

EUROPE 2023

4 months | 6 countries | 8 house swaps | 10 journey legs | 2 grand-boys

Air Travel

Over the past 15+ years, we've covered many thousands of kilometres by air, encountering familiar challenges along the way. The persistent issues of cramped seating, anxiety about exceeding luggage weight limits, and the chaotic rush of passengers boarding and disembarking planes remain unchanged. These experiences, as exemplified by our recent visit to Gatwick Airport, make it no surprise that passengers often respond with skepticism when airlines tout their commitment to "customer service."

Our most recent flight was with EasyJet, and I must say that the term "easy" doesn't quite fit the experience. While their new self-check luggage system is intended to enhance efficiency, it seems to have the opposite effect, leaving customers more stressed than ever. Almost everywhere you turned, travellers were seeking assistance due to computer-related issues, aggravated by the shortage of available staff. It begs the question: Wouldn't it be more efficient to have knowledgeable check-in staff who are well-versed in the process? What truly frustrates me is the immediate post-flight customer feedback survey that pops up, asking, "How would you rate us?" The provided list of response options feels inadequate, as it rarely includes "completely dissatisfied." And when you take the time to provide comments, they press you to allow a customer service agent to contact you for a more "in-depth" discussion. The answer is a resounding NO!

It's interesting to observe the transformation of Qantas from a premier airline with a sterling reputation to a mediocre carrier that has lost the trust of both passengers and staff alike. Many employees are dissatisfied due to the widespread shift to contract and casual employment, leading to chronic understaffing and rampant outsourcing, all while compensation continues to decrease. Meanwhile, the CEO, Alan Joyce, receives a staggering \$10 million bonus. In Joyce's own words, "we do this because we are simply looking after our shareholders." It's truly astounding! Shareholders coming before customers and before staff? Total nonsense - it's all about Joyce's pocket.



England to France

We are safely and happily ensconced now in our French chateau but yesterday was something else. We had an eight hour wait for our plane to Marseille because we wanted to be at the airport to see the "kids" safely in their waiting lounge for their trip home. The wait was not too bad actually because we found a padded bench seat in a restaurant and stayed there the whole time. The cup of tea cost a fortune but hey the comfort was great. The flight over to Marseille was quick and smooth (apart from the crowds and self checkin crush) but then the fun began.

Firstly we could not find the Budget car rental outlet at the airport. I went off searching whilst Siggy waited with the bags. I walked and walked through dark car parks (quite stupid really). I came back and we finally went forth together and, after lots of questions to security staff, taxi drivers touting for business and fellow passengers also looking for a ride we eventually found the place - near Terminal 1. We were at Terminal 2 - the other side of the airport. They could have put that in the address on the brochure! Our vehicle, a latest model Peugeot was all we expected and our Budget receptionist



helped us connect our phone and put in the GPS coordinates for the hotel we had booked some months ago. Well, the GPS took us to a quite another place. There are more than one Ibis hotels in this area it seems. The combination of tiredness, old age, darkness and driving on the wrong side of the road had us in a less-than-sane state. We decided the best option was to stay at the second hotel and pay a second time! A very basic room was provided, not even any tea to refresh me. But we were in a safe place and went straight to sleep.

Today Siggy was brilliant once again managing to be a competent driver on the wrong side of the road and we made our way inland to our house swap. We had both our old trusty GPS, and our iPhone linked into the screen telling us where we should go - not using tolls or freeways. The country we drove through was very dry and the temperature was already in the high 20s when we took off. Dressed in shorts and T shirts for comfort, we quickly got out of the city and started to enjoy the rugged scenery. Some of the roads up the side of a mountainous area were very narrow and winding, meaning Siggy had to be constantly on his toes. But the scenery was superb.

On arrival at the Grand Bastide we were met by Julie and Daniel who had stayed in our place last year. The property is owned by Julie's parents and Daniel, her partner, is a New Zealander. We are near a little village in Provence called Lauris. Its a typical ramshackle rural countryside area with ancient homes and out houses.

It turns out that the Grande Bastide is a huge place that is on the French registry for historic places!! They rent out the part we are in for 225 Euros a night. We are here for 14 nights! In my brief study of the notes left by Julie, this place dates at least to the 17th and 18th centuries. High ceilings, exposed beams, huge thick walls, curved ceilings, large rooms, large door openings, courtyard, swimming pool and a huge pool all for our use. Evidently there was a place here as far back as the Romans.

I think we will stay around here more than we usually do at house swaps. One, we are a little travel weary, and two, this place is just so special.

Just to the north of us is an uplifted area called the Luberon and it is apparently famous for its perched villages. Just up our alley. Lots of churches, castles and ancient buildings.







