A letter from France...

~ Most beautiful ~

After three busy days in Paris, we picked up our brand-spanking-new Peugeot 308 from the Paris La Defense office, on the outskirts of the city. For the next three weeks, there were to be three of us in the marriage: the Writer, the Spouse and … The Lady - the pleasant but firm voice of the car's inboard GPS system.

We were awash in beauty. We had travelled some 600km and 500 years from 21st century Paris to Limeuil, a living, breathing medieval village of about 300 inhabitants, in the stunning Dordogne region of France. But it is not alone. Each village, small town or bastide (fortified town) in the area seems to be vying for the title of THE most beautiful village in France.

Home for the next two weeks was a 16th century cottage known in the village as La Maison de la Justice – the magistrate's house. Living at the top of the village, with a steep drop to the river below, the said magistrate no doubt felt suitably protected from his clientele further down the hill. With low door lintels and steps worn concave with centuries of use, the cottage exuded history.

It's as much about texture as colour: warm limestone walls, faded terracotta tiles, dark, weathered timbers and brightly-painted doors and shutters. Add flowers and shrubs in pots and terraced gardens ... et voilà!

Our first sightseeing marathon took us to Sarlat-la-Canéda, a largish, well-kept medieval town on the 'must-see' list of many thousands of tourists. I'd add to that: 'must see first thing in the morning'. We were there early enough to observe the town preparing itself for the expected hordes and smugly drove away as the big tourist buses began to arrive. One doesn't like to think of oneself as a tourist, of course!

Next stop: Chateau de Montfort. This was on our itinerary because the Spouse had read about, and taken a strong dislike to, Simon de Montfort ("the bastard"). His crime? In 1209 he ordered the massacre of the entire (Catholic) population of Béziers, all of whom had sought sanctuary in churches. A couple of years later, he captured and razed to the ground the original Chateau de Montfort. Wikipedia lists more of his crimes, if you're interested.
Finally on our first big day out The Lady took us to Domme, a hilltop bastide built by Philip the Bold in 1281. This fortified village was under siege by various intruders - French, English, Protestants, Catholics - from the 13th to the 16th centuries. Today, it's still under siege, of course, but that's the price it pays for being un des plus beaux villages de France (one of the most beautiful villages in France).

The Vézère is a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of its numerous prehistoric caves. There was a flurry of activity in the area after discoveries of cave painting and humanoid remains in the 19th century. The best-known cave system, Lascaux, was closed in the 1960s after the authorities realised the thousands of tourists passing through had brought in bacteria that threatened the 17,000 year old paintings. Lascaux II is an exact, hugely popular reproduction of the original cave. People book tickets months in advance or queue early on the day to get in. Organised people, that is...

We always prefer ‘the road less travelled’ so our first stop was in the little hamlet of St Cirq. Five tourists crammed into the small cave to listen to a 30 minute explanation - in French - of the cave drawings. We got the gist. This cave contains one of only two prehistoric drawings in France of a human figure, Le Sorcier, a very well-endowed chappie of some spiritual significance.

Another pleasingly quiet spot up in the cliffs above the river, Abri de la Madeleine is the site of both prehistoric and medieval villages. With a good English language booklet, we were able to meander happily, building up an appetite for lunch.

The impossibly pretty village of St Léon sur Vézère was our lunch destination. Some intense research on my part (reading the guestbook recommendations as well as the hosts’ own suggestions) had revealed that most visitors to this region take a gourmet’s interest in what they eat. All of the suggested restaurants would be very popular, they warn, and must be booked days or weeks in advance. Peasants at heart, we bowled up to the Auberge du Pont and enjoyed hearty peasant fare from the menu de jour (at 15 Euros each).

That just left the biggest and most impressive medieval village: La Roque St Christophe. More than a kilometre of caves have been carved out of the limestone bluffs above the river, over five levels, providing shelter to man since prehistoric times - or, as the advertising claims, for 55,000 years. Certainly during medieval times, from around 900AD, it was a fully-functioning fortified city. With some ingenious machinery to lift and pull loads, as well as to eject unwanted intruders, this was a much-prized piece of real estate.
~ Vive la Revolution! ~
Bastille Day, July 14, marks the birth of the French Republic in 1789. This year, the national day fell on a Saturday, so it was a weekend of celebration in Limeuil. We watched the setting up of two massive marquees. In a medieval village, with no access for trucks or trailers, this involved an inordinate number of men, 16 at least, carrying the top section of each marquee down to the Port (the riverside area).

By Saturday evening when we wandered down the hill, the party was well under way. We joined others in the heavy rain, bought our tickets then exchanged them at the catering tent for moules, a steaming bowl of mussels in their shells, cooked with onions. Mmm, yes. And frites with mayonnaise, double yes! Sunday evening's tent meal was described as a banquet of local delicacies. We stayed chez nous (at our place) for dinner but managed to keep ourselves awake for the evening's highlight, the fireworks display, at 11pm.

It's so tempting to draw conclusions and make generalisations about other cultures when you're travelling - based on only small glimpses of those other lives - but I was struck by the family atmosphere evident during both evenings. Celebrating one's national holiday is treated seriously; small children are formally dressed, and are very much a part of the occasion.

Funnily enough, there were no signs banning alcohol consumption in public places, nor was there evidence of law enforcement officers ... or of drunkenness. Just families celebrating their national day.

~ Le Tour de France - It's SO not about the bike! ~
On our final day in Limeuil, we headed cross-country in our trusty Peugeot to catch up with the Tour de France. As we know, life is all about the journey. The destination, especially when I'm navigating, can be a pleasant bonus. But today, we were in the hands of The Lady.

Curiously, she must have been aware of the nature of this excursion. The route she chose was more or less as the crow would have flown (if it were interested in the Tour de France, of course). But The Lady decided to send us along some rather interesting 'roads'. Black tarmac and white dotted lines soon disappeared and we found ourselves trundling along cycle path-width lanes, with the occasional detour onto what looked more like footpaths. Once the road name goes to three numbers (as in the D184E), expect to give way to pedestrians!

All credit to The Lady, though; she took us precisely where we needed to go, and we found ourselves an excellent viewing spot by early afternoon.

And it wasn't long before the circus arrived. Not the riders, just the pre-show entertainment: an endless convoy of decorated trucks, cars and floats promoting sponsors’ products - interspersed with gendarmes on fast motorbikes. Kids, young and old, scrambled to catch the freebies tossed from moving vehicles. There was plenty to keep us entertained for the three hours or so until the announcement "cinq kilometers!"

Jeremy Roy, a French rider, led the blur of colours past our corner. His leading group of three was closely followed by two other riders,... and the peloton - the main bunch - would have been only 30 seconds behind them. After over 200km of racing, they were tightly bunched. The stage had an exciting finish: with only 300 or so metres to go, Mark Cavendish sprinted from nowhere to cross the line - his second stage win of this Tour.

~ Mort pour la France ~
After leaving lovely Limeuil, we spent a few days in Arras, northern France. Arras was part of the Western Front during World War I and was also the site of a major British offensive designed to bring the war to an end.

The New Zealand Division - 15,000 soldiers - arrived on the scene in September 1916 and 2,000 of them died within the month. My grandfather and his brother sailed from Wellington in May 1916 as part of the NZ Rifle Brigade. I have a photo of these two handsome young men in uniform; no doubt they visited the Wellington photography studio to make sure their mother had something to remember
them by. My grandfather returned within a year and lived till his late 70s, a hard-working small-time orchardist in Hastings. His brother was one of the unfortunate 2,000.

His grave in the small Estaires Communal Cemetery has been immaculately maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. And he does have his name on a headstone. Over half of those New Zealanders who died on the Somme have no known grave.

The Battle of Arras, though another criminal waste of young lives (the British commanders’ tactics weren’t the best when it counted), was one in which New Zealanders played a crucial part. We visited the excellent La Carrière Wellington (the Wellington Quarry) 20 metres below the city of Arras. These medieval chalk cellars were chosen by the Allied commanders as the place to gather 23,000 soldiers before the surprise offensive against the Germans.

A group of experienced New Zealand miners were called up and became the NZ Engineers Mining Company. Their task was to enlarge these underground caverns and create a series of interconnecting tunnels. Which they did. Superbly. So, deep underground in northern France, we were led through caverns named Wellington, Auckland, Blenheim, Waitomo - and were made to feel quite special because of our nationality. It was a remarkable experience.

~ All quiet at Le Quesnoy ~

With strong links to New Zealand, and to Cambridge especially, Le Quesnoy was a ‘must visit’. Surely we’d only have to wave our passports to be welcomed with open, gesticulating arms, or kisses on both cheeks ... or an invite to lunch with the Mayor even?

About 70 km from Arras, Le Quesnoy was famously liberated - they scaled the steep fortress walls - by New Zealand troops from its German occupation at the very end of World War I. Liberated, what’s more, without destruction, ensuring the eternal gratitude of the town's residents. Some 90 Kiwi soldiers died in the attempt.

Unfortunately, we managed to arrive in this sleepy town just on midday, in time to hear the town's bells playing Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring'. We walked to La Maison Quercitaine de Nouvelle-Zélande (the town's NZ Resource Centre). Shutters were drawn. We tried the Office Tourisme. Doors locked. Oh well, no handshake from the mayor then. Like much of France, Le Quesnoy slumbers from 12 till 2.

There was plenty of evidence of the town's historical link with New Zealand on its walls though. And there was one boulangerie open, so all ended well.

After more than 3 weeks our relationship with the formidable “Lady” came to an end, with a tinge of regret I might add, as we handed our Peugeot back in Calais to take the Eurostar to London. We had plenty more adventures to come on this trip, but sadly they had to be without the guidance of The Lady.