

THREE WEEKS IN PROVENCE

Blundering Our Way Through The South Of France

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In June 2013 my wife Andrea and I went to Europe for the first time in twelve years, renting for a month from a friend a house just outside Passignano sul Trasimeno, near Perugia in Umbria. Despite the perils of driving our manual transmission rental car up and down a one lane unpaved mountain road every day to get to and from the house, and a broken wrist suffered by Andrea in a fall on the patio of the house, we enjoyed our stay. But when we arrived back in the U.S., we agreed (or so I thought) that in our mid-seventies we were too old for another excursion requiring us to drive the narrow, twisting, curbless streets and unintelligible roadsigns of Continental Europe.

By the spring of 2014, however, Andrea was waffling. At first she suggested maybe we could rent another house for a few weeks in England, where we could read the road signs, and get around via public transportation. We investigated several possible properties in London, but they were too expensive and/or too small or too drab to appeal to us. Then her attention turned to France. First she suggested Brittany, which had been recommended to her by a friend who had stayed there years ago. It was now becoming apparent to me that our agreement regarding driving in Europe was in jeopardy. We of course couldn't find any place to rent in Brittany where public transportation was an option, and as it turned out we couldn't find any rental properties there at all that we were willing to take a chance on for several weeks. It was beginning to look like Europe was not in the cards this year.

But then fate intervened. One day in August I happened to pass the laundry room in our condo building and ran into Caroline, the daughter of the owner of another unit in our building. Caroline and her family live in Paris and were visiting her mother for a few weeks. I mentioned to Andrea that Caroline was in the building, Andrea arranged to have a chat with her, and Caroline mentioned that she had a friend named Benedicte who owned a house in Provence that she rented out. We investigated and found that Benedicte's house was a recently remodeled 250+ year old townhouse in the historic center of St. Remy containing 1600 square feet of space on three floors. We didn't need that much space, and the weekly rent was about 50% higher than that of the house we rented in Italy in 2013, but we decided we could manage if we rented for only three weeks. After an exchange of numerous e-mails with Benedicte concerning the terms, we signed a contract and sent her our deposit via PayPal.

We had little trouble using the internet to book a roundtrip flight from Chicago to the Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris, seats on the high-speed TGV train from CDG to and from Avignon, a rental car to take us from Avignon to St. Remy (about 15 miles away) and to use for three weeks, and a reservation at the Ibis hotel at CDG the night before our return flight to the U.S. But then came the hard part. We wanted to have a phone to use after we arrived in France to coordinate our arrival at Benedicte's house with the property manager and to provide GPS directions for our drives around Provence. I knew that our non-GSM Verizon and Virgin Mobile smart phones would not connect to French mobile phone networks, and the AT&T prepaid phone plan I had for my GSM Nexus smart phone did not offer service outside North

America. When we were in Italy in 2013 I had, with considerable difficulty, managed to find, buy and successfully use a SIM card from an Italian mobile service provider with my Nexus phone, and I hoped to do the same in France. I discovered, however, after fruitless hours spent on the internet, that despite what some websites would have one believe, it is virtually impossible to obtain a SIM card in the U.S. to be used for phone and data service in France for a reasonable cost. The best deal I found was a SIM card with a British mobile number from some company in Texas that represented I could use it to make calls in France for “only” 45 cents a minute and receive data for “only” 29 cents per megabyte. I bought one as an interim measure for \$20. I also found conflicting reports that I might be able to buy a SIM card from a French phone company at a Relay shop at CDG airport. I would have to wait and see if that worked.

We planned to leave on our trip on September 21 and return to Chicago on October 13. On September 20 Andrea had a family commitment for lunch in Chesterton, Indiana, and afterward she joined me at our farm in Southwest Michigan to pick up a few items there for our trip and close up the house. In mid-afternoon we began driving to our condo in Evanston to do our final packing. Unfortunately, however, we had forgotten one thing. An hour or so after we left the farm, Andrea remembered that she had left her carry-on bag, full of clean laundry and other necessities for our flight to France, so we had to drive back and pick them up. This would not be the only minor inconvenience we would experience on our trip.

We finished packing in Evanston with little problem, got a good night’s sleep, and, to soothe my travel anxiety, arrived at O’Hare Airport on September 21 two and a half hours before our scheduled 5:30 p.m. departure. We checked two carry-on size bags, proud that we had packed so lightly, and went through airport security, where Andrea was chosen, apparently at random, for a detailed check of her carry-on toiletries. After finally being cleared by security, we soon realized we had made a serious packing mistake. Our wheelless carry-on bags were too heavy to carry by hand all the way to our gate. Fortunately we were near a Brookstone shop and were able to buy a lightweight bag carrier with wheels for \$60, which we justified as being no more than the cost of a new carry-on bag with wheels. We then proceeded to our gate without further incident and reached it at about 3:30 p.m., pleased to note that our plane was already there.

After waiting patiently for check-in for our flight to begin, at about 5 p.m. we were told that airline workers were still doing some “maintenance” on our plane and that departure would be delayed for half an hour. This concerned us only slightly because we knew we had five hours at CDG to make the connection with our TGV train to Avignon. We continued to receive additional half hour delays until about 9 p.m., at which time we were told that a different plane would have to be substituted for the plane we were supposed to take. By now I was becoming seriously worried about making our train connection. I tried to call Rail Europe, through which we made our train reservation, only to find that their office had closed at 7:30 p.m. Having sat in uncomfortable seats in the boarding areas at O’Hare for almost seven hours, we finally got on our plane about 10 p.m. and took off about 10:30 p.m., exactly five hours late. Andrea managed to sleep for most of the flight, but I slept little, fretting about our train connection and worrying about how I could possibly explain to a French ticket agent that we wanted to use the tickets for our missed train on a later one, assuming one was even available. My only consolation was that, in a

remarkable coincidence, the passenger sitting to my right on the plane had reservations for himself and his wife on the same TGV train to Avignon that we did. But I doubted that he could speak French any better than I could. I also was annoyed when it got cold in the plane and I went to put on my sweater and discovered that on one of the many occasions I had pulled things out of my carry-on bag during our long wait at O'Hare, I had apparently forgotten to put my sweater back in and left it at the terminal.

Day One—Arrival in France

As our flight to Paris progressed, we received one bit of good news. Flying time to Paris would be only seven and a half hours, rather than the eight hours scheduled. This gave me some hope but didn't relieve my anxiety, especially when, after landing, it seemed to take forever to taxi to the arrival gate and to make our way off the plane. Going through passport control and picking up our bags, however, were fairly expeditious, and we entered the CDG terminal with almost twenty minutes before our train was to leave. Obviously I had no time to shop for a SIM card (and in light of later observations would almost certainly not have found one). We had no idea how to get to the TGV station, but we spotted a sign pointing the direction. Rolling our bags and bag carrier as fast as we could, we set off for it. The direction signs were true and after ten minutes we found ourselves in the station. But we didn't know how to get to the platform for our train, and there was a long line at the information desk. Parsing together what I could understand from the electronic displays of arrival and departure times and some garbled advice from another passenger in the station who spoke only French, was looking for a different train, and did not know where his train was, we managed to find the correct platform and the correct place to board our train about three minutes before the 2 p.m. departure time. Despite making a wrong turn with our luggage when we got on the train, we eventually found our reserved seats and dropped into them with an enormous feeling of relief.

The three hour ride to travel the 400 miles to Avignon on the fast TGV train was smooth and pleasant and we were glad we had opted to go this way rather than taking another flight. We got off the train at the modern and spacious Avignon TGV station (which is actually several miles from the center of the city and to be distinguished from the Centre Ville station used by non-TGV trains) and, except for a small struggle getting our bags down the steps leading north from the station, found our car rental office with little difficulty. The clerk spoke enough English to make our check-in expeditious and we found our car after a long walk to the back of the adjacent parking lot. I had to repeat the walk when we discovered some dings on the car that had not been noted on our rental contract, but the clerk readily made the corrections. My British-number SIM card worked well enough for me to call the property manager of our house and tell him when we would meet him, and we set off for St. Remy. I had printed out directions to the house from Avignon TGV on Google maps before we left the U.S., and, with Andrea driving and me navigating (as we would do on all our car trips in Provence), they got us to St. Remy easily. They did not, however, get us easily to the house. For reasons known only to Google we were routed through the center of St Remy to the house on a circuitous route using narrow tiled streets barely wider than sidewalks that appeared to require us to drive across a

public square. After circling the town center several times we found another route that was slightly more passable and eventually got to the house about fifteen minutes late. The property manager was there to greet us and told us we could park near the house in a wide spot on the narrow Rue du Parage, the street on which the house was located. We did so and, dragging our luggage with us, we entered the house.

The ground floor of the house was not quite what we had expected. Although obviously totally remodeled recently (as was the rest of the house), it was rather dark, and the two bedrooms, bathroom, and laundry room, as well as the little yard and swimming pool outside the back door, seemed rather small. The concrete steps leading up to the first floor were steep and, without a handrail, not easy to climb. But when we got to the first floor, with its open cooking, dining, and living area occupying the whole floor, we knew we had chosen well. It was light, modern, and comfortable, and through two sets of French (!) doors there was a nice terrace overlooking the pool. The second floor, reached by another set of open, steep concrete stairs, was devoted to a large open master bedroom with bath and sitting room. It was every bit as attractive as the first floor and also contained large windows looking out onto central St Remy. We were a bit surprised by the absence of walls between the sleeping area and the bathtub and toilet, but we figured this must be the way the French did it and we could adapt.

The property manager showed us around, gave us our keys, and on the way out showed us that we could drive to and from the house through a short alleyway to Boulevard Gambetta, making it unnecessary to traverse the narrow pedestrian streets through which Google had routed us. We still had plenty of time before its 7:30 p.m. closing to walk to the nearby Spar grocery store to get some breakfast items for the next morning, and we found the walk through the narrow streets enchanting, marvelling at the fact that cars even used these streets at all. We made a few calls to relatives back in the U.S. advising them that we had arrived safely (using the free wifi and internet phone service provided with the house and not having to rely on my British-number cell phone). We took another walk to look for a restaurant and had our first French dinner, tasty and nicely presented, at a little place called La Fontaine. It consisted of country pork and vegetables (including a miniature pumpkin filled with squash puree) for Andrea and a local grilled fish and vegetable soufflé for me, followed by a chocolate covered and ice cream filled crepe for dessert. We then returned to the house, called it a day, and slept extremely well in the king size memory foam bed in our new master bedroom.

Day Two—The Intermarché

On Tuesday, September 23, after sleeping much later than usual because of the time change and my lack of sleep the night before, I decided at about 9 a.m. to go out and forage for something else for breakfast. I don't have words to describe how much I enjoyed that little morning walk along those quaint tiled streets, which I would repeat most of the days we were in St Remy. I have never seen anything like them in the U.S. or anywhere else. I found a bakery and patisserie that had fresh bread and delicious butter and chocolate croissants, and managed to buy some of each using hand motions and the remnants of French learned in high school 60 years ago, even

conveying that I wanted the bread sliced. I brought them home and Andrea and I enjoyed them along with coffee she had made from a package we found in the house.

We needed to buy more coffee and many other groceries that we had not found in the little Spar market, so we decided after breakfast to make our principal activity for the day (after resting up from our travels of the day before) a trip to the supermarket. We had seen an Intermarché supermarket as we came into town that was about a kilometre away from the house, and we decided to drive because we couldn't carry very many groceries back to the house on foot. We set out to go there in our car but after about a mile were puzzled because we hadn't come to the Intermarché and didn't remember any of the other things we were seeing. After consulting Google maps on my cell phone I realized that we had gotten turned around from our repeated circling of the city center the day before and were driving south instead of north back toward Avignon. We corrected the mistake and soon found the Intermarché but missed the turnoff into it, an error easily remedied by reversing directions twice on two of the omnipresent road roundabouts, a technique that served us well on numerous other missed turns in succeeding trips. We pulled into the Intermarché turnoff on the second try and parked in its large parking lot, just like we would do on a visit to the supermarket in the U.S. Unlike the U.S., however, we had to put a coin in a slot to use a shopping cart for our purchases.

The Intermarché was large and more fully stocked than most U.S. supermarkets and had quite a few household and apparel items (such as shoes and a few mens clothes) not normally in a U.S. grocery store. The produce seemed fresher and more abundant and there was vastly more wine, bottled water, cheese (of countless varieties) and packaged lunch meat (mostly ham of countless varieties) than in our local Jewel back home. They even carried caffeine free Diet Coke (which we had been unable to find anywhere in Italy the previous year) and both instant and ground decaffeinated coffee (which no restaurant we visited in France, including Starbucks, seemed to serve). But some things we hoped to find were missing. There was no sugar free jelly, no antacids, and not even any aspirin that we could locate; perhaps the French don't suffer from the ailments that these items address. I was surprised to find, in this land of *pain* and croissants, a large selection of breakfast cereal on the shelves, almost all of it (other than corn flakes, all bran and oatmeal) loaded with sugar. We spent a lot of time in the store, much of it trying to figure out where things were (as in the U.S.), and we found it a pleasant and educational experience. They took our credit card for our purchases (well in excess of 100 euros) and we returned to the house to fill the cupboards for our three week stay.

In the afternoon we walked more of the streets of central St Remy, scouting out the restaurants and shops, and found a Tabac shop where, my research indicated, I might find a French SIM card for my smart phone that would provide data at a reasonable charge. Sure enough, the shopkeeper had a SIM card for the Orange mobile network for 10 euros, which would give me 5 euros worth of call time. The shopkeeper tried to explain, in French, how the card worked and needed to be activated. I didn't understand most of what she said, but I knew from my research that I could add a data package for about 10 more euros that would permit me to download all the directions we needed for the phone's GPS app during our stay. I bought the card, very pleased with the purchase, believing that I had finally solved the French cell phone problem that had been worrying me for so long.

In the evening Andrea and I set out walking again, intending to try a restaurant that was recommended in one of our guide books. We took one or two wrong turns, and just as we were thinking about retracing our steps we spotted a nice looking little restaurant with covered outdoor seating called L’Olivade. We decided to eat there and had another enjoyable French meal, salmon for me and a pasta dish with chicken for Andrea, but no dessert this time. (I also learned that an *entrée* on a French menu is an appetizer, not a main course, which is a *plat*.) We returned to our house and our comfortable bed. This night, however, I did not sleep well. The jet lag caused me to wake at about 2 a.m., and, on the way to get something to eat in the kitchen area, slipped and fell while trying to avoid an ornamental vase at the bottom of the steep concrete stairs and scraped my arm and knee. Nothing serious, though, and I eventually managed to get back to sleep for a few more hours.

Day Three—Mistral 7

On our third day in St Remy, September 24, we awoke to clouds and rain, and the forecast indicated no improvement. (It was to be the only rainy day we had during our entire stay.) It was Wednesday, Market Day in St Remy, and we had hoped to spend the morning visiting the many stalls to see what was being offered for sale. Because of the rain we decided to wait until the next Wednesday and we also decided it would not be a good day for sightseeing. There was, however, another task that needed to be done in my seemingly endless efforts to get my smart phone working, and this would be a good day for it.

I had no trouble installing the Orange SIM card that I bought the previous afternoon in my Nexus phone, and I had the phone up and running on the Orange network fairly easily. I had only to log on to the Orange website (using the free wifi that came with our house) and add the 500 megabyte data plan that they offered for another 10 euros. But to my surprise, the website wouldn’t allow me to do it. After an hour or so of trying, and then attempting to translate the technical language of the website, it appeared that I had to mail in a registration form with a copy of my passport and have it approved before I would be allowed to add anything beyond the basic 5 euros worth of talk time that came with the SIM card. Half of our time in Provence would be gone before this could happen. There had to be a better way, so I searched on the internet for an Orange store and found one about twenty miles away on a highway southeast of Avignon.

We set out in the rain and after forty minutes we came to the place where the Orange “boutique” was supposed to be, a huge indoor shopping mall called Mistral 7. I didn’t know that they had these things in France. We parked in the crowded parking lot and went inside and searched through the mall directory. I was dismayed to find no listing for an Orange boutique, although I did find listings for at least three other shops that appeared to sell mobile phones and service. I resolved that next time in Provence I will wait until I can go to Mistral 7 to get a SIM card, but these three shops didn’t help me much now. We did go into one of them and asked what happened to the Orange boutique. To our surprise we were informed that it was alive and well at the other end of the mall. (This would not be the only time that we received erroneous advice about the absence of a shop at Mistral 7.) We found the boutique,

waited in line inside for an unnecessarily long time (not realizing that we were supposed to sign in on a computer terminal when we arrived) and eventually were waited on by a clerk who actually spoke a passable amount of English. He told me that he couldn't register me at the store so I could buy the 10 euro data plan, but when I offered to buy a 20 euro plan instead (that would give me 300 megabytes of data, which was the minimum I needed, and unlimited talk time within France for a month, which I did not need), he miraculously determined that he could in fact register me. He did, and I walked out of the boutique and Mistral 7 with a smart phone that was capable of providing us directions (though not necessarily reliable ones) to wherever we wanted to go in Provence for the rest of our stay.

With a sense of relief, we drove back to the house and relaxed with a small glass of *pastis*, an anise flavored liqueur our guidebooks said is much favored in Provence, which Andrea had purchased at the Spar. Not wanting to go out again in the rain, Andrea prepared us a nice dinner featuring asparagus potato soup using the fixings she had bought at the Intermarché. I spent time during the rest of the evening trying to determine whether my U.S. subscription to Netflix would work in France, where Netflix had just begun streaming video over the internet earlier in the month.

Day Four—The Luberon

The next day, Thursday September 25, Andrea and I decided to begin our driving tours of the leading tourist sights in Provence with a trip to the Luberon, a hilly area beginning about 25 miles east of St. Remy. The Luberon is the setting of the popular book A Year In Provence, written about 25 years ago by an Englishman who bought and restored an old house there. We didn't get quite as far east as the part of the Luberon where the author lived, but we saw enough to get a good feel for the area.

We first stopped at the town of Gordes. As we approached it we accidentally turned off the Google-plotted route onto a different road and had unbelievably striking views of the town, perched as it is on the top and sides of a high cliff. There was no place to pull off the road for a photo opp, and we didn't come back this way, so we had to settle for post cards, which didn't do justice to the view we saw. We parked and walked around Gordes and were somewhat disappointed that the shops and sights were not as great as the view from the road. We decided (mistakenly as it turned out) not to have lunch in Gordes but pushed on to the next destination.

Following the signs now, and not our Google map, we proceeded to the nearby Abbaye Notre Dame de Senanque, going for several kilometres down a one lane road where we thankfully didn't encounter any vehicles going the other way. The centuries old abbey is a large and attractive cluster of buildings located in a valley and surrounded by fields, some of which had been recently tilled and others of which, next to the abbey, contained acres of lavender. We got some good photos there, decided not to tour the inside of the abbey but did go to the gift shop, which featured honey and lavender items made by the monks, but didn't buy anything. We had thought there might be a place to eat at the abbey but didn't find one. We were getting hungry so we left for our next destination, Roussillon, which did not appear to be far away and where we knew there were good restaurants.

Roussillon may be close to the abbey, but it took what seemed like forever to get there. Rick Steves, in his France guidebook, had predicted that we would get lost in the Luberon, and that is essentially what happened. We did keep seeing road signs directing us to Roussillon, but the roads the signs put us on seemed endless. We couldn't find out exactly where we were with GPS on the smart phone because I had failed to download a Google map extending to the Luberon on wifi before we left, and we had now lost our Orange smart phone connection in all the hills and valleys. Eventually, however, we came to the striking ochre hills that surround Roussillon and arrived, starved, in the town shortly before 2 p.m. We were further delayed because, after driving up a steep and impossibly narrow street into the center of the town, we discovered that the weekly market stalls were still occupying the car parks. We backtracked down the hill to a road where parking was available and, after finally deciphering how to use the *horodateur* parking ticket machine, walked back up the hill to find a restaurant that was open. We first entered a restaurant up a long flight of stairs that had been recommended in the Steves guidebook but after sitting for ten minutes without being acknowledged we left and went to a different restaurant recommended in a different guidebook. It was called the Bistrot de Roussilon and was worth the wait. We sat at an outdoor table overlooking a small public square and had an excellent meal of fish for me and a salad for Andrea, after which Andrea visited some of the shops bordering on the square.

It was now after 3 p.m. We debating driving further east to visit some of the towns mentioned in the Year In Provence book, but decided that we had seen enough for one day and had a good sense of the Luberon. We regained our Orange connection in Roussilon and had no trouble finding our way back to St Remy, except for one small hitch. Google maps inexplicably directed us onto the D7 highway for a few miles after crossing the Durance River before routing us to the D30 (which led directly to St Remy), perhaps so we wouldn't have to drive through the town of Noves. But after several tries we couldn't find the road shown on Google maps that supposedly connected the D7 to the D30; it either didn't exist or was a concealed cowpath. So we backtracked, got on the D30 at the river, drove through Noves (a pretty little town) and soon were back in St. Remy. For the first time the wide spot on Rue du Parage where we had been parking was taken by another car, but we found a place in a small parking area just off the alley that led to Blvd Gambetta. Having had a full meal in mid-afternoon, we had a light dinner with the rest of Andrea's asparagus potato soup and an uneventful evening.

Day Five—The Van Gogh Trail

September 26 was a day for sightseeing in St. Remy beyond the confines of the *centre ville* (the historic town center, which, incidentally, was accessible from outside only through a limited number of narrow entrances, some of which contained the remnants of gates that probably once could have been shut to block any entrance to the old city). Andrea had read somewhere that a map of a walking tour of St. Remy could be obtained from the local tourist information office, located just south of the centre ville. After moving our car back to our original parking spot nearer the house,

we walked there and did indeed obtain such a map, which listed the significant sights both within and without the old town center. (We also picked up a leaflet describing some kind of festival beginning the next day, which we put aside to study later.) Many of the sights, such as the birthplace of Nostradamus and the building where Gounod first performed one of his compositions, we had already noted in our walks looking for shops and restaurants. But of most interest to us was a description of a walk from the centre ville to the Cloiture St. Paul, a former mental hospital a mile or so to the south where the painter Vincent Van Gogh had confined himself for about a year from 1889 to 1890, shortly before he returned to Paris and took his life. While he was in St. Remy Van Gogh produced, as part of his therapy, more than a hundred paintings, most of them of things he saw in St. Remy. Along the walk to the hospital, the town has placed about two dozen weatherproof reproductions of some of these paintings, mounted on easel-like stands for easy viewing by passers-by. We decided that this would be a good day to take that walk.

Before beginning our walk Andrea and I had lunch at a restaurant recommended (but not starred) in the Michelin Red Guide named Bistro Decouverte. We both opted for the inexpensive daily lunch special called faux filet. It turned out to be grilled ribeye steak that was very tasty but a bit tough to chew. We decided we would return to the Bistro Decouverte later and try their dinner menu.

We then set out on our walk to the Cloiture St. Paul, which we soon found was uphill all the way because the ground south of St. Remy rises gradually to become the Alpilles range of mini-mountains several miles further on. But with frequent stops to look at the paintings, all of which Andrea carefully photographed, we made it to the hospital without too much difficulty. The Cloiture St. Paul is no longer a mental hospital but is still a hospital providing medical services for women. Most of the hospital is not open to the public, but at the south end there is a building housing a museum dedicated to Van Gogh and his work, the main feature of which is a reproduction of the room (but not the actual room) where Van Gogh lived while he was at the hospital. There are many reproductions of Van Gogh's paintings in the museum also but no original paintings there. (To the best of our knowledge there are only two original Van Gogh paintings in permanent collections in Provence, one in Avignon and one in Arles; during our stay there was also one on exhibit temporarily in the Garnet Museum in Aix.) The museum exhibits provided a great deal of interesting information about Van Gogh's life and work, such as the fact that in his lifetime he only sold one painting—ironic considering that there are today over 800 of them on display throughout the world, with a collective market value of billions of dollars. The walk to Cloiture St. Paul and our visit to the museum gave us (especially Andrea) a strong interest in and appreciation of Van Gogh's work that we had not had before.

Just across the street from the grounds of Cloiture St. Paul is an entirely different St. Remy sight that we found equally impressive. Over 2000 years ago the Romans colonized this area and built a sizeable city at this location called Glanum. Among the things they built here are a large mausoleum and enormous arch, which is thought to have been the entrance to Glanum. These structures are amazingly well preserved and it was hard for us to grasp just how old and well-built they are. (There are also extensive ruins of Glanum that can be visited; we were too tired to visit them on this occasion.)

Our walk back to central St. Remy was downhill and much easier. We ate at the house, a delicious Salade Nicoise Andrea had prepared the day before, and spent most of the rest of the evening trying to decipher the leaflet that we had picked up at the tourist information office about the forthcoming festival. It was much more difficult to translate than we had expected because it used a lot of words (such as *abrivado* and *manades*) that were not in our French-English dictionary. It would take us more than one day to figure out what this festival was all about.

Day Six—The Festival Begins

The first thing we figured out about the festival was that it was not just a one day or weekend affair but would be going on for nine days, two weekends plus the intervening week. I was immediately concerned about whether we would have trouble parking our rental car during the festival, so I called the property manager for our house about it. He acknowledged that yes, we would likely have trouble parking near the house on some days but that I could probably find a place to park on one of the streets a few blocks north of the house that were outside the city center. I took a walk in that direction to see whether he was right and was not encouraged. I might have to find a different solution to this problem as the week progressed, especially because I noted a sign announcing that parking would be prohibited on Boulevard Gambetta at various times during the week. I also noted on my walk some other new signs warning about the danger of *taureaux* on the streets. I thought I knew what this meant but needed to consult the enigmatic flyer to be sure.

Sure enough, *taureaux* meant bulls, and the flyer seemed to be saying that there would be bulls in the street from time to time during the festival. I had thought that such things happened only in Spain, not France. We now understood the flyer to mean that at 10 a.m. today some bulls would be traversing a nearby lake accompanied by some *manades* (bullfighters, I guessed). At 11 a.m. they would be arriving at Place General-de-Gaulle (which I couldn't find on Google maps but later learned to be a parking lot across the street from the Intermarché), where at noon there would be *rafraichisements*. Then at 3 p.m. there would be a *cource camarguaise taureaux emboules*, which I took to be some kind of a bullfight, at an arena a little south of the town center. After some consideration, Andrea and I decided to skip the arrival of the bulls, the *rafraichisements*, and the bullfights and also decided to spend the morning and early afternoon safely inside our house. We did go out for a very nice lunch (chicken curry for me, vegetables and fried rice for Andrea) at Le Mandarin, a Vietnamese restaurant across the boulevard from the Bistro Decouverte.

The flyer further stated that throughout the day there would be a *boules* competition at a field on Boulevard Gambetta near our house; that at 5 p.m. there would be a *defile des vieux metiers*, which we translated to be some kind of parade, along the streets, including Gambetta, that encircled the town center; and that at 10 p.m. there would be a *grand bal* somewhere in the centre ville. We decided to check out the *boules* competition and the parade. The *boules* game, we saw, was like the Italian bocce game with steel balls, and we enjoyed watching the competitors. They were mostly older men and women and were incredibly proficient, able to toss a steel ball twenty or more feet in the air and have it land directly on top of another player's

ball to knock it away, and the women were just as good if not better at it than the men. The parade turned out to be a procession of people dressed in historic clothes (mainly rural in nature but a few top hats); animals (mostly sheep and horses), and historic vehicles (mostly wagons but, at the very end some vintage tractors, including both John Deeres and some made by Porsche, a manufacturer that I identified only with sports cars). We enjoyed the parade also and took many photographs and a few videos on my smart phone.

After the parade we returned to the house and had a dinner of beef and barley soup that Andrea had prepared and spent a good part of the evening trying to translate and understand the schedule in the flyer for the remaining days of the festival. We skipped the *grand bal*, which did not begin until after our bedtime.

Day Seven—Bulls and Les Baux

This day, Sunday September 28, was, according to our leaflet, the day of the *traditionelle abrivado di biou*, in which “*6 taureaux cornes nues conduite par 6 gardians*,” would make a “*tour de ville*.” We translated this to mean that a traditional running of the bulls would take place, involving 6 bulls conducted by 6 cowboys, on a tour of the town center. It would begin at 10:30 a.m. on a Sunday, which struck us as an odd time for a main event of the festival. We decided that this was a must-see for us so we ventured out of the house and discovered, to our surprise, that heavy metal fences had been installed overnight on both sides of all of the four boulevards that encircled the town center, including Blvd Gambetta. Feeling safer, we followed the crowd to the big St. Martin church (which, incidentally, appears in the middle of Van Gogh’s famous painting “Starry Night”) across the street from the Place de Republique, a large public square where most of the crowd had gathered. We stood on the church steps with many others to get a good view and awaited the beginning of the *abrivado*.

10:30 came and went and not much had happened other than a band playing and several horsemen riding by. Andrea got tired of waiting and decided to go back to Blvd Gambetta next to our house. To do so she eased through an opening in the fence onto the boulevard in front of the church and headed home. Not long afterward there was an excited stirring from the crowd, the band played, there was an urgent announcement over the loudspeakers, horsemen appeared again, and then the bulls. They were milling about in the street below, dashing toward the youths who were taunting them from just outside the fence. I tried to take a few videos with my smart phone and in my haste at first had the phone turned backward and got a very nice shot of the people behind me. Then the bulls started running up the street away from the church, followed by a large group of youths who emerged from the crowd like a school of fish. I suddenly became worried about Andrea, who when I last saw her was out on the boulevard up which the bulls were now running. I raced back to the house, using the narrow town center streets where there were no bulls, and found her safely inside the fence on Blvd Gambetta, taking some great pictures of the bulls. She had been warned about the bulls coming, she said, and left the boulevard and eased back behind the fence well before they arrived.

The bulls moved on down the boulevard and we decided we had seen enough of them for the day and went back to the house. By the afternoon the bulls had been sequestered somewhere awaiting another bullfight in the arena and the fences had been removed and the boulevards reopened. We saw this as a chance to escape from St. Remy and do some sightseeing. A number of people had recommended that we go to Les Baux, a medieval fortress city on a high promontory ten miles or less south of St. Remy. So we gave up our convenient parking spot, and made the easy drive uphill into the Alpilles to Les Baux.

According to our guidebooks, Les Baux was for centuries in the middle ages the home of ruthless lords who controlled and taxed dozens of other towns in Provence. Eventually it was captured by French forces from the north of France and largely destroyed, but after they left it was rebuilt and the descendants of the lords resumed their plundering ways. Finally, Cardinal Richelieu sent another force to Les Baux that razed the town completely, and it has remained only as ruins that serve as a popular tourist attraction. The sight of Les Baux approaching it from the highway is indeed impressive, with the remnants of its castle and tower perched high on the edge of a steep cliff (over which the ruthless lords are reputed to have thrown their enemies). Finding a place to park was very difficult on a Sunday afternoon, but we finally squeezed into a spot in a car park not too far away and then could not figure out how to pay the 5 euro parking charge, so we just headed for the main gate into the town. We didn't see much evidence of living quarters in Les Baux (they may have been on the other side of the promontory) but a nice tourist information office and countless shops and restaurants graced the steep narrow streets leading up to the ruins. Andrea visited a number of shops as I waited patiently outside, and we then paid our admission fee at the end of the streets and went out for a walk around what was left of ancient Les Baux. The wind was strong up here and the views of the vineyards far below excellent. There were interesting full-size catapults and a battering ram to inspect, and even what was left of the old castle and tower gave us a good idea of their immense size. After watching a short film of aerial views of Les Baux and other Provence attractions in a small preserved chapel Andrea and I retreated downhill and back to our car, which fortunately had not been ticketed, and drove back to the house in St. Remy, where our parking spot was still open.

For our dinner we thought we would try something from one of the festival food stalls near St. Martin church; I bought a "kabob" sandwich on pita bread there and took it home. It was the only unpleasant food I had in France. After eating half of it I threw it away and had some more of Andrea's beef barley soup. For our evening entertainment I managed to get Netflix up and running on my laptop and watched a program (*Suits*, episode 1), that I don't believe was even available on Netflix streaming in the U.S.

Day Eight—The Intermarché Again

On September 29 there were no festival events in the town center or otherwise near our house, but we stayed in St. Remy anyway and made another major shopping expedition to the Intermarché, where we spent another 100 euros and I bought a sweater to replace the one I had left at the airport in Chicago. In the afternoon I went on a walk around the town center with Andrea while she checked out the shops more

closely and bought a few items. I did a lot of reading, finishing a novel I had started before we left for France and starting a short history of France that Andrea had given me. For dinner we finished up Andrea's beef barley soup. Afterward I managed to watch another episode of Suits on streaming Netflix.

Day Nine—More Bulls and Two Museums

Today, Tuesday, September 30, according to our festival leaflet, there would be an *encierro de tau* with *manade Agu* at 10:30 a.m. on Boulevard Gambetta. We didn't know exactly what this meant so we walked over to the boulevard and, sure enough, the fences were back up along the boulevard and we couldn't get our car out. So we waited, spectators started appearing, and eventually the bulls appeared again, being teased by reckless youths, one of whom managed to run and climb up on the fence in front of us to escape a bull he had provoked. The show lasted for half an hour or so, with the bulls running away down the boulevard and then reappearing a few minutes later, and then we went back to the house.

Not knowing how long the boulevard would be fenced off (it turned out not to be so long), we decided that today we would stay in St. Remy again and visit the two museums in the city center, both of which were very close to our house. The first we went to, the Musee Estrine, in a remodeled former mansion, displayed primarily contemporary art, in which we weren't much interested, but also had another exhibit we liked which focussed on Vincent Van Gogh. The museum had no original work of Van Gogh, but it had, among other exhibits, a series of panels describing Van Gogh's life and a projected slide show comparing many of Van Gogh's paintings to those of his contemporaries or to those of earlier artists (such as a Japanese artist whose work Van Gogh had copied in his early years). We found these interesting and complementary to the exhibits we had seen at the Cloiture St. Paul museum. The museum also had an excellent gift shop, with many Van Gogh items, including numerous large posters of many of his paintings. Andrea decided that these posters were just what she wanted, for herself and for gifts, and purchased a number of them, which the shop rolled and packed in a large tube. It was only after we arrived back at the house that I realized these posters would not possibly fit into our luggage and I would have to figure out what to do with them.

The other museum was the Musee des Alpilles, located in a remodeled former hotel literally a few steps away from our house. The building itself was beautiful, both inside and out, but the exhibits had a very narrow scope. They attempted to show in many ways the history, mainly the history of agriculture, in the Alpilles region. There was, for example, a series of exhibits on the thistles that used to be grown by farmers in the region that were dried and used to card wool. Being myself a weekend farmer, I think I would have enjoyed these exhibits a great deal if I could have understood them, but the descriptions were all written in French that I could barely comprehend. We spent less time in this museum than it deserved. One question that occurred to me in the Musee des Alpilles, and also to some extent in the Musee Estrine, in both of which we were practically the only visitors, was how could these elegant museums support themselves? The modest admission charges surely were not enough to cover even the overhead expenses of the buildings with the sort of attendance we saw. I concluded that both museums must be the pet projects of

wealthy founders or wealthy foundations that they were willing to support as a contribution to the town of St. Remy.

When we got back to the house I wrestled with the problem of how to get the posters back to the U.S. I first considered whether we could mail them (the shop where we bought them would not do this for us) and spent quite a bit of time on the internet reading imperfect translations of Byzantine French postal regulations. Probably this would work but it was unclear what kind of packaging was acceptable and whether we needed to produce a receipt (which we had already lost) for customs purposes. And in any event it would be fairly expensive, perhaps 25 or 30 euros. A second solution would be to carry them onto the plane going home as one of the two carry-on items each of us was allowed, but I felt we needed this allowance for other things. A third solution would be to use one of the bags we had checked on the way to France as a carry-on (they were small enough) and buy a new bag of some sort to check that would hold the posters. This alternative appealed to me because I was also beginning to worry how we would get other items home that Andrea had purchased. But we would have to investigate the cost of purchasing a new bag and making a decision within the week and a half we had left in France.

Andrea and I had a nice dinner that night at another restaurant recommended in our guidebooks called Bistro des Alpilles. When we got home I decided I would download some of the many photographs she had taken so as to free up memory space for more on her camera. But when she went to look for her camera she couldn't find it anywhere. We hypothesized that maybe she had taken the camera out of her purse and left it in a shop in Les Baux when she paid for her purchases two days ago. We resolved to go back there and see if the shop had the camera. This was the night for the festival fireworks, and we watched them from our upstairs bedroom before we went to bed.

Day Ten—Aix en Provence

Today, October 1, was a Wednesday, and we had been looking forward to our first market day in St. Remy. We were quite surprised, when we walked to the Place Favier, the public square very near our house, to see no stalls for market day vendors. We asked others we saw and were informed that there would be no market day this Wednesday because of the festival, even though no events were scheduled today until 5 p.m. (an enigmatic *bandido des enfants*) and continuing *boules* competitions. We quickly reconsidered our plans and decided this would be a good day to make the drive we had been planning to Aix en Provence, a large city about 50 miles away that had a close association with the painter Cezanne.

We left in mid-morning and stopped on the way in Les Baux to inquire about Andrea's camera. The shop clerk, who remembered Andrea, informed us that no camera had been left in her shop. Disappointed, we continued on to Aix. This required us to use the French expressways for the first time but we were prepared with plenty of euro coins to pay the tolls. We managed the expressways very well except that we accidentally took the first Aix exit rather than the second and had to plot our route to where we wanted to be on Google maps as we drove. Eventually we reached the Cours Mirabeau, our initial destination, and drove the length of this beautiful

boulevard, which our guidebooks said is considered to be one of the most attractive streets in Europe. We gawked at the stately plane trees shading it and the gorgeous old buildings on either side, until we came to the eastern end, where we had to choose among several narrow pedestrian-oriented streets on which to continue. We picked one that seemed to run in the direction of Blvd Carnot, where Google maps said there would be a parking garage. We soon found signs directing us to the garage, an underground structure, and entered it, only to wonder if we would ever be able to get out. The aisles were very narrow and the marked parking slots seemed half the size of those in U.S. parking garages. We finally found one and squeezed into it with repeated backing and filling while impatient Aixian drivers urged us to hurry with their car horns.

From the parking garage we walked a few blocks back to the Cours Mirabeau and were again impressed with its grandeur. There were numerous sidewalk cafes on the north side of the street and we selected one where we had an excellent lunch, salmon for me and spaghetti bolognese for Andrea. We then decided to take a walk north from the Cours Mirabeau to a site Andrea had read about that was classed as a “must-see” in Aix, the studio that Cezanne owned and in which he did much of his work. The first part of the walk was a pleasant stroll through the interesting streets of Aix’s old town center and past a charming old church, but as we went on the road to the studio became much steeper and far less attractive and seemed much longer than we had expected. When we finally arrived at the studio we had walked well over a mile uphill and were hot and exhausted. The studio was closed when we arrived for the lunch hour but soon opened and we went inside, only to be deeply disappointed. There were no original Cezanne paintings to be seen and only a few reproductions. Basically the studio was just a big room with some big windows to provide light and a few paint cans and brushes sitting around. It had been preserved, we were told, exactly as it had been when Cezanne worked here, but obviously Cezanne wasn’t trying to make the place a tourist attraction. We left after ten or fifteen minutes and made our way back to the Cours Mirabeau; thankfully the walk seemed shorter and less arduous going downhill. Andrea found time to check out a few shops on the way.

When we got to the Cours Mirabeau we decided to see one more sight in Aix. We had learned that there was a temporary exhibit at the Garnet museum that featured numerous original works by Cezanne. Although the exhibit consisted of paintings on loan from museums in the U.S. that we could theoretically see after we got back home, we considered this an opportunity with little effort on our part for Cezanne to redeem himself. The museum was on our way back to the parking garage and we figured this would be an easy visit, but we were dismayed when we got there to find a long line snaking back from the entrance. We debated skipping the exhibit but the line seemed to be moving so we waited and after about twenty minutes made our way into the museum. We went directly to the temporary exhibit and sure enough found quite a few Cezanne paintings to look at. But Cezanne did not redeem himself, at least in my eyes. I found his paintings to be crude and wholly uninteresting. I am wholly unable to comprehend that one of his works (not one at the Garnet) holds the record for the most expensive painting ever sold, at over \$100,000,000. Andrea tended to agree with me, with the reservation that perhaps if she knew more about what Cezanne was trying to accomplish she would appreciate his work more. Fortunately the exhibit also included one Van Gogh painting that I liked (of a stagecoach in Tarascon, a town about six miles west of St. Remy), so the visit to the

museum wasn't a total loss. We spent less than half an hour in the Garnet, including a quick walk through some of the other galleries, then went to retrieve our car. We had a bit of difficulty getting our parking ticket validated at the *horodateur* because it would accept only certain kinds of 5 euro bills (I don't know why there are more than one kind) but we eventually got it done using coins, extracted our car from the claustrophobic garage, and drove back to the house in St. Remy. We had a light dinner and I watched one more episode of Suits on Netflix, decided I didn't care to watch any more, and went to bed.

Day Eleven—L'Isle sur la Sorgue

On Thursday, October 2, no events were scheduled for the festival (other than the continuing *boules* competitions), so we considered taking another trip. Having missed two Wednesday market days in St. Remy, we decided we should catch a market day somewhere else just to be sure we had seen one. After some research in our guidebooks, we settled on a little town called L'Isle sur la Sorgue about twenty miles northeast of St. Remy. The guidebooks noted that this town had two market days every week, one on Saturdays that featured antiques, and another on Thursdays that was more conventional. We figured that this town must know how to do market days, and we would not be disappointed. As we prepared to leave, Andrea discovered, while rummaging through her purse for something else, that her camera was tucked away at the bottom of a deep pocket. It hadn't been lost after all, and we embarked on our trip in good spirits.

The drive to L'Isle sur la Sorgue was complicated but I managed to follow the directions in Google maps and we got there having to backtrack after a wrong turn only once. But when we arrived at the finishing point identified by Google maps, we were in the middle of a residential area with no signs directing us to the town center. We drove around aimlessly for a while until we spotted what looked like a bridge in the distance. We headed toward it and soon found ourselves on a lovely street paralleling the river, with many shops on the other side and even a number of market stalls. We had arrived at the centre ville. After determining that parking on the street was impossible, we followed signs for car parks, but not until we reached the third one did we find an empty parking slot and then only because we saw another car just pulling out. We noted a few landmarks so we could find our way back and walked the few blocks to the place on the other side of the river where we had seen the shops and stalls.

We found L'Isle sur la Sorgue to be a very pleasant little town. The clear shallow river running through the town and the tree-covered riverwalk alongside it provide a very enjoyable stroll. We also had a nice lunch at a restaurant along the river called Grand Café de la Sorgue. But we were most impressed by the many market day stalls, which extended into the town center for several blocks north of the river. Andrea spent a lot of time shopping in those stalls and the bags of purchases she was accumulating renewed my concern about how we were to get everything back to the U.S. We returned to St. Remy in mid-afternoon and I immediately got onto the internet to do more research on French postal rates but also on where we might be able to purchase an additional large suitcase (*valise*). We made a quick shopping trip to the Intermarché where Andrea bought the ingredients to prepare for us a light

dinner of leek and potato soup. Andrea also bought some ground beef for spaghetti bolognese the next day but only after a long and difficult conversation with the butcher. He informed her that they did not sell prepackaged ground beef and he would have to grind the beef for her to her specifications, which was difficult because she didn't know how big a kilogram was. That evening I gave up on watching Suits on Netflix and instead was able to watch on the internet a speech by President Obama at Northwestern University, my alma mater. I marveled at being able to do this in a small town in the south of France and wondered if we could ever watch a speech by President Hollande of France on the internet at our farm in rural Michigan.

Day Twelve—Bleu Cerise

On Friday, October 3, there were again no festival events scheduled that we were interested in or that otherwise affected us. I decided that we really need to solve the baggage problem today or tomorrow because on Sunday Andrea's sister Anne and brother-in-law Tim were arriving to stay with us for our final week in France and we would be fully occupied with them. I continued my internet research on purchasing a new *valise* and determined that there was nothing available at the Intermarché or anywhere else in St. Remy. After considerable effort I did come across a website for a chain of French luggage stores called Bleu Cerise, and the website included a listing for a store at the Mistral 7 shopping mall southeast of Avignon that we had visited the previous week. The website also advertised, among many other things, a large duffel bag 86 centimetres long on sale for 15 euros. This was long enough to hold the posters Andrea had bought and the bag was big enough to hold a lot of other stuff Andrea had bought, so we decided to make another excursion to Mistral 7.

We drove again to Mistral 7, parked, went inside, and checked the store directory. No listing for Blue Cerise. Since the directory had misinformed us before, we were not daunted. We did what we had done before and asked about Blue Cerise in other shops. At a luggage store in the mall that was temporarily closed for remodeling (and had not shown up in my internet search) we asked a clerk who happened to be inside (and who ought to know about her competitors) where we might find the Blue Cerise store. She assured us that there was no such place in the vicinity of Mistral 7. Taken aback by this, we tried again at a Thomas Cook travel agency in the mall, where we assumed they would have knowledge about luggage stores, and were again informed that no Blue Cerise store existed at Mistral 7.

Now disappointed and frustrated, we walked around all the corridors of the Mistral 7 building searching for Bleu Cerise or some other luggage store, to no avail. But we did note that one entire end of the mall was occupied by an enormous Auchan store, which seemed (a la Walmart) to sell everything from groceries to electronics (another untapped potential source for SIM cards, I thought). We went inside and sure enough found a luggage department there where they had two kinds of large suitcases that would accommodate Andrea's posters, selling for about 50 euros each. This was a reasonable price but a lot more than the 15 euros I had hoped to pay for a duffel bag at Blue Cerise. We tentatively concluded that this was the best we could do but decided to have lunch and think it over. We went to a restaurant in the mall and ordered *croque monsieur* grilled cheese and ham sandwiches that were acceptable but not great.

During lunch it occurred to me that I hadn't checked Google maps for the location of a Blue Cerise store. Google maps doesn't always list stores but sometimes it does, perhaps when the stores pay for the service. I opened Google maps on my smart phone and zoomed in on Mistral 7. To my surprise it showed a Blue Cerise store located in a strip of shops just the other side of one of the Mistral 7 parking lots. Not overly optimistic but hopeful, I went to check it out while Andrea stayed behind in the mall to do some other shopping at the Auchan, which had intrigued her. After a little difficulty orienting myself to the Google map I walked the length of the shopping strip and just as I was about to give up, there it was: a Blue Cerise store. I went inside and found myself in one very large room with luggage of all types arranged in stacks and on the walls. There was one small counter with a single clerk. I asked him about duffel bags but didn't know the French word and communication failed, so I walked around the whole store searching for the one I had seen advertised on the internet. It was nowhere to be found, but they did have a duffel bag that was a little smaller that would probably suffice that cost 35 euros, not 15. I trudged back to the Auchan, found Andrea, told her the good news and the bad news, and she agreed to accompany me back to the Blue Cerise store though it seemed she was leaning toward buying the suitcase at the Auchan.

When we got to the Bleu Cerise it was closed for lunch. Andrea good-naturedly agreed to wait until it reopened and went into a sporting goods store and a womens apparel store that were open but didn't buy anything. Eventually the Blue Cerise clerk returned and opened the door and we went inside. But we never got to the duffel bags. Just inside the door were several nice looking large suitcases that were on sale. I checked the dimensions listed on the tags and found one of them that was 76 centimetres long, enough to accommodate Andrea's posters if placed diagonally. The tag said the price was an unbelievable 5 euros. We asked the clerk why the price was so low and he said the sale merchandise had defects. We checked the 76 centimetre bag and the only defect we could find was a handle that wouldn't extend. But it was a roller bag with four wheels and we could easily move it about without extending the handle. We decided on the spot to buy it (how could we go wrong for 5 euros?), packed it in our car, and returned to St. Remy satisfied that our trip had been a success and laughing at the series of odd events we had just experienced.

When we got back to St. Remy we decided to buy fuel for our car (it took diesel) for the first time but had a lot of trouble figuring out how to do it at the Intermarché station. In Italy the year before the service stations had automatic dispensers that required one to deposit cash. Here, it turned out, one fuelled the car and then went to a drive-in cashier to pay. It seemed simple once we figured it out but it required the help of a friendly Frenchman who spoke no English but communicated well with hand gestures. Returning to the house, we found our usual parking places occupied and parked in a two hour "blue zone" while we figured out what to do next. I walked around and discovered a car park about a two minute walk away on the north side of Gambetta and put the car there for the night. We had a nice spaghetti bolognese dinner prepared by Andrea (inspired by her lunch in Aix) and spent most of the evening reading.

Day Thirteen—Moving Day

On Saturday, October 4, there was another *abrivado* of bulls from the lake to the parking area across from the Intermarché and another bullfight at the arena south of the town center but nothing involving our immediate part of St. Remy. There were, however, an *abrivado* and a *bandido* scheduled for the next day on Blvd Gambetta at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. respectively. Because we would need to leave for the airport in Marseilles early tomorrow afternoon and return around 6 p.m. I became concerned that our new-found car park, which exited onto one-way streets, might be blocked. I went on a more extensive search and discovered another car park further north, about a six minute walk from our house. This car park was on a through road, the D99, and I was pretty sure that it wouldn't be blocked for the festival, so I put the car there to be prepared for tomorrow.

In preparation for the arrival of Andrea's sister Anne and brother-in-law Tim tomorrow, Andrea and I decided to vacate our luxurious top floor bedroom and move to the much smaller bedroom on the ground floor. We wanted our guests to appreciate the house as much as we did. I accompanied Andrea on a shopping walk in the town center near our house and in late afternoon we had a nice 45 minute Skype video chat with our daughter in Los Angeles. More spaghetti bolognese at the house for dinner, and a quiet evening reading.

Day Fourteen—More Bulls and Marseilles Airport

On Saturday, October 5, the fences were up again on Blvd Gambetta and the bulls arrived in late morning. We took some more pictures of them and then had lunch and left for the Marseilles airport which is conveniently (for us) located about ten miles northwest of Marseilles on the way to St. Remy. The trip was on the A7 expressway most of the way and took us only little over an hour. The airport parking was easy to find and get into, and we had an hour or so before our guests' flight arrived, much of which was spent in the Starbucks (which did not serve decaffeinated coffee). The Marseilles airport terminal building is large and attractive and also easy to find one's way around in. Anne and Tim arrived on schedule and we whisked them back to St. Remy, where we again had to park in the more remote car park. They didn't mind rolling their bags up the road to the house, where the *bandido* (which apparently means the leaving of the bulls) was just about to begin. They dropped off their bags and were in time to see the bulls run up the street toward us and up a ramp into a waiting trailer, which presumably took them back to the Camargue until the next festival at some other town.

Ann and Tim inspected the house and approved and moved in to their upstairs bedroom. After some pastis and conversation we walked to the Olivade restaurant where Andrea and I had had one of our first meals. Everyone liked the food (though I liked my previous meal better—too many onions in the vegetable dish this time) and Anne, who once spent a year in Strasbourg and speaks French well, had a nice conversation with the woman who managed the place. Anne and Tim both ordered both a *salade* and a *plat* and found it all too much to eat, as I expected. We then returned to the house for more talking and drinking until our guests, who had been more or less awake for more than 30 hours, excused themselves and went to bed.

Day Fifteen—The Van Gogh Trail Again

For their first breakfast in Provence, I went out early to a local bakery and bought for Anne and Tim a selection of croissants and tarts, which they enjoyed mightily. They then insisted on going to a different bakery later in the morning, where they bought a selection of baguettes for our lunch. They wanted to spend this day becoming familiar with St. Remy, so we walked around the historic town centre after lunch. Then Andrea persuaded them to take the long walk to the Cloiture St. Paul to see the reproductions of Van Gogh paintings on the way and the museum. I joined them on the walk but couldn't bring myself to go into the museum again, so I waited on a bench outside and amused myself by watching the several busloads of tourists and their tour guides arriving for a visit (who were even more interesting than the museum). Anne and Tim also went across the road to see the Roman arch and mausoleum. We had intended to see the nearby ruins of the ancient Roman city of Glanum but discovered to our dismay that it was closed because it was Monday.

That evening we decided to take them to the Bistro Decouverte for dinner. Confident that I knew exactly where it was, I led them there by a different route than Andrea and I had taken before. When we spotted what I thought was the restaurant, we hurriedly grabbed the only remaining table. Only after I started reading the menu and looking around did it occur to me that we were not where I thought we were. It turned out we had gone into the Bar-Tabac restaurant which is right next door to the Bistro Decouverte. We decided to stay anyway and had an acceptable but meager meal. Afterward we went to another small restaurant near the St. Martin church for dessert. We then went back to the house, where Andrea, Anne and Tim paid me back for my mistake by making me play bridge with them.

Day Sixteen—Arles and Tarascon

On Tuesday, October 7, Anne and Tim were ready to do a little more travelling, and we decided to go to the town of Arles, about fifteen miles west of St. Remy. Because Arles is a larger town and major tourist destination, I carefully studied our Steves guidebook advice as to parking. According to the Steves book there was a parking garage on Blvd des Lices (which the Google Translate app on my smart phone translated as “boulevard of the bitches”) just south of the historic town center, and we headed there. There was in fact a parking garage where Steves said it was, but we had a lot of difficulty spotting it and almost got lost in the parking area for an adjoining building before finally entering it. As in Aix, the parking slots were minuscule and required all passengers to get out of the car before we could get into one.

Using Google maps on my smart phone with a high zoom, as I had learned to do at Mistral 7, we threaded our way through narrow streets until we arrived at the 2000 year old Roman arena. This is truly an impressive structure, which has been carefully restored and is used for soccer games, bullfights, concerts, and other events. Inside, it feels as big as a modern U.S. football stadium, and it amazes me that the Romans could have built such a thing so long ago without any

electric or gas or diesel or steam powered equipment, using only the muscle of humans or other animals. After visiting the arena, Andrea made a number of purchases in a nearby shop she liked, and we all then had a very good lunch of savory crepes at Le Grillon restaurant (where they erroneously charged my credit card twice but subsequently corrected the error). We next walked by the ruins of the Roman theater, which is not nearly as impressive as the arena (or as the Roman theater in Orange that we saw later). We then walked through the center of town, stopping to photograph a café that has been painted a bright yellow to match the color used by Van Gogh when he painted a picture of the building in 1898 during his stay in Arles, just before he went to the hospital in St. Remy. We came to a very modern new building that houses a new Van Gogh museum, including one original Van Gogh painting, but decided it wasn't worth the high admission charge to go inside because we had no interest in the other art on display. Again using Google maps, we then returned to the parking garage, only to encounter another difficulty. The parking validation machine would not take any coins at all and, like the one in Aix, only certain kinds of euro bills. We finally came up with one that would work, left the parking garage, and drove north a few miles to the town of Tarascon.

I had seen pictures of the castle/fortress on the Rhone river in Tarascon, but no picture can do it justice. It is a massive structure, still in use and still in excellent condition. I am as amazed at the ability of the builders to construct it without modern construction equipment 500 years ago as I am at the ability of the Romans to build the arena in Arles 2000 years ago. There was not much in the way of shopping near the castle at Tarascon, but I did pick up a 3-D postcard of Camargue bulls there for my grandson. I had never seen a 3-D postcard before and am surprised that I first encountered one in a small town in southern France. We then returned to the house in St. Remy in plenty of time to have champagne, French cheese, and crackers before heading out to dinner. We walked to the Bistro Decouverte by a more direct route this time and found it easily and enjoyed a very good (but much more expensive than the Bar-Tabac) dinner. Tim especially liked his order of duck and Andrea her order of lamb shank. A precedent having been established, I was again required to play bridge with Andrea, Anne and Tim before I could retire for the evening.

Day Seventeen—Market Day In St. Remy and Les Baux Again

On Wednesday, October 8, the weather was fine and there was no more festival, so St. Remy market day was in full swing. Many of the streets and both large plazas in historic central St. Remy were filled with booths, as were the boulevards and the Place Republique just to the south and west of the centre ville. All manner of goods were for sale, especially clothing, and the plaza by the Hotel de Ville was jammed with vendors of all kinds of food. Andrea and Anne were especially delighted with the shopping opportunities but I saw little that interested me other than a few food items and one small table displaying an assortment of cell phone adapters. After sitting on a bench and watching the shoppers shop for a while, I retreated to the house but was unexpectedly joined shortly afterward by the rest of our group who informed me that shopping was over because market day ended at 1 p.m. We all then went to lunch at Le Mandarin, the Vietnamese restaurant Andrea and I had visited earlier, and all of us ordered the excellent chicken curry.

With market day over, we decided to take the afternoon to drive Anne and Tim to Les Baux since it was so close by. This time I figured out where the *horodateur* was located and deposited the surprising charge of 5 euros for the privilege of parking for an hour or two, rationalizing it by realizing I had parked there two times before without paying anything. Anne and Tim walked and shopped the streets up to the entrance to the ruined castle but decided not to explore it. Andrea visited a shop she had been in before (where she erroneously thought she had left her camera) and some others, while I waited patiently outside and then visited the tourist information office. Eventually we returned to the house where we had more champagne, crackers and cheese (some of it purchased just today during market day) and then a nice Salade Nicoise dinner prepared by Andrea. The dishwasher door seal came loose, so we hand washed the dishes and left an e-mail for the building manager about it. More bridge and then to bed.

Day Eighteen—Orange, Chateauneuf-du-Pape, and Vaison-la-Romaine

On Thursday, October 9, we scheduled the most ambitious trip of our stay in France, involving three separate destinations. The four of us set off fairly early for Orange, our first stop, about thirty miles away. We had planned to take a direct route there on secondary roads recommended by Google maps, but somehow got off track. Rather than stop and try to download new directions, we instead just followed signs for the A7 expressway, which we knew went to Orange, though somewhat more circuitously. It was a good decision and the trip went quickly. We arrived in Orange, a fairly large city, without having scoped out a parking place in advance and found the streets and the first few car parks we saw choked with traffic. Finally we spotted a car backing out of a small parking area just off a main street near the Roman theater and we pulled into the vacant slot. A sign told us we had to pay for parking there but it took five or ten minutes to locate the *horodateur*, which was different from other ones we had seen, with rows of letters and numbers across the bottom. I gave up trying to figure it out and we all walked over to see the theater, but I came back to the car after a quick look around while the others stayed to see some exhibits and a nearby museum. This time I camped by the *horodateur* until someone else came to use it (he didn't even use the letter and number keys), tried to do what he did, and eventually got it to print out a little receipt evidencing payment to put on the dashboard. I thought I had managed to avoid a parking ticket until a month or so later when, back in the U.S., I received in the mail a notice of violation in Orange, France, from the French government, apparently booked before I figured out the *horodateur*. The notice was in French but directed me to a website that was mercifully in English, where I easily paid a 17 euro fine with a credit card. If I had known that the parking fine was only 17 euros (less than the price of two admissions to the Roman theater) and that I wasn't going to have to pay our car rental company a three-figure processing fee to handle it, I would have saved myself a lot of hassle.

In the brief time I did spend looking around the Roman theater in Orange, I was greatly impressed, every bit as much as I had been with the Roman arena in Arles. The tiered seating area of the theater was enormous, and the wall at the back of the stage must have been four or five stories high. Like the arena in Arles, the theater in Orange is at least 2,000 years old, has been carefully restored and maintained, and is still used for performances. Again I was amazed at how the Romans could build

such huge structures without modern construction equipment, and how well those structures have stood up over the centuries. After we left the Roman theater we drove to see an equally well preserved Roman arch standing in the middle of a main highway just north of the town, with the traffic routed around it. It was similar to the Roman arch just south of St. Remy and, though worth seeing, not nearly as impressive as the Roman theater.

Our next stop was Chateauneuf-du-Pape, the center of an important wine producing area several miles south of Orange. The drive through the miles of vineyards outside the town was every bit as interesting as the town itself. Andrea, Anne, and Tim went to a wine-tasting shop there and sampled some of the changing variety of wines produced in the region that the shop offered. Then we all had lunch at the Pistou restaurant in Chateauneuf-du-Pape. I had the coq au vin there (not quite as good as I had hoped) and we all shared some excellent desserts.

Our next destination was the town of Vaison-la-Romaine, about 15 miles northeast of Orange. Vaison distinguishes itself in my mind by the huge free parking area across the road from the tourist information center, which we gladly used. There are extensive Roman ruins there next to the information center, consisting of building foundations and rubble (similar to the ruins in Glanum south of St. Remy). We elected to bypass those in favor of the street of shops that led to the medieval town perched on a high hill across the river. The shops turned out to be not so great as hoped, but the Roman bridge at the end of the street was well worth seeing. I waited there by the bridge while Andrea, Anne and Tim mounted the steep path going to the medieval town. The 2000 year old bridge still carries automobile traffic and is impressive for that reason alone. It is also an attractive structure, perched high above the river, and offers excellent views both down the river and up the river, where one can see in the distance Mt. Ventoux, the tallest mountain in Provence at about 6000 feet above sea level.

Andrea, Anne and Tim soon descended from the medieval town, somewhat unimpressed, and we decided we had had enough touring for one day. We tried to set a course for our house on my smart phone only to discover that the battery was almost dead because the car charger I had been using failed. Fortunately, we had a paper map with us, and we used that to get to the A7 expressway and took that to the exit nearest St. Remy. We got lost shortly after leaving the expressway and used the small remaining charge in my smart phone to redirect us successfully but the phone was now saying that it would take three or four hours to travel the few miles left to St. Remy. It in fact only took a few minutes but the phone kept making these travel time miscalculations long after I recharged it. It was not until after we got back to the U.S. that I realized I had accidentally touched the button that gave travel times for walking instead of driving.

When we arrived back at the house we were pleased to find that the property manager had already come and fixed the dishwasher. We had some of the Chateauneuf-du-Pape wine that Tim had purchased with our French cheese and crackers, and then Anne and Tim left for a romantic dinner somewhere by themselves, while Andrea and I had leftovers for dinner. We played bridge again when Anne and Tim returned and then retired for the night.

Day Nineteen—Avignon

On Friday, October 10, we all embarked on our final sightseeing trip, this time to the town of Avignon, the third largest city in Provence (after Marseilles and Aix), with a population of about 100,000. The short drive there was easy except for having to stop suddenly as we entered the city to avoid hitting a drunken man who was weaving his way toward us on the street. We parked after only one wrong turn at the car park for the Centre Ville train station, just outside the medieval wall surrounding the city center. We walked through the gate in the wall and went several blocks to the tourist information office, where we went inside to get a map. Adjoining the information office was a shop that caught Anne's fancy, and while she was making some purchases there a tall young woman walked in the door, began screaming unintelligible nonsense (or maybe just loud French), went through into the information office and then out another door to the sidewalk, still screaming. The clerk at the office didn't seem overly concerned, claiming to have seen the woman there before. We hoped that the drunk and the nut case weren't typical of the residents of Avignon (and we didn't encounter any more of them).

We then walked north from the tourist information north for a number of blocks, passing numerous shops. Andrea and Anne explored a few of them but found them to be too much like stores back in the U.S. to be of much interest. Eventually we came to the large plaza adjoining the Palais des Papes, the huge palace built by the Catholic Church as its headquarters and the seat of the Pope from 1309 to 1377 (and of an anti-pope for 40 years thereafter). The Palais, like other massive medieval structures such as the Chateau at Tarascon, has to be seen to be appreciated; it is difficult for pictures to capture its size and the way it dominates its surroundings. We decided not to tour the inside of the Palais, our guidebooks being lukewarm about what was to be seen there, but instead walked up the steep roadway from the plaza to a park between the Palais and the Rhone river. The view of the Palais from the park was impressive, but just as impressive was the view of the river in the other direction. From there one can clearly see what is left of the bridge across the Rhone that is the subject of a well-known childrens song (*sur le pont d'Avignon, l'on y danse tout en rond*). Tired from our walk, we found an outdoor restaurant in the park where we had a delightful and inexpensive lunch of crepes and baguettes, while across a small pond from us we watched a group of very mixed-race and noisy schoolchildren on a field trip to the sights we had just seen.

After leaving Palais des Papes, we headed back toward the railway station and the car park, but a block or so away Andrea and Anne noticed what appeared to be a small shop they wanted to check out. Tim and I waited for them on a convenient stone bench next to a fountain across from the shop. After waiting what seemed to us to be an unusually long time, Tim went to make sure our wives were still there. It turned out that the small shop was actually an entrance to an arcade of many small shops, and so we had to wait a while longer. Eventually we resumed our walk back to the car park, arms laden with shopping bags. We found the car easily, had no problem with the *horodateur*, and had a short, uneventful drive back to the house in St. Remy. While Tim and I napped on the sofas, Andrea prepared a very nice dinner featuring beef tournedos, which went extremely well with a red wine Tim had bought

in Chateauneuf-des-Pape. We toasted our successful journeys, played more bridge, and went to bed.

Day Twenty—Packing and Mistral 7 Yet Again

We started out on Saturday, October 11, laying out our clothes and purchases in preparation for packing to return to the U.S. When we determined that, thanks to our new 5 euro suitcase purchased at Bleu Cerise, we had more than enough room for everything, Andrea mentioned that she had some Christmas shopping yet to do. I made the uncalled-for remark that I didn't want to go on any more trips if they just turned into shopping expeditions. Andrea was not happy with me for the rest of the morning, and I wished I had never said anything. After all, I was the one who insisted on buying the bigger suitcase, and our trip to France had been far more than a shopping expedition.

Andrea and Anne did some final shopping in St. Remy, and at lunchtime we went with Anne and Tim to the Olivade restaurant again, where we all ordered the delicious pistou that Anne had ordered on our first visit to the restaurant. After that Andrea and I drove Anne and Tim back to Avignon to the TGV station, making only one wrong turn thanks to an inexplicably erroneous direction from Google maps (which was also still telling me the trip would take four hours instead of the twenty minutes it actually took) into a dead end. We dropped them off at the car rental office, where they had reserved a car to take them on a trip to Languedoc after Andrea and I left. Andrea and I then drove to Mistral 7 (again), delayed (again) by another inexplicable direction into a dead end from Google maps (which obviously needs to re-examine its database on the streets of Avignon). At the Auchan at Mistral 7 Andrea bought 5 (!) sweaters as Christmas gifts for her sons and grandsons, and we then drove back to the house at St. Remy.

After some more packing, we all went to have a very nice last dinner together at the highly recommended L'Estagnol restaurant just south of the town center, where Tim had a lamb dish, Andrea had braised pork, and Anne and I both had cod filets in a wine sauce. Upon returning to the house, Andrea discovered that one of her hearing aids was missing. Thinking she might have left it on the table at the restaurant, she and I walked back there, searching the ground (unsuccessfully) with a flashlight on the way in case she had dropped it going to or from the restaurant earlier. The hearing aid was not at the restaurant and we returned dejected to the house, where Tim had some good news and some bad news. The good news was that he had found the hearing aid on the floor in the living room; the bad news was that he had accidentally stepped on it, thinking it was one of the cashews we had been eating earlier. A broken hearing aid being better than none, Andrea thankfully put it away safely in the hope it could be repaired back in the U.S. (it was, for much less than the cost of a new one). We played bridge one last time and retired for the night.

Day Twenty-one—Back to CDG

On this last day in St. Remy, Sunday, October 12, we did some final packing with no problems accommodating everything and winding up with two bags to check

and one large and two medium-sized carry-on bags. Anne and Tim left in their rental car for Carcassonne at about 10 a.m. Shortly thereafter the property manager came to check out the house and get the keys, and Andrea and I packed our car and left for the TGV station in Avignon at about 11 a.m. We didn't need directions to the station this time but when we arrived I didn't know how to get to the back of the station, where I had read the rental car return was located, so I parked in the rental car lot where we had picked up the car. (I discovered when we got into the station that this lot was in fact at the back of the station, not the front as I had assumed.) We rolled our bags to the rental car office where we had signed up for the car, found a clerk who was not busy but spoke little English, told him where we had parked the car, and gave him our copy of the rental contract. He immediately left and we waited for him to return with our contract and a receipt for the car. After about twenty minutes of waiting we attempted to ask another clerk when the first clerk would return and understood her to say that we didn't have to wait for him, so we collected our bags and with some difficulty rolled them up the ramp adjoining the stairs to the station and went inside.

It took us a little while to decipher the train information posted on the electronic displays but soon ascertained that our train to CDG was on time and where to board it. We had a wait of about two hours, and it was quite warm in the station with the sun coming through the huge modern glass ceiling. We had a marginally satisfactory lunch in the station restaurant, which was even warmer and quite crowded. After lunch we discovered that there was more than ample seating in which to wait upstairs from the main floor on the platform level and we went there, popping out the doors to the platform occasionally to cool off. When the train arrived we were pleased to find that we were located right next to the door to our car but were not so pleased to discover that our seats were on the upper level of the car. We struggled to get our five bags onto the train and up the stairs and lost track of one of them briefly when I made a wrong turn at the top of the stairs. Eventually we got the bags stowed away properly and found our seats and settled in for the smooth three hour ride to CDG. As we started out I complained somewhat heatedly to Andrea for the umpteenth time about how I hated the inconveniences of travel, especially managing the luggage. She resolutely maintained that the pleasures of travel greatly outweighed the inconveniences, and after a few minutes I cooled off, apologized, and reluctantly concluded that she was right. But it doesn't make my travel anxieties go away.

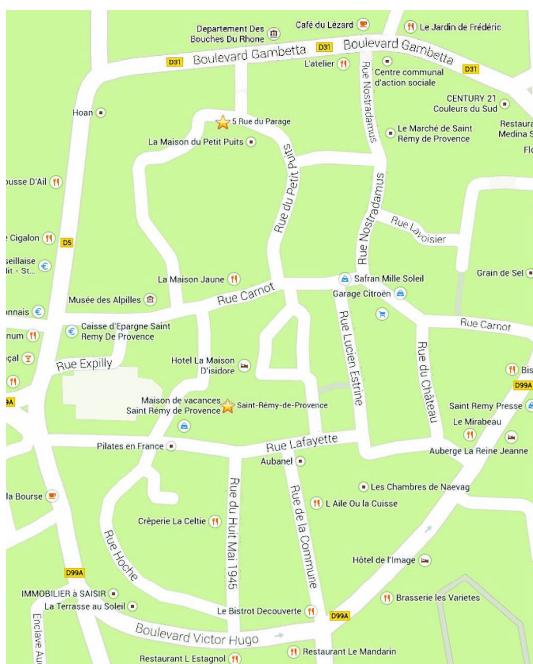
Our train arrived on time at CDG and we found it much easier to get our five bags off the train than it was to get them on. Because flights from Paris to Chicago all leave in the morning, we had booked a room for the night at the Ibis hotel at CDG. We did not, however, know how to get to it from the TGV station. I thought it was near terminal 2A, from which our flight would depart in the morning, so we walked that way. Seeing no signs, Andrea decided to ask at a check-in desk where there was a clerk who was not busy and got excellent directions, in English. We had to go back to the TGV station, then get on board the nearby CDGVAL shuttle, and take it to terminal 3. We did this, managing the bags by using the convenient elevator at both ends of the line. From the CDGVAL stop in terminal 3 it turned out to be a fairly short walk, part of it on a covered outdoor walkway, to the hotel. We checked in without any wait with our prepaid reservation and went to our small but modern room. We had a nice spaghetti dinner at the Pasta & Pizza restaurant at the hotel, tried unsuccessfully to make calls back to family in the U.S. with the few remaining international minutes on our Orange SIM card, and called it a day.

Day Twenty-two—Return Home

The next morning, Monday, October 13, we went to have breakfast in the hotel buffet. After being directed back to the hotel reception desk to pay for it in advance, we were admitted to the buffet and a large selection of breakfast foods. We checked the airline schedule on the free wifi at the hotel and determined that, unlike our flight to Paris three weeks earlier, our flight back to Chicago was on time. We retraced our steps from the Ibis hotel to the CDGVAL shuttle and took it to terminal 2. There was a long but well-managed line waiting to get to security for the American Airlines gates and there were several security checkpoints, at two of which Andrea was again taken aside, again apparently at random, for questioning and a more thorough check of her carry-on bags. Once in the secured area Andrea looked around at the duty-free shops but didn't buy anything and we then went to a Starbucks where I had to settle for a bottle of water (still no decaf coffee). Eventually we boarded our plane and after a long but mostly smooth flight we arrived at O'Hare airport around 2 p.m. local time and were at our condo in Evanston by 3 p.m. with 300 photos, 10 smart phone video clips, and countless memories of our three weeks in Provence.

Three Weeks In Provence

Illustrations



St. Remy Historic Town Center (Star is Our House)



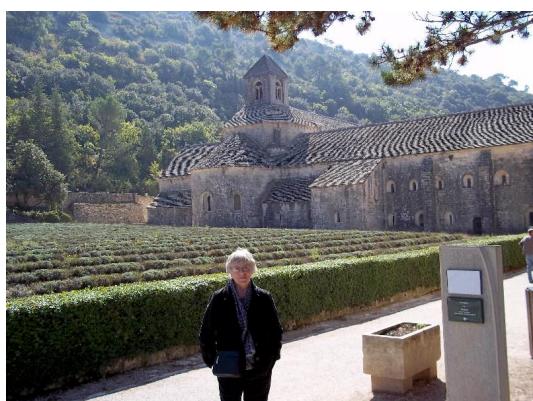
Outside Our House In St. Remy



Inside Our House in St. Remy



Down the Street from Our House in St. Remy



Abbeye Notre Dame near Gordes



Van Gogh Painting of Street Pavers in St. Remy



Festival Parade in St. Remy



Young Gardian at the Abrivado in St. Remy



Taureaux at the Abrivado in St. Remy



Ruined Castle in Les Baux



Cours Mirabeau in Aix-en-Provence



River in L'Isle sur la Sorgue



Roman Arena in Arles



Market Day in St. Remy



Waiting for Shoppers at Market Day in St. Remy



Roman Theater in Orange



Roman Bridge in Vaison-la-Romaine



Pont d'Avignon