

EUROPE 2023

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

Living like a local

Watching a live TV broadcast of the France vs. Denmark match with French commentary. Pedalled around Lauris on my bike attempting to decipher the meaning of various signs. Trying to purchase everyday items such as cordial, bulk yogurt, quality thick bacon, and hair conditioner at the grocers. Life can be puzzling at times, but it's all part of the immersive experience of living like a local.

Colourful flower boxes adorn every corner and every village street, adding vibrancy to the otherwise plain sandstone and rendered buildings. The village's narrow back streets pose a delightful challenge to navigate. Supermarkets display an astonishing array of foods, including a wide assortment of cheeses, breads, and pastries. Gracious locals are happy to extend their helping hands, going out of their way to assist when they notice our confusion, whether it is figuring out ticketing machines, operating boom gates, or distinguishing between Bleu des Gausses, Le Brézain, and Somme de Riilhac cheeses. In our area, petrol stations were surprisingly scarce, but Peugeot cars dominate the roads. All these little things were integral to our "living like a local" experience.

The Chateau La Grand Bastide where we are staying for 2 weeks is steeped in history. The entire surrounding area is chronicled in history books. Everywhere we look, history is intertwined with the present. Hilltop villages cling to the rocky outcrops and the roads are incredible narrow. But there is an abundance of opportunities and attractions to explore and enjoy within a short distance, allowing us to fully embrace life as locals.



Close to home base

We are in such a unique spot here that we can travel less than 15 minutes and be in some beautiful locations. Today it was two such spots, Cucuron and Lourmarin.

Cucuron was first on the agenda. We arrived at about 8 am. It is still lovely and crisp at this time of day and so far very lacking in traffic - both foot and vehicle. We managed a park in what we hoped was an allowed space. This can sometimes have difficulties as we can't read all the signage and these villages often have restricted parking. After our last sojourn to Italy we received two parking fines 9 months and 12 months later! Oh well, on we go.

We first walked up to the highest part of the village - not too high in this case — and discovered an old tower that is now looks fairly deserted apart from the pigeons who occupy the heights. We met a very old man having his morning walk before the arrival of "unwants" like us. Sig climbed around the base of the tower and I enjoyed the cooing of the current pigeon residents. A ramble down from the heights showed us that Cucuron is constructed in the usual style of the middle ages with streets and houses winding their way down. Our iPhone helped us find our way around.



The unique feature of this village is that the main square (which is at the bottom of the village) has a huge pool of water at its heart. This basin is filled with carp which one writer described as “contented-looking fish who can't believe their luck that they are not stuck in a small fountain with coins raining down on their heads”.

The rectangular feature is surrounded by very large, old, pollarded plane trees. In order to sit and enjoy the ambiance we bought some hot chocolates.

We then had to find our way back to the car. This can sometimes be in issue as one can easily get disorientated walking around tiny narrow back lanes. In this case it was easy achieved quickly and we were off to our next destination some 4km away.

Lourmarin sits at the entrance to the road that snakes up the valley between the Petit and Grande Luberon - the one we drove on yesterday. Its location was obviously strategic and thus it developed into a very important site. In 1348 the city was virtually deserted as the plague caused the death of the majority of the residents. However from 1475 the Lord of the region encouraged the resettlement of the town and it has grown to what it is today. It is regarded as one of the most beautiful villages in France.

A fortress was first built here during the 12th and 13th centuries. It fell into disrepair but was rescued in 1921 by an Italian entrepreneur with lots of cash to splash. We toured the chateau and were very impressed by the restoration and the beautiful location. From its garden terrace you can view the three belfries (towers) for which the village is known. I particularly enjoyed walking the streets as it has many colourful and interesting shops. It feels as if it is still a “living thing” - not just a tourist attraction (as did Gordes yesterday). Gorges was beautiful but it felt “cold”. Sig was a little “ho hum” about it all - “certainly a magnificent chateau complex but a rather typical French village brim full full of sidewalk restaurants and glitzy tourist shops waiting to separate you and your money!” I feel Siggy lacks the browsing instinct.

As with the first few days, we were back at the house by about midday after a quick shop at the local supermarket. It is too hot to be out wandering during during the afternoon. What followed was a beautiful lunch of bread stick, ham and fresh salad, a snooze, a read and maybe even a swim. Possibly a quick bike ride. Life is hard!!





