

**France and Spain  
January - March 1998**

**JPW**

**1) To Spain 6 - 10 January**

**5) A visit to Granada, Baeza and Ubeda  
Sunday 15 February - Thursday 19 February 1998**

**11) 1998 1- 5 March  
Return from El Portet de Moraira to Somerton**

## a) To Spain 6 - 10 January

This was in many ways a repeat performance, though in very much more pleasant weather than in 1997, so I will try to keep this narrative to new impressions only.

### Tuesday 6 January

We started from Somerton at 2.23pm after lunch and short rest. This afternoon start makes packing and tidying up much easier than the early morning start in the dark of a few years ago. We immediately ran into a heavy downpour, sheeting down past Montacute and, later, after Dorchester. But it cleared by the time we got to the Mansion House at Poole at 4pm, 60 miles. This hotel was a new experiment as despite the good view we were fed up with the brash modernity of the Quay Thistle, and casual behaviour at the reception. The Mansion House is a really splendidly elegant late 18th. century red-brick house, in Thames St, just behind the Quay, in the oldest part of Poole, surrounded by other elegant 18th century houses. It has a magnificent staircase facing one on coming through the front door. It is only five minutes across the lifting bridge to the ferry, which is what we want. And it's expensive, but, we concluded, worth it, for the large comfortable room, and excellent dinner, with friendly, helpful staff. The hotel was built as his private house by a native of Poole called Lester who, with his brother, made a huge amount of money by catching and smoking cod in Newfoundland and importing the product to Europe. Lester in fact died before his mansion was completed and the cod trade decline in the 19th century. But the brothers had made enough to enable their descendants to live later in a number of fine country estates all over Dorset.

We had an excellent Chilean Errazuriz (a Basque name) Sauvignon Blanc for dinner and I also had a splendid old fashioned bread and butter pudding with clotted cream, which, in terms of digestion, proved to be a mistake. Tilla did try to dissuade me, but gave up. In Chile 1954 - 57 we had good friends, elegant and vivacious, called Carlos Errazuriz and Patsy Beeche de E. I wonder what has happened to them.

### Weds 7 January

Up at 0645 and to the ferry 0740, held up for 10 minutes by the lifting bridge. The UK makes one show passports before embarkation; the French have no controls at all now. The Ferry Company (Britanny) also makes one fill up a silly form about travel habits, for marketing purposes. This time the Duc de Normandie which does not have such comfortable sitting arrangements as our usual Barfleur. We got one sea sickness pill each from the female purser who admitted "*Ça va bouger*". But the pills worked. And it was indeed very rough, so that I found it impossible to stand without holding on to something. But it all passed off, and we were away at Cherbourg at 1325, through the town, up the hill and to the right down by the coast road past Barneville Carteret, (huge hail storm hereabouts but clearing after that) and in two hours (100 miles) we were at L'Auberge de la Sélune once more, by 1525. Mme Girres greeted us warmly; they had had a good season, and then gone to Namibia for their annual holiday in November - they loved it. We were the only guests. The river very high now after heavy rain. M Girres told me the salmon season had been awful. No water, and so the nets in the estuary had a fine catch, but only 68 were caught on

the river, and only one at the hotel. Tilla walked into the village to ask about a new beauty product for wrinkles which our 50 year old elegant Swiss friend at El Portet, Madeleine, had asked her, on the telephone, to try to find. Not easy as Ducey and Céret, neither a city, are our only stops with any chance of finding something like this, and I did not think it likely. But the pharmacie, though never having heard of it, called the wholesaler in Rennes, a kind gesture. In Rennes they looked it up, said they had it, and it would be in Ducey at 0830 with their delivery van the next day. And they were all as good as their word.

I took the car to reconnoitre the little white roads by Poilley and Juilley, entirely rural villages, narrow muddy roads, beasts in the byres, to get to the red road south to Antrain and avoid the confusion caused by huge new roadworks and roundabouts on the turn-off from Avranches to Ducey. The French are now well into *ronds points* or *circulations giratoires*; only a few years ago they were rare. But, as I have noted before, the rules are pretty vaguely interpreted. On return I walked in the charming, bustling Norman town, as last year. I noted at least three butchers in full swing at 6pm with housewives queuing for their cuts of meat for the evening meal. So different to the UK, although people say French habits are dying out.

We had a bored girl and bored young man to serve dinner - we were the only people in the dining room. Tilla had *pie au crabe* and I *feuilleté de veau aux champignons*, with a half bottle of St Nicolas de Bourgeuil '96. It came under the "Loire" heading, so I assume "Bourgeuil" is the town so called just north of the river and opposite Chinon. For dessert Tilla had a very good *mousse au rhubarbe* and I a *crème brûlée*, reliable if not original.

We were sound asleep by 2130 hrs (no TV in our room to tempt us!).

### Thursday 8 January

Up 0730 and breakfast at 0800. Still pitch dark. Listen to Radio 5 Live on our new small Matsui Radio. I had never heard the station before. Very "different". T duly collected the beauty aid from the *Pharmacie* and we were on the road, by my reconnoitred back route across the river, at 0900. Mme Girres, from whom we parted warmly, said, when asked, that she was fairly satisfied with VFB, but they were "*gourmands*" for money, and increasingly so.

Petrol at Antrain. Garage lady says times are hard and unemployment bad. Grey and drizzling. Smoothly round Rennes. *Auto-route* to Nantes. No *péage*. Clear road. Then sun and watery blue sky making visibility directly into sun, difficult. Round Nantes and across the big bridge pretty smoothly. Through Dept of Isle et Vilaine and into Loire Atlantique. Featureless undulating country, with rivers in flood in the valleys. Stop at Aire de Puceul 1050 -11.10 for coffee break and loo (92 miles). *Autoroute du Sud* starts soon after, also Dept de la Vendée. Road gets dry. Still no traffic. Pay at Fontenay Ouest (48 frs) and *Auto-route* comes to an end. Picnic lunch at Aire d'Auzay outside Fontenay. Pâté and hard-boiled egg. At next petrol stop above Niort, owner blames everything on Mitterrand. "He put it all into his back pocket." "And he had a mistress too." I said "*Oui, quel exemple!*" Better country in the Charente valley, woods and hills, the river flooding all the meadows. We got to the Hotel Campanile at 1430 hrs, at a hideous roundabout on the main road to the *auto-route* out of Saintes. Rows of cheap hotels and commercial premises. Traffic noise.

Our room was up the exterior steps on the first floor, bare and simple, but adequate, and would have been less distasteful if the surroundings had been more agreeable. But at £19 for the night, one should not complain, though T. did! We had not dared, however, risk the weather and try to reach Duras (Les Ducs) and we do not know anywhere between. Last year the ice forced us into Saintes. Perhaps it's good for us to see the cheaper, modern shape of France for the lower end of the tourist market and commercial travellers! Several middle aged Brit couples in the restaurant looking as if they were going to Benidorm!

We went for a good one hour walk down a country lane, unsigned, off the roundabout and found ourselves immediately in *la France rurale*. At the first village cows were standing in mud up to their hocks. On the way back four gendarmes, from an unmarked white estate car, were coming out from the bushes and stopping vehicles on their way to the *auto-route*.

Dinner for two (£20 with a ½ bot of not very nice Muscadet) was just competent but entirely unremarkable, the cold buffet offering the best value.

We were seduced by two police thrillers, one American and one French, on TV and did not go to sleep till 1 am! We never caught the titles but thought one had de Niro and possible Pacino. Certainly well done.

### Friday 9 January

Up at 0750. Excellent varied buffet breakfast. Not all bad at Campanile! Fine orange-coloured sky. Mild weather. Away at 0910. Get through Bordeaux (73 miles) in one hour, despite sun in our faces. Stop for hot chocolate (from our resources) break at Aire de Buzet sur Baize, with fine chateau perched on its hill, at 11.10. 141 miles from Saintes. As usual very little traffic. Into Dept du Lot et Garonne, then Tarn et Garonne, and then Haute Garonne (Région Midi-Pyrénées). Familiar brown hills and *bastides*. Round Toulouse without problems, through more traffic. Lunch at 1310 at Aire du Port Lauragais. Sunny but huge wind. "Barcelone" on signs from Toulouse. Spanish trucks more frequent. Also a truck from Slovenia, rare. Overcast and chilly after Castelnaudary (our old haunt) until coast and then bright sun again shining on the Mediterranean. Huge Corbieres vineyards from Carcassonne filling every fold of the hills, and round the corner towards Perpignan more vines, of Fitou. Dept of Pyrénées Orientales. Get petrol at Le Village Catalan, last stop in France. Woman says petrol slightly cheaper in Spain. Arrive Céret, a good drive at 1600 and stop in *place*, very full up. T. unable to get into Les Feuillants, where we had booked by phone. All shut. So we went to our friends at Les Arcades, a hundred yards away, and took the same room, on the fourth floor, as last year. Big welcome by helpful barman (20 years in same job) and proprietor, both Catalans. T telephoned manageress of Les Feuillants. She was apologetic and said the bell must have broken as someone was there; she offered to come and let us in. We said we were fixed up. In fact better, despite luxury of Les Feuillants, which had attracted T, as Les Arcades has a fine, secure, lock up garage, with automatic door controlled from the bar. And the Arcades, with paintings and Toulouse Lautrec posters on every wall, is interesting and lively, and the room nice enough. We saw snow again on the north face of the mountains. We walked to the *Musée de l'Art Moderne* in the town. Picasso, Chagal and group of c. 1910 French painters, also some extreme modernist and abstract objects, and charming 1997 landscapes by art students at Perpignan staying for the summer from Paris. The museum, a fine edifice, with plenty of staff, lecture rooms etc, is owned by

the Municipality. We had *thé citron* in a bar and then rested till 8pm dinner, after a bath.

Dinner at Les Feuillants, one Michelin star, but in the brasserie this time. The restaurant, experienced last year, was, we felt, too much, though splendid enough. We had a Spanish waiter from Valencia. He and his wife were settled in Céret. We had the Frs 130 menu (say £13 with the strong pound). Only two other couples at dinner.

T	J
	Kir Royale
Cru de saumon avec salade	Crème de lentilles aux moules
Cuisse de lapin farcie	Pavé de morue aux pommes
Couple des fruits avec glace	Délice du chocolat
½ bot Pinot de Rousillon (Chateau du Jau)	
	Vieux Marc de Banyols (local)

A fine meal. Mme came to express regrets but insisted she did not feel *coupable*. T thought as usual I was unnecessarily provocative. But it did not matter, and the result for us was perfectly all right. Asleep by 10pm.

### Saturday 10 January

Sun through mist. Orchards shining as we headed off at 0845 by back roads, advised by the patron, by way of Maurellas and Perthus and onto the old Route Nationale, and cross the frontier at Jonquera and so onto the *auto pista*, or, in some places marked as *auto via*. We concluded this 'short cut' had little advantage over Le Boulou. An easy, fast, drive to our first stop at the Area de Penedes (wine country), 143 miles in 2½ hours. Sun shining and warm air. Musto discarded.

*Péage*, or *peaje* in Spanish, is heavy on the *auto pista*. About £40 in the day.

Through Barcelona more easily than last year. It goes on - the outer industrial parts - for miles.

The Ebro was really full, even more so than last year. Other rivers dry. Hard rocky country. First oranges in groves north of Valencia. Bright sea to our left. No-one at all visible in fields all day. Petrol beyond Tarragona. It did seem cheaper than France. Picnic lunch beyond Castellon. The restaurants at the big service areas are first class. (I ate at one last year and we passed by one this year in search of *el baño*) but T is a brilliant organiser of picnics and we were not over hungry.

We turned off at Benissa. It all seemed very familiar, and we drove down to the sea at Moraira and onto Portet and up the hill as if we were coming home. Bernard and Madeleine welcomed us with *abrazos* and showed us the villa. It all seemed luxurious and spotlessly clean. We got in at 1630. 1234 miles from Somerton. Pretty tired. I had a whisky with Bernard and gave him a bottle. The sun welcomed us as we arrived, and gave us a fine sunset. A huge full moon lit the sky.

We unloaded, had soup and cheese, and half a bottle of Spanish tinto which Bernard kindly brought. Then we went to bed at 2130 and slept like logs.

JPW 14. I.98

## b) A visit to Granada, Baeza and Ubeda

### Sunday 15 February - Thursday 19 February 1998

Up at 0800 hours in dark still but sun and blue sky followed quickly with the dawn. Listened on our small Japanese radio to Alastair Cooke's *Letter from America*. We left the villa at 0927 and stopped for the Times and petrol in Moraira, and then onto the *autopista* and south at Benissa, the main (and only) route up and down the length of the Levante. In two weeks we will do the same thing, but going north, and home.

First stop after 111 miles beyond Murcia, 1145, at La Paz Area. Only Spanish families and couples sitting out. No tourists. Inside splendid range of hot and cold tapas and dishes. We had a few pieces of fish (like quenelles) in light fried batter, chicken livers, sausage and spare ribs, selected by Tilla - all delicious. Orange juice to drink, very cheap.

Though no more *peajes* (tolls) to pay, the road continues as a well surfaced double highway to Granada. Up and down, through mountains and across high plains. Hardly any villages and no-one visible on either side of the road. Huge stretches of country and hills. Our next stop was in fact at a small village, Las Vertientes, off the highway. A single street place with petrol, agricultural engineers, a small store and an hotel - people sitting on front stoops at curtained doors - like a Wild West movie. Very, very dry but a few patches of green and trees now visible. No animals seen anywhere. Less than 100 miles to Granada. The young man who filled us up with petrol said the place was "*muy tranquilo*".

As we continued across the high plain, we suddenly, and to our astonishment, saw a patch of snow high and far to our left. We had no idea that this was the Sierra Nevada, and that we would get better and better views of the whole range as we got closer to Granada, and that from the Alhambra the high peaks and snow would be clearly visible. The guidebook says it's the highest range in mainland Spain. Surprising. But the highest is 11,000 ft. Tilla took some photos but the light was directly into the camera. Approaching Granada we climbed high into mountains, huge gorges and steep drops to our right, twisting road. We decided from the (small scale) map - I had left the larger scale Michelin, itself not very good, in Somerton - that our best bet, as the Alhambra lies to the East of the town, would be to get off at Exit 253 for Granada Este. This proved a mistake, but we are still not absolutely sure of the best way to get to the Alhambra from outside the town as Granada proved to be a huge place with a difficult and complicated, at least to a newcomer, approach up the hill to the Alhambra and our Parador.

So we went down a long, twisting road (reminiscent of the approaches to Millau in the Cévennes), past small villages, with people still eating their Sunday *comidas*, and down yet again and there was Granada below in a smog filled basin surrounded by mountains - seemingly a modern, industrial city shining white in the sunlight through the smog and with the Renaissance monuments scarcely distinguishable in the bright light. We asked the way twice of women; unhelpful replies, not from ill will, but from sheer inability to give directions, as prevalent in Somerset as in Spain. Then we stopped at a light behind two motor bike cops. Now in the centre of town. Tilla hopped out and inquired. They gave curt directions and were away. We followed. Without this guidance we would have been in real trouble. One

more enquiry and a clear and helpful reply from a well-dressed man. Then (we would not have found it without guidance) we climbed a ramp onto the *cicunvalacion*, a fine name for a ring road or, in American, beltway. It was double highway and fast. We got off where there was a sign to the Alhambra, going north, and went through a tricky tunnel crowded with charabancs and then up and up and back to the high outskirts of town, and so down and up again, meeting more huge charabancs and passing hotels, and finally, after directions from a charming girl in her car, up a steep hill between houses and there was the Parador ahead, right in the Alhambra complex, originally a Franciscan Convent.

We had to press a button for the parking gate, and announce ourselves to reception. The gate opened immediately, and we were in. A few yards walk to the entrance of the hotel, and there an efficient, friendly receptionist, who showed us to a huge ground floor suite, with a terrace surrounded by a garden, and pictures of bullfighting in the entrance passage. The bedroom had an enormous canopied *cama matrimonial*.

We learned how lucky we were to have got a room. Through March and April the hotel would be full, and it was full the day we arrived. That's why we had the suite!

We had been told by the Madrid central booking office that no second night was available at the Ubeda Parador, but we asked our nice receptionist to try again and an hour later he told us we had the suite, and best room, at Ubeda for Tuesday and Wednesday. They offered to *amigos de los paradores*, for which we had signed up in UK, two nights for the price of one at Ubeda (not at Granada) so we were not troubled unduly by expense.

We were in our suite at 4.30 after taking an hour searching from our first arrival in Granada - 290 miles from Moravia.

The receptionist said that guests were usually divided equally between Spanish natives and foreigners including *gringos* as they called Americans. I thought this was only a Mexican expression. Certainly we could see immediately that the guests were of a wide number of nationalities including Americans, and of a pretty wealthy and up-market kind, altogether different from our coastal strip at Moraira, Calpe and so on. Most men wore jackets and ties for dinner, unheard of in the Levante.

We went for an initial walk in the evening sun round the Alhambra walls. Crowds of tourists and also handsome young Spanish couples, on the low parapets, demonstratively amorous to a degree which surprised Tilla.

Dinner started at 8 pm and was excellent, but a bit too much, as usual in Spain.

### Monday 16 February

Not worth writing a history or description of the Alhambra here. All in the books, and we were given in the Parador a splendid complimentary edition of David Roberts' early 19th century engravings. Tilla also bought and read Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* published in 1832. He was American Ambassador to Spain and spent some time living in the Alhambra. Some of his comments and descriptions are, except for roads and cars, the same as mine! He calls the Alhambra "that romantic pile"!

I will only use the words "amazing" and "magnificent" about the series of (mostly Moorish) palaces which we toured from 10 - 1.30. Tilla opted for a guided tour in Spanish. I decided to start on my own, guide books in hand. After a bit I ran into Tilla's party and listened in. Her guide was late middle aged, handsome and charming, perhaps a retired teacher. He was so clear and interesting that I did the rest of the tour under his guidance. We were tired enough by 1.30 as the tour involved a lot of walking and steps up and down.

Tilla took a lot of photos - since developed at Moraira with splendid results. One striking feature was the Moorish use of fountains, canals and long stone ponds. Here there is no shortage of water, ever. The stone *acequias* (irrigation ditches) were just like those we had in Chile. Here in the gardens they were built by the Moors.

We had light lunch from our store of picnic paté etc in our suite and then took a siesta. Late in the afternoon I walked out along the path to the Generalife (Moorish gardens) which we had taken in the morning, carrying my painting rucksack, folding table and chair, and pushed through a hedge, to get away from the tourists, perpetually walking to and fro on the path, and talking every language from Dutch to Japanese, and found a level patch from where I could get an agreeable view in the bright evening sun towards the snows of the Sierra Nevada. I was glad to try a picture which in fact came out well.

We had another good, but lighter, dinner and slept like logs. Cold soup called *ajo blanco con almendras* - white garlic with almonds - was especially good.

We were thankful we had come to the Alhambra. The overlap of two artistic cultures, the influence of the invading Moors who first arrived in AD 711 and were not defeated and thrown out of Granada until 1492, and the flowering of Renaissance architecture subsequently, combine to form the beautiful and striking contemporary ensemble.

**17 February** Another blue, sunny day. After a wonderful breakfast, served buffet style, I was able to get the previous day's Telegraph in the hotel, free. The bill (which Tilla generously paid as a special gesture) was pesetas 90,000 = £360. Considering the luxury and the site, not really excessive, and we enjoyed ourselves.

We finished off the Alhambra with a visit to the Museum which is in the Palacio del Rey Carlos (V). This is a fine Renaissance building with inner galleries surrounding a courtyard open to the sky. This is where, years ago, Polly played a concert with one of her Ancient Music Baroque groups, in front of the Spanish King and Queen. We reminded her in California by E mail, and she replied that although she did not remember the Royals ("Trust Daddy to remember that!") the Alhambra had provided her with a wonderful spiritual experience.

The ground floor of the Museum, off the central courtyard, contained Moorish coins, potteries, toys, carved wooden ceilings, all of fine workmanship. Then textiles and rugs, and upstairs paintings, not outstanding as mostly formal Renaissance religious subjects, and rather dull. But later some landscapes and one each by David Roberts and John Frederick Lewis, distinguished mid-19th century watercolourists of Mediterranean and Arab scenes.

We left at 11 am and took the autopista for Jaen off the *circunvalacion*. Suburban Granada, all smog and vile smells, went on for miles. But then we were in clear air and red stone mountains, up and up, up. Dry and hot. I was reminded again of Chile or R.S.A. All the way, and indeed nearly to Albacete, there were rows and rows of olives, marching in well drilled order up the mountains as far as eye could see. No-one about and nearly all the scattered farmhouses were, in Donegal terms, 'tumbled'. A few distant *pueblos* (villages) perched on the hills shining in the sun. Pleasing to see the streams flowing in the deep valleys.

We left the *autopista* just before Jaen, visible in the smog bound distance, and took the *carretera* north east - a good surface but full of bends. More and more olives. Tumbled houses. At intervals ugly industrial buildings along the road; more smog and smells. Red soil and rocks.

At 1.30 we turned off into Baeza - 90 miles from the *parador* - and parked, luckily, right in the centre. Everything shut for siesta, but the Romanesque and Renaissance buildings magnificent. We got a guidebook and map from the tourist office and walked about in the sun. Our own guidebook says nothing much has happened in Baeza since it was recaptured from the Moors in 1227. This confirmed when we saw two gnarled peasants walking slowly through the town with donkeys loaded with fire wood. It reminded me of San Miguel. The narrow side streets were fascinating, all shaded from the hot sun. School kids poured down in a flood, high and primary schools from different locations in the stone monuments, the latter met by their parents, all looking quite prosperous. Some fathers.

We left Baeza after an hour, not enough to see all the monuments, but enough to get the feel of it all. Only half an hour to Ubeda, shining across the valley. Again we needed help - a kind man led the way through the usual winding, narrow streets - to get to the *Parador*. We had, the receptionist said, the best rooms in the hotel, which is an ancient magnate's palace, built on a square, with open aired courtyard. We were on the first floor, a corner suite looking out on a plaza surrounded by famous monuments, churches and palaces, built by rich nobles who came in after the defeat of the Moors.

We had a picnic in our suite and then a rest. No English papers available in Ubeda. We each went for separate walks (as our interests and speeds differ) through the old town, checking on the monuments from their numbers in the guide plan. I had a sherry in the *Parador* bar. Curiously sherry on offer in the *paradors* is the same as UK. I was offered 'La Ina' and 'Tio Pepe' - of course both in the top class. The bar maid told me that olives in this district were harvested by machines which sucked them off the trees by compressed air, except for the high ones which were knocked down "*con palo*". It must be hard work to harvest about a hundred miles length of olives, miles wide! The olives here are all used to make oil.

Dinner was not until 8.30 pm, the typical Spanish timing. I had again *ajo blanco con almendras* (white garlic soup with almonds) cold, *lenguado frito* (grilled sole) - exceptionally good; iced chocolate truffles; and we had a very good house white, Marques de Caceres.

### Wednesday 18 February

Again a super breakfast after which Tilla and I walked out separately. I took the road down from the *Parador* which led along the old walls. I wanted, in the twisting narrow streets, to reconnoitre the best route out of town and onto the Carretera to Albacete, which I found after some enquiry. I also found the enormous covered market, full of separate booths or stalls, with every kind of meat, fruit and vegetable. The fresh meat interested me, butchers cutting to order individual customer's requirements. But we never saw a single cow on our trip and only three flocks of sheep, each with shepherd, well apart from each other. Bulls must exist somewhere as there is a Plaza de Toros, very busy in the season. I went on through old cobbled and narrow streets and plazas, past *palacios* and churches, some Romanesque in style but mostly later. Ubeda was captured from the Moors in 1234, whereupon the rich nobles competed in building palaces. It is not the fashion, unlike in France, to have bars with seats and tables out on the streets, and I was not tempted by the bars I looked into. On the way back to the *Parador* after two hours walking I found what looked like a nice small restaurant off the Plaza del Ayuntamiento (Town Hall) and went in and talked to the amiable elderly *duena de la casa*. At the *Parador* I reported to T, who was drinking soda water in the patio, and we agreed to go to my find, called El Seco, which she had also identified after a similarly good walk through town.

The restaurant was empty at first at 1.30 but one young couple came in later. We learned they were hugely busy at weekends, with tourists from all over. We were waited on by a quite enchanting girl, the daughter of the house, who made a real mark with her engaging manner, readiness to communicate, and cheerful smile. She was married to a *camionero* who drives a fruit lorry all over the lower half of Spain. She tempted us with her charm to have a go at *andrajos* which literally means "rags" but it proved to be, to us, an unappetising slimy sort of porridge, and we had to send it back, both of us. She took it well. She had been in jeans (*vaqueros* - a good word) when we came in, but told us she must change, and reappeared in tight black trousers, white shirt and black waistcoat. She recommended *salmorejo*, which I had, and roasted *pimientos* with a *merluza* (hake) sauce, for Tilla. Both were delicious. The *salmorejo* was a sort of thick gazpacho with chopped hard boiled eggs and lean pieces of ham. We shared a *jarra pequena* (small jug) of red house wine, which was light and pleasant. We shared a *postre* and I had coffee. The bill was ptas 2,800, say £11.

After our rest, I went for a walk along the hills, high up with huge views towards the mountains. I could see a horseman exercising a lively animal far below. Old men sat on stone benches on the walls and smoked. I talked to some small gypsy girls, one of whom asked what *pueblo* (village) or *ciudad* I came from. She did not seem to have heard of England. At the *Parador* we watched CNN on the Iraq crisis. We felt oddly detached from the risks of war.

We had dinner at 9 pm. Tilla's had *espinacas con huevos y bacalao* (spinach with egg and cod) I had a very good sort of *quenelles* of salmon. We did not feel very hungry for some reason. At dinner was a noisy group of cyclists, trainers and managers from Barcelona whose huge long buses we had seen occupying the cobbled front parking lot. We were told that they were here for an international *vuelta* (race) with teams from all over Europe. In fact we saw them all riding, with police escorts, and horns hooting, through Moraira the following week. Our Barcelona team's red bus, covered with advertising, was in the queue.

### Thursday 19 February

We were away at 0850 from the Ubeda *Parador* - 381 miles so far. Bright sun and difficult glare in the eyes. Up and down on the *carretera* - plenty of traffic. Some 60 miles from Ubeda we hit the Provincia de Albacete, and the road surface improved. Still olives running up the mountains. Red earth. Petrol stop at gas station outside a small village, not marked on the map. An elderly labourer approached and hailed us as "British". He said he was a farmer with a house in the village and another in the country. In the summer he was a receptionist - hard to imagine in his dirty overalls - in an hotel at La Palma, Mallorca. He said that in the country round there (where we were) there were still peasants living with no electricity and no drinking water.

The country continued much more green. *Kopjes* of odd shape. No hedges ever.

We stopped off the road at the hilly approach to Alcaraz, recommended by our petrol station attendant. High up on a winding road off the highway, it looked inviting, and proved an amazing and unique architectural spectacle. We prudently stopped outside the village and walked in through a narrow entrance to the small *plaza*; this was surrounded on three sides by two churches (horseshoe arches) and high galleried palaces, honey coloured. Cars crowded into the square, squashed in as only the Spanish can, and I was glad to have stayed out. Take away the cars and one could believe it was the 16<sup>th</sup>-century. Nothing seemed to have changed: our guidebook notes the place but in flat terms. I found it fixed on my mind.

On and on, still up and down. Nicely running small rivers in the valleys. Poplars. Red ochre mountains. Some arable, but no beasts. Only one flock of sheep. Then down onto a dead flat plain for the last 20 or so miles to Albacete, hidden in smog to our right. We got onto the *autopista*, circled Albacete and headed down towards Alicante, through the mountains.

A good light lunch at 1.45 - 2.20 (584 miles) at a buffet restaurant. *Bocadillos con ternero* (beef) and camembert and *jamon* (ham), a quarter of a bottle of Rioja, coffee and a chocolate bun.

A lot of traffic and industry down the valleys to Alicante - everyone in a hurry. Left turn at the coast and home at 1640 hrs. 687 miles in all and 301 in the day.

A wonderful excursion which opened our eyes to the real Spain, old and new.

### c) 1998 1 - 5 March Return from El Portet de Moraira to Somerton

As much of this route has been covered in earlier narratives, I will only recall here what was new.

We left at 0750 hrs from the villa at El Portet. A lovely day, and the same glorious weather until north of the Loire when rain and wind supervened.

The *peaje* charges have been reduced this year which is a surprising but welcome action by a state enterprise.

The first night, **Sunday 1 March**, we spent at the wonderfully sited *Parador* at Aigua Blava, perched on a cliff by the sea on the Costa Brava, level with Girona. Big room, balcony, comfortable, glorious sea views, and good dinner. Not expensive either, pesetas 21,572 - £86. And 394 miles in the day.

The village of Begur above the *Parador* was enchanting ("*precioso*") and the country full of *conjuntos medievales* (medieval buildings).

On **2 March** we got to Les Ducs at Duras where we stayed last year, but were rather less impressed this year. The room was narrow and tight, and Madame seemed rather cool and detached. I did a drawing in the sun, and hope to paint it. T bought two French novels in the town, and I got the Sunday Telegraph.

On **3 March** we stayed, after a fine cross-country drive to the *Autoroute* at Mirambeau (huge *château* now a hotel) and a gallop up past Poitiers, at Le Grand Monarque, in Azay le Rideau, recommended to us for years by Michael Oatley. This proved a real reward. Huge room and admirable dinner, warm welcome from M et Mme Forrest (curious name) proprietors. The town itself charming with a fine *château* right on the banks of the Indre and pleasant gardens, and an inspiring Romanesque church with a splendid memorial to a Lieutenant General who died at 69 in 1805 and his wife, who died in the 1830's, and their three young sons who were all killed in action in their twenties, two in the Army, and one in the Navy. An excellent bottle of Sauvignon de Touraine for dinner.

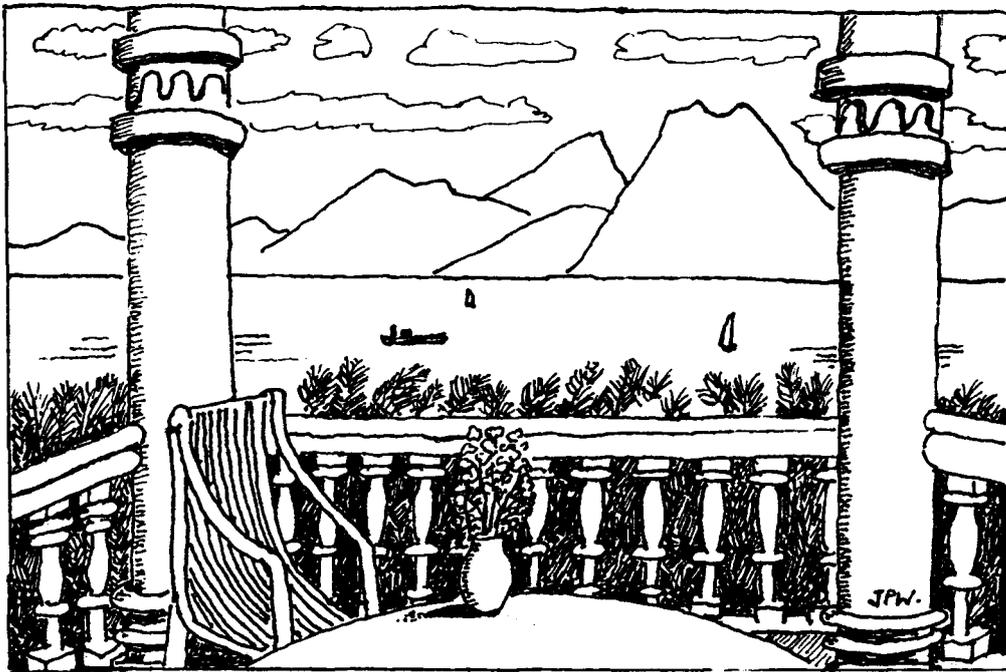
On **4 March** we had another fine cross country journey north on green and white roads, due to good map reading by T, via Langeais, Bougueil, Longué, Beaufort, Seiches, Château Neuf, Château Gontier, Loiron and St Hilaire du Harcourt. At St Hilaire we luckily found a parking place (backing in) in pouring rain on the main road right outside a bright looking restaurant, Le Cygne, full of business people, tucking in. Our excellent *soles*, with another bottle of Sauvignon, cost only £7. The 10 franc £ is a wonderful help. The atmosphere was cheerful and the service quick and helpful, typically French bourgeois. And the sun came out.

We spent the night at Tilla's find, Les Ormes, in Carteret, a charming hotel, with a nicely furnished large bedroom, much better than the exiguous room and antique loo in La Marine. But we dined at La Marine (one Michelin star) and this was splendid, and elegantly served. Huge oysters and a bottle of Menetou Salon. Too windy to paint.

**5 March** A rough crossing but not too uncomfortable. Passengers not allowed out on deck. Amazing coincidence in the waiting queue at Cherbourg, when our next-door neighbours in Somerton, after an overnight shopping trip, drove up beside us.

We got to Poole punctually. Not a Customs man, woman or dog to be seen, and a charming passport control man (for Tilla's "resident permit" which they have to record). Some are not so charming.

Home at 2.45 pm. 1,322 miles in all from El Portet. Another good journey and not too tired. Mike Squire had mown the lawn, bless him, in response to my postcard.



*THE BAY OF TUNIS from the AMERICAN EMBASSY RESIDENCE. FEBRUARY 1999.*