand and Isabella was a Christian triumph, in name at least, it was not a triumph of humanity. If the philanthropist or the more rational economist, speculating with a view to utility alone, were to enquire what use Christian Spain had made of her dearly bought conquest, and how far the aggregate happiness of mankind and the interests of civilisation had been promoted by the extermination of the heroic, ingenious and industrious people, a picture of fraud, cruelty and oppression would be presented, as frightful as the world has ever witnessed, and followed by consequences equally ruinous to the oppressors and the oppressed."

We chose a Pension almost opposite the site.

Christian kings extended the fort and used the palaces for the next two or three hundred years, after which they were left in the care of the Governor of Granada and so began to fall into disrepair. An American, Washington Irving writer, diplomat and incurable romantic made a perilous journey on horseback with a friend, from Seville to Granada in 1829. A distance of about 300Km over mountain tracks and passes populated by bandits. He was given permission to live in the Governor's quarters at the Alhambra and stayed there for many months. As a result of his explorations of the Alhambra, eliciting legends and stories from the locals and researching Muslim writings on the Alhambra's Muslim period he wrote a book 'Tales of the Alhambra'. This book evoked intense Spanish and International interest in the Alhambra and so a long and meticulous restoration of the Alhambra began.

Washington Irving's book still sells well today. It describes the various features of the Alhambra in a delightful way as well as weaving stories and legends from the past into the descriptions and has become as timeless as the Alhambra itself. When one tours the Alhambra, one can hire an audio device which describes salient points. Each of these points are numbered by signs placed along the paths and one merely enters the appropriate number into the device and presses 'Play'. Most of the descriptions in this audio device have been read, by an actor, from Washington Irving's book. So even today, we seem not to have found a superior way to describe the Alhambra.

The Palace areas consist of inner rectangular courtyards with large pools, usually with fountains, edged by gardens and into which water runs from four directions through small open channels. The sound and sight of the rippling, splashing water is most pleasant and soothing. There are rooms facing open to the courtyards on all four sides with every wall

and ceiling covered with intricate filigree work. The upper floors above the ground level rooms were the dark eyed harem girls and princesses lived and played, hidden by screens through which they could observe any activities in the courtyards below.

Surrounding the palaces proper were series of walled gardens, also with a strong emphasis on water, bubbling in channels, sprinkling from fountains or still in pools. The environment became so attractive to the later Muslim leaders, they were reluctant to venture forth and so grew out of touch with their kingdom and ultimately, lost it.



The symbolism inherent in the architectural design of the palace areas related to the delights and pleasures of the Muslim heaven and it seemed that the charmed Muslim life was to reflect the Muslim heaven here on earth. So it was a life of sensuous pleasure in environment, sound, sight and touch. The 'heaven' the Muslims had created at the Alhambra was designed to enhance and heighten their own personal pleasures. A very different approach from the 'self sacrificing' Christians, determined to redeem themselves from an imagined insult to God. The difference can be seen in the style of architecture, representation of religious ideas and the approach to pleasure (almost 'sinful' for Christians - taken to extremes by the Albigenians).

La Alhambra overlooks the tiled roofing of Granada and is so extensive that a single day is insufficient to indulge in what is required, a relaxed stroll through the gardens, past the water features and into the scattered buildings of this elegant museum of Islamic Memories.

The overall impression left with me was, I do not think I would like to be a Roman Consul any more, I would prefer to be a Muslim Caliph at the Alhambra.

I was surprised and a little disheartened to find Christopher striding well ahead of me up the steep hill in the gathering dusk to the Pension. I thought my exercise prior to and at Val d'Isere would have rendered me much fitter than I seemed to be.

Seville, our last stop in Spain was about 250 Km from Granada, so with a little more time in Granada on the following day before continuing on, it was late in the afternoon when we arrived.

February, Thursday 4th - Seville

Seville, a very old town important in Roman, Muslim and Christian times. Unfortunately as we had arrived later than expected, some of the places we wished to visit had closed.

In our hurry to visit the Tourist Office before it closed, we parked the car in a small lane quite distant from the office. When we went to collect it, we began to realise that amidst the maze of narrow winding lanes, we had no idea where it was. After lots of twisting and turning getting nowhere, we went back to the point on the main road where we had first entered the lanes in the car and then tried to remember the route we had taken in the car, step-by-step. It worked and we eventually found the car safe and sound.

Next we found a Pension. The tall, slightly unkempt proprietor warned that we had to be back before midnight or we would be locked out.

Seville is an important Flamenco centre, so in the hope of finding some spontaneous Flamenco, not the special but 'insipid' shows mounted for guided tours, we embarked upon a 'pub-crawl'. In Spain, most pubs provide 'Tapas' while the patrons drink. Tapas are 'titbits, from just roasted peanuts to kebabs, depending on the pub. Each pub may have available from 6 to 12 different types of Tapas. So wine was our beverage, tapas our meal.

After visiting about 6 pubs, it was well past midnight and we had found no Flamenco. Perhaps everyone stayed at home in winter. But on walking back to the Pension by Christopher's usually reliable 'instinct', we became hopelessly lost again amidst the narrow, weaving lanes. Eventually I realised our navigator had no idea where he was going, but I knew we were moving further and further away from the Pension. So I took possession of the map and entered a noisy smoky back-alley bar to find hand-clapping, guitar playing and Flamenco singing. Unfortunately, it was now very late. The Pension proprietor will be angry and we had to meet LiPo off his plane the following day in Lisbon, 400 Km away. We could not stay at this pub for long. I received directions back to the street containing our Pension via the major roads from a friendly patron. He warned me "Do not go via the alleys, it is very dangerous at this time of night"- just what we had been doing for the last several hours. "It is common for people to be robbed or assaulted at knife-point" he added helpfully.

I took the information to Christopher outside. We did find our way back to the Pension and banged hopefully against the door, chained closed. It took quite some banging but the angry proprietor eventually appeared to scold us vociferously, but eventually allowed us to enter.

February, Friday 5th - Lisbon

It was with some little surprise that we did manage to rise early for our drive to Lisbon. This road was no longer a divided highway but a two lane, quite narrow road which became decidedly rougher when we crossed the border into the poorer Portugal.

Christopher drove like a racing driver, fast, assuredly and safe. Another secret advantage we had, not mention prematurely to Christopher, was Portugal time was an hour different from Spain's, in our favour. In addition, LiPo's plane was a little late, so we were there and waiting for him in good time.

During the pub crawl the previous night in Seville, Christopher was extolling the pub culture in Melbourne mentioning it was the best way to meet 'chicks'. Not only because that is where they were, but a moderate amount of alcohol acted as a 'social lubricant' and it made it easier to introduce oneself etc. He claimed that over 70% of young people enjoyed this style of meeting. I mentioned I thought it was a sad that things had to be that way and I related how in my youth there were many types of activities for meeting girls. Parties, dances, tennis, outings etc. I also mentioned that I never had any problem introducing myself to the most beautiful girl in the room without the slightest amount of alcoholic support. Of course, this was met with derision and statements that times were different now etc.

We returned our car at the airport and the three of us caught the airport bus back to the centre of Lisbon. I was sitting by myself with one of the many vacant seats beside me. Then a stunning young Portuguese girl sat beside me and so I smiled at her as she sat, a smile she readily returned. After a little while I asked if she could speak English and she could. So we chatted about Lisbon and this and that until we reached our stop. Of course, when we alighted, Christopher and LiPo were agog 'How come she sat next to you? How did you do that? Why did you not introduce us?' etc. I just smiled and said 'Like I said last night, its easy when you know how'. However, the more realistic answer was the possibility she felt safer sitting next to an old person than sitting next to young 'bucks.



Lisbon to me seems little different from when I was here last, over 20 years ago. An Adelaide—sized charming town with all the major historical sites within walking distance of each other. Again, as with the rest of the Southern Iberian Peninsular — a history of Romans, Christians, Muslims, Christians.

By the time we checked into the Pension and completed other administrative chores, we could only walk around the central area before enjoying a Portuguese dinner.

February, Saturday 6th - Lisbon

Today we succeeded in completing a considerable amount of walking exercise up and down some of the seven steep hills upon which Lisbon nestles. There are ancient conductorless trams, about 1/3 of the length of Melbourne trams, which grind noisily through the streets and help relieve the walking. There are also strategically placed cable trams on the very steep pinches of the hilly streets and the only purpose of these is to 'elevate' the passengers a few hundred metres from a lower street to a higher street further up the hill. They are always in counter-balanced pairs, so the single track widens into a double track in the region where the upgoing tram passes the down coming tram. So that is explains the secretive passing of the funicular railways in the tunnels of Val d'Isere.

Having long been a fan of the world-leading Fado singer, Amalia Rodriguez, whom I accidentally discovered through hearing a recording by her in a record shop in Adelaide in the early 1960s – what a voice, what melancholy!

Lisbon is the home of Fado. Tonight I hope we can visit the restaurant that originally launched Amalia Rodriguez and if I am very lucky, may hear some good Fado. If I am not lucky, then I will have to wait until I get home and just play my Rodriguez records and think of Lisbon.

Well, we were lucky and did hear some quite good Fado. We were seated just next to the small area in the restaurant where the traditional two guitarists and one singer perform. Between about 10PM and 1:30AM we heard from three different women singers and one male singer. The latter persuaded me to buy his tape.

Prior to the singing the meal was large and filling, a little too much after, unusually, we had eaten a full lunch in the afternoon.

Chris and Po then wanted to check out the bar scene, so a few streets away we found a street full of young people spilling out of the many crowded bars and drinking in the streets.

They all seemed to be enjoying themselves talking and laughing with little evidence of drunkenness. We tried two bars, with Li Po sipping his beer at the rate of a glass per 1/2 hour. I did not realise he was a little allergic to alcohol, like Chuan and did not really enjoy beer. Christopher had learnt drinking from Charles and could down a beer in no time.

It was after 3AM by the time we returned to the Pension. It was also the first night I slept through to 8AM without restless tossing and turning for at least two hours during the night. I think I will try a 3 AM bed time more often.

February, Sunday 7th

Li Po was to catch a 2:45 PM plane back to Stuttgart via Paris today. But first, he wanted to drink coffee overlooking the Tagus river estuary around which Lisbon is built.

I reminded him we had to leave the Pension for the airport no later than 1:15 in order to be sure of catching his flight.

By this time Christopher and I had become tired of the luke-warm coffee customarily served in Europe and we tried to persuade the waiter to serve hot coffee. It was surprisingly difficult to explain this in sign language or Portuguese – especially as we had no Portuguese between us. We resorted to drawing thermometers and other symbols.

Finally we seemed to communicate effectively and received coffee a few degrees above luke-warm.

Coffee turned into lunch and we did not leave until 1:30. From then on, it was all systems go. We managed to get Li Po to the check-in area with only 5 minutes to spare, but his seat was no longer available. The plane was full. Li Po had to pay an extra \$150 to book the next day, then phone a colleague that he would not be at work on Monday (Refer to the consequences, Note 2. on the last page).

Whilst at the airport we took the opportunity to rent a SIM card from the local mobile phone network provider. We thought that their own SIM card would permit us to email again. Alas, we were wrong, it produced exactly the same symptoms as the SIM card that had been couriered from Australia. Our conclusion, the new mobile phone bought in Geneva was faulty in the area to do with data transmission.

February, Monday 8th

Today completes our skiing holiday, tomorrow is the start of the long, long journey back. First a 5 hour flight to Vienna, an overnight stay and then a 20 hour flight to Australia.

And, only now do I realise why whenever I turned on the 'cold' water tap in the bathroom or kitchen, hot water came out. It is because the tap had printed on it 'C' for 'Chaud' (hot), not 'C' for 'Cold'. Well, you learn something new everyday.

February, Tuesday 9th

Well, today is our last day in Europe, in Vienna to be precise. We are merely 'hanging around' waiting for the aircraft to depart in about 3 hours time.

Although we had a good motel room, courtesy of Lauda Air, we stayed awake most of the night 're- conditioning' ourselves to Australian time. Christopher reading a novel, myself just tossing and turning in bed due to the bright light being used by the reader.

Have we learnt anything? A few random thoughts come to mind.

Size: Europe as an area, is far bigger than we generally tend to think. Just from Vienna to Val d'Isere is a very long way. From Val d'Isere to Lisbon is twice as far again. We are considering Australian distances here, Melbourne to Perth.

Population: There are quite a few countries in Europe that are smaller in population than Australia. Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark. So Australians do not need to be

embarrassed about their relatively small population. There are many other countries with a long and interesting history which have smaller populations.

Food: Australia has far superior ingredients, better cooked, wider variety and significantly less expensive than anything we encountered in Europe. That is something we can really feel superior about. Perhaps a first class restaurant in Paris can match a first class restaurant in Melbourne, but I would think the Paris restaurant meal would cost twice as much as the Melbourne meal.

Beaches: Europe does not rate a mention compared with Australia. Again we can feel superior.

Skiing: The ski-able snow-fields are more extensive and better developed than in Australia, providing more reliable and higher quality snow with generally better weather. However, given the type of continent that is Australia, that Australians can ski at all is remarkable. In addition, possibly because in Australia, where there is snow, we tend to have more difficult runs, we do not have the luxury to be able to develop easier slopes. We noticed that Val d'Isere is described as 'a difficult' mountain, but we found it relatively 'tame' in terms of general difficulty.

History: In terms of Western Civilisation, of course Europe is Western Civilisation, so there is much to see and absorb. It would require several years to feel one had a general appreciation of the historical development of Western Civilisation, where it happened, the consequences for the area in which it happened etc. We saw a lot, but would like to spend more time with what we did see and even more time on what we did not see.

Australia: Does not seem to rate. People have generally heard of Australia and express a desire to visit sometime, but in general, Australia is 'out of sight, out of mind'. For example, of the many 'world maps' displayed in the Oceanographic museum in Monaco, Australia simply did not appear.

Culture: For better or worse, the culture of the Europe we saw has been determined by the Catholic Church. Protestantism is no more than a minor sect and has had little cultural influence. By this, I do not mean the Catholic Church did or does now control everything. I mean that for the last 2000 years or at least 1800 years, the Catholic Church has been the cultural coloniser.

From around the year 200 AD, one can see everywhere the beginnings of Church influence, its growing importance, its accommodation with new invasions (the 'barbarians' replacing the Romans), its eventual repelling of new invasions (the Moors) until even politically, it began to dominate the whole of Europe. As States became more independent the Churches political power waned but the cultural influence remained. The influence permeates everything, political structures, humanist movements, humanitarian movements, public policy issues, social justice issues, art everything. In a way the development of the EEC is a reversion to 'The Holy Roman Empire' where the whole of Europe was a united Christendom (Catholicism). The only recalcitrant member is the once Catholic but now Protestant Britain.

Internet: Access to the internet, for at least email is very useful. However, it did not work as well as we expected using a mobile phone. Transmission speeds are slow (9600 baud) and 'roaming' data facilities do not seem to be available in every country. It seems to depend on the local 'contractual' conditions. The most promising was Portugal where one could rent a local SIM card for \$5 per day, however, they only permitted voice on that service, not data. Another alternative is Internet cafes, but then we have to 'log' in with an

'open' password. Hackers scanning the Internet could determine our password, so it is not secure. Another method may be to sign up with a local ISP, even if one pays say \$30 for a few hours. For example, some of Christopher's customers are visitors who are only going to be in town for a few days, but it would nevertheless be less expensive than the equivalent mobile phone charges. This area needs more research in order to determine the best way.

Where to live: Nothing we saw persuaded us that we would want to live anywhere but Australia. A couple of years living in Europe may be useful in order to come to terms with the origins of our own civilisation, but for an open, hassle free, comfortable environment where most things (mechanical and social) work quite well and where we are exposed to entirely different cultures (Asia - Europeans are not very aware of Asia), but, Australia is where we call home.

Our estimated time of arrival at Tullamarine is about 10PM on Wed 10th.

Damien

Notes:

1. Avalanches claim five more lives in France

Page 12 (483 words) Sunday, 14 Feb 1999

From section: News Publication: The Sunday Age

GRENOBLE. SATURDAY. Five more people, including an Australian, died in avalanches in the French Alps yesterday, taking the toll of snowslides to 18 in a week, following Tuesday's disaster in the Mont Blanc region. Police said three people were killed in Les Arcs and two, Australian Mr Anthony Thorburn, 23, and Briton Ms Catherine Ovington, 27, in Val d'Isere. They said Mr Thorburn and Ms Ovington were swept to their deaths by an avalanche triggered by other members of their skiing group. All had ignored repeated warnings from authorities to stick to marked runs because of the high risk of avalanches after the heaviest snowfall in decades.

2. Home again for Li Po

Well, I hope your trip went smoothly because mine certainly didn't. I didn't arrive in Stuttgart until midday Tuesday, after what seemed like one continuous nightmare.

Landed in Paris and then had to sit around for 3 hours. It was cold, dark and showing outside so I didn't think it was worthwhile going into Paris to sit in a cafe or walk around.

Once we boarded the plane, we then had to sit there for 1-1/2 hours before they eventually told us that the flight was cancelled because the runways were frozen over.

It was funny to see the cultural stereotype emerging between the German passengers and the French staff. The French staff seemed not to be really concerned with our plight and would try and sneak away. The Germans would surround them and start screaming, "What is your plan?!! What plan do you have?!! Who's responsible?". They didn't seem to care what the plan might involve, other than being given clear direction.

After an hour of this going back and forth we eventually got booked on the next morning flight leaving at 7:20 AM and received a voucher for a hotel stay. Air France told us there would be a bus leaving from such and such gate at such and such a building. Went there and nothing came. The taxi drivers said the buses were at another spot, waited there took the bus to a Novotel, only to be told on arrival that we were at the wrong one. Went back to the airport. By this time it is shutting down for the night and there was barely a soul there. Finally found someone from Air France who disappeared for 30 minutes (we started to suspect he'd run away to hide from us) before returning with some taxi vouchers to take us to the correct hotel.

Finally get to bed at 2:30 am only to have to wake up at 5am to get the morning plane.

Arrive at the airport. Look at the board and see in big flashing red "Flight cancelled". They then book us on a 9:10 Lufthansa flight which means I won't get to work before midday.

But still it's finally looking positive except they can't find my checked-in luggage and promise to send it after me. So I finally arrive in Stuttgart at about 10:30 with no luggage. No house key, because my house key is in my luggage and no toiletries to clean up because they are also in my luggage.

Luckily, the boss didn't seem upset at all when I finally arrived.

I calculated I could have hired a car when we got chucked off the first flight in Paris around 10:30 PM, driven home, would have arrive in Stuttgart by about 4:30am had 4 hours sleep and would have gotten to work on time.

It seems strange to be writing email back to Australia again. I can remember so clearly sending the email before the skiing trip trying to organise the trip, and feeling more excited as the time drew closer. Now that excitement is gone and its a bit more like slow attrition until I get to go home again.

Li Po