

### **Wednesday, March 9**

Today was a very quiet day. We went to Pamiers in the morning to do some shopping and I almost couldn't drag myself away from the Carrefour!

JM sat on a bench outside the store with Maggie while I went inside. I'm much better at food shopping when I'm on my own, because I love to wander the aisles and look at everything. JM gets a bit more impatient, because he doesn't understand why I need to take so long!

As always, I was simply amazed that the types of things that are available here, which are so different from what we find in U.S. markets. There's a really wide range of foods, which, in the States, would be considered "gourmet" specialty items, but here are just average supermarket food.

I'm talking about things like patés, cheeses, delicatessen, regional specialties, etc. Almost any one of them would have either sent me running all over L.A. to find, or I would have had to special order online.

Another thing that I like is that portion sizes are a bit smaller. I always found it difficult to buy things for just two people that wouldn't either cause us to overeat, or leave leftovers for far longer than I would feel like eating them. It's much nicer to buy something that we can eat in one meal, or even two, than something that we have to look at for three or four days when we're tired of it. Less waste as well. (And less "waist" too!)

The dairy aisle never ceases to amaze me. The quantity of different desserts, yogurts, etc. is simply mind-boggling. I don't know why no one does anything like these in the U.S. Other than pudding cups and yogurt, there just isn't a lot to choose from. Here, there are *parfaits*, creamy things in all kinds of flavors like rum raisin, biscuit, light chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate, caramel, coffee; just about any kind of thing that you want. Yogurts come in a wide variety of flavors, textures, fat content, styles. It would take me most of my life to try them all.

Then, there is the butter: dozens of different kinds of butter from each area of France. Salted, unsalted, partially salted, various fat contents, easily spreadable. It goes on and on.

I don't think I can do more than touch on the cheese, of course. There are, of course, more pre-packaged cheeses than you can shake a stick at. Then, there is the counter where the nice ladies make suggestions and cut your cheese to order. I'm grateful that it's all much more affordable here than it was in L.A., where everything was imported. Because if not, we'd be breaking our budget on cheese alone.

I'm going to have to see if I can take some pictures to share with you. You really do have to see it to believe it.

[photo]

### **Thursday, March 10**

Today turned out to be absolutely beautiful.

After lunch, JM and I decided we needed to go out and just *be* in the Sun. We headed out with our camera and Maggie, with no goal in mind but to simply enjoy.

First, we walked around town, taking pictures of Chalabre under the sun, something that we haven't really been able to do before.

Then we took the car and decided to head towards Limoux. But first, we drove up to the Château to get some pics from there.

During the summer, the Château does medieval re-creations, so they have a stable and horses for jousts, etc. I don't know if the majority of the horses live there all year round or not, but there is a very old, retired horse that hangs out in a paddock next to the Château. Today, a very sweet pony joined him.

While JM went to take pics, I took Maggie over to see the horses close up. She seemed quite fascinated, but was well behaved. The horse was not completely sure about our presence and, although he sniffed my fingers, decided to back off a little bit from the Diva. However, the pony seemed to be fascinated by our presence and came up from the far end of the paddock to see what we were doing.



*One of the horses kept at the Château de Chalabre*

Now, he wasn't all that much bigger than Maggie, and I think at first she thought he was a funny-smelling, weird dog. The two of them actually sniffed noses, which was really cute.

Then, I think Maggie realized he was *not* a dog and decided he needed to be watched for herding potential. She planted herself outside the paddock and just stared. I tried to take her back to the car and she just lay down and wouldn't budge. Eventually, reluctantly, she came along with me.

**[photo]**

Back in the car, we just started driving through some of the small back roads in the area, exploring. It really is astonishingly beautiful here. We would drive from totally dry ground and, suddenly, around a curve, unmelted snow was everywhere.

We wound up at Lac Montbel, and were blown away by how large and gorgeous it is. I have the feeling that the whole area must be pretty heavily overrun by tourists in the summer, but looking at it under the sunlight today, I can't say that I really blame them.

***MONTBEL***

**[photo]**

**[photo]**

### *The village of Montbel*

*Lake Montbel is an artificial lake created in 1985, which serves as the main drinkable water reservoir for the nearby city of Toulouse (over 1 million population).*

*Chalabre and the neighboring villages get their water from local sources. The side of the lake opposite to the last picture features a beach, boats and facilities for diving, sailing, surfing and canoeing.*

*The old village of Montbel still sits on a hill overlooking the lake.*

### **Friday, March 11**

One more step on the road to normal life today: our washing machine is hooked up! I'm typing this to the gentle sound of clothes getting clean. It's a good sound.

We also got a cool new wireless thermostat, so we should be using less heating oil as well. The heater totally turns off when it reaches the right temperature, whereas before, it ran almost constantly, which can't have been good.

Last night, our mason, Manu, came by to discuss the various issues he needs to deal with. He's going to come over in about two weeks to see if the stone in the downstairs walls is in good enough shape for us to be able to have them show. I would love that if it were the case. He also had some really good ideas for the kitchen, which makes me eager to get started on remodeling. Still, I need to be patient.

I think that doing all these jobs slowly is really going to work out well. First, we get to know the artisans with whom we'll be working and second, it gives us a chance to think about what we really want, without making rushed decisions that we'll regret later.

Tomorrow, the roofer is coming to look at the skylight and see if it can be repaired or if it needs to be replaced. He's also going to consult on the bathroom door height problem, which is the work that will be the most complicated to do.

I'm getting used to doing things differently than I have been for the last 20 years, and that's not a bad thing. Slowing down, simplifying, enjoying life, these are all benefits of this new existence.

### **Sunday, March 13**

The weather seems to have turned to spring here. Both yesterday and today were just beautiful: cold in the morning but delightful in the afternoon. It seems to have brought everyone out of hiding.

Our market was bigger and busier than I've seen it before, both with more merchants and more buyers. I wound up finding all kinds of thing that I needed for the kitchen from one of the stands. Then, I bought a beautiful rotisserie chicken and some vegetable fritters for lunch. It was all excellent.

On the house side of things, we had a small problem with our long-awaited washing machine! When I started my second load of laundry Friday night, it started to leak! But our wonderful plumber, Christian, came by on Saturday and tightened one of the connections which had come loose because it was too close to the wall.

Also, another roofer/carpenter came by to look at our skylight and help work on the ever-present first floor bathroom door problem. The more people we have trying to figure it out, the better off we'll be.

After our delicious chicken lunch, JM and I walked up to the castle to visit the horses. Maggie managed to scare the ponies, who now don't trust us at all. Not that I blame them, she was looking particularly wolf-like during our visit.

Our friends Philippe and Bernadette came over to have dinner with us at the hotel. But before that, Bernadette and I had time to walk around the village and I finally paid a visit the small fruit/vegetable/cheese store and bought some amazingly good cheese along with farm fresh butter! Heavenly.

This morning dawned even more beautiful than yesterday. It was warm enough to go out with just a sweater and no jacket! I couldn't believe how great that could feel after the last month of cold and damp.

Our British friends, Lizzie, Coral and Peter, picked us up and we all went to Rieucros for a *choucroute* at the Munich, where we're now considered regulars. That's one of the things I love about living here, getting to know the people with whom we do business and bringing them new customers.

After lunch we drove through the countryside and were blown away, as usual, by the beauty of this region. The sky is a crystal clear blue, the Pyrénées are majestic, the rivers that crisscross the area are flowing and clear. It is also fishing season and the trout fisherman were out in force. I don't know if they were catching anything, but they sure looked like they were having fun.

We capped off the afternoon sitting in Lizzie's garden, soaking up the sun. It really does feel as if spring is right around the corner and I'm so looking forward to seeing how things change as each season fulfills its promise.

## **Monday, March 14**

The gorgeous weather continues. We opened windows and shutters wide today to let the fresh air blow through the whole house. It got up to 15 or 16 degrees C (about 70 F) in the afternoon and the bakery had to close the blinds to keep all their newly prepared Easter chocolate from melting!

Our nice plumber, Christian, stopped by this morning just to check on whether our washing machine was doing okay. We talked about my new idea for redoing the kitchen and he has offered to loan me some tools so that I can actually attempt to refinish the antique buffet myself! JM remains unconvinced about that, perhaps because he has heard my screams when I've injured myself with various kitchen implements over the years...

Then, at lunchtime, Stéphane Montoro, the electrician, appeared. He had finished the estimate for the electrical work, which actually came in lower than we had anticipated. The even better news is that his current job is going on hold next week, so he can get started working on things here! I can't believe it, we may actually have modern electricity!

The final "house" thing was the carpenter coming to measure the garage door. He thinks he'll be able to install that in ten days or so. That should have it done by the time that our furniture arrives, which will allow us to store things in the garage if we need to. It all seems to be falling into place.

The nice weather has brought everyone in town out to wander and do their errands. It makes us all feel like visiting and chatting, probably because no one really wants to go back inside. It made me really hope that we will eventually come up with the money to do our roof terrace. I just keep thinking about how glorious it would be to sit up there with my laptop, writing this blog in the sunshine and warm breezes.

An interesting side note. One of my American friends went to her local DMV to get a picture ID. They wanted *six* pieces of identity before they would give it to her! Who *has* that many pieces of ID? Everyone in France is always complaining about the bureaucracy, but it seems to me that it's nowhere near as bad as that. JM wanted a new ID card at the town hall today, and he only

needed a certified copy of his birth certificate, some pictures and a form he had to sign. Piece of cake!

Something else I've been meaning to mention. There's a great book I read several years ago. *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience* by Raymonde Carroll.<sup>1</sup> I found it hugely informative and helpful in understanding how two cultures can look at the same thing so differently. Really a worthwhile read.

## Tuesday, March 15

We are officially part of the system! We stopped by the Community Center to find out if there was any news from Social Security, and lo and behold, we have been approved!

It will be several weeks before we get our "*cartes vitales*" which will be our individual medical cards, but we have an officially stamped piece of paper, so that if we need to go to a doctor, we can. We haven't received a bill yet, but I'm sure that will come sooner or later.

Once again we were struck by how pleasant it has been dealing with the *administration* in the area. The nice man who comes once a week to deal with Social Security issues always seems so eager to help us; it's a real pleasure dealing with him. Of course, I know that there are both good and bad bureaucrats, but we've been particularly lucky on this front. Maybe it's the water?

Speaking of water, I think I'm going to disappoint our plumber. I called an *ébéniste* which is someone who restores wood. He's coming next week to look at the two pieces of furniture that I need refinished. I just don't think that my skills are up to working on 200-year-old antiques of that size. If I'm going to do this kind of thing, I think I should start small. Not to mention that it would probably take me close to 200 years to finish them!

His name is Gabriel Chevalley, and I met him at the Hotel de France last week. He's got a good reputation and I like him a lot. Of course, I have no idea how much doing that kind of thing might cost!

I committed my first *faux pas* today. I put out my yellow recycling bin and first, M. Martinez from next-door came over to tell me that it wasn't the right day. A little later, I went over to the butcher's across the street and Didier (yes, another Didier!) mentioned it to me as well. I figured I had better move it before I created a village incident! One of those differences with L.A. that I hadn't counted on. There, people leave their trashcans out for days at a time and no one says a word.

Still, it seems to have been a small thing and I'm now in line with the neighbors. Crisis averted!

## Thursday, March 17

I've got to get used to thinking metric!

Yesterday, I decided I wanted to *really* cook, not just throw together dinner from prepackaged ingredients. So, I went across the street to the Boucherie du Kercorb and got a beef roast. It was a filet roast and cost 26 euros for a kilo. At first, I thought it was really expensive, until I started doing the conversion in my head and realized that it actually only came to about \$11 a pound (using cost of living as opposed value of the dollar), which is an incredible bargain for filet by L.A. standards.

I also picked up a few potatoes, some fabulous *crème fraîche*, farm fresh butter and more cheese at our local vegetable/cheese shop.

With that, I was able to make a potato gratin: thinly sliced potatoes, lardons (chopped bacon), *crème fraîche*, whole milk, garlic, chives, salt (but *fleur de sel* which is amazingly good) and some cantal cheese. Baked that in the oven for about an hour-and-a-half, then rubbed more

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<sup>1</sup> Still available at Amazon.

*fleur de sel*, garlic, *herbes de Provence* and olive oil on the roast, which I cooked for about 20 minutes on a 500 degree (F) oven.

I know I shouldn't say this about my own cooking, but it was a fabulous dinner. I need to go across the street to tell Didier how much we enjoyed that roast. I can't stop thinking about the leftovers we're going to have for today's lunch.

I'm now getting eager for my kitchen things to arrive, because I will be able to do much more cooking once I have the appropriate tools.

Speaking of metric, we had a funny moment with our electricians. We were looking at the placement of the plugs we need to put in the bedrooms and JM pulled out the American tape measure, because of course, we'd measured all our furniture in inches, not centimeters. The electricians were quite surprised, because they'd never had occasion to run into the American measurement system before. I think they were fascinated by the differences.

Today was also my first attempt as a French teacher! Strange, I know, but it worked out that way. Our British friend, Coral, doesn't yet feel comfortable speaking French, so I've offered to help. I still remember how awkward I felt when I was first learning. I think it might be easier for her to speak with someone who has "been there, done that," and who understands the things that are difficult to learn.

It went pretty well, although on this first day, we did speak more English than French! Next week, I'll try to be better about pushing the French-envelope. Still, I hope that Coral got something useful out of the experience.

While she was here, we did a few small errands in the village, one of which was visiting the flower shop. I've been admiring the beautiful cups and glasses that she has in her window. Today, I found out that Lily hand paints them herself. They're really stunning and quite reasonably priced for all the work that goes into them. I've got my eye on a set of coffee cups, but I'm feeling too guilty to buy them right now.

## **Friday, March 18**

We had our first encounter with the French medical system today. Only it wasn't for us, it was for Maggie!

Yesterday, we went to Limoux to pick up a package. Some of the companies here use a system called *Relais Colis*. They've got a network of stores that act as delivery points for purchases. The idea is that you find one that's near where you live or work, then you don't have to worry about being home to receive a package or have a neighbor take it in for you. Quite clever, really.

We hadn't had time to walk around Limoux before and we quite liked it. Lots of nice stores, including a great pet store with a selection of more natural foods that I can try with Maggie. We walked around for about 45 minutes, then came home through the beautiful mountain road between there and Chalabre.

When we got into the house, Maggie went to her usual spot under our work table and napped until it was time for dinner. When it came time to eat, she couldn't stand up! She couldn't put her left hind leg down on the ground and actually collapsed, poor little thing! I wound up partly hand-feeding her. Eventually, she did manage to stand, but it clearly was uncomfortable.

I took her for a short walk, and surprisingly, after she walked for a few minutes, she seemed to feel better. But once we were back in the house, as soon as she lay down then tried to get up again, the problem was clearly still there.

So, this morning we called a vet in Lavelanet who had been recommended to us by our British friends in Rivel. It turns out that poor Maggie has sciatica! I certainly sympathize, having had it on and off myself for years. I think that last week, when she got out of the car and slipped because her leash was tangled up and JM hadn't seen that in the dark, she must have twisted her back. It just took several days for the sciatica to kick in.

Now, she's on anti-inflammatories for a few days and we're supposed to try to keep her from going up and down the stairs. This is not popular at all. And, tomorrow we're supposed to have lunch at Dylan and Florence's house. I don't know what to do: leave her home or take her along and keep her on her leash the whole time. Neither is the ideal solution, I'm afraid.

Still, in an effort to give her gentle exercise that wouldn't make things worse, we took a quiet walk around town this afternoon, picking up ingredients for dinner and getting sympathy from one and all. I'm sure the warm temperature outside is good for her back and the sunshine is good for all our morales.

## **Sunday, March 20**

Today's theme is contrasts and gratitude!

We set out early this morning to drive to Perpignan, which is on the Mediterranean coast. We took the back roads, which is the best way to go anywhere if you're not in a hurry. The countryside still continues to blow me away with its beauty. I never get tired of discovering a new road or small village.

That being said, discovering Perpignan was not a particular success. First, the weather there was much cooler than it had been when we left Chalabre. It was barely 50 (F) there when it had been around 60 (F) here. Plus, it was all overcast: the sky was gray, the sea was gray, the city was ugly. Frankly, I felt no desire to hang around after we did a drive around to look at the city.

We headed towards Le Canet, which is where the beach and port are.

What to say about Le Canet... It really represents the worst of French modern construction. It could have been any beach town anywhere in the world. Tacky, ugly, seriously depressing, yet enormously expensive. I don't think you could pay me to live there. I certainly feel no urge of any kind to go back for a day on the beach.

We headed back towards home, taking a different route, and as soon as we were back in the country our spirits lifted. We went through amazing combinations of vineyards and orchards with the Pyrénées standing as a backdrop that just took our breath away. The orchards were in bloom, most with simply stunning bright pink flowers. I think these may have been cherry trees, but couldn't swear to it.

Still, breathing in the fresh spring air and seeing those bright flowers in the late morning sun quickly washed the thoughts of Perpignan out of our heads.

It was getting on to lunchtime and we hadn't seen any restaurant signs along the side of the road, which is relatively unusual, to be honest. So we came to Vinça, a largish town, and decided to look there. They had an auberge that seemed perfect, except that it didn't allow dogs. What a shame, I'm sure we would have had a nice meal, but I wasn't about to make Maggie wait in the car after a three-hour drive. Instead, we found a small restaurant a little further into town. We decided to check it out.

Well, it wasn't a smashing success, to say the least. The food itself was very good, but *slow*! One waiter, one cook and everything cooked to order, which is nice. But someone hadn't done their preparation I think, because it took two hours to get two courses served. And, to be really honest, neither one was that complicated. I think the table that came in after us almost got up and walked out, and I wouldn't have blamed them. Still, not every discovery can be perfect, right?

When we finally finished the meal that would not end, we continued along our way. And then we made a wondrous discovery! We actually drove through *Rivendell*!

I'm serious, there was this beautiful, mountain spa town called Molitg-les-Bains, perched on the side of a cliff. It was really amazing. Unfortunately, the whole town was closed for the winter!