

# Spain (through France)

January and February 1997

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**JPW**

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## **Journey through France to Spain, Jan 1997**

### **Thursday 2 Jan**

It had been freezing cold since Christmas, but no snow. Nevertheless we congratulated ourselves on planning an early afternoon departure from Somerton, still in extreme cold, and overnight stay, on Thursday 2 Jan, at the Quay Thistle Hotel, overlooking the quay, and moored tramp ships, at Poole. 55 miles in 1¼ hours, as usual. Not cheap but much more relaxing than a start at 06.00.

The Thistle is a large modern establishment, but comfortable, well sited, and efficient. The receptionist said they had very few French visitors, even in summer, which surprised me. The dining room was full, and the dinner agreeable with a large *hors d'oeuvres* buffet. At £151 the night stay was considerably more expensive (no breakfast either) than in France. The headwaiter was Turkish, rare.

### **Friday 3 Jan**

Up at 06.30. To ferry (5 mins drive) 07.30. The Duc de Normandie. Our usual friend SS Barfleur was in for annual refit. The Normandie was more cramped and less comfortable. Breakfast cold. I bought two litre bottles of Grants and £28 worth of Champs Elysées Guerlain scent for T. She bought for herself earrings, bracelets and skin cream. The couple sitting in front of us were only going to Cherbourg for the day - nine hours or more sitting in a boat! And little to see!

We started late, but caught up, and were in at 1pm (2pm continental time), but the wind made docking awkward and we had to do it twice, thus losing time. There was snow everywhere and the hills were white. The exits from the port had not been scraped but as soon as we were out of the port, the roads were all swept and made for good driving, despite snow in the verges and on all sides in the fields and woods. There were only a few miserable beasts to be seen huddled in odd corners. We missed the new exit to Caen out of the port, and so went, as usual, through the centre, no less quick, I think. We left the ferry as 1.24 (French time) and had a smooth, unrushed journey via Valognes, Coutances, and Avranches, to arrive at Ducey on the River Sélune at 16.40 hrs, about 95 miles from the boat.

The hotel (de la Sélune) is on this attractive river. Photos of anglers with salmon. The patron showed me slides of salmon leaping, with great pride. He said 164 fish were taken this year - season is 1 March to 31 August. But on reflexion I think he may have meant this total was for the river as a whole. There is only a short stretch of fishing as some barrier prevents the fish going beyond a certain point up stream. M. Girres said that the river at Avranches also had a good run. A licence is expensive and is the same for a day, a week or the season. M. Girres said he hoped this would be changed as it was a deterrent to visitors. As usual in France most fishing seems to be by spinning. The fish looked a good size and in fine condition from the photos. The river looked nice to fish, about the width of the Exe at Exebridge. July is the best month.

I went for a good walk in the nice Normandy town and out into the country beyond. Very, very cold but no rain or snow. All the shops open at 7pm, and decorations still up. Butchers and bakers hard at it in the French way.

The patron and his wife said they had come from Paris originally and had started in the other hotel in the town, a block down the road, before buying L'Hôtel de la Sélune. The husband is the chef. They are both charming and efficient. Only one other late arriving couple staying, and at dinner in the pleasantly decorated dining room. For dinner we had:-

| T.   | J.   |
|--|--|
| 6 huitres<br>coquilles St Jacques<br>glace | Moules en patisserie au curry (excellent)<br>Panaché du bar et du saumon<br>Livarot et Pont L'Éveque<br>Gateau au chocolat<br>Calvados |
| ½ bottle of Muscadet                       |  |

We had a cheerful, large waitress. After dinner we watched news and météo in the salon (no TV in our room) but were in bed by 10pm. It was rather too hot in the room, and I, for once, had a disturbed night - perhaps due to the Calvados!

The hotel we got through V.F.B. and is recommended.

#### **Saturday 4 Jan**

Up at 06.45 and downstairs by 07.30. Mme opened the courtyard with her key. Useful to have secure parking. A cold wind but not freezing. Mme kindly telephoned for us to Les Dues at Duras, our next stop. The woman there spoke of *verglas* during the morning but assured that it would be OK by mid-day. So we were thus reasonably optimistic.

We left at 08.21 - it was still dark and we needed lights (which I had forgotten to get adjusted in Somerton) and it was so overhung with cloud and murky that even as the day wore on, there was little day light. We went on red N175 (double highway) and then south via Antran on the same road but single highway to Rennes. It got more and more covered with snow. Traffic slowed to single file in a long queue. We became mildly anxious. Around Rennes on double highway we did better, but on the way south to Nantes we slowed again to a queue and single file at about 40 mph. We stopped for petrol at 11.20 at the Aire de Treillères about 10 miles north of Nantes. T had a hot chocolate. I felt too tense from the road to have one. Very snowy underfoot and sliding about in the mire, and a biting wind. But warm enough in the car.

We got round Nantes pretty easily, all well signed, and the Loire under the bridge looked strange, as the ice was covered with snow. Double highway again and *péage* 38 frs south to Fontenay, after which it all slowed up again to Niort. We climbed the approach to the autoroute in a queue only to be diverted off it by two shivering gendarmes who shouted "*Prenez Saint Jean d'Angély*". So we started down N150, getting slower and slower till we were in a crawling queue at 10 - 20 mph, sometimes stopping entirely. When this happened on a hill, there was a lot of slithering about and revving up of engines. Our Proton held up well and only began to slide once. We could see that the verges were icy, and side roads impassable, either with snow or sheer *verglas*. In one village on a hill, the people were all rushing about, cars were broadside on, and tractors were in action. There was absolutely nothing to be done except grin and bear it, and hope for the best.

By now we calculated we could not possibly make Duras in daylight and probably not in any case even if we tried to flog on. So we began (at 4 pm and lighter than in UK owing to clock change, but murky due to cloud) to look for an hotel. The problem was to take the car off the main road at any point. We stopped for more petrol (as a precaution) at a gas station before St Hilaire (the loos were frozen) and learned of an hotel there, but it looked ghastly as we crept by, on a corner and with no obvious approach or parking, so we pushed on towards Saintes. We got there at 5 pm, in the early dusk, and were given directions to cross the Charente bridge and there would be an hotel in the Rue Principale. There was a slot by the curb and I took it, as none others in sight, by a "Hotel" sign. T went in - the pavement was really dangerous - and came out to say we had a room. The hotel proved to be a dump, with a scruffy bar incorporated (and our guide evidently meant a better establishment on the left of the road and nearly opposite, which we missed) but we had a warm, ground floor room in the courtyard and a large bathroom with piping hot water. So, in spite of the sleazy air and casual service, we were thankful to be established and warm. In fact we had done 263 miles from Ducey despite the conditions.

The hotel owner helped me 'phone to Les Ducs, where we were due. The *patronne* seemed quite unworried to hear we would not arrive, but offered lunch the following day, though not a room, as they close Sunday night!

I had one Marks and Spencer prawn sandwich all day, so was ready for dinner which we had, on the hotel's advice, in a large bourgeois restaurant opposite, full of families, with a large elderly patron (in his chef's whites) and a severe looking *patronne*, ruling all. Our hotel was called Hôtel des Voyageurs - a common title for down-market places, coupled with Hôtel du Commerce and de la Gare. The restaurant, in the Ave. Gambetta, was called Chez Louis. T's tummy was a bit off, but she had fish soup (good) and I had excellent oysters and ½ bottle of red '94 Bordeaux. The rest of the meal not worthy of record. We were asleep by 9.30 pm and slept soundly until 08.00 hrs! An adventurous day, ending safely and well. And the hotel was perfectly comfortable, and very cheap, despite its sleazy air! We felt lucky to be safe.

### **Sunday 5 Jan**

Gossip with a nice French family, who came in late on Saturday, after adventures, and who had already called the *gendarmes*, elicited that the *auto-route* was open, but some snow in Le Gers (pronounced with an audible 's' - not always heard). It was much less cold, and the pavement, though still covered with ice, was starting to melt. Over *café au lait* in the bar, we were accosted for information by a nice Brit and pert son, who (the son) spoke good French, who had come up through Spain, from skiing. They had to put on chains in the mountains and had a terrible drive. They were aiming for Calais up the *autoroute*, and home, where the boy had a letter from Oxford, not yet opened, awaiting him, about entry. He was already offered a place at London.

We took off at 09.00 on a damp and slightly misty morning, the road also damp but clear. The sun came up at 09.30 and in fact was so low and bright it made it hard to see. There were warning signs that the road was slippery around Bordeaux but no sign of this, and traffic was going 75 - 80 mph. We got to an *aire*, Pont de L'Aquitaine, near Agen, in 2½ hours. No snow beyond Bordeaux but approaching Toulouse the snow was again covering verges, fields and hills. Bright sun all the time. Past Castelnaudary, evocative of past visits, and signs to Mirepoix and Limoux

(memories of *blanquette!*). We arrived at Aire de Corbières at 14.02 hrs, and crossed over by the bridge, to a splendid, efficient and cheerful restaurant where I had a cassoulet, salad and apple cake and a *car* of Minervois, and felt much better. Less than 100 miles to Perpignan. T had a good buffet. My *cassoulet* was piping hot and delicious, filling, but not too much. An excellent interlude in sunshine.

We galloped past Perpignan, feeling rather odd to turn south, into unknown country, towards Spain. Nice views of the blue Mediterranean across flats.

We got off the *autoroute* at Le Boulou almost at the frontier and made our way, further than we expected, somehow, through narrow roads and villages and vineyards to Collioure on the coast. Lovely views of red tiles and glowing walls as the sun set, buildings dropping down the cliffs to the small port, dominated by a huge castle. Narrow streets and steps, corners and dead ends, artists' galleries down every alley. We found La Frégate, a tall building, ornate, right by the river leading down to the sea, in the centre of town, with car park (public) opposite. Crowds of people milling about, a veritable evening parade, lots of handsome young, dressed up, and plenty of traffic. I was able to find a hole in the car-park while T went in. We were expected, as indeed we should have been, and the receptionist was charming, though she initially put T in an unmade up room by mistake. She transferred us to the third floor, a small but adequate room, furnished in a sort of Spanish, heavy style, with a view onto the car-park and town centre. There was a very small lift - only room for one person. T began to feel unwell and was sick. We never discovered if it was due to something she ate or some other sort of infection or virus. She was not well enough to come down to dinner so, after an excellent walk round the town and by the sea, I dined on my own - only one man besides me in the room.

Dinner, in a very well appointed ground floor dining room, served by a very pretty, blonde waitress of about 35, who came from Perpignan, was excellent. I had fish soup, *morue* (cod) with vegetables and sauce, and *Crème Catalane* (a sort of flan, with rather more body to it). Also a bottle (I brought away about half) of Côtes de Roussillon *blanc*, Terrasous '95, which the waitress recommended - locally made - 116 frs. It was very good. You don't often see in the UK wine such as this from so far south, although of course, Corbières, Fitou and Minervois are now seen in super-markets, and very good too.

The waitress said Catalan influence was quite strong but only old families talked the language. Many look to Barcelona for shopping. She spurned the idea that this *petit coin* was *isolé* or ever had been, even before the *autoroute*. There was a great following for Rugby Union especially in Perpignan. Tourists in summer came from all over Europe but mostly family parties rather than *les jeunes*.

She said there were *gendarmes* from time to time in the square and the car and its contents (too much to unload) should be quite safe, especially in winter.

She gave me Vieux Marc de Banyuls (just up in the hills) as a (very strong) digestif.

T was unwell but slept quite soundly and, although far from OK in the morning, and having no breakfast, was able to travel.

We did 393 miles from Saintes to Collioure - very easily.

## Monday 6 Jan

Up at 07.15. Good hot bath. Rain outside and school children catching their busses in the dripping wet *place*, still dark except for street lights. Good breakfast on the first floor - fresh orange juice - brought by a new, equally nice, receptionist, also from Perpignan. T only had verbena tea. The hotel had not taken the deposit I had offered on the Visa card so we paid the full amount, far from expensive. We left at 09.10 hrs - a nice little town and a good stay except for T's sickness which colours her memories. 807 miles from Somerton.

It poured, sometimes in torrents, the whole way until the last hour or so, below Valencia. We were at Barcelona at 11.10 hrs - 114 miles. We could not go fast and visibility was poor. Passing *camions*, squirting up curtains of rain, was a horrid business. All very green in the valleys, below high hills. It reminded me of Donegal! We stopped for petrol (3,000 pesetas, say £15, to fill up) at the Airea de Paredes. We had to show passports to have Visa cards accepted. The man who filled the car was full of alarmist talk - our first interchanges in Spanish. He said there was snow above Alicante and the motorway was closed. We were horrified and alarmed - visions of having to find an hotel off the motor-way, and even more difficult driving. When I paid for the petrol inside there was a crowd of what looked like truckers all shouting. The man who took my card and passport confirmed the bad news. But there was nothing to be done except press on. In fact we ran into heavy sleet for a period, but no snow, and the motorway got better and better after Valencia. It was a good example of rumour being fed upon by the ignorant. The next *péage* said the route was clear!

We began to see oranges on trees, and the sea, storm tossed, quite close on our left. All coloured brown, and red mud. T said the landscape reminded her of the Hollywood Hills. The *autopista* was in good repair and we gradually found the going easier. Not much traffic. *Péage* or *Peaje* cost £43 in all, which explains why it's not crowded.

We stopped, 30 miles north of Valencia, 1,119 miles in all, at a huge restaurant/hotel, crowded with families. I was suddenly hungry but T's insides were still awry and she did not eat. The buffet and service were excellent, with a wide range of hot dishes. I had *potaje* (thick soup), *merluza* (hake) with veg and chips, *crème catalane*, and a small bottle of Sangre de Toro, with a *cortado* to finish, which seemed to be the word for *café au lait*. They took the Visa card. I felt better.

After Valencia the rain stopped. We got on at 80 mph. Very little traffic. Mountains. Views of dark blue sea. High rise buildings shining in the evening sun. Very built up all along the coast.

We got off at Benisa (Exit 63), and so down to Moraira via Teulada, from the map, and at Moraira we followed Chris Pacey's instructions and got up to the villa after a number of sharp turns on the narrow winding and steep lanes. We were glad we had the instructions. We parked, daringly, down the very, very steep and, on one side, unprotected drive, to make unpacking easier. But after extricating ourselves with some apprehension the following morning, we kept the car thereafter on the edge of the roadway above the villa.

We arrived at 17.30 hrs - it was still light till 6.15. 1,240 miles from Somerton. 433 miles in the day, despite the rain.

We unpacked and settled in. T had brought provisions for supper. Tired but content we had made it, as planned, despite the horrific conditions.

So we began our Spanish adventure. T's sickness passed in a few days, fortunately.

## Return from El Portet, Moraira, 25 Feb - 1 March 1997

### Tues 25 Feb

We left Villa Fleur, having loaded as much as possible the previous night, at 08.40. We gave our Swiss friends, Bernard and Madeleine, a toot on the horn on the way down the hill. It was a fine clear day with blue sky and bright sun. Mileage 2,378 so we did just over 1,000 miles in the six weeks of our stay. Traffic pretty light except around Valencia. Stop for coffee just before Castellón. 120 miles in two hours. Stop for petrol and picnic lunch (*coca* - a kind of pizza - and *gaspacho*) just beyond Tarragona (Airea del Médol). Big west wind getting stronger, but still sunny and blue sky. Better views than on way down, and fine vistas of empty rocky shore and deep blue sea before Tarragona. Oranges galore in the plains, and olives. Bright white houses with red tiles surrounded by polluting industry, making the sky hazy. All river beds bone dry until the Ebro, which was wide and flowing.

We left after lunch at 1.45 and, after negotiating the surrounds of Barcelona, full of heavy traffic, got to an *airea* after Gerona at 15.45. Landscape much more green and poplars everywhere in copses. 386 miles from Portet.

Much cooler since Barcelona, greener, and more arable. We saw two British trucks and one Polish; no British cars all day. We were at the frontier at 16.30, 410 miles from Portet, and changed our pesetas for francs on the French side, on the advice of the *Guardia Civil* at the *Área*.

We got off at Le Boulou and went 5 km into the mountains to Ceret, known as an artists' town, which we had identified from Michelin. After a false start, which put us off, at a car park marked for *Centre Ville* where there was an unattractive group of hippies, we finally got to the centre, up the hill, and narrow, everyone parading about, as at Collioure on our way down. Hotel Vidal was, curiously, full and I had a hard time backing out of the very narrow lane. But T found Les Arcades, also in the centre and demanded "your best room". It was fine, on the fourth floor, and with, as we saw next morning, a glorious view of the snow covered mountains. Les Arcades was obviously a social centre, with a large bar full of Catalan speaking customers! 421 miles from El Portet. But not too tiring.

We were advised by the patron, a collector of paintings from the evidence on the walls, to go for dinner a hundred yards away at Les Féuillants, where the Chef had a Michelin *Étoile*. We have never dined in a genuine One Star Michelin restaurant. Forks yes but not stars.

I went to reserve a table. But it did not matter. We were the only customers in the dining room, though there were several tables occupied in the Brasserie. The restaurant opened at 8 pm. There were four waiters, with various functions, strictly observed. And an elegant and informative *patronne*. The real *patronne*, her sister in law, was in Maryland (surprisingly) studying wine. She is, it seems, an expert. We had a beautifully cooked and presented dinner, perhaps the best we have had, with a glass of a different regional wine, of excellent quality, with each course. £102 but worth it.



## 26 Feb

Sun and blue sky after grey early morning. Breakfast 08.40 and get car out of well protected garage. We missed the Le Boulou entry to the *autoroute* and went on the R. Nationale to Perpignan and so onto the big road. Petrol at Aire de Corbières and the weather changed to overcast, drops of rain, and a big wind. Markedly cooler. One more Polish truck and one from Llanelli, but still no Brit cars, and none as far as Cherbourg. Picnic lunch past Toulouse. Off at Marmande and north to Duras, Les Ducs Hotel, booked through V.F.B. It was here we had aimed to reach on the way down. And coming back from Pau several years before we had liked the looks of the place, but found it closed on a Sunday, and gone on to Ste Foix la Grande. V.F.B., for reasons unexplained, had got us a room with a shower only (and told me in Portet on the phone that this was all that was available). Tilla got it changed immediately, and the *patronne* told us it was nonsense on V.F.B.'s part. Bad marks by V.F.B., to be pursued in due course.

There was a big storm, with a gale, as we arrived, and another heavy shower later. But we had a nice walk in the sun in between showers and I got a D.Tel at the Maison de Presse (the previous day's). The owner said there were a number of British residents in the area. I suppose in real estate terms it counts as "Dordogne" though about 20 miles South of the river. We had a good dinner, cooked by the husband, and liked the hotel. 280 miles in the day. Wine from Duras vineyards - a great feature of the hotel and the town. *Armagnac aux prunes*. Fine chateau, but closed.

## 27 Feb

We left at 08.30 hrs. The parking area was locked at night. Such a relief for us. The rain had gone and we had clear sky and sun all day. Across country via Montpon and Montguyon on attractive empty yellow and white roads, and onto the *autoroute* beyond Regnac at the Blaye intersection. Stop for coffee and *pain au chocolat* beyond Saintes. Then very fast past Poitiers and stop for picnic lunch at L'Aire d'Usseau, 40 miles short of Tours. There was a nice yellow, clipped forsythia hedge in the centre of the motorway, not seen elsewhere. We came off past Tours and went down the Loire bank - plenty of water - and went through Vouvray to Vernou and called on the Perce Nez Hotel, where we had such a splendid birthday (my 75th) celebration last October. We knew from V.F.B. they were shut for holidays and renovations, but I was fussily keen to see if we could recover our large thermos, left on their breakfast table. The owners were in, working hard, and greeted us with enormous warmth, and Mme. had kept the thermos for us, meaning to get our address from V.F.B. but never getting around to it. They had had a good two weeks holiday in Abidjan. Mme. confided to Tilla that her N. York cousin, who had ordered a splendid bottle of Burgundy for us on the phone, had quoted a credit card which was out of date! Of course T offered to pay, but Mme would not allow it, and said she would write or call Tonda. A shaming affair. I want to tell Tonda but T says I am not to intervene! I did later - she said she would rectify.

We identified the Hôtel La France from Michelin in Chartre sur le Loir, and went there across country through Monnaie, St Laurent en Gâtines, La Ferrière, Les Hermites, and west to Chemillé sur Dême. This, as noted before, is a pretty poor area, and a desert for hotels.

The Hôtel La France proved to be run down, in effect closed (the restaurant was closed) although well situated on the main *place*. Apparently, as we learned at dinner, the former owners have just retired, and their daughter and (younger) husband do not really know their *métier*. But we were not prepared to search further. The parking was secure, and the room adequate and very cheap. Indeed the effect of the stronger pound was noteworthy on all our bills - to our advantage.

We were pointed to a restaurant, about half a mile away on the road to Chateau Loir, and walked there. The river was in full flood but had evidently been higher, and some houses and all the surrounding fields were inundated.

We had done 307 miles in the day, very fast on the *autoroute*. Fine sunshine all the time.

The Restaurant Auberge de St Nicholas gave us a fine dinner, serving by a cute and bouncy, and efficient pregnant waitress. The (lady) Mayor came in to a private room with a large party which the *patronne*, in some awe, said was the *Conseil général (de la Région)* presumably). They did not look much, but made a good noise, and were accompanied by 'Carmen'.

| J.                                      | T.       |
|---|----------|
| 9 oysters                               | Kir      |
| Goujonnes des rougets á St Jacques      | The same |
| Mousse au chocolat                      |          |
| Ménéteau Salon white (very good always) |          |
| Framboise (alcohol blanc) digestif      |          |

We walked back, feeling good. The *ménu* was frs 145 (+wines) and the room and breakfast was frs. 270. All very moderate.

## 28 Feb

We left at 08.30 and T did a formidable map reading to get us across country and around both Le Mans and Alençon. We went by Le Grand-Lucé (D304 red and yellow D13), Tresson, Maisoncelles, Bouloire (D34), Conneré, Tuffé and Bonnétable. Then west to Ballon, and yellow D6 to Beaumont S. Sarthe (floods everywhere). Then Fresnay S. Sarthe and Villaines. In the latter we saw a memorial to the dead of 1870 (Sedan etc), put up in 1871. I do not remember seeing such a memorial ever before. Also the first lambs, very, very small.

All this was a new route to me, and a new approach through Normandie Maine to the very familiar Domfront, via Javron and Lessay.

We got to Domfront at noon, and, after petrol, came north via Tinchebray and Vire, for lunch on a side road to Ste Marie Laumont. Signs of early spring.

We came out of St Lô, after false starts - not an easy drive - on D900 red N.W to Périers, a new route to me, and then North on yellow D24, real Cotentin Normandy country, big stone farm houses and manors, with elegantly spaced windows, all the way to Valognes, where we had identified two hotels from the Michelin. We saw more first promises of spring in the hedge en route to Valognes. The first hotel

proved too sordid and unappealing (in the Rue des Religieuses) for T to accept, and the second we could not find, on the old route to Cherbourg, I do not know why. So we gave up and took the first road beyond Valognes to St Vaast. It proved very twisting, bad surfaced and remote, very difficult to find the way, but we got there, and both St Vaast hotels which we know are first class were closed! So back to Quettehou and we found a new (2 years) hotel, the Demeure du Perron, in nice grounds just at the entry to the town. The *patron* was an engineer but longed to cook. His wife (no children) was a publicity agent in Paris, young and attractive. They gave the impression they were learning their way still, but it was all comfortable enough. We were on the ground floor with the car at our door. Restaurant a separate building, a few yards away and breakfast in a special room adjoining the residence of the owners. We had done 242 miles.

I had 12 oysters, *morue avec pommes de terre* (salt cod) and *mousse au calvados*. Tilla had *daurade* (not in the dictionary but the waiter last year in Bayeux told us it was sea bream) and we shared half a bottle of Anjou Savennières which was so good I have now included it in my order from Eldridge Pope.

Asleep v. early.

### **1st March**

Up at 07.00 and breakfast (served uneasily, somehow, by the *patron*, but we parted warmly) and nice drive from 07.45 - 08.15 at port and straight on board. Some sun, misty. Good French lunch and Mouton Cadet. Boat nearly empty. Punctual arrival 13.00.

Home 14.30 - 3,712 miles - 2,378 from Portet; 84 miles last day.

All well at home. A great and successful adventure, but we felt as if we had jet lag for several days. Can't think why.

JPW

Somerton, 10. III. 97

## Spain Jan and Feb '97

Here are a few impressions from our stay at the Villa Fleur. They are inevitably superficial, and generalised; but it may be worthwhile putting them down, between my usual narratives of the journeys down and back through France (already written, as easier) for reference in future, to see how our views change.

I think we only came gradually to realise that we were situated in the middle of expatriates, in great numbers. Germans are probably the strongest in numbers, with British, Dutch, Belgian and Swiss following close behind. No Americans at all, which seems curious to us who are used to the Americas but less curious on reflexion. And few French. The expatriates, especially English, clearly have a thriving, nostalgic life, superimposed on the Spanish culture, and imbibing little from it, few bothering to learn more than "please" and "thank you" in Spanish. There are English language newspapers about local expatriate subjects of interest, and friends of ours went to a "sing-along" in Teulada where all those present, elderly, as most expatriates are (though some have brought their younger family members) sang, to piped music, World War songs. Our friends said it was fun.

Some expatriates are settled as bar or art gallery owners, television technicians, or real estate agents. Most, however, live in the innumerable villas, which stretch on the edges of towns down the coast, mainly on hill sides, from Valencia to Alicante and below. Construction was apparently halted in recent years, or at least, held up, but it has started again and everywhere in Moraira and roundabout, building work is going on. There seems to be some positive planning control. No more high rises to be allowed in Moraira. The two that got through the net are not too bad; nothing like so hideous as in Calpe and Benidorm, beyond belief awful. But no more. And everything is faced in local yellow and ochre stone, each piece chipped smooth by hand. The builders bring cranes and bulldozers up sheer cliffs, and seem amazingly skilled, and tough, and hard working.

Many of the villa owners live on the Costa Blanca all year round, and villas in the more mature areas, with fine gardens, are sometimes owned and occupied by Spanish families. But in others the owners seem to be elsewhere some of the time, especially in winter, and there is a lot of letting of property, rents varying from cheap, by any standards, in winter, and moderately expensive, but nothing like, say, those in Southern France, in summer. Moraira swells with people in summer, and must be pretty unpleasant, though the sun and sea are always beautiful, the coast line is attractive, rocky, and with magnificent views, and the beaches long, smooth and gently sloping, with clean, golden sand.

Spanish politics make, we felt, absolutely no impression on the expatriates. The most that expatriates connect with social and political life in Spain is over local questions such as water supply, rubbish collection and disposal, and theft. On crime generally, contrary to what we had heard, we saw nothing and heard little, though the papers and T.V reported plenty of the usual villainies and atrocities. Nowhere we went gave us any threat or feeling of menace. We saw no urban squalor or under-class, but we were not in big cities.

On the question of water supply there seemed to be excellent pressure and no shortages. Yet all the river beds we saw (until the Ebro) were bone dry, and looked as

if they had been dry for years. This in spite of unseasonably heavy rains as we arrived in January. We did not get any informed opinion on water, and where it came from.

We hired a 'dish' to give us Spanish T.V and enjoyed it, even though much of it was unintelligible, being in Valenciano, the local dialect; and Castellano (pure Spanish) was often spoken so fast, that the details were hard for us to follow, whereas we had no problems reading the language. Tilla's accent and speech were as good as ever. My accent was poor, but my fluency and vocabulary improved markedly, and I had no hesitation in discussing any everyday subject with whomever possible. Chilean phrases came back to me. It is virtually impossible to meet educated or professional Spanish people socially. Indeed we did not even see any who resembled an 'upper class'. So our conversation was restricted to our maid, Conchin, a charming and hard-working young mother of two from Teulada, shopkeepers, waiters, and building workers or technicians. We socialised with one Spanish wife, she from Bilbao, and he a Swiss, friends of our neighbours, but that was exceptional, and we spoke mostly French with her.

On our T.V we enjoyed, and largely followed the dubbed Spanish of, a rather corny but engaging soap called *La Saga de los MacGregor* about Australian pioneer families in the 19th. century! It was on most nights. We only saw one good home-made Spanish T.V film, but T.V seemed generally of a pretty high and varied standard, and with a notable frequency of intellectual round-table discussions about politics and arts.

On class matters, although we did not mix with British expatriates, or feel any need to do so, those we saw in restaurants, bars or streets, looked distinctly 'down-market', and their voices confirmed this. We were probably prejudiced, but I felt Germans behaved, and drove, more disagreeably than others, and our Swiss friends said it was always the Germans who were using their horns at any check or delay.

The reasons for this expatriate incursion of the lower orders must be the climate and the low costs of life. Restaurant meals, liquor and wine, petrol, are all very much cheaper than in UK. Supermarket prices are only a little below those in UK. House prices we did not examine closely but seemed cheaper, if rising, and they were probably much cheaper in past years. Curiously we paid our maid £5 per hour, a little more than we pay here. Heating and cooking, with gas bottles, were very cheap and electrical bills much less than in UK. Generally we felt life was much less expensive. We did not, thankfully, explore medical bills but our Swiss friend had two operations for spots on his neck in a private clinic, which he said was of superb quality. We did not ask the price.

We ate more meat than ever at home. Partly because it was served in restaurants (and we went out for lunches a lot) and partly because it was good, especially the *cordero al horno* (oven roast lamb). We and two friends demolished a whole leg of lamb (with mint sauce) from an enormous oven, together with a starter, salad and dessert, and seemingly unlimited wine, for £10 per head. The most we spent, in a high class French-run restaurant on our beach, known to be expensive, but for an excellent lunch, was £30 for two for a set menu Sunday lunch, including quails, for example!

On the coast, restaurants proliferated. In the nearer, inland villages there were usually one or two. We exchanged information on their qualities with our Swiss friends. Further inland, in the towns, we ate at several real Spanish restaurants, with

no other foreigners. Some remarkably cheap, almost absurdly so. Always a nourishing meal, and palatable wine. Interesting to watch the local businessman in mid-week and Spanish families at weekends. And everywhere we found the service obliging, cheerful and efficient. Indeed we did not see or hear anyone in restaurants or shops or other service jobs being disagreeable all our stay. One of the outstanding features, we felt, of this visit. Perhaps it's the sun. Eating hours were later than ours, after starting at 2pm. We did not explore evening meals. We found wine very drinkable and cheap. For £2 you could get a perfectly adequate Rioja, with good body. The rosado, which I do not normally favour, was especially agreeable. Again, perhaps it's the sun! Certainly there were available many more expensive Spanish vintages, but we found no need to try them. Eating outside under blue skies at lunch, whether on our villa's terrace or at a restaurant, was one of the principal pleasures of our stay. Fish was of course very plentiful and good. Besides lamb and beef, rabbit is a favoured dish, especially in the country, though the only time I had it was a disappointment, being tough and dry.

It seemed curious to us that in spite of all this proliferation of excellent cooked meat, we saw no cows anywhere, and only one flock of sheep, in the Jalon valley, just inland from Moraira, with a shepherd moving them along, with his dog. We never saw this sight again.

As to game shooting, I talked to a local, also in the Jalon valley, who said that the locals were traditionally accustomed to shooting, but the game was disappearing even in the remote mountains. He muttered something which sounded like *jabali*, wild boar, as if this was a target, but he did not sound very convincing. Hare is seen on menus occasionally, so there must still be some of them left.

Going back to the expatriates and their relationship with the Spanish, a close friend of ours, now a senior official in the Government of British Columbia, wrote interestingly this year to Tilla about her perceptions of tourists and expatriates in one of the West Indies islands. She had visited Tilla in San Miguel, Mexico, and was contrasting the life there with what she observed on holiday in Tortola in the West Indies. In the latter, she wrote, there was no society, no meeting place and no library; and visitors, even residents, did not feel any pressure to contribute to local welfare. The comparison may not be fairly drawn because in Mexico there was so obviously an appalling poverty and social deprivation, so that the Americans, who are generous, if brash, and unselfconscious about the way they may be regarded, felt drawn to good works, genuinely useful, in such fields as birth control, child welfare and simple charity. They contributed in these ways even though they had, in Mexico, as little social intercourse with educated and well to do Mexican families as do the expatriates in Moraira with Spanish. We did not sense that, in Moraira, expatriates contributed to the general welfare, other than through their own material expenditure.

Unlike in San Miguel, Moraira and neighbouring towns did not appear to have, except for the festivals which are certainly manifestations of popular enthusiasm, and unifying, any artistic culture. A few practising artists, yes, but no theatre, no lectures, no library, where locals and expatriates might join forces. In San Miguel, there were always lectures, art classes, readings and so on in full daily swing. Maybe the difference merely reflects differences between American and European characters.

Of course all these impressions and attempts at comparison are superficial, and rash in being generalized. Their only value lies in the fact that they were our impressions at the time. We are ready to revise them.

Easier to describe was the magnificent mountain landscape, barren and sheer coloured rocks, sharply indented teeth at their peaks, shining in the sun. In the valleys, of red earth, were clouds of almond blossom, white to lively pink, in full flower in February while we were there. And alternating with the almonds were grove after grove of shining, glossy oranges all the way up to Valencia, so ripe that some were falling off the trees. Further south, in the flats below Alicante, we saw plenty of vegetables.

The roads in the mountains, though very twisting and often above sheer, unprotected drops, were very well maintained. The Spanish in general drive faster than I do on winding roads, but I could not complain about their driving manners, except for tail-gating by small vans and trucks.

Even in January, when we arrived, there were flowers and flowering shrubs blooming in El Portet, especially bougainvillea, jasmine and a wild purple iris. Later came mimosa, japonica and others I could not put a name to.

We saw bull fighting on T.V from Valencia on Sunday afternoons, and there was an advertisement on the roadside for a *corrida* at Benissa in February for young bulls. Benissa lies just off the *autopista* about ten miles from Moraira. We did not hear of anyone being interested in this, and we were engaged elsewhere, so I couldn't go as I would quite have enjoyed doing, to contrast it with the two or three *corridas* I went to in San Miguel in '92.

We were awed by the sheer size of Spain, with its wild landscapes and seemingly teeming populations in even the smaller sized towns as indicated on the map. We seemed to travel all day on our inland expeditions, but covered, on the map, only a small segment of the country. The towns shone white in the sun from a distance. When one reached them, the streets were extremely narrow and overhung by tall, six storey buildings, shading all below. Except at siesta time, the streets seemed crowded in the towns, less so in the villages. A substantial amount of industry and nauseous air pollution surrounded many of the towns. Unlike France residential architecture in the Costa Blanca is largely undistinguished.

Moorish influence was marked, not only in the names (*Beni-* as prefix to so many towns) but also in people's minds. We met a waiter who said proudly he could trace his ancestry back to Moorish origins. The Moorish antecedents are one of the factors which differentiate Spain from France. It's difficult to analyse the others, but there is no doubt that Spain felt for us totally different to France; there is no transition; the difference starts at the frontier.

As I write now, our first incursion into Spain seemed a great success, and we plan to try to go back to the same area, if not to the same villa, in '98.

JPW

17.III.97

## Appendix: correspondence from Villa Fleur

### letter to JTW: 'Thursday 9 Jan '97'

...We are here, after the worst journey you can imagine! But safe and sound nevertheless, and the car very solid and running well. First afternoon from ferry to Ducey beyond Avranches - hotel with (to my surprise) a fine salmon run. Photos to prove it. Snow in verges and fields but road itself OK. Next morning OK to Rennes and across the Loire at Nantes, sprinklings of snow, but thereafter snow on road, freezing ice on side-walks, single file queues, cars slipping off road into ditches, or sticking on hills, head to tail, stop and go, 10 mph at best. We finally got to Saintes in the dark and found a scruffy but warm hotel - everyone in same boat and exchanging experiences of adventure. *Autoroute* closed, which is why we came in on side roads. Impossible to reach our booked hotel at Duras so we phoned to cancel. We had a reasonable dinner opposite and a warm night, hot water etc and were all on tenter-hooks to know if *autoroute* (which had been closed) would be open following day. As it was, much milder and we got on well - snow and fog but main *piste* OK - past Bordeaux and on in lovely sun now past Toulouse and Carcassonne (with snow thick on hills and fields) and so right hand down to Perpignan and Collioure - very pretty fishing and holiday village - like Cornwall but red roofs and orange stone and big parade of people at dusk - and a nice hotel. Tilla felt nauseous, and still does as if with a virus - and did not eat. The next day down through Spain past Barcelona on *autopista* in the most ghastly flooding rain - sheets of it and passing trucks a hazard. But we did 400 miles - and had lunch in a good motorway restaurant, packed with Spanish families, and got here at 5 pm. (1240 miles door to door).

It started very cold but is better now. We had lunch outside by the Marina in Moraira and on our terrace yesterday. Nights still cold. We look out on a range of hills covered with white, orange roofed similar villas. Sea just visible on left. We are at top so not overlooked. Nice Swiss/ French neighbours below - v. helpful. Nice little maid twice a week. T.V at first not working but now man came and we get CNN and Sky! But not Spanish! Also Mexico!

Villa smaller than expected. Second bedroom v. small and not on to have guests except v. close friends or family, eg Polly. We have been to super-market, post etc and yesterday took videos to colonial expatriates, friends of friends in Somerton, and drank a pink gin! I'd hate to live here, myself. But we haven't been inside to the mountains yet.

Now after hail and wind this morning, sky is clear blue and not a cloud to be seen. Post received - only about 5/6 days.

Verdict so far - worth coming for adventure but I'm looking forward to spring in Somerton! I think it will get better, and warmer. Steep walk up ½ mile - ill paved road but good for us...

Post box no essential as box up a lane a good way from house...



### **Postcard to Katy, 'Saturday morning 11 Jan 97'**

...Thank you for a very nice letter which we found in our *buzon* (post box up the street) two days ago. We are now settled and enjoying ourselves more and more (tell Daddy - my first letter to him was a bit gloomy). This morning the sun is shining from a clear blue sky - no wind - and the air feels good. It will be easy to have lunch outside. The picture here is what it looks like when the sun is out as now! We talk Spanish all the time....

### **Postcard to Hermione, 'Saturday morning 11 Jan 97'**

...Thank you for your nice letter. We are enjoying ourselves under blue skies and in lovely sun, after the first few days of cold. We speak a lot of Spanish in the shops and big market yesterday. The view from this postcard is the same as we get at the bottom of our hill - 10 minutes walk. There is a bay and a few restaurants and a lot of villas to the left with this view. ..

### **Letter to JTW, 'Friday 7 Feb 97'**

The days fly by... After a week of damp and sometimes rainy weather (though not cold compared with U.K.) we have this week had glorious blue skies and warm sun from mid-day. Hot enough to eat outside. We have been walking regularly, up and down these villa strewn hills, and feel pretty fit. Mail seems to be coming pretty reliably but variably. From America (N.Y or California) quicker (4 or 5 days) than from U.K! Several expeditions, and meals out. We drove 190 miles inland all day yesterday. Pretty good roads but very, very winding and I go slower than most, so let people by. The low-slung Citroens nip round the bends; and so even do the lorries. Restaurants are good and incredibly cheap. We like those, as yesterday in an old Moorish town with a castle perched on rocks high above, where there were only Spanish customers. They all come in for lunch at 2 pm and most shops shut till 4 pm. We have made friends and talk French with a Swiss couple just below us and are going out to lunch with them to a Cafe above the sea today. Tilla has meanwhile walked (35 mins) down to the Friday open-air market and I shall drive down to fetch her.

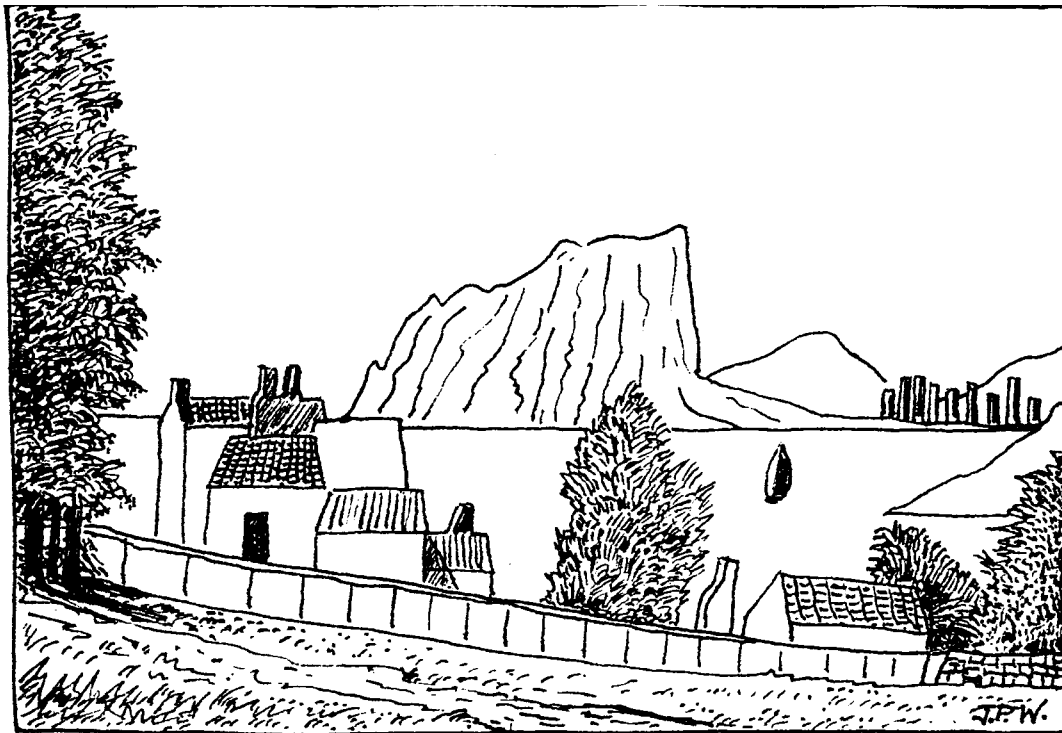
I am quite eager, more so than Tilla, to get home, and look forward to our journey through France again. Spain is very bare and hard, and the landscape here (though the mountains are splendid) does not tempt me to paint. Too featureless, and nowhere to sit! Spring in the garden is always exciting.

We start 25 Feb and will get up to the frontier on the fine motor-way that day. Then S.W of Bergerac. Then near Tours, on the Loire, and then near Cherbourg, and the 09.30 (08.30 U.K time) ferry on 1 March which may allow me to see England - France Rugby! About 1,200 miles in all from here to home.

I shall nevertheless miss the sun, and talking Spanish. But the expatriates' environment is not for me, not here and not in Mexico 6 years or so ago. Soon it will be fishing again, which excites me....

**Postcard to JTW: 'Weds 19 Feb 97'**

...Yesterday we went for our last drive through the mountains, the lower slopes all pink and sweetly scented from almond blossom, and shining with oranges on their trees, now ripe and juicy. We've had glorious sunny days for 2 weeks and are appalled to hear on Radio 4 this am (we are well up to date and get a day old D.T or Times everyday - not cheap but worth it) of impending further storms and snow in U.K. We have had a good adventure and I'm very brown. We'll miss the sun but I'll be glad (more so than Tilla) to get home.



*EL PEÑON D'IFACH from EL PORTET DE MORAIRA*

Typed JTW Oxford May 1997 - revised 2016